

Benjamin's Montage Technique to Build the Constellation as the Modern Storyteller's Tool to Frame the Magical

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Abstract. In order to understand the infinite, we have to create a certain frame which by doing so the process of inclusion and exclusion is unavoidable. As the technology evolves, the information gained is also infinitely produced. However, it is very difficult to get a wisdom which once easily absorbed via storyteller. To regain such a wisdom, Benjamin created photo montage technique which I argue is intended to build a constellation which will help us to navigate in the sea of infinity.

Keywords: Storyteller, Magical, Infinite, Incomprehensible, Incommensurable, Montage, Frame, Constellation

1 Introduction

Modern technology such as printing has created individuality. In the past, a story could only be told by a storyteller and everyone enjoyed it together in a community. With the coming of printing machine and its novel, people tended to enjoy it individually. The price to pay for this was that people were gradually detached and alienated from the community and environment. The wisdom of the story teller was gone buried by the progress of modernity. However, Benjamin attempted to regain such a wisdom in the age of modernity. His photo montage technique, I argue, is intended to build a constellation, which is commonly used by the story tellers to build a frame of a frame by using mimetic faculty, to frame the magical, those which are infinite, incommensurable, and incomprehensible.

To unpack my argument, we have to start with life itself. Life is infinite, incommensurable, and incomprehensible. Therefore, there has been many attempts to frame it to make it meaningful such as through literature on which there is a structure of beginning and ending. But then we will realize that literature is also infinite since essentially, we can also frame stories in stories. The number of the stars above is also infinite, incommensurable, and incomprehensible which lead us to create a system to understand it and we call it a constellation. Indeed, by understanding a constellation does not necessarily mean that we understand the stars. But at least it helps us to understand our position or situation in relation to the stars. The same goes with literature. To understand Shakespeare's works does not necessarily mean that we understand life but at least it helps us to live the life as we expect it to be.

On the Constellation and *The Task of the Translators*

If we trace back to answer the question what the first frame is, then probably we will get language as the connecting dot. It is not surprising that, as noted by Benjamin, the object of the first chapter of Genesis is "neither biblical interpretation, nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth, but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language" [2]. We may speculate that it means that the moment we say that we understand something, we can only understand it via language. In other words, there is nothing outside of language. Things only exist if it is inside of language. There is nothing outside of language at least relative to human position as a linguistic being. This explains why for Benjamin "we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything. An existence entirely without relationship to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit even within that realm of Ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God" [2]

If existence is inside of language then including our existence is inside of language. Benjamin clearly argues in the same way by saying that "this mental being communicates itself in language and not through language. Languages therefore have no speaker, if this means someone who communicates through these languages. Mental being communicates itself in, not through, a language" [2]. Since we cannot escape language, we can also consider language as infinite, incommensurable, and incomprehensible or as Benjamin calls it, magical. Regarding this Benjamin says that "the notion of the magic of language points to something else: its infiniteness. This is conditional on its immediacy. For just because nothing is communicated through language, what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity". [2] In short, life is magical, even after it is framed by language, it is still magical and even the language as the tool to frame it is also magical since the nature of its infiniteness. In other words, we can still frame language and literature is the proof of the frame within the frame.

Before the Fall, adamic language is pretty much like a yin yang symbol or binary code 0/1 without any danger of misunderstanding. Indeed, by using such a language we have already frame the life but it is still in its infancy and it has its own danger. To have language (logos) will lead to the extrapolation of knowledge which often times considered dangerous and therefore

symbolized in the bible that by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge will lead to the fall or if use ancient Greek myth that after gaining the fire provided by the Prometheus will lead to the opening of the Pandora Box. I argue that all Benjamin writings are essentially related to this theme of the Fall which then extrapolated into 'from Idea into copy' or 'from symbol into allegory'. (Here I arbitrarily put them into the same position, but it is important to keep in mind that Idea and copy and Presentation and representation are not on the same level, the same goes with symbol and sign or allegory. However, we can all see it as a form of extrapolation of knowledge). Indeed Benjamin, regardless his religious perspective, refuse to take this situation negatively. On the contrary, the extrapolation of knowledge, such as from story into novel, from aura of the object into the aura of the subject, or from one language into many languages, for Benjamin is a chance to build a constellation that might give us the feeling of remembrance again. Remembrance here is not necessarily Platonic anamnesis but more on the level of mnemonic of the storyteller or to be precise the constellation of the modern storyteller. It is impossible for us to return to the age of mnemonic or to the age of symbol, which therefore Benjamin makes an attempt to create at least something that resemble both of them and calls it remembrance (eingedenken). If Plato's anamnesis can be put into religious belief then it is not a big wonder to see that Benjamin call his attempt as a messianic.

To explain my argument, let us start with *The Task of the Translator*. Here Benjamin shows us the case of from one language into many languages and the need of the translation. Benjamin mentions that essentially translation, like arts, is not necessarily for the reader. "No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener. Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original? This would seem to explain adequately the divergence of their standing in the realm of art" (Illuminations, 69). He further mentions that "any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information-hence, something in-essential. This is the hallmark of bad translations. [1] The echoes of inessentiality of information can also be found in *the Storyteller* on which the seed of experience can grow into wisdom which can be externalized in daily life actions, while information is mostly something simply pass-by. We have to keep in mind that we, including Benjamin, live in a world of information. What Benjamin is trying to do is to make something out of that condition. The world of story is easily memorized since the experience is transferred to the community in the form of memory by using its mnemonic characteristics which means that it has created a constellation or a frame to be followed by the storyteller's audience while the readers of the novel need to build their own constellation since it is once again an overwhelming magical situation that is presented by the novel, not to mention by the news and its information. Therefore, the world of translation is also an overwhelming magical situation which need to be framed to create a constellation.

According to Benjamin, "translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability. [1] Benjamin further accentuates that "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them (Illuminations, 70). If we refer back to our previous

discussion then we can simply conclude that life is essentially untranslatable which therefore man creates a fantasy of totality in order to move forward via language and make things translatable. Untranslatable is the real or the real magical while the translatable is already in the discourse of language. Since the nature of language is also infinite then it can also create many frames of various layers of copy upon copy or translation upon translation.

For Benjamin “translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential that they be translated; it means rather that a specific significance inherent in the original manifests itself in its translatability. It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards the original. Yet, by virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with the translation; in fact, this connection is all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original. We may call this connection a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital connection. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original-not so much from its life as from its afterlife. For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life. [1]. Manifestation is presentation while phenomena are representations. It means that manifestation essentially has no connection with phenomena or representations or we can also say that the original has no connection with its copies or translations. It can easily be understood via comparison which shows that there is no connection between a rabbit and pictures of rabbit. Layers of copies or translations are similar to the photoshop editing of the pictures of the rabbit which essentially has nothing to do with the rabbit itself. Therefore, the notion of after life is important since it shows that it has been framed. Death means that it has been framed and afterlife is the evolution itself. Insisting on the sameness with the original would simply mean death without after life.

On the notion of the changes in life Benjamin argues that “the concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, the range of life must be determined by history rather than by nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul. The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history” [1]. It is very important to highlight here that the characteristic of the nature is in its non-changing essence which can be perceived has been radically changed by Darwin with the theory of evolution on which it shows that the nature is also changing. History can be defined as the records of this changes which then posit a question whether the philosophers' task is merely on the non-changing essence or also on the changes which of course would mean history. The discussion of history, I argue, is the hallmark of the difference between Plato and Benjamin since Plato really concerns on essence to return to the Form while Benjamin embrace the changes or history in his messianic project.

So how can we know when the translation makes a change? Benjamin mentions that “translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when in the course of its survival a work has reached the age of its fame. [1]. This notion becomes a starting point of an event (similar to Derridean event) which transgress the boundary which is no longer personal but shared. In short, personal translation can be considered as a bad translation while a shared translation on which fame is achieved is the good one.

Since sharing requires a form of relationship then Benjamin mentions that “All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance. Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form. This representation of hidden significance through an embryonic attempt at making it visible is of so singular a nature that it is rarely met with in the sphere of nonlinguistic life. This, in its analogies and symbols, can draw on other ways of suggesting meaning than intensive—that is, anticipative, intimating-realization. As for the posited central kinship of languages, it is marked by a distinctive convergence. Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express [1]. If we try to locate then the original is in the realm of manifestation in the form of presentation not in the realm of Idea (or Form) and the manifestation of life can only be represented by its significance while the attempt to present the manifestation will always be in vain since it is once again magical. The only possibility that translation can make is the fact that like in Venn diagram translation has the ability to interact with many other parties and its existence is always anticipate the existence of other parties as in communication always anticipate the interlocutors. Therefore, Benjamin argues that “no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process” [1] It means that it is the heart of evolution or the essence is in itself in the changing. Further, Benjamin argues that “even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal” and “the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations [1]. Benjamin also mentions that “all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole—an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language. [1]. This means that every language has their own intention. Based on such intention then we have a kinship of many languages. Such a kinship is manifested in translation. Totality of these intentions is called as a pure language. As a comparison language is a parent who has a child or intention. What connect a parent with other parents is that they bear the same fate of having children which is called parenthood (Kinship). Translation is the communications

among parents about their children. The totality of the communication is what form the school (pure language). In short, school can only be formed not by one parent because one parent is simply a fragment and school can only be created because of the totality of the communication of communications among parents. In other words, this is also related with relationship and relationship is related with a structure or as we have called it often times as a constellation which in Benjaminian sense is always messianic in its nature. Therefore when Benjamin mentions that "the words Brot and pain "intend" the same object, but the modes of this intention are not the same [1] it simply means one child A and another child B both are children. One child is called Taufan and another child is called Mia. The intention is the same but the mode of the intention is different. This is what is called intention and object.

To elaborate more, Benjamin mentions that "In the individual, unsupplemented languages, meaning is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux-until it is able to emerge as pure language from the harmony of all the various modes of intention. Until then, it remains hidden in the languages. If, however, these languages continue to grow in this manner until the end of their time, it is translation which catches fire on the eternal life of the works and the perpetual renewal of language. Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness? [1]. Here Benjamin gives us a compelling argument which shows that nothing can stand on its own and everything has to be in relationship with other things. If we put the example in language then a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, an essay or even a language itself has to be sustained by a relationship for its existence. To illustrate, the sentence "I love that smart girl" if written in "I" then the readers cannot decide whether this is an "I" or a number "1". If it is written as "I love" then the readers will probably understand that it is an "I" but still kind of confused since it fails to deliver a clear meaning. Even if we write it completely with "I love that smart girl" it is essentially will still fail to deliver its meaning without the convention of English language. Further even English language will also fail without the convention of what is a language. Therefore, translation as a form of communication among language is expected to be able to reveal what is a pure language. In other words, the pure language is categorization of many languages. Once again, we need to bear in mind that constellation is such a relationship. Stars are infinite and we arbitrarily create a relationship among the stars. Languages are like the stars. By using translation, we can create many constellations which hopefully can push the boundary toward its magical which is infinite. This explains why Benjamin quoting Kant saying that "Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express. [1]. To conclude, translation is like harmony in music. The original is like the melody and translation is like the harmony, both rhythm and base. From this harmony, we can play it with not only one instrument by with many instruments and even creates an orchestra or let us say a pure language. To return to the pure language means to expand from merely "to symbolize" into "to be symbolized". Symbolized

enable us to see the decay and moves further from it. Therefore, the continued life of the original which is sustained via translation put translators both in contemporariness of the author's times and the times on which he lives. In short, the only way to gain back Pure Language is via the progress which in this case is translation. In addition, we have to always also keep in mind about the point of untranslatability since it reveals the looseness with which meaning attaches to the language itself or to any constellations we have created.

On the Constellation and *the Storyteller*

Benjamin's attempt to write a constellation is also clearly depicted in *the Storyteller*. A storyteller is essentially someone who by using certain mnemonic device has memorized many stories. Such a mnemonic device is what I argue function as the constellation. It is not surprising that Benjamin start by discussing the role of memory. According to Benjamin, "memory is the epic faculty par excellence. Only by virtue of a comprehensive memory can epic writing absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other" [1]. For a storyteller, to remember is the heart of its own existence. Therefore, they tend to worship Mnemosyne. According to Benjamin, "Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the Muse of the epic art among the Greeks. This name takes the observer back to a parting of the ways in world history. For if the record kept by memory-historiography-constitutes the creative matrix of the various epic forms (as great prose is the creative matrix of the various metrical forms), its oldest form, the epic, by virtue of being a kind of common denominator includes the story and the novel" [1]

Benjamin further explains that "memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practiced by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story when-ever her tale comes to a stop. This is epic remembrance and the Muse-inspired element of the narrative" [1]It is obvious that the storyteller used a method or a frame or a constellation that is not easily applied in modern day life since it requires everyone to use the same frame. The example of the frame of *Arabian Nights* which is used by the Sufis to disseminate their teaching clearly shows that everyone needs to succumb to the story of Scheherazade's frame to frame other stories. In other words, we are required to memorize certain pattern before attaching a new knowledge. Therefore, the pattern of such a storyteller tends to be exclusive. If we use Sun Tzu's frame, then it is going to be different than Scheherazade's frame which therefore is not universal. The universality of the method that becomes part of our modern-day life is what makes this method hardly accepted. However, we cannot deny that these methods work. They work perfectly well not only in the past but also for

our own era. It has been proven by the mnemonist, not a modern storyteller, who can use their own frame to memorize many different information. The only difference is that most of the times nowadays mnemonist use their frame with the goal only to memorize not to gain wisdom.

Storyteller's wisdom is gained via experience. Therefore, a story tends to be about the moral of life while a novel is more on the meaning of life which we can arbitrarily create. We also have news which essentially only disseminate information. Wisdom is related with internalization of knowledge which can only be gained via experience and not information. It is because the nature of information is using reason which tends to force its truth while story telling is more like planting a seed and letting it grow. Hoax is essentially about forcing a form of information not about how the audience receive the information. It happens since information has a characteristic of verifiability on which everything is 'understandable in itself'. What information provide is its newness. With information, everything has already been explained and those who refuse to believe it will be considered stupid. In short, the nature of information is 'I am right, and you are wrong' while story is free from explanation. We are allowed to interpret a story and let our interpretation grows like a seed which grows if we nurture it.

If wisdom is gained by listening to the stories which by design are easier to be memorized and internalized, then are we still gaining wisdom in modern life? Can we really internalize academic writings including Benjamin's own writings? Is it possible that academic writing is now merely disseminating information like a newspaper? One might be tempted to solve the problem by using mnemonics to memorize information. However, it will repeat the same pattern since many mnemonics will also become a mere information for it is going to be difficult to be memorized and internalized. Not to mention that we live in the age of Information technology on which information is unlimited. This is exactly why according to Benjamin we need to study novel since by using novel we can partly regain the loss of the epic remembrance. Indeed, novel has the power of creative memory on which without any preceded essence but creating essence in the process but novel which is a product of printing machine of the modern technology also creates individuality. Then how come it may give us a hint on the salvation if we may call it so? I argue that with the so many novels produced we will indeed feel numb. But that is exactly when we truly need a constellation. The so many novels can be perceived as the stars which urge the need to build a constellation. Therefore, it is no wonder that Benjamin loves to write by using quotations which are essentially his attempt to build the constellation. In short, I consider that Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is the blatant proof of this constellation. This constellation is the redemption of the loss of the epic remembrance which comes out of mnemonic and now it is replaced by the constellation which comes out of remembrance (*eingedenken*).

If the stars are similar to the novels and the constellation is similar to the arcades then it leaves one clear problem which is that not everyone has the ability to create their own arcades like Benjamin. *Arcade project* depicts the impact of modern city life upon the human psyche. In modern city life, people are shocked by the bombardment of images. It is the flaneur that

manages to switch the numbness of the *erlebnis* into a better *erfahrung*. The flaneur has a relaxing lifestyle refusing to work dictated by the speed of the machines. It is the flaneur who is collecting and cataloguing information from the everyday and positing their spirit of intellectual curiosity. Equipped by camera enables the flaneur to create his own montage or constellation. However, not everyone can become the flaneur too. It means that there has to be a way so that the montage of the flaneur or Benjamin's arcade can be disseminated.

To disseminate a constellation is to involve with a community which is not similar with the storyteller who manage to gather everyone together in a community. The constellation of the storyteller is not the same with the constellation of the novel. The community that comes out of the constellation of the novels is the community of individuality. Marx names the group of these individuals' proletariat, a group of labors that creates a community which in the end is never going to be the same with the community in the past since the higher goal of the community is often times undermined by the individuality.

In order to be involved with the community, action is needed, and action will create changes. Changes is the other name of the history itself. If we want to carry over the principle of montage into history then we will get a history in the form of a constellation. It means it is no longer a sequential based totality of history since history can be perceived in the form of constellation. At this point once again, we have to imagine that history or histories are similar to the stars. To build a constellation out of histories is not building it block by block based on chronological order. But we can perceive each block of history as a star, and the combination among the stars to create a constellation is arbitrarily built. Therefore, history in this perspective is not linear.

2 Conclusion

Life is infinite, incommensurable, and incomprehensible. Language as the tool to frame life is also infinite, incommensurable, and incomprehensible. Further, after we have language, everything can be extrapolated. In Platonian terms it is called from manifestation in the form of presentation to the representation. Benjamin considers presentation as symbol and representation as sign (allegory). It means that we have a movement from sacredness to profanity or from theology to history. A sacredness of a symbol is supported by the cult value. The cult value of a religion in the form of a statue for example is shattered the moment people notice that they also can build their own statue and to build a statue is no longer privilege of the priest. In Bali, the priests insist of having *taksu*, a ritual to fill the statues with God in order to differentiate their statues with souvenir. For those who no longer believe in it then these statues will simply be considered as the works of art. The multiplication of such souvenirs is what is called profanity which happens in the realm of allegory. Gradually, multiple reproduction will also destroy the artistic value of the souvenirs simply because the rarity of the souvenirs itself can also be shattered. Such a switch of Benjaminian aura can simply be understood via the switch of aura of the object to subject. At one point, a song was sung by a priest and the song

itself has the aura. And then gradually everyone can sing. Then, it is no longer about the song but about the singer on live performance. It means the subject or the singer who has the aura. Suddenly there is a switch and we have DJ who can use even copy and record but can still have aura for their performance in night club etc. This multiplication is making us numb and Benjamin's solution is via constellation. Benjamin's montage is the constellation that enables the coming up of remembrance (eingedenken) to redeem the past.

References

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