

ON NOTES

If note-taking had a colour, I would imagine it to be grey.

It is hazy, holding many shades.

It's a meandering from one form to another.

Thoughts seem suspended —but nevertheless seemingly connected by loose threads within a web of many directions; centre-less.

Yet – eventually the miscellaneous mental material adopts a solid and fixed form on a piece of paper.

What does it tell us, then?

One could claim that note-taking's immediate and erratic quality provides access to the innermost thoughts of the writer. The notion of authenticity retains its high value in a contemporary period where mediums that are inherently multiple and based on reproduction are omnipresent, increasingly pushing the concept of originality towards obsolescence.

Walter Benjamin is known as having been a passionate note-taker, collector and archivist of his and other peoples' ideas and objects. He was a lover of the miniscule, the detail and the concreteness of the world of things. It is often stated that his miscellaneous notes reflect not only his work method and thought pattern, but also draw a portrait of the author himself. What is at any rate true is that his notes allow us to observe his fond and lively relationship to objects and their materiality. They make us aware of his fetishisation of things. Benjamin literally performed a cult around his notebooks and described them as “most tender and tidiest quarters”¹ without which he would have had been relegated to writing “homeless

¹ *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, ed. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwartz, Michael Schwartz, trans. Esther Leslie, London, 2007, p. 152. Original: „den zartesten und saubersten Quartieren”, Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Briefe*, Bd. IV, Frankfurt a.M., 1995 – 2000, S. 153.

thoughts”². This passionate relationship coincides with a somewhat obsessive attitude that is reflected in one of the thirteen theses Benjamin formulated in regard to the writer’s technique: “Let no thought pass incognito, and keep your notebook as strictly as the authorities keep their register of aliens.”³ One in fact easily succumbs to this notion of thingness when looking not only at his notebooks, but at all the material he so meticulously ordered and stored: manuscripts, picture postcards, photographs of Russian toys, hand-sewn pages, collaged paper fragments — his microscopic handwriting covering every last bit of available space on a sheet of paper. As Michael Taussig remarks in this context, editors and collectors “seem to have caught quite a dose of the fetish bug themselves”⁴.

I perceive most of Benjamin’s notes as visual compositions. I look at them rather than try to decipher them. A crossed out word is as much a component as a legible heading. So are the different modes of scratching through. Style, direction and colour of writing vary. Systems of signets add colourful elements. All manner of paper types with various emblems on them appear. (Famously, possibly out of economical shortages, Benjamin used every piece of paper he could find.) And nowadays stamps with the archive number (partly dating from times of the Theodor W. Adorno archive) have become part of the visual assemblage as well. It might not be surprising to precisely experience Benjamin’s notes in such a manner, since he himself consciously used graphical elements to lay them out. Explicit figures such as the ellipse or the coordinate system reappear. Topographical arrangements often replace the linear order of writing.

²Walter Benjamin’s *Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, ed. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwartz, Michael Schwartz, trans. Esther Leslie, London, 2007, p. 152. Original: „*obdachlos schreiben zu müssen*”, Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Briefe*, Bd. III, Frankfurt a.M., 1995-2000, S. 433.

³ *One Way Street*, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, New York, 1978, p. 80. Original: „*Laß dir keinen Gedanken inkognito passieren und führe dein Notizheft so streng wie die Behörde das Fremdenregister.*” Walter Benjamin: *Einbahnstrasse*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. IV.1, Frankfurt a.M., 1972, S. 106.

⁴ Michael Taussig: *Fieldwork Notebooks*, in: *100 Notes, 100 Thoughts: Documenta Series 001* (100 Notes – 100 Thoughts/100 Notizen – 100 Gedanken), Ostfildern, 2011, p. 13.

What we see are indexical signs, traces of the passing of time. A crossed out passage from a previous work session is visually as prominent as the most recent one; the Theodor W. Adorno archive stamp as present as the one of the Walter Benjamin archive. On the plane of a paper, the dynamics of time are arrested. What is temporally remote is physically present. “A new category of space-time: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority”⁵ – to converse with Roland Barthes – not only concerns the perception of photography but also that of notes as images.

Certainly one can translate these visual phenomena to the level of content, as is wonderfully done by the editors of *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*. However, the vague and intriguing qualities of note-taking seem to find a more suitable expression in the pictorial notion of a note. In suspending time rather than interweaving elements into a processual, linear thread; in moving along the surface rather than plunging into depth. And perhaps sometimes signs should be allowed to just be visual forms in their own right – no strings attached.

⁵ Roland Barthes: *Rhétorique de l'image*, in: *Communications*, No. 4, Paris, 1964, p. 47.