For students of modern criticism and theory, Walter Benjamin's writings have become essential reading. His analyses of photography, film, language, material culture, the poet Charles Baudelaire, and his vast examination of the social, political, and historical significance of the Arcades of nineteenth-century Paris have left an enduring and important critical legacy. This volume examines in detail a substantial selection of his important critical writings on these topics from 1916 to 1940 and outlines his life in pre-war Germany, his association with the Frankfurt School, and the dissemination of his ideas and methodologies into a variety of academic disciplines since his death. David Ferris traces the development of Benjamin's key critical concepts and provides students with an accessible overview of the life, work, and thought of one of the twentieth-century's most important literary and cultural critics.

- Life
- Contexts
- Works
- Reception

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The Cambridge Introduction to

Walter Benjamin

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Between 1931 and 1936 some of Benjamin’s most well-known works are completed. Not only does “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility” date from this period, but also “Little History of Photography,” a first version of an essay on Brecht “What is Epic Theater?,” “Experience and Poverty,” “Franz Kafka,” “The Author as Producer,” and “The Storyteller.” In addition, during this period, Benjamin works on his autobiographical texts, Berlin Chronicle and Berlin Childhood around 1900, and publishes a collection of letters by German writers using the pseudonym Detlev Holz in order to avoid the attention of the fascist authorities.

While the essays on photography and the work of art stand out and also frame these years, the issues they raise are also reflected in the writings on more literary subjects. Foremost among these is the possibility of a revolutionary art. New media such as photography in the nineteenth century and cinema in the early twentieth century lend themselves easily to revolutionary claims on the strength of their newness. What Benjamin attempts to secure through these new media is an account of art no longer dependent on contemplation and the aesthetic distance it demands between artwork and audience – precisely the terms in which the auratic character of art will be presented. As a means of displacing this auratic aspect, Benjamin will emphasize the materialist basis of the aesthetic understanding that has been so prevalent in the history of art. The name of this method is dialectical materialism.

Dialectical materialism derives from Marx’s materialist concept of history, however, it is not a term used by Marx (nor is historical materialism). In fact, both are coined later within a more theoretical development of Marx’s thought. For Benjamin, his encounter with these terms and the thinking they reflect first occurs in 1924 when he reads Lukács’s History and Class Consciousness. Broadly speaking, the approach of dialectical materialism locates things or the material reality of life within a process that involves ongoing conflict and opposition. Because no absolute power governs this process, its development is dialectical...
in nature, that is, it proceeds through a movement that registers the changing relations between the different elements of a society as they participate in the material conditions of their existence. Focusing on these conditions permits the analysis of the political, cultural, and intellectual tendencies of an age without succumbing to the ideologies present in that age. Interpreting this dialectical movement in the material of culture is the central task of the project Benjamin undertakes in his writings in the 1930s as he seeks to place the political, cultural, and intellectual forces of his time within a dialectical and materialist understanding of history.

“Little History of Photography” (1931)

“The literarization of the conditions of life.”

With this essay Benjamin opens the analysis of technology and cultural forms for which he is most widely known. The essay undertakes a “backward glance” at the history of photography. The thesis informing this procedure is that the early years of photography allow Benjamin to recover historical and philosophical questions that “have gone unheeded since its first decades” but which are once again evident. Why these questions went unheeded is attributed to the industrialization of photography. The reason they can now be asked again, Benjamin claims, results from a crisis in capitalist industry. Yet, despite being set within this historical and political frame, the questions posed by this essay provide a more philosophical account of visual perception. The critique of capitalist industry provides a frame, always present in the background, however, it is not developed significantly beyond Benjamin’s opening remarks.

The essay quickly moves to distinguish the technological significance of photography from traditional concepts of art. Benjamin underlines how little these concepts have in common with photography and also how great a mistake it is to try and understand photography with them. To do so, Benjamin observes, is to try and legitimize photography “before the very tribunal [it] was in process of overturning” (SW 2, 508). The radical divergence between photography and traditional forms of art reflects Benjamin’s sense that another nature is at work in photography, a nature that cannot be comprehended by the traditional approach to understanding art.

Benjamin indicates the qualities that make photography distinctive in the following terms:
No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long-forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it. (SW 2, 510)

Like the magical aspect of language Benjamin writes about in 1916, the photograph has a double quality which belongs to it quite independently of the artfulness of the photographer. This doubleness occurs in the way that two opposite aspects are present: pastness and immediacy. As the Proust essay also insists, this pastness occurs as an image. As such, its significance is not to present the past as it really was. Instead, the photographic image contains a contingency that only the present is able to recognize. In the case of David Hill’s photograph of a Newhaven fishwife, Benjamin captures this contingency in the series of questions posed by this image: “there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer’s art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an unruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in ‘art’” (SW 2, 510).

In the technical sphere, Benjamin explains this ability of the photographic image to reveal a hidden significance through what he calls the optical unconscious, one of the central concepts of this essay. It is described as follows:

another nature . . . speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: “other” above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious. While it is a commonplace that we have some idea about what is involved in the act of walking (if only in general terms), we have no idea at all about what happens during the fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step. Photography, with its devices of slow motion and enlargement, reveals the secret. It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. (SW 2, 510-12)

The contingency present in the image and the experience of an optical unconscious are effects attributable to the medium of photography. Thus, the emergence of photography has both historical and perceptual consequences. Historical, because the significance of an image from the past is no longer determined by the past (the contingency, the here and now of the moment recorded in the image, can only be uncovered in the future). Perceptual, because aspects
of an object not visible to the human eye are made available to perception. These two aspects are the foundation of Benjamin’s account of photography: one points to a contingency that the actuality of a photographic image cannot help but present; the other points to a technological character that distinguishes photography from a history of producing images through human abilities.

These historical and perceptual aspects define the extent to which photography has transformed the relation between the image and its beholder. To explain this transformation, Benjamin introduces the concept with which he is most widely associated: the aura. Benjamin writes:

What is aura, actually? A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer’s noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch. (SW 2, 518).

The mountains and the branch become auratic as their spatial existence is defined according to a particular moment in time, thereby making what is seen unique. As such, an object appears to the beholder in the form of an image whose significance is locked to a particular time and place. In the case of photography, the opposite is true because the experience of the image is no longer restricted to a specific place and time but can exist in different places at different times yet remain unchanged. Benjamin interprets this aspect of photography as the sign of a change in perception:

The peeling away of the object’s shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for the sameness of things in the world has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness by means of its reproduction. (SW 2, 518-19)

Photography removes the shell from things in the world and brings them to the beholder in a way that emphasizes an experience based on transience and reproducibility. Transient because photography presents objects at a moment in their existence rather than something that has the appearance of a fixed and unique significance. Reproducible because the question of which photographic print is more original than another is irrelevant: a print made ten years ago and one made today are essentially the same. In both these aspects, the photographic image opens up the possibility of a different relation to history as well as a
different understanding of history—one in which the material object has a significant role.

For Benjamin, the work of a French photographer, Eugène Atget, exemplifies this different understanding. What attracted Benjamin to Atget’s images of deserted Paris streets was the way they separated the material existence of the world from any presence of a human subject. In this respect, Benjamin sees Atget’s documentary images of Paris as being at one with the “salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings” typical of surrealist photography. Furthermore, it is in this estrangement that Benjamin discovers the ability of photography to give “free play to the politically educated eye” (SW 2, 519).

Benjamin traces the political aspect of the photography practiced by Atget and the Surrealists to the more purely technological nature of the camera’s means of representation. This is succinctly stated in the later essay on the work of art: “photography freed the hand from the most important artistic tasks in the process of pictorial reproduction, tasks that now devolved solely upon the eye looking into a lens” (SW 4, 253). As the hand no longer shapes the image so too does the image relinquish any intimate relation between the human figure and the surroundings it inhabits. Since the aura is recognized because of the way in which an object appears to a human subject, Benjamin sees in Atget a figure who initiated the movement to “emancipate the object from aura” (SW 2, 518). Through this emancipation, the political function of photography emerges in a form that brings “a living and unequivocal relationship with modern life” (SW 2, 523). Photography achieves this by altering the relation between the human and the material world. No longer does the singular, the individual, and the unique serve as the source of cultural and social meaning. Instead, the material existence of the world opens to the free play of the politically educated eye. Benjamin attributes this opening to a “shock effect [that] paralyzes the associative mechanisms in the beholder” (SW 2, 527). The shock in question arises when the beholder is confronted with images of urban landscapes from which the human subject is absent.

Benjamin defines the effect of Atget’s photography as “the act of unmasking or construction” (SW 2, 526). This definition recognizes that Atget’s images of Paris should not be regarded as a merely documentary project, as if their significance could be restricted to merely reflecting reality. Even if Atget had intended this, their effect is quite different. The absence of the human figure indicates for Benjamin (who cites Brecht when making this point) that “something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed” (SW 2, 526). In other words, the human connections into which these images are placed must be recognized as constructed. Yet, this recognition is only part of Benjamin’s understanding.
Another element also comes into play: inscription. After describing the shock effect that paralyzes the associations of the beholder, Benjamin writes: “This is where inscription must come into play, which includes the photography of the literarization of the conditions of life, and without which all photographic construction must remain arrested in the approximate” (SW 2, 527). If the constructive effect of photography were merely the interruption of an auratic response, its achievement would remain negative. To this interruption Benjamin adds the necessity of inscription. A photography that performs this inscription is a photography that performs what Benjamin calls, after Brecht, a literarization of the conditions of life. Brecht’s use of this word literarization is related to another concept he developed in these years: Umfunktionierung, which literally means the “re-functioning” of one medium in terms of another.6 The questions Benjamin poses at the end of this essay all address the effects of this “re-functioning”: “Shouldn’t a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won’t inscription become the most important part of the photograph?” (SW 2, 527). These questions underscore the need to read the material conditions of existence already inscribed within photography. Through them, the questions photography posed at its very beginning return – questions that then also heralded a re-functioning of art. With the recognition of a modern “re-functioning” in this process of inscription, photography reclaims what Benjamin calls earlier in this essay “a living and unequivocal relationship with modern life.”

Suggested further reading


“The Author as Producer” (1934, unpublished)

“Commitment alone will not do it.”

The “re-functioning” Benjamin introduces in the “Little History of Photography” also figures prominently in “The Author as Producer,” one of the most politically committed essays he writes in the 1930s. However, what produces this “re-functioning” is not simply the result of what an author or critic chooses to do. In notes summarizing this essay – which Benjamin writes during his stay with Brecht in the summer of 1934 – he alludes to this “re-functioning” in a
way that more strongly identifies its occurrence as a historical effect: “I develop the theory that a decisive criterion of a revolutionary function of literature lies in the extent to which technical advances lead to a change in the function of artistic forms and hence of the intellectual means of production” (“Notes from Svendborg,” SW 2, 783). These technical advances, now identified as the historical tendency of the modern age, open the door to a political art.

In this essay, Benjamin is well aware of how limited the quality of literature can be when its significance is restricted to a political agenda. For this reason, he begins by carefully distinguishing between two types of author. First, there is the bourgeois author who claims to create from a position of autonomy and freedom. Second, there is the author who recognizes the extent to which the “present social situation” makes it necessary “to decide in whose service he is to place his activity” (SW 2, 768). Since the former has always been regarded as a sign of literary quality, the question posed by this distinction is whether the latter can co-exist with the literary. Benjamin’s response to this question is an emphatic yes. Accordingly, his intention is “to show that a literary work can be politically correct only if it is also correct from a literary point of view” (SW 2, 769). But, instead of placing a political tendency within a literary work, Benjamin reverses expectations and asserts that literary quality is always contained within the political: “this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every correct political tendency of a work, alone constitutes the quality of that work” (SW 2, 769). The change announced by this claim is that the literary is no longer the representation of an external political position, rather the literary is political.

This shift in how politics relates to literature is explained by a shift in the kind of question to be addressed to literature. Benjamin writes:

Rather than asking, “What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?” I would like to ask, “What is its position in them?” This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary technique of works.

(SW 2, 770; emphasis added)

The replacement of “to” by “in” suggests a subtle difference, yet the whole essay as well as Benjamin’s brand of materialist criticism depends on it. The use of “to” not only affirms a distinction between literature and its political significance but this distinction continues the tradition of making one the representation of the other.
The overcoming of this tradition lies in what Benjamin calls technique. Technique, he explains,

makes literary products accessible to an immediately social, and therefore materialist, analysis. At the same time, the concept of technique provides the dialectical starting point . . . furthermore, this concept of technique contains an indication of the correct determination of the relation between [political] tendency and [literary] quality, the question raised at the outset. (SW 2, 70)

With technique, attention is now focused on an aspect that provides a measure of historical comparison between authors as well as an index to the way in which authors stand within the conditions of their time. Such an approach allows literature to be defined according to the development of techniques that produce a transformation of its forms—in the same way that technology produces a transformation in the way we live our lives. Since technique is a productive force, then, literature can be read as occurring in tandem with the conditions of production prevailing at a given time. These conditions are overwhelmingly technological in the 1930s. As a result, Benjamin’s emphasis on technique is an attempt to “rethink our conceptions of literary forms or genres” in order to “identify the forms of expression that channel the literary energies of the present” (SW 2, 771). In a more expansive vein, Benjamin explains, “we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms, a melting down in which many of the opposites in which we have been used to think may lose their force” (SW 2, 771). This recasting of literary forms reflects Benjamin’s adherence to Brecht’s concept of “re-functioning.”

Benjamin clarifies the dialectical process at work in this melting down of opposites by referring to a Russian author, Sergei Tretiakov, whose remarks on the decline of writing are cited at length. Here, Benjamin’s interest in Kraus’s crusade against bad writing takes on its full political significance. Rather than simply attack the decline of writing, Benjamin, feigning to cite a “left-wing author” but actually citing himself, declares that this decline “proves to be the formula for its [writing’s] revival” (SW 2, 771). In this formula Benjamin perceives a dialectical process at work: the negative (the decline of writing) becomes the foundation for something positive (the redefinition of who can be an author). In conclusion, Benjamin, again citing himself as the “left-wing author,” refers to this overcoming of a culture of specialization as “the literarization of the conditions of living. (SW 2, 772).

Benjamin had referred to the call for the “literarization of the conditions of life” at the end of the “Little History of Photography,” however, the full
political and dialectical consequences of this call only emerge in this essay. Benjamin comments:

only by transcending the specialization in the process of intellectual production—a specialization that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order—can one make this production politically useful; and the barriers imposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces that they were set up to divide. The author as producer discovers—even as he discovers his solidarity with the proletariat—his solidarity with certain other producers who earlier seemed scarcely to concern him. (SW 2, 775)

The political significance Benjamin attaches to the elimination of specialization is found in its refusal to sustain the kind of bourgeois aesthetics that defines the author as a specialist. Once this specialization is broken down, the author also becomes a producer. The solidarity with the proletariat is then derived from the identity of both as producers.

An immediate consequence of this identity is that artistic production can be reinterpreted in line with the class struggle of Marxist theory. This is precisely the consequence Benjamin now follows:

If you look back from this vantage point on the recasting of literary forms that I spoke of earlier, you can see how photography and music, and whatever else occurs to you, are entering the growing, molten mass from which the new forms are cast. You will see this confirmed: it is the literarization of all the conditions of life that alone gives an accurate conception of the range of this melting-down process, just as the state of the class struggle determines the temperature at which—more or less perfectly—it is accomplished. (SW 2, 776).

The dissolution of the traditional forms of art is now portrayed in the extended metaphor of industrial production. Since it is a melting process, the literarization or “re-functioning” of art will generate the heat that allows the progress of the class struggle to be measured. Underpinning this metaphor is Benjamin’s claim that new productive forms emerge according to a historical logic that mirrors the logic at work in the class struggle—the logic that eventually leads to revolutionary conditions. An imperative of Benjamin’s thinking during these years is thus to affirm that advances in the technique of art are as revolutionary as the changes emerging from the growing chasm between different social classes.

After presenting the theoretical link between art and the class struggle, Benjamin devotes most of the remainder of this essay to an example of this link in Brecht’s Epic Theater. Benjamin’s discussion of Brecht largely follows
the remarks he made in his 1931 essay, “What is Epic Theater?” (later revised in 1939; SW 4.302-09). Brecht, Benjamin explains, develops a theater that has learned from the new media of photography, film, and radio, as well as from recent literature by the surrealists. What each of these sources displays is an ability to interrupt the illusion of a reality fostered by narrative devices such as plot. Although Brecht has not yet publicly defined such interruption in terms of alienation, (he does not do so until 1936), Benjamin already speaks of Brecht as concerned with “alienating [the public] in an enduring way, through thinking, from the conditions in which it lives” (SW 2, 779). By becoming alienated to what it observes, the audience is forced to recognize the contemporary situation to its own existence. Without alienation, such a situation remains concealed because an audience is left to seek satisfaction through the aesthetic contemplation of a work of art.

For Benjamin, the key device producing this alienation is the procedure known as montage, whereby a “superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted” (SW 2, 778). Recognizing this disruption reveals what Brecht calls the *gestus*. Brecht uses this term to define the set of relations in which all of the figures on stage not only stand in relation to one another but do so in a way that allows their specific situation to be recognized. In the following passage Benjamin provides an account of the *gestus* as well as an example of how interruption reveals it:

> Brecht’s discovery and use of the *gestus* is nothing but the restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film, from an often merely modish procedure to a human event. Imagine a family scene: the wife is just about to grab a bronze sculpture and throw it at her daughter; the father is opening the window to call for help. At this moment a stranger enters. The process is interrupted. What appears in its place is the situation on which the stranger’s eyes now fall: agitated faces, open window, disordered furniture. (SW 2, 778-89)

The ability to see this scene as something other than a representation of domestic life arises from the appearance of a stranger who has no natural relation to what is played out on stage. The stranger arrests the action in a way that allows it to be seen as a situation in which sympathy for the daughter has no role. Instead, what emerges are questions about what this scene is actually organized around, namely, why the father is at the open window rather than protecting his daughter. Here, the productive process of the theater is revealed to be quite different from any identification with an individual in that scene. Instead, the interruption demands that the audience consider and think about the situation made present by the arrival of the stranger. Because of this demand,
the audience participates as a producer rather than a distant, contemplative observer.

Benjamin sees the demand made upon the audience by Brecht’s theater as the demand contemporary writers must confront, namely, “the demand to think, to reflect on [their] position in the process of production” (SW 2, 779). Through this reflection, the solidarity of the writer with the proletariat is located. However, Benjamin adds, the writer remains in a mediated position with regard to the proletariat because the writer, as a member of the intelligentsia, is never really proletarian. Benjamin explains: “the bourgeois class gave him, in the form of education, a means of production that, owing to educational privilege, makes him feel solidarity with it, and still more it with him” (SW 2, 780). The result of this situation is that the revolutionary intellectual (here Benjamin cites Louis Aragon, a leader of French surrealism) “appears first and foremost as the betrayer of his class of origin” (SW 2, 780). For Benjamin, this betrayal is not a purely destructive task on the part of the writer—in the way that Karl Kraus’s satire does nothing more than seek to destroy journalism’s reliance on the empty phrase. Benjamin claims that the writer is able to “adapt the productive apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution” (SW 2, 780). For Benjamin, the revolutionary role of the writer remains a mediating one yet it is still guided by the attempt to change the function of literature by moving it away from an object contemplated for its beauty at an aesthetic distance. To achieve this, the writer must learn the lessons introduced by photography and film.

These lessons show that the task of the author is no longer defined by the attempt to express spiritual qualities in art. With this last observation, Benjamin clarifies the full political consequences of this essay when he observes that it is through such spiritual qualities that fascism makes itself known. The purpose of the essay is to reclaim the means of production from fascism so that the real political struggle between capitalism and the proletariat can emerge rather than the false struggle between capitalism and spirit invented by fascism for its own political purposes. Defining the author as producer is, therefore, not only an account of the political tendency present in literature but also the opening of the political critique of fascism through a literature and art whose function has already changed with the advent of the technological means of production.

**Suggested further reading**

"The Storyteller" (1936)

"Half the art of storytelling [is] to keep a story free from explanation."

In the same year Benjamin completes the early versions of "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility," he also completes this essay on the Russian author Nikolai Leskov (1831-95), a novelist and contemporary of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. While the essay focuses on Leskov, its true significance lies in Benjamin’s development of earlier reflections on storytelling he had written down between 1928 and 1933 in an unpublished piece, "Little Tricks of the Trade" (SW 2, 728-30). What Benjamin develops more fully in "The Storyteller" is a concept of experience that also provides this essay’s most significant link to Benjamin’s thinking in this period.

In 1933, he had also written directly on the relation between a poverty of experience and the loss of storytelling. (see "Experience and Poverty" [SW 2, 731]). Not only will some of the remarks from this 1933 essay be repeated here but one of the questions posed in the earlier essay makes explicit what is at stake in the "The Storyteller": “what is the value of all our cultural capital if its divorced from experience?” (SW 2, 732). Here, experience is not confined to what an individual encounters in the present, but rather it has both an individual and a collective aspect. It is the means by which an individual relates to collective experience. The German word Benjamin uses confirms this: Erfahrung. Unlike another word for experience, Erlebnis, which refers to experience as something lived or witnessed, Erfahrung emphasizes the sense of a wisdom drawn and communicated from experience. An appreciation of the distinction can be gained in English if experience (in the sense of what is handed on from one person to the next) is contrasted with experiences.

In "Experience and Poverty" the relation between the individual and the collective is defined as “communicable experience . . . that passes from mouth to ear” (SW 2, 731-32). In this essay, Benjamin traces the interruption of such a relation to the effect of the First World War and the increased use of technology as a means of war. Both have led to a poverty of experience that is termed “a new kind of barbarism.” The barbarism Benjamin perceives here is, however, understood in a positive way since its recognition permits a fresh start free from the illusions of the age. Benjamin sees this new start exemplified in the kind of architecture practiced by Paul Scheerbart. Scheerbart’s new glass-covered dwellings are also the occasion for one of Benjamin’s eminently quotable phrases: “Objects made of glass have no 'aura’” (SW 2, 734). The significance of this remark lies in the way it points to the use of opaque walls as an affirmation of privacy and the possession of inwardness as social values. The
political and historical meaning of these values is then found in their assertion of the primacy of individual experience. Against the distance that asserts this primacy, Benjamin expresses the hope that the individual, despite the poverty of experience afforded by opaque walls, can still have a relation to the masses (SW 2, 735).

Although pursuing the goal of such a relation, the constructive aspect of a poverty of experience is emphasized less in “The Storyteller.” Instead, Benjamin’s account of the art of storytelling is the analysis of an art whose disappearance is interpreted as a symptom of larger forces, “the secular productive forces of history” (SW 3, 146). As Benjamin admits in a letter to Adorno, this disappearance is to be understood in relation to his treatment of aura in the work of art essay: “I have recently written a piece on Nicolai Leskov, and although it does not remotely claim the range of my writings on the theory of art, it does reveal certain parallels to the thesis concerning ‘the decline of aura’ in so far as I emphasize that the art of story-telling is approaching its end” (AB, 140). Storytelling, like the aura, can only be recognized as it disappears. This is the parallel that Benjamin emphasizes.

While Benjamin’s essay reveals admiration for the lost art of storytelling as well as a certain nostalgia for its passing, it would be a mistake to see this essay as contradicting his position in the work of art essay. Benjamin distinguishes storytelling from the kind of values associated with auratic art, values that the reproducibility essay seeks emancipation from. For Benjamin, storytelling offers a “communicability of experience” that is received collectively (SW 3, 146). In this respect, like cinema, storytelling also offers a collective experience. So too did the epic before such experience declined with the rise of the novel and, later, with the ascendancy of the newspaper.

In the case of the novel, this decline first owes its origin to two material causes: the printing press and the invention of the book. These causes allow the novel to develop as a form created by the isolated individual:

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has secluded himself. The birthplace of the novel is the individual in his isolation, the individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give none. (SW 3, 146)

From this basis, the novel developed in such a way that it carried to an extreme “the representation of human life” and all its perplexity. For Benjamin, this extreme form integrates “the social process with the development of a person.” In so doing, it “bestows the most brittle justification on the order determining that process.” He then concludes, “the legitimizing of this order stands in direct
opposition to its reality” (SW 3, 146-47). Any legitimizing of reality based on individual experience is false to Benjamin. Rather, what is real is formed by the relation of the individual to the collective, which is precisely what he sees occurring in modern experience with film.

Despite the significant role played by the novel in this decline, it is not the decisive form that threatens to bring storytelling to an end. That role is reserved for a form of communication that has even less to do with experience in the sense of Erfahrung: the newspaper. Here, the social and political aspect of Benjamin’s account of the decline of storytelling emerges:

With the complete ascendancy of the middle class—which in fully developed capitalism has the press as one of its most important instruments—a form of communication emerges which, no matter how ancient its origins, never before decisively influenced the epic form. But now it does exert such an influence. And ultimately it confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way; furthermore, it brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information. (SW 3, 147)

Benjamin views the newspaper as the diametrical opposite of the story. In this position, it menaces storytelling more than the novel. Where the story “does not expend itself,” the newspaper “does not survive the moment in which it was new” (SW 3, 148). The shift in experience from story to newspaper is now cast in political terms: it results from the rise of a bourgeois class created and sustained by capitalism. Against this shift, Benjamin holds up the example of a story that “preserves and concentrates its energy and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (SW 3, 148). His emphasis on these properties reveals the outlines of the historical thinking Benjamin develops in his final years. According to this thinking, the past awaits its significance just as the story awaits the moment in which its significance can be recognized. But another aspect that Benjamin will subsequently develop also surfaces here: the full meaning of storytelling becomes visible in its disappearance—a condition the aura also shares. This condition underlines the extent to which only the present can understand the past and only then as it disappears. In that disappearance, the past is preserved for the time in which its significance can be recognized—what Benjamin will subsequently call the “now of recognizability.” Here, Benjamin’s late thinking on history takes up the task of the story, to communicate the past as something that has to be told and experienced as the present.

Suggested further reading

enters the orbit of a modernity from which the political, cultural, and economic significance of the present is perceived through the disintegration of the past. In this aspect, the projected Baudelaire book, as Benjamin indicated, attempts to accomplish for the nineteenth century what his study of the mourning play did for the Baroque. But he does so by pushing that earlier book’s understanding of history towards an account of modernity as an age fated to rescue its own ruin from the ruins of contemporary, isolated experience.

Suggested further reading:


“On the Concept of History” (1939-1940)

“A unique experience with the past.”

In a letter to Adorno written in May 1940, Benjamin emphasizes the relation between this work and his studies of Baudelaire: “[the theses] present a certain stage of my reflections in continuation of the Baudelaire” (C, 630). Written after the completion of “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” the theses provide a condensed account of the historical questions posed by both The Arcades Project and the study of Baudelaire. But, like these major projects, “On the Concept of History” remains a work in progress at the time of his death in September 1940.

The importance of this work cannot be underestimated both within the immediate context of his thought in the late 1930s and within the greater trajectory of his career. A concern with history and the articulation of its significance in the present can be traced from Benjamin’s early writings, including those that predate his exposure to Lukács and Marxism in 1924. In April 1940, in a letter to Adorno’s wife Gretel, Benjamin describes the long presence of history in his thinking while also noting the occasion of this work: “The war and the constellation it brought with it has led me to set down certain thoughts
about which I can say that I have held them safe with myself for almost twenty years, yes, even from myself” (GB 6, 435). In this context, he goes on to draw special attention to Thesis XVII as the one that “would have to reveal the hidden but conclusive relationship between these observations and my previous works” (GB 6, 436).

Topics expressed in Thesis XVII are readily recognizable in Benjamin’s writings: the emphasis on the constructive, on the double sense of thinking as a movement and the arrest of that movement, on constellation, on historical materialism, and on an aspect that has always been present but which comes strongly to the fore again, the messianic. All these aspects of Benjamin’s thought are now enlisted in a method whose intention is “to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history” (SW 4, 396). Despite the image of “blasting,” this is not a destructive undertaking but rather a restructuring of history that seeks to preserve the objects it attends to while allowing the emergence of what has been oppressed in the past. When Benjamin describes this method at the end of Thesis XVII, the blueprint for this Baudelaire book is easily discerned: “As a result of this method, the lifework is both preserved and sublated in the work, the era in the lifework, and the entire course of history in the era” (SW 4, 396). This remark makes clear just how expansive Benjamin’s treatment of history has become. What is now at stake – and in a situation that can only magnify this sense – is the entire course of history. Here, the task confronting Benjamin is to find a means of articulating this history without simply collapsing under the weight of accumulated historical material – which is precisely what he sees happening within traditional accounts that seek to ascribe a universal significance to history in the form of progress. Against such accounts, this work seeks a “theoretical armature” in order to avoid a method whose procedure simply “musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous empty time” (SW 4, 396). With this goal in mind, Benjamin’s struggle with the material he has gathered for The Arcades Project is brought to a crucial focus in such an “armature,” thereby making this work an important statement on the significance of that project.

One of the distinctive aspects of Benjamin’s account of history in this late work is the role he gives to the messianic in relation to the historical materialism that had defined his work on Baudelaire and The Arcades Project. Thesis XVII summarizes this relation as follows:

The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. (SW 4, 396)
Whenever a historical object appears as a monad, that is, whenever it is separated from the continuous flow of events and objects through time, there occurs the messianic arrest in which history is brought to a standstill. In this arrest, Benjamin sees the possibility of recognizing a past no longer oppressed by the ideologies that have determined not just historical study but the understanding of what history itself is (for example, the view that the task of history is simply to know the past “the way it really was” [SW 4, 391]). Although Benjamin presents his approach in revolutionary terms, he does not consider revolution to be a foregone conclusion. He only speaks of “a revolutionary chance.” By referring to the “messianic arrest of happening” as the opening of such a chance, Benjamin underlines the precariousness of the historical position he describes in this work. Grasping this precariousness is essential in order to understand Benjamin’s concept of history in his last work.

In Thesis V, precariousness plays a crucial role when Benjamin describes how “the true image of the past” appears. He writes that “The past can only be seized as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability and is never seen again” (SW 4, 390). Two important aspects of Benjamin’s historical thinking are stated here: the past can only be recognized in an image and this recognition occurs in a specific moment, the present that offers “a unique experience with the past” (Thesis XVI; SW 4, 396). Benjamin opposes this unique experience to the kind of history he calls “historicism” – where the present is only understood as a transition. The present in Benjamin is an interruptive force. However, its power of interruption is short-lived. The image of the past that flashes up in the present “flits by.” But what is crucial in this “flitting by” is that the present still recognizes itself as “intended in that image” (SW 4, 391). “Intended” means that the significance of the past which has been recognized can only be recognized in this specific present moment. Here, the unique experience at the heart of this concept of history emerges: when the present recognizes itself as intended it also realizes its historical significance as the moment that arrests the historical illusions present in ideas such as progress and so on. This recognition makes the present stand out from the course of history since it is the one place where history occurs in a meaningful way – that is, in a way that allows the appearance of the revolutionary potential concealed in the ideologies of the past.. Only the present is capable of recognizing this potential and only this recognition has any meaning for the present.

Although Benjamin recognizes such potential in this “true image of the past,” he also adds two conditions that complicate its ability to change the political and historical situation in which it occurs. The first has already been
mentioned: the image does not stay put, it flits by. The second condition states that this image “unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger” (SW 4, 391). Benjamin glosses this danger as something that “threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes” (SW 4, 391). The past, here called tradition, is always in danger of being appropriated for political purposes. Benjamin tries to resist this appropriation through an image that does not already participate in a process whose outcome is already pre-determined – as is the case with the idea of progress or the political goals of fascism. The revolutionary potential of Benjamin’s historical image is located here; it interrupts such ideas and goals. However, its ability to interrupt is not accompanied by an ability to resist either progress or fascism. Despite the interruptive, critical power this image exerts, Benjamin tells us that there is a “conformism . . . working to overpower it” (SW 4, 391). The image that “flits by” and is “never seen again” does not endure in the face of the forces lined up against it.

Despite this danger, Benjamin maintains the hope that history possesses something that will redeem it, however, this hope is by no means unconditional: “The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious” (SW 4, 391). Neither the past nor the dead are safe from an enemy whose victories give it the right to determine the past and what it means. This powerlessness lies behind a much cited sentence from this work, namely, “there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (SW 4, 392). This sentence indicates both the weakness of culture when confronted by the barbaric enemy and the precariousness of the critical position Benjamin develops here. To articulate a historical understanding that does not end up repeating historicism, this understanding cannot rely on victory for its justification. This is why Benjamin makes the true image of the past something fleeting that can never be repeated. Its critical effect arises from the counterweight this precariousness offers to the ideological illusions of historicism such as progress, universal history and, ultimately, fascism. However, the price paid for this critical effect is the inability of Benjamin’s “true image of the past” to stand in an enduring way against the forces of conformism. As a result, its real significance lies in its ability to illuminate those forces and, in this way, open up the chance of a revolutionary outcome.

This understanding of history reveals the strongly messianic character of Benjamin’s historical thinking. Although the messianic has been an element in Benjamin’s thinking for a long time – already in his first dissertation, he speaks
of the messianic element in German Romanticism – it emerges here as a crucial component. It is first referred to in Thesis II when Benjamin explains how “the past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption.” This index is subsequently defined as “a secret agreement between past generations and the present one” (SW 4, 390). This agreement takes the form of a claim that the past makes on a power that the present possesses. This power, Benjamin states, is messianic but a weak messianic power. It is weak because it cannot proclaim the end of history—only the arrival of the Messiah can do this. Yet, like the Messiah, this power has the ability to arrest the flow of time. Here, the difference between the messianic and the Messiah is that the former can only arrest time in the form of an interruption. However, in that interruption (which is when the “true image of the past” occurs), history is redeemed from the ideological forces that have distorted it. The possibility of redeeming the past from the “forces of conformism” rests on this power. Without it, the secret index or agreement between the past and the present cannot take place.

For Benjamin, historical materialism’s ability to bring time to a standstill in an image is in step with the weak messianic power that informs his concept of history. This does not mean that Benjamin’s thinking and writing conclude with a theological concept of history. A theological conclusion would demand the arrival of the Messiah. This is where the importance of Benjamin’s emphasis on the messianic or what is like the Messiah is crucial. What Benjamin offers is a messianic concept of history into which no Messiah steps. What appears through his historical materialism are only “models” or “tremendous abbreviations” of what the Messiah offers. Accordingly, the task of the historical materialist is to establish “a concept of the present as the now-time in which splinters of messianic time are interspersed” (SW 4, 397). Accordingly, the Messiah does not appear. Only the messianic is present and only then in a fragmentary form. With this distinction, Benjamin refuses a theological solution to a history because it would have neither political nor historical meaning. Where redemption of the past occurs, it must occur within history in order to have political significance. But, in this case, the redemption offered by the messianic, as Benjamin indicates in a fragmentary text from 1938-39, is a “small fissure in the continuous catastrophe” (“Central Park,” SW 4, 185). The rescue of this small fissure from a history that threatens to overpower it at every moment forms the basis of Benjamin’s concept of history. Historical materialism is adopted here as a method precisely because the messianic power lodged in this fissure is weak; it cannot defeat what threatens it. This fissure, this splinter of messianic time is, for Benjamin, the revolutionary chance that no other concept of history appears able to offer.
Suggested further reading:

