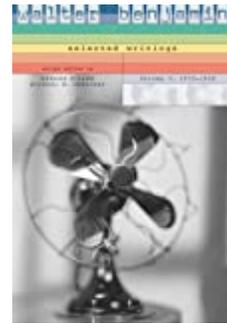


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Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, eds. *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writing, Volume 3, 1935-1938*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. 462 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00896-0; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01981-2.



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A tragic symbol of the Weimar Republic's extraordinary intellectual enterprise, Walter Benjamin's writing is an indispensable resource for current research of modern culture and societies. More than fifty years after the re-introduction of his then commonly overlooked texts to the post-World War II German reader, Benjamin is universally read today as a perceptive, even prophetic, critic of bourgeois culture. The growing interest in Benjamin and the rising number of essays related to his work notwithstanding, only a narrow selection of his diverse writings are available to readers of English. The translation series *Selected Writing* contributes to an effort, intensified in recent years, of presenting unfamiliar facets of Benjamin's work in the English language. This third volume of the series presents selected writings from the years 1935-38. It introduces its readers to some of the milestones in the development of Benjamin's thought, although not all of the essays are of equal importance. Some of the essays included here have been translated and presented in other annotated editions recently; this volume, however, provides an interesting framework for an assessment of the development of Benjamin's ideas and beliefs.

In contrast to the German edition of Benjamin's collected works, as well as to other English translations of Benjamin's texts, the essays in this edition are arranged

chronologically, by date of composition, rather than thematically or according to genre.[1] As an introductory measure, this arrangement appears at first to be somewhat problematic: it provides a seemingly arbitrary assembly of reviews, short stories, conference reports and diary entries, alongside insightful critiques of the roles of art in the political sphere. However, the resulting amalgam produces an illuminating picture of Benjamin's ideas and inspirations. This chronological presentation enables the reader to follow the development and changes in Benjamin's ideas. This volume contains, for instance, an early, unpublished version and commentary notes for the renowned "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility" (written in 1936). Above all, the reader is challenged by the disjointed character of this volume to find correlations between the different aspects of Benjamin's writings manifest in various generic formulae.

Moreover, the diverse short essays and reflections assembled in this volume form an intriguing collection of *Denkbilder*, or "constellations," that demonstrate the fragmented nature of Benjamin's work. A general lack of methodical reasoning, possibly one of the reasons for his current popularity, were perceived by Benjamin as essential to his arguments. This tendency in Benjamin's writing is seen in one of the most important texts in this volume, "Paris, the Capital of the 19th Century"

(1935). Written as a synoptic presentation of Benjamin's "Arcade Project," this essay is a montage-documentation of the objects, spatial relations, ideas and anxieties of the lost world of the nineteenth century, the time and place in which the principles of capitalist modernity were first formulated. When Benjamin initiated the "Arcade Project" in the late 1920s, the surrealist concept of the dream guided his fragmented writing. The reassessment of the project in the mid-1930s presented in this edition was influenced by Marxist theories. The montage-shaped argument then was used to form a dialectical critique of "the phantasmagoria of capitalist culture" (p. 37).

During these years the "dialectical understanding" of society and culture became a principle concern in many of Benjamin's texts, in which positivism and objectivity were contested. In "Johann Jakob Bachofen" (1935), for instance, Benjamin celebrates this forgotten scholar of the nineteenth-century as a "prophetic scientist," who "refute[s] ... Mommsen's positivist approach" (p. 15). In "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937), he develops the idea of a "dialectic insight" for the history of reception (p. 263). According to this idea, a work of art is an "open" concept that develops and changes through the history of its reception. In "Translation-For and Against" (1936) he asserts that the meaning of a text is always dependent on the "horizon and the world" in which the text is read. Philosophy is the "world of thought" and "one sees of the world only what is provided for by language"; that is, by the cultural and historical context. According to Benjamin, translation clearly reveals the validity of this assumption: certain passages of a German text that he read took on a totally different meaning when they were translated into French. The passages were absent in the translation: "they had become French" (p. 249).

A similar approach is found in "The Storyteller" (1936). This piece seems to encompass the main views and attitudes of Benjamin in the years of his exile in Paris and San Remo. Modern culture is associated here with the disappearance of the storyteller and the emergence of the bourgeois novel. Here too, a dialectical understanding of the art work is depicted as a necessary tool in the hand of the social critic. The storyteller's tale, which remains "free from explanation" (p. 148), was an efficient instrument in the struggle against social injustice. In contrast, the novel, and the *Bildungsroman* in particular, reassert the existing social reality. The novel is but a symptom of modernity's over-interpreted experience. Unlike the pre-modern stories, every piece of information in the modern world is "shot through with explanations," with confirmation of the contemporary social or-

der (pp. 147-148). In "Rastelli's Story" (1935), Benjamin takes the storyteller's position to demonstrate the subversive potential of the unexplained lesson.

"The Storyteller" emphasizes the relationships between art, especially the technological medium of the art, and politics. Benjamin observes that the politicization of art is not a mere analytical consideration; it is a response "to the aestheticizing of political life inaugurated by Fascism" (p. 139). According to Benjamin, Brecht achieves this level of "politicization" through his dialectical writing, for instance in Brecht's "Threepenny Novel" (1936; Brecht's *Dreigroschenroman* was published in 1934). Some passages in this piece "interrupt the text" and thus "invite the reader now and again to forgo illusion" (p. 7). The juxtaposition of the social problems of the 1930s and a nineteenth-century setting in one story contributes further to the dialectical understanding of the novel. The interwoven mixture of now and then in Brecht's writing also attracted Benjamin because of its associations with the "now of reconizability," a concept he was developing during 1935 (p. 424). According to this idea, certain aspects of the past and its culture can be recognized only from current socio-cultural contexts, "as it never was before, and never will be afterward." Since meaning is always dependent on a dialectical analysis, it is this unique encounter between past and present, between different cultures and histories, that enables a critical interpretation. This need for a critical standpoint is probably the reason for Benjamin's assertion, in a letter to Theodor Adorno, that his "Paris, the Capital of 19th Century" (1935) could be written "only in Paris" and "only in German" (p. 52).

Alongside the problem of over-interpretation, "The Storyteller" underlines a "crisis of experience." The tale belongs to an age of shared experiences; the novel represents an era of isolation, in which experiences cannot be repeated or shared. This, says Benjamin, is evident in post-World War I European literature, which failed to convey the experiences of the trenches. Modern isolation of the human subject is a recurring theme in Benjamin's writing. In his works between the years 1935-38, perhaps as a consequence of his own exile and isolation in San Remo, his contemplations of this concept seem to intensify. Of particular interest in the texts of these years is the growing tension between the bourgeois need for an actual refuge, a sheltered private sphere, and the subject's desperate need to share experiences and to communicate in the modern city's public spheres. A remarkable depiction of this tension, wrapped in bitter-nostalgic tones, can be traced in "Berlin Childhood around 1900" (1938).

The ideas and convictions mentioned above are apparent in Benjamin's discussions of film and photography in this volume as well. From the analysis of the "artistic superiority" of the early photography, due to both the technological and social origins of the medium, to the reports on the "crisis of painting" (p. 238), the texts in this edition illustrate an absorbing search for a new concept of art that would correspond with modern technologies and political urgencies. Along these lines, this edition also includes a short essay about the "dialectical structure of film" (p. 94), as well as a call for a film theory that would acknowledge this dialectical nature. The renowned critic Bela Balázs wrote as early as 1922 that film had taken over the cultural role of former storytellers and their folktales; it seems that Benjamin suggests, implicitly, a similar concept of film, which puts it in opposition to the bourgeois novel. Unlike Balázs, however, Benjamin understood the folktale quality of the film as including an unambiguous subversive potential. The drafts and notes Benjamin wrote during these years for his celebrated "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility" (1939) would eventually provide the foundations for a dialectical theory of film. Scholars of film and its social functions will find this volume valuable because of the opportunity it offers them to reassess these notes and their influence in the field of film studies.

Surely, scholars of modern culture will be intrigued at the appearance of Borgesian motives in Benjamin's comments on perception and representation. In resemblance to Jorge Luis Borges' famous lines, Benjamin uses phrases such as "I found myself standing in front of a map and, simultaneously, standing in the landscape which it depicted" (p. 335). He also uses similar metaphors, associating a dream with a labyrinth, and blurs the boundaries between metaphor and reality. Unlike Borges, who, like Benjamin, was "rediscovered" by post-World War II American intellectuals, Benjamin is explicitly interested in the desperation and helplessness of the displaced individual. It is his own homelessness and loneliness that

he finds in the labyrinth, when he climbs its stairs and reaches the "peak which afforded a far reaching view of all countries" (p. 336). The inability to communicate, to share experiences, drives the people in his dream, and eventually himself, to be "seized by vertigo" and to fall "into the depths."

Benjamin is read today in a way that resembles his 1935 portrayal of the "Prophetic Scientists": a "remarkable mind" with "a certain dilettantish aspect," which "operates on the frontiers of several sciences" and inspires the research of the future generations (pp. 15-16). The pieces assembled in this volume demonstrate some of the principal topics that inspired scholars in the western world several decades after Benjamin's death. Benjamin looked at intellectuals of the past century and found them "prophetic," not because they could guess future events, but because their comments on their own world gained new meanings and provided new tools for social critics of the future generation (p. 167). Just like these "prophets," Benjamin has given future scholars analytical tools to enhance their own critical enterprises. This volume enables the English-language audience to engage with Benjamin's work in a crucial moment in the development of his thought. The novice reader of Benjamin will find the explanatory footnotes and the short chronology at the end of the book helpful. More well-informed readers may benefit from more information regarding the lesser known texts and their places in the general thought of this extraordinary critic of modernity.

Note

[1]. This is true for the German comprehensive edition of Benjamin's writing, from which the texts in this volume are translated (Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972-1989), as well as for recent English translations, for instance: A. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Art* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005).

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