

WALTER BENJAMIN

1892–1940

"One of the foremost tasks of art has always been the creation of a demand which could be fully satisfied only later," remarks Walter Benjamin in his celebrated essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). The same could be said of Benjamin's criticism itself. During his lifetime, he was considered, by a small coterie of admirers such as the philosopher THEODOR ADORNO, one of the most original and promising writers on literature, language, and aesthetics of his generation; but at the time of his premature death fleeing the Nazis in 1940, his name had passed into obscurity both within and outside Germany. The publication in 1955 of a collection of his works in a German edition sponsored by Adorno spurred renewed attention, and since the 1970s Benjamin has become one of the most highly esteemed critics of the twentieth century; he is seen as an innovator in diverse fields, including Marxist literary criticism, deconstruction, historiography, and media studies. A broad speculative account of the interaction of industrial production and modern aesthetics, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" has had particular influence in contemporary film and visual studies and is considered a fundamental work of cultural studies.

Born in Berlin into a wealthy Jewish family, Benjamin was first educated by private tutors, later attending boarding school and the University of Freiburg. He continued his studies in Berlin and Munich, but settled in Berne, Switzerland, in 1917 to avoid being drafted into the German army in World War I. In 1919 he received his doctorate from the university there; his thesis, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, was published the following year. Returning to Berlin in 1920, he wrote essays and newspaper articles as he worked on a translation of the important nineteenth-century French poet CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, building a significant reputation as a cultural critic. Under financial pressure from his father, who wanted him to take a position in a bank, Benjamin considered starting a used book business but finally decided to pursue an academic career. To complete an additional requirement for a teaching post in the German university system, he wrote a second dissertation in 1925, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928; trans. 1977); however, it was rejected because of its density and difficulty. One examiner commented that it was an "incomprehensible morass" (another examiner who criticized the submission was MAX HORKHEIMER, later an associate of Benjamin's).

Thus thwarted, Benjamin became an independent scholar, writing articles for leading German periodicals, translating, and conducting research for an ambitious but never-completed historical work on nineteenth-century Paris later known as the *Arcades Project* (trans. 1999). During the twenties and thirties, he traveled across Europe; in a visit to Moscow (1926–27), he observed firsthand the achievements and limitations of the Bolshevik Revolution. Though his friend Gershom Scholem, the Jewish mystical thinker, urged him to emigrate to Palestine, Benjamin remained in Germany, participating in the German Communist Party (as his brother had done). Initially attracted to Marxism in the 1920s on reading GYÖRGY LUKÁCS's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and influenced by his friendship during the 1930s with the German Marxist writer Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin adopted increasingly left-wing political positions and showed the influence of Marxism in his writings on culture.

Exiled in Paris after the Nazi takeover in Germany in 1933, Benjamin lived a lonely and, as the threat of war approached, increasingly desperate existence. He struggled to support himself by writing while pursuing research for his *Arcades Project*, one small section of which, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), appeared in the journal of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. But Benjamin's methods and political orientation were increasingly at loggerheads with those

of the institute—members of the Frankfurt School were turning away from the traditional paths of Marxism—and he became distant from his friend Adorno, as correspondence from the 1930s reveals. After the German invasion of France in 1940, Benjamin attempted to escape to Spain, intending to emigrate from there to the United States. Stopped at the border in the Pyrenees and fearful that he would be sent back to France to face internment in a concentration camp, Benjamin committed suicide.

Though many of his larger projects remained unfinished at the time of his death, and his essays were often composed under financial and emotional duress, Benjamin's work encompasses a rich and heterogeneous range: autobiographical writings and familiar essays on topics including his travels to Moscow, his experiments with hashish, and his love of book collecting; dense theoretical considerations of allegory and language, such as *Origins of German Tragic Drama* and "The Task of the Translator" (1923), which speculates on how translation offers fragments of a "pure language"; translations into German of Baudelaire and the modern French novelist Marcel Proust; literary criticism introducing contemporary authors such as Franz Kafka to general audiences; aphoristic considerations of the philosophy of history; and avowedly Marxist examinations of the role of art in modern society, such as "The Author as Producer" (1934) and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Academically trained but denied an academic career, Benjamin represents a crossover figure in literary theory, resembling the mid-twentieth-century American literary and social critic EDMUND WILSON in the range of his writing and cultural concerns, as well as the more academic Adorno in his philosophical sophistication.

Among the texts that Benjamin published under the auspices of the Frankfurt Institute, none has become more famous than "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." It introduces his seminal concept of "aura"—the unique quality traditionally attributed to an artwork, giving it a special status equivalent to that of a sacred object in religious ritual. Investigating the perennial theoretical problem of the relation of aesthetics to social history, Benjamin argues that the status of the artwork is not timeless: it changed with the advent of capitalist mass production, which dispelled its unique aura and revered standing by devaluing the concept of the "original." Taking photography and film as his prime examples, he speculates that social transformations induced by technological changes in production alter aesthetic perception itself. He contrasts painting—a topic of comparison made familiar in aesthetics by GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING (1729–1781)—with film, noting that the stream of images in film promotes a "deepening of apperception" and that the close-up, among other techniques, "extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives." These are benefits of the mechanical reproduction of art.

Though many view Benjamin as a mystical thinker, he does not express nostalgia for a time when the artwork possessed an "aura"; indeed, he denounces theories that assert an auratic or ritualistic power of film, branding them politically and aesthetically regressive. In contrast to painting or orchestral music, film has revolutionary potential because it abolishes authenticity and aura and enjoins the participation of the audience. Echoing Brecht on the "alienation effects" achieved by actors and staging in experimental theater, Benjamin maintains that the very process through which a movie is constructed—shot by shot, as the editor sutures together sequences filmed at different times—prevents audience members from unconsciously empathizing or identifying with any actor, thereby provoking them to thought and perhaps to action.

Nonetheless, Benjamin recognizes that any art form can be turned to reactionary purposes, and that the apparatus or technology of film does not guarantee a singular political outcome. He thus dispels the utopian belief that technology necessarily generates beneficial changes (a belief sometimes expressed today in rhapsodic pronouncements on the World Wide Web, discussed by STUART MOULTHROP among others). Mindful of the uses that fascists had made of film—notably Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1934), an infamous celebration of Nazi ideology—Benjamin

sternly rebukes the aestheticization of politics, by which sheer technical brilliance and beauty mask the representation of a pernicious political program. Instead of offering a fascination with aesthetic qualities, communism positively "politicizes art" by foregrounding political action in the work and compelling the audience to reflect on the problems it raises. As is often the case with Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is less an authoritative statement of general aesthetic principles than a sequence of striking observations and an injunction for future work.

Some critics have stressed Benjamin's trajectory from the philosophical idealism of his early writings on language, aesthetics, and philosophy to his more explicitly Marxist later writings, but the very range of his work—on language, allegory, translation theory, historiography, aesthetics, film, and the philosophy of technology—has sometimes led commentators to shape Benjamin's work according to their own tastes. Beginning with his lifelong friend, Gershom Scholem, one prominent strand of readings foregrounds Benjamin's more philosophical works, seeing them as an expression of Jewish mysticism. Such readings downplay his mature works of the 1930s, viewing them as a misguided infatuation with the Marxist Brecht. Contemporary deconstructive critics, notably PAUL DE MAN and Geoffrey Hartman, draw on Benjamin's writings on allegory and language, claiming him as a precursor of deconstruction in his focus on the problematics of language. Marxists like TERRY EAGLETON have stressed his exemplary role as a revolutionary critic, though one with messianic leanings. Despite the legendary obscurity of his prose style and his use of idioms derived from mysticism and German idealist philosophy (especially in his earlier writings), Benjamin persistently calls attention in his later work to the influence of the means of production on culture; he commands the revolutionary intellectual to assume an attitude that would transform him "from a supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who sees it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of proletarian revolution" ("The Author as Producer").

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Not until decades after his death did Benjamin's diverse work become readily available in German and, increasingly, in English. In addition to his two dissertations, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* (1920) and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928; trans. 1977), he published many essays and articles and left several unfinished book manuscripts. The first collected edition in German, the two-volume *Schriften (Writings)*, edited by Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem (1955), brought renewed attention to Benjamin's work. The standard scholarly edition of the complete writings in German is *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schwepenhäuser (7 vols., 1972–89). The first selection of essays in English, *Illuminations*, was edited by Hannah Arendt (1969); it includes the standard translation of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" used in our anthology. A string of English collections followed, sometimes overlapping in material: *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1973); *Understanding Brecht* (1973); *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Peter Demetz (1978); *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (1979); and *Moscow Diary*, edited by Gary Smith (1986). Harvard University Press has begun publishing a standard edition, including *Selected Writings, 1913–1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (1996); *Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (1999); a projected third volume of selected writings from 1935 to 1940; and the massive *Arcades Project* (1999). The series is seriously flawed, however: the volumes are incomplete (as the titles indicate), rely on earlier translations, and have sparse scholarly apparatus, omitting the extremely useful introductions and notes provided by Benjamin's more scrupulous German editors. Among several collections of letters, the most comprehensive

is *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, edited by Scholem and Adorno (1966; trans. 1994).

The standard biography is Momme Brodersen's *Walter Benjamin: A Biography* (1990; trans. 1996), which replaces Bernd Witte's earlier *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (1985; trans. 1991). Gershom Scholem's *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (1975; trans. 1981) offers a firsthand personal account.

The secondary literature on Benjamin in English is extensive. Fredric Jameson provided an influential introduction of Benjamin to contemporary American literary theorists in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (1971). Susan Buck-Morss's *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School* (1977) roots Benjamin's work in the context of the Frankfurt School. A spirited attempt to recapture Benjamin for the Left was undertaken by Terry Eagleton in *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (1981). Much of the criticism on Benjamin, such as Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (1982; 2d ed., 1994), follows the mystical interpretation inaugurated by Scholem. Michael Jennings's *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (1987) is a useful examination of Benjamin's critical methodology. Perhaps the best collection of criticism in English is *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, edited by Gary Smith (1988); it contains important texts by Benjamin's contemporaries Adorno, Scholem, and Ernst Bloch and a well-informed assessment by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. See also the companion volume edited by Smith, *Benjamin: Philosophy, History, Aesthetics* (1989). A synoptic account, Rainer Rochlitz's *Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (1992; trans. 1996), considers Benjamin's reflections on language, on art and modernity, and on politics and history.

Many critical studies of Benjamin focus on a single facet of his work. One prominent line of commentary comes from deconstruction; see Carol Jacobs's *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (1999), which includes an influential essay originally published in 1975 on Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," and Paul de Man's "Conclusion: On Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'" (1981), which builds on Jacobs, finding that Benjamin suggests the deconstructive lesson of the unreliability of language. Benjamin is a touchstone for film critics; see, for example, the leading film scholar Miriam Hansen's "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience," *New German Critique* 40 (1987).

The standard bibliography in German is *Walter Benjamin: Eine kommentierte Bibliographie*, compiled by Momme Brodersen et al. (1996), which includes a section on Benjamin's work in English. Gary Smith's *Benjamin* (cited above) includes a bibliography of Benjamin's work and selected secondary material up to 1988, and Rochlitz's *Disenchantment of Art* also includes a useful selective bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction¹

"Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours. But the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful. In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor

1. Translated by Harry Zohn.