

Dan Erdman  
Culture of Archives, Museums and Libraries  
CINE-GT 3049  
Antonia Lant  
May14, 2012

### **Walter Benjamin's History and the Technologies of Memory**

Despite having been rehabilitated and made safe for consumption as a thinker and writer in the near postwar era, Walter Benjamin still carries something of the whiff of trendiness. A Google Scholar search finds his name cited in some capacity or other in 8,040 separate texts since 2011 alone. While popularity may simply be an index of the usefulness of his work, even those only glancingly familiar with his output recall dense, allusive, sometimes impenetrable writing, idiosyncratic theoretical obsessions and a political orientation that is both central to his thought and firmly rooted in a specific set of historical circumstances which no longer exist. There is a definite tendency in Benjamin scholarship to see him as an authority on any topic, but the honest reader must occasionally be troubled by the prospect of this attitude's mirror image: does Benjamin, seventy years after his death, have any more to say?

I originally had intended to investigate his work in order to find relevant opinions on institutions of cultural memory or, failing that, to perhaps isolate some particular trend in his thinking that might be useful to such institutions today. Instead, what seemed most salient in Benjamin's writings had nothing directly to do with museums or archives, but rather addressed the social need that such institutions are supposed to fulfill. Though I have by no means exhausted the corpus of his work, barely even scratching the surface of what has been translated into English, I believe I have located a consistent line of thought uniting his concern

for experience, tradition and history.

Benjamin's relationship to the modern age is a fraught one. His life spanned the tail end of the triumphant bourgeois nineteenth century, the catastrophe of WWI, the debut of revolutionary communism (of which he was a supporter, though not a conventional or uncritical one), the establishment of the Weimar Republic and its collapse into the Third Reich. He participated in one of the great involuntary migrations of the 20th century, fleeing Germany after the situation became truly dire. But he waited too long; he ended his life on the road, taking an intentional overdose of barbiturates in the Spanish wilderness after encountering what was to be the last of many obstacles, despairing of making it out of Europe and fearing deportation back to his country of origin.

Despite all of this, I don't believe it is entirely fair to cast his generally gloomy philosophical orientation as an overly-convenient reaction to the big events of his day. For one thing, the biographical reading makes it too easy to ignore his writing and concentrate instead on Benjamin as a doomed twentieth century martyr (what T. J. Clark mocked as "Benjamin, Prophet of the Holocaust"<sup>1</sup>) For another, the chronology doesn't quite work out. Here is twenty-one-year-old Benjamin in 1913: "More and more we are assaulted by the feeling: our youth is but a brief night (fill it with rapture!); it will be followed by grand 'experience,' the years of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and lack of energy. Such is life."<sup>2</sup>

Even then, he was preoccupied with the way in which experience itself had become a devalued currency; this was to be a theme that he would revisit often in later years. For

---

1 T. J. Clark, "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?", *Boundary 2* (Spring 2003), 41

2 Walter Benjamin, "Experience," in *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 3

Benjamin, the pace of technological and social development in the modern age constituted an assault on experience on two fronts. Most obviously, it subjected the population at large to sensations which had not - indeed, could not - have been anticipated in the previous era.

Benjamin's writings yield forth many examples of this from the everyday life of the urban dweller. "At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like energy from a battery...Thus technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training."<sup>3</sup> These sorts of assaults on the human perceptual apparatus find their echo in popular entertainment such as cinema. "There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle."<sup>4</sup> Obviously, the most prominent example of this comes in the crucible of the recently-concluded World War which so devastated Benjamin's own country. "Wasn't it noticed at the time how many people returned from the front in silence? Not richer but poorer in communicable experience?...A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body."<sup>5</sup>

Equally as catastrophic, however, was the concomitant decline in tradition and narratives sufficient to assimilate these historically new events. In his capacity as a literary critic, he noticed the signs of this in poetry, theatre and the novel; the health of certain genres, for Benjamin, was tied to the varying currents of experience in the modern age. His celebrated

---

3 Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books, 1968), 175

4 Ibid., 175

5 Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings Volume 2: Part 2: 1931-1934*, ed. Michael William

essay on Baudelaire, for example, notes that "conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry have become less favorable, [thus] it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers. This may be due to a change in the structure of their experience."<sup>6</sup>

But he even noted the decline of narrative on the more prosaic level, suggesting that, even in the interpersonal sphere, colloquial frames of reference were no longer up to their old tasks. "Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? Where do you still hear words from the dying that last, and that pass from one generation to the next like a precious ring? Who can still call on a proverb when he needs one? And who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?"<sup>7</sup>

These disparate observations congeal in a broad complaint against the decline of tradition, which Benjamin regarded as the structuring element of experience. "Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life. It is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data."<sup>8</sup> This loss of tradition is related to the de-sacralization and disenchantment of the world; as science explains what mythology used to, traditions lose their social significance. "For clearly the observable world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples."<sup>9</sup> Even in his early writings, Benjamin found himself disconcerted by this state of affairs. In an

---

Jennings and Marcus Paul Bullock (Harvard University Press, 2005), 731-32

6 Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 156

7 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," 731

8 Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 157

9 Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (Schocken Books, 1978), 334

essay written in 1918, he stressed the importance of locating - or constructing - a new frame of reference which could legibly order experience in ways that the old traditions were no longer capable of. "Thus, the task of the coming philosophy can be conceived as the discovery or creation of that concept of knowledge which, by relating experience exclusively to the transcendental consciousness, makes not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible."<sup>10</sup>

Benjamin's view of experience and tradition find their fullest expression in his writings on history. Though these are among his most fragmentary and koanishly aphoristic texts, they reward close attention by spelling out some of the assumptions behind his thinking on these other subjects.

The clearest statement of this can be found in an extended polemic against what he refers to as "historicism," contrasted with "historical materialism." The former is his shorthand for the sort of modern, bourgeois history-writing common to Benjamin's day. Although he never uses this term, it seems to be synonymous with "Whig history," for which the past is conceived as a sequence of discrete events naturally evolving into a liberal, progressive and enlightened present. Herbert Butterfield, who coined the term, described its practitioner as one who "very quickly busies himself with dividing the world into the friends and enemies of progress."<sup>11</sup>

Some of Benjamin's criticisms of this perspective read as fairly typical Marxist cautions, such as his castigations of the bourgeois historian's willingness to accept the premises of power

---

10 Walter Benjamin, "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," in *Selected Writings Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 105

11 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (Norton, 1965), 5

and the present. Benjamin regards it as essential to remember "with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers...."<sup>12</sup> In uncharacteristically blunt language, Benjamin writes that such complacency risks "becoming a tool of the ruling classes."<sup>13</sup>

He also questions the assumption that progress in the technological realm necessarily entails a complementary advance in the social world. Allegorizing progress as a "storm blowing from Paradise," he points out that even his fellow Marxists see "only the progress in the mastery of nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features later encountered in Fascism."<sup>14</sup> (I, 259)

But his critique of the historical enterprise is far more ambitious than this. Indeed, his criticisms of "progress" were a fairly well-trod path when he was writing in the 1930s. Furthermore, it would be easy enough to rehabilitate an insufficiently jaundiced attitude toward power, and one writing history could just as easily "empathize" with the oppressed as with the "victors" without calling into question any of the basic assumptions of historical practice.

Benjamin's true issue is rather with the very notion of "empathy" with the historical subject in the first place. This is a recurring theme in his notes to his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" essay (published in English in *The Arcades Project*); in an atypically pithy summation, he writes that "the basis of the confrontation with conventional

---

12 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken Books, 1968), 256

13 Ibid., 255

14 Ibid., 259

historiography and 'enshrinement' is the polemic against empathy."<sup>15</sup> In this context, I take empathy to mean that process by which the historian purports to account for the (limited, naturally) perspective of a subject or society within its own epoch, as well as the historian's ability to successfully recreate that perspective and invest it with some explanatory power within their narrative. Such an attitude is only feasible against a background of a great many assumptions, first among them that the historian's own perspective is free of any distortion. In his notes, Benjamin quotes another writer on the difficulty of doing history "without involving in this retrospective glance anything that has taken place in the meantime," only to conclude that this "'purity' of the gaze is not just difficult but impossible to attain."<sup>16</sup>

But even this could be misconstrued as mere criticism of the practical difficulties of reconstructing the past; further review of the literature suggests that Benjamin regarded this type of history as, in addition to "impossible," undesirable. Historical empathy, for him, can only result in the creation of a static conception of the past in which all events are regimented into a linear chain of direct cause-and-effect. "Universal [bourgeois] history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time."<sup>17</sup> "Enshrinement" and "continuum" (or some variation, such as "continuity") are words which appear nearly as often as "empathy" in his notes on history, and they are similarly held in disdain by Benjamin as bad habits of the modern historian. "The enshrinement or apologia is meant to cover up the revolutionary moments in the occurrence of history. At heart, it seeks the establishment of continuity. It sets store only by those elements of a work that have already

---

15 Walter Benjamin, "Convolute N [On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]," in *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Harvard University Press, 1999), 475

16 *Ibid.*, 470

emerged and played a part in its reception."<sup>18</sup> Later: "And so, from time immemorial, historical narration has simply picked out an object from this continuous succession. But...its first thought was then always to reinsert the object into the continuum, which it would create anew through empathy."<sup>19</sup>

The model that Benjamin proposes as an alternative to this - his version of "historical materialism" - encourages active participation with a past that is accessible and open to use by the present. Benjamin's vision of history attempts to square the practice of a scholarly discipline with the function of living tradition. Although his instructions for how to establish this are characteristically vague, his hope was that historical materialism could address both the counter-revolutionary effects of bourgeois history as well as the social rudderlessness of a modern age which has eclipsed all traditions.

Historical materialism overcomes the contemplative bias of bourgeois historicism by establishing a direct relationship with the present. Benjamin's preferred image here is that of the constellation, which appears many times in his notes; a typical example asserts that it "is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather [the] image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."<sup>20</sup> Rather than arranging elements in a careful sequence after the fashion of bourgeois history, historical materialism makes use of the past by an act of radical decontextualization. "Materialist historiography does not choose its objects arbitrarily. It does

---

17 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 262

18 Benjamin, "Convolute N," 474

19 Ibid., 475

20 Ibid., 463



not fasten on them but rather springs them loose from the order of succession."<sup>21</sup> More than once, he refers to this process as the "blasting" of historical material out of its continuum. Only freed from this context can its resonances with the present become apparent: "moments in the course of history...become moments of the present day and change their specific character according to the catastrophic or triumphant nature of that day."<sup>22</sup> What cannot be rehabilitated for use in the present falls beneath the concern, and possibly the perception, of the materialist historian. "For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."<sup>23</sup>

Benjamin repeatedly draws a parallel between materialist history and the practice of cinematic montage. "The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components."<sup>24</sup> It is not entirely clear if or to what degree Benjamin was familiar with the writings of Sergei Eisenstein, but the concept of montage, as outlined by the Soviet director, actually serves as a useful allegory for Benjamin's notion of historical scholarship. Writing in 1929 - four years before Benjamin's notes for "Theses" were composed, more than ten before that essay's completion - Eisenstein defends what he regards as proper montage from popular misunderstanding. "The old film-makers, including the theoretically quite outmoded Lev Kuleshov, regarded montage as a means of producing something by describing it, adding individual shots to one another like building blocks....*But in my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that*

---

21 Ibid., 475

22 Ibid., 474

23 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 255

*DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another* (the dramatic principle)."<sup>25</sup> Against Kuleshov's logical joining of shots in order to construct in the imaginations of the spectators a space, figure or action, Eisenstein contrasted his own attempts at stimulating an idea through the marriage of two fragments which not only did not seamlessly build on one another, but in fact conflicted. He believed in montage "as a collision, my view that the collision of two factors gives rise to an idea."<sup>26</sup> He offers an example the famous "For God and country" sequence in his *October*.

Kornilov's march on Petrograd took place under the slogan 'In the Name of God and the Fatherland'. Here we have an attempt to use the representation for anti-religious ends. A number of images of the divine were shown in succession. From a magnificent Baroque Christ to an Eskimo idol.

Here a conflict arises between the concept 'God' and its symbolization. Whereas idea and image are completely synonymous in the first Baroque image, they grow further apart with each subsequent image. We retain the description 'God' and show idols that in no way correspond with our own image of the concept. From this we are to draw anti-religious conclusions as to what the divine really is.<sup>27</sup>

Eisenstein's shots appear, not in an order determined by the conventional dramatic logic of a scene, but rather as an intrusion, disrupting the linear narrative. Despite its lack of immediate relevance to the plot, the meaning of the "images of the divine" becomes apparent in this sudden recontextualization (at least according to Eisenstein). Something like this is what Benjamin recommends for the practice of historical materialism.

---

24 Benjamin, "Convolute N," 461

25 S. M. Eisenstein, "The Dramaturgy of Film Form," in *Selected Works, Volume I: Writings, 1922-34*, ed. Richard Taylor (Indiana University Press, 1988), 163, italics in original

26 S. M. Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot," in *Selected Works, Volume I: Writings, 1922-34*, ed. Richard Taylor (Indiana University Press, 1988), 144

27 Eisenstein, "The Dramaturgy of Film Form," 179-80

This is a history that is to have an immediate use to the present, both as a means to advance the class struggle ("Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism."<sup>28</sup>) as well as to assume the role abandoned by tradition to provide shape to the modern experience. This is an interested, committed history, which seeks to reclaim the past for the struggles of the present day; Benjamin warns that "the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it."<sup>29</sup>

I have attempted to explain Benjamin's vision of history in somewhat concrete terms, although in doing so I may have been guilty of papering over some important cracks. This is a difficult pitfall to avoid, since he doesn't explicitly suggest many real-world implications of his thinking. In the "Theses," he offers the example of the French Republic's invocation of ancient Rome, but this seems all too commonplace to properly fit his radical idea of the use of history (and he might just as easily have used the example of his own country, which at the time had placed itself third in line in a genealogy running through the Holy Roman Empire and Wilhelmine Germany). Much more intriguing is his other example: "Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger's leap into the past."<sup>30</sup> Benjamin unfortunately doesn't expand on that remarkable point, but it does point the way to some possible realizations of his notion of historical materialism.

Before addressing that point, however, it is worth considering the possible implications of Benjamin's view of history for institutions of cultural memory. Turning to this question,

---

28 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 257

29 Ibid., 255

30 Ibid., 261

what seems most immediately significant is the fact that nowhere does he mention museums, libraries or archives in any of his writings on historical materialism. In one sense this shouldn't surprise, as he hardly mentions them at all in any of his writing. Yet it is a rather curious omission, particularly for a writer who so habitually returned to the subject of memory and its relationship to experience in the modern age; he seemed to be able to find a historical perspective on nearly every other aspect of contemporary existence. For example, he contrasted the rise of the newspaper and other forms of popular press with the decline of oral storytelling, finding in the former a means of delivering information unencumbered by the trappings of tradition. "In turn, there is a contrast between all these forms and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is not the object of the story to convey a happening per se, which is the purpose of information; rather it embeds it in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the marks of the storytellers much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter's hand."<sup>31</sup>

Most famously, he considered the role of photography in these terms. For Benjamin, it is the very fact of the camera's ability to mechanically reproduce a personage or cityscape which, paradoxically, hastens the decline of memory. "What prevents our delight in the beautiful from ever being satisfied [by photography] is the image of the past, which Baudelaire regards as veiled by the tears of nostalgia....Insofar as art aims at the beautiful and, on however modest a scale, 'reproduces' it, it conjures up (as Faust does Helen) out of the womb of time. This no longer happens in the case of technical reproduction."<sup>32</sup>

There are other examples of this type of thinking throughout his work, but I think that

---

31 Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 159

these two suffice to demonstrate a motif in his analysis of technologies that purport to aid and extend human memory. In nearly all such cases, memory becomes separate from tradition and, thus, from active use. Daniel J. Sherman, in a consideration of the possible relationship of Benjamin's thinking to museum practice, points out that "Benjamin identifies two forms of valuation for art: cult or ritual value and exhibition value...When the technology of reproduction reduces the authority, and hence the cult value, of original works of art, the emphasis shifts to exhibition value..."<sup>33</sup>

This amounts, I think, to the same thing. With no living tradition - "cult value" here - to guide individual use of an art object, the viewer is reduced to playing a passive, contemplative role. Sherman contends that the very form of the modern museum has a hand in this as well, hinting at an essential overlap between Benjamin's thinking here and that of French-Revolution-era art theorist Quatremere de Quincy. "Yet in terms of the conceptual work they perform, the museum and [mechanical] reproduction in a very real sense belong to the same age...Although Quatremere does not deal specifically with reproduction, such an enterprise clearly falls into the category of fetishizing activities, the 'kill[ing] Art to write its history,' that he deplored."<sup>34</sup>

Sherman later attempts to rehabilitate the museum, suggesting that Benjamin's critique could be productively assimilated into both artistic and display practices, citing the work of Marcel Broodthaers as an example. Announcing that the artist was "concerned with the way in which museums institutionalize a discourse justifying art's isolation from society," Sherman

---

32 Ibid., 187

33 Daniel J. Sherman, "Quatremere/Benjamin/Marx: Art Museums, Aura, and Commodity Fetishism," in *Museum Culture*, ed. Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff (Univeristy of Minnesota Press, 1994), 136

describes his work as "a series of 'museum fictions' beginning in 1968 and consisting of nonexhibitions, parodic exhibitions, and written statements in a variety of forms, he exposed the ordering knowledge produced by museums as a strategy of power."<sup>35</sup> But this is fairly weak tea; merely exposing the "strategy of power" at use in museums - or other institutions of cultural memory - has little potential to alter any actual practice, particularly when, still trapped within the circle of "exhibition value," Broodthaers's work is unlikely to function in any manner beyond that.

I would suggest that the work of the museum and other memory institutions could be thrown into greater relief when considered alongside the history of the development of memory technologies as a whole. Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, in their overview of the concept of collective memory, summarize some of the impact of the advance of these technologies.

Epochal generalizations about the developing relations between memory and technologies of communication have nonetheless described a broad shift from orality to literacy over millennia. Founding this tradition, McLuhan theorized the effects of electronic communications on typographic culture within a history that includes the move from manuscript to print culture two centuries earlier and from orality to literacy a millennium before that (Hutton 1993). Subsequently, Ong traced a long-range pattern from orality to manuscript literacy, to print culture, to media culture, drawing out implications for memory.<sup>36</sup>

Later, they point to observations from J. Le Goff on some of the other forms of these technologies.

[M]emory as it developed from the Renaissance to the present involved the gradual revolution in memory brought about

---

34 Ibid., 137

35 Ibid., 139

36 Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 114

by the printing press, which required the long development of a middle class readership to complete its effect. With a 'progressive exteriorization of individual memory,' the collective memory grew to such a degree that the individual could no longer assimilate it in toto....In the same period, we witness the birth of archives, libraries, and museums, reflecting the interests of different nations seeking to build shared identities within their citizenries.<sup>37</sup>

What Olick and Robbins are implying here, and what I think is a useful fact to keep in mind when reading Benjamin on history, is that museums, archives and libraries are not simply warehouses built to store the products of this ongoing revolution in technologies of memory, but are *themselves* technologies of memory. Though they do not produce an artifact after the fashion of the printing press or the camera, they regulate the access to and use of memory to the same degree as do the newspaper or photograph by separating an object from what Benjamin called its "ritual value" (but which I prefer to abstract into simple "use").

But I would argue that appreciating the full, radical measure of Benjamin's critique requires even one more step back. Once again, Olick and Robbins provide a useful perspective.

When the past is no longer obviously connected to the present, memory becomes of diagnostic importance, as Terdiman (1993) puts it. Yerushalmi (1982) specifies much of this in his discussion of Jewish memory: 'The modern effort to reconstruct the Jewish past begins at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living and hence also an ever-growing decay of Jewish group memory.' In sum, according to Schieder (1978, p.8), '...historical thought served a compensating function making up for the actual loss of history by exaggerating a consciousness of it.'<sup>38</sup>

Thus we come back to the beginning of Benjamin's criticism of history and its

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 115

connection to the devaluation of experience, for the very discipline of history, according to this account, is also a kind of technology of memory, mediating the experience of the past rather than giving shape and meaning to it after the fashion of living tradition - "a compensating function." This seems to me to provide the key to Benjamin's writing about history and collective memory; his critiques are not aimed at particular commodities, institutions or types of scholarship, but rather at any system, physical or ideological, which disrupts the direct relationship between humankind and the past, relegating individuals to a purely passive role vis a vis the material of their own history. There seems to be no evidence to be found in his writings that would spare museums, libraries or archives from Benjamin's ultimate disapproval, nor any indication that such a total dismissal could be assimilated into their operation.

Despite his lack of confidence in such institutions, Benjamin does see emancipatory potential in the modern age, ironically enough finding opportunities for individuals to form an active relationship with the artifacts of the past in the very commodity culture which he so forcefully savages elsewhere. His reference to the way in which fashion mines the past for trends, mentioned above, is an idea that seems to have potential, unfortunately undeveloped by its author. Benjamin's most idiosyncratic example can be found in his essay "Unpacking My Library," the main idea of which is his attempt to forge a concept of ownership untainted by consumerism and commodity fetishism. Benjamin describes in detail the highly personal ways in which he puts his collection to use (as stand-ins for personal memories, as evidence of a certain chain of custody and so forth), most of which do not involve actually reading the books.

"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is typically thought of as



Benjamin's foray into film theory, but it seems to be more interesting as a general account of the way in which habit and distraction might form a new basis for experience. The fruitful example in this essay is not film but architecture, which does not allow for the sort of detached spectatorship otherwise encouraged by the modern age in so many other ways. "Such appropriation [of a building] cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building....For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation."<sup>39</sup>

These examples don't offer much in the way of systematization, and thus don't seem to offer much to institutions as they currently exist, but seems to be the whole point. Benjamin was concerned with the regimentation of life and society, and the purpose of an institution is to provide consistent, rational means of administering its mission and materials. Benjamin's critique, despite the best efforts of Sherman, does not lend itself to the reform of any sort of memory technology, from museums to the writing of history itself.

Finally, a brief return to the musings which began this effort: what good is Benjamin? If his thinking about history and experience are so uncompromising, is there any benefit to taking him seriously as a critic? This paper has been an attempt to tease out some of the implications of his work; in order to do this properly, one must necessarily read Benjamin with a sympathetic disposition and from a generally charitable perspective. Nevertheless, there are plenty of objections to be considered before taking his writing at face value, chief among them the fact that his anti-modern intellectual orientation has a history of its own. For a variety of

---

39 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt

reasons, Germany in the years before World War II was fertile soil for what Georg Lukacs called "romantic anticapitalism," an "attitude characterized both by a bitter resentment against the soulless world engendered by modern industrial capitalism and by a marked nostalgia for bygone epochs in which communal forms of life remained intact."<sup>40</sup> Benjamin was not the only writer of his generation to find an intellectual home in this milieu.

He was, however, probably the only one (or at least the most prominent one) to improvise a rather eccentric blend of Jewish mysticism and revolutionary Marxism as the bedrock of his philosophy. The theological bent to his writing is more or less prominent from one work to the next, but one of its most forceful expressions can be found in the "Theses on the Philosophy of History;" it is in that essay that Benjamin introduces the concept of "Messianic time" and reveals that "theology" is the hidden prime mover of history. These concerns didn't prevent Benjamin from producing interesting and useful work, but it is not clear how to proceed in evaluating his thinking if one doesn't share his underlying supernatural assumptions.

Despite this, and despite the fact that his work doesn't offer much succor to cultural memory institutions, Benjamin's is still a useful take on the way in which history, memory and tradition function as forces in social life. It is this process which seems to be a constant feature of human society, not any one particular expression of it; there is no reason to expect that libraries, archives or museums will continue in their present form indefinitely through the course of human existence. Whatever the character of the means by which humans renew the past, Benjamin's anatomizing of this impulse is a genuine contribution which deserves serious

consideration from those who wish to take on the responsibility for themselves.

### Works Consulted

- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt. Schocken Books, 1968
- Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections*, edited by Peter Demetz. Schocken Books, 1978
- Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings Volume I 1913-1926*, edited by Marcus Block and Michael W. Jennings. Harvard University Press, 1996
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Harvard University Press, 1999
- Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings Volume 2: Part 2: 1931-1934*, edited by Michael William Jennings and Marcus Paul Bullock. Harvard University Press, 2005
- Butterfield, Paul. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Norton, 1965
- Clark, T. J. "Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?" *Boundary 2* (Spring 2003): 31-49
- Eisenstein, S. M. *Selected Works, Volume I: Writings, 1922-24*, edited by Richard Taylor. Indiana University Press, 1988
- Olick, Jeffrey K., and Joyce Robbins. "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices.'" *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105-140
- Sherman, Daniel J. "Quatremere/Benjamin/Marx: Art Museums, Aura and Commodity Fetishism." In *Museum Culture*, edited by Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff. University fo

□ PAGE □20□

Minnesota Press, 1994

Wolin, Richard. *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. Columbia University Press, 1982