

EDITORIAL

The centenary in 1992 of Walter Benjamin's birth provided the context for a critical reappraisal of his work and its implications for a cultural politics of the 1990s. Centenaries are usually the occasions to celebrate a knowable body of work; a canon which is somehow already in place, set for commemoration. Although it is true that Benjamin's place in the canon of twentieth-century critical theorists is now established, the boundaries of his work still resist classification and demarcation. His writings are not easily summarized or assimilated; they remain an uneasy but thrilling combination of the actual and the mystical, of Marxism and messianic utopianism.

So if we are to search for the actuality of Walter Benjamin, perhaps it is to be found in his quietly determined failure to belong – to a speciality, to an institution, to an easily specifiable tradition of thought. It is this indeterminacy and refusal to remain within boundaries which signifies Benjamin's contemporaneity, his rich place within a cultural epoch in which belonging and abiding have come to seem so philosophically troubling.

Benjamin's intellectual career prior to 1955, when Theodor Adorno produced a two-volume German edition of his work, had been one of startling obscurity. Since then, however, Benjamin seems to have been made and remade as the necessary ancestor of the varieties of the left that grew through the 1960s and beyond. The appearance in German of his *Collected Writings* (1972-1989), including the notes for his great unfinished project, the *Passagenwerk* (Arcades Project), prepared the ground for a mass of secondary literature which took on the vexed task of interpreting Benjamin's relevance for a contemporary political and intellectual history.

Devastated by the rejection of his doctoral dissertation on the 'Origin of German Tragic Drama' by the University of Frankfurt in 1925, Benjamin turned away from a career as an academic literary critic and made himself, almost single-handedly, into the kind of cultural theorist who was to become common in the 1970s. From the mid-1920s to 1933, Benjamin scraped a living through journalism and the writing of articles commissioned by the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Much of his work for the Institute was related to his projected history of nineteenth-century French ideologies and included the now well-known 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. The positions embodied in his work during this period are not easily assimilated with those represented in his writings from earlier years and in his final piece, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Written after the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, the 'Theses' envisage intellectual activity as a form of magical remembrance and revolution as a utopian ending of time and the beginning of a new temporal order.

The diversity of Benjamin's work and themes is reflected in the diversity of the contributions to this collection. Yet the theme of temporality and memory

emerges as one of the most powerful common strands. In a century in which memory has been more than ever before under threat, Benjamin offers us a body of work in which the demands of modernity are investigated alongside the ethical demands of memory. To speak, write and think in memory of Walter Benjamin, to commemorate his centenary, is to be in memory of a writer for whom the requirements of memory were pressing and ineluctable – it is to be in memory of the fragile value of memory itself.

The relationships between memory and history, mourning and melancholy, are explored by a number of contributors to this volume. In her analysis of Benjamin's complex and difficult relation to Judaism, Gillian Rose shows how Benjamin, 'the taxonomist of sadness', negotiates, or fails to negotiate, the passage between mournfulness and melancholy, *aberrated mourning* and *inaugurated mourning*; 'in his work', Rose writes, 'the hard heart of judgement does not melt into grief, into forgiveness, or into atonement'. Axel Honneth, pursuing the theme of atonement, links Benjamin's anthropologically fashioned concept of experience and his philosophy of history, and argues that Benjamin's emphasis on the recovery of lost modes of experience has as its corollary a symbolic restitution to a past in need of redemption, a moral debt paid to preceding generations. Honneth expresses doubts about the viability of a project of reparation conceived in these terms, while emphasizing the continuing need for the task of historical remembering.

Zygmunt Bauman, in his discussion of Benjamin the intellectual, takes up the theme of redemption, but argues that, in Benjamin's version of revolutionary action, historical narrative becomes an act of *construction* rather than restitution. Rebelling against the concept of 'historical necessity', Benjamin's idiosyncratic version of historical materialism entails a replacement of 'the false certainty of progress with the unprocessed, untamed, un-domesticated hope of free creation'. Martin Jay, like Honneth, takes Benjamin's concept of 'experience' as his starting-point. He argues that Benjamin could have found a form of 'absolute experience' – one which transcended the subject-object dichotomy without the need to invoke magic or metaphysics – in the language of the novel. Jay links the 'indirect free style' characteristic of the modern novel not only with Benjamin's own styles of intransitive writing (his suppression of expressive subjectivity), but also with current historiographical debates about the representation of the 'unrepresentable' (in particular, the Holocaust), and the politics of the 'middle voice', seen either as the proper mode of articulation for unspeakable sentences/histories or as an evasion of political agency. Andrew Benjamin also engages with the consequences of representation understood as a mode of thinking, and with the temporalities of memory, in his analysis of the enduring problem, for philosophy as well as for history, of thinking the Holocaust as event and occurrence. Like Bauman, Andrew Benjamin argues for a fuller analysis of the meanings and the temporalities of 'hope'.

Janet Wolff's essay offers a cultural analysis of Benjamin's work and of the 'legendary' status that certain aspects of his life and writing have acquired. She

argues for a new willingness on the part of critics 'to explore the origins and connotations of the images which figure in their analysis'. Where Martin Jay points to an emptying out of authorial subjectivity in Benjamin's writing, Wolff sees Benjamin – author of numerous 'autobiographical' sketches – as a significant forerunner of the move in feminist theory and cultural studies towards the inclusion of the 'personal moment', an acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the theorist and of the nature of his/her commitment to the theoretical object. Sigrid Weigel's essay provides a response to Wolff's call for a deconstruction of the fascinating image and for an interrogation of the concept of the 'dialectical image'. She explores the function of the whore/prostitute – and the feminine generally – as image and sign in Benjamin's work, and the representation of the whore as an allegory of modernism. The 'dialectical image' is profoundly and problematically gendered in Benjamin's work, Weigel argues, and she shows how concepts of time and space become linked to representations of the female/feminine in Benjamin's mappings of the city. Building on historically fashioned links between 'body' and 'city', Victor Burgin pursues the metaphor of porosity and a competing dialectic of interior and exterior in Benjamin's writings on the city. Burgin argues that the ambivalence between these two metaphoric structures 'marks the representational space of modernism in general', but that such spatial representations need to be understood in psychic/psychoanalytic as well as cultural/historical terms. Subjectivity is also profoundly spatialized: 'today, the autistic response of total withdrawal, and the schizophrenic anxiety of the body in pieces, belong to our psycho-corporeal forms of identification with the tele-topological puzzle of the city in pieces'.

The image or fantasy of the 'body-in-pieces' is also central to Susan Buck-Morss's analysis. She delineates the cultural meshing of 'aesthetics' and 'anaesthetics' and a neurological understanding of modern experience in Benjamin's work, centring on shock. Exposing the links between technology and the social imaginary, Buck-Morss argues that the physiological traumas of modernity 'were the underside of the technical aesthetics of phantasmagorias as total environments of bodily comfort'. Images of the fragmented body and the whole body have complex psycho-corporeal resonances – they are also primary aspects of fascist aesthetics. Benjamin's concerns, particularly in his 'Artwork' essay, are with this crisis in cognitive experience. Against the fascist aesthetic, Julian Roberts draws out a radical 'aesthetics of conflict' from Benjamin's writings. The theme of conflict guides Benjamin's work on Baudelaire in which, Roberts argues, Benjamin reveals the failure of modern writers and intellectuals to achieve collective solidarity and to resist the demands of the market or the state. The theme of conflict is also central to Benjamin's aesthetic system itself, for he points up the need to relinquish the utopian or nostalgic aesthetic of the symbol, to celebrate 'melancholy' as one of a number of attitudes to beauty, and to valorize a principle of construction – 'that form of art which thematizes its own instability'. In contrast to a number of critics, Roberts argues that Benjamin's aesthetics, and more broadly, his

sense of history, are both secular and systematic.

Irving Wohlfarth's essay gives us the title of this collection – *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*. Like Bauman, Wohlfarth takes up the vexed questions of historical understanding versus historicism, of the 'actuality' of Benjamin's 'now', and of the (im)possibility of transposing Benjamin's 'actuality' into our own time. Interrogating the desire to 'celebrate' and commemorate, Wohlfarth gives us our keynote in Benjamin's words:

'Celebration' or apologetics aims to smooth over the revolutionary moments of the historical process. Its concern is to construct a continuity ... what it misses are the jagged edges which offer a foothold to someone who wants to get beyond that work.

The essays which follow, we believe, both point to the steps beyond and show us how extraordinarily substantial were the footholds which Walter Benjamin supplied.

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