

## Proust and Benjamin: a figural reading

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**Abstract.** Marcel Proust's notion of time inspired Walter Benjamin's one; however, they present many differences. Since simple comparisons between the two authors have brought to contrasting results so far, this article tries to explore the possibility of making use of an hermeneutic scheme of which Proustian work may be considered an epigone, the figural interpretation studied by Erich Auerbach, in order to establish three dimensions of time – its structure, its extension and its essence – with respect to which it should be possible to carry about a strict confrontation. The figural approach to Proustian and Benjaminian accounts of time highlights that for the two authors time has both a linear and convoluted facet, but for Proust those aspects are balanced, cover everything and derive from a private act of interpretation, whereas for Benjamin only convoluted time is significant as time exists alongside its negative and is the result of a collective organization.

### 1. Previous comparisons between Proust and Benjamin

In an article appeared for the first time in 1961 on *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* Peter Szondi outlined an important yet nowadays debated comparison between the ways of thinking of Marcel Proust and Walter Benjamin. The latter got so struck by his reading of the former's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, of which he was also one of the first German translators, to having stated that “he did not wish to read a word more of Proust than what he needed to translate at the moment, because otherwise he risked straying into an addictive dependency which would hinder his own production” (Adorno 1954, p.74); moreover, both authors shared the same coeval cultural substrate, alongside with a sensitivity towards an epochal – philosophical, social, technological, economical, religious, ecc – change in human history that was bringing to light perspectives about man before concealed.

Apart from similarities, Szondi stressed one particular difference between the two authors: the conception of time and consequently the subject's way of making experience and dealing with it. As he argues, Proust holds the view of a transitory temporality from which his aim is to flee in some kind of crystallization of an instant of its made accessible by the experience of involuntary memory, whilst Benjamin seeks into the past whose peculiar experience actualizes for glimpses of “lost future” (Szondi, 1961, p. 501). The point is that during the act of making experience of time in a non-temporal approach, Benjamin anchors himself in a film-like flux in which he discovers that some frames possess the same quality, thus making the remote ones a manifestation of the present ones and a promise of the ones still to come: it is by their compresence that their common quality appears so that true history<sup>1</sup> is for Benjamin no more a temporal issue, but rather another way of observing time from this unique perspective. Such relation that goes beyond the subject in the timeline by crossing it at right angles concerns not only his profile but also the social environment around him: on a different and truer level

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<sup>1</sup> Although in Benjamin's works “history” is often a synonym of “time”, it is fundamental to remark that I'm using such term in opposition to the latter: Benjamin himself writes that “temporal” is the relation between past and present, while “dialectic” is the one between what has been and now, and that only is “authentically historical” (Benjamin 1974-89, Vol.5, N 3,1). From now on, if not otherwise specified, any reference to history must be read in this sense.

than linear temporality past fragments coexist and merge with current lives and offer an enigmatic hint about their fulfillment.

On the contrary Proust is told to be merely looking for genuine memories since by the involuntariness of their reminiscence they guarantee to him an escape from the transience of things and a grasp of them in their ahistorical essence, which is bringer of happiness in contrast to the sway of time and the grief of such consciousness, for that can eventually “*rendre la mort indifférente*” (Proust, 1954, vol. 3, p. 867). It seems that for Szondi Proust is obsessed with a linear account of history and temporality – for Benjamin, instead, real history is qualitatively different from temporality – whose contents are unpredictable excepted for its term, which is death; therefore, as involuntary memory is an experience of time of a totally different kind – indeed it cancels time and thus is a comforting relation to it – Proust becomes addicted to it. This does not mean that time itself has a non-temporal aspect opposed to temporality like in Benjamin, but rather that with involuntary memory Proust becomes able to suspend it and enter an immobile, eternal dimension of essences. He locates himself in temporality just to jump out to “*jouir de l'essence des choses, c'est-à-dire en dehors du temps*” (Proust 1954, vol.3, p. 871) by letting past fragments be dragged into a present experience.

We can now summarize Szondi's analysis as following: Proustian approach looks backward and its goal is to abandon temporality-history to reach eternity; Benjaminian approach looks upward and its goal is to abandon temporality to reach history. So Proust's experience is static, consisting “*d'obtenir, d'isoler, d'immobiliser – la durée d'un éclair – ce qu'il n'appréhende jamais: un peu de temps à l'état pur*” (Proust 1954, vol.3, p. 872); Benjamin's experience is dynamic, since it implies a potential of future or “temporal index, according to which it is assigned to salvation” (Benjamin 1950, p. 495) hidden in every time fragment. Though these points do not lack of sense and evidence, yet they present, especially with regards to Proust, a partial if not misunderstood reading; no wonder they got challenged.

I take the critiques advanced by Louis Simon towards Szondi to be convincing. For Simon both Proust and Benjamin embraced a notion of simultaneity of narrative and memories, “a dimension in which the linear continuum of life experience [...] folds upon itself, revealing at once the existence of a nontemporal ‘pattern’ of experience...” (Simon 1997, p. 366); such model can even be visualized, as the author states, by imagining a volume “close and unread”, “its pages of text touching one another” (Simon 1997, p. 367). Although Szondi never explicitly posits his contrast in terms of linearity versus non-linearity, Simon believes that this is the core of his mistake; he equates linearity to temporality and affirms that Proustian and Benjaminian “nontemporal ‘pattern’ of experience” is an alternative to it. In other words, time presents for them two dimensions: one straight and one folded with simultaneous events. This entails that Proust does sustain a notion of non-linear time which is not only negative, as eternity, but also positive, and that such Benjamin and Proust's experience of time as non-linear shall be requalified.

Firstly, it is deprived of any direction: this does not modify the reception of Benjamin as much as Proust's, since upward can be better conciliated with the evanescence of every direction than backward. About this, Simon claims that “the Proustian mystical illumination cuts across temporal boundaries – the past, the present, and the future – in the locus of the now” (Simon 1997, p. 365): memories then are not made present but rather real, in an alternative pattern of experiencing time. Just like Benjamin's change of route from temporality to history, Proust reaches a different understanding of reality in “the convolution of the individually woven fabric of time” (Simon 1997, p. 364).

Secondly, Benjamin and Proust's experience of time becomes a force field capable of aggregating different time fragments; as a whole it is a system at rest, yet inside it the components oppose their energy in a state of tense equilibrium. This means that such experience is dynamic into its folds, but static as a concretion: we shall again think at the metaphor of the volume. Actually, it is not just retaining both aspects as if there was no significant interaction between them – that indeed takes place and produces qualitative differences. As Szondi interpreted Benjaminian dynamic history, the messianic force contained in each time fragment is allegiant to future, therefore providing a teleological inspiration that transcends the actual experience; now it seems that Simon's reading of such an experience cuts off any form of external teleology, by admitting only internal forms of it. That is certainly the case of Proust,

since his actual self, the one who reminisces, is the limit, the ultimate stage so far that cannot be trespassed; at this threshold complicated time arrests itself. But is that true of Benjamin?

Here we face a dilemma, since the issue is left unclear by the author: finalism of the convoluted facet of time is a new point upon which Proust and Benjamin diverge or we must abide by Benjamin's history only being internally teleological. A clarification is needed, which will also help understand the limits of Simon's work – one above all, he does not give any reason of the differences between the two authors as his principal objective is to contrast Szondi's interpretative line. We should regard time as a whole as a structure intertwined with space and generative of entities; hence, by highlighting the differences between Proust and Benjamin about the nature and the extension of the experience of time and the ontology resulting from the overlay of linearity and non-linearity it should be possible to draw information about their concept of time *tout court*. I will briefly sketch out the most important distinctions, which will turn out useful even for subsequent paragraphs.

As opposed to Proust, Benjamin was a Marxist and colored this peculiar mystique of the everyday in a political tone; that means that even if we assume that his true experience of time coincided with Proust's one, while the latter by the bliss of it affirmed to be able to contemplate things in their very essence, the former would have put in addition into them a cry for a revolution that had to happen historically in order to liberate them. Therefore time convolution is for Benjamin a chance to intervene with history in temporality, starting with producing a *periagoge* or awakening in the conscience of the philosopher. Yet as history is opposed to time since it provokes its annihilation, any act carried about in temporality, by partaking of its nature, will not affect its destruction, but rather prepare it: for Benjamin revolution is a messianic event external to the timeline, so it does not depend on individual nor collective deliberate actions for no one can predict nor control its advent. The point is that whilst Proustian essences are at the far edge of temporal folds, Benjamin's promises of future enveloped in past fragments need a completion beyond time: notice that this is the reversal of Szondi's position, since, if we recall Simon, Proust maintains time by offering an experience of it alternative to linearity, whereas Benjamin exits temporality at all. This also means that the "nontemporal 'pattern' of experience" Simon states the two authors share is not the same.

Such Benjaminian political drive leads to another difference. In *On some motifs in Baudelaire* he writes:

According to Proust, it is a matter of chance whether an individual forms an image of himself, whether he can take hold of his experience. But there is nothing inevitable about the dependence on chance in this matter. A person's inner concerns are not by nature of an inescapably private character. They attain this character only after the likelihood decreases that one's external concerns will be assimilated to one's experience. [...] Where there is experience [*Erfahrung*] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory with material from the collective past (Benjamin 1939, p. 315).

Terminology here is quite important. In German *Erfahrung* designates a particular type of experience, mostly unbeknown to the subject inasmuch as it is comprised of traces of perceptions sedimented in his memory; Benjamin is contrasting it to *Erlebnis*, another word for experience that denotes consciously lived memories ever accessible to the subject. For Benjamin, Proust wrongly understands *Erfahrung's* involuntariness and uncontrollability, thus predicating its privateness. *Erfahrung*, which is indeed the real experience, exceeds individual possibilities but is apt to be socially organized; the fact that at Benjamin and Proust's epoch privates were charged with the responsibility of it, thus making matter of luck to ever be subject of true experience, is therefore a socially determined condition.

So again the two authors part ways: notice that this is not an external aspect of their doctrine of non-linear time experience, for in the first place it qualifies each one in a peculiar manner. True experience of time is in Proust, when not consciously perceived, *Erfahrung*, and, when consciously perceived, involuntary memory – we may regard at it as the explicit side of *Erfahrung*. Even for Benjamin *Erfahrung* is the modality in which we make experience of time without being aware of it, but when we manage to lay it out in the open we are participating in a phenomenon of illumination whose scope is wider than Proustian account of memory – even though Benjamin would categorize it as "memory" in its original sense. Benjamin and Proust share a notion of memory as a trace or sign inscribed in the body and

charged with spirit, therefore for them remembrance does not only resurrect past experiences but allows to experience essences (completed or lacking completion) that contributed to shape the subject; the difference between the two kinds of memory lays in the fact that for Proust such an experience is regulated by “the individually woven fabric of time”, while for Benjamin it is socially construed<sup>2</sup>. Hence in the “now”, that Benjamin calls *Jetztzeit*, in which we take the pattern of convoluted time, we can access an organization of past traces that is not an involuntary private product, since such traces precisely call for us in order to be saved and fulfilled with the voice of the generations that came before us and produced them. Involuntary memory is for Benjamin a subcategory of illumination, whose effect is to strengthen the bonds between individual and society: so when we become able to see things from the perspective of their redemption we discover that our everyday experiences are threatened by social forms of depletion consisting of reducing *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis* and making us believe in an individual and not holistic dimension of non-linear time.

In the second place and above all, involuntary memory and illumination, as different expressions of *Erfahrung*, apply to different objects. Strictly speaking they share a common basis in bodily perceptions marked with spirit, but since they refer to worlds of different quality (private or collective), their semantics consequently change: for Proust folded time is associated with identities, for Benjamin with dialectical images. It is true that in his essay *On the image of Proust* Benjamin states that even Proust “could not get his fill of emptying the dummy, his self, at one stroke in order to keep garnering that third [with respect to container and content] thing, the image<sup>3</sup> which satisfied his curiosity” (Benjamin 1929, p. 240) but Proustian images are not the Benjaminian, dialectical ones.

In involuntary reminiscence Proust becomes the spectator of a particular type of identity of past Marcells and of other names’ referents, which has been defined “an impossible entity – the singular repetition, or a repetition with a difference” (Schlossman 1986, p. 102). Such an entity appears in fact as an image resulting from the collision of sensations, the past and the present one, that mostly, but not wholly, coincide: in the image, that is the only object of a single true experience, at least two compressed universes or fragments of time are overlapped yet perceived as identical, as one. That is the principle of seriality. Even if the subject is dealing with a couplet of perceptions – i.e., just one memory of the same event – seriality is already operating since the identity it constitutes is open to a potentially infinite sequence of integrations; the fact that Proust always describes “*le miracle d'une analogie*” (Proust 1954, vol.3, p. 871), which is a relationship between two terms, is only due to his believing that the conscious side of *Erfahrung* is involuntary individual memory, consisting of a resurrection of a past trace in the present by virtue of a repetition. *Erfahrung*, implicit or explicit, does proceed with series, as Proust shows when he tries to depict his multiple selves, multiple Albertines or multiple Balbecs. Proustian images are therefore serial identities discovered by the consciously perceived resonance between two exemplars of them; in front of such essences Proust is for an instant invested with the office of minister of a “cult of similarity” (Benjamin 1929, p. 239) and substitutes with them, in an act of resignification, false identities produced by the voluntary memory and associated to names by intelligence. Since for Proust *Erfahrung* is a private phenomenon, identities exist only for the subject as a monad, from whose standpoint time is convoluted; in a passage of his novel, he calls this unique *voyeur* “*vrai moi*” (Proust 1954, vol.3, p. 873).

Benjaminian images do not belong to this sort. Remember that for Benjamin *Erfahrung* presents a social structure, so images produced by that are not an individual construction but the result of holistic, historically (in a Marxist sense) determined forces. Hence images are not charged with subjective repeated perceptions as they are not contemplated from a private spectator, but rather they come into existence when “in drawing itself together in the moment - in the dialectical image - the past becomes part of humanity's involuntary memory” (Benjamin 1940, p. 403); as the relation of being to been exceeds the individual in an inter-individual, “objective” sense, and the standpoint from which images are formed corresponds with the impersonal perspective of redeemed essences, such images qualify

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<sup>2</sup> By providing such a definition I take into account Benjamin’s abandonment of any reference to collective unconscious after being criticized by Adorno in a letter to him (2 August 1935).

<sup>3</sup> Notice that the term “image” is not limited to the visual – it may refer to, e.g., a linguistic image as well. From now on I will use “essence” and “image” as synonyms.

themselves as autonomous force fields. This means that whenever impossible unities of temporal opposites which do not find any synthesis (that would be the case in history as destruction of temporality) take place a – therefore dialectical – image, which is “not dichotomous and substantial, but bipolar and tense” (Agamben 2007, p. 31; my translation) is punctually produced. Punctual is here the contrary of cumulative, which is the cipher of Proust’s essences; for Benjamin instead dialectical images are the symptom of the messianic force of time fragments, as apparent contradictions that could be dissolved only outside time. One example is commodity, since it is contemporarily a good and a fetish, which are two incompatible aspects entangled together, whose unity craves a solution. Notice also that all commodities share the same essence, i.e. represent the same image, but alongside them it is possible to include images which are unique and unrepeatable.

To sum up, both Proust and Benjamin, and this was Simon’s intuition, share the idea of a non-linear time that shapes our experiences of true essences; but Simon does not take into consideration that Proustian essences are, in the now in which they are experienced, perfect, privately produced and serial – they are repeated identities; and that Benjaminian promises of future true essences are yet imperfect, socially produced and punctual – they are dialectical images. As time manifests its nature by producing a peculiar ontology such distinction cannot be ignored. We have previously come across the problem of finalism, consisting in asking if such non-linear account of time is for Benjamin internally teleological, like for Proust, or not. Now we can answer negatively, for Benjamin’s notion of convoluted time points to an end which goes beyond its experience as it is found wrapped into dialectical images. So there is a big difference between the two authors about their conception of time; but how to outline it, how to define such directionless, static-dynamic finalism and its two declinations? Here another question arises, since we still do not know how linear and non-linear time structures, as alternatives, coexist and interact to produce their objects, images. I think that the notion of *figura* studied by Erich Auerbach might due.

## 2. About *figura*

As hinted before, “the eternity which Proust opens to view is intertwined time, not boundless time. His true interest is in the passage of time in its most real - that is, intertwined - form, and this passage nowhere holds sway more openly than in remembrance within and aging without”. Here Benjamin synthetizes that peculiar alchemy between different dimensions of time we are investigating in order to appreciate what distinguishes his philosophy from Proust’s one. He continues:

To follow the counterpoint of aging and remembering means to penetrate to the heart of Proust's world, to the universe of intertwining. It is the world in a state of similarity, and in it the *correspondances* rule; the Romantics were the first to comprehend them and Baudelaire embraced them most fervently, but Proust was the only one who managed to reveal them in our lived life. This is the work of *la memoire involontaire*, the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging. [...] Proust has brought off the monstrous feat of letting the whole world age a lifetime in an instant. But this very concentration, in which things that normally just fade and slumber are consumed in a flash, is called rejuvenation. *À la Recherche du temps perdu* is the constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost mental awareness (Benjamin 1929, p. 244).

In this passage Benjamin himself provides a reading of Proustian approach to time which is particularly insightful. When he talks about “the counterpoint of aging and remembering” he is describing *Erfahrung* and the perennial conflict between its conscious and unconscious sides; Proust’s “constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost mental awareness” corresponds to his strive to extend explicitness at the expense of implicitness by means of narrative art. As *Erfahrung* cumulates bodily and spiritual data deriving from physical or cultural impressions on the subject, who is ultimately shaped by them, it carries with itself as effects of aging when the subject is unaware of it and remembering in the opposite case. Then there is a dimension in which time runs linearly, even though our true experiences have the power to tangle it. Moreover, temporality interacts with simultaneity of stored memories. If linearity of time did not enter this process, *Erfahrung* would be just a synchronic phenomenon and there would be produced no real images, but rather a collection of instantaneous and unrelated traces; instead,



frames are for Proust ruled by *correspondances*, which we have subsumed under the principle of seriality, thus forming repeated identities of diachronic impressions.

Age and rejuvenate the world as it is mirrored and contained - let it be added - in an image, this “monstrous feat” that Benjamin praises Proust for, is the work, or better the very essence of identities of this serial sort. They inhabit the subject who most of time is neither aware of their presence. “To reveal them in our lived life”, that is the question: as discussed above, it is about that that Benjamin diverges from Proust, since by overcoming subjective contours to open to socio-historical forces he eventually abandons temporality to reach the contrastive compresence of instants of dialectical images. One could say that Benjamin transposes the affinity between fragments from their integrative potential in time to their redemptive force outside time, thus moving from the combination of diachronicity and synchronicity to a dimension of pure, messianic synchronicity. The core of this argument is that intertwined time manifests itself in the features it provides these images with, as *Erfahrung* and its counterpoint between aging and rejuvenating are our transcendental gateway to these essences, be they serial identities or dialectical images: therefore it is possible to study the interaction of linear and non-linear dimensions of time by referring to what constitutes such images. Now the background has been prepared for the keystone of the confrontation to be introduced: Auerbach’s reconstruction of the concept of *figura* in the context of his literary criticism.

Auerbach’s interest for such a concept comes out of his studies on Dante. In the article *Figura* the author outlines a history of the eponymous word’s uses and meanings. At the beginning he writes that “originally *figura*, from the same stem of *ingere*, *figulus*, *factor*, and *effigies*, meant ‘plastic form’” and after adds that “the notion of the new manifestation, the changing aspect, of the permanent runs through the whole history of the word” (Auerbach 1938, p. 12 – following quotations referring to the same work will only report the page number between brackets).

Here we face a first motif, “something living and dynamic” implied in the very origin of the notion. This is why *figura*, as Latin progressively takes charge of the legacy of “the philosophical and rhetorical elaboration of the language of Plato and Aristotle” (14), is used to translate the term *schèma* which refers to the perceptual shape of matter, as opposed to *morphè* and *eidos* which refer to what matter is informed by and which are translated with the word *forma*. However “*figura* is broader [...] than *schèma*” (16) since it also translates what in Greek is meant by the words *typos*, which signifies imprint, and *plasis*, plastic form; on the other hand *schèma* brings along the meaning of “outward shape” in the context of scientific terminology and *typos* the one of exemplary (of a universal law). Hence, the original tension in *figura* is further developed as its usage in the process of Hellenization of Roman culture produces a semantic ambiguity between its original sense and meanings that eventually “efface the already faint dividing line with *forma*” (15). Notice that, paradoxically, such a contamination intensifies rather than dampens the index of dynamicity entailed in *figura*’s *potestas verbi*, since it gains all the energy of this contradiction. We can therefore conclude that, within the notion, a plastic element and a formal element coexist.

This leads to the second motif, that we find, for Auerbach, in Lucretius:

The important transition from the form to its imitation, from model to copy, may best be noted in the passage dealing with the resemblance of children to their parents, the mixture of seeds, and heredity; with children who are *utriusque figurae* (“of both *figurae*”), resembling both father and mother, and who often reflect *proavorum figuras* (“the *figurae* of their ancestors”), and so on. [...] Here we see that only *figura* could serve for this play on model and copy; *forma* and *imago* are too solidly anchored in one or the other of the two meanings; *figura* is more concrete and dynamic than *forma* and preserves the individuality of the original more purely than *imago*<sup>4</sup> (16).

In this passage we can track down many themes. First: *figura*, by virtue of its nature, is employed to complicate the relations between the original and the copy under the concept of similarity. Children are themselves *figurae* and reflect others’ *figuras* – singular exemplars overlaps, as their contours fade, and

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<sup>4</sup> “...and preserves the individuality of the original more purely than *imago*” is actually absent in the English translation; it is my translation. In order not to make confusion with our previous use of the term “image”, we may best understand *imago* as “picture”.

resemble each other. Second: *figura* refers to a concrete individual that we can neither associate to *forma*, since it would signify an essence too abstract to interlace and mutate with matter, neither to *imago*, for it would rather designate a view in which no singularity emerged. Third: due to its carrying of the meaning of perceptual shape, *figura*, as Auerbach states right after, is applied by Lucretius even to the copies of individuals that “peel of things like membranes and float round in the air [in the context of] his Democritean doctrine of the “film images” (*Diels*), or *eidola*, which he takes in a materialistic sense” (17). Lucretius also calls *figurae* “dream images”, “figments of fancy”, and “ghosts”. Therefore we discover that *figurae* can be external data or impressions organized as to denote individuals that the subject happens to perceive and also his own productions.

It is with Christianity that Western culture was able to make another step in the progression of *figura*'s meanings, which is the object of the third motif that has to be pointed out. Tertullian is the first to make use of the term to designate the prophetic quality of a biblical individual and his biography in relation to Jesus or other future entities and events, like Church; in this sense as *figura* (e.g., *Christi*), such an individual is now “something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical. The relation between the two events is revealed by an accord or similarity” (29). What is new from previous insistences on dynamicity, similarity and concreteness is that in Tertullian those elements get harmonized and systematized in the tension inherent to a real exemplar towards another analogue one. The latter pole of the connection, the “concrete historical facts” (30) to which *figurae* tend, is what is called their “fulfillment”: since they are still incomplete, only the advent of what they pre-figure gives them back their true meaning and identity.

Augustine remarks other fundamental features of Christian notion of *figurae*. For “the “heavenly” fulfillment is not complete as God's Final Judgement and Reign are yet to come, no historical fact can ever freeze *figurae*'s instability by completing them. The first fulfillment brings along a promise that is over-temporal, since it in turn needs the End of time after which God Himself keeps it: Auerbach refers to this as “an idealism which removes the concrete event, completely preserved as it is, from time and transposes it into a perspective of eternity”. From this standpoint exists an “omnitemporality of *figurae*”<sup>5</sup> that can be best understood in the following passage of Augustine, which Auerbach quotes:

*Quid enim est praescientia, nisi scientia futurorum? Quid actem futurum est Deo qui omnia supergreditur tempora? Si enim scientia Dei res ipsas habet, non sunt ei futurae, sed praesentes; ac per hoc non iam praescientia, sed tantum scientia dici potest (De div. quaest. ad Simplicianum, II, qu.2, n.2)* (“For what is foreknowledge but knowledge of the future? But what is future to God who transcends all time? If God's knowledge contains these things, they are not future to Him but present; therefore it can be termed not foreknowledge, but simply knowledge”) (41-43).

It is necessary God, as a divine standpoint from whose perspective all essences are synchronic, to establish similarities between them as *figurae* and fulfillments. This is the condition and the center of gravity of figural interpretation. Through God's eye temporal fragments, took from their diachronic dimension, are crystallized and put in contact together: the past, the present and the future converge into their final essence, which is the result of their being into time as it runs, folds upon itself and is eventually torn apart. This makes *figura*'s semantic realm “both real and spiritual, hence authentic, significant, and existential” (45). Auerbach describes the approach to this kind of concept as follows:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life (53).

Both referents, however, partake of linear temporality and of eternity, because “this eternal thing is already figured in them, and thus they are both tentative fragmentary reality, and veiled eternal reality”

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<sup>5</sup> This is not how the English translation sounds, but I take it to be more adherent to the original. See also Müller (2015).

(59-60). The “figural view of history”, as it is transferred from texts to reality, thus consists of discovering a *correspondance* between two entities – whose similarity is strongly confused with their very identity – by the grace of an index of a transcendent eternity hidden in both, vertically linking them to the divine standpoint.

As it has been said, Auerbach studied the notion of *figura* in the economy of his Dante criticism: now Dante is the inventor, the poet of the fourth, most crucial and extreme motif of the history of the concept. All starts with a visionary intuition of Dante: “the *Comedy* is a vision which regards and proclaims the figural truth as already fulfilled, and what constitutes its distinctive character is precisely that, fully in the spirit of figural interpretation, it attaches the truth perceived in the vision to historical, earthly events” (67). This is the turning point in art and in the way of seeing reality. We can articulate its consequences in three steps. First, beside inter-individual, Augustine-like figural devices (e.g., in the character of Francesco D’Assisi<sup>6</sup>), as the *Comedy* treats of the *status animarum post mortem* of concrete individuals who once were alive and are now encountered in the other world, Dante introduces a totally different, intra-individual kind of *figura*. Virgil, Cato and Beatrice exemplify it since their earthly existence is considered a *figura* of their real, revealed identity, which is the eternal fulfillment and result of a historical phenomenon. In other words, *figurae* become constituent of a unified, individual, singular identity. Notice also that for Beatrice this means an indifference to the origin of *figura*: as Virgil’s and Cato’s *figurae* are derived from history, which is the result of a linguistic impression, Beatrice’s one comes from direct, sensitive experience of her in Dante’s life.

We shall move to *Mimesis*, Auerbach’s masterpiece, to appreciate the second and the third steps - *Figura* ends by focusing on the first one, while here the author develops further his argument. In the chapter *Farinata and Cavalcante* he stresses once again the aggregating feature of *figurae* Dante employed<sup>7</sup>, then he notices what constitutes the second step:

The suspense inherent in the yet unrevealed future [...] has ceased. In the *Comedy* only Dante can feel this suspense. The many played-out dramas are combined in one great play, involving his own fate and that of all mankind; they are but *exempla* of the winning or losing of eternal bliss. [...] With Dante as spectator, all the dramas are played over again in tremendously concentrated form (Auerbach 1946, p. 197 – following quotations referring to the same work will only report the page number between brackets).

What is important of this passage is that Dante is a living – experiencing suspense, concern and commitment – spectator. Indeed, as we have seen in Augustine, the figural “dramas” would not happen if God did not guarantee their very possibility as the standpoint from which they can exist; but Dante’s *opus*, his universe and his characters, draws on a poietic act that depends on his individual and secular standpoint. It is Dante, from his particularistic, limited, contingent and situated point of view who organizes what he contemplates in order to produce the truth in the beauty of art; indeed a spectator is needed in order to establish a *correspondance*. That is precisely the reason for which he can apply figural reading to intra-individual identities, who are not related to other, providential entities but only to themselves: he is in the end their poet and creator, since they appear in the scenario posited by his vision, though he depicts it as a universal representation inspired by God. As a result, subjective standpoint takes over for the divine one.

But this appropriation of the standpoint, thus giving it in fact an immanent quality, is not the only attack brought to transcendence. There is another step, the third one, that illustrates this aspect. Dante “opened the way for that aspiration toward autonomy which possesses all earthly existence. [...] Figure surpasses fulfillment, or more properly: the fulfillment serves to bring out the figure in still more impressive relief” (200), for *Comedy*’s inclusion of temporality into eternity results in

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to notice that this is a reversed *figura*, as its fulfillment, Christ, is temporally prior to it. Auerbach proposes to call it “integral imitation”, also translatable as “existential imitation” (Auerbach 1944, p. 179).

<sup>7</sup> “There results as it were a tremendous concentration” (Auerbach 1946, p. 192).



a direct experience of life which overwhelms everything else, a comprehension of human realities which spreads as widely and variously as it goes profoundly to the very roots of our emotions, an illumination of man's impulses and passions which leads us to share in them without restraint and indeed to admire their variety and their greatness. And by virtue of this immediate and admiring sympathy with man, the principle, rooted in the divine order, of the indestructibility of the whole historical and individual man turns against that order, makes it subservient to its own purposes, and obscures it. The image of man eclipses the image of God. Dante's work made man's Christian-figural being a reality, and destroyed it in the very process of realizing it. The tremendous pattern was broken by the overwhelming power of the images it had to contain (201-202).

The apex of the figural interpretation coincides with the purification of it from its Christian roots that had been fundamental to develop its most peculiar characteristics. Dante's characters are alive, plastic, autonomous: they retain all their concrete features, amplified. The perspective is no more outside time, in a transcendent dimension of being, but inside time, which runs linearly as the progression of *figurae* is historical but which also convolutes itself in order to produce their unity in a repeated identity. This provokes a change in focus in favor of an immanent index of integration possessed by images.

Let us summarize the main points of Auerbachian figural interpretation. We call *figura* something that is dynamic and, in a sense, formal (hence, also static); that is related to other *figurae* by similarity; that is concrete; that can be experienced through an impression or an expression (or production); that is temporal and open, linked to a fulfillment which is temporal and open as well – so that we may simply consider it another *figura*; that can be inter-individual or intra-individual; that presupposes a standpoint in order to exist and relate; that is immanent. At the beginning of this paragraph we prepared a background for the interrogation that had been set at the end of the previous one: how to mark the difference between Proust's and Benjamin's teleology of time. Our leading intuition was that in order to clarify it we should deepen the interaction between linear and non-linear time. The background consisted of a reduction of time structures' interaction to its products, images: for Proust, dia-syn-chronic serial identities; for Benjamin, synchronic dialectical images. Now it is possible to apply Auerbach's hermeneutic tool to such images.

### 3. Figural comparison between Proust and Benjamin

I will make use of the motifs enucleated in the previous paragraph to define many figural dimensions within which it should be possible to highlight the distinction between Proustian and Benjaminian notions of time. Some of them may turn out to establish accordance, either. The presupposition is the following: it is possible to consider serial identities and dialectical images as made up of *figurae*. Just like *feuilletts*, *figurae* cumulate together into or show in filigree their true essence.

Experience of *figurae* is *Erfahrung*, which stores them in the body conserving their spiritual character; with regards to memory, they are perceptual traces of essences and contribute to shape the subject. This quite corresponds to the fact that *figurae* are concrete, reside in impressions or in expressions and are immanent, and both Proust and Benjamin would share such an assumption, as this is entailed in their bodily conception of memory. Be careful about this crucial point: as long as *Erfahrung* is embodied *figurae* may have a sensitive origin or a linguistic origin (which reflects the medieval transition of figural interpretation from text to history and Dante's transition from inter-individuality to intra-individuality), but this is indifferent to their characteristics, in fact it does not determine whether their *Erfahrung* is implicit or explicit, how they relate together, and so on. We have already discussed, by referring to the experience of time (but the same goes for the components of images which are produced by time), how dynamicity and staticity are to be predicated of what I am addressing to as *figurae*: for their openness and their "valence", i.e. their capacity to tend to something else which is also more identical to their true essence, they are dynamic, whilst as crystallizations constitutive of that very essence as materials and as parts of formal organization, they are static. They are the pages of the volume.

Having expunged these parameters, what is left can be grouped into three dimensions: the kind of relation *figurae* set up, the kind of openness they are qualified by, the kind of standpoint from which they are experienced. There is one aspect that is left aside: the inter- and intra-individuality. Surely, talking

about essences, Proust and Benjamin accept intra-individuality, whether it is referred to the subject (Marcel or Walter) or to other objects (Combray or commodity), since *figurae* coalesce into something or point to something. Do they interchange? Can *figurae* constitutive of an essence be co-opted in another? This is true for Proust, for in his *Recherche* one can read, e.g., that “*Albertine tenait, liées autour d’elle, toutes les impressions d’une série maritime qui m’était particulièrement chère*” (Proust 1954, vol.2, p. 363). For Benjamin the same mechanism applies to his notion of constellation (in a letter to Gretel Adorno, he calls it “figure”<sup>8</sup>). However, that is not related to any peculiar time structure, so it won’t be taken into account.

### 3.1. Time’s structure: integration vs redemption

The first distinction between Proust and Benjamin in terms of figural approach to time is about the force that animates *figurae* establishing different relations between them. Recall the issue of teleology: for Proust it is internal, for Benjamin it is external to time. For Proust the now is the pinnacle of the essence, which is perfect in the sense that there is nothing beyond it so far - it is indeed passible of a further development by the accumulation of new *figurae*, but when it is experienced it is complete. In order to come into being as an essence, it is necessary for its *figurae* to repeat themselves with some kind of variation: repetition is inscribed in linearity, since it is a diachronic event. For Proust, as explained above, *figurae* are endowed with an integrative potential under the principle of seriality. It is by virtue of such quality that the linear dimension of time plays a role in his conception of it. On the other hand, the non-linear facet of time is indispensable in order to make essences emerge in the juxtaposition of two exemplars of their serial identity: only synchronicity of *figurae*, as it is provided by a fixed standpoint, allows them to cumulate and aggregate by tending to one another. Affinity between *figurae* is thus inflected as integration (linearly) through and (non-linearly) into time. This reflects our first recon about Proustian particularity in the second half of the first paragraph, i.e. the perfection of his essences.

On the contrary, Benjamin denies that essences, as they come in front of our sight, are perfect: they need completion, without which they cannot be essences at all but rather promises of themselves. From such perspective, *figurae* are in the end always punctual and synchronic for the standpoint, since they fail to aggregate into one: in *Jetztzeit*, that is a clash between epochs, *figurae* do not merge into a synthesis, but they show that the present and the past are incompatible, since their index of redemption has not been satisfied yet. That very index is, however, what grants them their impossible unity. So here linearity has to be intended in a really weak sense: it is only a determination of what is past and what is present, which are quite indifferent to one another. Non-linearity is indeed the dimension where *figurae*, displayed alongside each other by a common redemptive force, cut across time, searching for their fulfillment outside it. This is why, for Benjamin, convoluted time is ultimately the sole detaining significance.

### 3.2. Time’s extension: seriality vs dialectic

“It will be a gloomy series”: thus wrote Claude Monet about his painting *The Bridge at Vervey*<sup>9</sup>. It is not daring to consider Impressionism as a gear shift in Western representation of reality, maybe even more decisive than photography and cinema. Arnold Hauser put it at the roots of the whole following art, included Proust’s work<sup>10</sup>. But as the quotation from Monet aims at demonstrating, Impressionism is not only – nor, maybe, primarily – concerned about impressions, but also, and this is crucial, about series of them. Seriality is its own principle. Impressionist serial paintings challenged traditional art as they shattered the whole of the essence paintings were supposed to represent; from this perspective, photography only complicated the conflict, since on the one hand it made it possible to jeopardize even traditional paintings’ unicity by virtue of the technological reproducibility of works of art it allowed – this intuition was the guiding idea of Benjamin’s most known essay<sup>11</sup> – and on the other hand it

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<sup>8</sup> Letter to Gretel Adorno (16 August 1935).

<sup>9</sup> Letter to Alice Hoschedé (4 April 1889).

<sup>10</sup> See Hauser (1951).

<sup>11</sup> See Benjamin (1935).

introduced the possibility to have, exception made for their material support, identical exemplars in a serie. In other words, Impressionism and photography brought to light the serial aspect of essences; it is not that it did not exist before – we have seen that, e.g., it was auroral in Dante – but by focusing on instantaneous flashes, by reducing to the extreme the time compressed in images, by approximating to the furthest limit before temporal zero, Impressionism and photography exposed in the most icastic way such a temporal ontology, which would have been a blasphemy to Plato and Aristotle, but that in Christian thinkers was already foreshadowed.

This had an enormous impact upon Proust's doctrine, as on this basis he rejected the possibility to ever come to know essences – Balbec, Saint-Loup, his own self: in the *memoire involontaire*, in which two exemplars overlap, serial essences just become enjoyable, so that one can recognize their existence, but no more (especially in cognitive terms). It is by virtue of their temporality that “for Proust, characters are not *beings* at all. Fugitive and ungraspable, they are essentially without essence” (Bal 2015, p. 221), in that seriality does not provide fixed identities and undercovers that its exemplars may integrate, as heterogeneous as they are, in the most unpredictable way. It is simply impossible to know the full set of *figurae*. What can we infer about Proustian time from this? In the first place, as stated, the temporality of essences. As linearity and convolution are two aspects of time, we find them operate together in order to generate serial identities, whose exemplars' relations have been discussed above. In the second place, the temporality of *figurae*, which coalesce in a progression of repetitions. Instead, Benjamin cannot accept such temporality of images (and of their *figurae*) for they are not for him wholly filled with time: their cipher is punctuality, which is produced by the empty space that connects their parts. They are involved in a dialectic, an infinite repartee that as a principle fixes opposites and let their chemical reaction get started without producing any substantiality, but only a tension. Benjaminian *figurae* lack time. This mirrors the third aspect of our confrontation between the two authors, seriality *contra* punctuality.

I have previously employed the expression “openness” to contradistinguish this dimension of *figurae*: here the stress is not on time's structure, but on its spatial extension. We can now understand why Proust and Benjamin look quite similar, though not identical, about their understanding of temporal patterns, while they misalign more about their domain - we should not reason in terms of contrasts but rather of occupation of more or less coinciding regions. Figural reading shows that the only difference about how exemplars interact is produced by the temporal quality of the image they tend to be organized by: as a regulative principle, seriality or dialectic alters the teleology of time's structure, but the main difference is located at its level, i.e. the level of essences and *figurae*'s openness to time. This second dimension, which defines not if time is linear or convoluted but how wide its interlace with space spreads, indeed counteract on the first one: this is why although Simon's assertion about Proustian and Benjaminian shared simultaneity is not wrong yet it is wanting with regards to the fact that a figural variable intervenes and modifies in divergent ways the positions of the two authors.

### 3.3. Time's essence: private *vs* collective standpoint

We may now focus on the aspect of *figurae* which refers to the standpoint. For Proust, as Gilles Deleuze rightly stated,

indeed, there exists an activity, a pure interpreting, a pure choosing that has no more subject than it has object, because it chooses the interpreter no less than the thing to interpret, the sign and the self that deciphers it. Such is the “we” of interpretation [...]. Interpreting has no other unity than a transversal one; interpreting alone is the divinity of which each thing is a fragment, but its “divine form” neither collects nor unites the fragments, it carries them on the contrary to the highest, most acute state, preventing them from forming a whole (Deleuze 1964, p. 128).

The passage brings seriality to its ultimate consequences. Essences are perfect yet unstable, open and unknowable, and they can only be experienced in the now of analogy, in the explicit modality of *Erfahrung*, as images that are around, aside, above, everywhere, ever foreshortened, never in full sight: this holds for any object and for the subject. No one of these can be the standpoint, since no one of these can provide unity on its own. Recall that for Proust essences are privately produced, which was the

second element in the comparison with Benjamin. But this production cannot be the work of the self, as it is as serial as anything else. Here we face both an individual and superindividual perspective, which is precisely the Deleuzian “we of interpretation” that Proust calls “*vrai moi*”: this retains that divine capacity, before ascribed to God, to display all *figurae* in front of its eye and let them converge towards different images. Deleuze recognizes them as principles of individuation and states that their unity is “transversal”, while the standpoint, as a “formal structure” is what sets a squared transversality between them. The “*vrai moi*” is thus the supreme point of view, separated from the subject, from the object and from their *figurae*, which in this sense “neither collects nor unites the fragments” (be they serial identities or their exemplars) as it is the global affirmation of each one of them. This is indeed the final revelation of *Le temps retrouvé*: the body, by virtue of its *Erfahrung* and memory, carries folded essences within it, which are “*réels sans être actuels, idéaux sans être abstraits*” (Proust 1954, vol.3, p. 873): with an extraordinary effort, in “*la durée d'un éclair*” of such explicit experience, not only them, but also the global configuration as the result and the origin of a lifetime appears. This standpoint is individual just for its privateness: it unfolds the whole history, the universe of *figurae* and their integrations, as they involve the body of the actual self who is the contingent subject of the experience.

Things are different for Benjamin. The standpoint from which *figurae* and dialectical images show themselves is in his conception an unidentified, secret *rendez-vous* of succeeding generations casting a messianic light upon fragments of past, hence shining with future; it is a collective and convergent point of view, made accessible by the participation of every individual to society and history in a Marxist sense. This is not the explication of merely private experiences: it is the universal memory that tends to the fulfillment of all its promises, whose sum is redemption. Unlike Proust, for whom the “*vrai moi*” belongs to every center of memory as its purest form, Benjamin considers the standpoint a holistic eye that, for this motive, trespasses temporal memory; this is also why it can be socially organized.

The problem of the standpoint captures another dimension of time. Alongside time’s structure and extension, now what emerges is its essence itself. Proustian standpoint implies that “*en dehors du temps*”, actually, there is nothing: nor the essences, nor the “*vrai moi*” itself. Time exists as it creates its *voyeur*, an auto-interpreting memory: in front of the standpoint time is brought to the coincidence of linearity and convolution, in an intertwined reality that a volume again, as a three-dimensional mosaic, represents best. All is imbued with time, but with different significances. The expression “*en dehors du temps*” simply means outside the time of *figurae* and of essences, in the place which is no place, as it is dimensionless as a monadic scope that embraces a world. This of course caused Szondi to assert that what distinguishes Benjamin from Proust is the latter’s attempt to freeze linearity as opposed to the former’s purpose to grasp future from simultaneity. Since the “*vrai moi*” does not surpass the fragments but only displays their multitude it can indeed appear that Proust is concerned about producing a stall of linearity – but this is what one gets only if he arrests himself at the first impression. Simon predicates the temporal simultaneity of his art, instead. By distinguishing between figural levels of interpretation, we propose that, at the highest one, Proust insists on the coexistence of all *figurae* and essences in their spatiotemporal relations so far; that all essences as images or serial (or repeated or transversal) identities or principles of individuation belong to this domain; that *figurae* connect themselves linearly and convolutedly. This phenomenon is material and spiritual: material, as it is permitted by the memory stored in a body, and spiritual, as that memory cannot do anything but immediately auto-interpret itself.

Benjamin’s *rendez-vous* is temporal in a different sense. As the standpoint is a collective heritage whose sight is not limited to what has happened so far but also to what is yet to come, the temporality of *Jetztzeit* consists of its enactment and its medium, that are the gateway through which an individual may access an inter-individual patrimony. *Figurae*, thought they are produced into time as both linear and non-linear, only account for this second aspect; this in fact is at the origin of the incomplete essences that are dialectical images, which show flaws in time’s texture whose result is exposing its extensive limits; eventually, in order to judge about this, the standpoint must be external to time, for it can link the fragments of messianic force to history, as the perpendicular to temporality. Then time is always coexistent with its negative, it is itself dialectic, as it is observed from the perspective of redemption. We may consider such standpoint, whose correlated experience is illumination, a “we of interpretation” that surpasses all bodies and memories and is located above the whole existence. Were one to ask what would



be of time when the synthesis comes, it would cease in the sense that the standpoint would collapse: time would not become naught, but simply meaningless, or meaningful in a totally different way. What matters is that for Benjamin time is more a collective socio-semantic phenomenon than an private, ontological one.

#### 4. Conclusions

This essay has been an attempt to make use of Erich Auerbach's interpretative concepts in order to clarify the distinction between Proustian and Benjaminian notions of time. In particular, in the context of a figural approach to their works, we have distinguished three dimensions of *figurae*: how *figurae* connect together, what kind of openness they have and from what standpoint they are overlooked. This has allowed us to study three different characteristics of time: its structure, its extension and its essence. About temporal structure, both Proust and Benjamin share a theory of time as linear and convoluted, but for Benjamin the convoluted aspect is the most relevant. About temporal extension, Proustian images follow the principle of seriality, which is fully temporal; Benjamin's ones instead follow the principle of dialectic, which depends on a break in temporality. About temporal essence, Proustian time is an auto-interpreting memory, while Benjamin regards time as a possible interpretation of memory; the former is private and more ontological, the latter is collective and more semantical.

I suppose that the difficulty inherent to the confrontation between Proust and Benjamin lies in the fact that, in their work as well as in a part of the culture of their epoch, the concept of reality began to collide with the concept of its interpretation, thus provoking a unique interference between the two plans. But interpretation is not arbitrary; it is the result of infinite practices that react together, in a progression of authors that involves Proust as much as Benjamin. This is why *figura*, an interpretative tool that goes and transforms itself throughout history, seems to function as a good device to comprehend their theories. However, its use does not exhaust the topic; it only establishes a frame into which one can make things cohere in a meaningful language. Surely figural interpretation may reveal itself helpful to carry about other comparisons. It does not entail that there could not be other schemes capable of bringing into light neglected aspects so far.



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