

FMST 804/2 Fall 2017

Walter Benjamin and Film Studies

Thursday 1:15 to 17:15 H 333

Instructor: Professor Catherine Russell

www.catherinerussell.ca

katie.russell@concordia.ca

Office: FB 319 514 848-2424 ex. 4798

Office hours: Wednesday 2-4 pm

Please call ex. 4666 or email gpa.cinema@concordia.ca for appointment



Walter Benjamin was a prolific writer, whose corpus spans a wide range of genres, from philosophy, to criticism, to autobiography. A small cottage industry has developed around Benjamin's extensive writing, producing an ongoing stream of interpretations, applications, and contextualizations. A host of different "Benjamins" have arisen, depending on the great variety of analytical frameworks and disciplinary concerns. Benjamin's difficult life in interwar Europe as a nomadic character on the fringes of so many cultural circles is very much part of his philosophy, and cannot be entirely separated from his critical theory. Benjamin worked on the edge of a political precipice, and adapted methodologies from a wide range of cultural currents, expressing himself eloquently in French and German, providing a significant challenge to his English translators. He challenges the film critic and media analyst to craft new avenues of interpretation in order to recognize the utopian within the ideological, and to illuminate the lost promises of technological modernity.

Students in this class are encouraged to think through Benjamin's critical aesthetics in light of contemporary image culture and tropes of recycling, affect, technologies, and posthumanism. The fragmentation and circulation of images in digital media is anticipated by Benjamin along with its dangers and potentials for social justice. We will explore the ways that his work has been taken up by feminist theorists, media archaeology scholars, and other interdisciplinary scholars as a way of opening up a richly interdisciplinary approach to the aesthetics and politics of film and media. Students will be required to do class presentations and complete a final research paper.

Required Texts

- Weekly readings on reserve at Concordia Library (linked to moodle site)
- Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 1999.

Recommended:

- Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings Vol. 1 1913-1926*. Eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 1996.
- Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings Vol. 2 1927-1934*. Trans Rodney Livingstone et. al. Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 1999.
- Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings Vol. 3 1925-38*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, et. al. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 2002.
- Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings Vol. 4:1938-40*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott et. al. Eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge Mass: Harvard UP, 2003.
- Hansen, Miriam Bratu. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodore W. Adorno*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

Syllabus

1. Sept. 7 Introduction to Benjamin

One-Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin, John Hughes, 1993 (58 mins)
Who Killed Walter Benjamin? 73 mins. David Mauas, 2005 (excerpt)

- “Excavation and Memory,” plus excerpts pp. 1-10; 29-32, *Walter Benjamin’s Archive*, Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, Erdmut Wizisla, eds. Esther Leslie, trans. (New York: Verso, 2007).
- WB, “A German Institute for Independent Research,” *Selected Writings 3*, 307-316.
- Miriam Hansen, “Actuality, Antinomies,” *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodore W. Adorno*, 75-103.

2. Sept. 14 “The Work of Art” Essay

Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler, Part 1 Fritz Lang, 1922 (excerpts)

Les Enfants du Paradis, Marcel Carné, 1945 (excerpts)

- WB, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility: Second Version,” *Selected Writings* Vol. 3, 101-133.
- WB, “Little History of Photography,” *Selected Writings* Vol. 2 507-530
- Miriam Hansen, “Aura: The Appropriation of a Concept,” *Cinema and Experience*, 104-131.

Recommended

- WB, “On the Present Situation of Russian Film,” *Selected Writing* Vol. 2, 12-14
- WB, “The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression,” *Selected Writings* Vol. 3, pp. 94-95.

3. Sept. 21 Photography and Media Archaeology

La Jetée, Chris Marker, 1962 27 mins.

Nostalgia, Hollis Frampton, 1971 36 mins.

- WB, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” *Selected Writings Vol. 2: 720-722*
- WB, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” *Selected Writings 1: 62-74*
- Miriam Hansen, “Mistaking the Moon for a Ball,” *Cinema and Experience*, 132-162
- Thomas Elsaesser, “Freud and the Technical Media: The Enduring Magic of the Wunderblock.” *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, Implications*. Edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011, 96-115.

Recommended

- WB, “Photography” *Convolute Y Arcades* 671-692
- WB, “Reproduction Technology, Lithography” *Convolute i Arcades* 786-787

4. Sept. 28 History

Persistence, Daniel Eisenberg, 1997 84 mins.

- WB, “On the History of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” *Convolute N Arcades* 456-488
- WB, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings Vol. 4*, 389-400
- WB, “Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History” *Selected Writings Vol. 4*, 401-411

- Margaret Cohen, "Benjamin's Phantasmagoria," *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, David Ferris ed, 199-220.

5. Oct. 5 **The Arcades Project**

Les Vampyres, Louis Feuillade, 1913-15 Episodes 1-3, 81 mins.

- WB, "Paris, Capital of the 19th Century," (1939 exposé) *Arcades* 14-26
- WB, "Panorama," Convolute Q *Arcades* 527-536
- WB, "Mirrors," Convolute R *Arcades* 537-542
- WB, "Fashion," Convolute B *Arcades* 62-81
- Susan Buck-Morss, Part I, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989, 47-109

6. Oct. 12 **The Archive and the City**

A Propos de Nice, Jean Vigo, 1930, 23 mins.

Paris 1900 (Nicole Vedres, 1947) excerpts

Los Angeles Plays Itself (Thomas Anderson, 2003) excerpts

- WB, "The Collector" Convolute H *Arcades* 203-211
- WB, "Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian," *Selected Writings* Vol. 3, 260-302
- Howard Caygill, "Walter Benjamin's concept of Cultural History," in *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, David Ferris ed, 73-96
- Max Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images," in *Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, David Ferris ed, 177-198

7. Oct. 19 **Baudelaire, Modernity Theory**

Modern Times, Charlie Chaplin 1936, 87 mins.

- WB, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Selected Writings* 4: 313-355
- WB, "Chaplin," *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 199-200.
- WB, "Chaplin in Retrospect," *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 222-224.
- WB, "Hitler's Diminished Masculinity," *Selected Writings* Vol. 2 792-793
- Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Autumn, 1992): 3-41
- Recommended
- WB, "The Flâneur," Convolute M *Arcades* 416-455

8. Oct. 26 The Avant-garde

Enthusiasm Dziga Vertov, 1930, 67 mins

Létracte Rene Clair, 1922, 22 mins.

Selected Mickey Mouse cartoons

- WB, "The Author as Producer," *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 768-782
- WB, "What is Epic Theatre?" *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, 302-309
- WB, "Surrealism," *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 207-221
- WB, "Mickey Mouse," *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 545-46.
- Esther Leslie, "Mickey Mouse, Utopia and Walter Benjamin, in *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant garde* 80-122

9. Nov. 2 Allegory

The Exiles, Kent Mackenzie, 1961, 73 mins

- WB, "Allegory and Trauerspiel," *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 159-235
- WB, "The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy," *Selected Writings 1*: 59-61
- Christine Buck-Glucksman, excerpts from *Baroque Reasoning: The Aesthetics of Modernity*. "Baroque Space," 53-62; "Baudelairean Space," 63-73; "Catastrophist Utopia," 97-105 ; "Anthropological Utopia, or the heroines of Modernity," 106-114

10. Nov. 9 Narrative Ruins

The Falls, Peter Greenaway, 1980 185 mins (excerpts)

- WB, "The Destructive Character," *Selected Writings 2*: 541-542
- WB, "The Storyteller," *Selected Writings 3*: 143-166
- WB, "The Task of the Translator," *Selected Writings 1*: 253-263
- WB, "Critique of Violence," *Selected Writings 1*: 236-252
- Rey Chow, "Walter Benjamin's Love Affair with Death," *New German Critique* 48 (Fall 1989), 63-86.

11. Nov. 16 Benjamin's Post-Humanism

Wall-e, Andrew Stanton, 2008, 98 mins. (excerpts)

Welcome to Pine Point, Michael Simons and Paul Shoebridge, 2011 (Interactive documentary)

- WB, "Left-Wing Melancholy," *Selected Writings 2*: 423-427
- WB, "Karl Krauss," *Selected Writings 2*: 433-458
- WB, "Program for Literary Criticism," *Selected Writings 2*: 289-296
- Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels*. "Limits of Humanity," 108-113; "Benjamin's Unmensch: The Politics of Real Humanism," 114-126; "The Mythical Origins of the Law," 127-136.
- Shannon Lee Dawdy, "Clockpunk Anthropology and the Ruins of Modernity," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 51, no. 6 (December 2010), 761-793.

12. Nov. 23 Student presentations

13. Nov. 30 Student presentations

Course Assignments

1. Class participation and moodle posts. 20%

Students are required to post moodle responses to the assigned readings each week (with a minimum of 8 for the semester). These posts should be approximately 300 words (i.e. between 200 and 400), and should include a) a significant short quotation from one of the readings; b) an explication of it; and c) a question arising from the readings. Students should be prepared to follow up on the posts in class discussion. *Moodle posts are due every week at 10 am on the Wednesday before the class.*

The success of the seminar depends on everyone's active participation, so please come to class prepared, and don't take up too much space with your own commentary.

Class participation includes students' contribution to the discussion of the screenings. Each week we will watch films that are either contemporary with Benjamin's own history, or that "fit" with the themes of his writing. Benjamin did not offer any clear analytical methodology for film criticism, although he had a great deal to say about the role of the critic in society. Our task as a group is to explore the possibility and potential of Benjaminian film criticism.

2. Class presentation. 20%

Each week one student in the class will prepare a one-hour presentation on the assigned readings, with the three-fold objectives of 1) explicating the Benjamin writings assigned for that week; 2) analyzing and evaluating the assigned secondary literature assigned for that week; and 3) offering an overall assessment of the

general topic of the day, making connections to other theorists or problematics in film studies. The presentations may include illustrations of film clips and images. The presentation will be followed by a question period, in which the class asks the presenter questions. The presenter is not responsible for the assigned screenings for that day.

3. Presentation of Research project. 10%

The last two weeks of the course will be reserved for each student to present the research for their final paper. Students may choose to read a draft of their paper, or to present material they are working with to the class in the form of notes and an oral presentation. If a final argument/thesis has not been reached, the presentation may present the work in the form of questions and problematics. The length of the presentation will depend on the number of students in the class.

4. Final paper. 40%

Due Dec. 14, 2017

Students are invited to develop an original research topic that emerges from the course material. This might be focused on a specific concept or work of Benjamin's; or it may be on the relation of his ideas to other theorists; or it could be an engagement with some of the secondary literature and a discussion of how Benjamin has been interpreted and/or used by contemporary scholars; or it could be an application of any aspect of his thinking to a film or media studies issue or text. Students are encouraged to meet with me to develop these projects well before the date of the presentation. Feedback after the presentation will also help to focus and develop the paper.

Bibliography

Primary Sources (on reserve)

Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, George Lukacs, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno. Translated and Edited by Ronald Taylor. London: New Left Books, 1977.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

_____. *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Trans. Harry Zhon. London: Verso, 1983.

_____. *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: NLB/Verso, 1977.

- _____. *Selected Writings Vol. 1: 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996: 444-488.
- _____. *Selected Writings Vol. 2: 1927-1934*. Eds. Michael J. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Trans. Jonathan Linvingstone and others. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- _____. *Selected Writings Vol. 3: 1935-1938*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland others, Ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- _____. *Selected Writings Vol. 4: 1938-40*. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003: 389-400.
- _____. *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*. Eds. Ursula Marx, Gudrun Schwarz, Michael Schwarz, Erdmut Wizisla. Trans. Esther Leslie. London: Verso, 2007.
- _____. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland, and others. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- _____, and Theodore Adorno. *The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- _____. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, edited and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno ; translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Secondary Sources

- Adorno, Theodor W. and Walter Benjamin. *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*. Edited by Henri Lonitz. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Means without End: Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- . *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2012.
- Amad, Paula. *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archive de la Planète*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. *Baroque Reasoning: The Aesthetics of Modernity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994.
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- Buck-Morss, Susan. "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering." *New German Critique*. No. 39 (Fall 1986), pp. 99-140.
- Cadava, Eduardo. *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997.
- Charney, Leo; Schwartz, Vanessa R. (eds.). *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Cohen, Margaret. *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Ferris, David S. *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Gilloch, Graeme. *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1996.
- Gleber, Anke. *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flânerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.
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- Harootunian, Harry. *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
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- Ray, Robert B. *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
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- Steinberg, Michael P., ed. *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Taussig, Michael. *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Weber, Samuel. *Benjamin's Abilities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

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- Concordia Counselling and Development offers career services, psychological services, student learning services, etc.

<http://cdev.concordia.ca/>

- The Concordia Library Citation and Style Guides:

<http://library.concordia.ca/help/howto/citations.html>

- Advocacy and Support Services

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