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Women as Constellation in Walter Benjamin's Aesthetics

Abstract

In seeking to combine the concept of the 'Feminine' and 'Aesthetics,' the approach here is to carry out an initial examination of Walter Benjamin's aesthetic theory, then delve into his texts on Eros, leading to his personal correspondence. These combined references will indicate his change of mind, moving from the feminine, as unique, towards its 'constellation formation'. Montage is the medium of leading with quotation as a mosaic incorporating the image of constellation. The use of montage has parallels in certain avant-garde art movements, its purpose being to disrupt a purely linear approach, in order to cope with the reality of the fragmentation of experience. Although we have little evidence of Benjamin's theory being connected to Gender Studies, we can take his theory on Eros as an example of how this philosopher foresaw some of the contemporary questions concerning women, amalgamating these with his Aesthetics theory.

Key words

women, aesthetics, montage, constellation

Introduction

It can be argued that Benjamin's Aesthetics is trans-disciplinary in a critical and methodological way. His theories not only unify different fields of knowledge, but transcend their borders, so overcoming internal limitations. It is possible to think about the feminine, sexuality, arts and

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history through an epistemological principle conceived as an image: namely, the constellation.

The principle point of this article is to bring up Benjamin's speculation on women, not only from the point of view of his studies of modernity, but in relation to the contrast created between his early studies on Eros and a different composition of woman, in analogy to his idea of constellation. This idea, which is methodologically important both for his philosophy of history, as well as for aesthetics, refers to the opposition with the system as an idea of wholeness and unity. When creating the analogy between constellation and the feminine, he changes the idea of women as an erotic natural unity – in order to approximate aesthetics and its fragmentary comprehension. The female figures assembled to the constellation idea keeps its typological differences under tension so as to become complex and fragmentary at the same time, in contrast with the woman image previously understood as cohesive and unique. Graemer Gilloch suggests an “aesthetic engineering” in Benjamin,¹ applicable to different contexts.

These are precisely the tasks of Benjamin's ‘aesthetic engineer’. Objects, edifices, texts and images are fragmented, broken and blasted from their usual contexts so that they may be painstakingly recomposed in critical contemporary constellations. The eclectic engineer juxtaposes disparate and despised artefacts, forms and media, so as to generate an electrifying tension, an explosive illumination of elements in the present.²

The metaphor of “aesthetic engineering” to deal with fragments – dialectical tension between the juxtaposed elements, in order to create “illumination” – to reach some kind of truth, is interesting in explaining a method which is not always easily comprehensible. We prefer to recognize this “engineering” as a method, coming from his studies on aesthetics and mainly applied to literature and in his theory of modernity, in which is included the question of the woman's body as the clearest reifying composition of modern capitalism.

Our purpose here is not to repeat his theories on modernity concerning women's bodies under capitalism, but to consider the feminine first by looking at some of his early writings on eroticism, which stand in contrast to an undelivered letter that he wrote to Annemarie Blaupot ten Cate, the Dutch painter. In this comparison, there are three perspectives of the feminine:

¹ G. Gilloch, *Walter Benjamin – Critical Constellations*, Cambridge 2002.

² *Ibidem*, p. 4.

a supernatural unity, a paradoxical condition – either romantic, beloved, unreachable woman or its opposite, the whore – and, the ‘woman as constellation.’³ We hope to demonstrate that his “aesthetic engineering,” or the method connected to his aesthetics, is capable of composing a constellation, after the destruction of the idea of women as supernatural unities.

The first two conditions, according to Benjamin, result from male blindness, based on an “atrophy and decline” to what is merely natural or non-natural. In this sense, he brings into opposition historical distance against naturalistic beliefs. *Eros* allows Benjamin to connect historical experience with experience of life, proceeding from the intellectual to the sexual sphere. Thus, it is possible to construe the meaning of his letter to the Dutch painter as a complex description of women, through a private example, set alongside the idea of constellation. First, however, an introduction on Benjamin’s aesthetic theory would be useful, so as to harness the themes of the feminine and aesthetics, which can then lead on to the idea of perception, fragmentation, mosaic, montage and constellation.

It is also timely to point out that this essay considers a particular aspect of Benjamin’s interest in sexuality and gender. More comprehensive studies have been published by German interpreters, including Sigrid Weigel,⁴ who devotes three chapters of her book titled *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise*⁵ to the subject. In the section ‘Leib und Bildraums’ (‘Body and space image’), she focuses on the issue of gender difference, on the relationship between *Eros* and genius in Benjamin’s early writings, on the language direction related to the gender *ratio* in order to approximate Benjamin to the contemporary feminist discussion on language. According to Weigel,⁶ Benjamin, in his early writings on language, based on the Bible, tells us about an “adamic” nomenclature dimension, which is to say that, if Adam is able to name

³ This article is a development of a presentation at a conference titled “Aesthetics and the Feminine”, in July 2015, in the University of Cork, Ireland. From the aesthetic point of view, my contribution was to present a relationship between these two issues through the eyes of a very important philosopher in the field of aesthetics. It is certainly a male conception of the feminine, but more than a male’s fantasy of the female, I aim to show the connection between Aesthetics and the feminine through the idea of constellation.

⁴ S. Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit. Walter Benjamins Theoretische Schreibweise*, Frankfurt am Main 1997.

⁵ Eadem, *Body – and Image – Space. Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, trans. G. Paul, London, New York 1996.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 136.

things, for Eve only silence remains. However, in another text from his youth, *Wie Sprachen Sappho und Ihre Freundinnen? (How did Sappho talk to her friends?)*, Benjamin considers female language as a different kind of eloquence. In short, the author interprets that therein lies an idea of a feminine language that would include performance and body pleasure, as well as a language incorporation of *ratio*. Somehow, this idea of a feminine language should bring Benjamin closer to Luce Irigaray's theory, when she says that women's speech has not yet been established; that the existing language of the female gender operates only through imitation of male speech – i.e., a condition of displacement with no proper place. The author also brings Benjamin close to Julia Kristeva's theory, concerning the relationship between silence and pleasure, as well as the paradoxical relationship between the feminine body as voiceless and the disembodied feminine voice. On the one hand, the absence of language is characterized by the silence; on the other hand, there is a mimesis of male speech by the 'ornamental female.' Finally, Weigel considers that the idea of a spiritual and sexual metamorphosis of men through the silent productivity of women is vital in his reflections on Eros and overcomes the traditional gender polarity. It is even possible to argue that, following the current theories, Benjamin effectively announces a transgender theory. He did not fully develop a theory, as such, but indicated it as an intuition.

In the first section of this essay, the intention is to deal with some conceptions concerning Benjamin's aesthetics as a philosophical basis for the main subject. The second section will then analyze the text on Eros, while the third section lays out our conclusions on Benjamin's feminine perspective as a constellation image.

On image and montage: the idea of constellation

Walter Benjamin has been identified as a "thinker-up" of images (*Denkbilder*). Many of these images have become a source of explanation and are often quoted by readers and interpreters. Indeed, Benjamin would often borrow images from other authors, philosophers and writers, transforming them – as he did famously with Nietzsche's words on Heraclitus – describing the 'Ephesian hermit' as 'a star without atmosphere.'⁷

⁷ F. Nietzsche, "Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen", [in:] idem, *Werke*, eds. G. Colli, M. Montinari, Berlin, New York 1967, p. 834.

He recalls this metaphor for loneliness within an epoch or culture that misunderstands its philosophers or poets at the conclusion of his essay 'On some motifs in Baudelaire,' saying that the poetry of Baudelaire "shines in the sky of the Second Empire, as a star without atmosphere."⁸ Beyond a strategy of writing, Benjamin began to develop a critical theory of quotation. In developing this presentation of thought, one of his aims was to shatter the linearity of a story and to awaken the reader, who might thus be liberated from an 'adhesive' empathy to the author's ideas.

The use of quotations is not akin to deference to the past, since when one conjures an image, retrieved in its virtual power, its meaning is destroyed and another meaning arises in conjunction with the present. This is no empty repetition, rather the destruction of a meaning in its original context, which could, however, be redeemed, in terms of the present.

The methodological approach linked to this strategy is the montage, which is explicitly mentioned by Benjamin as a method in the *Arcades Project*. The montage is associated with the technique of quotation, with the idea of mosaic, with the one of constellation, allegory, and finally, with the purpose of expressing philosophy in an anti-totalitarian and systematic way. One can say that montage is a *Zeitgeist* idea and technique adopted by some of the avant-garde art movements, such as Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism. Brecht's epic drama, and the literature of Joyce, Dos Passos and Döblin, is also related to montage. In a different way, films depend on the technique and notion of montage as the most important step in the completion of cinematographic works. Across the spectrum of photograms, the cut and editing of scenes – both still and in motion – the camera frame and other related techniques meant that human aesthetic perception was transformed in such a way that contemplation is no longer possible. This means of perception, prevalent in modern aesthetic theories, emphasizes that an all-encompassing concentration is needed towards the artwork. This current approach, which fragments aesthetic perception, is opposed to the idea of organic artwork. Therefore, for Benjamin, the use of montage in philosophy was a means of interjection, a basis from which one can break away from that all-pervading and systematic thinking, the power of which is to cope with the claims of a reality whose essence has become prey to the fragmentary world.

⁸ W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. IV-I, eds. R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main 1991, p. 138.

This specific feature, closely related to the technique of citation, became a major ally in the design of the implosive autobiographical genre held, for example, in his *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*. Firstly, because it tells of a life that is not composed sequentially. Secondly, as a consequence, it interrupts the illusion of the reader which would normally identify itself with the story. The reader's expectations are thrown off course, as he fails to encounter a life story unveiled in typically organic chronological stages: i.e. childhood, youth, manhood and old age. In the course of the narrative, surreal elements are inserted – such as dreams and impressions distorted by the child's sensorial perception – which is characterized as both magical and tyrannical at the same time. Strong political aspects are also depicted in fabulous images, such as the one of the moon that invades Berlin during the day, destroying the image of the family compound as in a portrait, shredding its bodies and covering the earth.

Berliner Childhood fulfills the historic project of recovering the past in the present, crystallizing the images remembered by the child as they represented themselves in the memory of an adult. What is presented as an image does not represent the private life of its author in his need for recognition and personal exposure. These are images that could 'crown' the collective social and historical experience circa 1900.

Eros and related matters⁹

When it comes to the relationship between women as constellation, the concepts we refer to are the very basis for our interpretation of Benjamin and his understanding of women, for there is no text written by Benjamin that we could follow step-by-step in scholarly fashion. Sometimes Benjamin's interpreters can find themselves identified with him in a similar instance, as shown in that photograph in the National Library in Paris, where we see him hunched over a desk – seemingly all forehead, shoulders and arms – pen in hand, reading and writing as though there is not a moment to lose. Remembering his 13 years of intense research in this environment, collecting quotations and configuring thousands of pages for the *Arcades Project*, it is not hard to imagine how so much theory and

⁹ Most of the analysis we present here was previously developed in an article published in a Brazilian journal for Aesthetics, titled *Artefilosofia*, Ouro Preto, n. 4, January 2008, pp. 54–60.

practice, philosophical principles and raw material from the 19th century could leap from these junctions into various constellations. The constellation we aim to embrace is partly theoretical, and partly connected to his life and his relationship with a special woman.

It seems paradoxical to begin with a short text written by Walter Benjamin in 1920, published posthumously, titled "About Love and Related Matters (A European problem)."¹⁰ Our analysis follows two steps: First, an approach to this text of only two paragraphs, which is part of a series of fragments organized by Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser under the title "On Morality and Anthropology" (*Zur Moral und Antropologie*), published in the sixth volume of his writings.¹¹ And, secondly, an approach to the themes of this set of fragments, which encompass the notions of Eros, psychology, perception, body, death, marriage, lies, shame, guilt regarding sexuality, and the figure of the prostitute; as well as a set of oppositions, such as spirit and body, spirit and sexuality, nature and body, pleasure and pain, distance and proximity, among others.

This text confines the concept of Eros to the question of the relationship between genders inserted into the opposition between nature and history. This is not developed as it later appears in the *Arcades Project*, whose complexity focuses on criticism of the idea of history as a natural evolution of society. From the critique of this linear and progressive representation of history emerges the concept of a proto-history (*Ur-Geschichte*), whose character, while arresting the progress, creates a new meaning of Natural History, its intention being to avoid mythical thinking. The text in question ranges from a supernatural image of women and the transfer of the erotic associated with the linguistic to the erotic associated with the intellectual. In other words, on the historical experience of life, stemming from the intellectual sphere in the direction of the sexual one, related to the perspective of history in general and to a subjective history.

Nevertheless, this relationship remains only sketchy. The opening theme takes into account an unprecedented revolution in the relationship between the sexes, possible to be perceived only by the one who is able to observe the actual transformation of centuries-old forms in history. Benjamin's criticism is directed at a false assumption that this change happens

¹⁰ W. Benjamin, "Über Liebe und Verwandtes. (Ein europäisches Problem)", [in:] idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., Vol. VI, pp. 72–74.

¹¹ Idem, "Autobiographische Schriften", [in:] idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, op. cit., Vol. VI, pp. 54–89.

only on the surface, based on the eternal laws of nature with regard to the difference between the sexes. In contrast to this type of naturalizing conviction, Benjamin opposes a historical distance.

“But how?” he asks, “can anyone sense the scope of these questions and not know that what history shows most powerfully are the revolutions in nature?”¹² For him, even if we assume an almost metaphysical foundation of erotic and sexual drive in women, this would be found buried so deep that it would be impossible to recognize it in “banal assertions” such as, for example, those related to the supposedly natural gender war (*Kampf*). “Even if this war does belong among the eternal verities, the forms it assumes certainly do not.”¹³

Following an argument representing the woman paradoxically, Benjamin affirms that this primordial and supernatural unity woman is sadly hidden by the “truth,” which regards her as natural. This “truth” is clearly a masculine perspective and, from his fear and inability to perceive the supernatural unity of the woman arises his failure and impotence. The supernatural life of women – as a result of men’s blindness, he says – “atrophies and declines into the merely natural, and thereby into the un-natural.”¹⁴ A process of dissolution is at work, the results of which establish the understanding of women in simultaneous images: the one of the prostitute and the one of the untouchable beloved.

Interestingly, it is noticeable by now that the perspective is always masculine, either when he conventionally creates the conflicting paradigms of the two types of woman or when it is he, and presumably only he, who will be able to restore the original meaning of the unity of woman. The figure of the prostitute¹⁵ in this text does not have the same interpretative value as it will receive in his later writings, yet it announces an interest to be developed in the design of the *Arcades Project*, with the admission of the prostitutes and lesbians of Baudelaire’s poetry now portrayed as heroines of modernity. For Benjamin, the “untouchability” of women is forged as a figure based on low desire and constrained as the figure of the prostitute. The untouchable woman figure is a male construction evidenced by the romantic love ideal.

¹² Idem, *Selected Writings*, Vol. I, 1913–1926, eds. M. Bullock, M. Jennings, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 1996, p. 229.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 230.

¹⁵ “Whore” would be a closer translation of the German word used by Benjamin: *Dirne*.

The idea that suffering is the unattainable romantic love brand is potently and tellingly expressed in the words of Benjamin when he says: "The great, authentic symbol for the permanence of earthly love has always been the single night of love before death."¹⁶

This goes for romantic love, which still feels "ownership" of the beloved. For the "young European generation," for whom Benjamin writes, the situation is no longer that, [...] "Only now it is not the night of love, as it was earlier, but the night of impotence and renunciation. This is the classic experience of love of the younger generation. And who knows for how many future generations it will remain the primary experience?"¹⁷

Returning to the initial part of the text, Benjamin said that the mythicized war between the sexes exists as illegitimate historical form, because of man's disability. There was a decline in what he calls the male "creative act of love" and he affirms: "Today European man is as incapable as ever of confronting that unity in woman which induces a feeling of something close to horror in the more alert and the superior members of his sex, since even they remain blind to its exalted origins."¹⁸ The disability and blindness of man makes women also incapable and blind to their professed supernatural unity.

So, what conclusion does Benjamin arrive at? Being at that time an attentive reader of Plato's *Symposium*, he relates impotence and desire, and says that he found a "new, unprecedented path for the man who finds the old path blocked" – that is, "to arrive at knowledge through possession of a woman."¹⁹ He talks about how to rise up to the knowledge of the essences, starting from the contemplation of a beautiful body with the one night of love before the death of romantic love. The "new and unprecedented path" reverses the dialectical movement of Platonic asceticism: it is not the idea of Eros, but from these ideas to Eros, or rather, the recognition of the idea of women as an intelligible Form going to the sensitive world, i.e., to the possession of her. This inverted movement would determine the male metamorphosis, "the metamorphosis of masculine sexuality into feminine sexuality through the medium of the mind (*Geist*)."²⁰ In this way, the man becomes similar to the woman, "Now it

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 229.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 230.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 229–230.

is Adam who picks the apple, but he is equal to Eve."²¹ The similarity, however, ironically, does not guarantee the result: "The old serpent can vanish, and in the re-purified Garden of Eden nothing remains but the question whether it is paradise or hell."²² We can take all this reasoning as a great irony, but what he assures us of, with this conclusion, is our finding as unacceptable the "natural" (and religious) assumption of eternal war that has developed between the sexes. Based on the idea of a 'tabula rasa' of the differentials for the transformation of male sexuality, we can begin thinking about the existence of such a dispute. It should be noted, however, that Benjamin's perspective remains, in a sense, 'platonian,' as it is grounded in the intellect, its associated gender being male.

This is clearly, however, an attempt by the author to provoke a reflection on men's understanding of women. There are further indications that allow us to identify a development of his reflection. The designed pictures of woman – the supernatural model woman, the male invention of a woman characterized by romantic love, and the prostitute – are not exactly original figures invented by the author. The figure of the prostitute, as already noted, has its meaning in the context of his study of modernity, turning it into an allegory of capitalist society; this allegorical and social characterization reappears in the house-street polarity ("beggars and prostitutes") established in the context of his bourgeois *Berliner Childhood*.

A woman as constellation: Anne Marie Blaupot ten Cate

Now we enter another stage of Benjamin's life and another significant piece of writing in particular. It is a draft of a letter²³ that was never sent to the addressee, written thirteen years after the first text. In this text, we find a transformation of the woman as supernatural paradigm, present at the beginning of the Eros text, into one that approaches the figure of the heroine of modernity as "guardian of the threshold" in the *Parisian Arcades*, along with another final indication of a third figure,

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem.

²³ This letter was originally part of the material under the guardianship of the Academy of Fine Arts of Berlin and the Theodor W. Adorno Archive, and was published in the sixth volume of Walter Benjamin's correspondence (*Briefe*, 1931–1934, eds. R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main 1998, v. IV, pp. 278–279).

the Sibyl, whose meaning leads us to the idea of another threshold between life and death.

The draft letter, dated 6th August 1939, was written in exile in Ibiza, probably intended for the addressee's birthday on the 13th of that month. According to Gershom Scholem's calculation, it would be Benjamin's fourth loving relationship: Dutch painter Anne Marie Blaupot ten Cate, known to Benjamin as Toet. She was a friend of Brecht, and had undertaken (along with her French husband Louis Sellier) the translation into French of the text "Hashish in Marseilles", and was an intermediary in publishing it in the magazine *Cahiers du Sud*, n. 168.²⁴ The two maintained a correspondence, exchanging news of a network of friends – at that time exiles – and talking about their difficulties. Benjamin wrote about her to Scholem saying: "I have met a lady who is the feminine counterpart of Angelus Novus."²⁵

He first met her in May 1933 in Berlin during the burning of books by the Nazis, encountering her again during his exile in Ibiza. In the draft of the letter, he says he loved a woman who was the only one and the best one. "She remained unique," he repeats. Addressing himself more directly to Toet, he writes:

[...] This has now changed. You are what I could never love in a woman, you do not have this [this unity], thus you are much more. Your features contain all that changes you from a woman to the guardian (*Hüterin*), from mother to whore (*Hure*). You transform yourself from one into the other and to each one you give a thousand forms. In your arms, destiny would forever cease to surprise me. Without fear and without risk, it would fail to distress me. The deep silence that hangs round you indicates how far you are from what worries you. In this silence, the change of the figures takes place: within you. They play with each other like the waves: whore and Sybil, expanding a thousand times.²⁶

More than just a fourth passion, or a merely biographical aspect, we find in this draft for Toet a number of ideas that coincide with the figures that have become iconic in his writings, whether in the analyzed text, in relation to the narrative of his *Berliner Childhood*, or the figure who is both guardian and prostitute in *Arcades*. The initial contrast to be noted is the

²⁴ *Cahiers du Sud*, n. 168, pp. 26–33.

²⁵ W. Benjamin, *Briefe*, 1931–1934, op. cit., letter dated 01/09/1933, n^o 806, p. 287. "Ich habe hier eine Frau kennengelernt, die sein [Angelus Novus] Weibliches Gegenstück ist."

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 278–279.

processing of the woman as a whole into a mutant figure composed of different aspects, gelling with the negative description of the angel inspired in Toet, the Agesilaus Santander, described as having “sharp claws” and “knife-like wings.”²⁷ A woman, who is much more than one and who brings together the horrific, the demonic and the enigmatic, as does a Sybil. While she inspires fear, she also inspires security. “Mother,” he says, in whose arms destiny would cease to surprise him. As for the figure of the prostitute, some caveats should be offered.

The underworld of the Parisian galleries in which about 10,000 gathered (according to the “census” of that time quoted by Benjamin, in contrast to the 28,000 before the revolution), was made up of revolutionaries and the decadent side of the city. Benjamin speaks of incendiaries disguised as women circa 1830, using, as a refuge, the same galleries. The prostitute is also, as intimated earlier, ‘the other side of the street,’ outside the bourgeois home in his autobiographical narrative. Above all, in Benjamin’s interpretation of the prostitute in the poems of Baudelaire, a dialectical image is created. In one of the most quoted extracts from *Arcades, Paris – the Capital of the 19th Century, Exposé, 1935*, Benjamin emphasizes one dialectical sense present in the image, whose manifestation is ambiguous. Benjamin speaks of the “law of dialectics in immobility,” which may sound unorthodox to modern dialectical sense, but, in speaking of immobility, it assumes the imagery manifestation that exposes the object in its dual and contradictory face, giving to it a dreamlike aspect. We can see three dialectical images: the commodity as fetish; the arcades, comprising house and street; and the whore, combining the vendor and the goods.

The figure of the Sybil also composes a dialectical image and refers to an element of those Arcades, not only the underworld and Parisian political scene, but from the depths of the earth; not as a cause of death, but as the guardian of her inevitable passage. Contained among the documents left by Benjamin – compiled in a single document by the researchers of the Walter Benjamin Archive in Berlin (*Walter Benjamin Archive*) – were some postcards with Sybil’s images,²⁸ reproductions of which are composed in a mosaic in Siena Cathedral, Italy. It is known from Benjamin’s letters that he visited this city in 1929. In an attempt to interpret the riddle of this

²⁷ J.-M. Gagnebin, *Sete aulas sobre linguagem, memória e história*, Rio de Janeiro 1997, p. 127.

²⁸ See: *Walter Benjamins Archive, Bilder, Texte und Zeichen*, Frankfurt am Main 2006, pp. 236–239.

small collection of postcards, correspondence relating to them and their contents, researchers are believed to have found a possible relation to the same review of Benjamin, quoted above, concerning the poetry of Baudelaire.²⁹

In this sense, a dialectic image is created in the image of women merging with death, which results in a third one: the city of Paris itself. The Paris of Baudelaire's poems, Benjamin says, is less the underground and more the underwater city. So, to the second conundrum: inscribed above this extract is a quote from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which says: *Facilis descensus Averno (Easy descent to Averno.)*³⁰ Averno is, at the same time, a river and the inlet of the underground world. In Virgil's poem, the Sybil leads the hero Aeneas to the underworld. In the interpretation of the researchers: "Without her, he would be lost, for she alone, who has a connection with the dead, can bring back the hero to the surface. In the underworld she guides him through what was, what is lost, to what is forgotten and helps him to see a new domain; she leads him into the past to show him the future."³¹ The relationship between the Parisian underworld and underwater makes the poetry of Baudelaire the 'Sybil-conductive' historian knowledge and the representation of the past, present and future of the city.

In the women figures of the unsent letter-draft, there are similar transformations: "from woman to guardian (*Hüterin*)," from "mother to whore (*Hure*)," and in the wave motion, the final images of the whore and the Sybil are magnified a thousand times. Returning to the text that was our starting point, Benjamin directed his speech to "European man," to the new and "future generations." He spoke from the perspective of one who not only notices the changes, but who had the ability to suggest a reversal of platonic "Eros" to form a new understanding of the female by the male and of the male himself. The tone is partly provocative and ironic. In that letter draft, we can glimpse other women's images and, above all, realize the disintegration of the organic paradigm of single figure woman when he transforms her into multiple.

The contrast accentuated between the text and the letter-draft – separated by a decade – aims to show the complete destruction of the unitary idea, the essential and naturalizing of women to counteract the oscillation

²⁹ W. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Cambridge 2002.

³⁰ Virgilio, *Eneida*, trad. J. Victorino Barreto Feio, São Paulo 2004, VI.

³¹ See: *Walter Benjamins Archive, Bilder, Texte und Zeichen*, op. cit., p. 237.

of different figures in the same and particular woman. It is not unique; it is composed of several women, constantly changing. Her image projected on the sky and sea, in the darkness and in the San Antonio Lighthouse helps him to compose a picture more than paradoxical: one constellate image of Toet as a different kind of beloved, who brings together differences, contrasts and changes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we discussed the feminine in connection to Walter Benjamin's concept of constellation. But what is its relationship with aesthetics? Three different answers could be given. First, taking aesthetics as sensation as a means of understanding Benjamin's reference to Plato's Eros in his early writing. Secondly, aesthetics as perception, as Benjamin had understood it in his Artwork Essay, which he related to a Greek doctrine. Aesthetics as perception, in the Artwork Essay, shows us that distraction – in opposition to contemplation – became the way to perceive what is no longer unique, and to deal in the modern world with fragmentation, where montage appears to be a model of constitution without the pretension of being entire or sequential. Thirdly, and closely related to the second point, that constellation is an idea which stemmed from aesthetics and art, dealing not only with fragmentation, but with 'montage' – a principle that inspired Benjamin's philosophy and aesthetics, the roots of which are to be found in literature and the arts.

The idea of constellation deals with fragmentation, although each unit remains independent, combined as a mosaic. The mosaic is another image that maintains the difference, the oppositions and the tension among its units. In his *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin uses the idea of constellation and the mosaic to propose a method of investigation and of presentation (*Darstellung*), opposed to the *more geometrico*, that deductive type of philosophical and scientific discourse, so aiming to demolish the traditional epistemology in philosophy, history and in the history of art. Thus, the idea of constellation, coming from an aesthetic and artistic context, plays a large role in the structure of his thought, which can be applied, as a meaningful image, to different circumstances and ideas. This is from where the merging of the constellation image with the feminine emanates; through the comparison of the feminine as a natural and unique entity to the complex image of the feminine suggested in Benjamin's letter-draft to

his Dutch friend, the painter Toet Blaupot ten Cate.³² In the letter-draft, the different types of women form a constellation – likened by him to the stars in the sky above San Antonio's Lighthouse of Ibiza, intertwining with the sea and its waves below. This complex image that he draws shows there is movement from one type of woman to another, forming an almost cinematographic fusion of the waves with the constellation whose single units are not only fixed and related to each other, but also in transit. Thus, this complex image reinforces our intention to bring closer together the feminine and aesthetics through the idea of a moving constellation.

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³² See: S Weigel, *Body – and Image – Space...*, op. cit., footnote 16 of Chapter VI, where she refers to Toet Blaupot ten Cate, recommending the conference of Wil van Gerwen: “Walter Benjamin 1932/33 auf Ibiza”, given at Benjamin Conference in Osnabrück, June, 1992, published by Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm, Munich 1999.

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