

*On Photography: Walter Benjamin*

by Esther Leslie

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Reviewed by Michael Berkowitz

Esther Leslie, Professor of English and Humanities at Birkbeck, soars where many of her contemporaries fall flat. In *On Photography: Walter Benjamin*, Leslie has produced an attractive, erudite, readable yet sophisticated work on Benjamin, specifically, his “key statements on photography”. Benjamin (1892-1940), a German Jew often associated with his friend Gershom Scholem, the pioneering historian of Jewish mysticism, is widely regarded as a towering and pathbreaking intellectual (beyond the Jewish realm per se) of the twentieth century whose life was truncated due to Nazism. Scholem himself wrote about his complex friendship with Benjamin, and Hannah Arendt helped introduce Benjamin to the English-speaking world in an acclaimed edited volume, *Illuminations* (1968). Benjamin has been the subject of an extraordinary amount of commentary from different disciplines, with an emphasis on literature and theory. What has been termed the “Benjamin industry” is continually expanding and could never be fully digested by a single individual. Leslie's *On Photography* should prove to be of immense value to scholars, students, and the diverse educated public that seeks a better grasp of the slippery Benjamin, whose name has been dropped, not always intelligently, for decades.

Anyone who writes on, or participates in, a public forum on photography can expect a summons to reflect on how her or his work relates to the thought of

Benjamin. Often those posing the question have nothing more than a sketchy sense of one of Benjamin's essays, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1936). At its most superficial level Benjamin avers that it is typical for a photograph of a work of art to flatten it in such a way as to demolish its "aura". Photographs, especially in the form of mass-produced postcards and other kitsch, fail to capture the sensation that captivates a viewer when she or he experiences the actual art object. Like so much of what Benjamin offers, it is a sharp observation that is simultaneously brilliant and baffling. It is the same Benjamin who claimed that his own "collection of picture postcards", aura-less or not, would be the best source of "insight" into his adult life. "Photography suffuses his work", Leslie observes, "not just as a theme he raises again and again in his essays and reviews, his *Arcades Project*, in his writings on Baudelaire or on Surrealism, but also as something that configures his forms of writing and his philosophy of history."

Leslie's stellar work may be described as comprising the most comprehensive treatment thus far of Benjamin's engagement with photography, with the important exception of the famous "work of art" essay. But its omission is not necessarily a problem. Leslie herself deals extensively with the piece in her 2007 book on Benjamin (Reaktion Books, 2007), and the essay is discussed in the massive 2014 biography by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life*. Given that Eiland and Jennings, while formidable, are specialists in literature, it is not surprising that Leslie is more deft in explaining Benjamin's perspectives on photography. Leslie provides a substantial overview of Benjamin followed by short introductions to his diverse writings about photography, both published and unpublished. One of the novel features of this book is Leslie's fine translation of Benjamin's "Short History of Photography" (1931), which overlaps many of the ideas

in his more famous “work of art” essay. The “Short History” is the longest section of the book, and there are several brief yet fascinating glimpses into Benjamin’s encounters with photography, including a private letter to a friend, and several book reviews.

One of the strengths of Eiland and Jennings’ biography is that it recalls how Benjamin often felt that he lacked sufficient knowledge or background to comment intelligently on the subjects of his criticism, yet he wrote nevertheless—especially when he was desperate for assignments in order to make ends meet. Eiland and Jennings also inform us that money was even more crucial for Benjamin because he was not simply a struggling intellectual without a firm journalistic or academic appointment for most of his life—he also had gambling and whoring habits to feed. As I discuss in *Jews and Photography in Britain* (University of Texas Press, 2015) the foundational historian of photography, Helmut Gernsheim, and his friend Tim Gidal, both a photographer and a historian of photography, were amazed when Walter Benjamin’s writing about photography garnered increasing attention in the 1970s. They thought that Benjamin’s familiarity with photography was spotty, at best, and some of his observations and theories were tendentious. Leslie generously states that Benjamin’s subjects were his “preferences”. Gernsheim and Gidal had no idea that their own acrid criticism was more or less in sync with Benjamin’s fear that he would be exposed for being something of a charlatan, a magician performing with smoke and mirrors. Benjamin had, Gernsheim and Gidal surmised, offered rather grand theories on the basis of only a handful of examples, and sometimes without much understanding of even these. Probably toward the end of his life, when he became friendly with Gisele Freund—a photographer who did know a great deal about the history of photography—he gained wider knowledge. Freund also produced

one of the most spectacular portraits of Benjamin, in Kodachrome.

But Gernsheim and Gidal were both right and wrong. Benjamin's preparation for a large share of his writing was neither thorough nor impressive, but he managed to notice and express things that made others think more deeply about photography, which tended to be simply taken for granted. At bottom, Benjamin, like his contemporary Siegfried Kracauer, was on target in asserting that photography was an extremely important cultural phenomenon that could tell us as much about society and humanity as any of the other arts. While photography was indeed "commonplace" in Benjamin's world, his point was to show that it was also remarkable. In the words of Leslie, Benjamin was fully cognizant that "photography mattered", and that it too had its own history. It is not surprising that "the face of fascism [as] a death's head" was so brilliantly evoked by photographers such as Erwin Blumenfeld and John Heartfield.

In addition to revealing Benjamin's proclivities impinging on his work, Eiland and Jennings also mention that Benjamin was not very comfortable with the English language. This meant that the sparseness of his reading in photography was further hampered by a lack of familiarity with the work of Alfred Stieglitz, whose prolific writings and photography certainly would have enhanced Benjamin's comprehension and appreciation of its possibilities. Lotte Jacobi, for instance, who did know English, said that Stieglitz was, for her, by far the most important voice concerning photography. Stieglitz, in contrast to Benjamin, was more attuned to the fact that many of those dedicated to photography needed to earn their daily bread through their work. It was both a craft that must be respected and for which its practitioners should be decently compensated, as well as a means of producing art which was no less creative than drawing, painting or sculpture. Stieglitz not only believed, but put into practice, the idea that photography should be displayed and considered alongside

modern painting.

Throughout the scholarship on Benjamin there are either overt or covert notions of how much weight to assign his Jewishness as a factor in his make-up and constituent element of his ideas. The Eiland and Jennings biography purports to fully engage Benjamin's Jewishness, but in fact does not realize this dimension of the project. Leslie, in word, does not go there. While there may be a danger of picturing Benjamin as more self-consciously Jewish than he was, he could not avoid being effected by specifically Jewish circumstances of his time and place. My own suspicion is that Benjamin feared suffering the fate of Franz Kafka in the hands of Max Brod: he did not want to be primarily received or remembered as a Jew, and certainly not as a Zionist. Yet he also failed to appreciate how his Jewish friends treasured what they believed to be his messianic nature and writings, no matter how much he protested or tried to distance himself from the conventions of Jewry.

Part of Benjamin's cultural inheritance was not only the ever presence and importance of photography, but the extent to which it was part of the Jewish world, which was left unexamined. But should we, and Benjamin's current mediators, refrain from speculating on, or attempting to assess the Jewishness of photography? Only one critic to date, philosopher and religious studies scholar Eric Jacobson, has noted the connections between Benjamin's messianic and photographic discourses (which has not yet been published.) Some hint of the prevalence and significance of Jewish super-activity in photography is revealed in one of Leslie's lists of six photographers from the magazine *Uhu*—five of whom are Jews, and two murdered in the Holocaust: "Moholy-Nagy, Martin Munkaschi, Albert Regner-Patzsch, Sasha Stone (Otto Umbehr), Erich Salomon and Yva (Else Neuländer-Simon)."

Esther Leslie graciously informed me that she first encountered Benjamin as a

teenager, thrilled by his essay on Baudelaire. She saw this as a most promising means of understanding the various “isms” that seemed so firmly entrenched and others that were newly emerging, such as punk. Her attraction to Benjamin as a spectacularly creative critic on and of the Left was nurtured by her studies at Sussex University, when it was a leader in interdisciplinary German Studies. But Benjamin's Jewishness was for her—as well as for most other scholars—a marginal aspect of his life better left to others. The “Jewish” treatments of Benjamin are certainly uneven. There are, however, excellent contextualizations of his life and work in this regard, such as the historical introduction to the correspondence between Benjamin and Scholem from 1932-1940 by Anson Rabinbach (1989), and Eric Jacobson's *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem* (2003). For Leslie, the most crucial interlocutors of Benjamin have been the philosopher Irving Wohlfarth, who sought to overcome rigid Marxist and theological classifications, and the literary critic Susan Buck-Morss, who attempted to unite visual and literary sensibilities. Esther Leslie's next turn in Walter Benjamin scholarship is to focus on him as storyteller, which is likely to yield books and articles at least as superb as her current work on Benjamin and photography.