

Thresholds, Passages and Surfaces: Touching, Passing and Seeing in the Burlington Arcade.

[this excerpt is taken from Jane Rendell 'Thresholds, Passages and Surfaces: Touching, Passing and Seeing in the Burlington Arcade', Alex Cole (ed.), The Optics of Walter Benjamin, (London: Blackdog Press, 1999).]

[...]

Passage: Transition from One State to Another

can't find as fair and fresh a maid, by blundering straight through Burlington Arcade.¹

This street is named Asja Lacis Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author.²

My lips are not opposed to generation. They keep the passage open . . .³

As symmetrical streets and skylit spaces, arcades give access to the interior of blocks, provide semi-public routes through private property and allow ways of organising retail trade. The spatial layout of the arcades exploited possibilities opened up by divorcing the point of sale from the place of production. Shops could be smaller, allowing narrow strips of unusable urban land to be economically developed. The building of the Burlington Arcade allowed a narrow strip of land alongside Burlington House to be made commercially viable. Samuel Ware's early designs, based on the Exeter Change, described two entrances, four double rows of shops and three open, intervening spaces.⁴ But as-built, retail opportunities were increased by including unbroken rows of enclosed shops down each side, providing not only a space of static consumption, but also as a space of transition, a place for a promenade.

To consider the passage as a place of transition, a place where we might pass from one state to another, allows us to return to Benjamin. In 1924, an epistemological shift, one frequently referred to, occurred in his work. This was the year in which he met Asja Lacis. Lacis was a Bolshevik, an actress and director active in post revolutionary Russia who saw her own work as integral to revolutionary transformation of society. Benjamin and Lacis met in Naples where they collaborated on the first of Benjamin's city portraits, the "Naples" essay.⁵ "Porosity", the central idea of this essay and one which will be returned to later, has been attributed to Lacis. *One Way Street* is dedicated to her: "This street is named Asja Lacis Street after her who as an engineer cut it through the author".⁶ Just as the passage of the arcade cuts through the surrounding urban fabric, starting at one point and ending at another, so too can we consider changes in epistemological status in terms of space. Whether the "cutting through" refers to Lacis's effect on Benjamin emotionally – he fell in love with her – or whether it describes the influence of her marxist ideas of historical materialism on his own mysticism remains ambiguous. But it is clear, that Lacis's passage through him, reminiscent of the penetrative act of the penis and of masculine phallic knowledge, radically altered the course of Benjamin's work.⁷

To be in one place and then in another, to be transition, in motion, is a defining feature of the prostitute. Unlike the mobile flâneur, whose journeys though the city have been celebrated as forms of urban exploration and the gathering of knowledge, the passage of the prostitute has been cause for concern. The prostitute's movement is transgressive. As an intimate and private female figure moving through the streets and other public places of the city she blurs the boundaries of public and private spheres, representing the uncontrollability of women on one hand, and social decay and moral destruction on the other.

The Burlington arcade was described as an "argeeable promenade", "walk or piazza", "long and commodious archway" and "covered passage".⁸ To associate the place with movement was to suggest the possibility of transgression, but it was also the case that the arcade was the site of enacted transgressions. On the public street, according to the 1822

amendments to the Vagrancy Acts, women could be booked for being “disorderly”, a definition which described such women as prostitutes.⁹ The ‘private’ street of the Burlington arcade provided a place with wealthy clientele where it was possible for prostitutes to solicit in comfort without fear of being arrested.

The notion of the arcade as a passage, as a space of movement, can be thought of somewhat differently if we turn now to Irigaray’s work. Irigaray’s position regarding the exchange of women in patriarchy allows us to consider more precisely the kind of female movement which might be considered transgressive. In patriarchy, men distinguish themselves from women through their relationship to exchange. Men exchange women as and in space. For Irigaray, as mother, woman is off the market, excluded from exchange. Defined as natural use value, mother is confined as and in private property. As virgin, woman is on the market, but once violated, she is taken off the market, removed from exchange among men. Defined first as natural exchange value, then as use value, virgin is confined as and in private property.

The prostitute does not fall into the binary opposition of use or exchange value, private property or market. Once used, the prostitute is not defined solely as use value, confined as and in private property, instead the prostitute remains on the market, both useful and exchangeable. Prostitution amounts therefore to “usage that is exchanged”.¹⁰ The prostitute stands for exchange, and further, as seller as well as commodity, the prostitute occupies a subject position and stands for the exchange of herself, for self-determined exchange. For women to be moved between men as exchangeable commodities is acceptable in patriarchal culture, but for women to move to exchange themselves of their own free will is not. As a self-motivated moving female body, the prostitute flouts patriarchal rules concerning the exchange and movement of women as and through space.

As well as providing us with a conceptual understanding of the mechanisms of patriarchal exchange, Irigaray’s work also suggests an alternative and celebratory way of viewing

female movement, from a position of female subjectivity. Here the moving female figure may be considered in terms of the "angel". The angel circulates as a mediator, as an alternative to the phallus, who rather than cutting through, goes between and bridges.¹¹ The angel cannot be represented in patriarchal terms since she rethinks the organisation of patriarchal space and time. For Irigaray, it is in order to deny the angel, or women's nomadic status, that men have confined women as and in the spaces of the male symbolic systems of law and language. The image of the "angel" in Benjamin's work also concerns women and movement – in passage and at the threshold. At different stages in his writing, Benjamin explored the figure of the angel in various positions at the threshold of past and present.¹² Like the guardian of the threshold of time, the angel allows the present access to the past, indicating that the threshold is not only spatial but temporal. The angel mediates space and time.

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¹ Egan, 1821, op. cit., p. 16.

² Benjamin, 1992, op. cit., p. 45.

³ Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, London, The Athlone Press, 1992, pp. 65-6.

⁴ Ware, 'op. cit.', n. p.

⁵ Benjamin, 1992, op. cit., pp. 167-76.

⁶ Benjamin, 1992, op. cit., p. 45.

⁷ Buck-Morss, op. cit., p. 21. For a more detailed account of the relationship between Benjamin and Lacis from Benjamin's perspective see Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1986.

⁸ 'The Opening of the Burlington Arcade', *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 87, part II, September 1817, p. 272; Ware, 'Proposal', n. p; John Tallis, *Tallis's Illustrated London: in Commemoration of the Great Exhibition*, London: J. Tallis and Co., 1851, p. 153; 'Covered Passage, Burlington House', *The Times*, 3 April, 1815.

⁹ See for example, *Charge Book of the Parish of St. James's D2113*, (26.05.1818 – 09.11.1818) and *Charge Book of the Parish of St. James's D2116*, (30.01.1821 – 26.08.1821).

¹⁰ Irigaray, *This Sex*, 1985, op. cit., p. 186.

¹¹ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London, The Athlone Press, 1993, p. 15.

¹² For a fascinating discussion of Benjamin and angels, see Weigel, op. cit., pp. 54-60.