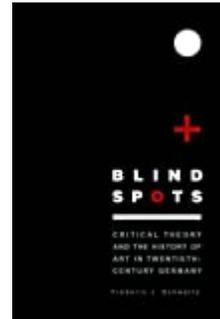




Frederic J. Schwartz. *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. xiii + 300 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10829-3.



Reviewed by Thomas O. Haakenson (Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities)

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Thinking in the Dark

The publishers of Frederic J. Schwartz's *Blind Spots* describe it as the first book to focus on the relationship of early-twentieth-century critical theory and the (other) discourses of the visual. While Schwartz's invocation of the works of Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and others is provocative, it might be more accurate to describe his study as a recontextualization rather than an engagement with the heretofore ignored. The book is worthy of praise, no doubt, but the publishers seem to have sacrificed accuracy in the name of advertising, a funny thing indeed given the focus of Schwartz's impressive and interesting engagements.

Schwartz seeks to situate the scholarship of the Frankfurt School and its affiliates in terms of art historical debates and developments in the early twentieth century, debates and developments that focus to varying degrees on something loosely described as "the visual." Schwartz asks, "What did critical theory learn from the history of art?" (p. x). If the question itself is not illusory, then the answer is certainly elusive. To this end, Schwartz succeeds in placing critical theory in intriguing, sometimes

new contexts. Schwartz falters in losing sight, ironically enough, of the politics underlying the work of several of the thinkers in question.

Schwartz's book is a series of four case studies united by two, central goals. First, the author claims that "discourses of the visual" influenced German critical theorists in ways underappreciated until now. These discourses include, for Schwartz, the academic history of art, the avant-garde, psychology and its related fields. Certain concepts have returned to present-day art history from its repressed past. This return of the repressed requires, according to Schwartz, that we reinvest certain concepts with the "contingency of their own formation" (p. xi). Second, Schwartz examines the manner in which the visual became a way to examine the often contradictory processes associated with modernity (pp. xii). Here, physiological optics, physiognomy, and psychotechnics become dominant discourses as well as metaphors for Schwartz, as the critical theorists he examines invoke these fields even as they fail to recognize the risks involved.

In addition to a brief foreword and a somewhat lengthier afterword Schwartz's text is divided, unevenly, into several chapters: "Fashion," "Distraction," "Nonsimultaneity," and "Mimesis." Each chapter invokes various critical theorists to achieve its ends. The chapter on Benjamin provides an example of both the strengths and weaknesses of the effort to recontextualize early Frankfurt School thought, to revisit this thought, as it were, with a view from outside.

In "Distraction: Walter Benjamin and the Avant-Garde," Schwartz makes a striking effort to distinguish between the "professional" and the "expert." The expert and expertise are, of course, key themes in recent work in the sociology and history of science and technology.^[1] Schwartz, however, engages the expert differently than do many of these studies. Put simply, the professional is a bourgeois, whereas the expert has no a priori class affiliations. At issue is the understanding of *Berufstand*—professional status or "occupational estate"—and the conceptual viability of the term in assessing class relations (p. 96). Schwartz seeks to explain the resultant failure of class as an analytic category by focusing on one emerging field of knowledge in particular, that of psychotechnics. The field of psychotechnics, a sort of technical or commercial application of psychology, encouraged what Schwartz describes as the "instrumentalization of the body and the eye in the service of business" (p. 94). Its numerous practitioners lacked an academic, disciplinary home for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. They found a home by becoming experts for sale.

The expert is a figure key to Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and other early twentieth-century theorists. For Kracauer, the expert is a product of a system in which specialization produces the inability to "grasp the entire situation enough" (Kracauer, as quoted on p. 87). Benjamin, in comparison, finds in the notion of the expert a figure "whose mode of thought does not dangerously combine the limitation of instrumental reason and the placebo of idealism" (p. 88). At its foundation, the debate between Kracauer and Benjamin appears to be a debate over the type of knowledge possible in modernity, fragmentary or totalizing. Kracauer's expert fails because he (or she) is unable to understand the problems produced by modernity in their totality; Benjamin's expert succeeds for many of the same reasons. The problem with Benjamin's efforts is, according to Schwartz, that he ignores the politics of real-life experts. Using the example of psychotechnics, Schwartz suggests that "the experts in and out of suits were converging politically, but were

moving together towards the right and not the left" (p. 99). Supposedly Benjamin's use of this right-leaning, expert knowledge compromised his own Marxist orientation.

In noting Benjamin's engagement with the expert, Schwartz suggests via analogy the "failures" of Benjamin's own intellectual vision using the idea of the blind spot. The retinal blind spot was made visible through a diagram developed by the optical physiologist Wilhelm Wundt (p. 95). In Wundt's model, the eye's blind spot can be revealed by focusing on a particular point while holding the diagram a certain distance from the viewer. Schwartz uses this empirical model metaphorically to suggest that Benjamin (and other critical theorists) did not or could not see the shortcomings of their intellectual projects. Schwartz's discussion of Benjamin's "blind spot" is worth quoting at length because it is a good example of the many provocative recontextualizations in Schwartz's study. It also shows the way in which Schwartz must paradoxically charge a figure like Benjamin with failing to be concerned with "real" politics, despite the fact that Benjamin's method is to invoke the expert analogically. Schwartz's recontextualization results in a misrepresentation, despite the fact that Schwartz explicitly is at pains to avoid such an error.

What is Benjamin's figurative "blind spot," according to Schwartz? "He [Benjamin] knew the work of constructivist typographers, and he knew of the work of psychotechnicians.... Benjamin must have blinked with one eye, for the precise point at which these two groups intersected ... remained invisible to him" (pp. 94-95). This "precise point" was the manifest concern of both typographers and psychotechnicians in determining how the eye processes information. The psychotechnicians, in particular, used this instrumentalization of human perception to give their field institutional significance and to provide advertisers with insight as how to best represent their wares. On the surface, the use of expert knowledge for other than politically progressive ends may seem unimportant. Schwartz would have us believe there is a deeper problem here, however. Because of his use of the expert, Benjamin's Marxism is compromised fundamentally when he references the psychotechnical expert in, for example, his infamous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

To be sure, Schwartz is not dismissive of Benjamin, especially regarding Benjamin's innovative if misdirected use of the "expert." Unlike the "professional," the expert has a relationship to knowledge that frees him

(or her) of the burdens of class-based political affiliation. Such a fluidity, in part, makes Benjamin's appropriation of the term possible. To Benjamin, the "notion of the 'expert' ... is an alternative to the bourgeois 'professional,' a hypothetical mode of social existence leaving knowledge open to a different politics and freeing it from the pressure of class and status that were so powerfully inflecting it" (p. 96). Despite his unique use of the "expert," Benjamin fails to see, according to Schwartz, the political perils involved. Benjamin retained a "strange naivety about the role of the eye in production and leisure, when others already knew better" (p. 95).

It is in the professionalization of psychotechnics that Benjamin's "blind spot" is to be found (p. 99). Benjamin ignores the way in which psychotechnics made possible an instrumentalization of the body in the field's effort to secure academic prestige and commercial success. Indeed, Benjamin's figurative blindness to the compromised political aspects of his own invocation of psychotechnical expertise leads to even more significant problems, according to Schwartz. The ability of psychotechnics to become an academic discipline in the early twentieth century depended to a great extent on the expert practitioners of psychotechnics instrumentalizing the human body for capitalism. The commercial use of psychotechnics not only allowed the field enough cultural capital to enable its institutionalization as a formal site of academic inquiry, this very process jeopardized the politics of those who, seemingly unaware, used this knowledge for anti-capitalist ends.

In the process of waging this criticism of Benjamin's apparent ignorance of the politics of "real" experts in early-twentieth-century Germany, Schwartz reveals his own blind spots. That is, Benjamin does not discuss the "real" politics of the expert because he is concerned with the way in which fascism can easily co-opt such rhetoric to its own end. Benjamin wants, instead, to use the concept of the expert dialectically, to prevent its instrumentalization for fascist politics.

According to Schwartz, Benjamin uses the notion of the "expert" to find a way to analyze socioeconomic relations and simultaneously avoid the concept of class. Class, Schwartz notes, provided "limited value in understanding the relation of labor to knowledge or politics in Weimar and post-Weimar Germany" (p. 96). Benjamin's use of the "expert" does not do away with a class-based analysis of society or politics altogether, however. The fundamental issue seems to be the value of locating Benjamin's supposed blind spot even though Benjamin him-

self was not explicitly concerned with the disciplinary issues involved. Schwartz suggests that Benjamin developed the notion of the expert for his own, specific purposes. Why, then, take Benjamin to task for supposedly ignoring the other ways in which his contemporaries employed the expert, figuratively and literally? Is Benjamin's political project itself undermined by the politics of various experts in early-twentieth-century Germany?

If nothing else, these questions reveal the way in which a recontextualization such as Schwartz proposes might allow us to appreciate the continued relevance and analytical usefulness of Benjamin's lesser-examined concepts. Such a project also proves a model for further exploring similar, overlooked connections between early-twentieth-century German intellectuals and their historical, disciplinary context. Key to any such recontextualization, however, is that it be what Keya Ganguly describes, with Benjamin in mind, as a "historically attentive discussion of his project."^[2] To recontextualize Benjamin's references does not mean forgetting Benjamin's own orientation toward a revolutionary Marxism nor his focus on analyzing changing social relations engendered by capitalism. If Benjamin was not concerned with the way in which psychotechnical expertise was used in advertising, it was in great part because he was not a historian in the traditional sense of that term.

In at least one instance, Benjamin will describe the "expert" in "The Work of Art" essay in relationship to the film star Charlie Chaplin. The mass audience reacts to Chaplin's *Groteskfilme* in what Benjamin describes as a progressive manner. Benjamin juxtaposes this progressive response to a reactionary one, and uses the idea of expert knowledge to explain the distinction: "Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art. The reactionary attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into the progressive reaction toward a Chaplin movie. The progressive reaction is characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert. Such a fusion is of great social significance. The greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public."^[3] The social significance Benjamin refers to here is, of course, the function of an art form in a class-based society. That the public can engage grotesque films "like an expert" analyzing the works of Pablo Picasso reveals the revolutionary potential of mass media for a new type of politics. Certain visual forms—Benjamin's example is painting—traditionally have been "in no position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience"

because of their very nature.[4] Film, however, allows for the simultaneous contemplation of the object by a large public; film produces a transformation in the reception of visual culture. Put another way, the objects of visual culture reveal the modes of perception indicative of a particular period. Benjamin's is thus a history of perception as a manifestation of social relations. That numerous members of the public have access to film of course suggests more about the use of such media for mass politics and less about the nature of expert knowledge for physiological optics.

Benjamin's emphasis on social relations through a history of modes of perception suggests a need to rethink how class antagonisms might be reconfigured in new, potentially revolutionary cultural terrain. The public's reactionary response to the Picasso painting indicates the decline of painting in social terms. That is, the social significance of painting has decreased. The masses view films "with the orientation of the expert" because films have the potential to translate visual information into immediate emotional enjoyment, not because Benjamin is invested in reading the effects of psychotechnical expertise on visual display. Benjamin finds a revolutionary potential in the mass audience's mode of viewing in so far as it is produced by the masses themselves, not for them by art historical experts. Or, as Esther Leslie explains, audiences "become experts, because they critically measure film against the daily reality that they experience and because they learn to assimilate new scenarios of potential social and physical ordering." [5] To compare Benjamin's analogical use of the expert in his discussions of the public's visual perception with disciplinary-specific notions of expertise is, in effect, to compare apples and blue orchids.

If Schwartz seeks to criticize certain intellectuals' apparent blind rejections of the convergence of capitalism, science and critical theory, he makes it clear that such blind rejections did not always mean a lack of knowledge about the political uses or misuses of new disciplines. Kracauer's unique invocation of physiognomy, for example, represents a somewhat consciously antithetical approach to that field's disciplinary contours in the 1920s and 1930s. Physiognomy traditionally "posits and seeks to trace the organic intertwining of body and character, the mutual dependence of the psyche and flesh which share the same life" (p. 138). Kracauer's physiognomy is radically different; it is, in essence, a reading of surface fragments for their own value rather than for these fragments' revelation of a totality. If the fragments of modernity revealed anything to Kracauer, it was that in

modernity there was only the alienation, the fragmentation, of the masses themselves.

Comparisons of disciplinary-specific expertise with the work of the early Frankfurt School and its associations make for useful critical theory today, as we struggle to comprehend the implications of new forms of knowledge as well as new forms of visual culture. Charging critical theorists with failing to be good disciplinary historians makes much less sense. Schwartz's ambitious project is to correct the tendency of art historians and art critics, as he puts it, to invoke "uncritically and prematurely" the work of Benjamin, Kracauer, Adorno and others "as if theory were an unmediated form of truth and need, at most, be tried on 'ready made' to see if the fit is good" (p. xi). To that end, Schwartz accurately cautions that the use of the critical theory of and inspired by early Frankfurt School figures in a way that makes their art historical references appear elective prevents a "proper dialogue" about their work (p. x).

Some of the claims Schwartz makes with respect to his case studies, however, seem grandiose, too much so to be taken at face value. He clarifies that Benjamin, for example, is the "only figure of Western Marxism in Germany whose relation to a specific art-historiographical context has been explored in any detail" (p. x). Yet an entire chapter is devoted to Benjamin despite the book's explicit goal of recovering this lack (a chapter which, regardless of its paradoxical inclusion, is fascinating). Similarly, Schwartz argues that certain figures "developed central concepts of their aesthetic historical thought by means of a much closer engagement with various discourses of the visual than has hitherto been assumed" (p. x). In Benjamin's case, Schwartz claims that this engagement was, in fact, not one at all: Benjamin was "blind" to the way in which psychotechnics supported capitalist manipulation of the masses through advertising.

Schwartz insists that the history of art has much to contribute to critical theory and that such a contribution can be made apparent only with a "view from outside." A problem of Schwartz's book is that it that he distances some of the figures he examines too much from their own political and philosophical leanings. Schwartz claims that "analyzing the internal coherence and structure of these ideas within the oeuvre that the Frankfurt School represents" does not allow us to "gauge their usefulness" (pp. xi). It seems that such an approach falls into the same trap that Schwartz himself criticizes, namely, situating critical theory in a way not so in line with these early Frankfurt Schools figures' own inclinations.

That said, if Schwartz's book falls prey to its own blind spots, these by no means make his provocative studies any less worth the reading. Distance does give us, after all, a different angle on the work of early critical theory, so a "view from outside" is not necessarily a view to ignore. This optical terrain reminds us all, as Schwartz so eloquently explains, that we are "inevitably thinking, to some extent, in the dark" (p. xii). And sometimes distance and darkness reveal our failings just as much as they allow us see if not better, than certainly otherwise.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Stephen Turner, "What is the Problem with Experts?" *Social Studies of Science* 31 (2001), pp. 123-49; H.M. Collins and Robert Evans, "The

Third Wave of Science Studies: Studies of Expertise and Experience," *Social Studies of Science* 32 (2002), pp. 235-96; and Michael E. Gorman, "Levels of Expertise and Trading Zones: A Framework for Multidisciplinary Collaboration," *Social Studies of Science* 32 (2002), pp. 33-38.

[2]. Keya Ganguly, "Profane Illuminations and the Everyday," *Cultural Studies* 18 (2004), p. 261.

[3]. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in idem, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 234.

[4]. Ibid.

[5]. Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 149.

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