

Walter Benjamin, Politics, Aesthetics

Esther Leslie

Who was Walter Benjamin?

On 15 July 1892 Walter Benjamin was born to a well-heeled assimilated Jewish family in the capital of the Prussian Reich, Berlin. On 26 September 1940 he took his life while interrupted in his escape from Nazi Germany by way of Occupied France. Unable to cross from France into Spain because he had no visa – ill and threatened with hand-over to the Gestapo, to face certain incarceration as a Marxist and a Jew, he chose suicide. In the intervening years between these two dates he had lived in Weimar Berlin and in Paris, witness to much political turmoil and technological and social change. He made his fairly meagre money as a freelance writer selling literary criticism, historical analyses of culture and everyday life, interpretations of new technological cultural forms such as film and photography, he had written on theories of language, and delivered the radio lectures for children. The topics that attracted Benjamin are diverse: literature of the baroque, Romantic and modern periods, the philosophy of history, the social dynamics of technology, nineteenth century Paris, fascism and militarism, the city, capitalist time, childhood, memory, art and photography. Given his own precarious freelance existence, one of Benjamin's key concerns was with the changing status of the intellectual, writer and artist over the period of capitalist industrialization. He tracked, for example, the changing fortunes of the avant-garde in nineteenth century France. He wanted to understand the ways in which artists are skewered by the contradictions of capital. In his studies of Charles Baudelaire, for example, he notes how the failure of social revolution in the late 19th century, and the inescapable law of the market, bred a hardened hoard of knowledge-workers condemned to enter the market place. This intelligentsia thought that they came only to observe it – but, in reality, it was, says Benjamin, to find a buyer. This set off all manner of responses: competition, manifestoism, nihilistic rebellion, court jestering, hackery, ideologueism. Benjamin diagnosed the situation of cultural workers that preceded him, always keen to assess their class and political positions.

Benjamin also analysed the present. His famous essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Reproduzierbarkeit', from the mid-1930s, and his lecture for a communist circle 'Der Autor als Produzent', from 1934, were investigations into the possibilities that had opened up for contemporary critical Left culture workers. He examined strategies that would avoid the pressures on artists to be individualistic, competitive or promoters of art as a new religion or an evasion of the 'political'. He evaluated artists' efforts to work out cultural forms that could not be recuperated by fascism. He assessed what the new mass cultural forms that existed - radio, film, photography, photomontage, worker-correspondent newspapers – meant in the wider scheme of the social world, and how facts such as mass reproduction change humans' relationship to culture of the past and the present. He was certain that the age in which he lived as an age of the masses, a mass age and, acting and thinking politically, it should be conceived as an age of classes in conflict with each other.

By the time of his death on the Spanish border, Benjamin's German nationality had been annulled, specifically because of an essay he wrote for a communist magazine, *Das Wort*, about the decadence of fascist art and Nazi rule. With the victory of Nazism in Germany and the fall of France, his adopted homeland, the spaces of safe Europe were contracting. The East held little promise too. At the end of 1926 Benjamin visited Moscow for two months, in order to help him decide whether to join the Communist Party. He found an exciting, energetic society – with dangerous tendencies towards leadership cults and corruption. By the 1930s things were much worse. Further east was no option. A Zionist friend from his youth Gershom Scholem had tried for several years to tempt him to Palestine, but Benjamin did not find the Desert State or Zionism appealing. Instead he began to follow the path of other displaced European intellectuals and friends such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Kracauer, Brecht – to America and the hope of some sort of academic post or government-sponsored work or simply the opportunity to hawk talents to Hollywood studios. Benjamin did not make it out of Europe.

In the years after his death, slowly, through the efforts of Adorno, Scholem and others, Benjamin's work began to reach a wider public. The political events of 1968 brought Benjamin into a new legibility and, at that time, it was his more practically-oriented

writings on technological reproduction and interventionist cultural practice that came to the fore, alongside his critical commentaries on the myth of bourgeois progress. The mobilised students of late 1960s' West Germany took their lessons from him in pirate editions. The specifically 1960s' rediscovery of Benjamin by the cadres of social revolt is encapsulated in their image of him with photocopier in one hand and a joint in the other (for he had carried out experiments with hashish in the 1920s, part of an exploration of the parameters of experience). An embellishment of the image might include a Kalashnikov or bomb – Andreas Baader of the *Rote Armee Fraktion* would cite Benjamin in the coming years, for example drawing on 'On the Concept of History' in his 'Letter to the Prisoners' from 1976.¹

In these years, Benjamin was seen to provide writers and artists on the Left with a vocabulary for art and culture that did not share the assumptions of Socialist Realism. Socialist Realist directives ranked the intelligibility of content above form. At its most basic, Socialist Realism advised that the content of the picture or the story had to be clear, unambiguous, delivered through 'realist' means. It had to present the inexorable rise of a heroic working class and peasantry. Georg Lukács, to name an influential exponent of the doctrine, advocated nineteenth-century paragons of realist style such as Balzac and Walter Scott. Socialist Realist initiatives recommended the return to traditional forms of oil painting and novel writing. Walter Benjamin's analyses were directed against this course. He was a theorist of modernity. He believed that the modern age had thrown up new modes and media of representation, and, for any contemporary engagement in art, whether overtly political or not, these were forms that needed to be explored. He regretted the way that the development of Socialist Realism repressed a post-revolutionary wave of technological and formal experimentation in art, restoring old models of culture with their disempowering modes of reception, which expected audiences to stand in reverential awe before 'great works'. Benjamin, largely, though not without qualification, celebrated the progressive function of technical reproducibility in art. He mapped the implications of technological reproduction in art on art production more widely, pinpointing analogies between technological and technical-

¹ This is cited extensively in Irving Wohlfarth's essay, 'Entsetzen: Walter Benjamin und die RAF', In Wolfgang Kraushaar (ed.), *Die RAF und der Linke Terrorismus*, Hamburger Edition, Hamburg, 2006, pp.280 -31

formal innovation. This work of Benjamin's contributed burgeoning critical and media theory in the post-war, as evinced the work of Hans Magnus Enzensberger with his forwarding in 1970 of the potentially liberatory uses of the photocopier within the ideologically-stultifying 'consciousness industry'.²

Cultural and Technological Reproduction

Walter Benjamin understood technological reproduction in culture in two ways. Firstly, it referred to the easy accessibility of postcard representations of 'great art', illustrations in books and magazines, posters: copies that could be acquired, held in the hand, cut out and incorporated into a viewer's environment. Some sort of experience of artworks, previously available only to those who could travel to the place of deposit, could now be had by all – in copy form. It was as if art had undergone the type of evolution that the printing press had brought about for the written word. Secondly, technological reproduction was an aspect of relatively new cultural forms: film and photography. These were mechanical forms of cultural production in their own right, and their appearance bore important implications for concepts such as originality and uniqueness, key concepts of traditional art understanding. Photography and film possessed no original. Each print from the negative was as 'original' as the next or the one before it. Each filmstrip was as authoritative as all other versions of the same film. Each recording from a master was of equal validity. The unique original object either tended towards irrelevance or disappeared.

These developments, Benjamin insisted, brought about the decline of what he termed art's 'aura'. He observed how unique, authored works of art exuded a special presence and effect, akin to magical or mystical experience. Art's aura was a sort of glow that adhered to products of high art, making them untouchable, unapproachable, immensely valuable artifacts of geniuses. Auratic artworks disenfranchised the spectator, who became an individual privileged enough to enjoy unique communion with the art object. They compelled the spectator into the position of a passive beholder who consumed the vision of genius. Benjamin argued that the decline of this 'aura' – the happy by-product

² See Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien', *Kursbuch* 20, 1970, pp.159–86.

of mass reproduction – opened the way to a new appropriation of art by the masses.

A technologically-prompted process of breaching distance, of bringing art, data and materials within the ambit of the masses – to be used and manipulated by the masses – is the paramount promise outlined in ‘The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility’. The new art forms met the viewer ‘halfway’, exiting from darkened niches, out of the gallery, from the captivity of singular time and space. In the age of technological reproducibility, art was, at least potentially, removed from its traditional spaces; indeed, art disintegrated and multiplied all at once. As Benjamin's tale of the fate of art goes, by 1900 or thereabouts, art had the opportunity to break away from or be broken from magic, ritual and religion. By 1900 photomechanical reproduction was perfected, swallowing up the images of all previous art and generating its own inimitable forms. By that time too Atget had formulated a desolate subject for photography, breaking with the sentimentalism of portraiture to document spaces of the objective world. Technological art forms surfaced because they were demanded by the matrixed masses inhabiting a technologised world.

A demystified appropriation of culture by audiences was best witnessed in the cinema, a collectively-produced and -consumed cultural form. In perceiving artworks in a more casual fashion, in different environments, and in perceiving more and more of them through the organs of the press, audiences learnt to manipulate them, to criticise and evaluate. Benjamin's was no manifesto for self-proclaimed avant-garde art. One of the films Benjamin recalled in a letter to Gretel Karplus-Adorno, while working on the *Work of Art* essay, was a 1933 film version of *Alice in Wonderland*, one of the few books he had managed to read in part in English, as well as in French and German.³ The film, which he called ‘an extraordinary thing’, starred Gary Cooper as the White Knight, Cary Grant as the Mock Turtle and W.C. Fields as Humpty Dumpty. It was rich with special and optical effects, and the Walrus and the Carpenter sequence was animated by Max Fleischer. This was the type of film that attracted Surrealists and mass audiences alike. It proposed alternative, disfiguring and analytical vistas on the

³ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, vol. 5, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995, pp.221-2.

real.

Film opens up the banal, uninteresting everyday spaces of the world to vision and analysis. Cinema blasts apart a 'prison-world', so that we, from the comfort of the cinema seat, may take extraordinary adventures in its widely scattered ruins. Film's experience of the world extends our own. Film extracts a beauty from everyday environments. All is streamed past our eyes and made a site of looking, a point of fascination. This, Benjamin argues, is liberating. It allows us to penetrate the secrets contained even in very ordinary reality. It is as if a microscope is held up to reality, allowing the structural forms, the interconnections, the molecular structure to be seen. We penetrate it through its mediation and through the opportunity given us for reflection. Problems emerge, though, Benjamin notes, with narrative. The device of the 'plot' borrows clichés or templates from theatre, not allowing the tendencies immanent to film technology to dictate development. In terms of form, film has an array of technological devices at its command: slow-motion, speed-up, close-up, reversal, repetition, montage, image/sound montage, split-screen, superimposition and so on. In terms of content, technology can form the basis of film in many ways. The world we inhabit is technological. Film technology is simply a subset of the technologies that structure modern lives – in homes, offices, factories, streets. To this extent film allows a grappling with the forces that structure experience in the world. Technology is not one homogenous entity for Benjamin. He illustrates this idea by pointing to two examples, slapstick films, such as Charlie Chaplin's or Buster Keaton's, and Soviet montage cinema. American slapstick movies play with technology, technology gone wild, technology as over-lively. It is humorous and indicates something of the potential a 'liberated technology' might open up. The opposite of the ludicrously liberated technology in Chaplin or Disney, he suggests, is the lethal power of naval squadrons on manoeuvre, as openly displayed in Eisenstein's *Potemkin*.⁴ In each of these films the fact of human grappling with technology – and dominant force in people's lives – is on show. Because film is a technological form, the heroes of film, notes Benjamin, have to be those who have

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Erwiderung an Oscar A. H. Schmitz', Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band.II.2, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1991 p.753.

direct experience of technology in their daily lives –the proletariat, the workers who daily engage the machinery that produces commodities and reproduces daily life. The proletariat is a collective. It works and experiences collectively, just as the spaces of its leisure are the collective spaces of industrial and urban modernity.

Mickey Mouse and Montage

In 1935, in the first version of Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', a section titled 'Mickey Mouse' explains how in film's strange modernist montage-land, first steps were taken for a critical reconfiguration of our world. This was a move more significant than the escapades of dada, which might only limp behind the gags of commercial culture. Cartoons radicalise that effect of live film – where the nature that reveals itself to the camera, a 'second nature', is unlike the unmediated nature that flaunts before the eye. Adventurous travellers are offered a multitude of trips through widely strewn ruins in a world turned anti-physical. The dynamite of the split-second explodes this world. Space is expanded and shrunk by montage, while time is stretched and contracted by time loops. Cartooning takes such anti-physics for granted. Benjamin notes that this cosmos of detonated physics requires Mickey Mouse as occupant, for his function is curative. In the same essay, Benjamin contrasts the magician, or faith healer, who cures through the laying on of hands to the surgeon who intervenes in the body, augmented by machinery such as scalpel and forceps. Such cutting in is designed to open up and then heal. Benjamin extends the association. The painter, he says, is like a magician or faith healer, glossing over a surface. The camera operator is like a surgeon who cuts in to the web of reality. For Benjamin, the most appropriate use of the camera lens and the processes of editing or printing up subject reality to a segmenting, which slices through the natural appearance of everyday life, contravening any innate tendency of film to glide across the mirror-surface of reality in pure reflection. Reality as mediated in film, Benjamin says, is cut into by the surgeon-cinematographer, then stitched together again in more or less visible sutures. For Benjamin such dissection, an investigation of the world in close-up, the production of links between things through montage, the analysis of movement through slow-motion and so on, is part of a critical, scientific approach to the world. This is accompanied by an anti-naturalist, utopian rebuttal of

physical laws and ‘natural’ constraint. As he puts it in Thesis XI, the image becomes a multiply fragmented thing, whose parts reassemble themselves according to new laws. Film and photography might not do this, might just re-affirm the surface of reality but their very nature, their very technology cries out to be deployed in montage form. What point film without montage? What point film without slow-motion or speed-up or photography without super-enlargement of scale? The image of reality, as specifically represented in film and photography, is an image of the real that has been mediated, subjected to analysis, works with incongruities, destruction, construction, reconstructions.

The image of reality that Benjamin’s film and photography brings back may be an image, but it is an image with depth, not a surface. It can be cut into. It is montaged, a term that is imported from the world of engineering and architecture, a world that presented itself, in the years around the First World War, through the ambitious and more or less fantastical theories and practice of Bruno Taut’s crystal chain or Paul Scheerbart’s theory of glass architecture, as well as the more rational visions of Le Corbusier or Mies van der Rohe, as the primary realm for utopian exploration and new world building. Architectural experiment, like montage, allowed revised possibilities of inhabiting space, of interacting socially and of experiencing beauty. For Benjamin, all the arts culminate in architecture: the modern work of culture, such as is film and photography, finds its template in architecture, itself a penetrable space that is experienced through collective and ‘tactile reception’. With its architectural, tactile and collective referents, the montaged work reinvented everything: the space in which the artwork exists (looser, enterable in some way), the materials of which it might be made (diverse, and even including scrapped matter), the relationships between the various modes of art (intermedial and non-hierarchical), the relationship of parts within the artwork (disjunctive) and the relationship between viewer and artwork, artistic producer and the audience for art (dynamic, anti-contemplative, interactive).

Fascism and Capitalism

The epilogue of Benjamin's essay reversed the optimistic current – all the potential credited to art in the age of technology evaporated before the techno-mysticism and

class-violence of the National Socialists. In the essay's coda, Benjamin determined that fascists mirrored mass society in representations without substance; they too participated in technological modernity. But in Nazi film culture, the masses came to their expression but not to their rights. Effectively the masses expressed themselves – they left an imprint of their presence, but they were not present. They were ‘represented’ formally, but not represented politically in any meaningful way. Their image was appropriated by film.

‘Aestheticisation’ is the appeal to the eye. Politics, under the sway of aestheticisation, was a passive matter. Masses were represented from the outside, as masses in rallies or war. The fascist camera gobbled up passive masses as the raw material for an awe-inspiring fascist ornamentalism. Having infiltrated a medium that came to meet its viewers halfway, the fascist camera re-established distance. Halfway came to seem a long way again. It was the same sort of gesture as that made visible by John Heartfield in his photomontage of Goebbels hanging a Marx beard on Hitler. The Nazis moved halfway towards acknowledging the political desires and ‘rights’ of the masses to democratise property relations and be politically represented, but transmuted it craftily into an illusion, a deception, a surface. Film gripped the masses and yet, in this case, there was nothing for them to grip hold of in return, just a shiny surface with twitching flat ghosts that were supposed to be them. They were represented only superficially. In contrast, the masses who were genuinely gripped by liberatory politics became self-active, loosened up, got aerated in their self-activity. Such dissolution demanded the skills of the modernist camera, tracing motility, mobility, transformation, speed and simultaneity through film’s trickery of montage, superimposition and time effects.

It was not just Fascism that could divert cinema away from its liberatory tendencies. Benjamin was keenly aware of the ways in which the production of culture within the property relations of capitalism acted to constrain the progressive, democratic potential of culture. The Hollywood star system, for example, also attempted to re-instate awe before the product. The star system and capital accumulation re-established barriers between audience and film, just as Nazi propaganda films tried to illuminate Hitler and friends with a flattering ‘auratic’, charismatic glow. In radio and film, as in politics, a

new selection by the apparatus was underway – those with the right voice, the good looks and skilled exhibitionism were favoured. The beneficiaries of this were the champion, the star and the dictator. But, at the same time, procedures such as Sergei Eisenstein's workers' cinema or Charlie Chaplin's battles with technology and authority showed that cinema had at least the potential to generate a critical, politically-based culture in which negotiations of the central (technological and class) forces in our lives are tackled.