**Benjamin, Walter (1892-1940)**

**Angeliki Spiropolou**

Born and raised in an assimilated Jewish family in Berlin, Walter Bendix Schönflies Benjamin was a philosopher, essayist and literary critic associated with the *Institut für Sozialforschung* (Frankfurt Institute for Social Research). Initially trained in idealist philosophy, Benjamin developed his own version of Marxian historical materialism in the late 1920s, mixed with elements of Judaic mysticism. Aiming to ‘dismantle’ rigid disciplinary borders (*SW* II, 78), Benjamin’s lifelong engagement with aesthetics and modernity was reflected in his writing, which addressed subjects as diverse as philosophy, literary criticism, translation, cultural theory, mass media, urban geography and historiography. Ultimately, this project culminated in his unfinished sketch of a ‘primal’ history (*Urgeschichte*) of modernity out of nineteenth-century Parisian culture as well as his original studies of modern authors, art technologies and movements.

While his 1919 dissertation, ‘Begriff der Kunstkritik in der Deutschen Romantik’ (The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism), revealed the modernity of the Romantics’ immanent critical approach, in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928; *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*), he identified the baroque aesthetics of the ruin as allegorical response to the secularised historicity of modern times. Benjamin’s formative friendship with Bertolt Brecht, among other influences, marks his subsequent commitment to a materialist investigation of modernity’s origins and ideology, also resulting in analyses of Brecht’s political aesthetics. Like his fellow-thinker Theodor W. Adorno, Benjamin criticised modernity’s fantasy of progress, and the ‘cult of the new’ as serving commodity logic. His reflections on Proust (1929), Kafka (1934, 1938) and storytelling (1936) focus on memory, community and tradition, pointing to a crisis of integrated experience (*Erfahrung*) in modernity, while his seminal essays on film and photography, especially ‘Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ (1936), influentially recognize the radical potential of the decline of the artwork’s ‘aura’ in modern technological, mass culture.

However, Benjamin’s major contribution to a theory of modernity is interwoven with the alternative, materialist philosophy of history he started to put to practice around 1927 in *The* *Arcades Project* (1999; *Das Passagen-Werk*), his incomplete archive of modern capitalist culture epitomised by nineteenth-century Paris and the Baudelairean *oeuvre*. Anticipated by *One-Way Street* (1928) in method and political intent, the project is composed of diverse comments and quotations, grouped under representative authors, human types, sites, objects, ideas and phenomena. It thus compares to a fragmentary modernist artwork, exhibiting a surrealist valorisation of urban trivia and shock aesthetics (‘Surrealism’ 1929), while alluding to Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926).Benjamin’s modernist model of non-teleological, political historiography, theorised in his 1940 ‘Theses’ on history, is encapsulated in the dialectical image of Paul Klee’s drawing *Angelus Novus*, the Angel of History, a figure Benjamin interprets as being caught in the storm of progress (http://bit.ly/PvfAOE). As fascism spread in Europe, Benjamin endured long periods of self-exile, before committing suicide in 1940 at the Franco-Spanish border after a failed attempt to escape to New York from the advancing Nazis.

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**List of Works**

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------ (2008--) *Werke und Nachlaß. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. M. Brodersen et. al., Frankfurt am  Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 20 vols.

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**References and further reading**

Benjamin, A. and Osborne, P. (eds) (1994/2000), Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience, London and New York: Routledge/Manchester: Clinamen Press.

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Caygill, H. (1998) Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience, London: Routledge.

Cohen, M. (1993) Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Smith, G. (ed.) (1988) On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections, Cambridge and London: MIT Press.

**Paratextual Material**

The Walter Benjamin Archive <<http://www.adk.de/de/archiv/archivbestand/literatur/kuenstler/informationen_walter_benjamin_archiv.htm>>

[International Walter Benjamin Society](http://www.walterbenjamin.org/" \t "other) <<http://www.walterbenjamin.org>>

[The Walter Benjamin Research Syndicate](http://www.wbenjamin.org/walterbenjamin.html" \t "other) <<http://www.wbenjamin.org/walterbenjamin.html>>