

Force Dynamics: Mental Structures for Conflict or:
How Benjamin Th/Sought History

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The following brief presentation is an attempt to bring some approaches of cognitive sciences into culture studies, with the aim of explaining how certain ideas and conceptions in culture theory work. It is not a very usual way of dealing with the subject – and maybe it will cause some strangeness and rejection. However, I would hope that you acknowledge it as an attempt to make things clearer and better understandable. In order to achieve this, I refer to two basic cognitive science models. The first is force dynamics, proposed by Leonard Talmy in his work "Toward a Cognitive Semantics" (Talmy 2003). I will follow his description of force dynamic patterns up to a certain point at which Per Aage Brandt's model (presented in the book "Spaces, Domains and Meaning"; Brandt 2004) turns out to be more intuitive, accounting for the sequence of events and not just for a state of forces and is thus adopted. Furthermore, when I come to speak of the second cognitive category needed to explain our subject, I mostly refer to the conceptual integration (blending) model developed by Per Aage Brandt.

Walter Benjamin's work is a key reference in culture studies and perhaps one of the most quoted and most admired authors in an emerging and complex academic field. There are thousands of books and articles on his theory and even more books and articles *based* on his theory. And within his theory, the ideas concerning history are the most discussed and best explored issues, familiar to each of us – in a certain sense. Thus, my paper seems to be somewhat superfluous –and maybe this is the friendliest characterization you will give it – even before I start. So I have to explain what I am going to do over in the next few pages, as well as what I am not going to do.

First, I am not going to talk about *what* Benjamin thinks, I instead focus on *how* he thinks. Please do not take this distinction wrongly. I believe it may be rather helpful to gain some insight from Benjamin's thinking that might even explain why we admire what he thinks so much. The advantage of studying the way one thinks (instead of studying what this thinking is about) is very simple: it guarantees that this thinking is common to us and that we can share it; the content of one human mind is modelled by structures of thought and can be communicated and thus reconstructed by the same structures of another mind. Let me explain this simple statement through two very basic assumptions that are so central that we normally do not refer to them:

- We organize our thinking through a certain set of structures that are potentially common to all people.

- This set of structures is neither endless nor undefined but stable through diversity.

Of course I am aware that this kind of assumption – despite being more than basic and simple – needs discussion, at least because we debate Benjamin and other authors not because we all think the same way but because we all think different things. And Benjamin is in the focus of our interest not because he thinks the way we think, but because he thought things differently. But consider for some moments that there must be a real basic link from your thinking to Benjamin's because without it we could not admire him! And this link is what I would like to call the stable set of structures that are potentially common to all people.

Let us first mention – as an example – just one element of this structure that we are going to deal with only once and very briefly: the structural conception of space. Where are we now? Here in a certain room, in a certain city and in a certain country, maybe in Europe, certainly in the world, on earth, in the Universe. Of course, we are here, but you are there and I am here and so on it goes. You will find thousands of answers to the question about where we are, but you have only one structural conception to answer it: the conception of space. You would not accept an answer like "blue" or "smell" or "pfeifen" as a valid answer to the question. And I consider this renders a certain kind of peace to our life as we all know it.

Actually, there is a lot of work to do on Benjamin's structural conception of space – consider only the strong acceptance that the idea of *Passagen* found since he declared it to be a favorite in the modern worldview: a certain option in a stable set of structures.

My immediate priority is to explain a few sentences from Benjamin's ninth "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" in the sense of how they are thought. And I will only explain one aspect, specifically the conception of force dynamics that Benjamin uses in order to understand and make sense of history. The following famous sentences will be the focus of our analysis:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1999, 257-258)

There are three elements that make up Benjamin's idea or thesis: first, there is the angel, the angel of history, let us call it (or him?) the (prot)agonist in this

setting. Second, we find the storm as a blowing force, let us call it the antagonist, and third we have a certain movement forward in time. I think diagram 1 (Talmy 2003, I, 414) shows quite well the basic organization of the setting. The +-sign in the antagonist's symbol means that the storm is stronger than the angel and that it can make him (or it) move – willingly or unwillingly. So the action is symbolized by the small arrow on the line.

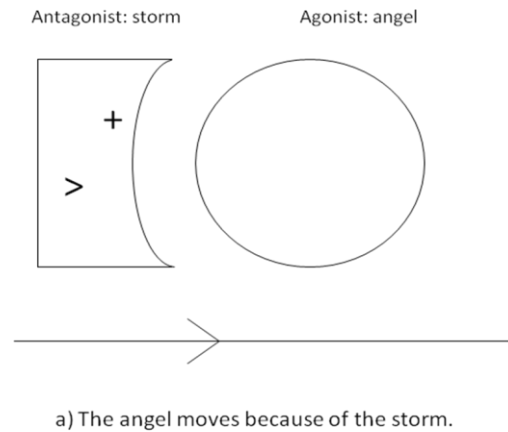


Figure 1

So far we find a very simple setting that is one of the basic structures of every cause-relation in force-dynamics: a) the angel moves because of the storm. Force-dynamics is about causing and letting, including other notions that are strongly related to them, such as the "general notions of 'despite' and 'although', and such particular notions as 'hindering', 'helping', 'leaving alone', and [...] 'trying'" (Talmy 2003, I, 429). I would like to invite you to briefly consider the three other basic steady-states that can be conceived of in the setting (Figure 2):

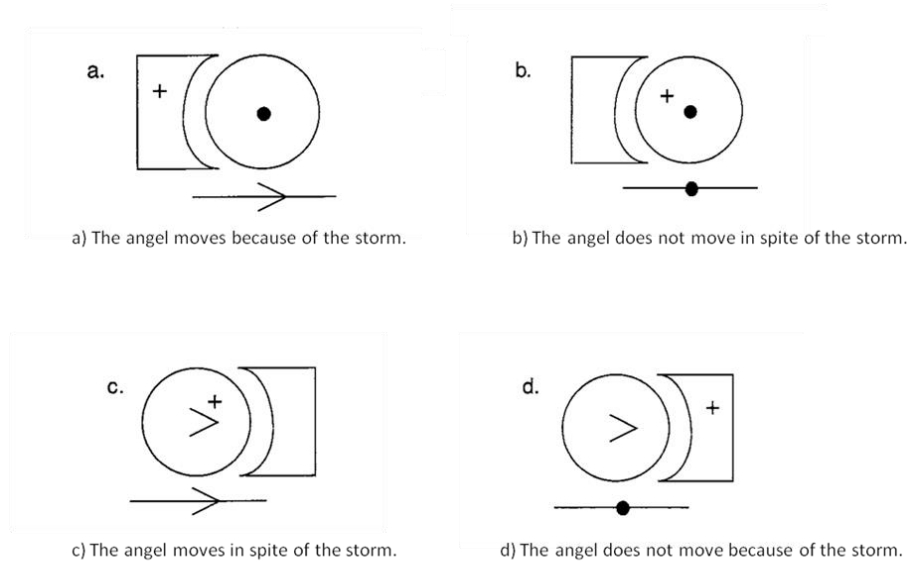


Figure 2

Of course Benjamin's thesis would have been completely different if he had chosen one of the other steady-state patterns. We should be aware that we leave out three of four patterns when we now take up idea a).

There is nothing special in the idea of a strong storm that makes an angel move (despite, perhaps, the fact that angels themselves are special). What makes the idea special are five other elements that complete the cognitive setting of the scene:

1. "The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed".
2. The angel blows forward, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.
3. The angel sees things differently.
4. The storm is progress.
5. And finally: a missing link (that we are going to explore later).

The first point is crucial because without it there would be no dramatic tension in the thesis but just interpretation. The point is that there is another dynamic relational force expressed by the angel's will to act (by staying, awakening and making whole that which has been smashed; I will call it the will to help). We must therefore imagine the angel as being a setting of a force dynamic pattern wherein

the will is the agonist and the ability the antagonist (Benjamin repeats the setting by mentioning the attempt to close the wings), as shown in figure 3.

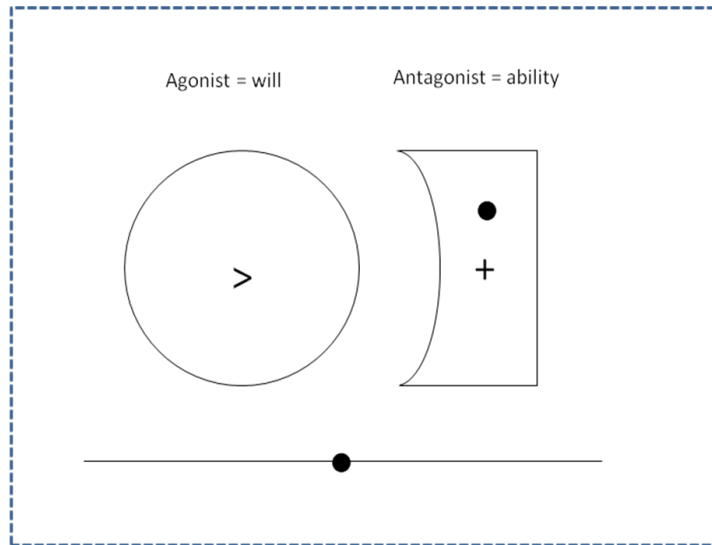


Figure 3

Taking into account the two settings we recognize a shift between the story or thesis actually given and the other that could be given. I would like to emphasize two points in this argument that seem to repeat on a structural or cognitive level what Benjamin's thesis is about: wherever causation is, there is a story behind it, or in other words "Causation is born in the past." (Brandt 2004, 76). And second: it is precisely in the givenness of the setting that one finds the potentiality of its otherness, or in other words, that the story could be different. One easily recognizes how this structure works in figure 4 (now following Brandt's model "On Causation and Narration"; Brandt 2004, 69-86).

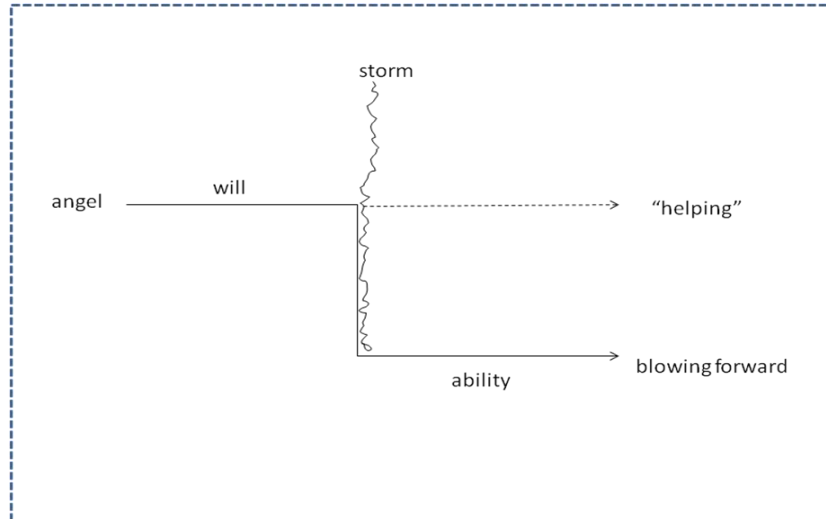


Figure 4

The shift in the angel's action line opens an undefined space between what is actually given (and to be observed) and what could be imagined instead of it. You see that Benjamin's thesis does not live just by its factuality; it turns out to establish potentiality as well – by the simple means of the force dynamic patterns that visibly work within it.

I should now turn to a second story within the thesis, namely the story of how to perceive history, mentioned above in point 3: the angel sees things differently. We find two ways of perceiving history in the text: first "our view" (expressed by "Where we perceive a chain of events") and second the angel's view: "he sees one single catastrophe". There is a shift in perception, forced by the angel's strange point of view, as shown in figure 5.

Force dynamics in the perception of history I

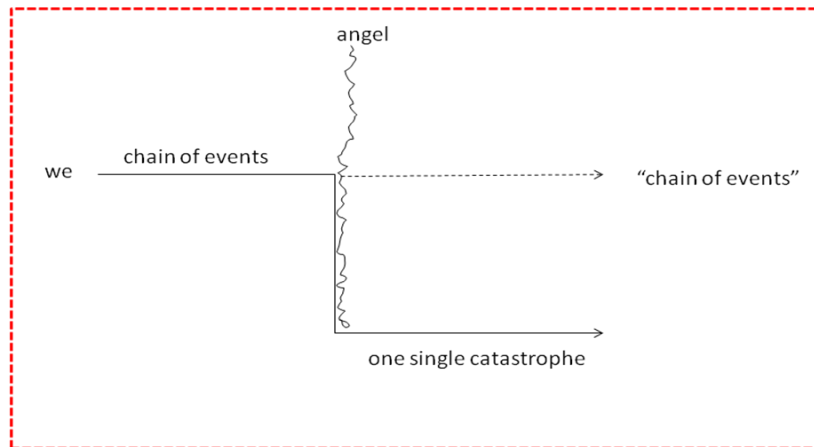


Figure 5

Significantly "our view" returns at the end of the thesis when one reads that the storm is "what we call progress", our forth point above. If we put the two stories (the storm-story and the perception-story) together, we recognize that the storm brings perception back to "our view", which conveys the ongoing undisturbed chain of events as progress. Figure 6 shows how this inversion works by joining diagram 4 and 5.

Force dynamics in the perception of history II

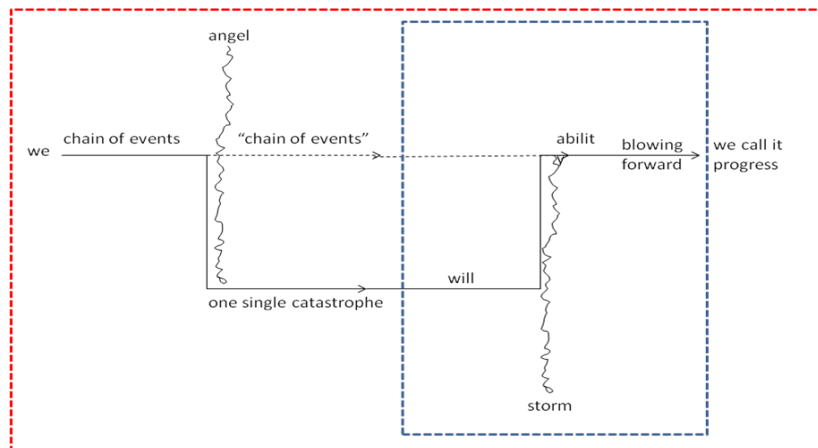


Figure 6

So far nothing changed. Let us now try to clarify the last point, the missing link, as I called it. The question is: where does the wreckage in front of the angel's feet come from? The answer is: from the catastrophe: "the catastrophe keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet." But isn't wreckage and catastrophe the same force? Does catastrophe create wreckage or does wreckage create catastrophe? What is the agonist and what is the antagonist? Which force is stronger? Can wreckage stop or move catastrophe? Can catastrophe move or stop wreckage. Diagram 7 shows: this does not work.

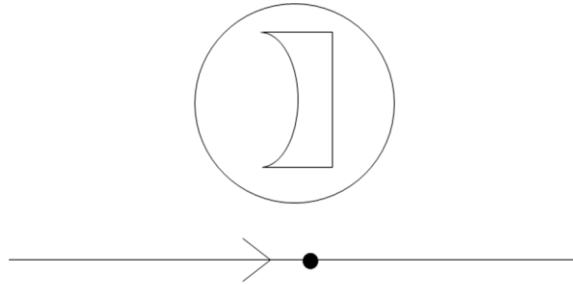


Figure 7

So we might look for a better agent that makes catastrophe and wreckage and of course we suspect of the storm. But the storm is not guilty, as one clearly recognizes in the conjunction in the following sentence: "The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, *while* the pile of debris before him grows skyward." The pile of debris grows not because of the storm but during the storm, there is strictly no causal relation between catastrophe and storm – just a temporal one, which is not a question of force dynamics but of time structure and we need to be careful not to mix up such differences. In conceptions of time, "while" is a very interesting conjunction, because it brings things and things and people and people and things and people together. Thus, it does not belong to the sequential or physical domain of time conception, but to the so called social domain that focuses on the aspectual dimension. Things happening at the same time are time-related but not force dependent on each other. Furthermore, in Benjamin's thesis, this time conception builds up a very interesting structure in which time and space are blended together. The keywords are "into the future" and "skyward" that open an own space of time-space-correlation as shown in diagram 8.

Time-space correlation

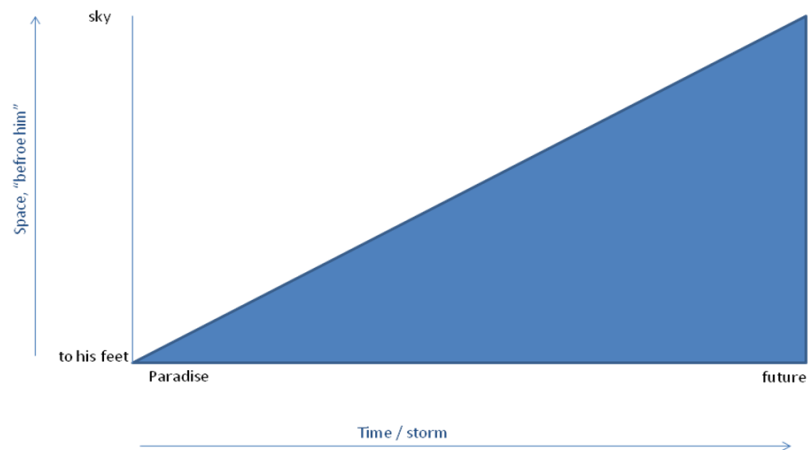
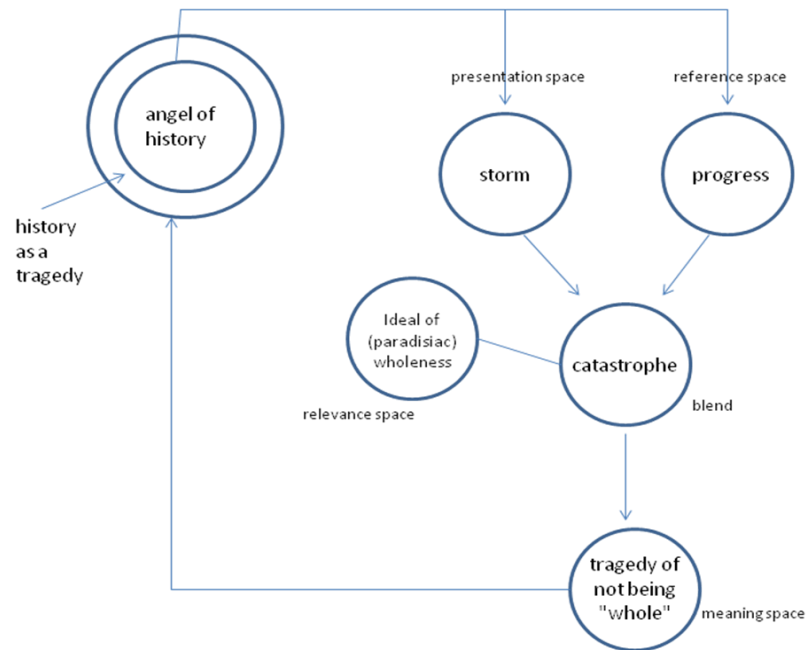


Figure 8

Thus, the storm comes from paradise, but where does the catastrophe come from? It seems that there can only be one answer: catastrophe comes from the angel's strange perception. The catastrophe is a matter of perception: seen by the angel and right at its feet. Actually, even the angel does not know where it comes from, it just sees it. And readers, taken through the angel's point of view, are finally left on their own again, while a strange perception challenges their philosophy of history. Force dynamics does not help us understand this idea. So we have to apply a different cognitive model to explain what happens here. Very briefly, I now seek to show how blending (as a cognitive function) works in this perception of history (diagram 9).



A blend in the perception of history

Figure 9

Correspondingly we once again find the angel, a reference space that we call progress and a presentation space named storm. These two spaces are blended together in the "catastrophe" where things have been smashed. What makes this blending work is the idea of wholeness (that comes from paradise) in the relevance space, so that we understand the blending as the tragedy of not being "whole". And tragedy results also from the fact that this process is irreversible; not even willpower can reverse the outcome – as shown by the force dynamic patterns applied in the text. This meaning turns the angel into a tragic hero and history into tragedy. This is what Benjamin's thesis is about.

The way back to paradise is closed: it is a matter of interpretation and – mostly frustrated – a matter of will. Is there any help to change things? There is no help, only the will to change. This must be the key to the high level of acceptance that the thesis usually gains. The main message of Benjamin's thesis is the ongoing existence of a will to change things (or to make them whole again), independently of all the force-dynamic relations it is imbedded in. It is the messianic idea of setting oneself out of history, announced, as appropriate, by a mightless angel blowing through the times.

However, this paper needs to come to a close as we are now embarking on interpretation and I promised to deal only with the way Benjamin thinks and not with what he thinks (or better: what we think that he thinks, or even better, what we think that he thinks we ought to think). I hope it became quite clear in which sense cognitive approaches and models (like force dynamics and blending) can help explain how Benjamin could think what he thought – and why we can understand it.

I would just like to ask you one last question to ascertain how much you understood of it: over the past few pages we have gone through a chain of arguments that make up this paper. Would you not now agree that it would be quite an interesting idea to think of the paper's contents as one single catastrophe which keeps piling up the wreckage of arguments and hurling them in front of your feet? If you manage to do this, we finally know who the angel is. In doing so, we identify the basic elements of Benjamin's ideas of history and their deep relationship with conflict and memory.

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