

**WALTER BENJAMIN'S PARISIEN PASSAGES:  
CORRESPONDENCES IN EUROPEAN THOUGHT**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the impact of France and its literary and philosophical heritage on Walter Benjamin's writings. It argues that this influence is not merely circumstantial, but dates back to Benjamin's early fascination with the nation's history and culture and was crucial to the development of his methods as well as the reception of his ideas beyond German borders.

Benjamin's unfinished study on the *passages* of nineteenth-century Paris — the *Passagenarbeit* [*The Arcades Project*] — acts as the connecting thread throughout the chapters of the thesis which chronicle his activity as a reader, writer and translator before and during his exile in the French capital. In addition to being considered for their status as the database of Benjamin's French interests, the arcades materials function as a case study to illustrate his methodology as a Franco-German comparatist. In turn, the thesis also reverses the question of French influence by challenging the significance of Benjamin's writings for post-war French thought and theory.

Central to my analyses is the notion of 'correspondence' — understood in an epistolary sense but equally as a type of intellectual and literary dialogue between texts and figures — which I propose as a means of conceptualizing the effects of particular French works on Benjamin's practice as a critic and thinker. The fusion of Benjamin's investment in francophone literatures with his grounding in the German intellectual tradition means his works emerge as interdisciplinary, transnational and translingual fields, where French and German sources are in constant 'correspondence' with one another.

By analysing the depth of Benjamin's ties with French literary and aesthetic culture and their influence on his work, the thesis highlights his role and legacy as a European intermediary within the history of Franco-German cultural and intellectual relations, and the ways in which philosophies from both nations were exchanged, inherited and developed.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I feel lucky to have shared parts of this thesis with a host of research communities in the UK and beyond, including the Critical Work-in-Progress Seminar and the Sainsbury Centre Reading Group at the UEA, the International Walter Benjamin Conference in Berne, the Institute for World Literature Summer School at Harvard, the Comparative Literature Summer School at Kent, the *Benjamin's Baudelaire* workshop at Goldsmiths and the *Pensées critiques au pluriel* Research Seminar at the CMB — I am thankful for their insights and responses to my work. Special thanks also goes to the members of the Walter Benjamin Research Collective, who continue to give me hope that the field of Benjamin Studies is alive and well.

I am grateful for the unwavering support of my parents, Kate and James. I would also like to acknowledge my sister Lucie, my cousin Susy, close friends Lily, Jeanne, Connie, and their families, whom I thank for being a constant source of joy and providing a welcome distraction from the harsher realities of academia.

Last but not least, my deepest and most heartfelt gratitude goes to my partner Louie, who is always at hand when storms need weathering. It means the world and more.

## NOTES ON REFERENCING AND USE OF TRANSLATIONS

All references to Benjamin's works and correspondence will appear as in-text citations (volume + page number) from the *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., ed. by Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–1991) and the *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 vols., ed. by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995–2000), referenced by volume and page number.

All English translations of Benjamin's works and correspondence, unless otherwise stated, will also appear as in-text citations (volume + page number) and will be sourced from *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004–2006), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, 2009).

The alphabetized and numbered sections of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* were given the categorisation 'Konvolut' (meaning a sheaf or bundle of papers) by the German editors. Since no direct English translation exists, in critical discussion the term has been given the anglicized spelling 'Convolute', which I will be using throughout. All references to the 'Convolutives' of *The Arcades Project* will be given in square brackets with the respective letter and letter/ number of the section and/ or subsection it appears in, e.g. [J 53, 7] = Convolute J, subsection 53, number 7.

In the instances where it appears necessary, the original German or French will be cited and accompanied by an English translation. However, for ease of reading, I will predominantly only cite in English translation. Original titles will be translated when first introduced; thereafter I will continue to refer only to the original unless I am using the abbreviations listed hereafter or as specified in an accompanying footnote.

Unless stated otherwise, all translations from French and German into English are my own.

References to materials from the Walter Benjamin Archive at the Akademie der Künste (Berlin) will be cited by title and inventory number in addition to a permalink to the Archive's public digital catalogue.

All references containing weblinks were last accessed on March 25<sup>th</sup> 2022.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*AP* = Benjamin, Walter, *Das Passagen-Werk/ The Arcades Project*

*C* = Benjamin, Walter, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*

*CC* = Adorno, Theodor W., and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*

‘DTB’ = Derrida, Jacques, ‘Des Tours de Babel’

‘FA’ = Derrida, Jacques, ‘Fichus: Frankfurt Address’

*GAC* = Adorno, Gretel, and Walter Benjamin, *Correspondence 1930–1940*

*GB* = Benjamin, Walter, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6 vols.

*GS* = Benjamin, Walter, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols.

*OGT* = Benjamin, Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels/ Origin of the German Trauerspiel*

*OWS* = Benjamin, Walter, *Einbahnstraße/ One-Way Street*

*PADS* = Rancière, Jacques, *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique/ The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*

*PP* = Aragon, Louis, *Le paysan de Paris/ Paris Peasant*

‘+R’ = Derrida, Jacques, ‘+R (par-dessus le marché)’/ ‘+R (Into the Bargain)’

*SED* = Baudrillard, Jean, *L’Échange symbolique et la mort/ Symbolic Exchange and Death*

*SW* = Benjamin, Walter, *Selected Writings*, 4 vols.

‘T’ = Blanchot, Maurice, ‘Traduire’/ ‘Translate’

‘The Task’ = Benjamin, Walter, ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’/ ‘The Task of the Translator’

“L’imagination n’est pas la fantaisie...L’imagination est une faculté quasi divine qui perçoit...les rapports intimes et secrets des choses, les correspondances et les analogies.”

- Charles Baudelaire as cited by Walter Benjamin in the *Passagenarbeit*, [J 31a, 5]

‘Ich glaube, ich bin auf Paris eifersüchtig, weil es Dich immerzu hat.’

- Gretel Adorno to Walter Benjamin, 12.10.1933

‘Je n’ai pas besoin de vous dire combien je me sens attaché à la France, tant par mes relations que par mes travaux. Rien au monde, pour moi, ne pourrait remplacer la Bibliothèque nationale.’

- Walter Benjamin to Max Horkheimer, 15.12.1939

‘Poorly received in his country and his milieu, almost unknown in the land of exile — France first of all and still today where he spent his life and killed himself. A critical man in a critical position, on the limits, a frontier man.’

- Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*

## INTRODUCTION

### **A German in Paris**

‘Did [Walter Benjamin] ever feel at home in twentieth-century Germany?’ asks Hannah Arendt in *Men in Dark Times*.<sup>1</sup> ‘One has reason to doubt it’, she claims.<sup>2</sup> France, on the other hand, ‘was profoundly European’ and thus ‘with unparalleled naturalness, offered itself to all homeless people as a second home ever since the middle of the [nineteenth] century’.<sup>3</sup> Following his first visit to Paris in 1913 as a young man, Benjamin recounted that its streets felt ‘almost more homelike’ than those of his hometown of Berlin which he would be forced to leave two decades later (*GB I*, 56). In spite of the xenophobia in France, which was dominant at the time, Benjamin was not deterred from settling in the French capital, which served as the conceptual and social-anthropological inspiration for his writing as well as a place in which to live out his personal existence of *flânerie*. For Benjamin, Paris was ‘the ground of three great revolutions, the home of exiles, the source of utopian socialism, the fatherland of haters of tyranny’ and ‘finally the soil in which the Communards are buried’ (*SW 3*, 274). As such, even before his exodus from Germany in the lead-up to World War II, Paris was closely intertwined with his practice and factored heavily into the making of his impressive body of work.

There are many threads that run through a corpus as rich and diverse as Benjamin’s — a writer, translator and thinker who possessed a distinctive intellectual curiosity and approached his subjects in contextually unorthodox ways. Some of these threads, such as his interest in the philosophy of language, his

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1968), pp. 153–206 (p. 172).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

conceptions of allegory and his writings on history and violence, are more prominent than others and have seen a devoted and decisive scholarship build itself around them. As has been well documented, Benjamin's interests as a writer ranged from the classical to the avant-garde and occult. Similarly, his writings range linguistically — from German to French — and geographically — across the European continent and beyond. Despite such breadth, it is nonetheless possible to identify certain patterns, most notably the presence of French literary, aesthetic and philosophical traditions. Benjamin was educated in and thus influenced by German literary canons, contributing significant studies on the German Baroque and Goethe amongst other topics. However, unlike some of his like-minded contemporaries working on similar subjects, such as Georg Lukács, who carved an entirely new field for himself within existing German tradition, Benjamin cannot be said to have done the same.<sup>4</sup> In a letter to Florens Christian Rang, Benjamin would observe of his work that 'national characteristics were always central: German or French' (C, 214). Indeed, these were his two dominant languages, and it was ultimately the socio-political and cultural climates in Germany and France which the majority of his writings responded to. His work was thus largely the result of a continuous Franco-German comparatism, which ran against the traditional scholarship of his home nation.

The French language was integral to Benjamin's intellectual formation from childhood and his fluency would give him access to a range of materials both in and out of translation. In later years, he would report that it amounted to a 'sort of alibi', which enabled him to spell out the truths that he struggled to express in German (*GB* II, 505). In his treatise on the act of translation, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' ['The

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Georg Lukács, *Die Theorie des Romans* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2009) and *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2013).

Task of the Translator', 1921/23], Benjamin compares the words for 'bread' in French and German to explore what he claims to be one of the fundamental 'laws' in the philosophy of language (*GS IV*, 14). Whilst *Brot* or *pain* 'mean' the same thing, their 'Art des Meinens' ['way of meaning'] is not synonymous (*ibid.*). This results in a German attaching a different meaning to bread than a French person, despite both words designating the same thing. This example is one of many in Benjamin's writings where he explicitly contrasts French and German language, culture and thought. Such an approach permitted him to fully explore and extrapolate the different 'ways of meaning' prevalent in the writers, poets and thinkers he chose to critique.

Benjamin's corpus — and by extension his personal archive — is therefore not only thematically multi-faceted, but fundamentally multilingual, showing itself to be open to a range of other cultures. Nevertheless, it is apparent that France is by far the most dominant nation of interest. Despite this seemingly obvious trait, the studies explicitly detailing Benjamin's experience of and interest in French language, literature and culture remain sparse. What's more, his position as an intellectual intermediary between Germany and France is rarely given the recognition his work warrants. Many of the writers Benjamin engaged with in his work (both franco- and germanophone), such as Kafka or Proust, had not been canonized the way they are today, proving that Benjamin's finger was on the pulse of not only the nineteenth, but also the twentieth century. In addition to France representing a place that allowed him to become immersed in the vanguard of contemporary intellectual developments, Benjamin was prone to drawing comparisons with the parallel situation in his native Germany, what he termed 'Niveauunterschiede' ['differences in intellectual levels'] (*GS II*, 295).

*Komparatistik* was not an academically recognized discipline in Benjamin's lifetime and it is certain that he would have fared better in today's climate of institutional interdisciplinarity. His entire approach was driven by the methodological tools of a comparatist who, situated in the *Literaturkampf* of the twentieth century, was constantly seeking points of similarity and difference to solidify his own position within the landscape of contemporary criticism. Consequently, Benjamin's perspectives and approaches were duly informed by the artistic, literary and socio-political currents that captivated him on both sides of the Franco-German border. This simultaneous pull between Paris and Berlin can be consistently traced in his body of work.

Paris — spatially and conceptually — stands at the forefront of a great number of Benjamin's critical endeavours. Samuel Weber makes the observation that Paris, 'perhaps more than any other [city], emerges in Benjamin's writing as itself a text'.<sup>5</sup> For as Benjamin stated: 'There exists no city that is more intimately connected with the book than Paris [...]. Paris is a vast library hall, through which flows the Seine' (*GS IV*, 356). Once he was in permanent exile, instead of following the exile writings of his fellow German natives, Benjamin's attention was predominantly taken up with the local literary happenings in France. In this sense, Benjamin's activity as a writer, critic and thinker can be equated to that of a European *homme de lettres*, which was only intensified through his experience in exile. This designation equally reflects Benjamin's intellectual freedom to operate at the margins of both academia and the literary press as he did not perceive his work solely in terms of monetary gain. His collection of books was a passion project and,

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Weber, "'Streets, Squares, Theaters': A City on the Move — Walter Benjamin's Paris" in *Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with the Arcades Project*, ed. by Kevin McLaughlin, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 17–30 (p. 17).

for the most part, had no utilitarian purpose: ‘it consisted of treasures whose value, [...] was proved by the fact that he had not read them — a library, then, which was guaranteed not to be useful or at the service of any profession’.<sup>6</sup> As Arendt notes, such an existence was virtually unknown in Germany, ‘where, despite Lichtenberg, Lessing, Schlegel, Heine and Nietzsche, aphorisms have never been appreciated and people have usually thought of criticism as something disreputably subversive’.<sup>7</sup> In France, on the other hand, such an approach to thought and literature had a long tradition which had been passed down to Benjamin’s French contemporaries such as André Gide and Paul Valéry, whose work he followed closely.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the omnipresence of francophone figures and texts in his work, Benjamin’s interests did not solely revolve around Paris. In an effort to maintain a balance to the claims of this study, it is necessary to acknowledge that Benjamin indeed travelled to and communed with other intellectual communities in Russia, Switzerland, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands, amongst others, the results of which are captured in his corpus.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin’s origins as a writer and thinker were very much steeped in the German tradition and one of his professional ambitions was to ‘be considered the foremost critic of German literature’ (C, 359). In spite of such statements, it would be restrictive to limit our conceptions of Benjamin’s oeuvre to that of a German critic writing from the German perspective, as it would run counter to the image he himself sought to portray. This thesis, with its emphasis on the traces

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> The only other German figure that Benjamin can be compared to in this respect is poet and critic Heinrich Heine, who was also drawn to Paris by the revolutionary utopian potential of Saint-Simonianism and remained in the French capital until his death. Cf. Ursula Stein, *Heinrich Heine — ein deutscher Europäer im französischen Exil* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Examples include essays such as ‘Neapel’ [‘Naples’, 1924], ‘Moskauer Tagebuch’ [‘Moscow Diary’, 1927] and ‘Die politische Gruppierung der russischen Schriftsteller’ [‘The Political Groupings of Russian Writers’, 1927].

that Benjamin's interactions with French works and figures left in his corpus, therefore forms part of a larger argument that deems it essential to read and reflect on his work within and alongside the other spatial, linguistic, geographic and cultural spheres it intersects with. Indeed, a transnational approach is necessary to fully elucidate the multiple national contexts which converge in his oeuvre, especially considering the extent of his engagement with various iterations of 1920s European avant-garde movements that were simultaneously local and international in nature.

For Ottmar Ette, Benjamin's work forms 'mobile, vectorized migratory spaces and choreographies'.<sup>10</sup> These movements 'occur as much at the level of architectonic or urban spaces as at the level of national or supranational spaces', encapsulating the past, present and future of Europe in motion.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that Benjamin espoused a view which would mesh well with today's academic trends linked to a globalizing perspective of literatures and cultures in the current digital age, originally stemming from a Goethean concept of *Weltliteratur*. Benjamin — as can be gathered from his writings on language, translation and literary figures — very much took the specificity of national characteristics into account. Nonetheless, his continuous contrasting of his own language, culture and thought with a range of international comparators reveals that his intellectual approach and political sentiments were driven by a desire to view phenomena within a grander comparative framework. This push beyond his native tongue and environment

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<sup>10</sup> Ottmar Ette, 'On the Wit, Weight, and Wonder of Literatures without a Fixed Abode (Proceeding from José F.A. Oliver)' in *Literary Transnationalism(s)*, ed. by Dagmar Vandebosch and Theo D'haen (Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 62–86 (p. 81).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



therefore lends his oeuvre a transnational consciousness where history, literature and philosophy face each other on an international stage.<sup>12</sup>

Given the breadth of his corpus, fully encapsulating Benjamin's relationship with French literature and philosophy goes beyond the confines of this thesis. For this reason, it restricts itself to following the sources that informed Benjamin's most ambitious work — the *Passagenarbeit* [*The Arcades Project*, hereafter *AP*]<sup>13</sup> — in order to question how French materials contributed to his ideas and methods from the start of his trajectory as a writer, translator, thinker and critic. This unfinished study on the *passages* or arcades of nineteenth-century Paris has enjoyed an extensive critical reception since its original posthumous publication in the 1980s. However, its significance as a fundamentally multilingual work-in-progress as well as its function as the database of Benjamin's interest in France — spanning the fields of politics, literature, art, photography, architecture and fashion — is yet to be extensively explored.

This thesis will engage with the project's origin story and its developments up until Benjamin's death, in order to outline how his interactions with the French intelligentsia, and the literary and philosophical frameworks of surrealism in particular, allowed him to develop the cultural-historiographical method of the *AP*. The project's themes date back to his first close encounters with nineteenth-century Paris in his activity as a translator of Baudelairean verse in the 1910s. From 1927 until his death in 1940, most of Benjamin's articles were then produced in connection to this growing draft of notes, leading to undeniable methodological

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<sup>12</sup> For a deepened discussion on the transnational, see Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> I will be using the German title *Passagenarbeit* instead of *Passagen-Werk* (the title editor Rolf Tiedemann gave the arcades materials in the fifth volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften*) since this is the unofficial title Benjamin used for the *AP* from 1928 onwards. See *GB III*, p. 345.

parallels between his writings. Benjamin's engagement with a range of contemporary works of the French avant-garde will thus be revealed as consequential on the methodology that underpins the *AP*.

The project will act as the connecting thread throughout the chapters of the thesis, since not only is it the result of Benjamin's varying interactions with French sources and his fascination with Paris, but he repeatedly stated that his other works were in some way tied to its conception. In the late 1920s, he termed the essay 'Der Sürrealismus' ['Surrealism'] an opaque *Paravent* [screen] before the *Passagenarbeit* (*GS V*, 1090) and his advance for a planned book on Proust and Kafka was to be put towards research for the arcades (*GB III*, 379). Throughout the 1930s, he referred to the essay that became 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' ['The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility'] as 'a kind of counterpart' to the 1935 arcades exposé (*GB V*, 195) and claimed that the works on Baudelaire in 1938 and 1939 first developed the 'foundational categories' of the *AP* (*GB VI*, 136). Lastly, the origins of his theses on the philosophy of history, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' ['On the Concept of History'], can be deciphered in the arcades Convolute N: 'On Epistemology; Theory of Progress' (*GS I*, 1225). Considering these works, which have since become widely canonized in the history of twentieth-century critical thought, within the context of Benjamin's relationship with French language and culture will provide novel insights into the ways in which they can be read.

Benjamin's research for the *AP* and other articles on French subjects led him to conduct his studies at the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he formed a relationship with intellectual and philosopher Georges Bataille, who worked there as an archivist and librarian. This relationship was crucial to the project's survival as Bataille

became the custodian of Benjamin's manuscripts, keeping them safe from the violence and destruction of World War II. The afterlife and circulation of the arcades materials was therefore in many ways determined by Benjamin's social connections in France. Viewed from this perspective, Benjamin's archive exists today because he not only took his practice as a *Sammler* very seriously, but equally bestowed a caretaking responsibility onto an international network of friends who ensured that his legacy was preserved following his death.

### Critical Contexts

In what follows, I will provide an overview of the literature relevant to the claims of this thesis. By doing so, I will establish a chronological outline of the posthumous critical reception of Benjamin's works on French topics and their place within his corpus across anglophone, francophone and germanophone contexts.

Many of the major themes of Benjamin criticism, such as his exploration of the dream, materialist anthropology, urban modernity and the politics of the European intelligentsia, can be linked to his relationship with the French language, which facilitated an in-depth engagement with a large variety of francophone works and figures. Yet this is not usually factored into such scholarship. Historically, when Benjamin's relationship to French literary, philosophical and artistic sources has been acknowledged, it has primarily been analysed with regard to his writings on surrealism, and secondly, his unfinished writings on Baudelaire and the Parisian arcades.<sup>14</sup> Besides these two main strands, which are of primary concern to the

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin's arcades materials have been a significantly popular research subject in the field since their uncovering and subsequent translation into English. Cf. amongst others, *Passagen: Walter Benjamins Urgeschichte des XIX. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Norbert Bolz and Bernd Witte, (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1984), *Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with the Arcades Project*, ed. by Kevin McLaughlin and Philip Rosen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003),

claims made here and will be discussed in more detail below, there also exists a host of scholarship on Benjamin and Proust.<sup>15</sup> The categories on Baudelaire and Proust have the tendency to focus on Benjamin's innovative approaches to their works as well as their impact on his critical conception of history, whilst the category on surrealism groups Benjamin's interest in particular writers under the central heading of the surrealist movement, with an emphasis on the argument that whilst Benjamin was attracted to certain features of surrealist writing, he ultimately distanced himself from their ideas. These studies traditionally seek to isolate key concepts and the intricacies of Benjamin's engagement with French works without paying attention to wider patterns or themes within his corpus. This thesis therefore intends to engage with past and present debates on these topics, although they will be framed and demonstrated to form an integral part of Benjamin's overarching research interests and methods.

Critical investment in Benjamin's penchant for French topics can predominantly be traced back to the posthumous circulation of his unpublished works, in particular the arcades materials. Although Theodor Adorno's advocacy on Benjamin's behalf had secured publishing contracts with Suhrkamp since the mid-1950s, it was not until the publication of the *Gesammelte Schriften* throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s that the extent of his involvement with French sources would become apparent to a wider readership. The publication of the arcades materials in the fifth volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* in 1982 was accompanied

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*Benjamin's Arcades: An Unguided Tour*, ed. by Peter Buse et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, ed. by Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2006) and *Approaches to Walter Benjamin's The Arcades Project*, ed. by Paweł Stachura, Piotr Śniedziewski and Krzysztof Trybuś (NY: Peter Lang, 2018).

<sup>15</sup> For examples see Robert Kahn, *Marcel Proust et Walter Benjamin* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 1998) and Daniel Weidner, *Traduction et survie: Walter Benjamin lit Marcel Proust* (Paris: Éditions de l'éclat, 2015).

by a preface by editor Rolf Tiedemann, where he not only claims that the *AP* inspired its own ‘miniature model’ in Benjamin’s work on Baudelaire (the manuscripts of which had been discovered by Giorgio Agamben in 1981), but draws parallels between Benjamin’s depiction of the material worlds of the nineteenth century and the *mythologie moderne* encountered in surrealist novels by Louis Aragon and André Breton.<sup>16</sup> The ‘surrealist theory of dreams’, writes Tiedemann, ‘formed one pole of Benjamin’s theoretical armature’ alongside that of the ‘concrete’.<sup>17</sup> Like Aragon, whose *Une vague de rêves* (1924) initiated a leap ‘into strange, unglimped realms of the Real’, Benjamin ‘wanted to submerge himself into hitherto ignored and scorned reaches of history and to salvage what no one had seen before him’.<sup>18</sup> However, Tiedemann goes on to ultimately differentiate Benjamin’s ambition to critically ‘awaken’ the ‘nineteenth-century language of images’ from that of the surrealists, whose abolition of ‘the line of demarcation between life and art’ reportedly detached them from ‘contemporary praxis and its demands’.<sup>19</sup> That same year, Richard Wolin’s *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (1982) was one of the first publications to highlight the importance of Benjamin’s engagement with surrealism as a ‘valuable insight concerning the methodological intent of the Arcades Project’ and identified the ‘Surrealism’ essay as a significant stepping stone in Benjamin’s conception of ‘the modern era under the mythical guise of commodity exchange’.<sup>20</sup> What’s more, Wolin detects a continuation of

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<sup>16</sup> Rolf Tiedemann, ‘Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*’ in Benjamin, *AP*, pp. 929–45 (p. 929).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 933.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 934.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 129. Wolin would later elaborate on these ideas in ‘Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism’ in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 93–122.

Benjamin's interests predating his discovery of surrealism, specifically his grappling with the restrictive nature of Kantian transcendental experience as expressed in 'Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie' ['On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy', 1917/18]. The surrealists thus offered Benjamin an opportunity to develop an anti-positivistic concept of experience 'assuming a profane, *exoteric* form'.<sup>21</sup>

Following the circulation of the arcades materials and these early critical responses pertaining to their surrealist influence, the strict dichotomy between the 'intoxicated' slumber of the world of surrealist literature and the historically 'awakened' materialist prospects of Benjamin's work continued to dominate discourses. An intervention into the consensus surrounding Benjamin's attitudes towards surrealism was initially made by French scholar Jacques Leenhardt, on the occasion of the first international conference on Benjamin in Paris in 1983. Leenhardt underlines Benjamin's efforts to write the *AP* in 'negative' opposition to Aragon's epistemology, yet also provides a much-needed elaboration on the nature and methods of Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* [*Paris Peasant*, 1926]<sup>22</sup> which challenges Benjamin's, as well as his critics', conception of this surrealist novel.<sup>23</sup> Leenhardt states that whilst

Benjamin cannot be suspected of not having read *Le paysan de Paris* but did he read it correctly? Or rather, did this rejection symbolize his need to ward off the 'demons' of surrealism which had infiltrated his work?<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Wolin, p. 131.

<sup>22</sup> Hereafter *PP*.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Leenhardt, 'Le Passage comme forme d'expérience: Benjamin face à Aragon' in *Walter Benjamin et Paris: colloque international 27–29 juin 1983*, ed. by Heinz Wismann (Paris: Cerf, 1986), pp. 163–171 (p. 165).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

Leenhardt's problematizing of Benjamin's simultaneous appropriation and disassociation from surrealist works reveals a sobering critique of his potentially misleading conceptions of the movement in purely 'impressionistic' or 'mythological' terms. Leenhardt thereby highlights a fascinatingly profound ambivalence within Benjamin's writing on surrealism, which will serve as a notable departure point for the arguments and critical endeavours of this thesis.<sup>25</sup>

The Paris conference proceedings to which Leenhardt contributed contained several other articles on Benjamin's relationship with Paris and his writings on Proust, Charles Péguy, Auguste Blanqui, Grandville and Baudelaire amongst others.<sup>26</sup> The 1980s witnessed the emergence of several publications which continued to illuminate Benjamin's proximity to surrealism and other French sources. Josef Fürnkäs' *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis: Walter Benjamin, Weimarer Einbahnstraße und Pariser Passagen* (1988) forms part of the earliest germanophone academic response to the initial publication of the arcades materials. Fürnkäs is also one of the first post-war critics to evaluate Benjamin's work in terms of prose writing, deviating from the common image of Benjamin as a philosopher per se.<sup>27</sup> Offering a detailed and comprehensive examination of the origins of the *AP*, Fürnkäs identifies Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* [*One-Way Street*, 1928] as the original

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<sup>25</sup> Leenhardt's approach is echoed in more recent scholarship on Benjamin's practice of textual appropriation and re-interpretation. Cf. *Entwendungen: Walter Benjamin und seine Quellen*, ed. by Jessica Nitsche and Nadine Werner (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2019)

<sup>26</sup> Bernd Witte, 'Paris — Berlin — Paris: Des corrélations entre l'expérience individuelle, littéraire et sociale dans les dernières œuvres de Benjamin' (pp. 33–48), Krista R. Greffrath, 'Proust et Benjamin' (pp. 113–132), Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, 'La mémoire est toujours de la guerre: Benjamin et Péguy' (pp. 133–144), Hartmut Engelhardt, 'L'interprétation de l'apparence chez Benjamin et Baudelaire' (pp. 145–152), Miguel Abensour, 'W. Benjamin entre mélancolie et révolution: Passages Blanqui' (pp. 219–248) and Marleen Stoessel, 'Dans le demi-jour, le même et le semblable: Deux contes en images de Grandville' (pp. 433–441) in Wismann.

<sup>27</sup> Josef Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus Als Erkenntnis: Walter Benjamin, Weimarer Einbahnstraße und Pariser Passagen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988), p. 2.

ground for the conception of his *Kurzprosa*, which he would brand with the term *Denkbilder*. Fűrnkäs relates Benjamin's thought-images to Aragon's novels *Anicet ou le Panorama, roman* [*Anicet or the Panorama, novel*; 1921] and *Le paysan de Paris*. Yet Fűrnkäs' positioning of this relationship within the categories of ethnology, archaeology and philology reveals that its impact can clearly be conceived beyond a literary context and related to wider trends of thought within Benjamin's corpus.

Fűrnkäs' study was succeeded by Susan Buck-Morss' *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1988), the first anglophone work on the *AP*. A self-described 'unorthodox undertaking', it is an ambitious and unprecedented study of the arcades materials, in which Buck-Morss takes it as her challenge to reconstruct the project as it might have appeared, had Benjamin been able to see it through to completion. Buck-Morss engages with the spatial, historical, natural and philosophical dimensions of Benjamin's writings on the arcades and by extension touches upon the importance of French history, with an emphasis on its fashion and architecture, to the elaboration of his ideas.<sup>28</sup> In this manner, Buck-Morss was one of the leading critics to acknowledge the implications of Benjamin's critical interest in the works of Baudelaire, Blanqui, Grandville and Henri de Saint-Simon, as well as place his ideas within the French historical contexts they stemmed from. Like Fűrnkäs, Buck-Morss also indicates the importance of the 'Surrealism' essay to the *AP* and recognizes the conceptual correlations between the project and Aragon's *PP*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> One example would be in 'Part II: Mythic History: Fetish' where Buck-Morss analyses the relations between the concept of historical progress in France, the world exhibitions in Paris and the mass urbanisation of the city by Baron Haussmann. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



The 1990s and early 2000s saw a further rise in scholarship dedicated to Benjamin and surrealism. In the USA, Margaret Cohen was the first academic to extensively address Benjamin's connection to the surrealist movement in *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (1995), specifically with reference to the *Passagenarbeit*. In her introduction, she states that Benjamin 'asserted in no uncertain terms the centrality of high surrealism to the arcades project from its inception'.<sup>30</sup> Cohen's main incentive is to uncover the important link between Benjamin and the pioneering work of André Breton through close textual analyses, since biographically there is little evidence of their encounters.<sup>31</sup> At the forefront of this study stands the term 'Gothic Marxism', as Cohen reconstructs early attempts to theorize it and then trace it within the works of both Breton and Benjamin. The concept of 'Gothic Marxism' encapsulates the genealogy of Marxists' fascination with 'the irrational' and the ensuing dream of instrumentalizing it in the name of social change.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Cohen engages with an integral part of Benjamin's relationship with surrealism, namely his own efforts to reconcile it with his grappling with Marxist theory. Despite Cohen's landmark study offering crucial evaluations on the significance of Benjamin's encounters with surrealism, it is nonetheless primarily dedicated to outlining Breton's major contributions to French post-war theory.

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> It has been established that both men were present at several events and gatherings in Paris; physical proof of their correspondence, however, remains uncovered. In the foreword to Benjamin's collected correspondence, Gershom Scholem writes: 'Among letters to French correspondents, those to André Breton, for example, have been lost or cannot be located.' 'Foreword' in Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910–1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. xi–xv, xii.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, pp. 1–2.

John McCole's *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (1993) provides an additional perspective amongst the pioneering anglophone studies on Benjamin. Not only does McCole situate Benjamin's work within the wider confines of German intellectual history, but he attempts to synthesize the seemingly incongruous intellectual developments in Benjamin's career under the rubric of 'tradition' which becomes synonymous with 'the communicability of experience'.<sup>33</sup> According to McCole, the 'antinomical' structure (the urge to simultaneously rescue and liquidate history and culture) present within Benjamin's writing is not the result of intellectual confusion but can be read as a coherent strategy. Within this trajectory, McCole similarly attributes an important role to Benjamin's encounters with surrealism, which was spurred on by the fact that 'the surrealists were enacting, in an open and extreme form, many of the conflicts he had found at the heart of the German *Frühromantik*'.<sup>34</sup> Such an approach diverges from the usual conception of surrealism as a complete departure from Benjamin's earlier, more 'academic' interests within the field of German philology, literature and philosophy.

Michael Löwy's *L'étoile du matin: surréalisme et marxisme* (2000)<sup>35</sup> proposes a similar argument with regards to surrealism's intellectual heritage, by tracing the founding of a 'new' universal mythology by Schlegel in the collective utopian efforts of Breton and his peers.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, within this context, Löwy places Benjamin within a line of international figures such as Pierre Naville, José Carlos Mariátegui and Guy Debord who engaged with surrealism 'because they

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<sup>33</sup> John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>35</sup> Translated as Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Löwy, p. 14.

understood that this movement represented the highest expression of revolutionary romanticism in the twentieth century'.<sup>37</sup> Most importantly, Löwy succeeds in mapping the intellectual crossover between surrealism and Marxism within the framework of revolutionary Romanticism. As Donald LaCross phrases it, Löwy's study makes

a convincing case for assessing the amorphously loose clustering of surrealism's wildly disparate, unpredictable revolutionary energies around Marxist poles over the past eight decades as an attempt by surrealists to recover and reverse-engineer the long-lost Romantic sensibilities inherent in Marxism.<sup>38</sup>

Placing Benjamin's critical engagement with surrealist and Marxist genealogies within the wider context of greater ideological and intellectual trends further reveals the significance of their unorthodox fusion within his writings. Doing so also demonstrates that the rhetoric surrounding surrealism's reception still greatly underestimates the extent of the movement's influence within the history of criticism and philosophy.

Benjamin's attunement to the intellectual shifts of his era, specifically in relation to his writings on French works and historical events, means that his engagement with surrealism can also be traced with regard to the socio-political crises which took place in France and Germany. His position as a figure of note within Franco-German intellectual history had already begun to be recognized in the first volume of the *Deutsch-französisches Jahrbuch* entitled *Vermittler* (1981).

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Donald LaCross, 'Introduction: Surrealism and Romantic Anticapitalism' in Löwy, pp. vii–xxx (p. x).

Alongside the likes of Heinrich Mann, Alexandre Kojève, Heidegger and Peter Szondi, Benjamin is featured as a writer and thinker for whom the contemporary landscape of French authors provided a type of reverse ‘magnifying glass’ reflecting the development of the literary intelligentsia in Germany.<sup>39</sup> In her contribution to the volume, Monika Noll places an emphasis on Benjamin’s engagement with contemporary French culture and its correlation with the beginning of his journalistic activities in the mid 1920s.<sup>40</sup> Through his critiques of novels by twentieth-century writers such as Julien Green, Paul Valéry, André Gide and the surrealists, Benjamin was attempting to delineate the dialectical shifts occurring between the bourgeoisie and the increasing politicization of revolutionary intellectuals.<sup>41</sup> This is where, according to Noll, Benjamin saw his task and an intermediary role in the making.

Several decades later, *Écrits Français* (1991) compiled Benjamin’s shorter works on France for the first time for a francophone readership.<sup>42</sup> Suhrkamp followed suit with *Passagen* (2007), which featured Benjamin’s writings on French themes from the very start of his writing career in both French and German.<sup>43</sup> The publication was overseen by French Germanist Gérard Raulet, who, in his afterword, remarks that several well-known contemporary French writers such as Romain Rolland never made an appearance in Benjamin’s work, indicating that his reviews of the French literary scene were not perhaps the most historically representative. In

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Einleitung’ in *Vermittler: H. Mann, Benjamin, Groethuysen, Kojève, Szondi, Heidegger in Frankreich*, Goldmann, Sieburg, ed. by Jürgen Sieß (Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 1981), pp. 11–20 (p. 16).

<sup>40</sup> Monika Noll, ‘Walter Benjamin und die revolutionäre Position in der modernen französischen Literatur’ in Sieß, pp. 41–58 (p. 43).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Écrits français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Passagen: Schriften zur französischen Literatur*, ed. by Gérard Raulet (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).

this regard, Raulet also examines Benjamin's own conception of his role as an intermediary, questioning whether he

was pursuing the goal of documenting an impartial and therefore wide-ranging view of the modern French intelligentsia, in other words to keep a regular chronicle of French books, [...] or whether there are motifs that similarly to the cases of Baudelaire and Proust, display particular connections to the authors he had chosen?<sup>44</sup>

In a similar vein, Chryssoula Kambas published *Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz: Moderne, Exil und Kulturtransfer in Walter Benjamins Werk* in 2009, becoming one of the leading German authorities on Benjamin's role as a cultural commentator of French modernity. Kambas highlights the importance of his work as a *Vermittler*, claiming his German authorship was based on his readings of French literature.<sup>45</sup> With a particular focus on Benjamin's work in exile, she frames this activity as a 'transfer' of literary and cultural references between both geographical spaces. What's more, Kambas gives a specific emphasis to Benjamin's 'Europa-Begriff' ('concept of Europe') and considers the extent to which the discourses surrounding nationalism, European humanism and its intellectual outputs are apparent in his corpus.<sup>46</sup> Kambas' publication thereby made a novel contribution to Benjamin's profile as a 'European' intermediary, whose writings on French authors and contemporary cultural and political crises make him a figure of reference for Franco-German intellectual exchange in the interwar period.

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<sup>44</sup> Gérard Raulet, 'Nachwort: Das befristete Dasein der Gebildeten, Benjamins Schriften zur französischen Literatur' in Benjamin, *Passagen*, pp. 423–453 (pp. 430–431).

<sup>45</sup> Chryssoula Kambas, *Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz: Moderne, Exil und Kulturtransfer in Walter Benjamins Werk* (Hanover: Offizin, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. 'Auswanderer aus dem Europa des Humanismus: Zum *Europa*-Begriff Benjamins' in Kambas, pp. 9–48.

In 2011, the publication of the comprehensive *Benjamin-Handbuch* marked a further decisive step in cementing Benjamin's status as one of the most important German authors and thinkers of the twentieth century. The handbook notably dedicates a chapter to Benjamin's history with French literature and culture.<sup>47</sup> Laure Bernardi, the chapter's author, acknowledges that, as a rule, the role of French literature in Benjamin's work and life is predominantly associated with Proust, Baudelaire and his years in French exile.<sup>48</sup> She makes the vital argument that his dedication, interest and involvement in French culture were prominent from much earlier and that the relationship with France represents 'an intellectual and affective red thread which runs through his entire corpus'.<sup>49</sup> Despite this seemingly evident fact, however, Bernardi rightly concludes that little to no critical attention has been dedicated to a wider investigation of this aspect of Benjamin's work. The chapter offers an instructive overview of Benjamin's activities as a journalist of French literary and cultural events, providing a historical summary of his relationship to different journals, his double 'outsider's perspective' and role as an intentional cultural *Vermittler* between both nations.<sup>50</sup> What's more, Bernardi discusses the socio-political ramifications of his engagement with the French radical intelligentsia, once again revealing the complexity of Benjamin's own political convictions.<sup>51</sup>

Bernardi's work uncovered the depth of Benjamin's engagement with French sources beyond the common critical perspectives on his experience with the surrealists, Proust and Baudelaire. Nonetheless, her claims do not seem to have

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<sup>47</sup> *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Laure Bernardi, 'Zur französischen Literatur und Kultur' in Lindner, pp. 332–343 (p. 332).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

spurred further extensive scholarship, which entails that many of the significant questions she poses in the handbook have continued to go unanswered. The critical silence surrounding these issues was recently broken in 2020, when aforementioned scholar Raulet published a monograph entitled *Das befristete Dasein der Gebildeten: Benjamin und die französische Intelligenz*, confirming that even in the present day, critical interrogations relating to Benjamin's interactions with French history, politics and textual sources are vital in comprehending the intricacies of his intellectual trajectory and methods. Following years of research on the matter, Raulet returns to the philosophical puzzle of Benjamin's involvement with a diverse host of interwar French writers and critics ranging from Julien Green, Marcel Jouhandeau and Proust to Julien Benda, Charles Péguy and Léon Bloy. 'Upon opening [Benjamin's] pandora's box of essays and reviews about French literature', Raulet writes in his introduction, 'the supposed certainties of [his] reception begin to falter'.<sup>52</sup> '[If] the variety of criticism, reviews, discussions, reports, and essays betray a common theme', he states, 'it is Benjamin's efforts to form a critical position with regards to the French intellectual scene'.<sup>53</sup>

As can be deduced from the above summary of existing works in the field on the subject of Benjamin's relationship with French literature, culture and history, there remain several gaps in the understanding of how this affected his writing and thinking. Despite the obvious presence of Benjamin's persistent fascination with France, his skills as a translator from French into German and his years of exile in the French capital, most critics do not relate these facts into his wider practice and methods, which is where this thesis will intervene. Here, it seems important to note

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<sup>52</sup> Gérard Raulet, *Das befristete Dasein der Gebildeten: Walter Benjamin und die französische Intelligenz* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2020), p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

that to properly delve into the topic, certain linguistic skills are demanded on the part of the Benjamin critic. This may explain why most scholars who have tackled the questions that are relevant to this thesis are capable of inhabiting Benjamin's text and its accompanying sources both in and out of translation. Given my own abilities as a multilingual comparatist, I am in the position of consulting Benjamin's German and French writings and his sources in their original language as well as synthesizing anglophone, germanophone and francophone criticism in the field.

Benjamin was by no means a traditional 'Francophile' — the range of his interests resulting in a myriad of interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives. For this reason, it has perhaps been easier to focus on his engagement with French works in a manner that befits his 'primary' critical axes, most predominantly, the cultural Marxist or materialist anthropological focus. Yet, is it that far-fetched to conceive of his life's work as that of a *European* thinker, whose writings were determined by his knowledge of *both* French and German contexts? This dissertation wishes to explore and ascertain the limits of such a claim.

### **Terminology, Methods and Approaches**

Benjamin's *Vermittler* status, in addition to the transnational and bilingual nature of his corpus, then leads to a consideration of his body of work in terms of a 'correspondence'. Not only in an epistolary sense — Benjamin was an avid composer of letters and corresponded in both French and German with his friends and acquaintances, resulting in a vast archive of letters — but equally as a type of intellectual and literary exchange between texts and figures.<sup>54</sup> As much as the term

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<sup>54</sup> Benjamin's estate contains around 1400 letters, which were published from the mid-1960s. For an overview, see Heinrich Kaulen, 'Walter Benjamin: Briefschreiber, Sammler und Theoretiker



‘correspondence’ in the title of this thesis is a nod to the Baudelairean notion of *correspondance*, which sees a poetic engagement in forging unforeseen relations between elements of the natural and industrial world, and was deemed an important part of Benjamin’s thought process in the arcades materials, I would like to extend the term as a means to think about the French influence on his writing. The consistent fusion of Benjamin’s French interests with his grounding in the German intellectual tradition means his works emerge as interdisciplinary, transnational and translingual fields, where French and German sources are in ‘correspondence’ with one another.

The term ‘correspondence’ can be related to Benjamin’s notion of *Konstellation* in which the realm of ideas is likened to astrological formations, simultaneously retaining their individuality whilst also forming part of wider patterns of interconnected relations (*GS I*, 215).<sup>55</sup> Aspects of *Verwandtschaft* or relationality were an integral part of Benjamin’s practice as a comparative critic and philosopher. A ‘correspondence’ or *Konstellation* of ideas most importantly offers a new schema through which intellectual influence can be perceived. In a short fragment entitled ‘Analogie und Verwandtschaft’ [‘Analogy and Relationship’, 1919], Benjamin discusses the hazards of equating ‘analogy’ with ‘relationship’ (*SW* 1, 208). Whilst analogy is formed through ‘similarity’, ‘relationships’ ‘can be directly perceived only in feeling’ (*ibid.*). Such ‘feeling’ is likened to the parent’s relationship to the child, which is based neither on ‘intuition’ nor ‘reason’ (*ibid.*).

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des Briefs’ in *Handbuch Brief: Von der frühen Neuzeit bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. by Marie Isabel Matthews-Schlinzig et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), pp. 1415–1429.

<sup>55</sup> In his study on the Baroque mourning play, Benjamin writes: ‘Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars’. For Benjamin, the ‘idea’ represents an ‘intentionless’ *Erfahrung* [experience] surpassing the contemplative logic and reason of traditional philosophy. See *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 34–36.

This thesis intends to highlight such an understanding of textual ‘relationships’ in Benjamin’s writings, outside of the usual framework based on ‘analogy’ and ‘similarity’. His own ‘constellation’ of French influences is made up of a dense network of thinkers and writers, some of whom preceded him, others that were his contemporaries and some that would become acquaintances and friends.

Alongside my attempts to outline a comprehensive and continuous relationship with French figures and sources, I thereby also wish to challenge most scholarly assumptions on the manner in which intellectual influence takes place. Rather than suggesting a harmonious and seamless transfer of an idea from one context into another, this dissertation will be using Benjamin’s writing as a means of dismantling the common comparative approach that sees the need to trace impact in immediate, explicit and complicit ways. Benjamin’s work arises as a fascinating case study to demonstrate that creative interests and intellectual influences are not always built on acceptance, agreement or acknowledgement. As has been examined by Raulet, Benjamin’s interests in French works often strayed into questionable territories such as his interest in the French far-right.<sup>56</sup> When he was overly invested in a specific text, such influences would frequently surface implicitly with references often obscure, inaccurate or untraceable. Furthermore, I intend to question the idea of influence as a one-way street with a set expiry date. In ‘Trauerspiel und Tragödie’ [‘Trauerspiel and Tragedy’, 1916], Benjamin conceives of historical time as ‘infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment’ (*SW* 1, 55). ‘No single empirical event is thinkable’, he claims, ‘that would stand in a necessary relationship to the particular historical situation in which it was produced’ (*ibid.*). For this reason, as well as looking at Benjamin’s work in his lifetime, the final chapter of this thesis

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<sup>56</sup> See ‘Benjamin und die französische Rechte’ in Raulet, *Das befristete Dasein*, pp. 163–193.

will approach the question of his critical and textual afterlives in the French post-World War II context.

In this regard, the term ‘passage’, referring to the subject of Benjamin’s project on the arcades, simultaneously connotes textual routes, paths and openings, which to varying degrees are reciprocal, unilateral and dead-ends. Once again, it appears necessary to invoke Benjamin’s concept of ‘constellation’, the meanings of which can also be gleaned from his ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ as well as the later ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ of his dissertation, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [*Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, 1928]. Both works contain a conception of the ‘idea’ as a changing and active mediation of meaning. What defines clusters or groupings of ‘ideas’ is not their reciprocity to each other, but their ‘unique and extreme’ differences which are held together through constellation. Similarly, Benjamin defines translation as a form of renewal and interrogation of the ‘original’ source. In addition to his linguistic translation of French works into German, Benjamin was actively translating the ideas he encountered in French texts conceptually and figuratively, creating new and unforeseen constellations of meaning in his work.

In this manner, the thesis will expand on the common conception of intertextuality as the transposition of one source to another. One could therefore argue that Benjaminian ‘constellation’, especially in the context of his philosophy of language, is closely related to the concept of intertextuality which first emerged in a French post-war context. Julia Kristeva, who is generally recognized as having coined the term, combined Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of language based on social contexts with Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic system to designate a literary shift which appeared in the ‘polyphonic’ twentieth-century novels of Joyce, Proust, and

Kafka. Kristeva describes intertextuality as ‘a mosaic of quotations’ wherein ‘any text is the absorption and transformation of another’.<sup>57</sup> Her understanding of intertextuality does not imply a relationship between literary texts, rather every text ‘is defined as a trans-linguistic apparatus that redistributes the order of language’, constituting ‘a permutation of texts’ in which ‘several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralise one another’.<sup>58</sup> In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva notes that

[intertextuality] has often been understood in the banal sense of ‘study of sources,’ we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic — of enunciative and denotative positionality. If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its ‘place’ of enunciation and its denoted ‘object’ are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated.

Benjamin’s *AP*, ‘a mosaic of quotations’ in itself, can be viewed in the light of such intertextual practice and ‘transposition’. What’s more, a ‘plurality’ of ‘shattered’ intertexts is very much at the heart of Benjamin’s corpus, so much so that his work has founded its own ‘field of transpositions of various signifying systems’. Roland Barthes, whose own intertextual relationship to Benjamin will be examined in the last chapter of this thesis, also contributed to the current-day understanding of the term in his differentiation between authorial intention and the interpretive

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<sup>57</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘Word, dialogue and novel’ in Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> Julia Kristeva, ‘The Bounded Text’ in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon Samuel Roudiez, trans. by Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Leon Samuel Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 36–63 (p. 36).

independence of texts. For Barthes,

[a]ny text is a new tissue of recycled citations. Fragments of codes, formulae, model rhythms, bits of social discourse pass into the text and are redistributed within it [...]. The intertext is a field of anonymous formulae whose origin is rarely recoverable, of unconscious or automatic citations without speech marks.<sup>59</sup>

Whilst the origins of Benjamin's intertexts are 'recoverable' to varying degrees, Kristeva's and Barthes' conceptions of the text as 'intertext' are especially useful when approaching the complex web of fragments of the *AP* and the numerous other essays it inspired.

Benjamin's recourse to building his concepts out of a variety of fragments means his methods can be likened to that of a textual *monteur*. His use of montage is both literary and philosophical and was inextricably tied to the significance he attributed not only to Baroque allegory, but equally to the works of the European avant-garde such as the novels written by Alfred Döblin and Louis Aragon or the artworks of László Moholy-Nagy and Sasha Stone. In his pioneering study, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), which predates the wider circulation of the arcades materials, Peter Bürger already likened Benjamin's practice to that of an 'avant-gardiste'. For Bürger, the 'central task of the theory of the avant-garde' is the 'development of the nonorganic work of art'.<sup>60</sup> What's more, the avant-gardiste's principal 'activity' 'consists in nothing other than in killing the "life" of the material', that is in tearing it 'out of its functional context that gives it meaning'.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes, entry for 'Texte (théorie du)' in *Encyclopædia universalis* (Paris, 1973), as cited in Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 33.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 68.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Bürger traces such an approach back to Benjamin's work on Baroque allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, whereby the allegorist is seen to dislocate elements 'out of the totality of life context' only to join 'the isolated reality fragments' in order to create meaning.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, it is particularly in Benjamin's use of citations in the Convolutes of his work on the French arcades that his practice as an 'avant-gardiste' comes to the fore. Benjamin's citational 'montage' method forms a unique constellation of commentary and critique which would become a model for thinkers such as Adorno after World War II. His investment in avant-garde media and texts, alongside his sensitivity to the importance of the rising medium of film, make his employment of montage methods in his writing, and above all in his philosophy of history, a pivotal part of his practice.

Much has been said of Benjamin's methods as a writer and critic: for a figure who seemingly defies categorization, numerous attempts have been made to class Benjamin as a particular kind of thinker, whether that be surrealist, Marxist, messianist or materialist. Here it seems necessary to state that this thesis does not necessarily wish to establish a new 'camp' of Benjamin criticism. In this day and age of Benjamin scholarship, it has become increasingly dubious to approach any of Benjamin's concerns or areas of critical interest in isolation. If the last half century of research on his works has taught us anything, it is that Benjamin's corpus consists of a multitude of subterranean tunnels which — following a little digging — unearth connections across time, space, and subject matter. This rhizomatic quality, to the chagrin of many Benjamin scholars, is perhaps responsible for Benjamin's current omnipresence in an eclectic range of disciplines and practices and has led him to be

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

dubbed the first ‘pop philosopher’.<sup>63</sup> In an interview with *Le Monde*, French Benjamin scholar Florent Perrier highlights such ‘subterranean’ circulation, which in its porosity constitutes a particular ‘arrangement’ of singularly disparate elements whose internal references and echoes never cease to ‘make sense’.<sup>64</sup> ‘One cannot build an image of Benjaminian thought’, he argues, ‘by disregarding one of the multiple dimensions which compose and recompose it’.<sup>65</sup> Taking such a perspective into consideration, this thesis argues that Benjamin’s areas of interest, however disparate, are interlinked, his literary, socio-political and messianic interests all contributing to the complex construction of the monument of his ideas.

The terms ‘constellation’, ‘passage’, ‘intertext’ and ‘montage’, which fall under the central umbrella term of ‘correspondence’, contribute to a more precise understanding of Benjamin’s methodology which was principally influenced by his relationship with French literature and culture, and consequently form part of the wider theoretical contexts within which my arguments take place. By highlighting historical, biographical and epistolary facts, in combination with discussions of Benjamin’s published and unpublished materials from his archive now housed at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, this thesis will illustrate his work as a continuous response to French literary, cultural and intellectual sources. Framing individual textual encounters as part of a broader ongoing focus on Benjamin’s methodology, research and practice as a thinker, translator and writer reveals that his status as a

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<sup>63</sup> Ray Monk, ‘Walter Benjamin, the First Pop Philosopher’, *New Statesman*, 14 October 2015 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2015/10/walter-benjamin-first-pop-philosopher>>.

<sup>64</sup> Perrier cites the well-known instance of Theodor Adorno believing that Benjamin’s ‘Theologisch-politisches Fragment’ (‘Theological-Political Fragment’) dated from 1937, when in fact it was written in the early 1920s. Nicholas Weill, ‘Walter Benjamin, Un penseur en France’, *Le Monde*, 14 March 2014 <[https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2014/03/14/walter-benjamin-un-penseur-en-france\\_5994713\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2014/03/14/walter-benjamin-un-penseur-en-france_5994713_3232.html)>.

<sup>65</sup> Weill.

Franco-German intermediary far surpasses the attention it has been given in scholarship thus far.

### **Research Questions, Aims and Overview**

In the four chapters of the thesis, I will address the following research questions in order:

- 1.** What were the circumstances of Benjamin's first encounters with French language and literature as a reader, translator and critic? In what ways did French influences make themselves apparent in his work in the 1910s and 1920s?
- 2.** How did French influences manifest themselves in his work on the *AP* and what impact did they have on the development of his ideas? What were the methodological and structural challenges he faced due to these influences?
- 3.** In what ways did these influences affect his working methods and the expression of his ideas in his writings throughout the 1930s? What were the circumstances of his Parisian exile?
- 4.** How did his critical commitment to French literature and culture affect his posthumous reception and contribute to his reputation as a figure of reference within post-war French theory?

To make the greater significance of Benjamin's relationship to French language, literature, and culture a central focus, the thesis will largely follow a biographically chronological structure. This will encompass Benjamin's childhood in Berlin at the turn of the twentieth century, his days as a university student translating Baudelaire in the 1910s, the start of his career as a cultural essayist in the mid 1920s up until his



life in exile in the 1930s and his eventual death on the Franco-Spanish border in Portbou in 1940.

The first half of the thesis will focus on Benjamin's engagement with surrealist sources and their effects on his writing both before and during his exile. Chapter 1 will investigate the prehistory of the *AP*, which includes Benjamin's early encounters with French language and culture but also most importantly his earliest engagements with the surrealist movement. Here, biographical information on his multilingual upbringing will pave the way to his first efforts as a literary translator and the start of his journalistic career from the early 1920s, when his failure to enter academic circles would encourage him to become an established writer on contemporary French culture and affairs. The Weimar Republic's *feuilleton* gave rise to a new format for commentary and criticism known as the *kleine Form* ('little form'), which had a definitive impact on Benjamin's work as a cultural essayist. I will undertake analyses of *Einbahnstraße* [*One-Way Street*, 1928], 'Traumkitsch' ['Dreamkitsch', 1927] and 'Der Surrealismus: Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz' ['Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', 1929]. Chapter 1 will also highlight Benjamin's status as a mediator between France and Germany, particularly in relation to the history of surrealism's German reception. Chapter 2 will delve more closely into the form and content of the *AP*. In a continuation of the arguments presented in Chapter 1 in relation to Benjamin's journalism of the mid to late 1920s, particular attention will be paid to surrealist Louis Aragon and his novel *Le paysan de Paris*, which served as a simultaneous model and anti-model for Benjamin's writerly and intellectual aspirations. Within this context, a decisive stylistic transition in Benjamin's writing — the appropriation of montage and its transference into the concept of social

history — will be taken into account. The systematic composition of disparate fragments will be outlined as a founding pillar of Benjamin's methodology, where montage emerges as an epistemological principle.

Chapter 3, subdivided into two parts, will be devoted to recounting Benjamin's public existence as a German intellectual in Parisian exile in the 1930s and how this environment fed into his work and methods. Despite his ongoing preoccupation with the *AP* during the mid to late 1930s, Benjamin was still producing smaller works, mainly consisting of reviews, essays and opinion pieces, which were influenced by his presence in Paris. Articles such as 'Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers' ['The Present Social Situation of the French Writer', 1934] which Benjamin produced as part of his affiliation to the Institute for Social Research, reveal a continuation of his interests in surrealism and the value of his proximity to French intellectual circles. With this in mind, Benjamin's efforts to translate his work and search for a French audience will be discussed in relation to 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' [The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility', 1935–39] and 'Les Allemands de quatre-vingt neuf' ['The Germans of Eighty-Nine', 1939].

During his final years in Paris, Benjamin became involved with the members of the *Collège de Sociologie*, also known as the 'renegade' surrealists. Research into the group's activities will shed light on his relationship with Georges Bataille as well as the intellectual exchanges between the *Collège* and the Institute for Social Research. The final section of Chapter 3 will focus on an offshoot of the *AP*, a study on Baudelaire with the working title *Charles Baudelaire: Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus* ['Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High

Capitalism', 1937–40] in addition to its connection to the philosophical fragments that constitute 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' ['On the Concept of History', 1940]. To conclude, Chapter 4 will reverse the question of French influence by outlining Benjamin's posthumous reception in France and examining the scope of his lasting presence within French intellectual history, with reference to the works of post-World War II thinkers Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Rancière and Jacques Derrida.

The intellectual correspondences that took place within Benjamin's life as well as in his writing, specifically between Marxism and French surrealism, will be revealed as the nucleus of his philosophy of modern experience. By reconsidering the nature of Benjamin's methodology with reference to his engagement with French writings, my thesis will contribute to a substantial recontextualization of his role as an innovator not only of content but also form within twentieth-century literary criticism. Through reference to biography, correspondence, archival materials, witness accounts and selected texts, I will draw attention to one indisputable fact: Benjamin was a multilingual comparatist, an 'in-between' figure, who was able to thrive outside of the linguistic and cultural context of his home nation and possessed the powers of perception to look beyond borders in his work. This being the case, individual sources and ideas and their accompanying analyses will be placed within the wider historical, contextual, and intellectual confines that Benjamin was actively operating in. In addition to engaging with past and present aspects of Benjamin studies, the claims of this thesis can be expected to find their place within the fields of Comparative and World Literature, European Intellectual History, Translation Studies and Critical Theory.

## 1. FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH FRENCH LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

### INTRODUCTION

This opening chapter will highlight that Benjamin's interest in French writings predated his work on the *Passagenarbeit* and his time in Parisian exile, which existing studies on the arcades materials fail to mention. It is often overlooked that Benjamin's exposure to the French language from a young age fuelled his later curiosity for francophone authors and poets, but also most importantly facilitated his later career as a translator. Throughout his early university years, a period generally acknowledged for his work on German Romanticism, Benjamin's attention was thus already taken up with several French writers. Furthermore, with particular emphasis on seminal essays from the 1920s, I will outline Benjamin's early engagement with surrealism in order to trace its long-standing implications for his critical ambitions in the *AP* and other related essays in Chapters 2 and 3.

After briefly discussing Benjamin's early encounters with the language and his work as a translator of French literature, I will focus on the context and circumstances surrounding his transition from academia to the world of cultural journalism in the Weimar Republic. The piece most reflective of this shift is *Einbahnstraße* [*One-Way Street*, 1928], which not only draws on the work of French writer Louis Aragon and montage methods of the avant-garde but equally the formalistic and linguistic features of the *kleine Form* ('little form') associated with the quick-paced environment of the Weimar *Zeitschrift*. 'Traumkitsch' ['Dreamkitsch', 1927] and 'Der Sürrealismus: Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz' ['Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', 1929], Benjamin's first critical examination of surrealist methods,

will then be analysed as seminal works within the evolution of his theory and practice as a writer and thinker. These texts unveil the disadvantages of a movement inspired by Aestheticism with political aspirations and thus concur with the writings of group members Aragon and Pierre Naville — whose work I argue contributed to Benjamin’s own critical evaluation of surrealism.

The concluding parts of the chapter will reflect on the fact that beyond the critical, formal and methodological significance of his encounters with French writers throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Benjamin emerged as an important mediator for French literature in Weimar Germany, a position which would prove to be immensely beneficial from a professional standpoint in the years leading up to World War II. Just as the surrealists had introduced the work of Freud and Hegel to French intellectual circles, Benjamin in turn would emerge as an unexpected, and mostly unacknowledged, spokesperson in Germany for what he perceived as an important development in European intellectual history. Surrealism gave Benjamin the critical distance to revisit many of the issues he had encountered during his studies and doctoral research, presenting him with the opportunity of an ‘outside’ perspective to review the intellectual and political landscape of his home nation.

### 1.1. BEGINNINGS

#### **A Berlin Childhood — in French?**

Benjamin was born into a wealthy, assimilated Jewish family in Berlin in 1892, a ‘wohlgebornes Bürgerkind’ [‘a son of wealthy middle-class parents’], as he would later define himself in the sketches of his *Berliner Chronik* [‘Berlin Chronicle’, 1932] (*GS* VI, 465; *SW* 2:2, 595). Although he did not work critically with French literature until the 1920s, the beginnings of Benjamin’s relationship with the language can be traced back to the early years of his childhood. As the oldest of

three siblings, he was watched over by domestic staff who included a French governess. What's more, Benjamin's father, Emil Benjamin (1856–1926), a former banker and successful businessman, was based in Paris for many years before moving to Berlin in the late 1880s to become an art and antiques dealer.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore justifiable to assume that — on some level — spoken French was a natural part of this domestic environment. At the age of nine, Benjamin was sent to the Kaiser Friedrich school, 'a decidedly progressive institution' which, under the direction of an educational reformer, Professor Zernickel, provided its students with French lessons from the first year.<sup>2</sup> These factual snippets may be considered minor details within the context of Benjamin's extensive and eventful biography; collectively, however, they constitute important evidence pointing to the foundational nature of his exposure to the French language from a young age.

Following the successful completion of his secondary education in 1912, Benjamin enrolled at Freiburg University to study Philosophy and Philology. The following year, he embarked on his first trip to Paris. In letters to his friend Herbert Belmore shortly before his journey, Benjamin made the necessary 'intellectual' preparations, enquiring about Baedekers, art guides and 'books about Parisian culture and impressionism' (C, 22). A letter to Belmore's eventual wife Carla Seligson in June reveals detailed insights into the two weeks he spent there:

[I]nstead of having a few isolated memories of this city I could tell you about, I have only

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the Benjamin family, see Uwe-Karsten Heye, *Die Benjamins: Eine deutsche Familie* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 34. The school, in line with recent educational reforms, had made the conscious decision to privilege the instruction of modern languages (most notably French) over Greek and Latin. For a fuller account of Benjamin's time at the Kaiser Friedrich school, see Momme Brodersen, *Klassenbild mit Walter Benjamin: Eine Spurensuche* (Munich: Siedler, 2012).

an awareness of having lived intensely for fourteen days, as only children do. I was on the move the whole day and almost never went to bed before two. Mornings in the Louvre, in Versailles, Fontainebleau, or the Bois de Boulogne; afternoons in the streets, in a church, in a café. Evenings with acquaintances or in some theatre or other: then, above all, every evening on the Grand Boulevard, which some ways could be compared with Unter den Linden if it were not narrower (cosier!), and if the streets did not wend their way through the entire inner city, whose houses seem made, not to be lived in, but to be stone stage sets between which people stroll. I have become almost more at home in the Louvre and the Grand Boulevard than I am in the Kaiser Friedrich Museum or on the streets of Berlin (C, 27).

As the excerpt vividly demonstrates, twenty-year-old Benjamin felt very much at ease in this newly discovered city. His initial trip to Paris, during which he also managed to attend a production of Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*, would mark the start of an intimate relationship with the French capital in the years to come. Benjamin's comparisons of the 'Grand Boulevard' with Unter den Linden not only foreshadow his eventual role as a commentator and mediator between Paris and Berlin, but also contain a germination of his critical insights into the cultural history of Parisian urban architecture, which he would later develop in his writings on the nineteenth-century French arcades.

### **The Task of the Translator**

The onset of the First World War marked a dark period in Benjamin's life. Shortly after its outbreak, his close friends, poet Fritz Heinle and Rika Seligson (Carla's sister), committed joint suicide. Having been declared unfit for military service, Benjamin was nonetheless undeterred from pursuing his literary interests. Alongside work on Friedrich Hölderlin, he had begun to turn his attention to a figure who would have an irreversible imprint on his work: nineteenth-century poet Charles Baudelaire. The stark difference between the two poets is very much representative

of Benjamin's own diverging sensibilities, as Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings put it: 'where Hölderlin's jagged lyric foreshadowed certain strains of Expressionism, Baudelaire's sonorous antilyric fed into surrealism'.<sup>3</sup> When fellow philosopher and long-time friend Gershom Scholem first met Benjamin in 1915, 'he was working on translations from Baudelaire' and on his desk 'lay Rowohlt's edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, published in Paris in 1909 or 1910, an especially beautifully printed volume'.<sup>4</sup> Mentions of Baudelaire can additionally be traced back to 1915 in Benjamin's correspondence, where he draws on the poet's art criticism to formulate his own theories on colour (*GB I*, 120).<sup>5</sup> Although Benjamin had already begun to translate Baudelaire's poetry in 1914, close to a decade would pass before his translation of the 'Tableaux parisiens' was published.<sup>6</sup>

Critics who choose to dissect Benjamin's relationship with Baudelaire tend to focus on the 1930s, since this was when he was actively writing and planning a book-length study on the poet.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to recall that his early engagement with Baudelaire was primarily defined by his first efforts as a translator at a stage when he was beginning to develop his critical thinking in conjunction with the experience of his multilingualism. One can therefore deduce that this encounter was significant to the development of his theory on language, as previously conceived in the piece 'Über die Sprache überhaupt und die Sprache des Menschen' ['On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', 1916], but also his later

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<sup>3</sup> Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 76.

<sup>4</sup> Scholem, pp. 55–56.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. 'Die Farbe vom Kinde aus betrachtet' ['A Child's View of Color', 1914–1915] and 'Der Regenbogen' ['The Rainbow', ca. 1915].

<sup>6</sup> In a letter dated 13.1.1924 to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Benjamin states that: 'Nine years passed between my first attempt at a translation of [*Les fleurs du mal*] and the book's publication' (C, 229).

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin's plans for a 'Baudelaire' book will be discussed in Chapter 3 (pp. 235–242).



doctoral dissertation *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* [‘The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism’, 1919]. In ‘Über die Sprache überhaupt’, Benjamin questioned the nature of language in his attempts to establish a connection between the spoken word and human thought.<sup>8</sup> He thereby laid the foundations for ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ [‘The Task of the Translator’, 1923], the essay prefacing his Baudelaire translation, which similarly reflects on the notion of intention within language but with the added complexity of a multiplicity of different idioms. That ‘which seeks to represent, indeed, to produce, itself in the evolving of language’ is unveiled as the ‘very nucleus of pure language [*Kern der reinen Sprache*]’ (*SW* 1, 261). ‘Pure’, ‘complete’ language can only be reached through the combination of this multiplicity, by establishing a kinship between different languages. This emerges as the ‘task’ of the translator, who must mediate between languages by supplementing the language of the original text with that of the translation.

Benjamin’s reading was nonetheless not restricted to Baudelaire. Evidence of his continued interest in French works during this early period can additionally be found in a small fragment written on the metaphysics of the Balzacian novel in 1917, but also in a short critique of Molière’s *Le malade imaginaire* from 1918.<sup>9</sup>

### Reading Contemporary France

Following the completion of his doctoral degree in 1919, Benjamin was able to return his focus not only to Baudelaire but several contemporary French authors.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘[A]ll communication of the contents of the mind is language, communication in words being only a particular case of human language and of the justice, poetry, or whatever underlying it or founded on it’ (*SW* 1, 62).

<sup>9</sup> See ‘Balzac’ and ‘Molière: Der eingebildete Kranke’ in *GS* II, pp. 602 and 612.

During a two-month vacation in July with his wife Dora and son Stefan at Iseltwald on Lake Brienz, he read Baudelaire's *Les paradis artificiels* (1860) and Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* (1897) alongside André Gide's *La porte étroite* (1909), on which he would write a review which was never published, work by Charles Péguy and according to Scholem, Georges Sorel's *Réflexions sur la violence* (1908).<sup>10</sup> That summer Benjamin wrote to Ernst Schoen that he was reading 'only French books' and shared his 'great desire to immerse [him]self in the contemporary French intellectual movement' (C, 143–44). Benjamin also detailed his experience of reading the French periodical *Nouvelle Revue Française* and spoke of how his engagement with contemporary French culture and the works of the aforementioned writers had allowed him to see remarkable points of contact with his own interests:

Finally, I am reading with the greatest interest and obvious impartiality what men like Gide have to say about Germany. I believe I am discovering a delightful loyalty among the members of this circle [...]. In the things I have been reading, there is a point of contact for me with some strand of the 'present' ['Fiber' der Gegenwart] that I simply cannot attain vis-à-vis anything German (C, 144).

This 'strand of the "present"' would emerge as a key component in what drove Benjamin to engage repeatedly with the French literary and intellectual landscape throughout the remainder of his life.

The same year that he completed his doctorate, Benjamin also revealed to Schoen that he intended to read the work of Ernst Robert Curtius, more specifically, *Die literarischen Wegbereiter des neuen Frankreich* (1919), which aimed to bring

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<sup>10</sup> Scholem, p. 212. Cf. *GB II*, pp. 101 and 127 for indicators that he did not read the Sorel book until early 1921.

new intellectual and literary French currents to a German readership.<sup>11</sup> The book included translations of work by Gide, Romain Rolland, Paul Claudel and Charles Péguy. Additionally, it featured essays such as ‘Zum Bilde Frankreichs’ and ‘Deutsch-französische Kulturprobleme’ where Curtius laments the disappearance of a youthful generation and the spirit of cultural exchange which took place before World War I. Curtius — a literary scholar and critic, who would eventually publish *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948), which alongside Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1946) is now considered one of the most important literary studies of the twentieth century — was to establish a reputation as one of the more prominent German Francophiles and translators.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore noteworthy that prior to Benjamin’s departure from academia and the beginning of his career as a translator and critic of French literature and culture, he was already following the developments of contemporary French literary currents as well as showing an awareness for the German critics active in this field. Indeed, as early as 1919, when he was still a doctoral student, Benjamin was keeping close track of France’s literary production.

## 1.2. EXIT FROM THE ACADEMY — A FRANCOPHILE IN WEIMAR

### A Change of Direction

The year 1921 would be almost fully devoted to Benjamin’s completion of the Baudelaire translation. The poet Ernst Blass had forwarded samples of Benjamin’s translations to his publisher Richard Weissbach in late 1920. Weissbach was known for producing the journal *Die Argonauten* and was so impressed with Benjamin’s

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<sup>11</sup> See *C*, pp. 154–155.

<sup>12</sup> Almost a decade later, Benjamin recounts his first meeting with Curtius in a letter to Marcel Brion. See *GB III*, p. 335.

work that he would offer him the opportunity to develop his own literary journal.<sup>13</sup> The surviving correspondence from this period, within the context of Benjamin's remarkably well-preserved archive, is surprisingly scarce. For this reason, his exchanges with Weissbach are some of the only remaining records of his literary activity during the first half of 1922.<sup>14</sup> What they reveal is the beginning of a fascinating shift from the world of the Romantics to the European avant-garde. In early 1919 whilst residing in Switzerland, Benjamin had already made the acquaintance of dada pioneer Hugo Ball who would introduce him to film-maker Hans Richter. Richter, in turn, would later present Benjamin to a group of artists in Berlin, which included former dadaist Raoul Hausmann, constructivist László Moholy-Nagy and young architect Mies van der Rohe. The group frequently met in Richter's studio or in cafés around Berlin where animated discussions on the new directions for European art took place.

In the years between 1919 and 1925, Benjamin was able to complete five significant works which, rather unconventionally for his career, were all published in his lifetime. Along with his dissertation, he wrote 'Kritik der Gewalt' ['Critique of Violence', 1921],<sup>15</sup> 'Die Wahlverwandtschaften' ['Elective Affinities', 1922], the aforementioned 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' (1923) as well as his only published critical study *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [*The Origin of German Trauerspiel*, 1925], which he completed to secure academic status as well as his father's approval and continued financial support. These works are all representative

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<sup>13</sup> The journal, entitled *Angelus Novus*, was fated to be one of Benjamin's projects that would never make it to press.

<sup>14</sup> See *GB* II, letters from 5.2.1922, 20.2.1922, 16.4.1922, 18.4.1922, 3.5.1922, 26.5.1922, 1.6.1922 and 30.6.1922.

<sup>15</sup> 'Kritik der Gewalt', the only work not focused on literature or language at this stage, is suggestive of Benjamin's increasing political awareness which he would further develop in his writings influenced by Marx. See *GS* II, pp. 179–203.

of a period when Benjamin was trying to shape his thought to pre-existing academic tradition. However, it was clear that he did not feel at home within the formal requirements of academia, his areas of interest being at odds with what was expected from the university system. Yet even during this time, his thoughts had gravitated towards France. In a letter to his friend Hugo von Hofmannsthal, he reveals that his ‘plan for the [*Trauerspiel*] habilitation thesis had originally been to elucidate both the German *Trauerspiel* and the French tragic drama in terms of their contrastive nature’ (C, 315). Several years following the submission of the habilitation, Benjamin considers revisiting this original idea by potentially ‘writing a book on French tragedy as a counterpart to [his] *Trauerspiel* book’ (ibid.). Such statements reveal that Benjamin’s early interest in French literature was more than a mere pastime and that his work from this period had started to assume a comparative element which would be of critical relevance for his future writing processes.

The rejection of Benjamin’s habilitation thesis in 1925 can be identified as a major departure point for the content and style of his writing. Before 1924, Benjamin had only written one piece relating to contemporary culture, namely an unpublished essay on author Paul Scheerbart in 1919.<sup>16</sup> This decisive shift from the more antiquated world of German literary tradition to the multifaceted diversity of contemporary culture in Europe and the Soviet Union is in many ways remarkable. Benjamin was a regular reader of detective novels as well as an enthusiastic collector of current children’s literature. Yet, despite being an avid consumer of contemporary culture and literature he had never formally cast his critical gaze upon them. Benjamin’s failed career as an academic gave him the opportunity — but equally the financial impetus — to engage with more alternative topics and experiment with

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<sup>16</sup> See ‘Paul Scheerbart: Lesabéndio’ in *GS II*, pp. 618–620.

form.<sup>17</sup> The period from the mid 1920s up until the early 1930s can be viewed as his most creative period of writing, when he would turn away from the denser theoretical formulations of his earlier career to embrace the faster pace of contemporary cultural events and Weimar journalism.

### The Academic System

In *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy*, Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick state that during the 1920s and up until the early 1930s, ‘German intellectuals were seized by the question of historical discontinuity’.<sup>18</sup> They point out that despite this ‘crisis’, which resulted in the departure from traditional thought, ‘patterns of ideology and ideas inherited from the *Kaiserreich*’ still persisted.<sup>19</sup> In fact, they argue that the ‘radical’ artistic and literary movements associated with Weimar culture ‘had deep roots within the *Kaiserreich*’.<sup>20</sup> Expressionism, cubism and abstractionism can all be pinpointed as well-established movements before the war, which would lay the groundwork ‘for extension and revision by both dadaism and *Neue Sachlichkeit*’ throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>21</sup>

Within German universities, there was a contradictory shift of embracing these innovations whilst simultaneously clinging to the academic customs of historical legacy.<sup>22</sup> The University of Frankfurt was founded in 1914 with the help of

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin described the need for a radical departure from the habilitation thesis in a letter to Scholem: ‘this project marks the end for me — I would not have it be the beginning for any money in the world’ (C, 261).

<sup>18</sup> Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick, ‘Introduction: Weimar Thought: Continuity and Crisis’ in *Weimar Thought: A Contested Legacy*, ed. by Peter E. Gordon and John P. McCormick (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 1–11 (p. 5).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

donations from wealthy banker families such as the Warburgs. It stood apart from the older institutions which Benjamin had frequented in Heidelberg, Freiburg, Munich and Berlin and quickly became a mecca for alternative and experimental intellectual movements. Benjamin's only hope for a career in academia rested in this institution. Nevertheless, his repeated efforts to establish himself there and find a sponsor for his habilitation remained fruitless. To gain the status of full professor, one had to endure the status of the *Dozent* for many years, whose salary depended on the fees paid by the students who showed up to lectures. To survive in these conditions, one was therefore more often than not dependent upon the external financial help of friends and family members. Max Weber, in a 1917 lecture entitled 'Wissenschaft als Beruf' ('Science as a Vocation'), observed that this factor made the professional advancements of an assistant lecturer subject to corruption and prejudice, stating that he knew 'of hardly any other career on earth where chance plays such a role'.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, Benjamin had previously done himself no favours in his efforts to gain recognition for his work from his academic peers. His 1922 essay on *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* had directly criticized scholar and poet Friedrich Gundolf's book on Goethe (*GB I*, 158). By levelling his critique at Gundolf, Benjamin had indirectly launched an attack on the *George-Kreis*. Although Gundolf was by no means an academic, his contributions to the study of Goethe's heritage had attracted scholarly attention.<sup>24</sup> Looking back on his habilitation thesis, Benjamin would later note that it

was the test case for just how far strict adherence to purely [*echte*] academic research

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<sup>23</sup> As cited by Gordon and McCormick, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> See Friedrich Gundolf, *Goethe* (Paderborn: Salzwasser Verlag, 2013).

methods lead a person away from the contemporary stance of the bourgeois and scholarly enterprise. This is borne out by the fact that not a single German academician has deigned to review it (C, 371–72).

Benjamin's intellectual approaches clearly were not suited to either the German academic or bourgeois literary establishments. He was vehemently aware that such explicit oppositions placed him outside of 'academe' in addition to 'the monuments which Gundolf or Ernst Bertram ha[d] erected' (C, 371). So, it would be within this competitive and rather unscrupulous environment that Benjamin would fail to find footing as an academic, making his case a little less uncommon than it is often portrayed.

#### **Weimar Journalism — *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Die Literarische Welt***

The changes prevalent within German academic institutions in the 1920s were also reflected in the contents of the journals and newspapers of the time. Benjamin was in this sense fortunate that his transition to public platforms for his writing was concurrent with the Weimar Republic mass media boom. In the city of Berlin alone, several thousand periodicals would appear every month. Two publications which regularly featured Benjamin's work were the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Die Literarische Welt*.

Benjamin's relationship with Siegfried Kracauer gave him backstage access to the editorial workings of the feuilleton sections of the left-leaning *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Kracauer had turned away from a career as an architect to pursue journalism, establishing himself as a significant contributor to the *Frankfurter Zeitung* with its focus on the shifting intellectual identities of Germany's period of cultural crisis. As well as acting as the editor for film and literature from 1922 up until 1933, Kracauer regularly contributed his own work. From 1924, the



*Frankfurter Zeitung* was under the direction of Benno Reifenberg who would build its reputation as ‘the most highly regarded literary section in the Weimar Republic’.<sup>25</sup> The feuilleton section of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* has retrospectively come to be known as a panorama of its time. It would publish writings and excerpts by writers such as Brecht, Döblin, Egon Erwin Kisch, Musil and Roth.

Another periodical Benjamin forged a continuous working relationship with was *Die Literarische Welt*, edited and managed by Willy Haas and financially backed by the Rowohlt Verlag. Haas, a film critic from Prague who had only recently moved to Berlin, was not an obvious choice for the position but his enthusiasm for the writers of the period made it a respected source for those within the industry.<sup>26</sup> His intimate relations with writers would also give him privileged access to certain materials; one of his friends was close to Joyce, another was able to get his hands on an unpublished Proust manuscript. The journal took its French equivalent *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* (set up by Éditions Larousse in 1922) as a model to discuss pressing issues within literary circles. In his retrospective memoir, Haas recalled its unexpected success: ‘its opinions were respected and cited, this journal was a factor of German intellectual life in this period, and as I have now begun to realize, a rather important factor’.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1926 and 1929, *Die Literarische Welt* published an average of around thirty contributions by Benjamin a year, many of which would come to be known as significant milestones within his career. Benjamin received regular commissions from Haas on French writers, yet despite his initial excitement, he soon

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<sup>25</sup> Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997), p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Willy Haas, *Die Literarische Welt: Lebenserinnerungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1983), p. 158.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

felt that the whole project was not up to the critical standard he had envisioned:

I had originally greeted the appearance of this journal with joy, until I rapidly made the realization that it was generally not intended for serious criticism. I am not unaware of the editorial and journalistic necessities that dictate a place in such a weekly for light and lightest content [*Leichtem und Leichtestem*]. But precisely for this reason, the weightier material should be measured with twice the consideration — and not just in terms of its column space (*GB III*, 116).

This remark is a reminder that despite his involvement in the press, Benjamin would nevertheless be sceptical of its efficiency as a critical medium. Benjamin never achieved official editorial status with either periodical, amongst other reasons because there was an obvious rivalry between the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and the *Literarische Welt*, but also since his specialization in matters of French literature potentially strayed into the territory of Reifenberg's interests, who would later become a Parisian correspondent for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Despite the paper publishing around fifteen of Benjamin's pieces a year in the early 1930s, he was therefore somewhat still dependent on Kracauer's goodwill.

In 1927, Benjamin wrote to Scholem that although he had not quite achieved his goal of becoming 'the foremost critic of German literature', he had nonetheless managed to carve 'out a reputation for [him]self in Germany [...] of modest proportions' (*C*, 359). In the same letter, he also echoed his aforementioned frustrations that literary criticism was no longer 'considered a serious genre in Germany' (*ibid.*). Benjamin's desire to build his reputation as critic was thus intimately tied to his ambition to 'recreate criticism as a genre' (*ibid.*). This objective was undoubtedly spurred on by his engagements with publications of the European avant-garde.

### Marxism and the Avant-garde

The question that most critics seek to address when looking at the ‘post-habilitation’ period of Benjamin’s life is what it was exactly, aside from academic failure, that pushed Benjamin from the German Romantics to contemporary art and culture, from sober criticism to a new genre of creative criticism, but also more importantly to a wider European focus? Often the answer is found in his political orientations as this period was also marked by a heightened interest in Marxism.<sup>28</sup> In ‘Walter Benjamin and the Avant-Garde’, Jennings proposes an alternative explanation with which I am broadly in agreement. He speaks of the ‘different picture’ that begins to emerge of Benjamin in 1923, ‘though this is a picture that can be read only in the mirror of other people’s letters and recollections’.<sup>29</sup> This change was linked to his contact with the aforementioned group of predominantly German-speaking intellectuals headed by Richter, known as the ‘G-Group’, an artistic collective fusing the avant-garde movements of Bauhaus, de Stijl, dada and Russian constructivism. The resulting journal, *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, would be the first arts publication with a focus on architecture. Five issues appeared between 1923 and 1926, in which ‘the manifesto as a form of thought, a form of presentation, and — as it had been for the dadaists and would be for the surrealists — as an important avant-garde genre, permeate[d] [its] entire production’.<sup>30</sup> As Jennings notes, most art historians have viewed the period between the end of Berlin dada in 1920 and the emergence of

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<sup>28</sup> The influence of Georg Lukács, but equally his relationship with Asja Lacis has been well documented. Cf. Michael Löwy, ‘A Historical Materialism with Romantic Splinters: Walter Benjamin and Karl Marx’ in *(Mis)readings of Marx in Continental Philosophy*, ed. by Jernej Habjan and Jessica Whyte (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 19–33.

<sup>29</sup> Michael W. Jennings, ‘Walter Benjamin and the Avant-Garde’ in *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 21.

<sup>30</sup> Detlef Mertins and Michael W. Jennings, *G: An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film 1923–1926* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), p. 3.

Parisian surrealism from 1924 ‘as a kind of interregnum’, when these years ‘in fact saw the rise and, not infrequently, the fall of a number of important avant-garde coalitions’.<sup>31</sup> The years 1922 and 1923 were therefore in actuality ‘watershed years’ which witnessed the creation of a number of internationally collaborative journals focused on experimental form.<sup>32</sup>

Jennings claims that it was Benjamin’s association with the G-group and the ensuing discussions with its members which would lead him to ‘discover his new thematic focuses: industrial art; architecture; photography; mass culture; and, above all, the emergence of startlingly new cultural forms in France and Russia’.<sup>33</sup> This statement may be a little far-fetched, especially since Benjamin’s interest in architecture (Scheerbart) but also French contemporary culture did predate the ‘Copernican’ turn in his writing.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, it is entirely possible that Benjamin’s immersion in the current events of the German avant-garde influenced his form and style, but also exposed him to a type of ‘proto-surrealism’.

*Einbahnstraße* can be considered the leading example of this influence of ‘G-ism’, not only in terms of its aesthetic but also its alignment with the political concerns of the avant-garde: the fusion of art with Marxist critique. It is certain that the text holds many a key to the later developments of Benjamin’s methodology as a writer.

### *Einbahnstraße* and the *kleine Form*

In December 1924, Benjamin had mentioned his intention of creating a *plaquette* (‘brochure’) for friends, in which he planned to collect his anecdotes, witticisms,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Jennings, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> As far back as 1912, Benjamin was taking courses such as ‘The Philosophy of Contemporary Culture’ and ‘Style and Technique in the Graphic Arts’ whilst studying at Freiburg.

observations and dreams, a project that would result in *Einbahnstraße*.<sup>35</sup> Around this time, André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* was published, and Benjamin had translated a short text by Tristan Tzara on photography for the aforementioned periodical *G*.<sup>36</sup> Despite not remaining a *plaquette* or possessing the dream-like quality of surrealist writing, *OWS* bears the marks of the movement that had introduced Benjamin to the subconscious world of the everyday object, but equally the complexity of the person perceiving it. Benjamin would soon dismiss the definition of 'aphorisms' and the use of the *kleine Form* in *OWS* would eventually develop into *Denkbilder* ('thought-images') — a term inspired by poet Stefan George — which in their combination of philosophical analysis with concrete imagery would produce 'a signature critical mimesis' and become a hallmark of Benjamin's analytical apparatus as a writer.<sup>37</sup>

The first excerpt of *OWS* was published in the *Berliner Tageblatt* in 1925; from this point on it would continue to appear in a steady stream of instalments in an impressive variety of German newspapers such as the *Erste Morgenblatt*, the *Magdeburgische Zeitung*, the *Vossische Zeitung* and the aforementioned *Frankfurter Zeitung*, but also the Amsterdam-based international revue *i-10*, up until its official publication in 1928.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore of relevance to note that Benjamin's

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<sup>35</sup> Henceforth abbreviated as *OWS*.

<sup>36</sup> See Benjamin, 'Tristan Tzara: Die Photographie von der Kehrseite' in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Supplement 1: Kleinere Übersetzungen*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999), pp. 9–12.

<sup>37</sup> Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> For a full publication history, see Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlaß, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 8: Einbahnstraße*, ed. by Detlev Schöttker (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 259. Certain selected texts from *OWS* were also featured in *Das Buch der Träume* [*The Book of Dreams*] in 1928, published by Rowohlt and edited by Ignaz Jeżower. Dedicated to Alfred Döblin and running to 700 pages, this weighty anthology arguably popularized modern dream interpretation but also contributed to solidifying the dream as an important cultural and aesthetic phenomenon.

experimentation with formal features was reflective of the feuilleton culture of the 1920s.<sup>39</sup> Many prominent authors shaped their writing to accommodate the requirements of the feuilleton; the *kleine Form* soon becoming synonymous with forms of criticism and cultural commentary in Weimar Germany.<sup>40</sup> But the formal features of the feuilleton would in turn also be linked to the rise of *flâneurism* in Germany as can be gleaned from author and artist Ernst Penzoldt's description of its subject matter:

The term ['kleine Form'] delineates the diverse literary genre of smaller prose pieces, which are hard to categorize and are usually at home 'below the line' ['unter dem Strich']: poetic observations of the smaller and bigger world, the charm of everyday experiences, fond strolls, whimsical encounters, moods, warm-hearted chatter, glosses and the like.<sup>41</sup>

In a similar vein, Friedrich Sieburg characterized the feuilleton section of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as follows:

Roaring narrative personalities, genius melancholiacs, strong-minded hair-splitters who carried out their intricate craft in the sociological currents of the time, believers and sceptics, scoffers and enthusiasts, all were placed at the service of a feature section that was

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<sup>39</sup> Publications such as Joseph Fürnkäs' *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis: Walter Benjamin, Weimarer Einbahnstraße und Pariser Passagen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988) identify *OWS* as an important link to the formalistic features of the *Passagenarbeit* without referencing the context of Weimar journalism.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Jennings, 'Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Weimar Criticism' in Gordon and McCormick, pp. 202–219 (p. 208).

<sup>41</sup> Ernst Penzoldt, 'Lob der kleinen Form', as cited by Wilmont Haacke in *Handbuch des Feuilletons* (Emsdetten: Lechte, 1951), p. 205. The publication *Straßenrausch, Flânerie und kleine Form: Versuch zur Literaturgeschichte bis 1933* (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 1989) by Eckhardt Köhn looks at this relationship in more detail.

in truth a panorama of the time.<sup>42</sup>

The section of *Einbahnstraße* entitled ‘Tankstelle’ (‘filling station’) offers a reflection on this ‘new’ format:

Significant literary effectiveness can come into being only in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that fit its influence in active communities better than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book — in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment (*SW* 1, 444).

Here we start to see Benjamin privileging the fragmented and ruptured over the finalized and complete, which was entirely in line with his more recently formed political and artistic convictions, but also his earlier grounding in German Romanticism. In the face of the destructive character of capitalism, nothing ‘whole’ may persist. Confronted with this world, the critic is no longer able to assume a position of distance and contemplation since a singular standpoint cannot encapsulate the nature of contemporary experience. In several of *OWS*’s titled ‘sections’, Benjamin discusses the current state of cultural criticism as well as the role of the critic within society who is cast as ‘a strategist in the literary struggle’ (*SW* 2:1, 459). The ‘prompt language’ Benjamin cites is indicative of the language of billboards, posters, signs, shop windows and other forms of advertisement, which an individual traversing the city may encounter. The writer must therefore adapt their methods and language to accommodate this development. The fact that *OWS* was pieced together from articles previously released in journals is indicative of Benjamin’s working conditions as a writer having changed. Kracauer in the essay

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<sup>42</sup> As cited in Dagmar Bussiek, *Benno Reifenberg 1892–1970: Eine Biographie* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011), p. 175.

‘Über den Schriftsteller’ [‘On the Writer’, 1931] made the comment that ‘journalist and author, under the pressure of economic and social relations, can be perceived to practically switch roles’.<sup>43</sup> In many ways, the feuilleton emerged as an escape from the new journalistic demands made on the writer, Kracauer claiming that ‘the task of the new author’ was to ‘establish the feuilleton as an enlightened space of resistance within the industrialized norms of media coverage’.<sup>44</sup> As Michael Bienert notes, the journalism of this period displayed a particular awareness for these pertinent changes: ‘The cultural criticism of the 1920s observed the expansion of the media industry and its effects on the perception and consciousness of the masses with concerned attention’.<sup>45</sup>

Although he was based in Berlin at the time, the roots of *OWS* are decisively French, Benjamin having claimed that Mallarmé was one of the first to incorporate the graphic tensions of advertising into his written work (*SW* 1, 456). The text also contains traces of Aragon’s *Le paysan de Paris*,<sup>46</sup> where reproductions of advertising leaflets, bulletin board posters and street signs simply become part of the text as well as André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), in which photographs of faces, local spaces, and objects replace textual descriptions. In the revised preface to *Anicet ou le Panorama, roman* (1946), Aragon would recall: ‘We considered everything written to be an advertisement, or propaganda as one would say today. Breton called religion an advert for the sky’.<sup>47</sup> This phenomenon is recorded *OWS* in the section ‘Attested Auditor of Books’:

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<sup>43</sup> As cited by Michael Bienert in *Die eingebildete Metropole: Berlin im Feuilleton der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1993), p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Aragon’s *Le paysan de Paris* will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 (pp. 104–161).

<sup>47</sup> Louis Aragon, *Anicet ou le panorama, roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 20.



The newspaper is read more in the vertical than in the horizontal plane, while film and advertisement force the printed word entirely into the dictatorial perpendicular. And before a contemporary finds his way clear to opening a book, his eyes have been exposed to such a blizzard of changing, colourful, conflicting letters that the chance of his penetrating the archaic stillness of the book are slight (*SW* 1, 456).

Not unlike the metropolitan streets, the pages of the press had been invaded by the language and visual aesthetics of commerce and advertising. What's more, this excerpt echoes a concern which would occupy Benjamin for some time and find an outlet in later essays such as 'Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nicolai Lesskows' ['The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', 1936/37], in which he laments the loss of the archaic figure of the storyteller, partially due to the influx of information from mass media sources. It is therefore particularly fitting that Benjamin was so vocal about this issue in *OWS*, since the 1920s would see a substantial increase in street advertising with the intention of distracting and seducing the masses. In Weimar Germany, street media included *Schaufenster* and *Schaukasten* (display windows and cases), *Litfaßsäulen* (electrically lit advertising columns) as well as *Normaluhren* (clock-towers lit from within). These new features employed in Weimar advertising, as Janet Ward argues, were strategies specifically devised to displace 'the spectator's literal and psychological perception' resulting in an environment defined by 'the shocks targeted at the psyche of the modern city-dweller'.<sup>48</sup>

In 1924, the same year Benjamin was working on *OWS*, he had written a letter to Scholem underlining the change in his research focus, where he claims that 'the literary exegesis of German literature [would] now back take a back seat' (C,

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<sup>48</sup> Janet Ward, *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 92.

258). 1924 was also the year that Benjamin left for Capri, where amongst other things he worked on a translation of Balzac's supernatural novella *Ursule Mirouët* (1841) which had been commissioned by Franz Hessel whilst he was an editor at the Rowohlt Verlag. Simultaneously, Benjamin was developing a growing enthusiasm for the contemporary French authors he was in the process of discovering, which included not only the leading lights Gide, Valéry, and Proust but also Vildrac, Duhamel, Radiguet, and Giraudoux. Several small commissions for translation work marked the spring and summer of 1925, the most challenging being the translation of Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the eventual fourth volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu*.<sup>49</sup> Benjamin also accepted the equally demanding translation of prose poem 'Anabase' by French writer Saint-John Perse (the pseudonym of Alexis Léger) thanks to his recommendation by Hofmannsthal to publisher Insel Verlag.

After Benjamin completed his thesis on Baroque drama, 1925 marked the shift to an intensive engagement with French literature, theory and culture, but also the turn towards Marx's writings, a point which would be decisive for the theoretical and methodological ground of the 'Parisian' production cycle, resulting in the *Passagenarbeit* (C, 322). The extent of this interest would first fully come to fruition towards the end of the 1920s in the essay 'Der Surrealismus: Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz'.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> In 1925, Benjamin would also embark on a collaborative translation of Proust's *Le côté de Guermantes* (1921) with Hessel.

<sup>50</sup> Henceforth referred to as 'Surrealism'.

### 1.3. FRENCH SURREALISM — TOWARDS A REZEPTIONSGESCHICHTE

#### Surrealism in the German Press

In letters dating back to 1924<sup>51</sup> one can detect Benjamin's devoted preoccupation with French contemporary texts and from around 1926, a quarter of the work he wrote was dedicated to topics relating to French literature and culture. Throughout the year 1926 Benjamin spent several months in Paris and would return in April 1927 to complete further research at the Bibliothèque Nationale.<sup>52</sup> The 'Surrealism' essay was written as a result of these research trips, where Benjamin was already diligently gathering content for the *Passagenarbeit*. Indeed, a collaborative article on the Parisian passages was planned with Hessel around this time but never made it to press.<sup>53</sup> The 'Surrealism' essay, in many respects, functioned as the construction site for the ideas that Benjamin intended to develop in his project on the arcades. Following the essay's publication, he would write that it 'contained some of the prolegomena to the [AP]' (C, 352).<sup>54</sup>

Benjamin's correspondence from this period repeatedly conveys his enthusiasm for the intellectual developments in France. In mid-1927 he wrote to Hofmannsthal to share his ambition 'to get close to the French spirit in its modern form':

Given my activities and interests, I feel that, in Germany, I am completely isolated among those of my generation. In addition to all this, there is something else. In France individual phenomena are engaged in something that also engages me — among authors, Giraudoux and especially Aragon; among movements, surrealism (C, 315).

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. *GB* II, p. 434.

<sup>52</sup> During his extended stay in Paris, Benjamin also took French 'conversation lessons' with a student from the *École Normale Supérieure*. See *C*, p. 299.

<sup>53</sup> See *GS* V, p. 1341.

<sup>54</sup> This premonitory quality of the 'Surrealism' essay in relation to the *AP* will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2.

The origins of Benjamin's engagement with surrealist texts can be traced back to 1925, shortly after the publication of Breton's first manifesto.<sup>55</sup> The first two chapters of Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* ('Préface à une mythologie moderne' and 'Le Passage de l'Opéra') were published in 1924 in the *Revue européenne*.

Benjamin's German translations of four passages from 'Le Passage de l'Opéra' would then appear on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> June 1928 in the *Literarische Welt*.<sup>56</sup> Prefacing his translation, Benjamin wrote a note to readers which already announced the 'Surrealism' essay:

Three or four years ago, Louis Aragon and André Breton founded the surrealist movement. Poets such as Benjamin Péret, Paul Éluard, Antonin Artaud gathered around them, painters such as Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico were close to them. *We will be returning to an extensive discussion of this movement, which manages to express the unsettling nature of both reality and language* (GS Suppl. I, 17, my emphasis).

Karlheinz Barck claims this note to be one of the first public references to the movement.<sup>57</sup> However, prior to this, Aragon and the surrealists had caught the attention of several German intellectuals. The first German critic to have discussed Aragon's work was Otto Grautoff, friend of Thomas Mann, who worked as a translator and was the president of the *Deutsch-Französische Gesellschaft*. Beyond an intellectual interest in French culture, Grautoff was set

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<sup>55</sup> In a letter to Scholem from July 1925 Benjamin mentions 'the questionable books of the surrealists' (GB III, p. 61).

<sup>56</sup> See 'Don Juan der Schuhputzer', 'Briefmarken', 'Damentoilette' and 'Café Certâ' in *GS Suppl. I*, pp. 16–33. Benjamin had reported to Fritz Radt on 21.7.1927 that he was 'now writing about Aragon' (GB III, 275).

<sup>57</sup> Karlheinz Barck 'Der Sürrealismus: Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz' in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), pp. 386–389 (p. 389).

on developing the social and political relations between both nations.<sup>58</sup> In his regular column in *Die Literatur*, he positively reviewed Aragon's *Le libertinage* (a collection of his novellas and essays) in 1924.<sup>59</sup> That same year, Curtius also published a review praising Aragon's talent, which would later be reprinted in *La Revue nouvelle* under the title 'Louis Aragon par E. R. Curtius'.<sup>60</sup> Curtius then wrote an article on surrealism entitled 'Der Überrealismus', which would be published in *Die Neue Rundschau* in 1926.<sup>61</sup> Whilst Curtius had praised Aragon's elegant style, fantasy and charm, he was rather dismissive of the movement in general. Despite these select few pieces, no German writers would go to the same lengths as Benjamin who saw great promise not only in Aragon's work, but in the essence of the surrealist movement as a whole.

### The German Observer

The 'Surrealism' essay appeared in three successive parts in *Die Literarische Welt* in the first two weeks of February 1929.<sup>62</sup> The first part was published in a special issue entitled 'Das moderne Frankreich' ['Modern France'], which was prefaced with the following editorial remark:

This issue is not an attempt to offer a complete overview of the dense and complex field of

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<sup>58</sup> The society's publication the *Deutsch-französische Rundschau*, the sister publication to the Parisian *Revue d'Allemagne*, appeared from 1928 until 1933.

<sup>59</sup> *Die Literatur*, no. 25 (1924), p. 294. See Wolfgang Babilas, 'Notice sur Aragon surréaliste en Allemagne' (1997) <<https://www.uni-muenster.de/LouisAragon/artikel/Allemagne.htm>>.

<sup>60</sup> *La Revue nouvelle*, no. 14 (1926), pp. 7–9. See Babilas. Benjamin wouldn't meet Curtius until mid-February 1928; he had, however, been following his essays on contemporary French novelists since 1919. Cf. Chapter 1 (pp. 48–49).

<sup>61</sup> *Die Neue Rundschau*, no. 37 (1926), pp. 156–162. See Babilas.

<sup>62</sup> Exact dates were the 1<sup>st</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> February 1929. Benjamin was rather dissatisfied with the essay in this format. In a letter to Alfred Cohn, he wrote: 'If you are interested in the essay on Surrealism, the best thing for you to do is to wait until it has been published in its entirety and to read it then' (C, 345).

contemporary French literature. Our intention was to provisionally trace several reference points and connections within French literature (as well as those that exist between German and French literature).<sup>63</sup>

Benjamin's essay was not only one of the most elaborate responses to the surrealist movement in the German press, but it also formed part of a distinct brand of comparative literary criticism between France and Germany in the journals of the Weimar Republic.

It is within this comparative framework that the opening paragraphs of Benjamin's 'Surrealism' essay dwell on the idea of the 'German observer' whose critical advantage lies in the fact that intellectual crises have plagued the highly politicized circles of Weimar intellectuals for quite some time.<sup>64</sup> Benjamin's issue with the so-called 'radical' left-wing intelligentsia of the Weimar Republic was that he considered their work to be overly dependent on the 'residual revolutionary reflexes' of the bourgeoisie from a position of 'negativistic repose'.<sup>65</sup> He even went so far as to describe some of his left-wing contemporaries as 'the proletarian mimicry of the decayed bourgeoisie' who used their influence to politicize culture but more for aesthetic value than in the name of social change.<sup>66</sup> The passage reads:

[The German observer] can gauge the energies of the [surrealist] movement. As a German he has long been acquainted with the crisis of the intelligentsia, or, more precisely, with that of the humanistic concept of freedom; and he knows how frantically determined the movement has become to go beyond the stage of eternal discussion [...] he has direct experience of its highly exposed position between an anarchistic Fronde and a revolutionary discipline, and so has no excuse for taking the movement for the 'artistic',

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<sup>63</sup> Willy Haas, 'Commercium et connubium' in *Die Literarische Welt* 5.5 (1929), Berlin, I.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin heavily identified with this figure, describing himself as an 'outsider observer' in relation to the French intellectual scene in correspondence to his friends as early as 1919. See *C*, p. 144.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin, 'Linke Melancholie' ['Leftist Melancholia'] in *GS* III, pp. 279–283 (pp. 280–281).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

‘poetic’ one it superficially appears (*SW* 2:1, 207).

This comment on the national situation is a reminder that Benjamin’s text was originally aimed at a highly localized audience in Berlin. The essential questioning of the surrealist cause was therefore to a wider extent a general criticism of the German left-wing intelligentsia. The image of the observer standing in the valley underlines Benjamin’s frustration that German intellectuals still had not grasped the full extent of the current cultural collapse. In a 1927 piece entitled ‘Verein der Freunde des neuen Rußland – in Frankreich’ [‘Association of Friends of New Russia – in France’], Benjamin had already commented on this difference between France and Germany:

It should not be forgotten that the cultural crisis in France is by far not as advanced as it is here. The precariousness [Problematik] of the intellectual’s situation, which sees a questioning of his right to exist whilst society simultaneously deprives him of the materials he subsists on, is virtually unknown in France (*GS* IV, 486).

The difference in historical development of both countries, what Benjamin terms ‘Niveauunterschiede’, along with the evolving circumstances of European intellectuals, emerges as one of the driving forces in his interest in France (*GS* II, 295). In the ‘Surrealism’ essay, Benjamin therefore makes the statement that the German critic should not simply perceive surrealism as yet another literary movement (‘Clique von Literaten’), but rather, as Breton relates in his manifesto, as an attempt to push the boundaries of poetry to its utmost limits, encompassing ‘demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs [and] forgeries’ (*SW* 2:1, 208). His task as a critic, he thus argued, was precisely ‘to recognize the connections that exist between these [surrealist] works and current, non-literary tendencies’ (*GS* II, 1035).

### ‘Traumkitsch’

Before turning to a closer examination of the ‘Surrealism’ essay, it is necessary to briefly discuss its lesser-known predecessor, a short piece entitled ‘Traumkitsch’ [‘Dreamkitsch’], which Benjamin wrote in 1925 but which did not appear until 1927 in *Die Neue Rundschau* when it was given the title ‘Glosse zum Sürrealismus’ (‘Gloss on Surrealism’). Benjamin was particularly moved by the surrealists’ ability to use language to enter ‘the realm of dreams by conquest, authoritatively and normatively’ (C, 274). ‘Traumkitsch’, the result of his first contact with surrealist writing, is dedicated to a discussion of *Répétitions* (1922) by Paul Éluard but also two texts integral to the origins of the surrealist movement, Aragon’s *Une vague de rêves* (1924) and Breton’s eponymous *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924). This short text constitutes an anticipation of many of the ideas which would later be developed in the ‘Surrealism’ essay and by extension in the *Passagenarbeit* — most notably the transfer of individual dream images to the realm of collective experience.<sup>67</sup>

‘Traumkitsch’ also contains a striking first conception of Benjamin’s dialectical historical method, which would become a founding pillar of his philosophy of history and challenge conventional historiography. In the text, Benjamin wishes to imply that since objects, the physical manifestations of kitsch, have managed to penetrate dreams, then the kitsch we encounter in the everyday world can also be conceived as products of a dream-like state. Not unlike Freud’s psychopathologies, the physical surface and objects of this world are understood as a reflection of the unconscious. As McCole notes, ‘Traumkitsch’ represents one of Benjamin’s ‘first, suggestive sketches of what he saw as a fundamental shift in the

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<sup>67</sup> *GS II* contains a typescript of a series of notes which Benjamin composed between 1928 and 1929, the year of the ‘Surrealism’ essay’s publication. As the editors observe, these notes mark the transitional reflections between ‘Traumkitsch’ and its longer successor. See pp. 1021–1022.



human mode of relating to the object world'.<sup>68</sup> It is therefore a further exemplar of his ability to uniquely decipher the historical developments in the relationship between human perception and experience.

Most importantly, however, 'Traumkitsch' stands out as Benjamin's initial attempt at appropriating several key methods proposed by the surrealists and incorporating them into his own. Paradoxically, Benjamin looked to the surrealists to establish 'a nonpsychological concept of dreamwork', which uses the dream not to uncover individual psychology but rather as a way of generating a collective understanding of our relationship with the world of things.<sup>69</sup> The surrealists converted the manifestations of kitsch in dream images into a tool that permitted them to uncover the energy of archaic forces latent within the structures of contemporary experience:

[The surrealists] seek the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history. The very last, the topmost face on the totem pole, is that of kitsch. It is the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things (*SW* 2:1, 4).

Benjamin notes that the surrealists were especially receptive to the perceptual shifts of modernity. Their experiments were successful precisely because they were attuned to the 'accelerating liquidation of forms and the new relationship between perceptual distance and closeness — which had been anticipated in the medium of art'.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the surrealists' objective was not to create art based on contemplative distance but to process the changes they perceived within the relations to the

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<sup>68</sup> McCole, p. 216.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

energies of the outmoded. In this equation, kitsch, the quintessence of everyday banality, becomes the conduit towards the traces of primordial experience and is instilled with a mythological quality. Benjamin was conscious of the fact that the surrealists were drawn to the psychoanalytic schemata of the dreamwork for its functionality. It is in this respect that Breton asks: ‘Can’t the dream also be used in solving the fundamental questions in life?’<sup>71</sup> As Natalya Lusty states, for the surrealists the dream constitutes ‘a heightened form of perception [that] could be harnessed to artistic, political and everyday experiences and actions’.<sup>72</sup> In *Une vague de rêves*, which predated the release of Breton’s initial manifesto, Aragon made the statement that surrealism took as its ‘starting point’ ‘the rediscovery of the dream, whence it came’.<sup>73</sup> ‘Now’, he writes, ‘the dream is illuminated [s’*éclaire*] by the flash of surrealism and assumes its meaning’.<sup>74</sup> Within the context of Freud and the advances in the field of psychoanalysis, Benjamin contributes to a conversation which began to take the power and agency of the dream more seriously:

The history of the dream remains to be written, and opening up a perspective on this subject would mean decisively overcoming the superstitious belief in natural necessity by means of *historical illumination*. Dreaming has a share in history (*SW* 2:1, 3, my emphasis).

Here following the example of Aragon and Breton, Benjamin first champions a new kind of ‘historical illumination’, an alternative format for critical historiography with

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<sup>71</sup> André Breton, ‘Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)’ in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 1–48, p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Natalya Lusty, ‘Rethinking Historiography and Ethnography: Surrealism’s Intellectual Legacy’, *Intellectual History Review*, 27.3 (2017), 405–418 (p. 408).

<sup>73</sup> Louis Aragon, ‘A Wave of Dreams (1924)’, trans. by Susan de Muth, *Papers of Surrealism*, 1 (2003), 1–12 (p. 7).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

recourse to the configurations of the dream: dreaming is perceived as a valid historically constructed form of experience. Thus, surrealism's dialectic of the dream and awakening provided him with a critical lens through which he could collectively interpret the material experience of modernity. Most significantly, as Tyrus Miller argues, the dream-concept which Benjamin develops as a result becomes 'an hermeneutical tool which cuts across both the Freudian and Marxist problematics eccentrically'.<sup>75</sup> It offers a new conception of history 'beyond its teleological unfolding whilst also promising new kinds of experiences of the present that are nevertheless anchored to the unfulfilled desires of the past'.<sup>76</sup>

In *Une vague de rêves*, Aragon writes:

Nothing can make people [...] understand the true nature of reality, that it is just an experience like any other, that the essence of things is not at all linked to their reality, that there are other experiences that the mind can embrace which are equally fundamental such as chance, illusion, the fantastic, dreams. These different types of experience are brought together and reconciled in one genre, surreality [surréalité].<sup>77</sup>

The ensuing surrealist movement was an attempt to radically change the common perception of the nature of reality. The *Centrale Surréaliste* at 15 rue de Grenelle constituted a 'romantic lodgings for unclassifiable ideas and revolutions in progress'.<sup>78</sup> Whereas Aragon's dream treatise makes no explicit reference to Freud's work, Breton's later manifesto openly acknowledges it while also providing a more structured approach to the dream's utility for artistic practices as well as everyday

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<sup>75</sup> Tyrus Miller, 'From City-Dreams to the Dreaming Collective: Walter Benjamin's Political Dream Interpretation', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 22.6 (1996), 87–111 (p. 91).

<sup>76</sup> Lusty, p. 410.

<sup>77</sup> Aragon, 'A Wave of Dreams (1924)', p. 12.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

life. Yet both Aragon and Breton conceived of the dream as a form of imaginative production freed from the control of the ‘reign of logic’.<sup>79</sup>

It is important to recall that the surrealists were responsible for introducing French intellectuals to the writings of Freud. As Helena Lewis writes in *The Politics of Surrealism*: ‘Freud was almost virtually unknown in France until the surrealists “discovered” him and became fascinated with his theory of dreams’.<sup>80</sup> Freud supposedly felt a slight unease at being associated with a movement drawing upon the unconscious for creative-critical means. Nevertheless, as Margaret Cohen contends, Freud’s interpretation of psychic activity, not unlike the surrealists, owed ‘a great deal to the Romantic exploration of the imagination’ but also most notably to ‘the Romantic interest in the close relation between nonrational mental activity and artistic creativity as well as to Romantic formulations of the sublime’.<sup>81</sup>

### French Intellectual History

Whilst ‘Traumkitsch’ had seen Benjamin rather excited at the prospect of the surrealist endeavour, the ‘Surrealism’ essay marks the next stage in his relationship with the movement. Surrealism’s ‘heroic phase’, which began with Aragon’s *Une vague de rêves*, had passed. As the subtitle ‘The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ suggests, the essay is framed as an attempt to capture a particular moment within the evolution of surrealism. The movement is presented to the reader as a phenomenon in transition, whose weaknesses give Benjamin the opportunity to analyse the crisis of the European intelligentsia. As such, one of its crucial aspects is

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<sup>79</sup> Breton, p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), p. x.

<sup>81</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 58.

a brief history of French cultural politics from the mid nineteenth century to the early 1920s in which the conflicting presences of Aestheticism and Anarchism would challenge the tradition put in place by the nineteenth-century French intellectual orthodoxy.<sup>82</sup> Benjamin accordingly traces the influence of Aestheticism and Anarchism — both primarily defined by the wish for unconditional freedom attained through direct, practical action — within the surrealist movement. The surrealists thus emerge as the ‘conservators’ of this cultural revolution; nevertheless, ‘politically and economically they must always be considered a potential source of sabotage’ (*SW* 2:1, 213). Benjamin’s interest in the history of French intellectual currents was to challenge the stage that surrealism had reached as he was writing the essay:

There is always, in such movements, a moment when the original tension of the secret society must either explode in a matter-of-fact, profane struggle for power and domination, or decay as a public transformation and be transformed. At present, surrealism is in this phase of transformation (*SW* 2:1, 208).

Benjamin’s conception of surrealism’s current ‘phase’ was primarily defined by his engagement with the ideas of Pierre Naville, one of the founders of the movement, who wrote *La révolution et les intellectuels* which was published in 1926.<sup>83</sup> The text, which Naville wrote during his military service, is in essence an attempt to turn surrealism towards the Marxist cause as he accused the group of neglecting their political objectives for the sake of more trivial pursuits. It voices the author’s hope

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. McCole, p. 221.

<sup>83</sup> In the notes for the essay from 1928–1929, Benjamin writes that he ‘must read Naville’s book’ (*GS* II, 1021). Naville’s text was then listed in the bibliography of the original press publication. See *GS* II, p. 1042. There is no known evidence to suggest that Naville read or knew about Benjamin’s piece.

that surrealism, despite its Romantic nature, would be able to move from revolt through to revolution.<sup>84</sup> The text would unsurprisingly provoke tensions within the group and eventually result in Naville's departure. Benjamin is therefore echoing Naville when he writes:

But will the surrealists succeed in fusing the experience of freedom with that other revolutionary experience, [...] with the constructive, dictatorial experience of the revolution? In short — binding revolt to revolution? (*GS II*, 1026).

### **Intoxication as Profane Illumination**

Benjamin, in his own critique of the movement, took Naville's ideas even further in stating:

To win the energies of intoxication [Kräfte des Rausches] for the revolution — this is the project on which surrealism focuses in all its books and enterprises. This it may call its most particular task. For them it is not enough that, as we know, an intoxication component lives in every revolutionary act. This component is identical with the anarchic. *But to place the accent exclusively on it would be to subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance. Added to this is an adequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication* (*SW 2:1*, 215–216, my emphasis).

He thereby implies that the issue with surrealism is not necessarily its insistence on a radical concept of freedom (as suggested by Naville), but rather that its notion of *Rausch* is undialectical and thereby unproductive. In other words, as phrased by

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<sup>84</sup> The text was equally prompted by the manifesto *La révolution d'abord et toujours* (1925), which was jointly written and signed by the surrealists and the members of *Clarté* in response to France's involvement in the Rif War. *Clarté* was a journal originally founded in 1919 in support of the Russian Revolution. From 1926 until 1927, Naville was its editor.

McCole, the surrealists would have to ‘unearth the ambiguities latent in the heroic phase of the movement, the discovery of intoxication and revolt’.<sup>85</sup> As the inheritors of Aestheticism, the surrealists were faced with the challenge of overcoming its negative attributes. Within Benjamin’s critique of surrealism thus lies a critique of Aestheticism itself. Furthermore, Benjamin’s engagement with the surrealists gave him the opportunity to return to many of the issues he had previously encountered in the German *Frühromantik*, prompting him to ‘radicalize’ his own critique of Romanticism.<sup>86</sup> In this context, Michael Löwy sees surrealism as a uniquely striking example ‘of a Romantic current in the twentieth century’.<sup>87</sup> The movement had ‘in the most radical fashion’ inherited ‘the revolutionary dimension of Romanticism’.<sup>88</sup>

Consequently, Benjamin argues that the surrealists’ strong inclination towards certain characteristics of Aestheticism could potentially hinder their anarchic aspirations. Only by tuning into the history of revolt would they be able to lay the groundwork for a successful revolution. Their strong advocacy of states of intoxication held the risk of them falling into ‘the humid backroom of spiritualism’ (*SW* 2:1, 209). Benjamin was sceptical as to the purpose of their intoxicated practice which had initially defined the group’s experimental activities at the *Centrale Surréaliste*.<sup>89</sup> Instead of targeting the realms of distant surrealist imaginaries, he proposed they shift their focus to the concrete everyday:

For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday

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<sup>85</sup> McCole, p. 223.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>87</sup> Löwy, *Morning Star*, p. 29.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Julia Kelley, ‘The Bureau of Surrealist Research’ in *Twilight Visions: Surrealism and Paris*, ed. by Therese Lichtenstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 79–101.

world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday [...]. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flaneur, are types of illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane (*SW* 2:1, 216).

In *OWS*, Benjamin had previously challenged the notion of intoxication in reference to the *Erfahrung* and *Rausch* which once characterized the ritual relationship between man and the cosmos, but that had disappeared with the advent of modern, urbanized society.<sup>90</sup> The surrealist movement encouraged Benjamin to rediscover this relationship, but in evolutionary form. This is how the ‘revolutionary energies that appear in the “outmoded”’ gain their importance, since the reworking of the past opens up the possibilities of a future in the present (*SW* 2:1, 210). The surrealist category of the ‘outmoded’ functions as an expression of hitherto latent and unfulfilled futures that conjure up an alternative temporal structure of modern experience. It is this conception of time, which subverts the notions of historical temporalization and progress, that would facilitate Benjamin to develop the notion of a *Jetztzeit* (‘now-time’). Indeed, the ‘experience’ of the ‘now’ – a kind of ‘avant-garde experience’, prefigures the ‘now’ of recognizability which stands at the forefront of his later work.<sup>91</sup>

This is where Benjamin’s conception of the term ‘profane illumination’ (understood as banal) takes its full effect. The ‘true, creative overcoming of religious illumination certainly does not lie in narcotics’, he argues, rather it ‘*resides in a profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson’ (*SW* 2:1, 209, my

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<sup>90</sup> See *SW* 1, p. 487.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 150.



emphasis). The surrealist equivalent of intoxication — previously conceived of as ‘historical illumination’ in ‘Traumkitsch’ — is thereby designated as a ‘profane illumination’. It stands in contrast to the more primitive and archaic intoxication of ancient times and can be most clearly traced in the writings of Breton and Aragon.

According to Richard Wolin, this ‘profane’ illumination is not unlike religious illumination, in that it ‘calls forth the energy of spiritual intoxication in order to produce a “revelation”: a vision that transcends empirical reality’.<sup>92</sup>

Nonetheless, it is important to note that Benjamin’s conceptualization of surrealist intoxication primarily takes root in his continued engagement with Naville’s *La révolution et les intellectuels*, which includes the following declaration:

The undersigned members of ‘La révolution surréaliste’, having met on the 2nd of April 1925 with the aim of determining which of the two principles, surrealist or revolutionary, is the most apt to direct its course of action, failed to reach an understanding on the issue, but have agreed on the following points:

1. Above all surrealist or revolutionary concerns, that which prevails, that which dominates their spirit is a certain *state of furore* [*état de fureur*].
2. They believe that only through furore are they capable of achieving what might be termed *surrealist illumination* [*l’illumination surréaliste*].
3. One of the first objectives to be attained is the clarification of a number of points at which this furore is aimed in particular.
4. For the time being, they perceive a single positive aspect, to which they believe all other members of ‘La révolution surréaliste’ should adhere: ‘The knowledge that the Spirit is an essentially irreducible principle that cannot be fixed, neither in life nor hereafter’.<sup>93</sup>

The notion of ‘illumination surréaliste’ as well as ‘état de fureur’ can visibly be

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<sup>92</sup> Wolin, p. 132.

<sup>93</sup> Pierre Naville, *La révolution et les intellectuels* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 73, my emphasis.

deciphered in Benjamin's 'Surrealism' essay under the guise of 'profane illumination' and *Rausch*. Benjamin's notion of a 'profane illumination' is critically celebrated as one of the most concise renditions of the movement's theoretical and political motives and is a starting point for his anthropological-materialist theory of politics, marking the essay as a key turning point within the development of his theory of experience. Yet critics commenting on this part of the essay rarely trace Benjamin's terminology back to the surrealist works from which they originally stemmed. Naville's *La révolution* thus represents an important reference in Benjamin's own conception of the movement as he actively appropriates and interpolates the surrealists' own discourse in relation to the internal intellectual developments of the movement following its launch.

### **The Organization of Pessimism**

In mid-October of 1927, Naville published 'Mieux et moins bien' in the surrealist journal *La révolution surréaliste*, where he returned to the topics of *La révolution et les intellectuels*. It saw him proposing the notion of pessimism, which 'generally appreciates the virtue of surrealism, in its current reality, but maybe even more so in its possible future developments' since 'a certain fundamental despair is a common feature of all serious and tireless spirits who are arduously committed to their object'.<sup>94</sup> It therefore arises as surrealism's task to organize pessimism:

The organization of pessimism is truly one of the strangest slogans that conscious man can obey. Nonetheless, it is this method [...] that [...] will continue to allow us to observe the highest partiality [...] it will prevent us, at the same time, from anchoring ourselves and from despair — which is to say, we will just as firmly maintain our right to existence in this

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<sup>94</sup> Pierre Naville, 'Mieux et moins bien', *La révolution surréaliste*, 9–10 (1927), pp. 54–61 (p. 58) <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5845141v>>.

world since pessimism cannot be developed nor can its effects be prolonged by simple verbal affirmation. Indeed, this affirmation can all too easily be generated by any failed attempt or mishap and can quickly lose its efficiency. In this sense, only living resources can extract a meaning in pessimism worthy of the years accumulated at our feet. *We must organize pessimism; or rather, given that this is not about complying with a call, we must let it be organized following the direction of the next call.*<sup>95</sup>

According to Naville, the ‘organization of pessimism’ is a critically constructive part of the movement, which will allow it to get closer to fulfilling the Communist cause.

Benjamin is thus agreeing with this statement when he writes:

Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer. And that means pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity (*SW* 2:1, 216).

This passage, with an obvious emphasis on the term ‘mistrust’, clearly sees Benjamin echoing the sentiments of Naville’s piece. For Naville, a key component of surrealism, but most importantly a point of intersection between surrealism and Communism, can be found in the revolutionary quality of pessimism, understood as the refusal to resign oneself to the natural course of history and institutional progress. Surrealism and Communism, as proposed by Löwy, were united not by ‘a teleological belief in a swift and certain triumph, but by the deeply held conviction that it is impossible to live as a human being worthy of that name without fighting fiercely and with unshakable will against the established order’.<sup>96</sup> For Naville then, ‘pessimism is at the origin of Hegelian philosophy and is also the source of Marx’s revolutionary method’ and is therefore not to be confused with its outward

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., pp. 59–60, my emphasis.

<sup>96</sup> Löwy, *Morning Star*, p. 9.

appearance of ‘contemplation’ or ‘scepticism’.<sup>97</sup> The organization of pessimism thus replaces the traditional contemplative, or in other words, passive stance with a direct, ‘bodily’ (*‘leibhaft’*) reception (*SW* 2:1, 217).

Lastly, the concept of ‘organized pessimism’ demands a form of intellectual freedom which facilitates actual reality to surpass itself. Unlike Naville, Benjamin identified with the libertarian streak of the surrealist movement, claiming surrealism to be the first to possess a radical notion of freedom since the work of nineteenth-century Anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (*SW* 2:1, 215). However, despite freedom being one of the central concerns of the movement, having been named by Breton as one of its first conditions, Benjamin does not discuss it at length.<sup>98</sup> The surrealists viewed freedom not as the property of the individual but ‘in its own terms and as related to the key surrealist notion of objective chance’.<sup>99</sup> This approach was in essence fuelled by a philosophy of negation, which as Jonathan Eburne argues, was built on ‘a proliferation of *rencontres*’ that ‘stag[e] negation as a constitutive event in its own right.’<sup>100</sup> This affirmation of negation formed part of the particular surrealist dialectic which was deemed ‘an operative worldly and cognitive function’.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Naville, ‘Mieux et moins bien’, p. 58.

<sup>98</sup> This aspect of critical writing on surrealism is not restricted to Benjamin, as the editors of the *Surrealism Reader* observe: ‘[The nature of freedom] has been surprisingly little discussed in the critical literature, even though the surrealist understanding of freedom is quite distinctive’. See *The Surrealism Reader: An Anthology of Ideas*, ed. by Dawn Ades, Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), p. 11.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>100</sup> Jonathan P. Eburne, ‘Heraclitus, Hegel, and dialectical understanding’ in *Surrealism: Key Concepts*, ed. by Krzysztof Fijałkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 19–35 (p. 23).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

### Image-Spaces

It is in the context of Naville's championing of pessimism that Benjamin's 'Surrealism' essay references Aragon's *Traité du style* [*Treatise on Style*, 1928], one of the most notable examples of hybrid surrealist writing methods. Aragon wrote the text shortly after joining the French Communist Party in 1927. In many ways, it marked the beginning of his movement towards 'socialist realism' for which he received recognition after World War II.<sup>102</sup> In a similar vein to Naville, Aragon's polemical work addresses some of the political pitfalls of surrealism and not only attacks intellectuals with false pretences but the moral standards of the French bourgeois establishment in general. Indeed, the entire cultural tradition of the *bourgeoisie* is scrutinized within Aragon's criticism of the big names of the French literary industry such as Paul Valéry and André Gide: 'I call well written that which is not redundant [ne fait pas double emploi]'.<sup>103</sup> In this sense, Aragon's *Traité du style* constitutes a public critique of the movement which Benjamin would follow in his essay on surrealism. *Traité du style* is also of note since Aragon questions surrealist methodology, yet still represents the genre with his writing style. His message, however, rings clear: 'If you write deplorable twaddle using surrealist techniques, it will still be deplorable twaddle. No excuses'.<sup>104</sup>

The book certainly succeeded in its mission to provoke scandal within literary circles. Aragon was committed to upholding one of the aforementioned fundamental principles of the surrealist manifesto: *liberté*. Freedom takes on a

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<sup>102</sup> The later novel *Les Cloches de Bâles* (1934) is indicative of this new direction within Aragon's career. In an exchange with Siegfried Kracauer from that year, Benjamin reports that he 'has not yet seen the book' (*GB IV*, 539).

<sup>103</sup> Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, trans. by Alyson Waters (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 98. *Traité du style* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 127.

<sup>104</sup> Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, p. 96.

particular importance in relation to *style* as Aragon explores the connection between thinking, writing and practical action. For Aragon, style is not just a question of aesthetics, but above all of ethics. Through Aragon's work, Benjamin is able to draw up a parallel discussion between style and politics. In this context, he notes the distinction of 'metaphor and image' ('Vergleich und Bild') (*SW* 2:1, 217).<sup>105</sup> Just as they are distinguished in style, they also require a distinction in politics: 'For to organize pessimism means nothing other than to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in the space of political action the one hundred percent image-space [*Bildraum*]' (ibid.).

This call for a distinction is essentially a way of setting politics free from ideology or hidden agendas. In surrealism, writes Sami Khatib, politics is no longer 'an embodiment of history's progress towards socialism — but an opening that presents itself as an immediate image, an image-space where all petty bourgeois moralism becomes inoperative, where all external meaning is extinguished'.<sup>106</sup> In this sense, the 'organization of pessimism' creates an authentic politics that can access the sphere of image-space and permit a more immediate staging of political action which is both collective and devoid of the customary formalities ('moral metaphors') associated with political representation. In this scenario, the phantasmagoria and dream-like images which arise from the collective amount to a 'transgressive medium for a revolutionary standstill, stasis'.<sup>107</sup> The workings of profane illumination can subsequently be conceived of as a vehicle which allows

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<sup>105</sup> '[D]o not confuse simile and metaphor' ['ne pas confondre image et comparaison'] (ibid., p. 74).

<sup>106</sup> Sami Khatib, "'To Win the Energies of Intoxication for the Revolution": Body Politics, Community, and Profane Illumination', *Anthropology & Materialism*, 2 (2014) <<http://journals.openedition.org/am/348>> (para. 12 of 21).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., para. 13 of 21.

individual and collective consciousness and dreamscapes to intermingle. It is in this sense that Aragon's treatise is therefore of major importance in relation to Benjamin's conception of a '*Bild*' – and by extension – '*Leibraum*' ('image- and body-space'). As early as 1927, Benjamin had associated Aragon with a form of 'historical materialism' (*GB* III: 311–312). The notion of 'profane illumination' compounded with a surrealist understanding of 'pessimism' via Naville thus leads Benjamin to his development of an anthropological materialism in which the 'bodily collective' becomes 'revolutionary' (*SW* 2:1, 218). This revolutionary impulse leads to the extinction of all metaphors, as the 'image-space' 'can no longer be measured out by contemplation' (*SW* 2:1, 217). Benjamin would later build on this assertion in his work on the arcades with a formulation by Engels: 'A [materialist] representation of history has [...] to pass beyond the sphere of thought' (*AP*, 475), in order, as he claims in the 'Surrealism' essay, to reveal the image- and body-space of 'political action' (*SW* 2:1, 217).

### **Anthropological Materialism**

The 'image-space' which Benjamin devised in response to Aragon's critiques of the French bourgeois literary establishment dissolves the conventional boundaries between the individual and the collective, the body and the image. This turn to the collective represents another significant theoretical transition for Benjamin's move towards a conception of collective consciousness in line with his recent Communist convictions. In the final paragraph of the 'Surrealism' essay, he goes on to state:

The collective is a body [*leibhaft*], too. And the physis that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, be produced only in that image space to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image

space so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge [*Entladung*], has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto (*SW* 2:1, 217–218).

This passage from the ‘Surrealism’ essay offers the closest definition that Benjamin provides of his concept of ‘anthropological materialism’. The term ‘innervation’ alludes to the ‘psycho-physics’ of German psychologist Gustav Theodor Fechner, signifying the transfer of energy between the neurological system and the mind.<sup>108</sup> Benjamin is concerned with the division between the individual and the collective, whereby innervation explores the interaction between the individual body and the collective spirit. In surrealism, the collective spirit becomes corporeal and in turn the individual body becomes collective. In their combination of the psychological findings of Freud and the phenomenology of Hegel, the surrealists were acutely aware of both internal and external conceptions of otherness. As such, one could argue that ‘the locus of surrealism is founded not in any common purpose but in the value of the encounter’.<sup>109</sup>

For Benjamin, the traditional conceptions of the corporeal and of the mind are similarly dispelled. His account of collective consciousness envisions a union of the body and mind, thus reflecting the central tenet within psychoanalysis of consciousness being immanent to the body.<sup>110</sup> By going against a transcendental Cartesian account of consciousness, Benjamin was therefore challenging prior

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<sup>108</sup> Cf. Andreas Killen, *Berlin Electropolis: Shock, Nerves, and German Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 32.

<sup>109</sup> Ades, Richardson and Fijałkowski, p. 10.

<sup>110</sup> In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Benjamin wrote several short reflections on the body and human experience. Cf. ‘Wahrnehmung und Leib’ [‘Perception and Body’], ‘Über das Grauen’ [‘On Horror’], ‘Schemata zum psychophysischen Problem’ [‘Outline of the Psychophysical Problem’]. His attraction to surrealism can thus also be linked to this ongoing interest, as the above sections of this chapter suggest.



notions of the individual body and mind and their relations to one another. As in ‘Traumkitsch’ and subsequent work such as ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ [‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility’, 1935], Benjamin describes a collective consciousness that has been transformed by the presence of technology.<sup>111</sup> The contextual social and political crises of Benjamin’s age demanded a particular critical vision and practice which would process the sensorial alienation linked to mass cultural production and its impact on collective freedoms and agency in order to mobilize an alternative, revolutionized reception of technology. The aforementioned ‘innervations’ of the Benjaminian collective *Leib* take place at the centre of the ‘image-space’ which is devised to counter the multiple shocks of modern existence.

Anthropological materialism, a contradictory worldview combining a Romantic vision of human experience with a scientific understanding of environments, originated in a decisive reaction ‘against the disenchantment of modern life’.<sup>112</sup> According to Benjamin, French anthropological materialism, the origins of which can be found in the works of nineteenth-century figures Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon amongst others, is expressed through the collective, urban physiologies and socialist utopias. German anthropological materialism (represented by the likes of Keller, Hebel, Büchner and Feuerbach) on the other hand, is fixated on an expression of individuality in a practically pedagogical sense. Benjamin, in keeping with his ‘dual’, Franco-German approach to intellectual history, thus brings together both German and French figures under his

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<sup>111</sup> The conception of a collective physis is also key to Benjamin’s reception of Marxism, which he would later develop in his writings on Baudelaire and the arcades.

<sup>112</sup> Marc Berdet, ‘What is Anthropological Materialism?’ (2010) <<https://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/644>>.

own term of anthropological materialism. As Marc Berdet remarks, Benjamin's work unites 'philosophers and activists who, facing the nascent industrial world, develop a very similar vision of the world ("materialism") applied to human issues ("anthropological")'.<sup>113</sup>

In addition, Benjamin's 'Surrealism' essay opposes anthropological materialism with the contemplative, metaphysical materialism of Russian intellectual Nicolai Bukharin and German scientist Karl Vogt, which instead of criticizing the methods of pre-existing power structures and exposing them as products of capitalism, simply adopts them and projects them onto society without question (*SW* 2:2, 217). Benjamin would later return to this notion in 'Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers' ['The Present Social Situation of the French Writer', 1934], where he would contrast anthropological materialism to the didactical materialism of Bukharin and Georgi Plekhanov. For Benjamin, the writings of these orthodox Marxists who imposed mechanical naturalist structures on the events of the present epitomised the conventions of a materialism which was incapable of conceiving of a classless society (*SW* 2:2, 759). The same essay, which revisited several of the key ideas of the 'Surrealism' essay, argues that despite the fact that the movement 'broke over its founders in an inspirational dream wave', it was able to create an image-space that 'proved more and more to be identical with the image-space of political praxis' (*SW* 2:2, 759, 760).<sup>114</sup> Within this image-space stands an anthropological materialism 'derived from their own experiences, and from the earlier experiences of Lautréamont and Rimbaud' (*SW* 2:2, 760). Despite Benjamin outlining the problematic aspects of the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> I will be returning to the arguments of the 'Social Situation' essay in Chapter 3 (pp. 181–190).

surrealist cause, he nonetheless ultimately celebrated the group for having successfully inherited the anthropological materialism of notable French and German precursors.

### A Delayed Reception

Benjamin's 'Surrealism' essay solicited no noteworthy critical responses in its time. What's more, the reverberations of surrealism's impact on intellectual history were not truly felt in Germany until the countercultural environment of the 1960s when a delayed reception of the surrealist movement took place. Whereas Herbert Marcuse was undoubtedly the patron saint of the student movement in West Germany, Benjamin's writings embodied its philosophical spirit, the 'Surrealism' essay as well as pirated copies of his other works circulating amongst readers throughout the 1960s. A number of publications which were written in response to the events of 1968 would in fact engage with surrealism's history whilst simultaneously acknowledging Benjamin's writings on the movement and cementing his status as a figure of reference.

Peter Bürger's *Der französische Surrealismus: Studien zur avantgardistischen Literatur* (1971) was written in response to the 1968 revolution, making Bürger was one of the first German critics to consider Benjamin's essay. Benjamin was 'perhaps the only German writer of rank', Bürger claimed, 'to have acknowledged the surrealists' methods and incorporated them into his own'.<sup>115</sup> In a similar vein, Karl Heinz Bohrer's *Surrealismus und Terror, oder die Aporien des Juste-milieu* (1970) — which was equally a result of the political debates of the

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<sup>115</sup> Peter Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus: Studien zur avantgardistischen Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 9.

1960s — argues that Benjamin was one of the only writers to have understood the politicization of surrealism. Benjamin's conception of the surrealist movement thus found an audience within the context of 1960s West German counterculture precisely because, as Bohrer puts it, he was able to encapsulate its 'Stimmung' ('mood') which had taken on a renewed relevance.<sup>116</sup> The events of May 1968 were evidence of surrealism's 'actuality', the riots and upheavals became indicative of the movement's political implications, which made it an intellectual phenomenon worth re-investigating.

Before the posthumous publication of the *Gesammelte Schriften* (1977) and of the *Passagenarbeit* within it, the critical relevance of the 'Surrealism' essay to the rest of Benjamin's corpus was not fully known. Thus, it was only gradually throughout the 1980s that a connection between the essay and the *Passagenarbeit* was established. Richard Wolin was one of the first critics to comment on this relationship in *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (1982), claiming 'that it was Benjamin's interest in surrealism which first led him to formulate the preliminary outlines of his "Pariser Passagen" or Arcades Project'.<sup>117</sup> Shortly after, the international colloquium organised by Heinz Wismann in Paris in 1983, which marked a decisive step in the French post-war reception of Benjamin's work, would see several contributors discussing the essay.<sup>118</sup> A decade later, Cohen completed her doctoral dissertation, eventually published as *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (1995), which remains one of the most

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<sup>116</sup> Karl Heinz Bohrer, '1968: Die Phantasie an die Macht? Studentenbewegung — Walter Benjamin — Surrealismus', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 17 (1998), 288–300 (p. 295).

<sup>117</sup> Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 128.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. *Walter Benjamin et Paris: colloque international 27–29 juin 1983*, ed. by Heinz Wismann (Paris: Cerf, 1986). I will be returning to this conference within the context of Benjamin's posthumous reception in France in Chapter 4 (pp. 264–265).

extensive studies on Benjamin's relationship with the movement. Most importantly, Cohen identifies one of the central aims of the *AP* as 'a conceptual liquidation of the surrealist inheritance.'<sup>119</sup> Interest in this surrealist influence generally subsided thereafter and Adorno's student Elisabeth Lenk was one of the only researchers to pursue the topic towards the end of the 1990s.<sup>120</sup>

It is apparent that Benjamin's affinity with surrealism has never been completely ignored by readers and scholars in the wake of the renewed circulation of the 'Surrealism' essay. However, despite Adorno's claim in *Prismen: Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (1955) that Benjamin's 'aim was not merely for philosophy to catch up to surrealism, but for it to become surrealist', the 'Surrealism' essay has not yet been given the critical attention it deserves.<sup>121</sup> Benjamin's writings on surrealism thus must be considered within the wider context of the post-war reception of French surrealism in Germany, in which they played a non-negligible role.

### Surrealism as Franco-German Dialogue

In a diary entry detailing a meeting with editor and critic Léon Pierre-Quint following the publication of the 'Surrealism' essay, Benjamin once again retrospectively reflects on the movement to 'establish some of the facts' (*SW* 2:1,

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<sup>119</sup> Cohen, p. 8.

<sup>120</sup> See Elisabeth Lenk, 'Das ewig wache Kollektivum und der träumende Seher: Spuren surrealistischer Erfahrung bei Walter Benjamin' in *global benjamin*, vol. 1, ed. by Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm (Munich: Fink, 1999), pp. 347–355. The correspondence between Lenk and Adorno throughout the 1960s provides a fascinating insight into the debates surrounding the delayed reception of surrealism and in many ways represents a continuation of the discussions that Adorno had started with Benjamin during his lifetime. Cf. *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, ed. and trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>121</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 238.

350). Whilst a particular ‘blend of poetry and journalism has started to become the formula for literary activity in Germany’, he writes, surrealism was able to ‘violently’ break through the norms of poetic and journalistic writing in a manner that ‘does credit to France and testifies to the vitality of its intellectuals’ (*SW* 2:1, 350). What’s more, surrealism’s ‘anarchistic passion’, which pierced through the ‘intimate interrelationship between dilettantism and corruption that forms the basis of journalism’, was able to resurrect the ‘great tradition of esoteric poetry’ (*SW* 2:1, 350).

Benjamin’s inherent fascination with the movement reveals the extent to which surrealism aspired to function as a platform for French and German intellectual dialogue. As previously discussed, the literary origins of surrealism can be traced back to the theoretical and ideological writings of Hegel, Marx and Lenin as well as the work of Freud. Having close ties to various German public intellectuals and artists (most notably Max Ernst) along with a general spirit of mistrust towards the regime of post-war France meant that the surrealists were open Germanophiles in the 1920s and up until the 1930s. In this sense, they introduced the French public to a wide range of German literature.<sup>122</sup> Despite the simultaneous influence of Hegel and Freud seeming rather contradictory — ‘one toward greater subjectivity, the other toward a keener comprehension of the object of man’s awareness’ — the combination of these influences would facilitate surrealist experimentation to proceed from abstract findings to the concrete but also from the subject to the object.<sup>123</sup> The task of surrealism, as phrased by Anna Balakian, was

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<sup>122</sup> One notable example would be the introduction which Breton wrote to the translation of the work of German Romanticist Achim von Arnim. See *Contes bizarres*, trans. by Théophile Gautier (Paris: Les Cahiers Libres, 1933).

<sup>123</sup> Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* (New York: Noonday Press, 1959), p. 137.

thereby the ‘permanent integral connection cementing abstract and concrete reality into a single framework of dream-wakefulness’ leading to the amalgamation of art and philosophy.<sup>124</sup>

Breton’s main philosophical motive within the movement, it therefore seems, was to merge the histories of both French and German thought. In an interview in the 1930s, he would assert that ‘the surrealists considered themselves the recipients of the [German philosophical] heritage, which in their opinion should not be called German but European’.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, when outlining their position towards this philosophy, Breton made the distinction of calling it not ‘German philosophy’ but ‘in the German language’.<sup>126</sup> As Peter Wollen notes, many aspects of French culture are inconceivable without Breton’s influence:

Not only did he develop a theory and practice of art which had an enormous effect [...], but he also introduced both Freud and Hegel to France, first to non-specialist circles, but then back into the specialized world through those he influenced (Lefebvre, Lacan, Bataille, Lévi-Strauss).<sup>127</sup>

In this sense, one could argue that the philosophical legacy of the surrealists is greatly overlooked and its critical reception, both in Germany and France, has been marked by substantial delays.<sup>128</sup> Even today, surrealism’s intellectual origins and the scope of its engagement with specific causes within twentieth century European intellectual history has been greatly neglected.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>126</sup> As cited by Balakian, p. 134.

<sup>127</sup> Peter Wollen, ‘The Situationist International’, *New Left Review*, 174 (1989), 67–95 (p. 78).

<sup>128</sup> Cf. *Surrealismus in der deutschsprachigen Literatur*, ed. by Friederike Reents and Anita Meier (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009).

<sup>129</sup> Cf. Ades, Richardson and Fijałkowski, p. 8.

Like Breton, Benjamin did his part in bringing a number of French works to a German audience, most significantly the writings of the surrealists. He equally took on the task of merging the threads of European thought in his own practice. His position as a German Francophile gave him a uniquely sharpened perspective on surrealist genealogy and its meaning within France's intellectual landscape of the 1920s. Thus the value of Benjamin's critical conceptions of the movement lies in his appraisal of surrealism's intellectual lineage, which he was one of the few German critics to respond to in the wake of its founding. His contribution to the field thus lies not only in his role as a historian of surrealism, but as Peter Osborne puts it, in his understanding 'of surrealist experience as historical experience'.<sup>130</sup>

#### **CONCLUSION: BENJAMIN THE *VERMITTLER***

As the discussions in this chapter demonstrate, Benjamin's engagement with surrealism had direct repercussions on his writing methods but was also a catalyst in his propagation of French literature and culture, establishing him as one of the only public spokespeople in Germany for the movement at the time. Nevertheless, Benjamin's contact with France and its literature was in no way limited to surrealism. If the content of Benjamin's works from the mid to the late 1920s is not sufficient grounds to prove the considerable impact of his interest in French authors, then one can look beyond this activity to see that Benjamin had begun to take his role as a *Vermittler* seriously claiming that he was 'very pleased to be able to contribute [...] to furthering the bond between German and French literature' (C, 274).

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<sup>130</sup> Peter Osborne, 'Small-scale Victories, Large-scale defeats: Walter Benjamin's Politics of Time' in *Walter Benjamin: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Andrew E. Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59–109 (p. 65).



This saw him advocating the translation and publication of a number of contemporary French texts. In 1924, he suggested to Weissbach that he should translate contemporary French writers such as Giraudoux and Radiguet (*GB II*, 497). Furthermore, journalist and historian Thankmar von Münchhausen would set him the task of creating a list of books which should be given as suggested translations to the Insel Verlag. The list contained authors that would be the subject of Benjamin's later writing such as Cocteau, Giraudoux, Valéry and Jouhandeau (*GB III*, 189). A similar list would appear in the *Literarische Welt* in June 1929 entitled 'Bücher die übersetzt werden sollten' ['Books that should be translated'], communicating this need to a wider public.<sup>131</sup> In a letter to Scholem in 1924, Benjamin mentions 'an impressive list of French desiderata from the years 1917–1923, about 100 pieces', which he was commissioned to create for Erich Auerbach, who was coincidentally the subject librarian of French contemporary literature at the Berliner Staatsbibliothek at the time (*GB II*, 434).<sup>132</sup> What's more, alongside the longer, denser articles examined in this chapter, Benjamin wrote an impressive amount of short reviews and profiles on French writers.<sup>133</sup> A number of these reviews appear to have been structured with the very intention of making the world of francophone literature more accessible to a germanophone readership, which reveals that alongside the creative-critical aspects of his writerly aspirations from this period, Benjamin was just as passionate about writing with pedagogical intentions.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> See *GS III*, pp. 174–182. The list also contained a reference to poet Léon Deubel, who was virtually unknown in both Germany and France.

<sup>132</sup> The same letter also mentions that this list would be useful for the work he was completing on the arcades.

<sup>133</sup> The third volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* is especially demonstrative of this activity. See Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. III: Kritiken und Rezensionen*, ed. by Hella Tiedemann-Bartels (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991).

<sup>134</sup> Examples include the humour in the work of French-Swiss Pierre Girard being compared to that of German-Swiss author Robert Walser (*GS III*, 76–77), Georg Heym to French poet Léon

To conclude, the findings in this chapter confirm that Benjamin's relationship with French language and culture predated his time in exile as well as his work on the *Passagenarbeit* and was in many ways a determining factor behind the launch and subsequent developments of his career as a journalist and cultural correspondent throughout the 1920s. As I have determined in my examinations of Benjamin's use of the *kleine Form* in *OWS*, it is therefore entirely plausible to view his experiments with the form and genre of criticism in light of this influence. The literary criticism he subsequently developed, based both on theories of materialism and a revised philosophy of history, was thus given an entirely new function. As Witte observes, its object was 'no longer the symbolic work of art, but public consciousness itself', the residues of which are evident in all of his writing from this period.<sup>135</sup>

For Benjamin, criticism's status as a technique of 'aesthetic evaluation' within the literary marketplace had switched to a method capable of accelerating 'the politicization of the writer', advancing the revolution of social change.<sup>136</sup> A propelling force behind this realization was the influence of the surrealists, particularly Breton, Naville and Aragon, who offered Benjamin the conceptual frameworks to dialectically decipher the primal history that lay dormant within the surface of modern, everyday experience.

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Deibel (*GS* III, 182), Paul Léautaud to Karl Kraus (*GS* III, 68) and Henry Poulaille to Heinrich Mann (*GS* III, 74). Cf. Bernardi, 'Zur französischen Literatur und Kultur' in Lindner, p. 335.

<sup>135</sup> Witte, p. 108.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

## 2. THE ARCADES PROJECT – POINT(S) OF DEPARTURE

### INTRODUCTION

*The Arcades Project* and the stages of its development throughout Benjamin's career have been the subject of a number of critical accounts.<sup>1</sup> This chapter intends to interrogate prior critical discourse by not only revisiting the project's structural history, but by revealing the extent to which its various nuclei can be deciphered in Benjamin's earlier journalistic work, with an emphasis on the pieces previously examined in Chapter 1, in particular *Einbahnstraße* (1928) and 'Der Surrealismus' (1929). From a wider perspective, I wish to examine the ways in which the city of Paris functions as a vital source of inspiration, in that it represents the locus of Benjamin's most ambitious project and figures prominently in his philosophical investigations on history, culture and industrialisation.

Even though it is apparent that Benjamin's encounters with Baudelaire's writing were instrumental in his understanding of Parisian modernity and thus for the conception of the *AP*, I wish to move beyond this relationship to focus on other intertextual figures of equal importance. Whilst it was the French poet who had introduced Benjamin to one of the most evocative and prescient images of Parisian modernity, it was his engagement with the surrealists that gave Benjamin the conceptual and terminological tools to develop a mythology of *the modern*. In this regard, Louis Aragon emerges as the twentieth-century successor to Baudelaire's nineteenth-century poetics.<sup>2</sup> Central to a rereading of the *AP* will therefore be a focus on Aragon's surrealist anti-novel *Le paysan de Paris* (1926), a text which haunts the

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of studies in the field, see Introduction, pp. 17–18, footnote 14.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of Aragon's convergence with Baudelaire's work, see Alain Trouvé, 'Aragon lecteur de Baudelaire', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 101.5 (2001), 1433–1454.

textual edifice of the *AP* from its inception. Filtered through the gaze of a semi-autobiographical narrator, Aragon's account of Paris in *PP* embodies a distinct brand of surrealist writing which combines a materialist concern for the outmoded with a rebellious privileging of sensual experience. His *flâneur* is a *paysan* who wanders the streets of Paris fully intoxicated by his experience of the city, traversing cafés, shops, brothels, and theatres, encountering members of the crowd and countless commodities. Despite his profile as a peasant, Aragon's narrator is very much an urban figure, and is as familiar with his surroundings as the peasant is with his *terroir*. Yet the rural designation of his origins recalls the history of France's industrialization, as well as the French peasantry's revolutionary past.<sup>3</sup>

A closer examination of *PP*'s subject matter, tone, form and intellectual and socio-political aspirations will allow me to analyse how these categories were in turn pivotal for Benjamin's own account of nineteenth-century Paris. The complex nature of the relationship between the *AP* and *PP* entails that it cannot be simply discussed in the terms of a seamless creative or critical inspiration. A decisive aim for this chapter will be to elucidate the ways in which this seminal work held a highly ambiguous importance for the *AP*, which will emerge in my examinations of Benjamin's arguable misreading of Aragon's conception of mythology and the dream in *PP*. My intentions are not merely to stress some of the apparent similarities between the two authors and their intentions, but also to highlight Aragon's implicit influence across several of Benjamin's works including the *AP*, and to reflect on the ways in which their writing was symptomatic of the wider artistic and political concerns of their time. Within this context, I will also expand my prior discussions

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976).

on Benjamin's incorporation of surrealist concepts in his works, specifically in relation to his notion of the 'outmoded' (*SW* 2:1, 210).

In a letter to Theodor W. Adorno in 1928, Benjamin had identified himself as an unforeseen successor of the surrealist movement. The *AP*, he claimed, would 'take possession of the inheritance of surrealism [...] with all the authority of a philosophical Fortinbras' (*C*, 342). It is above all his relationship to Aragon's work which provides a decisive, yet often overlooked, frame of reference to review this intellectual inheritance, which Benjamin deliberated over for much of his career, and which was arguably never fully resolved. Despite the common argument that his encounter with surrealist modes of thinking was but a brief intellectual fling, Benjamin was referencing Aragon and his works in his correspondence as late as 1940, more than a decade after his initial reception of the movement.

Lastly, Benjamin's interactions with surrealist texts led to his appropriation of formalistic devices of the avant-garde in his work. The final section of the chapter will therefore focus on his citational method — a unique constellation of commentary and critique — which will be discussed as the basis of the *AP*'s montage-like approach to a historical materialist understanding of history.

## 2.1. ORIGINS

Before moving on to comparative analyses between the *AP* and the influence of Aragon's *PP*, it will be necessary to ask a seemingly simple question about the *AP*, namely: what exactly is it?

According to Benjamin's notes and correspondence, he intended the project to be a political and social study. However, despite such statements, a significant number of his references are literary. In the overall spectrum of Benjamin's corpus,

this was nothing new, but it seems that in the case of the *AP*, he was making a conscious effort to move away from sources of this nature.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin's emphasis on the socio-political ambitions of the *AP* also appears to account for the fact that a lot of critics overlook the project's literary appeal in favour of a focus on its 'non-literary' sources. It also may account for why declarations such as the following have not been taken seriously:

[*The Arcades Project*] opens with Aragon — the *paysan de Paris*. Evenings, lying in bed, I could never read more than two to three pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down [...] the first preliminary sketches for the Arcades originated at that time (C, 488).

Nonetheless, there are exceptions within the discourse surrounding the *AP*'s genre. Marjorie Perloff contends that there is a 'less clearly understood' 'literary appeal' to be found in the project — 'an appeal evident in the response of its avid readers over the past few decades'.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the *AP*'s literary significance has recently been highlighted not so much by academics but rather by contemporary novelists, artists and other creatives who have been inspired by this aspect of Benjamin's writings.<sup>6</sup>

The *AP*'s vast quantity of notes, drafts, and excerpts (over 400 pages in total) dealing with the history of the nineteenth century could easily be taken for the plans of a socio-critical study, yet they simultaneously act as Benjamin's personal archive,

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<sup>4</sup> In a letter from 1935, Benjamin claims the *AP* is destined to become a 'pendant' to his work on German tragedy. Whereas the latter is more 'based on literature', his current project will concern itself with 'industrial and commercial demonstrations' ('manifestations industrielles et commerciales') and 'Parisian politics and customs' ('la politique et les mœurs parisiennes'). See *GB V*, p. 123.

<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 28, Perloff's emphasis.

<sup>6</sup> Recent examples include the exhibition *The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin* (2017) at the Jewish Museum of New York and the illustrations by artist Patrizia Bach in *Arcades-Work: Drawings on Walter Benjamin* (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2017).

brimming with snapshots of ideas, which has hitherto eluded definitive categorization. In this sense, it represents a unique textual composite, made up of words both original and appropriated, a conceptual labyrinth allowing for endless paths of exploration. Although Benjamin's finished works offer grounds to inscribe the drafts he left behind with meaning, the *AP*, as readers know it today, is still in many respects a large-scale plan or as the translators of the English edition put it: 'the blueprint for an unimaginably massive and labyrinthine architecture — a dream city, in effect'.<sup>7</sup> The resulting wide-ranging manuscripts give an insight into the sources Benjamin was predominantly consulting in the reading rooms of the Bibliothèque Nationale; his notes from books, essays and pamphlets comprise a bibliography of 850 titles.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, Susan Buck-Morss has designated the *AP* as both a 'working lexicon' and a 'historical warehouse of documentary parts and supporting theoretical armatures'.<sup>9</sup> Wille Bolle on the other hand has stressed the *AP*'s 'hypertextual elements', which in combination with the 'continuous expansion and constant building as well as the essential mobility of [its] archive' before and during Benjamin's exile, lend it the appearance of a 'construction kit [*Baukastencharakter*]'.<sup>10</sup> To add to this, Rebecca Comay observes that Benjamin's compositional method 'is itself an infinite process of self-archiving', consisting of

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<sup>7</sup> Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, 'Translator's Foreword' in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. ix–xiv (p. xi).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs*, ed. by Ursula Marx et al., trans. by Esther Leslie (London: Verso, 2015), p. 310.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> Wille Bolle, 'Metropole & Megastadt: Zur Ordnung des Wissens in Walter Benjamins Passagen' in *Urbane Beobachtungen: Walter Benjamin und die neuen Städte*, ed. by Ralph Buchenhorst, Martin Schwietzke and Miguel Vedda (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), pp. 17–51 (p. 20).

endless acts of ‘self-annotating, self-encapsulating, self-reviewing’.<sup>11</sup> Comay points out that Benjamin often returned to and reworked ideas published in earlier works, whereby

published offprints kept getting cut up into separate sections, the fragments glued onto other pieces of papers, corrected in the margins, the collage functioning both as a stockpile of disposable resources and as a kind of ruin and memorial — at once raw material and remnant.<sup>12</sup>

Benjamin did single out various ‘production cycles’<sup>13</sup> throughout his career, yet an undeniable trait of his thinking was his continuous return to ‘finished’ works resulting in a simultaneous gaze towards the past and the future — ‘a perfect literary enactment of the genealogical reversal [that his writings] would never stop exploring’.<sup>14</sup> The very nature of Benjamin’s writing, so Comay concludes, constitutes a snapshot of the dialectical image in motion.<sup>15</sup> The arcades materials form a collection of Benjamin’s most pressing critical concerns, a distillation of the questions that occupied him throughout his life. Benjamin described them as a project in *Geschichtsphilosophie*, a philosophy not *of* history but emerging *out of it*.

The *AP* originally started as a collaborative endeavour with Franz Hessel, when Benjamin was visiting Paris in 1927 and planning an article for the bi-monthly

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<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Comay, ‘Testament of the Revolution (Walter Benjamin)’, *Mosaic*, 50.2 (2017), 1–12 (p. 9).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> ‘Once I have, one way or another, completed the project on which I am currently working [...], “Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairy Play” [...] — one cycle of production, that of *One-Way Street* — will have come to a close for me in much the same way in which the *Trauerspiel* book concluded the German cycle’ (C, 322).

<sup>14</sup> Comay, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



journal *Der Querschnitt*.<sup>16</sup> The short essay ‘Passagen’ [‘Arcades’] was written as a result of his many conversations with Hessel on the arcades but was never published as a newspaper article. After the project’s inception in mid-1927, Benjamin then began collecting his reflections on the arcades and their contexts which were posthumously published as ‘Paris Arcades I’ in the *Gesammelte Schriften*. At this stage, according to Eiland and Jennings, he conceived of the project as a Parisian foil to his avant-garde *brochure*, *Einbahnstraße*, as ‘a montage text combining aphorisms and anecdotal material on French society and culture of the mid-nineteenth century’.<sup>17</sup> By January 1928, the planned essay carried the title ‘Pariser Passagen: Eine dialektische Feerie’ [‘Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland’] and over the course of the remaining year and possibly the one that followed, Benjamin began to write a series of longer, edited drafts (published as ‘Paris Arcades II’), the manuscript of which swiftly became populated with further quotations, commentary and textual references.

Despite the painstaking editorial work of Rolf Tiedemann to compile these materials into the fifth volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, one would be mistaken in treating them as a homogenous, fully realized text.<sup>18</sup> The only possibility to create a semblance of an objective structure out of the materials is thus to follow the work in the various stages of Benjamin’s research process, which is closely mirrored in his correspondence with his peers. In spite of the uncertainty surrounding the status of its completion, the *AP* constitutes an impressively large portion of Benjamin’s critical output and many of its minutely organized subject matters and themes were

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. ‘Passagen’, Archive of the Akademie der Künste (AdK), Walter Benjamin Archive, Berlin, inventory no.: WBA 348 <<https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/2577958>>.

<sup>17</sup> Eiland and Jennings, p. 286.

<sup>18</sup> In a letter to Scholem in May 1936, Benjamin claims that none of ‘the actual text’ (‘eigentlicher Text’) for this project exists. See *GB V*, p. 282.

apparent continuations of previous and current areas of interest. In this sense, one could nonetheless argue that although Benjamin was never able to publish the project in his lifetime, there were definite compositional methods at work. When viewed from the perspective of Benjamin's overarching critical methods within his corpus, the project's themes and form can be traced back to his textual encounters with surrealist works such as Aragon's *PP*.

## 2.2. BENJAMIN AND LOUIS ARAGON: A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE

Although Aragon's explicit presence throughout the *AP* is nowhere near as prolific as that of other French figures such as Baudelaire, Fourier or Saint-Simon, his importance in relation to the project's inception as well as its later developments can be deciphered in Benjamin's correspondence with friends and fellow writers such as Theodor W. Adorno, Alfred Cohn, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Siegfried Kracauer.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, what this importance entails and how it potentially helped shape the thematic and conceptual aspects of the project is never fully explained by Benjamin, nor by many of his critics to date.<sup>20</sup> Those who do mention the author and his work too often perpetuate a negative view of the text, and the ways in which, according to Benjamin, it fails to critically evaluate a specific moment in Parisian

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. letters to Hofmannsthal (*GB* III, 259) and Alfred Cohn in 1927 (*GB* III, 311–312). In 1929, he tells Cohn that instead of working in Berlin, he would rather be in Paris 'sitting next to Aragon' with whom a friend of his had recently become acquainted (*GB* III, 434).

<sup>20</sup> Aside from the critics I will be addressing in this chapter, the argument of Aragon's lasting influence can be further supported by Mauro Ponzi, 'Mythos der Moderne: Benjamin und Aragon' in *global benjamin*, vol. 2, ed. by Klaus Garber and Ludger Rehm (Munich: Fink, 1999), pp. 1118–1134. Nonetheless, although Ponzi notes certain similarities, both texts are still ultimately kept at arm's length. In his uncompleted intellectual biography on Benjamin, Jean-Michel Palmier also briefly acknowledges the link between the two writers, claiming that Benjamin's *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* and *PP* share 'many commonalities in ways of feeling and perceiving things'. See *Walter Benjamin: Lumpensammler, Engel und bucklicht Männlein : Ästhetik und Politik bei Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Florent Perrier, trans. by Horst Brühmann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 139.

history. I wish to challenge some of Benjamin's critiques of Aragon with specific reference to the *PP*, which I argue contributed significantly to Benjamin's the *AP*. *PP*'s influence will hereby be revealed to be not only literary but also conceptual and methodological. As will become clear in what follows, despite Benjamin's public declarations that he intended to distance himself from certain aspects of Aragon's work and the surrealist movement in general, their impact on his thinking was irrevocable.

### **Philatélie(s): *Einbahnstraße* and *Le paysan de Paris***

Before examining *PP* in more detail, I wish to briefly consider the parallels between Aragon's novel and Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße*, which in many ways can be read as the *AP*'s predecessor. Consisting of a montage of individually titled 'sections' that include citations by a number of French writers such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Proust, *OWS* is also orientated around urban topographies and forms of experience. What's more, its dedication to Latvian actress, director and writer, Asja Lacis, with whom Benjamin had a brief yet life-changing relationship, can be read within the context of Haussmannization, the last phases of the massive regentrification of Paris that had been started by the Prefect of the Seine, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann during the prosperous decades of the Second Empire.<sup>21</sup> In 1927, as Benjamin was spending time Paris with Hessel collecting material for the *AP*, he was simultaneously writing entries for *OWS*.<sup>22</sup> Like Benjamin's *OWS*, *Le paysan de*

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<sup>21</sup> The dedication reads: 'This street is named / Asja Lacis Street / after her who as an engineer / cut it through the author' (*GS IV*, 83). For an overview of Haussmannization, see David P. Jordan, *Transforming Paris: The Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (New York: Free Press, 1995) and Patrice de Moncan, *Le Paris d'Haussmann* (Paris: Mécène, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin would also later appropriate Aragon's title when in 'Tiergarten' of his *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*, he referred to Franz Hessel, without naming him, as a 'Berlin peasant' ('Bauer von Berlin'). See *GS IV*, p. 238.

*Paris* was originally published in serialized form in Philippe Soupault's *Revue européenne* over the summer of 1924 and spring of 1925.<sup>23</sup> Its disparate parts would eventually be compiled and published as a full-length book by Gallimard in 1926. As noted in Chapter 1, Benjamin wrote the short piece 'Traumkitsch' (1926) in response to Aragon's *Une vague de rêves* (1924), so it is entirely plausible that he would have followed or at least been aware of *PP* in its serialized state.<sup>24</sup>

Comparative analyses can be drawn between Aragon's *PP* and *OWS* in the blatant resemblances of their form, subject matter, and tone. Similarities can be found in the titles and subject matter of individual sections in *OWS*, in particular 'Tankstelle' ['Filling Station'], 'Coiffeur für penible Damen' ['Coiffeur for Easily Embarrassed Ladies'], and 'Briefmarken-Handlung' ['Stamp Shop'].<sup>25</sup> Critic Bernd Witte has suggested that the latter section on stamp collecting as well as the structuring of Benjamin's textual vignettes in *OWS* 'like a row of houses on a street' are taken from Aragon.<sup>26</sup> What's more, Martin Jay writes that the surrealists, in particular Aragon, favoured stamps for 'their potential through juxtaposition, disparities of scale and unnatural hues to awaken a sense of the marvellous'.<sup>27</sup> In this manner, Benjamin also displayed a sense for such 'marvellous' potential in the

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<sup>23</sup> The first two sections of the *PP*, 'Préface à une mythologie moderne' and 'Le Passage de l'Opéra' appeared in three monthly instalments of *La Revue européenne* spanning issues 16 (June 1924) and 19 (September 1924). The third section, 'Le sentiment de la nature aux Buttes-Chaumont', appeared during the Spring of 1925 between issue 25 (March 1925) and issue 28 (June 1925). Parts of the concluding epilogue, 'Le songe du paysan', were first published in several issues of *La révolution surréaliste*. All the different sections were then compiled in the first full-length publication by Gallimard in 1926.

<sup>24</sup> In addition, as discussed in Chapter 1 (pp. 66–67), Aragon's work had been the subject of several reviews in German publications such as the *Die Literatur* and *Die neue Rundschau* in the mid-1920s.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. passages in *PP* on pp. 117, 38 and 72–73 respectively.

<sup>26</sup> Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997), pp. 91, 95.

<sup>27</sup> 'Timbremelancholy: Walter Benjamin and the Fate of Philately' in Martin Jay, *Splinters in Your Eye: Frankfurt School Provocations* (London: Verso, 2020), pp. 208–225 (p. 213).

stamp which like other surrealist *objets trouvés*, was able to invoke a form of ‘profane illumination’.<sup>28</sup> Yet it was Benjamin’s friend Pierre Missac who initially singled out the importance of philately to the surrealists in relation to Benjamin’s ‘fondness for miniatures’ as a *collectionneur*:

it is easy to see [the stamp] as a suitable vehicle for surrealist imagery based on precision and trompe l’oeil. The routes it opens lead not only to Constantinople or Colombia but to imaginary countries or to the planets. [...] Nothing forbids it to dream, and thus it becomes the perfect example of the dialectic of the near and the far that constitutes the aura.<sup>29</sup>

For both Aragon and Benjamin, the miniature cosmoses of stamps function as mystical arcs between the microscopic world of objects of the child and the unwieldy totality of universal history. In their interweaving of space, time, geography, and history, the stamp thus leads to a connection between individual and collective past. This thought-image would serve as a springboard in Benjamin’s attempts to conceptualize collective notions of history, which he would go on to reformulate in his work on the *AP*.

Aragon’s reflections on stamp collecting in *PP* take the reader into the realm of fairy tales, as philately is not only personified but feminized:

O philately, philately: you are a most strange goddess, a slightly foolish fairy, and it is you who take by the hand the child emerging from the enchanted forest in which Little Tom Thumb, the Blue Bird, Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf have finally gone side by side; it is you, too, who illustrate Jules Verne and who transport over

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Missac, *Water Benjamin’s Passages*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 45–46. I will be returning to Missac’s work on Benjamin in Chapter 4 (pp. 253–259).

the oceans on brightly coloured paper wings those hearts least prepared for voyage  
(*PP*, 72).<sup>30</sup>

For Aragon's narrator, 'a thousand bonds of mystery unite [stamps] with world history' (*PP*, 72). He thus indulges in a childhood reminiscence, evoking specific stamps that offered first impressions of faraway destinations such as Sudan 'in which a white burnous mounted on a mahari advances against a sepia background' (*PP*, 72). Benjamin paints a strikingly similar picture in *OWS*, where he conceives of stamps as miniature gateways into human history, exposing cycles of both life and death:

Stamps bristle with tiny numbers, minute letters, diminutive leaves and eyes. They are graphic cellular tissue. All this swarms about and, like lower animals, lives on even when mutilated. This is why such powerful pictures can be made of pieces of stamps stuck together. But in them, life always bears a hint of corruption to signify that it is composed of dead matter. Their portraits and obscene groups are littered with bones and riddled with worms (*SW* 1, 479).

Once again, we encounter the figure of the child who, upon coming into contact with these philatelic worlds, is instantly transported into 'foreign' and 'exotic' realms:

The child looks toward far-off Liberia through an inverted opera-glass: there it lies behind its little strip of sea with its palms, just as the stamps show it. With Vasco da Gama, he sails around a triangle which is as isoscelean as hope and whose colors change with the weather. A travel brochure for the Cape of Good Hope. When he sees the swan on Australian stamps, it is always, even on the blue, green, and brown issues, the black swan that is found only in Australia and that here glides on the waters of a pool as on the most pacific ocean.

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<sup>30</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all English translations are taken from *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston, MA: Exact Change, 1994) and will appear as in-text references.

Stamps are the visiting-cards that the great states leave in a child's room (*SW* 1, 479).

These apparent resemblances make it seem unlikely that parallels in both form and content were merely coincidental. Furthermore, Aragon's influence on *OWS* can be substantiated by Benjamin's later reference to his 'modèle du hymne à la philatélie' ('model of the hymn to philately') in a letter to Horkheimer in 1940 (*GB* IV, 411). The general assumption that Benjamin read Aragon's works in 1926, once the *PP* was officially published, is thus rendered dubious. Claims such as Witte's, which indicate that Benjamin encountered Aragon's writing when it was merely serialized, are also supported by Benjamin's mention of Aragon in letters such as the following to Hugo von Hofmannsthal in June 1927:

In France individual phenomena are engaged in something that also engages me — among authors [...] especially Aragon; among movements, surrealism. *In Paris I discovered the format for the notebook [jenes Notizenbuch]* (*C*, 315, my emphasis).

The notebook that he references is *OWS*, which upon being published was instantly identified by Ernst Bloch as having inherited 'a model of surrealist thinking'.<sup>31</sup> The period referenced in the letter could also be understood within the context of Benjamin's later correspondence in 1935, where he indicated that *OWS* was essentially an earlier expression of what he hoped the *AP* would become (*GS* V, 1083). In 1927, Benjamin had also written to Kracauer claiming that the translated French title of *OWS* ('Sens Unique') excited him more than the original (*GB* III, 287). What's more, Benjamin had plans for the *OWS* to reach a French readership. In

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<sup>31</sup> Ernst Bloch, 'Revue Form in Philosophy (1928)' in *The Heritage of Our Times*, trans. by Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Oxford: Polity Press, 2018), pp. 380–83 (p. 380).

the same year in a letter to author and critic Marcel Brion, he writes that he had sent a manuscript for *OWS* to *Les Cahiers du Sud*, in the hope that they could extract ‘a few lines capable of interesting a large audience’ (*GB III*, 244).<sup>32</sup> In 1928, when discussing *OWS* with Scholem, Benjamin then details coming across

passages by young French writers who, while pursuing their own trains of thought, betray only fluctuations, aberrations, yet the influence of a magnetic north pole that discombobulates their compass. And I am steering straight for it (*C*, 340).

*OWS* can therefore not only be read with regard to Benjamin’s exposure to the literature of French surrealism as previously argued in Chapter 1, but its subject matter, form and methods can be linked to his engagement with Aragon’s *PP*, laying the groundwork for his ideas and ambitions for the *AP*.

### ***Le paysan de Paris: A Guide to Surrealist Practice***

The genre of *Le paysan de Paris* is hard to pinpoint as it ranges from a travelogue to a philosophical manifesto, a cultural and urban historiography to something resembling the script for an avant-garde stage play (in which ‘man’ converses with his faculties). Structurally, it consists of four sections: a brief introduction (‘Préface à une mythologie moderne’), a psychogeography of the Passage de l’Opéra (‘Le Passage de l’Opéra’), a recounting of Aragon’s nocturnal trip to the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont with André Breton and Marcel Noll (‘Le sentiment de la nature aux Buttes-Chaumont’) and a short epilogue (‘Le songe du paysan’). The progression of the text is stagnant and constantly interrupted by its shifts in tone, which fluctuates between sensitive lyricism and biting satire. Aragon wrote half the text in only two

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<sup>32</sup> Benjamin’s relationship to Brion will be discussed in Chapter 3 (pp. 202–204).



weeks, from the end of 1923 until the beginning of 1924. Unlike many of his surrealist colleagues, who were still occupied by the demands of automatic writing, he displayed a very different approach.

Aragon's *PP* thus occupies a unique position within the history of French surrealist writing, intriguing critics and resulting in a range of interpretations of its genre and style. For Johanna Malt, *PP* acts as 'the literary record of surrealism as a lifestyle', to the point where '[t]opography stands in for narrative'.<sup>33</sup> In the section 'Le Passage de l'Opéra', Aragon's narrator (a fictive version of the author himself), gives a thorough description of the Opera Passageway, recounting the appearances of many of its shops (both fronts and interiors) as well as those who choose to frequent them (he is particularly observant of the women that cross his path). Passing through the *Galerie du Thermomètre*, he walks past the bookstore *Eugène Rey* ('where one can glance through magazines at leisure without having to buy them'), a cane shop, *Le Petit Grillon* café, the Ladies and Gentlemen's hairdressers and the tailor's owned by a man named Vodable (*PP*, 45). He then moves over into the *Galerie du Baromètre*, introducing the reader to two of his favourite haunts: the *Théâtre Moderne* and the *Café Certa*. The text resembles a streaming inner monologue documenting the narrator's immediate field of vision as he surveys the Passage destined for extinction with the onslaught of Haussmannization.

In this manner, the narrator takes on the role of the voyeur — the book offering an omniscient insight into the comings and goings of the *Passage de l'Opéra* through the peasant's predominantly vulgar and unfiltered gaze. On more than one occasion, the fourth wall is broken, and the narrator explicitly implicates

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<sup>33</sup> Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 41–42.

the reader in a direct address. Yet, for the most part, the text consists of minute descriptions of the shops' interiors which rival the works of Aragon's realist predecessors.<sup>34</sup> In an inventory-like manner, the reader is provided with lists of commodities for sale as the narrator details the display of wares in the shops and profiles the business owners that reign over these destitute spaces. What's more, paragraphs are periodically interspersed with visual materials: replicas of

<b>“CERTA”</b>	
<b>TARIF</b>	
<b>DES CONSOMMATIONS</b>	
Martini Cocktail	
Perfect »	
Rose »	
Brandy »	
Champagne »	} 3 <sup>f.</sup>
Gin »	
Grillon »	
S <sup>t</sup> -James »	
Derby »	
Omnium »	
Max »	
Waller's »	
Manhattan »	
Oscar »	} 4 <sup>f.</sup>
Dada »	
Sherry Cobler	
Champagne »	
Porto »	
Café Glacé	1 <sup>f.</sup> 50
Porto Flipp	} 3 <sup>f.</sup> 50
Brandy	
Sherry	
Egg Nogs	} 4 <sup>f.</sup>
Fizzes	
Sours	
Sangarees	} 3 <sup>f.</sup> 50
Pick me Hup	
Kiss me Quick	
Pousse Café	5 <sup>f.</sup>
Péle-Méle Mixture	2 <sup>f.</sup> 50
Grillon Cup	3 <sup>f.</sup> 50
John Collins Gin	} 3 <sup>f.</sup> 50
Brom	
Clover Club	
Mousse Moka	2 <sup>f.</sup> 50
Florio	

<b>Whisky</b>
<i>Soda</i>
<b>— 5<sup>f.</sup> —</b>

Figure 1: Taken from Aragon, *Le paysan de Paris*  
(Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p. 77

advertisements bearing slogans or menus listing the prices of food and beverages (see fig. 1).<sup>35</sup> Alongside other surrealist novels such as Breton's *Nadja* (1928), in

<sup>34</sup> In his first notes for the *AP*, Benjamin would make a note of this quality in Aragon's writing: 'Relationship [Verwandtschaft] between myth and topography. Aragon and Pausanias. (Also consult Balzac.)' (*GS V*, p. 1031).

<sup>35</sup> The last instalment of Benjamin's *PP* translations, 'Don Juan', was printed with a reproduction of figure 1. Cf. *Die Literarische Welt*, no. 24 (1928), pp. 7–8. Benjamin would then directly adopt this in the *AP*. An example is Convolute A, where Benjamin cites not only Paul Léautaud's *Vieux Paris*, but equally the street signs and notices which appear in the text. Visual replications

which images of faces, spaces and objects replace textual descriptions, *PP* marked a shift from the surrealist *document*, which was ‘inherently poetic’, to the *documentary*.<sup>36</sup> Alison James defines this as ‘a mode of prose presentation that reflexively frames, interprets and acts on documents’.<sup>37</sup> The ‘surrealist document (dream text, photograph or found object)’, she claims, ‘retains its indexical power even as it is inscribed within a reconfigured documentary space’.<sup>38</sup> Margaret Cohen has also highlighted the ‘documentary function’ of Aragon’s text in its comparison with ‘the only non-literary description of the Passage de l’Opéra’.<sup>39</sup> Charles Fegdal’s *Dans notre vieux Paris* appeared in 1934, practically an entire decade after the passage’s demolition.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, as Walz states, the book’s seemingly ‘documentary style’ is disrupted by sudden ‘surreal visions’.<sup>41</sup> Essentially, what Aragon created was a ‘guidebook to surrealism’ as he draws upon the very ‘strolling techniques’ which are typically found in the conventional guidebook format of Parisian walking guides such as the Marquis de Rochegude’s *Guide pratique à travers le vieux Paris* (1903).<sup>42</sup> It is thus that the rapidly shifting urban landscape of Paris sat at the centre of the surrealist revolution in consciousness. Benjamin’s textual vignettes in *OWS*

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of signage thus become part of Benjamin’s citational poetics. See [A 3, 2] and [A 3, 3], *AP*, p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Alison James, *The Documentary Imagination in Twentieth-Century French Literature: Writing with Facts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> Charles Fegdal, *Dans notre vieux Paris: figures disparues, promenades parisiennes, Paris d’autrefois* (Paris: Librairie, 1934). For mentions of the *Passage de l’Opéra*, see pp. 151, 153 and 159.

<sup>41</sup> Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early Twentieth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

had already replicated the experience of the ‘prompt language’ of ‘leaflets, brochures, magazine articles and posters’ as well as the ‘shock effects’ of rapidly growing visual media forms (*GS IV*, 85). This phenomenon of the documentary, especially in an urban context, would then surface in his critical concerns for the *AP*.

### 2.3. *LE PAYSAN DE PARIS AND THE ARCADES PROJECT*

The argument that Benjamin’s *AP* in some manner used Aragon’s novel as its ‘template’ is instantly validated in their distinctly similar topographic paths. For Benjamin then too, ‘the labyrinth of urban dwellings resembles consciousness’, the arcades emerging as ‘the galleries of the city’s past’.<sup>43</sup> In both ‘texts’, the Parisian arcades assume a phantasmagorical appearance through several disparate categories of objects and activities: commodities, prostitution, gambling and fashion are utilized to extract the essence of the epoch, dismantling and challenging notions of *modernité*. In Aragon’s book, the arcades of the *Passage de l’Opéra* also form the basis of his mythological critique:

How oddly this light suffused the covered arcades [...] which are rather disturbingly named passages, as though no one had the right to linger for more than an instant in those sunless corridors. A glaucous gleam, seemingly filtered through deep water, with the special quality of pale brilliance of a leg suddenly revealed under a lifted skirt. The great American passion for city planning, imported into Paris by a prefect of police during the Second Empire and now being applied to the task of redrawing the map of our capital in straight lines, will soon spell the doom of these human aquariums. Although the life that originally quickened them has drained away, *they deserve, nevertheless, to be regarded as the secret repositories of several modern myths* (*PP*, 13–14, my emphasis).

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<sup>43</sup> See [C 1a, 2], *AP*, p. 84.

This excerpt was singled out by Benjamin in *Convolute R*, which is dedicated to the use of glass and mirrored surfaces in the arcades' architectural features.<sup>44</sup> Aragon's surrealist description of the arcades as murky, glass-covered 'human aquariums', emerges in Benjamin's description of the *passages* as the '[ur-]landscape of consumption' as well as in their status as dreamscapes detached from reality (*AP*, 827; 406).<sup>45</sup> Most significantly for Benjamin, however, Aragon locates the arcades' importance in their status as a threatened species on the brink of extinction:

[I]t is only today, when the pickaxe menaces [the arcades], that they have at last become the true sanctuaries of a cult of the ephemeral, the ghostly landscape of damnable pleasures and professions. Places that were incomprehensible yesterday, and that tomorrow will never know.<sup>46</sup>

In his 'Surrealism' essay, Benjamin had described the surrealists' Paris as a 'little universe', 'where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day' (*SW* 2:1, 211). In the pages of Aragon's anti-novel, we encounter such 'signals' in the crumbling remnants of nineteenth-century Parisian architecture. Around the time that Aragon wrote *PP*, photographer Eugène Atget was visually creating his own archive of Parisian topographies.<sup>47</sup> Just as Aragon's peasant surveys the Opera Passageway as it is headed for extinction, Atget inscribed his photographs with the melancholy words 'will disappear' ['va disparaître'], indicating the impending annihilation of the

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<sup>44</sup> See [R 2, I], *AP* p. 539. The arcades *Convolute*s P ('The Streets of Paris'), Q ('Panorama'), R ('Mirrors') and S ('Painting, Jugendstil, Novelty') contain explicit references to Aragon.

<sup>45</sup> The image of the arcades as a 'human aquarium' is a recurring motif in the arcades materials. Cf. *GS* V, pp. 103, 661, 681, 1042 and 1045.

<sup>46</sup> Aragon, *PP*, p. 14. Cited by Benjamin in [C 2a, 9], *AP*, p. 87.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 75.

subjects and buildings that appeared in his photographs.<sup>48</sup> Mingling past, present and future, Aragon's writing straddles the threshold between dream and reality. Dream-like visions and a return to sense perception, then, do not serve to further mythologize experience, but paradoxically offer an awakening from the rational, positivist narrative of progress. Aragon thereby follows Breton's dictum in the first surrealist manifesto, in which he declares:

If the depths of our mind conceal strange forces capable of augmenting those of the surface, or of struggling victoriously against them, it is vitally important to capture them, to capture them first in order, if need be, to later submit them to the control of our reason.<sup>49</sup>

Aragon's peasant's reveries are derived from the urban realities and ideologies that prompt them, and as such fulfil a surrealist concern for experience that can be understood politically.

Before examining the analogous categories of interest in the *AP* and *PP*, it must be stated that on the surface, the two texts can be said to diverge on one obvious account: whereas Benjamin, the dialectical cultural historian, uses the arcades to enact a critique bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Aragon, the surrealist *poète*, references the same *passages*, yet focuses on transitional moments of the present in which his text is historically grounded. Nonetheless, as Jacques Leenhardt has observed, since Aragon's text is based on the redefinition of pre-existing philosophical structures (as shall be discussed in the paragraphs to

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<sup>48</sup> In the materials for the 1935 exposé, Benjamin includes the following note: 'Aragon's technique compared with photographic technique' (*AP*, p. 901). Most notably, Atget's work served as a prime example for Benjamin to discuss the disappearance of 'aura' in his 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' ['Little History of Photography', 1931]. See *GS* II, pp. 368–385.

<sup>49</sup> André Breton, 'Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)' in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 1–48 (p. 10).

follow), his ways of re-writing and re-imagining the urban context of Paris arguably constitute a historical critique in themselves.<sup>50</sup> Taking such views of the text into consideration poses a significant challenge to Benjamin's own evaluation of *PP* and the reasons he claims that his own project departed from it.

### Politics

Fredric Jameson once termed Benjamin's work that of a 'revolutionary nostalgist'.<sup>51</sup> One might argue that Aragon's homage to the *Passage de l'Opéra* evokes a similar kind of avant-garde nostalgia, in that it mourns the recent destruction of urban space whilst also assuming a decisively non-conservative devotion to aesthetic innovation as well as the perspective of the city 'peasant'. Aragon, a keen newspaper reader, was well informed of the controversy surrounding the last phases of the regentrification of Paris under Haussmann, which was met with much outrage by the French public. The book's longest section, 'The Passage de l'Opéra', documents the arcade which was imminently destined for demolition. Originally constructed in 1822, the Opera Passageway consisted of three-storey *galleries*. Its architects based the promise of its commercial success on the stream of pedestrians visiting the opera, which could be reached through a narrow passageway connecting *rues de la Grange-Batelière* and *Le Peletier*.<sup>52</sup>

Going against the views of *L'Intransigeant*, a local newspaper that supported the completion of the Boulevard Haussmann to open the area to traffic, *PP* was

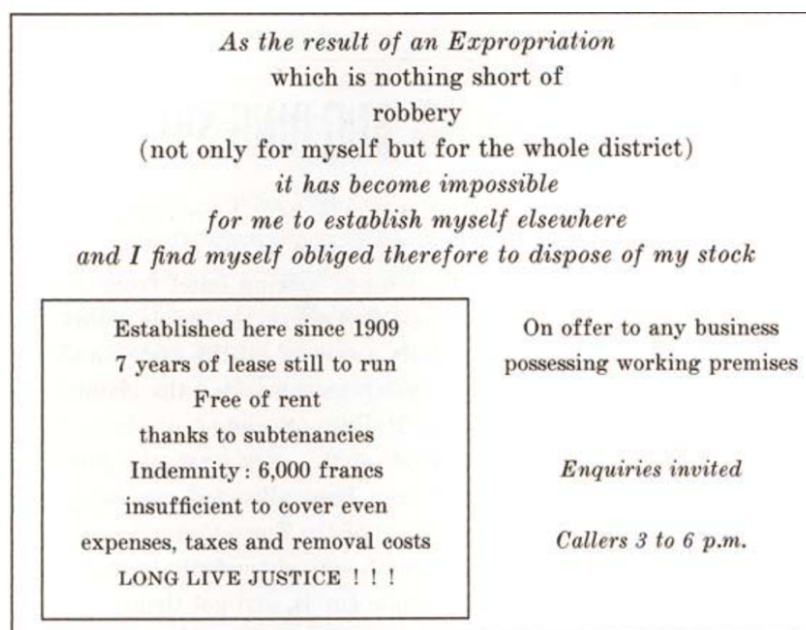
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<sup>50</sup> Jacques Leenhardt, 'Le Passage comme forme d'expérience: Benjamin face à Aragon' in *Walter Benjamin et Paris: colloque international 27–29 juin 1983*, ed. by Heinz Wismann (Paris: Cerf, 1986), pp. 163–172, 171.

<sup>51</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 82.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Walz, p. 20.

published in protest at the rapid urbanization of Paris which drove out local business owners. Aragon goes so far as to replicate the banners and placards that were hung outside shops and businesses to demonstrate their owners' objections, which are inserted into the text in a montage-like manner (see fig. 2). This backdrop to the serialized text indicates that Aragon chose to make himself a part of local political and economic debates on urban modernization and expansion. Aside from the press, public historical records of Paris chose to mostly overlook the space of the Opera Passageway. Aragon's textual montage therefore remains an important surrealist witness to the passage prior to its destruction.



*Figure 2: Aragon, Paris Peasant, trans. by Simon Taylor Watson  
(Boston: Exact Change, 1994), p. 28.*

In a similar vein, the second part of *PP*, entitled 'A Feeling for Nature at the Buttes-Chaumont', takes place during a nocturnal escapade to the Buttes-Chaumont Park, located towards the northeast of the city in a largely working-class neighbourhood. Accompanied by fictional versions of his real-life friends Breton and Marcel Noll, Aragon's narrator takes a stroll in the park just as dusk is falling. Despite the initial



excitement, he quickly becomes aware of the darker associations of this urban, man-made oasis. Aragon recounts the history of the park's creation in minute detail (*PP*, 137–140), displaying an awareness of its traumatic past when he mentions its role during the coup of the Paris Commune in May 1871 and describes it as a 'louche' zone that was the site of a notorious day of murder (*PP*, 133). He also refers to the circumstances of its construction under Baron Haussmann, describing the project as 'a crazy idea born in the head of an architect from the conflict between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the economic conditions of Paris' (*ibid.*). Forming part of Haussmann's renovations completed under emperor Napoleon III, the park was included in the World Exhibition of 1867.

Nonetheless, despite Aragon's references to the politics of Haussmannization within the arcades as well as the Buttes-Chaumont Park, his reasoning was not entirely driven by a desire to expose socio-economic inequalities. Especially in the case of the Opera Passageway, one could in fact argue that Aragon was not so much interested in the destiny of the arcades and their commercial inhabitants, as he was excited by the surrealist potential that this moment in Parisian history contained. Walz claims that it is unlikely that Aragon was motivated by nostalgia or that he was in any way attached to the passageway itself, it was more that the activities of idle *flânerie* and unbridled intoxication which the passage encouraged were fruitful for his writing practice.<sup>53</sup> In addition, the arcades' business proprietors were shocked and vexed by the content of Aragon's serialized text in the *Revue européenne* which contained several fabricated financial figures. Their reaction would later be mocked by the author in the full-length publication:

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<sup>53</sup> Walz, p. 23.

The other day, there was a meeting of the arcade big shots. One of them brought along Numbers 16 and 17 of the *Revue européenne*. They discussed it bitterly. Who provided this information? [...] They would like to meet him, this obstinate enemy, this Machiavellian character. And what would they say to him? What would bees say to the Baedeker of hives? (*PP*, 106–7).

This rampant tone of sarcasm is present in much of Aragon's text.<sup>54</sup> In a 'faux-documentarian' style, he reports the injustices inflicted on business owners by the Boulevard Haussmann Building Society with reference to factual details such as exact figures, and includes visual facsimiles of several documents throughout the text.<sup>55</sup> Even though Aragon therefore appears to narrate the imminent demolition of the passage from the perspective of the local business owner, he does not necessarily entirely identify or sympathize with their situation as can be attested by the citation above.

Conversely, Aragon did not side with the agenda of Haussmann's architectural policies either. In this manner, he subscribes neither to a progressivist, nor to a preservationist stance. It thus becomes apparent that the *passage* facing extinction appeals to Aragon above all due to its status as a compromised social space. And yet it is the violence of the onslaught of Haussmannization that brings to light what has been left behind by the progress of modernity. It is therefore that the *passage* and to a lesser extent the Park Buttes-Chaumont offer rich examples of what he refers to throughout the text as 'the vertigo of the modern' (*PP*, 114). Neither critiquing nor condoning the politics of modernization within both spatial environments, Aragon chooses to occupy what Abigail Susik terms 'a radicalized third position that places him outside of, but critically adjacent to, the reigning

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Chapter 2, pp. 138–140.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Abigail Susik, 'Paris, 1924: Aragon, Le Corbusier, and the Question of the Outmoded', *WRECK*, 2.2 (2008), 29–44 (p. 32).

political binaries of his day'.<sup>56</sup> And whilst this thought would certainly coincide with the central critique Benjamin levelled at the surrealists — namely that their materialism was less dialectical and more anthropological as derived from their predecessors Lautréamont and Rimbaud — Aragon's inclusion of the realities of urban development in the wake of Haussmannization would argue otherwise. Benjamin's accusation that surrealism laid a 'fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious' (*SW* 2:1, 216) does not apply in Aragon's anti-novel, where positivist facts are practically abundant, and it is precisely their profusion that causes them to assume 'an air of hallucination in the context of *le merveilleux quotidien*'.<sup>57</sup>

### **Allegory**

Whilst the surrealists' politics of the outmoded certainly appealed to Benjamin and his ambitions for the *AP*, a further significant reason that he was enticed by the *PP* was that it combined his more recent critical interests with those of his past. More specifically, Aragon's text connects the use of allegory with the form and subject matter of the avant-garde. Benjamin's contact with not only Aragon, but surrealist works in general, permitted him to see a contemporary application of allegory, and move beyond its seventeenth-century understanding which had been the subject of his contested habilitation thesis, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.<sup>58</sup> More specifically, as argued by Max Pensky:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>57</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Miniature Metropolis: Literature in an Age of Photography and Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 196.

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin's habilitation thesis was an obvious nod to Nietzsche (most notably his *The Birth of Tragedy*) who, in opposition to the predominant trend of his time to privilege the 'historical', continuously turned towards myth throughout his career to diagnose societal malaise and the failure of language and communication. Cf. James McFarland, *Constellation: Friedrich Nietzsche & Walter Benjamin in the Now-Time of History* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

[The] inherent relation between a ‘metasubjective’ allegoresis and praxis — the destruction of the puzzle, rather than its solution — is what Benjamin perceive[d] at work in the formulation of surrealist practice and what constitutes the key to [his] reception of surrealism.<sup>59</sup>

Surrealist revolutionary practice thus represented an alternative methodology to melancholy allegorical construction. The surrealists’ concern for experience and their salvaging of modern-day *Erfahrung*, writes Pensky, can be understood as ‘a political act, insofar as it marks a moment where the hegemony of capitalist dream time is broken’.<sup>60</sup> The ‘flood of memories that emerges from this rupture’ constitutes the ‘profane’ or ‘historical illumination’ that Benjamin sought in surrealist methods.<sup>61</sup> One only has to look at the opening paragraph of *PP* to note an affinity with Benjamin’s earlier writings on the seventeenth-century German *Trauerspiel*:

Man no longer worships the gods on their heights. Solomon’s temple has slid into a world of metaphor where it harbors swallows’ nests and corpse-white lizards. The spirit of religions, coming down to dwell in the dust, has abandoned the sacred places. But there are other places which flourish among mankind, places where men go calmly about their mysterious lives and in which a profound religion is very gradually taking shape. These sites are not yet inhabited by a divinity. It is forming there, a new godhead precipitating in these re-creations of Ephesus like acid-gnawed metal at the bottom of a glass (*PP*, 27).

For the Baroque, even for the Renaissance, the marble and the bronzes of antiquity still preserved something of the horror with which Augustine had recognized in them ‘the bodies of the gods so to speak’. ‘Certain spirits have been induced to take up their abode in them, and they have the power either to do harm or to satisfy many of the wants of those

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<sup>59</sup> Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), p. 188.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

who offer them divine honours and obedient worship'.<sup>62</sup>

As Václav Paris aptly remarks in relation to these passages, Aragon's work may well have presented Benjamin with the very inspiration he needed to visualize 'a way of presenting the ruin and the motley costumes of a past religion into a politically instructive and relevant form'.<sup>63</sup> Susan Buck-Morss confirms this by noting that 'whereas the Baroque dramas were melancholy reflections on the inevitability of decay and disintegration, in the *Passagen-Werk* the devaluation of (new) nature and its status as ruin becomes instructive politically'.<sup>64</sup> Peter Bürger, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), asserts that although Benjamin developed a concept of allegory in his writing on Baroque literature, it was 'only in the avant-gardiste' work that it finds its adequate object.<sup>65</sup> Bürger goes so far as to claim that it was Benjamin's engagement with works of the avant-garde that allowed 'both the development of the category and its application to the literature of the Baroque, and not the other way around'.<sup>66</sup> It is in this sense that one can read Benjaminian allegory in the terms of the avant-gardiste ('non-organic') work of art.<sup>67</sup>

In *OGT*, Benjamin writes that in 'the field of allegorical intuition, the image is a fragment, a rune' as a result of which the 'false appearance of totality is extinguished'.<sup>68</sup> The allegorist is able to join isolated fragments of reality in order to create meaning that is independent from their original contexts. The figure of the

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<sup>62</sup> Benjamin, *OGT*, p. 225.

<sup>63</sup> Václav Paris, 'Uncreative Influence: Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris* and Walter Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 37.1 (2013), 21–39, (p. 27).

<sup>64</sup> Buck-Morss, p. 170.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 68.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Benjamin, *OGT*, p. 176.

modern allegorist encountered in the montage methods of the avant-gardiste thus emerges as crucial to an understanding of Benjamin's concept of allegory. In his analysis of surrealist methods, Bürger notes that 'modern' society is in a sense naturalized, transforming our man-made environment into 'a petrified image of nature' within their recovery of 'pure' experience.<sup>69</sup> The urban metropolis as a natural phenomenon becomes the source of surrealist meaning. Objects of this 'new' nature (commodities, advertising, modern architecture) sit at the centre of works by Aragon, Breton and company. Benjamin encountered such an application of allegory in the pages of Aragon's *PP*:

I felt sure that the essence of such pleasures was entirely metaphysical and involved a sort of passion for revelation with regard to them. [...] an object became transfigured: it took on neither the allegorical aspect nor the character of the symbol, it did not so much manifest an idea as constitute that very idea. Thus it extended deeply into the world's mass (*PP*, 114).

It is passages such as the above that exemplify why Benjamin was able to conceive of the surrealists' 'vision of historically transient objects as a philosophical position rather than [merely as] an aesthetic technique', allowing him to move beyond his interpretations of the allegorical under the Baroque *Trauerpiel*.<sup>70</sup> His encounter with *PP* in particular, permitted him to transpose and rework this understanding within the *AP*, where he would elevate the modern commodity 'to the status of allegory' with a decisive emphasis on its 'fetish' character (*AP*, 207).

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<sup>69</sup> Bürger, p. 71.

<sup>70</sup> Buck-Morss, p. 238.

### (Modern) Mythologies

Closely bound to a notion of allegory is *PP*'s recurring allusion to the possibilities of 'a mythology of the modern' in order to expose 'an essentially modern tragic symbol [...] a sort of large wheel which is spinning, and which is no longer being steered by hand' (*PP*, 116; 118). Aragon's peasant 'set[s] about forming the idea of a mythology in motion': '*It was more accurate to call it a mythology of the modern.* And it was under that name that I conceived of it' (*PP*, 116, my emphasis). In this sense, he perceives his modern surroundings in terms of mythical configurations as everyday objects and places 'plunge' him into the 'great power' of their 'mystery' (*ibid.*, 113). While this was certainly of poetic value, Benjamin was not entirely convinced of the critical let alone theoretical potential of Aragon's modern mythology for many of the same reasons that he disapproved of the surrealist movement in general. Predominantly, especially within the context of his work on the *AP*, Benjamin's conceptions of mythology focused on phenomena directly influenced by the material and the 'profane'. This 'material' experiencing of myth, and its focus on the phantasmagoria of the modern, was thereby established as an essential part of Benjamin's cultural-historiographical method and accounted for the main critiques he levelled at Aragon's work. It was grounded in a desire to uncover the true *Urgeschichte* [prehistory] of the preceding century, through a focus on the metaphorical and ephemeral nature of commodity capital and urban architecture.

Citing pre-modernity in an effort to decipher modernity in many ways seems counterintuitive, yet according to Benjamin, this was the only way of clearing the pre-existing historical ground 'of the undergrowth of delusion and myth' (*AP*, 457). Freeing the nineteenth century of its 'undergrowth' would not only expose the misleading nature of its mythological structures, but equally disrupt their power and

authority over collective consciousness. High capitalism appears here as arch enemy; ‘a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythical forces’ (*AP*, 391). Although Benjamin’s project on the arcades remained unfinished, his materialist readings of myth would — as is evident in his notes, drafts and preparatory materials — define the essence of his critical approach.

In one of the entries from his earliest sketches on the arcades, Benjamin posed a series of important questions which distinctly encapsulate these underlying objectives:

What would the nineteenth century be to us were we bound to it by tradition? How would it look as religion or mythology? We have no tactile [*taktisch*] relation to it. That is, we are trained to view things, in the historical sphere, from a romantic distance [...]. Concrete, materialistic deliberation on what is nearest is now required. ‘Mythology’, as Aragon says, drives things back into the distance. Only the presentation of what relates to us, what conditions us, is important. The nineteenth century — to borrow the surrealists’ terms — is the set of noises that invades our dream, and which we interpret on awaking (*AP*, 831).

This passage demonstrates that Benjamin’s interpretations of nineteenth-century Paris were steeped in the consequences of his encounters with French surrealism and in particular his responses to Aragon’s *PP*. The surrealists’ recognition of the urban metropolis as the locus of myth and the cult of commodity capitalism was a fundamental point of departure for his work on the *AP*. Benjamin’s resulting consideration of the modern metropolis as the pre-eminent site of myth would lead him to the central categories of dreaming and awakening.



### Architecture of Dreams

It is the realm between dreaming and waking which differentiates Benjamin's discussions on surrealism from those on Proust.<sup>71</sup> In his essay, 'Zum Bilde Prousts' ['On the Image of Proust', 1929], Benjamin explores a further historical framework for a productive method which is built on the foundation of the dream. In line with the artistic agenda of the surrealists who first discovered 'the revolutionary energies of the outmoded' (*SW* 2:1, 210), Proust's writing constitutes an alternative model for a subjective encounter with the historical object which frees it from the reifying grasp of its previous context. Proust's *mémoire involontaire* thus constitutes a platform through which Benjamin is able to exercise his theory of instantaneous history, as the unexpected and unpredictable simultaneity of past and present. As Pensky remarks, the individual's subjective recalling of memories in Proust is seen as 'an accomplishment over intellectual memory, over the conscious application of subjective meanings upon the range of experiences presented to consciousness'.<sup>72</sup>

Through the tactics of 'Chock' ('shock') and 'Schrecken' ('frights'), involuntary memory creates the possibility of linking concrete experiences from the present with the past, resulting in a departure from the conventional continuum of temporality (*GS* II, 320; 318). The half-dreamlike, half-lucid superimposition of

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<sup>71</sup> Benjamin spoke of his essay on Proust as a 'counterpart' to the one on surrealism (*GB* III, p. 472). He was also immensely invested in the differences between German and French Proust scholarship: 'There is so much to Proust that is greater and more important than the "psychologist" who, as far as I can tell, is almost the exclusive topic of conversation in France' (*C*, 344). Alongside Rainer Maria Rilke and Ernst Robert Curtius, Benjamin formed part of the group of germanophone critics who brought Proust to a German-speaking audience. Cf. Peter Szondi, 'L'espoir dans le passé: Sur Walter Benjamin', *Revue germanique internationale* 17 (2013), 137–150.

<sup>72</sup> Max Pensky, 'Tactics of Remembrance: Proust, Surrealism, and the Origin of the *Passagenwerk*' in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. by Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 164–189 (p. 173).

several rooms onto each other encountered in *Combray*, in addition to the spatializing effects of the ‘deux côtés’ of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, provided exemplary moments of what Benjamin termed *Eingedenken*, the ‘spontaneous’ recalling of singular, personal events in which they are not simply ‘remembered’ but ‘actualized’ (*SW* 2:1, 238). Whereas such a method can be likened to the workings of surrealism or even Freudian models of remembrance, it is important to note that Proustian memory is a polarizing structure made up of past and present rather than a juxtaposition of several elements.<sup>73</sup>

What’s more, Proustian remembrance is above all considered a ‘Penelope work of forgetting’ since ‘purposive remembering’ unravels the web of memory as well as its ‘ornaments of forgetting’ (*SW* 2:1, 238). Whereas Proust’s work on memory was powerfully able to evoke ‘awakened’ facets of the nineteenth century, the surrealists managed to tap into a ‘postmelancholic, postallegorical recognition of the structure of commodified reality’, but only insofar ‘as they conceived of this recognition as dream consciousness’.<sup>74</sup> In Convolute N of the *AP*, Benjamin writes:

Is awakening perhaps the synthesis of dream-consciousness (as thesis) and of waking consciousness (as antithesis)? Then the moment of awakening would be identical with the ‘now of recognizability’, in which the things put on their true — surrealistic — face. Thus, in Proust, the importance of staking an entire life on life’s supremely dialectical point of rupture: awakening [N 3a, 3] (*AP*, 463–64).

Benjamin, in his work on Aragon and the surrealists, was attempting in his utilization of their dream constellations to move beyond a mythologized

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<sup>73</sup> For further discussions on Proustian models of remembrance, see Serge Doubrovsky, *La place de la madeleine: écriture et fantasme chez Proust* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1974) and Jean-Yves Tadié, *Le Lac inconnu: Entre Proust et Freud* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

<sup>74</sup> Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics*, p. 201.

consciousness to a profane or materialistic illumination whilst preserving the methodology of montage. Only this would permit Benjamin to decipher the nineteenth century in surrealist terms as ‘the set of noises that invades our dream, and which we interpret on awakening’ (*AP*, 831). In *Convolute K*, which is largely devoted to matters of the dream, Benjamin would express his intentions for the *AP* explicitly when stating that

the ‘critique’ of the nineteenth century — to say it in one word — ought to begin [with] the critique not of its mechanism and cult of machinery but of its narcotic historicism, its passion for masks, in which nevertheless lurks a signal of true historical existence, one which the surrealists were the first to pick up [K 1a, 6] (*AP*, 391).

Benjamin’s search for the nineteenth century’s ‘true’ history led him to incorporate aspects of Aragon’s *PP* into the *AP*, as it not only offered a template for a modern mythology but also prefigured his project with metaphors of awakening. This begins in its initial preface, where Aragon vehemently opposes the ‘modern’ spirit driven by logic and rationalism:

This spirit of analysis, this spirit and this need, have been transmitted to me. And like a man tearing himself away from sleep, it costs me a painful effort to tear myself away from this mental habit, so as to think simply, naturally, in terms of what I see and touch (*PP*, 8–9).

And so, the intent for Aragon’s *PP* was to awaken himself, and by extension his readers from such a philosophy. When Tiedemann, on Benjamin’s behalf, claims that ‘Aragon’s mythology remains *mere* mythology, unpenetrated by reason’, this is

because that was precisely Aragon's intention.<sup>75</sup> Lucidity was only to be achieved by succumbing to 'the vertigo of the modern' (*PP*, 114).

The Buttes-Chaumont Park and to a greater extent *Passage de l'Opéra* are thus depicted as oneiric underworlds which hold the city's 'collective unconscious' and represent the darkened depths which confront the narrator with his subliminal dreams and desires; 'each step he takes, he runs full tilt into himself' (*PP*, 136; 143). Driven by his senses, he encounters the inhabitants of this vast landscape – the prostitutes in the arcades, for instance, are depicted as sirens in an underwater landscape (*PP*, 51). Sensual experience is thus the reigning force of Aragon's writing, precisely because it allows him to depart from the rationalism which dominates the present, pushing his narrator to cross the threshold into fantasy and dream:

And how easy it is, amid this enviable peace, to start daydreaming. Reverie imposes its presence, unaided. Here [in the arcades] surrealism resumes all its rights. They give you a glass inkwell with a champagne cork for a stopper, and you are away! Images flutter down like confetti. Images, images everywhere (*PP*, 81).

Reminiscent of Lautréamont's classic definition of montage as the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table, this citation evokes the intoxicating effect of surrealist writing methods.

The question that hence arises is whether Benjamin's project of an awakened history was not as far removed from the surrealists, and Aragon in particular, as he claimed. Although Benjamin clearly took his cue to develop a mythology of the modern which would permit a 'tactile' relationship to the nineteenth century from

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<sup>75</sup> Rolf Tiedemann, 'Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*' in Benjamin, *AP*, pp. 929–945 (p. 934).

Aragon, he found himself conflicted with his conceptions of mythology in the *PP*.

This is demonstrated in several Convolute entries in the *AP*, where Benjamin explicitly opposes his project to Aragon's book:

Delimitation of the tendency of this project with respect to Aragon: whereas Aragon persists within the realm of dream, here the concern is to find the constellation of awakening. While in Aragon there remains an impressionistic element, namely the 'mythology' (and this impressionism must be held responsible for many vague philosophemes in his book), here it is a question of the dissolution of 'mythology' into the space of history. That, of course, can happen only through the awakening of a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been [N 1, 9] (*AP*, 458).

One could argue that the gradual dissipation of a sense of myth in modern society is what Benjamin equated with the disappearance of 'auratic' perceptions of reality.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the 1930s this quandary would continue to occupy Benjamin, resulting in his gradual move towards a more materialist conception of mythology, to the point where he would claim that 'there is no idealistic but only a materialistic deliverance from myth'.<sup>77</sup>

Within this context, it is relevant to bring up the main critique Adorno levelled at Benjamin's *AP* in his now-famed letter from 1938: namely that Benjamin's work was located at the rather dubious crossroads of magic and positivism since his use of myth and dream in his analyses of modernity were gravely undialectical (*C*, 587).<sup>78</sup> Retrospectively, it is easy to see that Benjamin's

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<sup>76</sup> The clearest definition of Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' can be found in his essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit', where he associates it with the 'here and now' of the 'original' art object (*SW* 3, 101). Benjamin conflates the withering of 'the aura' — what he terms the integrity of an object's ability to transmit a 'historical testimony' — with the influx of mechanically reproduced art works (*SW* 3, 103).

<sup>77</sup> See Benjamin, 'Karl Kraus' in *SW* 2:2, pp. 433–458 (p. 455).

<sup>78</sup> Benjamin's correspondence with Adorno on the *AP* will be further analysed in Chapter 3 (pp. 195–96).

methods were always going to be at odds with those of Adorno, and by extension those of the Institute for Social Research, for whom Benjamin's 'socio-political' study lacked sobriety.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, just as Adorno may have misunderstood Benjamin's harnessing of a collective dreamscape to expose the capitalist structures of nineteenth-century history, Benjamin himself was potentially guilty of misapprehending Aragon's 'mythologie moderne', which far from being 'impressionistic', was charged with socio-critical intentions.

As I have demonstrated, Aragon's locating of a modern mythology was in the decrepit, marginal urban spaces which were destined for extinction, whose inhabitants were fated to become the victims of ruthless gentrification. Whereas the greater part of the *PP* is steeped in myth, dream, fantasy and sensual experience, the overall 'narrative' of the novel is framed by Aragon's attacks on intellectual tradition: the 'Preface to a Modern Mythology' contains anti-Cartesian reflections, and the conclusive section, 'The Peasant's Dream', attests to Aragon's anti-Hegelian sentiments. Aragon and his surrealist colleagues were at the heart of a movement which called for an awakening from the discourses of 'progress' and 'rationality' which had dominated the nineteenth century and capsized in the traumatic wake of World War I.<sup>80</sup> Aragon's 'peasant' exemplifies this in the following realization:

I accepted uncritically the common belief that myth is [...] a figure of speech, a means of expression: I was mad enough to prefer abstract thought to myth, and even to congratulate myself on the fact. The man sick with logic: distrusting deified hallucinations, I defied this deification (*PP*, 113).

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<sup>79</sup> Benjamin's relationship with the Institute for Social Research will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Huyssen, p. 191.

In spite of Benjamin's dismissal of the *PP*'s 'vague philosophemes' in the citation above, Aragon's project of seeking a modern mythology which combined a recasting of positivism and rationality with subjective, bodily experience in many ways constitutes a fictional representation of Benjamin's ambition to create an urban 'image-space'.<sup>81</sup>

Aragon's mythology was not intended to mystify the modern, as suggested by Benjamin and consequently many of his critics who have examined this relationship, but rather to expose the working of the 'merveilleux quotidien' within day-to-day existence. In his first manifesto, Breton would define this iteration of the marvellous as a singular event in different periods of history: 'it partakes in some obscure way of a sort of general revelation only the fragments of which come down to us', he wrote, 'they are the romantic *ruins*, the modern *mannequin*, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time'.<sup>82</sup> Aragon's search for a modern mythology was thus intended to exploit the marvellous of the everyday to reveal 'the eruption of contradiction within the real' (*PP*, 204). Just as Benjamin was set on exposing the hellishly repetitious nature of experience under modernity,<sup>83</sup> for Aragon, the marvellous of the everyday draws attention to the 'asynchronism of desire' (*PP*, 53). His mythology of the modern thus stems from what he would later term 'a dialectical urgency born of another, lost urgency'.<sup>84</sup>

Far from being an ahistorical, mythological account that drives 'things into the distance', Aragon's portrayal of post-World War I Paris is very much grounded

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, pp. 83–85.

<sup>82</sup> Breton, p. 16.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. especially Convolute B on 'Fashion', *AP*, pp. 62–81.

<sup>84</sup> Aragon, *La Peinture au défi* (Paris: Galerie Goemans, 1930), trans. by Lucy R. Lippard as 'Challenge to Painting' in Lucy R. Lippard, *Surrealists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 37.

in factual description. His depictions of the *Passage de l'Opéra* shortly before its permanent destruction as well as the violent history of the Buttes-Chaumont Park demonstrate that his discoveries may have been located in a modern mythology but they were prompted by historical truths. The documentary essence of Aragon's text therefore predicted the development of the surrealist agenda as later specified by Breton in his 1935 lecture 'Political Position of Today's Art'. Within the conditions of modernity, 'art is no longer a question of the creation of a personal myth, but rather, with surrealism, of the creation of a collective myth'.<sup>85</sup> What Aragon termed *mythologie moderne* was neither a return to centuries passed nor the recovering of archaic forms. Rather, his focus was the lingering residues of the nineteenth century within contested urban spaces of the present and the estranging effects of modernity on the individual. Aragon's fictional renditions of Paris reveal his simultaneous reliance on the surrealistic dreamscape and the documentary value of the obsolete. In this sense, contrary to what Benjamin claims, Aragon was in fact 'dissolving' mythology into specific spaces and time periods.

### **A Riposte to German Idealism and Romanticism**

It is important to consider Benjamin's reservations about Aragon's use of mythology alongside Aragon's own self-reflection on his book. In his later memoir, *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou les Incipit* (1969), Aragon would provide further clarification on the origins of the *PP*, claiming that his original conceptions of the project were 'rather artless'.<sup>86</sup> Aside from his intentions to dismantle the pre-existing novel format as well as declaring himself 'the enemy of philosophy' ('there was no

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<sup>85</sup> Breton, pp. 212–233, 232.

<sup>86</sup> Aragon, as cited by Watson, p. xii.



question of succumbing to mere philosophizing'), Aragon recalls his observation 'that all the mythologies of the past became transformed into *romans* as soon as people no longer believed in them'.<sup>87</sup> He therefore decided on reversing this process in order to elaborate a novel that 'presented itself as a mythology [of the modern]'.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, considering Benjamin's materialistic ambitions for myth, it is also imperative to note that Aragon conceived of the book as follows:

starting with a mythological conception of the world, and leading towards a materialism which is not achieved [...] but only *promised* within the terms of a proclamation of the failure of Hegelianism, the loftiest of all those conceptions which allowed man to advance along the path of idealism.<sup>89</sup>

It appears that this very promise may have eluded Benjamin. According to Huyssen, Benjamin potentially wrongfully conflated Aragon's conceptions of modern mythology, dreams and images with a type of reactionary theosophy by the likes of Rudolf Steiner or Ludwig Klages, from whom he had previously derived a reactionary concept of aura for the purposes of a left-wing cultural critique.<sup>90</sup> However, as demonstrated above, Aragon's intentions were not dissimilar to Benjamin's: he too had an interest in deciphering the development of modernity and its ensuing ideologies since the nineteenth century which he was attempting to dispel. By explicitly critiquing Idealism and turning against Hegel, Aragon embeds his text in the remnants of philosophy's past, which are then incorporated in 'his aesthetic turn from myth to materialism and toward *le merveilleux quotidien*' that he

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Aragon, as cited by Watson, Aragon's emphasis, p. xi.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Huyssen, p. 190.

hoped would introduce a ‘new experience of metropolitan modernity’.<sup>91</sup> Thus, one could argue that in this regard, Aragon’s departure from a linear, progressive conception of philosophy to one of rupture correlates with the development of Benjamin’s own thinking in the 1930s.<sup>92</sup>

Benjamin’s own unconscious dialogue with the surrealists of his generation can be deciphered in his own riposte to German philosophical heritage: ‘Every epoch, in fact, not only dreams the *one* to follow but, in dreaming, precipitates its awakening. It bears its end within itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already noticed – by cunning’ (*AP*, 13). It is ‘with cunning [List], not without it’, Benjamin states, that ‘we absolve ourselves from the realm of dreams’ (*ibid.*). The use of Hegel’s term was certainly intentional and usurps its original meaning. The Hegelian ‘cunning of reason’ (‘List der Vernunft’) subsists through the wants, needs and desires of the unwitting individual.<sup>93</sup> However, within Benjamin’s framework of historical awakening, cunning is reclaimed to become a tool to outwit the supposed inevitable course of history, bringing its workings to the attention of the individual. The Hegelian confidence in the myth of historical progress is thus dispelled, the trick being the surrealist salvaging of the discarded, outmoded dream images of mass culture’s recent past.

Already in 1924, in his preface to *Le Libertinage*, Aragon had indicated the appeal of German idealism for his work: ‘Lightness hardly suits me. I have the habit

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<sup>91</sup> Huyssen, p. 191.

<sup>92</sup> Textual proof for this is that out of all the possible Convolute to place him in, Aragon’s work is referenced in Convolute N, ‘Theorie des Fortschritts’ [‘Theory of Progress’]. See *GS V*, pp. 571–572 and 579–580.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

of designating my heavy spirit as being Germanic [mon pesant esprit germanique]'.<sup>94</sup> In *PP*, the reader encounters a number of Hegelian allusions, especially in 'A Feeling for Nature at the Buttes-Chaumont'. As previously discussed in Chapter 1, the surrealist movement contributed to a modern French reception of Hegel's philosophy to which it was intellectually indebted. Their recasting of Hegel involved a 'privileging [of] the dynamism (and incompleteness) of dialectical movement rather than the abstract totality of Spirit' resulting in a thought process based on dialectical negation.<sup>95</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, the German Romantics reinstated the use of mythology in obvious protest against the 'rationalizations' of the Enlightenment, which Hegel's contemporary Schelling described as a 'universal symbolism' based on the 'things of nature', which 'both signify and are':

All symbolism must arise from nature and go back to it. [...] Only in mythology is there a truly symbolic material: but mythology itself is only first possible through the relation of its forms to nature. [...] The rebirth of a symbolic view of nature would thus be the first step toward a restitution of a true mythology.<sup>96</sup>

Schelling's conception of mythology represents myth as part of the process by which the Absolute reveals itself. Aragon, who had read Schelling in 1924 whilst he was drafting 'A Feeling for Nature at the Buttes-Chaumont' substitutes the Absolute for the unconscious. '[T]he seductive errors' and 'precarious truth[s]' that Aragon's

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<sup>94</sup> As cited by Josef Fürnkäs, *Surrealismus als Erkenntnis: Walter Benjamin, Weimarer Einbahnstraße und Pariser Passagen* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1988), p. 66.

<sup>95</sup> Jonathan Eburne, 'Heraclitus, Hegel, and Dialectical Understanding' in *Surrealism: Key Concepts*, ed. by Krzysztof Fijałkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 21. Cf. Bruce Baugh, *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>96</sup> Schelling as cited by Buck-Morss, p. 455.

narrator had read in this ‘fat German tome’ mean that he fails to recognize ‘the gods in the street’ (*PP*, 113). ‘Myth’, he then realizes, ‘is above all a reality, a spiritual necessity, that it is the path of the conscious, its conveyor belt’ (*ibid.*). The ‘figurative and metaphysical activities of [the] mind’ are thus equated with ‘the genesis of myth’ since ‘man is as full of gods as a sponge plunged into the open sky’ (*PP*, 115–116).

Similarly, Benjamin claimed that the ‘nature’ of the twentieth century had now ‘generated all the mythic power for a universal symbolism’, not within the realm of classical art as the Romantics had anticipated, but rather within the creativity generated by industrialisation.<sup>97</sup> The agents of this modern creativity — photographers, architects, graphic designers and engineers — are all featured in the materials of the *AP* as producers of the modern ‘collective’ imagination: “‘Mythic forces’” are present in abundance in the new industrial technology — indeed, “‘the gods are partial’” to the transitional space of awakening in which we now live’ (*AP*, 844). What strongly divides Benjamin from his Romantic predecessors is that he recognized the critical constraints that mythological systematization ushered in. For Benjamin, these ‘modern’ mythic symbols were just as transitory as the historical moment within which they were created: the ‘pervading of space by the gods [was] to be understood as a lightning flash’ (*ibid.*).

### **Surrealist Humour**

By rejecting the Romantic’s social-conservatist attitude, Benjamin found himself within the proximity of the practice of the surrealists, who rather than looking for meaning within folk culture and merely applying ancient symbols to present-day

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<sup>97</sup> Buck-Morss, p. 257.

phenomena, conceived of the urban-industrial environment as mythic in and of itself. The muses of the surrealists, as listed by Benjamin, are the dancers, characters, poets and celebrities of the stage, screen and billboards as well as iterations of kitsch and consumer products of the modern age: ‘Cleo de Merode, Kate Greenaway, Mors, Friederike Kempner, Baby Cadum, Hedda Gabler, Libido, Angelika Kauffmann, the Countess Geschwitz’ (*AP*, 82). Aragon’s peasant wanders through the streets of Paris in the same manner as his rural forebears would have traversed fields and forests. The Eiffel Tower appears as a giraffe, Sacré Coeur becomes an ichthyosaurus, the dispensers at the petrol station embody the qualities of divinities:

Hardly ever have human beings submitted themselves to so barbarous a view of destiny and force. Anonymous sculptors [...] have constructed these metallic phantoms [...]. Decorated with English words and other words newly created, with one long and supple arm, a luminous, featureless head, a single foot, and a belly stamped with numbers — at times these gasoline dispensers have the allure of Egyptian gods [...]. O Texaco motor oil, Esso, Shell! Noble inscriptions of human potential! Soon we will cross ourselves before your founts, and the youngest among us will perish for having viewed their nymphs in the naphtha (*PP*, 117).

These ‘idols’ of the modern age have taken on a life of their own. As the result of industrial innovation, they have put human agency into question. This fascination can be equally traced in Benjamin’s *AP*, where references to steel constructions, oil lamps, pumping mechanisms and rail works appear in abundance. Nonetheless, the arcade emerges as a privileged object of analysis as it is where macro and micro categories of industry and capitalism collide, and it therefore constitutes ‘the most important testimony to latent mythology’ (*AP*, 834).

Aragon’s tone in the excerpt above very much exemplifies the humour within surrealist conceptions of mythology. The intention of such humour was to undermine

the supposed ‘eternal truths’ of myths often advanced in the name of conservative politics. Humour thus became a device within surrealist writing not only provoke and shock: it also resulted in an ironic reversal where the profane and the mundane are substituted for that which is usually considered sacred. Benjamin appeals to humour in a similar vein in the *AP*, when he notes: ‘Humankind is to depart reconciled from its past — and *one* form of being reconciled is gaiety’ (*AP*, 467). He then goes on to write:

History is radical, and passes through many phases when it carries an old form to the grave. The last phase of a world historical form is as comedy [*Komödie*]. The gods of Greece who had already been tragically wounded in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, had to die again comically in the dialogues of Lucian (*ibid.*).

This citation forms part of Benjamin’s reference to the famed first lines of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), where Marx paraphrases Hegel’s idea that all great events and characters occur twice: ‘the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce’.<sup>98</sup> In an earlier manuscript from 1844, Marx proposes a third occurrence, namely that of comedy — which would allow ‘humanity [to] part from its past *gaily*’ (*AP*, 467). This would account for Benjamin’s claims that ‘surrealism is the death of the last century in comedy’, in the sense that it marked a complete departure from the dominant discourses and values of the nineteenth century (*ibid.*). This departure is primarily characterized through the humour-filled rhetoric of a collective imagination, constituting the metaphoric processing of the nineteenth century’s ‘image sphere of broken political promises, suppressed social movements,

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<sup>98</sup> Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ in Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 329.

frustrated utopian desires'.<sup>99</sup> Repetition allows for this repression to be worked through and awoken from, making it both a critical and comedic exercise. The ultimate aim for such a practice, according to Breton, is for surrealist collages to emerge as 'slits in time' which produce 'illusions of true recognition' 'where former lives, actual lives, future lives melt together into one life'.<sup>100</sup> In other words, a form of *Jetztzeit* ('now-time') in Benjamin's terms.

### **Ephemerality/ Thresholds**

A surrealist conception of 'now-time' can be found in Aragon's *PP*, where his peasant becomes the conduit that unlocks the potential of recognition within the objects he encounters:

I began to realize that [their] reign was predicated on their novelty, and that upon their future shone a mortal star. They revealed themselves to me, then, as transitory tyrants, as the agents of fate in some way attached to my sensibility. It dawned on me finally that I possessed the intoxication of the modern (*PP*, 114).

As has been extensively documented, Benjamin's fixation on surrealist experiences of intoxication [*Rausch*] spearheaded his encounter with the movement (*SW* 2:1, 208–9). In accordance with Benjamin's dictum that the surrealists would need to base their intoxications on the profane to overcome their baseless states of the dream, we find in Aragon's *PP* a literary depiction of Benjamin's theory in action. In *OWS*, Benjamin had criticized conceptions of the 'great' city as a triumphant fortification of progress, capable of withstanding mythical forces. Aragon's peasant

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<sup>99</sup> Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), p. 168.

<sup>100</sup> Breton, foreword to *La femme 100 têtes* (1929), as cited by Foster, p. 168.

similarly engages in dismantling the capitalist ‘fever of phantasmagoria’ (*PP*, 92). Unlike their ancient predecessors, these ‘divinities’ of the modern age are subjected to the workings of time, meaning they do not benefit from the same immortal status. Yet their transience is not interpreted as a weakness but in fact constitutes the very foundation of their critical importance:

These gods live, attain the apogee of their power, then die, leaving to other gods their perfumed altars. They are the very principles of any total transformation. They are the necessity of movement. I was, then, strolling with intoxication among thousands of divine concretions (*PP*, 116).

Aragon’s ‘modern’ mythology is thus one that is actively in a phase of transformation. On an even greater scale, he records this in his representations of modern-day industrialization. Machines, he claims, have replaced the activity of gods, but they have also assumed possession of the human faculties: ‘machines certainly think. Indeed, in the evolution of this thought they go beyond the limited function originally envisaged’ (*PP*, 118). Aragon’s mythology was thus conceived in opposition to its more traditional counterpart in order to dispel a reliance on over-systematization and rigid methodology. His peasant is thereby able to record ‘a fact that the theory of instrumental rationality represses’, namely as Buck-Morss states, that ‘modern reality in this still-primitive stage of industrialism *is* mythic, and to bring this to consciousness in no way eliminates the possibility of a critique, for which, indeed, it is the prerequisite’.<sup>101</sup> The mythical, according to Aragon, is an experience within which the usual separation of consciousness and the concrete, of subject and object are rendered irrelevant.

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<sup>101</sup> Buck-Morss, p. 260.



Transitoriness thus emerges as key within Aragon and Benjamin's grasping of the mythical essence of cultural objects. The consequence of mass culture's 'hellish repetition of "the new"', Buck-Morss continues, 'is the mortification of matter which is fashionable no longer. The gods grow out of date, their idols disintegrate, their cult places — the arcades themselves — decay'.<sup>102</sup> A further literary example that Benjamin references within this framework is Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1868) which he reads as the witness of 'the death of the Paris arcades [and] the process of decay of an architectural style' (*AP*, 204). Since these structures are in a state of deterioration and are thereby no longer appealing to the general public, the illusoriness of their status as dream-images is now exposed which is what gives them their dialectical value. In his initial notes for the first exposé of the *AP*, Benjamin had written: 'Cite a remark of Aragon's that lies at the centre of the problem [Zentrum der Frage]: the arcades are what they are for us here through the fact that they no longer are (in themselves)' (*AP*, 909).<sup>103</sup> The arcade thereby formed part of Aragon and Benjamin's agenda to critique high capitalist culture. Benjamin, following on from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, was aiming to capture the historical moment of the middle class in decline. Appealing to outmoded forms such as the commodity and outmoded environments such as the arcades had the power of exposing bourgeois society to its own mortality and refuting its so-called natural order.

Aragon and the surrealists conceived of architectures of the past as psychological, whereby their outmodedness was understood to be the repressing of a social unconscious. Benjamin takes this up when he notes that the arcades are

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>103</sup> The exposés of the *AP* will be analysed in more detail in Chapter 3 (pp. 191–194).

‘buildings, passageways which have no outside — like the dream’ (*AP*, 839). In the earlier ‘Surrealism’ essay, he had already noted that

[n]o one before these visionaries and augurs [the surrealists] perceived how destitution — not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects — can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism (*SW* 2:1, 210).

In the later exposé of 1939, he would return to this idea in his observation that surrealism ‘was the first to expose the ruins of the bourgeoisie’ (*AP*, 898).

Summarizing the history of the decaying bourgeoisie in the earlier exposé of 1935, Benjamin notes that the development of the forces of production ‘shattered the wish symbols of the previous century, even before the monuments representing them had collapsed’ (*ibid.*). Products of this collapse are the ‘arcades and intérieurs, the exhibition halls and panoramas’ as they ‘are residues of a dream world’ (*ibid.*). Here, the modern is recast as the primal, whereas cultural history emerges as natural history. Within this surrealist framework, as Hal Foster remarks, the historicity of the bourgeois class is represented through the images depicting the ‘accelerated archaism of its forms’, whereby its ‘transcendental ambitions’ are challenged by the depiction of ‘its wish symbols as ruins’.<sup>104</sup>

The arcades as object, along the objects contained within them, fascinated the surrealists and by extension Benjamin, precisely because they lay outside of the current sphere of capitalist and industrial production; it is their outmoded quality that makes them a source of political energy. In an early note for the project dating from 1927–28, Benjamin compiles a short list: ‘World of particular secret affinities: palm tree and feather duster, hairdryer and Venus de Milo, champagne bottles, prostheses,

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<sup>104</sup> Foster, p. 166.

and letter-writing manuals' (*AP*, 827). Objects dating from a time outside of present capitalism are recovered to shed light on past productive modes and return to times of simpler manufacture and usage. This approach serves not to romanticize the past but rather to construct links between personal and collective history via a social or cultural object. Such objects are of critical importance in the present and re-introduce the human and artisanal to capitalist structures in a revolutionary manner. As Malt contends, each in their own way, the works of Benjamin and Aragon

address the ideological processes by which the commodity becomes a reifying, fetishistic substitute for those utopian values which marked the origins of industrial production and whose residue languishes, in distorted form, in the commodities' discarded ruins.<sup>105</sup>

In the cases of the *AP* and *PP*, material objects are conceived of as being both historically and psychologically branded, they serve as temporal markers and lend themselves to archaeological analysis.

A key feature of the outmoded is thus the fact that it constitutes a threshold phenomenon, and it is no mere coincidence that Aragon discovered *le merveilleux quotidien* within two marginal urban spaces: the arcades that were destined for destruction and the Buttes-Chaumont Park of the proletarian East of Paris. The arcades dissolve the boundaries between inner and outer spaces, the streets and the shop interiors, protected and exposed environments. The Buttes-Chaumont Park represents a liminal space on the outskirts of the city, its presence questioning the distinction between natural and man-made environments, the organic and the artificial.<sup>106</sup> Thus, the notion of the threshold, which has been identified as a key to

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<sup>105</sup> Malt, p. 53.

<sup>106</sup> Benjamin never formally commented on this second part of the *PP*, however a note on the Buttes-Chaumont Park appeared in his very first drafts for the article he was preparing with

Benjamin's thinking, was already prevalent in the work of Aragon. His narrator recounts: 'at rare thresholds I become aware of this bond which unites the data of my senses [...] with nature itself, with the unconscious. This exquisite consciousness of a passage is the *frisson*' (*PP*, 123). Once confronted with the entrance to the arcades, Aragon's peasant comments on their status as places that one passes *through*: 'no one had the right to linger for more than an instant in those sunless corridors' (*PP*, 14). Aragon's threshold theory can be identified in Benjamin's own conception of the arcades as 'gateways'. In the first sketches for the *AP*, he writes:

No stone step serves to mark [these thresholds]. But this marking is accomplished by the expectant posture of the handful of people. Tightly measured paces reflect the fact, altogether unknowingly, that a <decision lies> ahead. Citation <from Aragon> on people waiting in front of arcades (*AP*, 862).

As Andreas Huyssen has noted, the 'Aragonian leitmotif of thresholds' ranges 'between reason and fantasy, between the factual and the mysterious to that between arcade and brothel, city and nature, the conscious and the unconscious'.<sup>107</sup> It is precisely the notion of the threshold that allows Aragon to demonstrate '[h]ow mankind loves to remain transfixed at the very doors of the imagination' and which Benjamin would appropriate for his own dialectical materialism in the *AP*.<sup>108</sup> This citation from Aragon's *PP* prompts him to make an important distinction in Convolute O:

The threshold must be carefully distinguished from the boundary [Grenze]. A *Schwelle*

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Hessel. See *GS* V, p. 1342. In addition, Benjamin's work parallels Aragon's in his references to man-made nature in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* and by giving some of the Baudelaire fragments the title 'Zentral Park' ['Central Park']. See *GS* I, p. 655.

<sup>107</sup> Huyssen, p. 215.

<sup>108</sup> Aragon as cited by Benjamin in Convolute [O 2a, 1], *AP*, p. 494.

<threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses [O2 a, 1] (*AP*, 494).

For Samuel Weber, the threshold is intimately linked to this motion of ‘swelling’, indicating ‘a crisis in the function of containment’ where a ‘clear-cut opposition between inside and outside’ has been extinguished.<sup>109</sup> In this manner, he explicitly links the Benjaminian threshold to an ‘interiorized form’ of allegory.<sup>110</sup>

A further issue which drew Benjamin to the Aragonian *frisson* was modernity’s diminishing of threshold experiences, so-called ‘rites de passage’ which attach meaning ‘to death and birth, to marriage, puberty and so forth’ and that he sought to reclaim (*AP*, 494). ‘Falling asleep and the act of waking’, as Benjamin says, ‘[are] perhaps the only such experiences that remain to us’. The threshold, primarily identified as that which separates the state of dreaming and waking, thus opens up a *Bildraum*, where images, sensations and sounds collide in a manner that Benjamin would specify in his essay ‘Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers’ [‘The Present Social Situation of the French Writer’ 1934]:

Life appeared worth living only where the threshold between sleeping and waking had been eroded, as if by the footsteps of images, ebbing and owing by the thousand. Language was itself only where, with automatic exactitude, sound and image, image and sound, had merged with each other so utterly that there was no space left for ‘meaning’ not even the smallest fissure (*SW* 2:2, 759)

The urban, spatial environment of Paris and its abundance of threshold

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<sup>109</sup> Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 233.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

experiences is highlighted in both the *AP* and *PP*. The threshold is thus what makes it possible for Benjamin to render ‘the topography’ of nineteenth-century Paris legible in an allegorical manner.<sup>111</sup>

### Commodity Fetishism/ Gothic Marxism

Benjamin summarized his intentions for the *AP* in a letter he wrote to Gretel Adorno in 1939 where he claimed that he had attempted ‘to highlight one of the fundamental principles of the passages: the culture of the commodity-producing society as phantasmagoria’ (*GB VI*, 240). Within the *AP*, distinctions between organic and inorganic, manufactured and non-manufactured are not absolute: ‘every true natural form [Naturgestalt] – and in fact technology is also such a thing’ (*AP*, 390). Within this modern incarnation of nature, commodities are representative of a phantasmagoric, transitional ur-form ‘of modern technology as momentary anticipations of utopia’.<sup>112</sup> The myth of eternal progress, which as previously argued, fuels capitalist modernity, is exposed through the phantasmagorical appearance of endlessly produced commodities. Within the process of commodification, wish-image is transformed into fetish which permits the mythic to ascend to eternity. Correspondingly, as Marx first diagnosed in his analysis of the commodity fetish, ‘ordinary’ commodities become invested with a magical, quasi-religious and dreamlike aura. Aragon’s *PP* offers a remarkably prescient evocation of the arcades as a world where the everyday is saturated with the marvellous, which arises as the basis for his ‘mythology of the modern’. Hence, the arcades appear as

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. Weber, p. 233.

<sup>112</sup> Buck-Morss, p. 159.

places where men go calmly about their mysterious lives and in which a profound religion is gradually taking shape. These sites are not yet inhabited by a divinity. It is forming there, a new godhead precipitating in these re-creations of Ephesus (*PP*, 11).

Convolute X of the *AP*, dedicated to Marxist thought, engages with the idea of commodity fetishism from *Das Kapital*. ‘By revealing *all* economic characters to be mere fragments of one great fetish’, Benjamin reflects, ‘Marx ultimately transcended all preceding forms and phases of bourgeois economic and social theory’ (*AP*, 662). ‘What Marx terms fetishism’, he goes on to claim, is ‘only a scientific expression for [what] he had described earlier as “human self-alienation”’ (ibid.). For Marx, this alienation came to the fore when commodity exchange value began to conceal the labour value of commodities in production. In his discussion of Benjamin’s ‘Kapitalismus als Religion’ [‘Capitalism as Religion’, 1921],<sup>113</sup> Giorgio Agamben follows Marx in ascribing to the commodity a divided character as it ‘splits into use-value and exchange-value and is transformed into an ungraspable fetish’.<sup>114</sup> It is for this reason that Benjamin looks to the commodity on display, where exchange value is replaced by representational value and categories of desire and novelty preside.

In the exposé of 1935, Benjamin describes the world exhibitions as the ‘places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish’ where the visitor ‘surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others’ (*AP*, 7). Aragon and Benjamin, perpetuating a Marxist understanding of commodity exchange value and pre-empting the post-war writings of the Frankfurt School, both dedicate a significant focus to the ‘exhibition’ of wares within the arcades. In *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord would elucidate the phenomenon that is

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<sup>113</sup> See *GS* VI, p. 100.

<sup>114</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 69.

commodity fetishism further by describing it as being ‘absolutely fulfilled in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a set of images that are superior to that world yet at the same time impose themselves as eminently perceptible’.<sup>115</sup> In this manner, the shop windows of the arcades are filled with obsolete commodities appearing in unexpected constellations. In *PP*, Aragon’s narrator is consequently placed under the spell of walking canes that appear to be floating, wines ‘by appointment to the Duc d’Orléans, handkerchiefs, old and foreign stamps, surgical appliances, mysterious cosmetics with picturesque names’ (*PP*, 22).

What is at work in the writings of Benjamin and Aragon is what Margaret Cohen has termed ‘Gothic Marxism’: ‘a Marxist genealogy fascinated with the irrational aspects of social processes, a genealogy that both investigates how the irrational pervades existing society and dreams of using it to effect social change’.<sup>116</sup> ‘Gothic Marxism’ thus encapsulates the intersection of Marxism, surrealism and psychoanalysis which forms the basis of Benjamin’s critical endeavours. A significant aspect of Benjamin’s *AP* is in this sense the need to free Marxism from its nineteenth-century baggage, namely its historiography based on the notion of progress as prescribed by the century’s ruling class — the bourgeoisie. In a letter to Horkheimer in 1937, Benjamin had explicitly expressed the application of psychoanalysis to Marxism as one of the *AP*’s principal methodological concerns:

I imagine that the definitive and binding plan of the book [...] would have to emerge from two fundamental methodological investigations. One would have to do with the critique of pragmatic history on the one hand and of cultural history on the other, as it presents itself to the materialist; the other with the significance of psychoanalysis for the subject of materialist historiography (*GB V*, 490).

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<sup>115</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 1992), p. 117.

<sup>116</sup> Cohen, pp. 1–2.



Benjamin's insistence on the 'significance of psychoanalysis' for the project would permit him to reveal the latent dimensions of materialist culture. Foster argues that the link 'between the historical riddles of the outmoded and the psychic enigmas of the uncanny' is also essential to Aragon and his work, and is responsible for the profound ambivalence of *PP*.<sup>117</sup> Aragon's evocation of uncanny forces served to revitalize the outmoded, resulting in its disruptive potential for the present. Such disruption is modelled in the narrator's existential anguish: 'What has become of my poor certainty [...] in this great vertigo where consciousness is aware of being nothing more than a stratum of unfathomable depths? I am just one moment of an eternal fall' (*PP*, 110–11).

Benjamin's opposition to certain aspects of Aragon's *mythologie moderne* served to define his own approach to a critical conception of history. The surrealists had succeeded in tapping into the revolutionary, utopian potential of modern culture, nonetheless ultimately Benjamin wished to overcome their intellectual failures. However, the supposed distance, 'the years and years' that Benjamin claimed 'had to be put between [him] and that kind of reading', is not necessarily convincing (*C*, 488). The *AP*'s roots remained decisively embedded in a surrealistic mode of thinking. The same month in which Benjamin sent his epistolary confession to Adorno recalling the excitement of his first encounter with Aragon's *PP* (*C*, 488), he also added a further entry to Convolute N. The first part of this entry is a direct quotation from an article by Aragon entitled 'D'Alfred de Vigny Avdeenko' which

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<sup>117</sup> Foster, p. 174.

had been published in the April 1935 issue of *Commune*.<sup>118</sup> Using de Vigny, the French poet, as a figure of reference, Aragon embarks on a historical analysis of the emergence of modern democracy in the nineteenth century, reflecting on the relationship between literature, politics and society. The turn of the twentieth century is identified as a time of crisis during which writers needed to grapple with the inheritance of Romanticism, and thus struggled to embed their work effectively into the relevance of their social surroundings. Avdeenko, a proletarian writer from the Soviet Union, offers the suitable alternative approach. Against the backdrop of rising fascism and his newly found Communist beliefs, Aragon's priorities as a writer had changed. Instead of rendering reality through the use of surrealist 'tricks', straight facts should no longer be tampered with. In the same entry which references this publication, Benjamin includes a cryptic, self-referential comment:

But it is entirely possible that, in contradicting my past, I will establish a continuity with that of another, which he in turn, as communist, will contradict. In this case, with the past of Louis Aragon, who in this same essay disavows his *Paysan de Paris* (*AP*, 464).

By 1930, Aragon's continued involvement with the French Communist Party meant that he would come to perceive *PP* as 'a revolt in individualism' ('une jacquerie de l'individualisme').<sup>119</sup> The entry above reads like a private, confessional note-to-self, only this time, Benjamin professes an affinity to Aragon on a biographical level. Following on from his letter to Adorno during this period (*C*, 488), was Benjamin

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<sup>118</sup> See [N 3a, 4], *AP*, p. 464. Established in 1933, *Commune* was the monthly revue published by the *Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires*, for which Aragon acted as a member of the editorial committee.

<sup>119</sup> See Louis Aragon, 'Critique du Paysan de Paris (Une jacquerie de l'individualisme) [1930]', *L'Infini* 68 (1989), 74–78.

admitting that his past evaluations of Aragon's work were inaccurate? The desire to 'establish a continuity with' Aragon certainly makes it seem so.

### Form & Method

In the concluding section of this chapter, I wish to examine Benjamin's formalistic choices for the *AP* and expand my prior discussions in relation to the surrealist 'document'. The montage methods of dada and surrealism maintained an ethos of dissociation when it came to images, thus preventing any form of simultaneous presence. Spacing their materials, letting the page retain white areas, ensured that their art was self-referential and signalled the fact that reality was infused with deliberate signification. As critic Rosalind Krauss states this reality is 'distended by the gaps or blanks which are the formal preconditions of the sign'.<sup>120</sup> Benjamin's *AP* had comparable aspirations: in *Convolute N* he claims that the 'work has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage' (*AP*, 458).

It is above all Benjamin's use of quotation that assumes a new formal significance in relation to such statements, which is why Paris believes that the project assumes a 'post-literary' status that makes it extremely appealing to contemporary writers and creatives.<sup>121</sup> The majority of critics, when discussing Benjamin's citational methods, choose to focus on the sheer quantity of materials that he gathered during the compositional process of the *AP*. According to Richard Sieburth, the materials so exceed 'anything [Benjamin] might conceivably need to adduce as documentary evidence in an eventual book that one can only conclude that

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<sup>120</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 107.

<sup>121</sup> Paris, p. 34.

this ritual of transcription is less a rehearsal for his *livre à venir* than its most central *rite de passage*'.<sup>122</sup>

In his early notes, Benjamin had spoken of the project taking place at a 'crossroads' within the development of intellectual history, where 'a decision would need to be made as to whether it would lead in a revolutionary or reactionary direction' (*AP*, 857). It is in this respect that he identifies similar movements at work in the writings of both the surrealists and Heidegger (*AP*, 545). It is therefore of note that the opening of Aragon's book features its narrator's thoughts on the status of philosophy:

Every idea, these days, seems to have passed its critical phase. It is a generally accepted fact that abstract notions about mankind have all been eroded imperceptibly by the investigation they have undergone, that human light has infiltrated its rays everywhere and that as a result nothing has escaped this universal process, which is subject, at the most, to revision. So, we have the spectacle of the world's philosophers incapable of tracking the smallest problem without first going through the routine of recapitulating and then refuting everything that predecessors have had to say on the subject. And by that very factor their every thought is inevitably the function of some previous error, based upon it and inheriting some its features (*PP*, 5).

This preface, as Fürnkäs notes, resembles a 'parody of Cartesian meditation', where Aragon both simultaneously engages with and refutes philosophical tradition; his monologizing speaker seeks to renew any doubts about our existing reality once again.<sup>123</sup> In this manner, it is intriguing to note that Aragon's opening statements on the difficulties surrounding intellectual inheritance in *PP* ironically exemplify not only Benjamin's later relationship to surrealist writing but also the citational

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<sup>122</sup> Richard Sieburth, 'Benjamin the Scrivener', *Assemblage*, 6 (1988), 7–23 (p. 17).

<sup>123</sup> Fürnkäs, p. 51.

methods of the *AP*. This is exemplified, in particular, in a passage from *Convolute N* which sees Benjamin referencing himself in a citation by Adorno who is, in turn, citing Kierkegaard:

Dialectic comes to a stop in the image, and, in the context of recent history, it cites the mythical as what is long gone: nature as primal history. For this reason, the images — which, like those of the *intérieur*, bring dialectic and myth to the point of indifferentiation — are truly ‘antediluvian fossils’. They may be called dialectical images, to use Benjamin’s expression, whose compelling definition of ‘allegory’ also holds true for Kierkegaard’s allegorical intention taken as a figure of historical dialectic and mythical nature (*AP*, 461).

At the forefront of Aragon’s critical agenda stands the category of ‘error’. His narrator’s seemingly distracted *errance* (wandering) through the arcades and the park is in fact not aimless but methodical. Fürnkäs summarizes this succinctly when stating that Aragon’s ‘myth of geography [Mythen-Geographie] and of hermeneutics [Mythen-Hermeneutik] are governed by one and the same causality principle: a discontinuous synchronism’.<sup>124</sup> Coupled with the techniques of collage and montage, this results in the text forcibly asking the reader to engage in the very same activities it describes, namely finding meaning and focus within the fragmentary and the peculiar. Decades later Aragon wrote about the form of *PP* in his memoir:

I was seeking [...] to use the accepted novel-form as the basis for the production of a new kind of novel that would break all the traditional rules governing the writing of action, one that would be neither a narrative (a story) nor a character study (a portrait), a novel that the critics would be obliged to approach empty-handed [...] because in this instance the rules of the game would all have been swept aside [...]. I was writing this novel-that-was-not-a-

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

novel — or at least I thought of myself as writing it.<sup>125</sup>

Benjamin's own formal innovation for his work was immensely disconcerting for Adorno who claimed that it was his intention 'to eliminate all overt commentary'.<sup>126</sup> The 'meaning' of the *AP*, according to Adorno, was 'to emerge solely through a shocking montage of the material [...]. The culmination of his anti-subjectivism [...] was to consist solely of citations'.<sup>127</sup> Although this observation is not entirely false, it encapsulates Adorno's extreme scepticism and demonstrates that he may have taken Benjamin's assertion that he 'needn't say anything [but] [m]erely show' at face value (*AP*, 460). Nearly a decade after Benjamin's death, once the arcades materials had been excavated from their hiding place at the Bibliothèque Nationale, Adorno would write to Horkheimer:

Last summer I worked through the [arcades] material in the most detailed fashion, and some problems arose [...] The most serious being the extraordinary restraint in the formulation of theoretical thoughts with regard to the enormous treasure of excerpts. This is partially explained by the (for me, incidentally already problematic) idea, which is formulated explicitly in one place, of the work as pure 'montage', that is, created from a juxtaposition of quotations so that the theory springs out of it without having to be inserted as interpretation (*GS V*, 1072).

Tiedemann, the editor in part responsible for the text we now refer to as the *AP*, had the following to add to the matter:

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<sup>125</sup> Louis Aragon, *Je n'ai jamais appris à écrire ou Les incipit* (Paris: Albert Skira, 1969), pp. 54–55. This passage is translated in the introduction to *PP*, pp. xi–xii.

<sup>126</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 239.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

In later statements Adorno took the montage idea even more literally and insisted that Benjamin had nothing more in mind than stringing quotations together. In his many discussions with Adorno, the editor was, however, unable to convince himself that literary montage as understood by Benjamin as a method was coincidental with a pure montage of quotations [...]. In the place of mediating theory, the form of commentary would have appeared, which he defined as ‘interpretation out of the particulars’ [N2, 1]; interpretation and commentary are, however, not conceivable in any other way than as representation. It is not the case that the work of the *Passagenwerk* is already present in the quotations and these merely lack their ingenious arrangement [...] Rather, the quotations are the material that Benjamin’s representation was to employ (*GS V*, 1073).

Benjamin’s own statements on his work make Tiedemann’s interpretation seem more likely. Adorno’s background and training meant that his search for a ‘suitable’ theoretical scaffold to mount the material on was always fated to be fruitless.

Benjamin’s understanding of montage was very much influenced by the technologies and engineering feats of the nineteenth century; this being the case, he perceived the project’s form in close relation to its subject matter. His aim was

to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary [*Kommentarstruktur*] (*AP*, 461).

The form of montage, which Benjamin had encountered most notably through the work of the surrealists as well as in his encounters with the G-group,<sup>128</sup> quickly became a privileged format for his compositional methods: *Einbahnstraße, Berlin Childhood um 1900, Deutsche Menschen [German Men and Women]*, ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’ (‘On the Concept of History’) and ‘Zentralpark’ (‘Central Park’) are all examples of Benjamin’s use of montage as a formalistic device. What

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. Chapter 1, pp. 57–58.

differentiates the *AP* from Benjamin's use of montage in his other works is the high number of citations which he worked into his materials and which, as Adorno observes, largely outweigh his own commentaries. The question that thus arises is whether Benjamin's intention to write a *Geschichtsphilosophie* which jeopardizes traditional readings of history must be considered in conjunction with his chosen format. If so, as Eiland and McLaughlin write, 'citation and commentary might then be perceived as intersecting at a thousand different angles [...] so as to effect "the cracking open of natural teleology"'.<sup>129</sup> Such a reading would by consequence imply that Benjamin's *Arbeit* was in fact an end in itself.

Despite Adorno's potential misapprehension of the project's methods, he does raise some relevant questions about Benjamin's citational tactics: How was Benjamin planning to 'make use' of 'the rags, the refuse' to let them 'come into their own'? (*GS V*, 574). In a 1935 letter to Scholem, Benjamin had written that the 'project involves [...] the attempt to retain the image of history in the most inconspicuous corners of existence, in its waste, as it were' (*GB V*, 138). In part, this recalls the importance of discarded, outmoded materials but it also serves as a reminder that Benjamin's conception of citation was formed in response to historiography. When Benjamin claims that '[t]o write history thus means to *cite* history', he is insinuating an intervention process through which historical materials are removed and repurposed (*AP*, 476). Citation, in a Benjaminian context, as Alexander Gelley thus remarks, consists of an incitation whereby historical data is conceived of as a monadic, isolated fragmentary structure which resists being

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<sup>129</sup> Eiland and McLaughlin, 'Translator's Foreword' in *AP*, pp. ix–xiv (p. xi).



assimilated into ‘a narrative mold’.<sup>130</sup> This permits it to ‘acced[e] to legibility’ (‘zur Lesbarkeit kommen’) (*AP*, 462; *GS V*, 577):

The events (das Geschehene) surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to cite history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context (*AP*, 476).

In his study *La seconde main ou le travail de la citation* (1979), Antoine

Compagnon analyses the citational process as follows:

Citation proceeds from a double arbitrary choice: first, that of solicitation, which is produced in the course of reading or hearing something and provokes me to extract from an *ante factum*, to excise a piece read or heard; second, that of incitation, which leads me to insert the piece that has been dislodged into my own discourse. Solicitation and incitation separate for good the citation from the referent, the ‘idea’ which the expression enunciated in the first place, the ground of the sign, and launch the series of values which it assumes in the repetition, these values and the repetition never abolishing the [element of] chance at the origin of the citation.<sup>131</sup>

The separate stages of solicitation and incitation that Compagnon describes are at work within Benjamin’s citational poetics, where the process of selection involves the interpolation of the cited and results in its renewed *Aktualisierung*. An additional aspect of the process is rendering the ‘actualized’ perceptible (in conjunction with its

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<sup>130</sup> Alexander Gelley, *Benjamin’s Passages: Dreaming, Awakening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 134. This recalls the process at work within Baroque allegory, as formerly discussed in relation to the work of Peter Bürger.

<sup>131</sup> Compagnon as cited by Gelley, p. 136.

legibility as referenced above), what Benjamin would term its *Anschaulichkeit*:

Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility of history? Or: in what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of the Marxist method? 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. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event (*AP*, 461).

Thus, a major part of the project was ‘to educate the image-making medium [*das bildschaffende Medium*] within us’ which Benjamin planned through his recourse to montage methods (*GS V*, 571; *AP*, 458). The resulting images, although dialectical in nature, resemble what Baudelaire termed *correspondance*: metaphysical connections between disparate moments in time. Within these imagistic citational constructs, temporal unity is entirely disrupted, predetermined relations between past and present moments rendered null.

In addition to the aforementioned ‘politics’ of the *AP* as inspired by *PP*, its method is also politically charged, particularly in the context of the historical backdrop during which he was working on the project. In ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’, Benjamin would write that the

French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It cited ancient Rome exactly the way fashion cites a bygone mode of dress. Fashion has a nose [*eine Witterung*] for the topical [*das Aktuelle*], no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is the tiger’s leap into the past’ (*SW 4*, 395; *GS II*, 701).

‘Such a leap, however’, he then specifies, ‘takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands’ (*SW 4*, 395). As Ian Balfour rightly observes, ‘citation

then is the model not just for the understanding of history but for its performance'.<sup>132</sup> This is ultimately the use value of the dregs of history, which Benjamin was attempting to utilize to carry out such a 'dialectical leap' 'in the open air of history' which 'Marx understood as revolution' (*SW* 4, 395). Thus, Benjamin's drive for formal innovation was motivated as much by politics as it was by epistemology. This drive had been catalysed first and foremost by his encounter with the montage methods of surrealism and the avant-garde.

## CONCLUSION:

### 'AWAKENING' HISTORY — CONTINUITIES WITH ARAGON

The 1920s and 1930s brought about intellectual developments which questioned different facets of industrialization, its products and their effects on urban experience and societal consciousness. Benjamin and Aragon's works offer critical perspectives that oscillate between revolutionary progressionism and preservationist nostalgia, whilst fully subscribing to neither. As Susik contends, their approaches thereby result in 'the overlapping of different historical epochs — a history of continuities and ruptures, of advances towards difference and uncanny returns of the same'.<sup>133</sup>

Aragon undoubtedly had his finger on the pulse of French thought. As shall be discussed in Chapter 3, following his own departure from the surrealist movement, several of its other 'dissidents' would rebrand themselves as sociologists of the sacred in the late 1930s. A recourse to the social sciences and interdisciplinary collaborations with figures in the fields of archaeology and ethnography were employed as a manner of investigating the sacred at a collective level: in churches,

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<sup>132</sup> Ian Balfour, 'Reversal, Quotation (Benjamin's History)', *MLN*, 106.3 (1991), 622–647 (p. 645).

<sup>133</sup> Susik, p. 44.

secret societies and the army, amongst others. In this manner, mythology would become a central category of intellectual inquiry throughout the 1930s, which both Benjamin and Aragon anticipated in their writing.

Benjamin's ambivalent stance towards Aragon's text was not only a result of the intellectual obstacles that he encountered in his work on the arcades but was equally a symptom of his scepticism towards myth as a critical category, given the rising fascist tendencies of his age and the perversions of myth that followed. Despite such scepticism, which endured in the aftermath of World War II, certain thinkers such as Ernst Bloch still sought to reclaim it as a springboard for utopian imaginaries.<sup>134</sup> In *The Heritage of Our Times* (1935), Bloch explicitly unites Aragon and Benjamin's works in their conceptions of the past: 'The form in which [the nineteenth century] after-dreamed, copied, mixed and replaced past times comes together into a hieroglyph'.<sup>135</sup> '[T]oday's memory', claims Bloch, 'simply further interprets what has been'.<sup>136</sup>

Even if we accept Benjamin's protests and take his 'oppositions' and 'delimitations' with regard to Aragon's novel at face value (*AP*, 458), the *AP* and *PP* still indisputably converge, firstly in their attention to the evaluation of time under the mythical enchantment of capitalism and industrial 'progress' and secondly, in their radical embracing of novel formats for writing. As I have demonstrated, Benjamin's proposed study of the nineteenth century advances a critique of the temporalities imposed by the modern mythology of capitalism. Similarly, Aragon's

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<sup>134</sup> The eventual official publication of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1947 would also once again re-question the nature of 'mythical thought' and its relationship to 'rationalist' discourse. A decade later, Roland Barthes' monumental *Mythologies* (1957) offered a renewed understanding of 'modern' myths by exposing their semiological structures.

<sup>135</sup> Ernst Bloch, 'Hieroglyphs of the Nineteenth Century' in Bloch, pp. 630–640 (p. 631).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

peasant derives his mythology from society's material culture and the behaviours of consumption which accompany it. In both instances, the bridge between collective dream and the possibility of a historical awakening — the 'threshold' which both writers identify within the urban environment of the arcade — is representative of an engagement with the inherent socio-political potential in their redefined categories of allegory, myth and the dream. In his *Salon of 1846*, Baudelaire wrote that '[t]he marvellous envelops us and saturates us like the atmosphere; but we fail to see it'.<sup>137</sup> The 'modern' mythologies that Aragon and Benjamin once strove to capture and unveil belong to a former age. 'Capitalism' has since developed new technologies, different masks and revised its language and we are arguably still ensnared in its labyrinth, lost in the 'primeval' forest of its 'symbols'. Aragon and Benjamin's textual testimonies of the Parisian arcades thus lead to the realization that any kind of 'awakening' can be but brief and sudden, and as such is never fully 'actualized'.

Benjamin was never afforded the same opportunity of retrospective self-reflection as Aragon in his memoirs. Even so, it remains questionable whether the arcades materials were ever destined to become the materialist social critique that he planned 'on the surface'. If anything, the fragmentary posthumous publication we now come to identify with this undertaking strongly resembles an avant-garde text that consistently defies definitive categorization. Benjamin's project of an awakened history took place within the competing fields of the dream and concrete materialism. Ultimately, the *AP*'s indebtedness to the work of the surrealists, and Aragon's *PP* in particular, was far greater than he intended. Weaving in and out the collective dreams evoked through the modern mythologies of urban industry and

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<sup>137</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. by P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 107.

commodity capital, the *AP* and *PP* remain important accounts of the mythical ‘dregs’ of a past century whilst simultaneously founding a mythology of their own.

### **3. PARISIAN EXILE**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

This chapter will address Benjamin's time in permanent exile from his native Germany, which he predominantly spent in Paris. It will give a detailed portrait of his existence as an exiled writer in the 1930s up until his death in 1940 and will consider his working methods, their results and the extent to which they were impacted by his immersion in French intellectual society. In a continuation of the focus of Chapter 2, I intend to maintain an emphasis on Benjamin's *AP* by highlighting the work he completed for it during the 1930s. An additional thread that will follow on from the previous chapters is Benjamin's continued engagement with the work of Louis Aragon, as well as his evolving relationship with other surrealist and post-surrealist modes of thought and writing. I will discuss how his life as a public intellectual in Paris shaped his last work on the arcades, but also the manner in which his presence in the French capital laid the foundations for his legacy as a European writer.

The chapter is split into two parts, firstly chronicling the developments of Benjamin's *AP* in the years leading up to his departure from Germany and then focussing on his exile in Paris from 1934. Around 1930, Benjamin broke off his work on the *AP*. One possible cause for this prolonged hiatus is that Benjamin was experiencing theoretical difficulties in his efforts to reconcile his surrealist inclinations with the demands of historical materialism. What's more, his writing on French sources substantially decreased during this interval since he had lost several of his regular commissions and moved on to other means to secure himself an

income.<sup>1</sup> In the early thirties, Benjamin then spent several months in Paris laying the social and professional groundwork for his time in exile before his definitive move to the French capital. When he did resume work on the *AP* again in 1934 once he had left Germany, it was with a restored energy caused by ‘new and sociological perspectives’ which he hoped would produce a ‘secure framework for its interpretive buttresses’ (C, 490).

Following his official affiliation to the Institute for Social Research in the mid 1930s, Benjamin was held to several deadlines by director Max Horkheimer and assistant director Friedrich Pollock. This renewed phase of expansion of the *AP* produced the exposé ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ in 1935, written in German and a predecessor of its French counterpart in 1939. These exposés will be considered as an important, yet by no means definitive, analytic insight into Benjamin’s structural aspirations for the *AP*. Given his history of planned publications that failed to materialize, I wish to shift attention away from what the project *was intended to be* and instead focus on the state that the project *was actually in* and its interrelation with his time in exile. The exposés will thus be examined within the wider biographical framework of Benjamin’s intellectual activity in Paris.

Alongside his ongoing work on the *AP* throughout the decade and despite the numerous challenges he faced as an exiled writer, Benjamin was producing reviews, essays and opinion pieces, which were shaped by his presence in Paris.<sup>2</sup> To advance my prior discussions of Benjamin’s ‘Surrealism’ essay (1929), I will undertake an analysis of the article ‘Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des

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<sup>1</sup> Willi Haas had to shut down the *Literarische Welt* due to rising political tensions and the *Frankfurter Zeitung* had changed hands, meaning that Kracauer was no longer in a position to offer Benjamin commissions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Écrits français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).



französischen Schriftstellers' ['The Present Social Situation of the French Writer', 1934], which Benjamin wrote at the request of the Institute. The essay constitutes a critically undervalued aspect of his sociological analyses of the politics dividing French writers and intellectuals of the interwar period and will be highlighted as a further example of his work as a European *Vermittler*.

As has been argued in Chapters 1 and 2, Benjamin's shorter cultural criticism was closely interlinked or derived from his research on the nineteenth-century arcades. This trend would continue during his exile with many of his major essays, which have since become intellectual trademarks, representing offshoots from the critical concerns and interests that he entertained whilst drafting the project. In the 1930s, Benjamin became increasingly absorbed in devising concepts and methods to decipher the workings of cultural history, drawing his inspiration from a host of French and German sources. His manuscripts for the *AP* served as a constantly evolving database from which he continuously borrowed and repurposed material for his other writings.

Many of Benjamin's most renowned essays such as 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' [The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility', 1935–39], but also his lesser-known publications such as 'Les Allemands de quatre-vingt neuf' ['The Germans of Eighty-Nine', 1939], will be reconsidered in affiliation and in response to his ongoing work on the *AP* and the contextual environment of Paris. Both pieces also shed light on the central role that translation played during Benjamin's time in exile, which saw him collaborating with French intellectuals, writers and editors such as Jean Selz, Pierre Klossowski, Marcel Brion, Jean Ballard and Jean Cassou in the hopes of creating a name for himself in France. Benjamin's status as a translator was a vital tool in ensuring his

‘survival’ in exile and permitted a continuation of his practice as a critic in public forums outside of German-speaking spheres.

The chapter will also focus on an obvious point of contention between Benjamin and the exiled members of the Frankfurt School during his final years in the French capital — namely his interest and involvement in the activities of the notorious group of intellectuals known as the *Collège de Sociologie* founded by Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois. Benjamin’s interactions with the *Collège*’s members will be examined within the wider context of the internal rifts that occurred within the surrealist movement during the 1930s as well as Benjamin’s ongoing fascination with surrealist intellectual principles and their derivatives.

To conclude the chapter, I will briefly consider the meaning and status of Benjamin’s project on Charles Baudelaire with the working title *Charles Baudelaire: Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus* [*Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, 1937–40*], its intimate relationship to the *AP* but also the philosophical fragments that form ‘Über den Begriff der Geschichte’ [‘On the Concept of History’, 1940].

### 3.1. 1930–1934: *THE ARCADES PROJECT ON HOLD*

Before discussing the circumstances of Benjamin’s interruption of his work on the arcades, I wish to summarize the state of the project at the time that it was temporarily abandoned by its author.

From 1927 until the end of 1929 or the beginning of 1930, it is generally believed that Benjamin composed the manuscript entitled ‘Pariser Passagen’.<sup>3</sup> This

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<sup>3</sup> See *GS V*, pp. 993–1038. Benjamin’s first notes for the *AP* have been collected under the title ‘Pariser Passagen I’, see *GS V*, pp. 991–1038.

manuscript was contained in a bound notebook that also comprised numerous sheets of notes and research on other topics such as travelogues and portraits. In contrast to the existing manuscript ‘Passagen’ which he had devised in his collaboration with Franz Hessel, ‘Pariser Passagen’, citing previously collected historical sources, displays a notable progression towards a more conceptual reflection on the project’s major themes. ‘Pariser Passagen II’ was created during 1928 and 1929 and is likewise made up of several shorter pieces which were eventually subsumed within the masses of material he began to collect for the *Convoluten*.<sup>4</sup> Both ‘Pariser Passagen’ and ‘Pariser Passagen II’ would have factored into a further essay which Benjamin planned at this stage — ‘Pariser Passagen: Eine dialektische Feerie’ [‘Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Fairyland’] — but which ultimately never materialized.

During the period that Benjamin was working on ‘Pariser Passagen II’, a further text was developed entitled ‘Der Saturnring oder Etwas vom Eisenbau’ [‘The Ring of Saturn or some Remarks of Iron Construction’].<sup>5</sup> In its introductory paragraph, Benjamin references a work by French graphic artist Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gérard, more commonly known as Grandville (1803–1847), entitled ‘Un autre monde’ [‘Another world’]. Benjamin utilizes aspects of the illustration depicting, amongst other things, a bridge dotted with gas lamps, to launch his reflections on the meaning of iron construction for ‘luxury establishments’ such as the arcades and winter gardens. Parts of the essay would later find their place in *Convolute G* ‘Ausstellungswesen, Reklame, Grandville’ [‘Exhibitions, Advertising, Grandville’].<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See *GS V*, pp. 1044–1059.

<sup>5</sup> See *GS V*, pp. 1060–1063. Eiland and Jennings speculate whether it was intended to possibly be a radio broadcast or newspaper article. See *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 287.

<sup>6</sup> See *GS V*, pp. 232–268.

In 1930, shortly after his development of ‘Der Saturnring’, Benjamin’s work on the *AP* then came to a sudden halt, and was not properly resumed until 1934, when it became his primary focus in the period before his death in 1940. In a letter to Scholem dated 20<sup>th</sup> January 1930, he describes it as ‘the theatre of all my conflicts and all my ideas’ and stresses the need to study ‘some aspects of Hegel and some parts of Marx's *Capital* to get anywhere [...] to provide a solid scaffolding for my work’ (C, 359). The letter also reports his realization that he had to ‘to pursue the project on a different level than [he] had previously planned’ (C, 359–360).<sup>7</sup> This notable hiatus from the project was nonetheless by no means unproductive.

Benjamin deepened his ties with Bertolt Brecht, began frequently broadcasting his writing on radio stations in Frankfurt and Berlin<sup>8</sup> and composed his childhood memoirs, later published as *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*.<sup>9</sup>

### **Königstein and the Marxist Turn**

During his hiatus from the *AP*, Benjamin would also begin to further develop his intellectual relationships with Adorno and other affiliated members of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt.<sup>10</sup> At the time, Adorno was still completing his doctorate and Benjamin would travel to Königstein, a town close to Frankfurt, where he met with other intellectuals such as Max Horkheimer (the later director of the Institute), Latvian actress and theatre director, Asja Lacis and Gretel

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<sup>7</sup> This comment foreshadows the nature of Convolute N of the *AP* which, as discussed in Chapter 2 (p. 153), offers insights into Benjamin’s epistemological ambitions.

<sup>8</sup> Between 1929 and 1932, Benjamin produced over eighty broadcasts on a variety of topics including dramas and children’s plays. See Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin*, ed. by Lecia Rosenthal (London: Verso, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See *GS IV*, pp. 235–304.

<sup>10</sup> This era marked the beginning of the famed twelve-year correspondence which took place between Benjamin and Adorno.

Karplus (Adorno's eventual wife). These gatherings led to lively debates, particularly in relation to some of the aforementioned recent drafts for the *AP* which Benjamin circulated amongst this inner circle.

According to Benjamin's correspondence, this time had a perceptible impact on his thought. In a letter from May 1935 addressed to Adorno, Benjamin claims the reunions in Frankfurt and Königstein provoked a noticeable transition, specifically regarding his work on the *AP*, which marked 'the end of rhapsodic naïveté' defined by 'carefree, archaic philosophizing [...] engrossed in nature' (C, 488–89). To add to this, Adorno would later describe their meetings thus: 'We congregated together, as intellectuals communed 40 years ago, simply with the intention to talk and to pick at any theoretical bones which we happened to be gnawing at'.<sup>11</sup> Scholem would retrospectively confirm this when he later pronounced the year 1929

as a distinct turning point in [Benjamin's] intellectual life as well as a high point of intensive literary and philosophical activity. It was a visible turning point, which nevertheless did not exclude the continuity of his thought.<sup>12</sup>

This period would most importantly see a decisive turn to Marxist tendencies, spurred on, not only by his amorous attachments to Asja Lacis, but equally by his growing intellectual friendships with Adorno and Horkheimer. The most significant cause for this sudden turn was, however — as has been well documented — the time he spent with Brecht. This Brechtian influence would come to the fore in a series of

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<sup>11</sup> Adorno as cited by Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz, 'Das Institut für Sozialforschung/ Gretel Adorno, Adorno und Horkheimer' in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011), pp. 92–106 (p. 92).

<sup>12</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review of Books, 2003), p. 159.

essays concerned with issues of cultural reception and production in the mid-1930s, which have since solidified Benjamin's importance as one of the most impactful critics and commentators of the twentieth century. It is easy to forget that out of all his intellectual friendships of this period, Benjamin spent the most time in Brecht's company.<sup>13</sup> During his time in exile he would travel to Denmark and Sweden, where the Brechts had settled, on numerous occasions.<sup>14</sup>

### **Vagabondism/ Networking in Paris**

Alongside these promising intellectual and professional developments, the beginning of the decade was also marked by several personal and professional setbacks.

Benjamin's divorce from his wife in 1929 resulted in emotional and financial isolation from his family who had threatened to deprive him of his inheritance.

Unsurprisingly, his journal entries from this time reveal the impacts of this dark and troubled period, during which Benjamin was entertaining suicidal thoughts.<sup>15</sup>

Although he received regular commissions from both newspapers and radio stations, Benjamin was caught up in the realities of the national economic crisis which swept through Germany from 1929. What's more, Hitler's rise to power during this period meant that Benjamin was often only able to publish his work under pseudonyms, if at all. In spite of such challenging circumstances, or perhaps because of them, Benjamin would devote these years to travelling Europe.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Christine Shuttleworth (London: Verso, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Lindner, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Scholem claimed that 'he never discussed [his suicide plans] with anyone. It was a climax of his life, a fever crisis that erupted suddenly and just as suddenly subsided'. See *The Story of a Friendship*, p. 307.

Benjamin spent December of 1929 until February of 1930 in Paris. These months would be primarily devoted to strengthening his network of literary contacts in Paris, which included previous acquaintances such as Louis Aragon, Robert Desnos, the critic Léon-Pierre Quint, the bookshop owner Adrienne Monnier and Julien Green, but also new ones such as writer Marcel Jouhandeau and journalist Emmanuel Berl. The results of these efforts were documented in his 'Pariser Tagebuch' ['Paris Diary'], 'some long articles on French literary currents today', which appeared in four instalments in *Die Literarische Welt* from April to June 1930 (C, 335). The articles, written, as their title indicates, in the form of diary entries, detail Benjamin's time in Paris during this period, outlining his impressions of the city, his casual conversations but also more formal interviews with some of the intellectuals named above. The entries distinctly convey the appeal of Paris and are a testament to Benjamin's own flâneuristic activity within the city whose 'streets [...] seem to be inhabited interiors', where the people, in an obvious reference to *Le paysan de Paris*, 'cultivate their *quartier* in as constant and peace-loving a way as peasants' (SW 2:1, 337–338). The articles display his brilliant qualities of observation and see him interacting and operating within the Parisian intellectual milieu with apparent ease. Despite his overwhelmingly solitary nature, his talent for journalism and networking saw him advance to the core of French literary society. Having read and reviewed several of the figures he encountered, Benjamin succeeded in inserting himself and his ideas into this environment. The entries also clearly illustrate his knowledge of the city's architecture, culture and literary scene which was undoubtedly furthered by his years of research on the Parisian arcades.

Aside from spending an evening dining with ‘Monsieur Albert’, the man Benjamin took to have inspired Proust’s *Albertine disparue*,<sup>16</sup> the highlights of this period included making the acquaintance of the aforementioned Emmanuel Berl and publisher and bookshop owner, Adrienne Monnier. Berl — a writer and journalist who was a relative of both Henri Bergson and Proust and would go on to earn the Grand Prix de littérature in the late 1960s — had an impact on Benjamin during this period. Berl had joined the surrealist movement after his time in the French army and had previously collaborated closely with members such as Aragon. In the 1930s, Berl became increasingly radical as he launched the *Marianne*, a successful leftist weekly journal which displayed his neo-socialist sympathies.<sup>17</sup> In a letter to Scholem from this period, Benjamin claims that it was Berl’s ‘rare critical acumen’ which he found so fascinating (*C*, 360). He also cites Berl’s *Mort de la pensée bourgeoise* (1929), which was followed up by a second volume entitled *Mort de la morale bourgeoise* (1930) and had started to appear in the journal *Europe* at the time Benjamin wrote his letter. This work, stated Benjamin, was ‘astonishingly close to [his] own point of view’ (*C*, 360). He would cite Berl in his written work as well as in his radio broadcasts in the years to come.<sup>18</sup>

Adrienne Monnier was the owner and founder of *La Maison des Amis des Livres* on the rue de l’Odéon in the sixth arrondissement. Monnier was one of the first women in France to independently open and run a bookshop and later advised her friend and partner Sylvia Beach when she opened her own premises, *Shakespeare and Company*, in 1919. Monnier and Beach’s businesses acted as

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<sup>16</sup> See ‘Paris Diary’, *SW* 2:1, p. 343.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), pp. 72–76.

<sup>18</sup> See ‘Pariser Köpfe’ [‘Parisian Heads’], *GS* VII, pp. 279–286.



important locations for artists and writers during the height of French modernism, staging readings and stocking the latest in avant-garde magazines and literature. The two bookshops transformed the ‘physical space’ of the street into an ‘intellectual space’ where ‘modernist identification and then production’ flourished.<sup>19</sup> *La Maison* functioned primarily as a bookshop, but also offered a lending library to its visitors, as well as events and lectures. What’s more, Monnier ran a publishing house and was a poet in her own right. Her journal, *Le Navire d’Argent*, published major writers such as Joyce, Eliot and Hemingway in the mid-1920s.

According to French Germanist Félix Bertaux’s correspondence to Monnier, Benjamin had read her works without knowing who she was:

Madame [Monnier], a writer and essayist from Berlin, M. Walter Benjamin, said to me yesterday: ‘Do you know the author of some poems that were published six years ago in the N.R.F. and intensely affected me? Of all the things I have read in French, this made the strongest impression on me’ [...]. [M. Benjamin] would be delighted if you would send him word that he could see you.<sup>20</sup>

Over the course of Benjamin’s exile, Monnier would become a close friend ‘in the German sense’ (*GB* V, 230).<sup>21</sup> In a later recollection, she would write that ‘his [French] accent was not harsh’ and that he commanded the language well, ‘making few mistakes, advancing slowly in his speech as if he was scrutinizing the words’.<sup>22</sup> Benjamin made frequent use of Monnier’s *bibliothèque de prêt* and would endeavour to establish a relationship between the bookshop and the

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<sup>19</sup> Joanne Winning, ‘Parties as Lesbian Modernist Production’ in *The Modernist Party*, ed. by Kate McLoughlin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 127–146 (p. 137).

<sup>20</sup> As cited in Gretel Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Gretel Adorno: Correspondence 1930–1940*, trans. by Hoban Wieland (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 170. Hereafter abbreviated as *GAC* and referenced in-text.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *GAC*, p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> Adrienne Monnier, *Rue de l’Odéon* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989), p. 177.

Institute for Social Research.<sup>23</sup> As Eiland and Jennings have put it, ‘her shop became an increasingly important point on Benjamin’s Paris compass’.<sup>24</sup>

Bertaux, a writer and translator in his own right, involved Benjamin in the publication *Neue französische Erzähler* [*New French Narrators*, 1930], which he edited with Hermann Kesten, and which featured work in translation by contemporary French authors ‘of the moment’ such as Gide, Giraudoux, Green and Malraux. Benjamin’s translation of Marcel Jouhandeau’s ‘Fräulein Zéline oder Gottes Glück zum Gebrauch eines alten Fräulein’ [‘Mademoiselle Zéline or God’s Happiness in use of an Old Demoiselle’] was included in the publication, but he also translated Bertaux’s introduction.<sup>25</sup> The aim of the book, according to Bertaux’s introductory comments, was to publicize ‘authors, works and intellectual perspectives [...] the meaning of which is still not apparent to the public today’ and will not ‘fade with the fashions’.<sup>26</sup>

Bertaux’s preface, and the intentions behind this anthology as a whole, were closely aligned with Benjamin’s own critical interests. Bertaux, not unlike Benjamin in his ‘Surrealism’ essay, addresses the ‘foreign observer’ of the French literary landscape, who may not recognize or want to acknowledge the extent to

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<sup>23</sup> In 1937, Benjamin wrote to the Adornos: ‘As far as Adrienne Monnier is concerned, I will try everything to arrange contact between her and Max [Horkheimer] in the next few days’ (*GAC*, p. 201).

<sup>24</sup> Eiland and Jennings, p. 499.

<sup>25</sup> Benjamin also prepared a collection of Jouhandeau translations for a publication with Kiepenheuer which never came to fruition. Several of his translations of Jouhandeau’s work appeared in the press though: ‘Der Dorfbräutigam’ [‘The Village Groom’] was published in February 1931 in the *Europäische Revue* and ‘Die Schäferin Nanou’ [‘The Shepherdess Nanou’] in the *Literarische Welt* in 1932. See Benjamin, *GS, Suppl. 1*, pp. 316–389.

<sup>26</sup> Félix Bertaux, ‘Vorrede’ in *Neue französische Erzähler*, ed. by Hermann Kesten and Félix Bertaux (Berlin: Kiepenheuer, 1930), pp. 7–17 (p. 7).

which it has been influenced by international movements and genres.<sup>27</sup> Today, he claims, one can add Scandinavian, Slavic and Asian influences to this mix and so the ‘pure’, ‘classical’ conception of France and its writers needs to be debunked.<sup>28</sup> A prime example for this complex literary history is Gide who is irrevocably intertwined in a ‘constellation’ between ‘Goethe, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Blake’, and represents the most exciting directions in French thought.<sup>29</sup> Bertaux rounds out these reflections with an incisive question: ‘What does it actually mean to be “entirely” [“von Grund auf”] French?’.<sup>30</sup> Like Goethe’s Faust or the characters in Giraudoux’s work, everyone is ultimately “made up” of dialogues’.<sup>31</sup> This collaboration, often overlooked within Benjamin’s impressive and wide-ranging corpus, marks his integration into a circle of multilingual French comparatists, for whom literary criticism was a subject that needed to take place outside of the realm of a purely national context. Thus, before he had even emigrated to France, Benjamin had managed to involve himself in the field of contemporary French criticism.

In 1931, Benjamin continued to establish himself in the Parisian intellectual milieu. Notable publications from that year include ‘Kleine Geschichte der Photographie’ [‘Little History of Photography’], ‘Paul Valéry’, ‘Der destruktive Charakter’ [‘The Destructive Character’] and ‘Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus: Eine Rede über das Sammeln’ [‘Unpacking my Library: A Talk

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<sup>27</sup> In this regard, Bertaux points out the Italian and Spanish influences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the English and German influences of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Bertaux’s comments anticipated studies such as Tyler Stovall’s *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Bertaux, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

about Collecting’] which appeared in *Die Literarische Welt* in July. Casting himself in the role of the collector, the latter piece is notable for the inclusion of selected extracts from Benjamin’s arcades materials, which would later form Convolute H, ‘Der Sammler’ [‘The Collector’]. The collector is portrayed as a figure facing extinction within an age of rapid commodity production and exchange. Even though Benjamin was not actively working on the arcades, his later inclusion of such materials in the Convolutés demonstrates that the *AP* was still a subconscious concern.

From 1932, Germany’s political situation would force Benjamin into a permanent state of exile. He would spend some time in Ibiza, before making his way to Paris to establish his permanent home away from home. In 1933, he left Germany for the very last time.

### 3.2. 1934–40: LIFE IN EXILE

#### The Institute for Social Research

The beginning of the 1930s had seen Benjamin begin to build relationships with various members of the Institute for Social Research based at the University of Frankfurt. This was mostly due to his aforementioned connection to Adorno who was constantly championing Benjamin’s writings to Horkheimer, the Institute’s director. Although he had no immediate plans to follow the Institute to their designated country of exile, the USA, Benjamin started working towards becoming a full-fledged member which was a goal he achieved in the late autumn of 1937.<sup>32</sup>

The Institute was initially founded under the name *Gesellschaft für*

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<sup>32</sup> In 1939, Benjamin wrote: ‘What kept me going during this first period of emigration was the hope that my work would earn me the position of a fully ordained researcher at the Institute’. See ‘Meine Beziehungen zum Institut’ (‘My relations to the Institute’), *GS V*, p. 1174.

*Sozialforschung* in 1922. It had officially been banned from Germany for its ‘hostility to the state’ in 1933; most of its library was seized, faculty members and staff were arrested. Having already anticipated their banishment, the Institute had set up a new administrative hub in Geneva with an office of twenty-one members, formally branding themselves the *Société Internationale de Recherches Sociales*.<sup>33</sup> Further hubs were subsequently established in London, Paris and New York. The Paris office had been set up with the aid of Célestin Bouglé, a French philosopher who was known for having worked under prominent sociologist Émile Durkheim and was director of the *École Normale Supérieure* from 1935 until 1940.

This newly forged professional tie had a noticeable impact on Benjamin’s critical output right up until the end of his life. The Institute, thanks in part to Adorno, now also had a stake in Benjamin’s ongoing work on the *AP*. Whatever Adorno’s motivations for his involvement in Benjamin’s unfinished work on the arcades, it is undeniable that in advocating his former mentor to the Institute’s members, he threw Benjamin a much-needed lifeline that allowed him to work on the project without the constraints of financial ruin that he would have otherwise faced. Nevertheless, as many critics have noted, their professional and personal relationship was constantly rocked by their diverging intellectual politics.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, despite his cordial and mostly enthusiastic tone to Horkheimer in his correspondence, Benjamin held continuous reservations about his suitability

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. by Michael Robertson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 132.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno was particularly wary of Brecht’s influence on Benjamin’s thought, and as has been documented by numerous critics, their disagreements culminated in Adorno’s appraisal of Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay in 1936. See Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 127–134. Hereafter abbreviated as *CC* and referenced in-text. Cf. Thijs Lister, *Benjamin and Adorno on Art and Art Criticism: Critique of Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

for the Institute's research programme. His exchanges with Scholem reveal a different facet of this relationship, in particular Horkheimer's labelling of Benjamin as a 'mystic'.<sup>35</sup> Benjamin admitted to Scholem that

he owed to the Institute the chance to function within a framework, albeit a very modest one, and to pursue his thoughts, although he really did not find some of the assignments he received from it to his liking.<sup>36</sup>

Nonetheless, Benjamin remained dedicated to the Institute since this cooperation gave him the financial support to continue to pursue his study on the arcades. The Institute, on the other hand, was able to benefit from Benjamin's network in Paris. Part of Benjamin's role as a stipendiary associate involved keeping Horkheimer in the loop of the major happenings of French intellectual circles.<sup>37</sup> In addition to the lengthier commissions he received from the Institute, Benjamin regularly sent Horkheimer *Literaturbriefe*, surveys which offered an overview of the current trends in French literature and thought across the political spectrum.<sup>38</sup> Benjamin's presence in France thus represented an extremely valuable connection for the exiled group

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<sup>35</sup> See letter from Scholem to Benjamin on 25.3.1938, Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem, trans. by Gary Smith and Andre Lefevere (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), p. 215.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>37</sup> An example would be that he ensured that Horkheimer was subscribed to journals such as *Mesures*, which despite being managed by the American Henry Church, was secretly edited by Jean Paulhan, the official editor of the *Nouvelle Revue Française*. Cf. Michael Syrotinski, *Defying Gravity: Jean Paulhan's Interventions in Twentieth-Century French Intellectual History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin wrote seven of these résumés between November 1937 and March 1940. See *GB V* pp. 595, 616 and *GB VI*, pp. 21, 37, 91, 197 and 403. The initial idea for these reports can be traced back to 1936, when Benjamin wrote in his 'work plan' for the Institute that he planned to produce surveys on 'the current state' of French literature. Cf. Göttsche and Lonitz, p.104 and Walter Benjamin, *Lettres sur la littérature*, ed. by Muriel Pic, trans. by Lukas Bärfuss (Geneva: Zoé, 2016).

who otherwise would have had no access to ‘the European intellectual currents that were its lifeblood’.<sup>39</sup>

### **The First Commission: ‘The Present Social Situation of the French Writer’**

Between April and June 1933, Benjamin wrote ‘Zum gegenwärtigen gesellschaftlichen Standort des französischen Schriftstellers’ [‘On the Present Social Situation of the French Writer’], which would be published by the Institute in 1934, marking his first formal contribution to their journal. The article, bridging themes from ‘Der Surrealismus’ (1929) and ‘Der Autor als Produzent’ (1934), was considered by both Adorno and Scholem as an instance of Benjamin’s ‘vulgar materialism’.<sup>40</sup> Writing during a sojourn in Ibiza, Benjamin essentially composed the entire piece without the relevant physical resources to hand.<sup>41</sup> For this reason, Benjamin himself admitted that the piece amounted to nothing but ‘sheer fakery’ (‘reine Hochstapelei’), yet he would claim that ‘he was not as displeased with the completed essay as might have been expected’.<sup>42</sup> ‘Something unchallengeable could not be produced here’, Benjamin wrote to Scholem upon the article’s publication, ‘I believe, however, that readers nevertheless will derive from this an insight into connections that never before have been made so clearly recognizable’.<sup>43</sup> The unusual circumstances of composition can also be deciphered in the article’s structure, which features a non-chronological unfolding of Benjamin’s arguments as

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<sup>39</sup> Eiland and Jennings, p. 584.

<sup>40</sup> ‘The whole difficult problem is connected to the figure of Brecht’, wrote Adorno, ‘and the credence you are willing to give him’ (CC, p. 53).

<sup>41</sup> It is therefore also worth noting that the essay fails to mention several noteworthy literary figures such as Henri Barbusse or Romain Rolland, whose work had been endorsed by the French Communist Party, but equally does not elaborate on the divergences and complexities that existed between French leftist intellectuals themselves.

<sup>42</sup> Scholem, p. 323.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin as cited by Scholem, p. 323.

he makes abrupt transitions between figures and time periods, at times citing sources, at others not at all. This could also be put down to the editorial process, but it remains unclear how much of it was amended or redacted.

Scholem's response to the article has historically been given more critical attention than the piece itself. Upon reading the piece, he asked Benjamin whether his efforts were to be understood as a 'communist credo'. Benjamin was rather displeased by such a provocation, responding that

among all the possible forms and means of expression, a credo is the last thing my communism resorts to; that — even at the cost of its orthodoxy — my communism is absolutely nothing other than the expression of certain experiences I have undergone in my thinking and in my life; that it is a drastic, not infertile expression of the fact that the present intellectual industry finds it impossible to make room for my thinking, just as the present economic order finds it impossible to accommodate my life; that it represents the obvious, reasoned attempt on the part of a man who is completely or almost completely deprived of any means of production to proclaim his right to them, both in his thinking and in his life — [...] Is it really necessary to say all this to you? (C, 439).

Unsurprisingly, on the other hand, Brecht's response was one of approval. He stated that the article 'reads splendidly and says more than a four-hundred-page book on the subject, a decent one at that'.<sup>44</sup> A product of Benjamin's engagement with the Brechtian concept of *Umfunktionierung* (refunctioning), whereby art is freed from the 'apparatus of production' to serve a socially progressive agenda (SW 2:2, 774), as well as his recent interactions with members of the French intelligentsia, the 'Social Situation' article offers an analysis of French literary techniques in order to

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<sup>44</sup> As cited in Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Christine Shuttleworth (London: Verso, 2016), p. xiv. Benjamin was also hopeful that Brecht's connections would permit him to present the piece to the editorial board of *Littérature Internationale*, the multilingual organ of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers.



question the writer's political accountability. For this reason, it constitutes a valuable document that provides an insight into Benjamin's understanding of the socio-political role of literature and the contemporary debates surrounding intellectual responsibility in the interwar period. Benjamin draws a portrait that includes the nationalism of Maurice Barrès, the rural Catholicism of Charles Péguy and Alain's radicalism. He also enters into an explicit dialogue with three prominent French critics of the interwar period: Albert Thibaudet, Julien Benda and Emmanuel Berl whilst including the views and works of writers from his regular repertoire such as Gide, Valéry, Proust and Aragon, for whom class traitorship constituted an essential trait of the bourgeois writers of the present age.

The 'Social Situation' essay gives a historical overview before proceeding to dissect the views of the critics named above, who display opposing views on the nature of intellectual duty. Benjamin begins the essay with a reference to Apollinaire's literary legacy, tracing his influence on the movements of futurism, dadaism and surrealism, before launching into a discussion of his prophecy of the imminent 'assassination' of all poets. By starting the essay with an allusion to Apollinaire's poetic vision, rather than simply referring to historical events, Benjamin already highlights the importance of identifying politics within literary form. He thus confirms Apollinaire's 'trick' of how to master the 'world of things' by 'substituting a political point of view for a historical one' (*SW* 2:1, 210). Published over half a decade after his 'Surrealism' essay, Benjamin's 'Social Situation' essay also unveils how his outlook towards the movement had shifted. '[H]ad [surrealism] originated unambiguously in politics', he writes, it 'would have been spared many enemies' (*SW* 2:2, 758).

Aragon, who had by this stage cut his ties with Breton and his followers, is once again used as an important point of reference within this framework. His *Une vague de rêves* (1924) had demonstrated ‘in what an unprepossessing, homegrown substance the dialectical nucleus of surrealism was originally found’ (ibid., 759). In his later *Traité du style* (1928), Aragon would go on to write: ‘When Kant heard the news of revolution, he interrupted his walk. Goethe continued his. How pretentious of them both!’<sup>45</sup> The irony of this statement encapsulates the conundrum which Benjamin approaches in his essay: in moments of political revolution, what role should writers and intellectuals play? As Zakir Paul has argued, the essay ‘constitutes one of the most generative points of contact between politics and literature in modernist criticism, since it does not conceptualize literary practice as lying beyond the pale of economic life’.<sup>46</sup> What’s more, Paul defends Benjamin’s essay against the aforementioned accusations of ‘vulgar materialism’, claiming that it does not exhibit a determinism linking economic base with cultural superstructure.<sup>47</sup> Rather, Benjamin advances a view which scrutinizes one of his most favoured topics, namely: the conflicts that arise between cultural production and distribution, in other words the more ‘technical’ aspects of the cultural superstructure.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Louis Aragon, *Treatise on Style*, trans. by Alyson Waters (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Zakir Paul, ‘Walter Benjamin and Political Style’, *The Germanic Review*, 91.3 (2016), 236–257 (p. 237).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Paul, p. 246.

<sup>48</sup> As Paul duly notes, the German term *Apparat* occupies multiple meanings in both the collective and institutional sense (p. 249). In his early writings in the 1910s under educator Gustav Wyneken, Benjamin had criticized the instrumentalization of education and referred to the German higher education system as an *Apparat*. He would also go on to utilize the term in the later ‘Work of Art’ essay to describe visual technologies.

France's intelligentsia was rapidly evolving in the last few years of the Third Republic. Thibaudet, whom Benjamin references in the essay, had previously examined the intellectual atmosphere of France in his *La République des professeurs* (1927). This Republic was one where intellectuals, professors, and professionals in the education sector (in particular those hailing from the *École Normale Supérieure*), were prominently involved in local politics, seeking to bring about social change:

The Republic of writers will not be the Republic of professors. The Republic of writers is on the Right, today at least, along with the Republic of economics. The Republic of professors is on the Left, along with the Republic of politics. Like the Republic of economics, the Republic of writers, or rather the Republic of Letters, places a premium on *production*. At its limits lie the apotheosis of genius, awe and reverence in the face of its unlimited rights, the imperialism of intellect. Like the Radical Party politician, the Republic of professors places a premium on *distribution*. A good average remains the ideal of the class.<sup>49</sup>

The Third Republic thus became synonymous with Thibaudet's 'Republic of Professors' which saw academics advancing their influence in social and political milieux.<sup>50</sup> As Michael Curtis has stated, this Republic, which championed 'open education careers open to talent', was the longest-lasting Regime in France, until its collapse was brought about by Nazi Germany in 1940.<sup>51</sup> The reasons for this generated polarized discussion, with some arguing that France's defeat was brought

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<sup>49</sup> Albert Thibaudet, *La République des professeurs* (Paris: Grasset, 1927), p. 235. As cited by Lionel Gossmann, 'Towards a Rational Historiography', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 79.3 (1989), 1–68 (p. 7).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Victor Karady, 'Forces of Innovation and Inertia in the Late 19th Century French University System (with Special Reference to the Academic Institutionalisation of the Social Sciences)', *Westminster Studies in Education*, 2.1 (1979), 75–97 (p. 84).

<sup>51</sup> Michael Curtis, *Three Against the Third Republic: Sorel, Barrès and Maurras* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 37.

on by moral decadence.<sup>52</sup> Such views can be traced back to Maurras, Barrès and Sorel during the early 1880s, when the so-called *ligues*, anti-democratic organizations challenging political authority, were established. Barrès was heavily involved in the *Ligue de la Patrie Française*, a nationalist group made up of mainly literary figures.

Within a year of Thibaudet's aforementioned study, Julien Benda would publish *La trahison des clercs* (1928), which denounced the recent intellectual turn towards politics and social causes.<sup>53</sup> Benda criticized those who had allowed the sacred ground of the intellectual figure to become soiled through their political sentiments, which he claims gave way to 'the age of the intellectual organization of political hatreds'.<sup>54</sup> His views on this topic are singled out by Benjamin in his essay:

Benda is concerned with the way in which intellectuals have begun to respond to politics over the past few decades. According to him, ever since intellectuals came into being, their world-historical task has been to teach the universal, abstract values of mankind: freedom, justice, and humanity. But now, with Maurras and Barrès, d'Annunzio and Marinetti, Kipling and Conan Doyle, Rudolf Borchardt and Spengler, they have begun to betray these values, whose guardians they have been for centuries (*SW* 2:1, 748).

What's more, Benda was immensely critical of the manner in which such political activity was taking place: 'he is shocked by the slogans of an intelligentsia that defends the cause of nations against that of mankind, of parties against justice, and of power against the mind' (*SW* 2:1, 748). Unsurprisingly, especially considering the

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Marc Bloch, *Strange Victory: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin would also later discuss Benda's *Discours à la nation européenne* (1933) in a letter to Horkheimer in 1938. See *GB* VI, pp. 94–95.

<sup>54</sup> Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. by Richard Aldington (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2007), p. 36.

political climate that the essay was conceived in, Benjamin disagreed with Benda's views, stating that

it is not hard to discern in this very utopian Europe a disguised and, as it were, oversized monk's cell, to which intellectuals — 'the spiritual' — retreat in order to weave the text of a sermon, undaunted by the thought that it will be delivered to rows of empty seats, if indeed it is delivered at all (*SW* 2:1, 749).

Benda, Benjamin argues, completely disregards that the 'decline' of the intelligentsia was 'determined crucially, if not exclusively, by economic factors' (*SW* 2:1, 749).

Benda's views are countered with those of Emmanuel Berl: 'Revolt of the spirit? When Benda uses the word 'spirit' isn't he thinking really of priests who minister to souls and see to earthly goods?' (*ibid.*).

Benjamin identifies a further perspective within this polemic in the rhetoric of former surrealist turned Communist Aragon, who maintains that

'revolutionary writers' [...] 'if they are of bourgeois stock, are essentially and crucially traitors to the class of their origins'. They become militant politicians. As such, they are the only ones able to interpret that dark prophecy of Apollinaire's [...] They know from experience why literature — the only literature they still think worthy of the name — is dangerous (*SW* 2:1, 763).

Benjamin was likely referencing a piece by Aragon entitled 'Le surréalisme et le devenir révolutionnaire' ['Surrealism and revolutionary becoming'] published in December 1931 in *Le surréalisme au service de la révolution*. The article is representative of Aragon's efforts to reconcile his surrealist past with the position he had taken up in 1930 with Georges Sadoul at the Second International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkiv:

It is not that we deny our bourgeois origin, but the dialectical movement of our development has already put us in opposition to this very origin. Strictly speaking, this is the position of revolutionary writers, who, despite being of bourgeois origin, present themselves essentially as traitors to their class of origin.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, according to Benjamin, class traitorship is not always the answer. Socio-economic conditions aside, writers have the responsibility to register political events, subsequently alter their writing as a result, but most importantly make their methods available to the masses. The surrealists, he writes, '[had] found a place for the intellectual as technologist', and now this place needed to be made accessible to the collective (*SW* 2:1, 763). The 'Social Situation' essay is therefore key in deciphering Benjamin's conception of the writer not only as artist and stylist but also as technician and producer with political agency, roles which he would later flesh out in 'Der Autor als Produzent', which dedicated a primary focus to the *Technik* (in all senses of the word) of writing (*GS* II, 686; 689).

It is in this context that Benjamin criticizes French authors such as Julien Green and his most recent work *Épaves* [*The Strange River*, 1932], for being a conformist when it comes to novelistic technique: 'Green's problem is old-fashioned, and no less old-fashioned is the standpoint of most of these novelists on questions of technique' (*SW* 2:1, 754). Once again, Benjamin cites Berl on this account who claims that most writers 'insist on seeing the life of a character in a novel as an isolated process' in that they 'refuse to take cognizance of behaviourism, or even psychoanalysis' (*SW* 2:1, 754–755). In this respect, the figures of Proust, Gide and Valéry act as counterexamples who have all, according to Benjamin, 'made more or less crucial modifications to [literary] technique' (*SW* 2:1, 755). Contrary to

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<sup>55</sup> Louis Aragon, *Chroniques I: 1918–1932*, ed. by Bernard Leuilliot (Paris: Stock, 1998), p. 441.

most critics, Benjamin conceives of Proust's writing as 'a merciless and penetrating critique of contemporary society' which exposes the 'hardened observation of existence from the standpoint of the pure consumer' (ibid.). Proust's work, specifically *À la recherche* — in its combination of poetry, memoir and commentary — sees the writer 'constantly placing himself at the disposition of the reader' (ibid.).

Similarly, in this regard, Valéry is praised for his contributions to the 'symptomatic importance for the function of the writer in society' through his reflections on the nature of technique (*SW* 2:1, 755–56). Valéry's character Monsieur Teste is posited as a subject with the potential 'to cross the historical threshold marking the dividing line between the harmoniously educated, self-sufficient individual and the technician and specialist who is ready to assume a place within a much larger plan' (*SW* 2:1, 757). Nevertheless, Benjamin faults Valéry for never having crossed said threshold into 'the sphere of the human community' (ibid.). Gide, on the other hand, had crossed this 'threshold' in his adherence to the Communists which Benjamin cites as being 'a matter of significance for the developments of the problems in the advanced intelligentsia in France' (*SW* 2:1, 757).

Often disregarded by critics in favour of later essays concerned with similar topics, the 'Social Situation' essay represents one of Benjamin's most distinctive formulations on the importance of a 'political' writing technique as well as exemplifying his work as an intermediary between German and French intellectual circles. It becomes clear that the figure of the French intellectual represented a model for Benjamin to explore the potential for a style that can be considered 'political'.<sup>56</sup> The innovative techniques that he encountered within the works of contemporary

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Paul.

French writers were the driving force behind Benjamin's critical engagement with France's *Literaturbetrieb*. Furthermore, the comparisons he was able to draw with France let him establish the extent to which the left-wing intelligentsia of Berlin was in need of renewal, particularly within the context of the cultural crises he saw taking shape before him — what he characterized as the fascist 'aestheticizing of politics' (*SW* 3, 122).

Benjamin certainly possessed a talent for capturing prominent moments of transition within European intellectual history, in particular within the boundary-pushing work of writers of the French avant-garde, which offered him the most fruitful platforms for comparison and critique. His works on French literature in this sense represent critical snapshots of intellectual developments in motion. The fact that he took issue with the Berlin intellectual scene, but also struggled to fully integrate himself during his Parisian exile, contributed to his critical awareness and his outside observer status as an intermediary capable of analysing the faults on either side of the border.

### ***The Arcades Project* — Revival and Expansion**

Benjamin's move to Paris meant that aside from the commissions he received from the Institute, his journalistic work largely dried up, resulting in his return to the *AP* in the mid-1930s. Once in Parisian exile, he quickly built up new working habits which included frequent trips to the reading room of the Bibliothèque Nationale. In a letter to Adorno on March 9<sup>th</sup> 1934, he recounts 'spend[ing] the entire day in the library reading room' and 'finally even com[ing] to feel quite at home with the rather officious *règlement* of the place' (*CC*, 27). A noticeable change which occurred in this period was the creation of a new organizational system, which led Benjamin to



classify his existing material into different categories. These categories, which the editors of the posthumously published materials would eventually term *Konvolute*, became a fast-growing database to which Benjamin would add material up until 1940.<sup>57</sup>

As detailed in the first section of this chapter, Benjamin had had several conceptual and theoretical breakthroughs in the preceding years. In a letter addressed to Werner Kraft in May 1935, Benjamin refers to the

total revolution [vollkommene Umwälzung] that the mass of ideas and images deriving from my purely metaphysical, even theological, thinking from the distant past had to undergo so that they could nourish my current disposition with all the force they contained (*GB V*, 88–89).

‘This process’, he tells Kraft, ‘proceeded in silence [...] I myself was so little aware of it that I was extraordinarily astonished when — as the result of an external stimulus — the plan was recently written within a few days’ (*GB V*, 89). ‘The plan’ Benjamin is referring to was an exposé of the *AP*, which he had been tasked to prepare by the Institute for Social Research. Following a conversation with Friedrich Pollock,<sup>58</sup> the assistant director of the Institute, Benjamin would devise this exposé out of the materials that he had been assembling since 1927: the first version was written in German and published in 1935, the other in French in 1939.<sup>59</sup> This bilingual aspect of the exposés once again underlines that the *AP* was a multilingual,

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<sup>57</sup> Roughly three phases have been identified within this process: entries dating prior to June 1935 (Convolute F: ‘Iron Construction’, F 1,1–4a; *GS V*, pp. 211–224), followed by those until December 1937 (F 5–7a; *GS V*, pp. 224–230) and lastly those dating up until May 1940 (F 8–8a; *GS V*, pp. 230–231).

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin wrote to Horkheimer in October 1935: ‘When he was here, Mr. Pollock provided the impetus for me to write down the précis’ (*C*, 509).

<sup>59</sup> Following the circulation of the exposé, Benjamin and his *AP* were featured in the Institute’s official programme under the title ‘The Social History of the City of Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century’.

transnational undertaking, an essential aspect of the project which is not conveyed in translations of the original work. Benjamin gave the exposé the title ‘Paris, Die Hauptstadt des 19. Jahrhunderts’, its later translation into French, ‘Paris, Capitale du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle’, making the punning allusion to Marx’s *Das Kapital* more explicit.

The structure for the 1935 exposé was, by Benjamin’s standards, remarkably straightforward: six chapters, dedicated to Fourier, Daguerre, Grandville, Louis-Philippe, Baudelaire and Haussmann respectively, outline a concept, event or invention associated with the figure of each section, offering a polyphonic rendering of nineteenth-century histories of architecture and technology.<sup>60</sup> The exposé, in many ways, is a sober contrast to the posthumously published drafts of amassed citations and commentaries.<sup>61</sup> Benjamin traces the socio-economic evolution of the arcades from the beginning of their construction in 1822, when the textile trade had reached an all-time high and the wonders of iron construction were about to become a significant part of architectural history. The exposé also explores different nineteenth-century ‘types’: the collector, the *flâneur*, the conspirator, the prostitute and the gambler.

Theoretically and conceptually, the first exposé marked an important milestone within the progression of Benjamin’s thought, namely the consolidation of his inheritance of surrealism with the newly developed interest in social history through a Marxist-inspired lens. In a letter to Alfred Cohn from 1935, he had written that following an extended interruption, he was returning to the project

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<sup>60</sup> The exposés’ individual sections are entitled ‘Fourier or the Arcades’, ‘Daguerre, or the Panoramas’, ‘Grandville, or the World Exhibitions’, ‘Louis-Philippe, or the Interior’, ‘Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris’ and ‘Haussmann, or the Barricades’.

<sup>61</sup> Out of the 36 known Convolutés, only 6 Convolutés are represented: A (‘Arcades, *Magasins de Nouveautés*, Sales Clerks’), G (‘Exhibitions, Advertising, Grandville’), I (‘The Interior, The Trace’), P (‘The Streets of Paris’), E (‘Haussmannization, Barricade Fighting’) and Q (‘Panorama’).

of [...] the Paris Arcades, which since its beginning seven or eight years ago has never been so zealously pursued as it is now and which has been through a large-scale and, I believe, conducive recasting process [*Umschmelzungsprozess*], in which the whole mass of thoughts, which was originally organized in an immediate metaphysical fashion, has been transferred into a state of aggregation more suitable to its current existence. There now exists a comprehensive exposé of this work, which allows traits of the actual book to be recognized (*GB V*, 102).

For the first time since the *AP*'s inception, the reality of publication had become tangible. However, owing to the current political situation, Benjamin was entirely aware that this reality remained questionable: 'Whether this will ever get written is, of course, more doubtful than ever before' (*GB V*, 102).

Nevertheless, Benjamin's drafting of the exposé breathed new life into the project. Throughout 1935, aside from a few other pieces,<sup>62</sup> Benjamin's focus was predominantly on gathering further materials for his study. During this period, he amassed numerous pages of notes as he consulted and copied from a diverse selection of nineteenth and twentieth-century sources, including Marx's *Das Kapital*. His materials grew to the point where following Pollock's advice, he arranged for them to be photographically reproduced.<sup>63</sup> Following the first exposé's completion, Benjamin wrote to Scholem on May 20<sup>th</sup>:

With this exposé, which I had promised without giving it much thought, the project entered a new phase, in which for the first time it bears more resemblance — a distant resemblance — to a book [...] just as the baroque book dealt with the seventeenth century from the perspective of Germany, this book will unfold the nineteenth century from the perspective

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<sup>62</sup> Up until June 1935, he was still able to publish a few select articles in Germany under the pseudonyms Detlef Holz und K.A. Stempflinger. Cf. Michael Opitz, 'Literaturkritik' in Lindner, pp. 311–332 (p. 331).

<sup>63</sup> See *GS V*, p. 1262.

of France (C, 481–482).

Not only is this excerpt indicative of Benjamin's comparative thought process, but it most importantly highlights how his encounters with French works had permitted him to transform his prior conceptions of history as previously developed in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*. In this regard, he would also inform Scholem that the *AP* 'represents both the philosophical application of surrealism — and thereby its sublation [*Aufhebung*] — as well as the attempt to retain the image of history in the most inconspicuous corners of existence — the detritus of history, as it were' (C, 505). This statement confirms that although Benjamin had started to consult further sources, the surrealist influence under which the *AP* was originally conceived still persisted. In this manner, surrealism's sublation within the *AP* led to its simultaneous preservation and transformation in Benjamin's efforts to merge it with his historical materialist aspirations. As such, surrealism under Benjamin was suspended in a dialectical exchange, functioning as a conduit which facilitated a correspondence between a host of intellectual currents.

Scholem, however, was not the man that he needed to impress in order to secure the future of the *AP*. In a letter to Adorno to which he attached a copy of the exposé, Benjamin once again claimed that he had come closer than ever before to shaping his material into a full-length study. Despite Adorno's view that the *AP* was 'not only the centre of [Benjamin's] philosophy but, in light of all that can be spoken philosophically today, the decisive word, a chef d'oeuvre like no other', he still needed to consider the concerns of the Institute (CC, 84). Yet the exposé seems to have quelled any existing former doubts. On June 5<sup>th</sup> 1935, he would respond to Benjamin:

After an extremely careful reading of the material, I believe I can now say that my former reservations about the Institute's attitude have been entirely dispelled [...] I shall write to Horkheimer at once to urge acceptance of the work en bloc and thereby, of course, appropriate financial support (*CC*, 92–93).

Despite his claims in support of the project, it is well known that there were certain aspects of the exposé which concerned Adorno. Following his letter in June, Adorno sent a follow-up communication to Benjamin about the exposé in August. The contents of this message, now often referred to as the 'Hornberg letter', offered a rather scathing critique of the social-psychological concepts that were central to the *AP*. Most devastatingly, Adorno maintains that Benjamin's treatment of a collective unconscious was too close to that of Jung, but also that his conceptions of the dialectical image of the dream was 'undialectical':

If you transpose the dialectical image into consciousness as a 'dream', you not only rob the concept of its magic and thereby rather domesticate it, but it is also deprived of precisely that crucial and objective liberating potential that would legitimate it in materialist terms. The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; it is rather dialectical in character, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness (*CC*, 105).

Furthermore, the psychologization of the dialectical image as a 'dream' would inevitably lead it to fall 'under the spell of bourgeois psychology' and lose its 'collective' power (*CC*, 106–7). 'For who precisely is the subject of this dream?', Adorno asks Benjamin (*ibid.*). 'In the nineteenth century', he claims 'it was surely nothing but the individual' (*CC*, 106–7). This was evidently the exact opposite of Benjamin's intentions. The exposé had outlined the use to be made 'of the dream

material’, ‘a textbook case of dialectical thought’ which would make it ‘the organ of historical awakening’ (*GS V*, 59). ‘The idea of the collective consciousness’, Adorno continues in the same letter, ‘was invented to distract attention from true objectivity, and from alienated subjectivity as its correlate’ (*CC*, 107). ‘Our task’, he tells Benjamin, ‘is to polarize and dissolve this “consciousness” dialectically in terms of society and singular subjects, not to galvanize it as the imagistic correlate of the commodity character’ (*ibid.*).

Benjamin appears to have been rather receptive to the great majority of Adorno’s criticisms, stating that ‘all of your reflections — or almost all of them — go to the productive heart of the issue’ (*CC*, 117). There was, however, one issue on which Benjamin would not budge: ‘how indispensable certain elements [...] in this constellation [of the dialectical image] appear to be: namely the dream figures’ (*CC*, 119). ‘The dialectical image’, Benjamin maintains, ‘does not draw a copy of the dream’ (*C*, 508). Yet it does ‘contain the instances, the moment consciousness dawns as one awakens’ and is therefore intricately linked to the process of historical awakening — that is, awakening from and to ‘that dream we name the past’ (*AP*, 389). For Benjamin, there existed a profound difference between the individual dreaming psyche of the individual and the ‘historical’ dream of collective consciousness. Contrary to Adorno’s reading, the dream could thereby hold dialectical potential.

In 1939, Benjamin would produce a second exposé written in French. The first obvious difference between this exposé and the 1935 version is structural, as Benjamin had chosen to add an introduction and a conclusion. Several other distinctions can be noted in the exposés’ contents: Benjamin had narrowed his recent focus on Baudelaire’s work, which is reflected in the section on Baudelaire in the

exposé and the sections on Louis-Philippe and Fourier were also modified. Whilst the first exposé ends on the rather hopeful idea of the dreaming epoch precipitating its own awakening — which, ‘as Hegel already noticed [bears its end within itself and unfolds by cunning]’, the second exposé ends on a note of resignation. In lieu of optimism, the conclusion of the later exposé is the result of Benjamin’s discovery of the writings of Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805–1881), the famed French socialist and lifelong revolutionary, who had previously inspired Marx. Blanqui occupies a notable place in French history for being involved in not just one but all three of the major uprisings in nineteenth-century Paris: the July Revolution of 1830, the 1848 Revolution and the Paris Commune of 1870, and for having been arrested and incarcerated after each one of those revolts. It was Blanqui’s *L’éternité par les astres* (1872), the last ‘cosmic phantasmagoria’ of the nineteenth century, which Benjamin took a particular interest in and which he cites at length in his conclusion. This being the case, Benjamin confirmed in his correspondence that the exposé was primarily focused on ‘the confrontation of semblance and reality’ (*GB VI*, 233). ‘The succession of phantasmagorias that are indicated in the individual sections’, he wrote, ‘leads at the end to the great phantasmagoria of the universe in Blanqui’ (*ibid.*).

Written during his incarceration in Fort du Taureau, a marine cell of the English Channel, in 1871, Blanqui’s *L’éternité par les astres* maps out what Nietzsche would theorize a decade later under the guise of the concept of *ewige Wiederkunft* (‘eternal return’):

The universe is eternal, the Stars are perishable, and since they form all matter, every one of them has passed through billions of existences [...] Every inch of the ground that we walk has been part of the whole universe. But it is a mute witness, and it does not breathe a word

of what it was given to behold in Eternity.<sup>64</sup>

Over half a century later, against the backdrop of raging fascism, Benjamin read these lines whilst in Parisian exile and their ‘cosmic speculation’ immediately struck a chord (*GS I*, 1071). He had come across this publication in the late autumn of 1937 at the Bibliothèque Nationale and immediately saw a personal parallel with his own situation of forced exile. ‘There is no progress’, writes Blanqui, ‘Alas! no, these are vulgar reissues, repetitions. So too are the copies of past worlds, so too are those of future worlds. Only the chapter of bifurcations remains open to hope’.<sup>65</sup> Benjamin’s projection of his own melancholy conception of history is confirmed in his interpretation of the passage that he cites as ‘the last word of the great revolutionary’ (*GS IV*, 151). In reality, Blanqui would be released from his cell in 1879 and go on to spend the last year and a half of his life travelling France, giving speeches at rallies, fighting election campaigns and even launching a daily newspaper, *Ni Dieu Ni Maître*, to which he was a regular contributor.<sup>66</sup>

Critics have generally ascribed a high importance to these exposés, which arguably remain the closest Benjamin ever came to publishing the *AP*. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that they served an obvious practical purpose and were prepared with a specific audience in mind. As Alexander Gelley states, ‘[the exposés] reflect a fixation of the project at a given moment, oriented to what Benjamin presumed to be the interests of the Institute’.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the exposés

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<sup>64</sup> Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars: An Astronomical Hypothesis*, trans. by Frank Chouraqui (New York: Contra Mundum Press, 2013), p. 107.

<sup>65</sup> Blanqui, p. 147.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Louis Auguste Blanqui, *The Blanqui Reader: Political Writings, 1830–1880*, ed. by Peter Hallward and Philippe Le Goff, trans. by Mitchell Abidor, Peter Hallward and Philippe Le Goff (London: Verso, 2018), p. xxxii.

<sup>67</sup> Alexander Gelley, *Benjamin’s Passages: Dreaming, Awakening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 128.



do not accurately reflect the content of the Convolutés and other associated drafts which Benjamin had been diligently working on for close to a decade. One must therefore question whether the exposés, produced at the request of an Institute funding his work during an unsettling period, can truly be considered a genuine part of the highly personal textual archive that is Benjamin's *AP*.

In 1939, Horkheimer shared the news that due to the waning financial state of the Institute, they would no longer be able to support Benjamin and his work. This turn of events was, of course, a devastating blow to Benjamin and his hopes for the *AP*.

### French Journalism

Despite the financial, social and intellectual setbacks that accompanied Benjamin's exile, he was still able to leave his mark in the pages and minds of French intellectual society. One skill that benefitted his output in France was his previous experience as a journalist and broadcaster, another was his aforementioned ability to network with some of the biggest names in French literary history.

In most retrospective accounts of 1930s Paris, two names stand at the forefront of French public intellectual life: Gide and Malraux. They had built a reputation for hosting literary salons which served as 'microcosms linked together by magazines, books, debates on ideas, and above all personalities'.<sup>68</sup> Amidst growing political tensions, the two writers had quickly replaced their literary activity with activism earlier in the decade, their names appearing on several public notices, appeals, petitions and manifestos. In 1932, Malraux joined the *Association des*

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<sup>68</sup> Jean Palmier, *Weimar in Exile: The Antifascist Emigration in Europe and America* (London: Verso Books, 2017), p. 610.

*Écrivains et des Artistes Révolutionnaires* (AEAR) which held regular meetings to contest Hitler's ascent to power. Gide served as honorary president at the World Congress Against War and Fascism held from 22–24 September 1933 in Paris.<sup>69</sup> As Palmier notes: 'One need only read the texts assembled in [Gide's] collection *Littérature engagée* to measure the number and scope of his declarations against fascism'.<sup>70</sup>

Gide's status in particular certainly did not escape Benjamin's attention. He had already made Gide the subject of several articles predating his exile.<sup>71</sup> In 'André Gide und Deutschland' ['André Gide and Germany'] for instance, which had appeared in the *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1928, Benjamin casts Gide as the most 'German' of all French writers, describing him as 'a great Frenchman [...] whose efforts, passion and courage have combined to lend his physiognomy a particularly European cast' (*SW* 2:1, 83). That same month, the *Literarische Welt* also published 'Gespräch mit Gide' ['Conversation with André Gide'], a piece which was the result of Benjamin's 'two-hour-long, wide-ranging, and fascinating conversation' with Gide (*C*, 326).<sup>72</sup> The interview-style article contains many fascinating parallels with Benjamin's own situation as a multilingual writer, such as Gide's renewed interest in the German language upon reading Goethe's *The Elective Affinities*: 'The crucial thing when learning language is not which language to choose; it is the ability to abandon one's own language' (*SW* 2:1, 94). Undoubtedly

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<sup>69</sup> In the 1930s, Gide was also invited to visit the Soviet Union by the Soviet Union of Writers, as a result of which he became critical of the Communist cause. Cf. André Gide, *Return from the U.S.S.R.*, trans. by Dorothy Bussy (New York: Knopf, 1937).

<sup>70</sup> Palmier, p. 608.

<sup>71</sup> His interest in Malraux, on the other hand, was less overt and mainly surfaced in the formerly discussed 'Social Situation' essay which discusses his novel *Les Conquérants* (1929). Cf. *GS* II, pp. 800–801.

<sup>72</sup> In a letter to Scholem, Benjamin recounts that he was 'the only publicist' whom Gide would meet with during his visit to Berlin. See *GB* III, p. 325.

this meeting marked a career-high for Benjamin at a time when he was eagerly attempting to carve his own niche within the environment of the Weimar press.

Benjamin's interest in Gide then persisted throughout his time in exile. 'Pariser Brief I: André Gide und sein neuer Gegner' ['Letter from Paris I: André Gide and his new Antagonist'] was published in 1936 by *Das Wort*, a monthly literary exile journal managed by Brecht, Willi Bredel and Lion Feuchtwanger.<sup>73</sup> The departure point for the article was Jacques Talagrand, a writer and journalist who went under the alias Thierry Maulnier, and whose recent book *Mythes socialistes* (1936) had criticized Gide's Communist leanings. Gide, who had chronicled his path to Communism in a series of journal entries which were subsequently collectively released in the *Nouvelles pages de journal* (1936), had become a praised example of a bourgeois writer whose self-questioning of his position had made him an ally to the USSR. Maulnier's intellectual blacklisting of Gide thus becomes grounds for Benjamin to reflect on fascism's hold over art, wherein culture 'can only be maintained by force' (*GS* III, 486). Such a civilization, upheld by the 'ruling class' and 'built on lies', is subject to a profound contradiction:

The contradiction in fascist art, no different to that of the fascist innkeepers or of the fascist state, is a contradiction between practice and theory. The fascist theory of arts bears the traits of pure aestheticism [...]. Fascist art is an art of propaganda' (*GS* III, 487–488).

Benjamin's investment in Gide's work, as well as his reception by a broad political spectrum of the French intelligentsia following his turn towards Communism, offered itself as grounds to analyse the socio-political developments of the French

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<sup>73</sup> In the foreword to the issue, Bredel publicly denounced fascist censorship and the romanticization of German warfare. See Willi Bredel, 'Vorwort' in *Das Wort*, 1.5 (1936), p. 4.

literary scene and the parallels that he saw between fascist Germany and the French right.

A further French figure with whom Benjamin had already corresponded prior to his exile in the late 1920s and early 1930s was critic and essayist Marcel Brion.<sup>74</sup> Benjamin had reviewed Brion's *Bartolomé de Las Casas* (1928) in 'Bücher die übersetzt werden sollten' ['Books which should be translated', 1929].<sup>75</sup> Brion, in turn, had also published several pieces reviewing Benjamin's work, mainly focusing on his translations. In a 1926 piece entitled 'Une traduction de Baudelaire par Walter Benjamin' ['A Baudelaire translation by Walter Benjamin'] which he wrote for *Les Cahiers du Sud*, Brion offers his readership a sustained reflection on the makings of a 'perfect' translation.<sup>76</sup> Whilst Brion contends that novels can be translated as long as the translation maintains the principal ideas and 'the movements' of phrases, poetry, he claims, remains untranslatable.<sup>77</sup> A poem, as a 'personal expression of intelligence and sensibility', should not be reproduced in another language.<sup>78</sup> Instead, and this is the thrust of Brion's argument, poetry needs to be 'recreated' by the translator.<sup>79</sup> The task of the translator is not only to translate, but to be in possession of a certain intuition that allows them to fully comprehend the work at hand and create an entirely new one which emerges as the reflection of the original. This is

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<sup>74</sup> Brion had known their mutual friend Ernst Bloch since the mid-1920s. Bloch had previously told Benjamin about his 'hour-long' conversations with Brion. See *GB III*, p. 225.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *GB III*, 317.

<sup>76</sup> In a letter dated December 1926/ January 1927, Benjamin proclaims his delight that Brion had reviewed his Baudelaire translation. See *GB III*, p. 225.

<sup>77</sup> Marcel Brion, 'Une traduction de Baudelaire par Walter Benjamin', *Les Cahiers du Sud*, 85, (1926), p.399. Brion also published a review of Benjamin's Proust translation entitled 'Une traduction allemande de Marcel Proust' in *La Revue d'Allemagne et du pays de la langue allemande* in November 1927.

<sup>78</sup> Brion, p. 399.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* Brion uses the example of Rilke's translations of Valéry's poetry. On the topic of 'recreating' poetry, see Henri Meschonnic, *Ethics and Politics of Translating*, trans. by Pier-Pascale Boulanger (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007).

what Brion claims is Benjamin's achievement in his translation of *Les tableaux parisiens*, where he is not only able to reproduce the rhythm and imagery of Baudelaire's verse but also translate the 'the soul and essence' of his genius.<sup>80</sup>

Following the publication of Brion's 'Deux livres de Walter Benjamin' ['Two Books by Walter Benjamin'] in *Les nouvelles littéraires* in March 1928, which introduced a French readership to *Einbahnstraße* and *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, Benjamin wrote to him to express his gratitude:

I would like to let you know that your public appraisal of my works filled me with profound joy. And I shall tell you that criticism such as your own in the eyes of a French audience represents for me an encouragement and a reward far greater than any German reviews (even the favourable ones)!<sup>81</sup>

Benjamin's desire to make a name for himself in French journalistic circles is already palpable here, several years prior to his definitive exile.

Brion subsequently became an important point of access for Benjamin to follow the contemporary developments of the French literary press. Benjamin would go so far as to forward to Brion his own work in progress, such as 'Zum Bilde Prousts', which presented the writer from a different perspective than French criticism and which Benjamin hoped would appeal to readers of *Les Cahiers du Sud*.<sup>82</sup> Brion's high estimations of Benjamin's work as a writer and translator meant that once he was forced to relocate to France, he would support him in a number of ways. Most notably, Brion wrote Benjamin's letter of recommendation to the general

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Benjamin cited by Nathalie Raoux, 'Marcel Brion et Walter Benjamin: Le passeur et le passant' in René Huyghe et al., *Marcel Brion: Humaniste et 'Passeur'* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), pp. 126–145 (p. 132).

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Benjamin's letter to Brion on 26.6.1929, *GB III*, pp. 470–471.

director of the Bibliothèque Nationale, allowing him to access the materials he needed to continue his work on the arcades.<sup>83</sup> Perhaps most importantly, though, Brion was a key advocate for Benjamin when it came to getting his work published. Nathalie Raoux has argued that Brion's role is often underestimated, especially with regard to Benjamin's relationship with Jean Ballard, the founder and editor of *Les Cahiers du Sud*, claiming that out of Benjamin's five articles for the publication, four can be traced back to Brion's direct intervention on his behalf.<sup>84</sup> Their correspondence reveals that Brion took up the role of mediator as early as 1927, when he convinced Ballard to publish Benjamin's work.<sup>85</sup>

Laure Bernardi, one of the few critics to have commented on Benjamin's relationship with Ballard, states that it is extremely telling that Ballard was based in Marseille, and not in Paris as, similarly to Benjamin, it seems indicative of his position as an outsider looking in.<sup>86</sup> Benjamin first encountered Ballard on a brief trip to Marseille in the summer of 1926 and would remain in regular contact right up until his death. Following their first meeting, Benjamin profiled *Les Cahiers du Sud* in a piece in the *Literarische Welt* in 1927.<sup>87</sup> His ensuing relationship to Ballard would prove extremely fruitful during his years in exile, when several of his pieces would appear in *Les Cahiers du Sud* in translation. Much to Benjamin's delight, his essay 'Haschisch in Marseille' would be featured in 1935.<sup>88</sup> Benjamin would write to

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Benjamin's letter to the director of the Bibliothèque Nationale on 8.7.1935 (*GB V*, pp. 123–24).

<sup>84</sup> Raoux, p. 134.

<sup>85</sup> Brion wrote to Benjamin: 'I have great admiration for your talent, and it would be a great opportunity for *Les Cahiers du Sud* if you could send them a few articles' (*GB IV*, 473).

<sup>86</sup> Laure Bernardi, 'Zur französischen Literatur und Kultur' in Lindner, pp. 332–343, 336.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. *GS IV*, pp. 483–485.

<sup>88</sup> This was largely the result of Brion's advocacy of Benjamin's work. He had previously written to Ballard: 'Benjamin gave me a very interesting piece to read about an experience of hashish in Marseille [...]. I think that this might interest the readers of the *Cahiers* and I have urged him to send it to you.' As cited by Raoux, p. 133.

Ballard that he was ‘extremely happy to have seen his work appear amidst a group of writers that he had followed closely for so many years’ (*GB V*, 31). This was then followed by a special issue entitled ‘Le Romantisme Allemand’ in the May–June issue in 1937, which included an extract from Benjamin’s essay on *Elective Affinities*, entitled ‘L’Angoisse mythique chez Goethe’ [‘Mythical anguish in Goethe’].<sup>89</sup> What is especially noteworthy about this publication is the manner in which Benjamin is introduced to a French readership:

It is known that the works of Walter Benjamin, the eminent German philologist and critic, have had a profound repercussion in avant-garde, academic and literary circles, in particular his work on the origins of German dramaturgy [...] and on the notion of art criticism in German Romanticism [...]. The following pages are taken from a long study on Goethe’s *Elective Affinities*, published in full in the *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* by Hugo von Hofmannsthal who saw this study as ‘an unparalleled probe into the Goethean mystery’ [‘ein beispielloses Eindringen ins Geheimnis’]. The change of political regime in Germany made it impossible to proceed with the publication of this project. Benjamin [...] has put the most rigorous philological methods at the service of a literary investigation that is as far removed from any aesthetic formalism as it is from historical positivism.<sup>90</sup>

The issue represents a rare instance where we see Benjamin’s reputation and status within French intellectual circles affirmed in his published work, his writing appearing alongside many of the authors and thinkers that he was inspired by and had previously featured in his writing.<sup>91</sup> The last piece by Benjamin to be featured in

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<sup>89</sup> The extract had originally been published in *Neue Deutsche Beiträge*. The special issue also contains pieces by Albert Béguin (‘Les Romantiques Allemands et l’inconscient’), Roger Caillois (‘L’Alternative’), and Jules Monnerot (‘Marx et le Romantisme’). Benjamin’s piece was featured in the category ‘Poètes’ alongside Charles du Bos (‘Fragments sur Novalis’), Jean Wahl (‘Novalis et le principe de contradiction’), Marcel Brion (‘Wackenroder ou le “Moine amateur d’art”’), Jean Cassou (‘Kleist et le somnambulisme tragique’) and Pierre Missac (‘Hoffmann et le péché originel’).

<sup>90</sup> Introductory remarks to Walter Benjamin, ‘L’Angoisse mythique chez Goethe’, *Les Cahiers du Sud* 24 (1937), 342–348 (p. 342) <<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k16512141/f1.item>>.

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin congratulated Ballard on the success of the special issue in a letter. See *GB V*, p. 577.

*Les Cahiers du Sud* was a piece on Albert Béguin,<sup>92</sup> which once again displayed his continued interests in the relationship between French and German cultural histories, namely German Romanticism and French poetry.

Brion was also responsible for connecting Benjamin with the editor in chief of *Europe*, Jean Cassou, in 1935. Subsequently, Cassou presented Benjamin's work to his readership when he accepted the piece 'Peintures chinoises à la Bibliothèque Nationale' ['Chinese Paintings at the Bibliothèque Nationale'] in 1938, which featured a review of a recent exhibition of French art expert Pierre Dubosc's private collection of Chinese art works. Several of Cassou's letters have been conserved in Benjamin's archive.<sup>93</sup> They reveal that Cassou frequently read drafts and commented on Benjamin's work and that he forwarded calls for contributions to Benjamin (such as a special issue on art and technology). What's more, Cassou gratefully received comments from Benjamin on his 'L'art du conte' ['The Art of the Tale'], narration figuring as a significant topic of interest for both writers. This work must have left an impression as the French translation of Benjamin's essay 'Der Erzähler: Betrachtungen zum Werk Nicolai Lesskows' ['The Storyteller: Observations on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', 1936/ 37] was edited to include a reference to Cassou.<sup>94</sup>

Despite the hardships and adversity of being an émigré writer, Benjamin was able to maintain contact and strengthen his relationships with writers and editors

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<sup>92</sup> 'Albert Béguin, 'L'âme romantique et le rêve: Essai sur le romantisme allemand et la poésie française' in *GS* III, pp. 557–560.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Nathalie Raoux, 'Six lettres de Jean Cassou et une lettre de La Revue Europe à Walter Benjamin', *Europe*, 75 (1997), 202–206.

<sup>94</sup> Benjamin worked on the translation from 1936 until 1939. The essay was due to appear in *Europe* according to an announcement on upcoming articles in the August 1939 issue (the last issue to appear before the outbreak of World War II). Cf. 'Allemands de quatre-vingt-neuf', Archive of the Akademie der Künste (AdK), Walter Benjamin Archive, Berlin, inventory no.: WBA 1438 <<https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/3034976>>. It was eventually published posthumously, see 'Le Narrateur: Réflexions à propos de l'œuvre de Nicolas Leskov', *Mercure*, no. 1067 (1952), pp. 458–485.



such as Gide, Brion, Ballard and Cassou. These pre-existing contacts ended up furthering his successes in the 1930s, allowing him to make a small, yet indelible mark in some of the prominent French literary mouthpieces of the interwar years.

### Translation in Exile

As discussed in Chapter 1, Benjamin's relationship to the French language stretched back to his earliest childhood. Prior to his permanent move to Paris, Benjamin was already in the habit of writing, corresponding and speaking in French.<sup>95</sup> As a result of his exile, Benjamin was then able to deepen his language skills. A significant aspect of furthering his career prospects in exile thus lay in his abilities as a translator. In an article for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* dedicated to a German translation of Verlaine's poetry, Benjamin wrote:

[T]hose who translate, work in two languages. Their material — or rather their organ, aside from their mother tongue, is not so much the foreign text but its language. Something is built out of both languages and one can generally count oneself lucky if this framework lasts a little longer than a house of cards (*GS* III, 40).

This passage in many ways exemplifies Benjamin's own relationship to his role as a translator. As early as 1926, Benjamin had acknowledged the difficulty of self-translation: 'I have not succeeded in attaining a command of French that is adequate to be published *tel quel*', he confessed to Scholem, 'I have had to rely on translators and this makes the whole thing so difficult that success is doubtful' (*C*, 301). Once in exile, translation became a vital tool, nonetheless it was a skill that did not develop without its cultural and linguistic challenges.

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<sup>95</sup> For a compilation of the letters he composed in French, see Walter Benjamin, *Lettres françaises* (Paris: Nous, 2013).

The role of translation for and within Benjamin's works has not been examined at length in this thesis thus far. Even though Benjamin was a translator in his own right, the critical responses to 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' and his philosophy of language in general far outweigh the studies that have been dedicated to the actual role that translation played (both literally and figuratively) in his career. Once Benjamin had permanently assumed exiled status in Paris, translation took on a renewed significance, especially within the context of his position as a mediator between his home nation and the culture and language of his principal home in exile. According to Gerhard Rupp, translation in exile constituted an 'intercultural challenge' for Benjamin; between 'his profound orientation towards France in the plans and contents of his writing' on the one hand and 'his adherence to German in his language and articulation' on the other.<sup>96</sup> In this manner, his time in exile, more so than ever, brought about daily trials in his efforts to find a French-speaking audience for his outsider's perspective on French history and culture.

In the course of the 1930s, Benjamin's relationship with French shifted significantly: translation became a means of collaboration, a way of establishing himself within his new intellectual milieu, but it was also key to disseminating his writings and keeping himself afloat as a writer since he had lost many of his usual publishing platforms in Germany. Translation in exile was essentially synonymous with survival. In a letter to Willi Bredel, Benjamin described the situation as follows: 'The interest in *production* here is interlaced, indissolubly, with the author's palpable interest in the *re-production* of his work. The path from manuscript to printed text is

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<sup>96</sup> Gerhard Rupp, 'Benjamin et Bataille: Rencontre(s) franco-allemande(s) à la recherche d'une autre discursivité' in *Ni gauche, ni droite: Les chassés-croisés idéologiques des intellectuels français et allemands dans l'Entre-deux-guerres*, ed. by Gilbert Merlio (Pessac: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 2019), pp. 275–85.  
<<http://books.openedition.org/msha/19759>>.

longer than it has ever been' (*GB V*, 516).<sup>97</sup> One of the principal ways in which Benjamin was able to 're-produce' his work in exile was through translation which was often the result of collaborative work with his French peers. But translation was inaccessible to the majority of German writers in exile and only a select few writers such as Thomas Mann, Lion Feuchtwanger and Stefan Zweig, amongst others, managed to live off translations of their work. For many German émigrés, the political situation meant that they had to shift their attitudes towards their native tongue. In a lecture in 1939 entitled 'Zerstörte Sprache — zerstörte Kultur' ['Destroyed Language — Destroyed Culture'], Ernst Bloch reflected on this shift, stating that German language and culture were under immense threat, due to what they had become associated with: 'It is not possible to preserve and develop a culture without speaking the language in which this culture is formed and continues to exist', he claimed: 'one has to write in the language of one's surroundings, anything else will be a dead creation'.<sup>98</sup>

Not all writers had the privilege of being able to express themselves or translate their work into the language of their country of exile: Benjamin was amongst those fortunate enough to be able to assimilate themselves linguistically.<sup>99</sup> However despite certain linguistic and social advantages, Benjamin's proficiency in French was by no means at a native level. He was acutely aware of the struggle in establishing oneself as a literary critic in a foreign tongue, especially seeing as he was not a commercial writer in the traditional sense. In December 1932, he wrote to Scholem that despite the switch of his 'activities to French' and his 'familiarity with

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<sup>97</sup> As translated by Eiland and Jennings, p. 554.

<sup>98</sup> 'Zerstörte Sprache — zerstörte Kultur' in Ernst Bloch, *Politische Messungen, Pestzeit, Vormärz* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp. 277–299, 277.

<sup>99</sup> He also did not shy away from learning Spanish and English but was somewhat hesitant to pick up Danish.

the stuff of linguistic life [Materie jenes sprachlichen Lebens]' in France, the position from which he approached things was 'still much too much in the vanguard to fall within the view of the reading public'.<sup>100</sup>

Following his move to the French capital the following year, Benjamin certainly knew that successfully reinventing himself as a 'French' writer was a daunting and perhaps even dubious prospect. Once again confiding in his friend, he wrote to Scholem:

You won't be surprised to learn that I am faced here with as many question marks as there are street corners in Paris. Only one thing is certain, that I have no intention of making a futile attempt to earn my living by writing for French journals. If I could place something in a representative journal (Commerce, NRF) once in a while — although even this seems unlikely — I would welcome it because of the attendant prestige. But to try to make a French literary career my means of subsistence [...] would soon rob me of what's left of my no-longer-unlimited power of initiative.<sup>101</sup>

Benjamin's fears and doubts, unfortunately, for the most part, proved to be accurate. The majority of his attempts to get his work published in the French literary press failed. Even when he did manage to secure a job, such as his portrait of Johann Jakob Bachofen, written entirely in French, he was eventually turned down by the *Nouvelle Revue Française*, who had initially commissioned it, as well as later the *Mercure*. Another example is a study on Haussmann that Alfred Kurella, a German Communist writer working alongside Henri Barbusse for the *Front Mondiale*, had tasked Benjamin to review for *Le Monde*, which never made it to press. Lastly, there was Benjamin's project of a lecture series that he devised in the spring of 1934,

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<sup>100</sup> Scholem and Benjamin, p. 23.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

which was to be delivered in French on German figures of the avant-garde such as Kafka, Bloch, Brecht, and Kraus, all with the intention of simultaneously reflecting on the sociology of German audiences.<sup>102</sup> Despite the support he received for the idea from people such as editor François Bernouard and Sylvia Beach, owner of the aforementioned Shakespeare and Company, it never got off the ground.

In one sense, this pattern did not necessarily deviate from the ways in which his career had unravelled in his native country; however — faced with financial destitution and social and cultural isolation — these failures were surely twice as crushing. It was during these years especially that Benjamin's wide-ranging and diverse areas of critical interest did him a disservice. He was largely unable to integrate himself into one particular field, and the contacts that he did manage to maintain were frequently put in jeopardy through the meticulous and stubborn ways in which he dealt with the French translation of his own work, often ending in his absolute refusal of compromise, and his frustration at the limitations of translating his use of the German language. An example would be his attempt to translate *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* with Jean Selz, whom he had met in Ibiza. In his later recollections, Selz wrote:

Benjamin read me his childhood memories [...] collected under the title *Berliner Kindheit*. As he read, he translated. His knowledge of the French language was extensive enough to make me penetrate the frequently steep paths of his thought. However, many passages remained obscure because he could not find certain equivalent words in French. This is what led me to undertake, with the help of his subtle but precise explanations, a French version of his *Berliner Kindheit*.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Cf. *C*, pp. 437–438.

<sup>103</sup> Jean Selz, 'Walter Benjamin à Ibiza' in Benjamin, *Écrits français*, pp. 469–86 (p. 479).

The collaborative work that ensued was long-winded and difficult: Benjamin would not agree to ‘even the smallest of intellectual differences in the words that he chose to translate as his own’.<sup>104</sup> ‘[W]hen you had to tell him that a word he wanted to use simply did not exist in French’, Selz recalled, ‘his dismay and sadness left you in a cruel embarrassment’.<sup>105</sup>

Translation would later play an equally significant role in Benjamin’s dealings with the Institute for Social Research and the commissions that they gave him, which included the famed ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’ [‘The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’], first published in May 1936 by their *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. The first known reference to this article was made in a letter to Gretel Adorno on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1935, where Benjamin reflects on a newly discovered concept:

[D]uring these last few weeks — I have identified the hidden structural character of today’s art [...] which allows us to recognize that what is decisive for us, but only now taking effect, is to be found in the ‘fate’ of art in the nineteenth century. I have thus realized my epistemological theory, which has crystallized around the concept of ‘the now of recognizability’ [...] and which I approach in a very esoteric fashion, using a decisive example (*GAC*, 166)

The following week, Benjamin composed a letter to Horkheimer where he stated his ambition to advance ‘the direction of a materialistic theory of art’:

The issue this time is to indicate the precise point in the present to which my historical construction will orient itself, as to its vanishing point. If the pretext for the [*AP*] is the fate of art in the nineteenth century, this fate has something to say to us only because it is

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

contained in the ticking of a clock whose striking of the hour has just reached *our* ears. What I mean by that is that art's fateful hour has struck for us and I have captured its signature in a series of a preliminary reflections (C, 509).

In the same letter, he informs Horkheimer that he imagines the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* to be 'the proper place' for this work as he 'would rather have [them] publish this fruit of [his] labour than anyone else' (C, 509–10). Following several extensive edits and an eventual translation into French (one of Horkheimer's stipulations), the article was considered finalized in February 1936.<sup>106</sup> Despite its publication, Benjamin could not leave the piece to rest and continued editing and redrafting it in German up until spring 1939.<sup>107</sup> As indicated in the citation above, this continuous rewriting process and 'work in progress' mentality can be identified as one of Benjamin's primary methods in parallel with his work on the *AP*.

The final (the third in total) version of the essay formed the basis of the draft that was eventually republished posthumously in 1955 and circulated internationally thereafter. The man responsible for the translation of the initial 1936 piece was philosopher and writer Pierre Klossowski.<sup>108</sup> Klossowski's other translations include works by Hölderlin, Kafka, Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Nietzsche. Klossowski would also make his mark as a philosopher with his study entitled *Nietzsche and the*

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<sup>106</sup> Benjamin felt that 'the publication of the text in French [was] something much to be desired in view of [his] position' (C, 519).

<sup>107</sup> Critics such as Miriam Bratu Hansen, who termed this second version the 'Urtext', consider it to be the most comprehensive and precise in its main arguments. See 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry*, 34.2 (2008), 336–375.

<sup>108</sup> Benjamin wrote to Adorno on 19.10.1936: 'After I sent Horkheimer a very detailed report about the translation situation [...], I recommended Klossowski as the translator in a letter of 17 October. Klossowski has also simultaneously contacted him on his own account. In both respects his sample translation is certainly to be preferred over [Frederick] Goldbeck's' (GB V, 405). A handwritten manuscript with Klossowski's annotations in pencil was preserved in Benjamin's archive. See 'Le Narrateur: Réflexions à propos de l'œuvre de Nicolas Leskov', Archive of the Akademie der Künste (AdK), Walter Benjamin Archive, Berlin, inventory no.: WBA 541 <<https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/2578475>>.

*Vicious Circle* (1969), which would go on to influence the work of thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard. Benjamin praised Klossowski's work by noting its extreme precision and ability to convey 'the meaning of the original' (*GB V*, 243–244). In addition, he claimed that the French edition of the text possessed 'a doctrinaire quality that one finds [...] only rarely in the German version' (*ibid.*). Nonetheless, the collaborative process was by no means an easy one.<sup>109</sup> In a letter to Adorno, Benjamin described his experience of working with Klossowski which had given him a new perspective on the essay:

The two weeks I spent in absolutely intense work with my translator have provided me with some distance from the German text. I usually achieve this only after longer periods of time. I say this not to dissociate myself from it in the least, but rather because I only came to discover at this distance one element in the text to which I would particularly like to see you as reader do justice: specifically, its cannibalistic urbanity, a certain circumspection and caution in the act of destruction (*C*, 523).

As is now known, Benjamin intended the essay to question the political nature of art. However, due to the current political climate, the Institute had to tread lightly and could not open their organisation to the possibility of being shut down. Raymond Aron, a French philosopher and sociologist, Professor at the *École Normale Supérieure*, who would come to be known for *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955),

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<sup>109</sup> Despite the challenges that the translation posed, Benjamin would nonetheless plan a further project with Klossowski under the title *L'Allemagne fraternelle 1800–1900: Textes et documents psychologiques, philosophiques, sociologiques et politiques inédits du XIXième siècle*. The book was envisaged as an anthology bringing together unpublished and neglected materials by some of the greatest German minds of the nineteenth century such as Goethe, Hölderlin, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche. Only the initial proposal documents were preserved. See 'L'Allemagne Fraternelle / 1800–1900 / Textes et Documents psychologiques, / philosophiques, sociologiques et politiques inédits du XIXième siècle / traduits, commentés et réunis par / Walter Benjamin et Pierre Klossowski', Archive of the Akademie der Künste (AdK), Walter Benjamin Archive, Berlin, inventory no.: WBA 520 <<https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/2578948>>.



was the elected French representative of the Institute at the time of the article's publication. It therefore fell to Aron to edit and revise the Klossowski translation. Allegedly, Aron felt that the translation noticeably contained the influence of its author 'and not always to its advantage'.<sup>110</sup> But it was Hans Klaus Brill, the then general secretary of the Paris location, who would end up making the most extensive revisions to the essay — much to Benjamin's frustration. These included amendments to the essay's 'political' tone and language, and the essay's first paragraphs being entirely omitted since they contained arguments for a radical form of aesthetics to further radical politics. Even the term 'socialism' was removed. Benjamin protested that the 'political *ground plan*' of the essay had to be retained if it was to have any 'informational value for the avant-garde of the French intellectuals' (*GB V*, 252).

It is evident that the Institute, which was keen to avoid a clash with French state censorship, had a different readership in mind to Benjamin, whose ideas had progressed beyond the left-wing politics of aforementioned figures Gide and Malraux. Horkheimer offered his sympathies to Benjamin, but ultimately supported the moderations that Brill had made: 'We must do everything in our power to prevent the *Zeitschrift*, as a scholarly organ, from being drawn into political discussions in the press [...] which would lead to a serious threat to our work' (*GS I*, 997). Horkheimer therefore ultimately supported the removal of what he termed the essay's 'politically exposing sentences ['politisch exponierte Sätze']' (*GS I*, 1007). Horkheimer also warned Benjamin that any further disagreement on his part would only contribute to further delaying the article's publication. Benjamin, not wanting to risk having the piece pulled, was quick to amend his position: on March 28<sup>th</sup>, he

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<sup>110</sup> Eiland and Jennings, p. 520.

notified Horkheimer that he accepted the revisions. What's more, Benjamin was aware that his reactions to Brill's amendments might have affected his place within the Institute's inner circle. He thus wrote to Horkheimer to reassure him that he would do 'everything in [his] power to restore the Institute's former confidence in [him]' (*GB V*, 267).

Despite Benjamin's concerns, the essay managed to have a noticeable impact within Parisian circles. After its release, it was discussed by philosopher Jean Wahl and the poet Pierre Jean Jouve at a public event (*GB V*, 352). What's more, Malraux would reference its theories on distraction at a London congress in June. That same month, Benjamin was able to publicize his work in a talk entitled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' at an event at the Café Mephisto organized by the Paris chapter of the 'Schutzverband deutscher Autoren im Ausland' ('Defence League of German Authors Abroad'). The following week, the essay was once again debated by a gathering of émigré writers with a presentation on Benjamin's work by his friend and writer, Hans Sahl. All in all, Benjamin was satisfied with the attention the piece received. In a communication to Alfred Cohn, who had also commented on the quality of the work, he noted its 'continuity with my earlier studies, in spite of its new and surely oft-surprising tendency' (*C*, 528). This continuity, Benjamin claimed, '[was] above all surely grounded in the fact that, over the years, [he had] tried to achieve an increasingly precise and uncompromising idea of what constitutes a work of art' (*C*, 528).

In addition to the French translation of his work, Benjamin simultaneously published a book-length publication entitled *Deutsche Menschen* [*German Men and Women*] in 1936 which had previously been serialized for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*. Benjamin belonged to a large number of writers who harboured a nostalgia for a

Germany free from the beast of National Socialism. He maintained a certain hope that this ‘better Germany’ he remembered as a ‘mountain covered by a glacier’, was still to be found and had not been entirely wiped out.<sup>111</sup> *Deutsche Menschen* was published in Switzerland by German émigré Rudolf Rößler under Benjamin’s pseudonym Detlef Holz. It consisted of a collection of 27 letters dating from 1783 and 1883, several of which Benjamin had already written and commented on in journal articles in the early 1930s. The letters were written by some of the biggest names in German literary history such as Hölderlin and Goethe, authors Georg Büchner and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and more marginal forgotten figures such as Samuel Collenbusch and Franz von Baader. According to Patrick Hutton, the letters also mirror Benjamin’s personal circumstances of exile, each one acting ‘as a touchstone for his own memory’.<sup>112</sup> Collectively, they represent Benjamin’s ‘humanist understanding of memory’s restorative connections’.<sup>113</sup> Although the collection was obviously an ode to the enlightened, humanistic ideals of the past — its correspondents forming ‘an imagined German republic of letters’ — the book’s title was very much a deliberate ploy for the publication to slip under the radar of German censorship unnoticed, which it did successfully.<sup>114</sup> Despite the circumstances of its publication, the book sold relatively well and the royalties which Benjamin earned from the sale were one of his principal forms of income.

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<sup>111</sup> Palmier, p. 802.

<sup>112</sup> The examples that Hutton names include ‘Georg Forster on a Paris exile from which he doubted he would return (anticipating Benjamin’s own fears)’, ‘Friedrich Hölderlin’s reminiscences about his restless travels abroad (like Benjamin in the years before settling in Paris)’ and ‘Justus Liebig on the consolation of communication from a Paris exile with an old friend (like Benjamin with Scholem)’. See ‘Walter Benjamin on the French Exile of German Men of Letters’, *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, 36 (2008), 235–248 (p. 241).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

This was followed by ‘Les Allemands de quatre-vingt neuf’ [‘The Germans of Eighty-Nine’, 1939], which was modelled on *Deutsche Menschen*, thus representing a cultural as well as linguistic translation of Benjamin’s critical immersion in the history of the French Revolution and its opposition to the Germany of the Enlightenment. The piece was published in a special issue of the aforementioned journal *Europe* entitled ‘La révolution française’.<sup>115</sup> The issue, which commemorated the sesquicentennial of the French Revolution, offered a further opportunity for Benjamin to make his mark as a Franco-German comparatist. In a letter, he reported that his piece, ‘a montage’, was supposed to relay ‘the effects of the French revolution on German authors of this period, and later generations up until 1830’ (C, 608). A typescript of this translation, which Benjamin worked on with Marcel Stora, has been preserved in Benjamin’s archive.<sup>116</sup> Editor Tilmann Rexroth observes that this French version of the text ‘contains numerous formulations that are unusual in French and somewhat difficult to understand, [which are] likely to have been written by Benjamin, at least in the initial rough translation’ (GS IV, 1095). ‘Benjamin’s way of using French’, he claims, ‘which is recognizable despite Stora’s revision, was retained in the creation of the text. No stylistic corrections, but several grammatical and orthographic corrections were made’ (ibid.). The typescript which the published article was based on is marked with handwritten corrections by both Benjamin and Stora, his ‘most likely contribution to the text [being] a revision of Benjamin’s own translation’ (ibid.).

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<sup>115</sup> The piece was included in the subsection entitled ‘La révolution et l’univers’ alongside others by writers such as Raymond Queneau (‘La révolution française et les états-unis’).

<sup>116</sup> Cf. ‘Allemands de quatre-vingt-neuf’, Archive of the Akademie der Künste (AdK), Walter Benjamin Archive, Berlin, inventory no.: WBA 1438 <<https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/3034976>>.

According to Benjamin, the legacy of the French Revolution was particularly relevant to the present moment. ‘Les Allemands’ showcased the fates of several German exiles impacted by the events of the Revolution. Once again, Benjamin’s critical finesse in the field of Franco-German mediation becomes apparent, starting with the preface where he underscores the extent to which the French Revolution had left a legacy in Germany with the revolutions of 1830 and 1848.<sup>117</sup> The letters he assembled were the ‘voices of witnesses [...] stifled in German today’, but which ‘were distinctly audible for nearly a century’ (*SW* 4, 284). In contrast to *Deutsche Menschen*, Benjamin went to greater lengths in commenting on the significance of each of his eight chosen letters, sometimes omitting the correspondents’ names and only citing fragments from the letters themselves.<sup>118</sup> The letters are all connected by the fact that they were written by intellectuals who had witnessed the Revolution, either up close in France or in nearby cities in the German Rhineland. The letters reframe a moment of particular importance in European history, demonstrating the commitment of German intellectuals to the Revolution, ‘with its emphasis upon human rights as a guide for the liberation of the people in Germany and eastern Europe generally’.<sup>119</sup>

Prevalent in Benjamin’s commentaries were his own personal frustration at the isolation that he was subjected to in exile. One particular correspondent, Carl Jochmann, one of Benjamin’s self-designated intellectual *Vorgänger*, was also a literary critic with a penchant for travel and was singled out by Benjamin as being ‘100 years’ ahead of his time. Jochmann was an important political correspondent of

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<sup>117</sup> A further source of inspiration was his discovery of aforementioned nineteenth-century insurrectionist Blanqui.

<sup>118</sup> This was very much in line with the citational practices he had developed for the *AP* materials.

<sup>119</sup> Hutton, p. 244.

the ‘Vormärz’ era who voluntarily exiled himself in Paris where he met other German émigrés, ‘as well as veterans of the Revolution, who confided to him their memoirs of France’s revolutionary days’.<sup>120</sup> He formed part of the legacy of German intellectuals who supported the cause of the French Revolution and passed down their knowledge and collective memories to those that succeeded them in the revolutions to follow. Benjamin was increasingly interested in this German lineage and therefore identified Jochmann with several past intellectual heroes who had championed a cause which was eradicated by the founding of the Second Reich in 1871. The issue on which both Benjamin and Jochmann seem to converge the most closely is in their conception of the past. For Jochmann, as for Benjamin, the past formed a continuum that stretched into the present and was decipherable amongst the dormant, forgotten ruins of tradition. Benjamin’s experience of the events leading up to World War II were cause to revive the memory of German exiles who had been in his position in 1789.

The letters that Benjamin compiled for *Deutsche Menschen* and ‘Les Allemands’ in many ways symbolize his identification with those that were involved in witnessing and preserving the experiences of the German Enlightenment and the French Revolution before him and are a further exemplar of his comparative Franco-German approach to collective European memory. As he remarked in his preface to *Deutsche Menschen*: ‘We may be the last representatives — with a few others perhaps — of an era that will not easily come again’ (*GB IV*, 151).

My discussions of Benjamin’s publications through the means of translation during his time in exile have revealed that his transition to a ‘French’ existence amongst francophone intellectual institutions and journalistic outlets was not entirely

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

seamless. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer notes that the ‘diversity of his interests’ meant that Benjamin constantly remained ‘on the go’ [‘sur la brèche’] due to a lack of local supporters who would have been capable of opening doors to French publishers and editors.<sup>121</sup> Benjamin never officially sided exclusively with any of the different communities that were available to him in exile, such as the bourgeois humanist group that gathered around the Mann family, the Communists with their sights set on the Soviet Union or the community of Jewish exiles. This refusal to adhere to any group, like the diversity of his personal and professional interests, did not help his social and financial situation. By remaining at the margins, Benjamin cut himself off from publications such as Klaus Mann’s *Die Sammlung*, a number of strictly Marxist journals such as the German edition of the Moscow journal *Internationale Literatur* or the aforementioned *Das Wort*, the mouthpiece of the *Front Populaire*.<sup>122</sup> It is therefore all the more remarkable that Benjamin was still able to integrate himself and collaborate with others to the extent that he did — to the point where by the late 1930s he was able to use his personal network of contacts to further the careers of his friends and acquaintances.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, ‘Introduction’ in Walter Benjamin, *Écrits français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), pp. 9–74 (p. 41).

<sup>122</sup> Benjamin did, however, manage to publish reviews in addition to excerpts from his *Berliner Kindheit* in journals *Maß und Wert* published by Thomas Mann and Konrad Falke and edited by Ferdinand Lion as well as in *Die neue Weltbühne*, edited by Kurt Tucholsky. Nevertheless, these publications were only made possible through his friendship with Ernst Bloch, who served as an intermediary.

<sup>123</sup> An example would be his assistance to photographer Germaine Krull, who despite having resided in Paris for longer than he had, still sought Benjamin’s advice when she was attempting to get a story published. Another would be his championing of friend Stephan Lackner’s novel *Jan Heimatlos* (1939) in a review for *Die neue Weltbühne*. See ‘Roman deutscher Juden’ [‘A Novel of German Jews’] in *GS III*, pp. 546–48.

### The *Collège de Sociologie*

Aside from his interactions with the Institute for Social Research and its members, Benjamin spent the late 1930s following the activities of the *Collège de Sociologie*, many of whom he had come into close contact with prior to the organisation's initial founding. In what follows I aim to look at the *Collège*, and Benjamin's relationship to it, in more detail.

Bataille, the co-founder of the *Collège*, had worked at the Bibliothèque Nationale since 1922. From 1930, he occupied a position in the Department of Printed Books where Benjamin most likely first encountered him. Nonetheless, it was only after having met Klossowski that Benjamin began to integrate himself into Bataille's immediate social and intellectual circles. In a letter addressed to Monnier, Klossowski described his encounters with Benjamin within this context:

I met Walter Benjamin during one of the meetings of *Contre-Attaque* — the name of the ephemeral fusion of groups headed by André Breton and Georges Bataille, in 1935. Later he assiduously attended the College of Sociology, an emanation intended to make 'exoteric' the closed and secret group *Acéphale* (crystallized around Bataille, following his rupture with Breton). From this point on he was sometimes present at our secret meetings.<sup>124</sup>

According to Klossowski, although the members of the group often found themselves in disagreement with Benjamin, they 'would listen to him with passion'.<sup>125</sup> For them, Benjamin represented a Marxist who 'lived torn between the

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<sup>124</sup> Pierre Klossowski, 'Entre Marx et Fourier' in *The College of Sociology: 1937–39*, ed. by Denis Hollier, trans. by Betsy Wing, pp. 388–389 (p. 389).

<sup>125</sup> Pierre Klossowski, 'Lettre sur Walter Benjamin' in *Tableaux vivants: essais critiques, 1936–1983*, ed. by Patrick Mauriès (Paris: Le Promeneur, 2001), pp. 86–87 (p. 86).



problems that could be solved through historical necessity and the images of the occult world that often imposed themselves as the only solution'.<sup>126</sup>

Ultimately, it was his connection to Bataille and Klossowski that permitted him to gain close access to the workings of revolutionary and radical thought in France during the interwar period. Bataille had found himself operating at the margins of surrealist groups since 1924 but had never fully supported Breton. In 1929 (the year Benjamin released his essay announcing the demise of surrealism), Bataille had started the journal *Documents* in direct opposition to surrealism under Breton. His actions seem to have hit a nerve, as Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* dedicated more than a page to the denunciation of Bataille and his journal.<sup>127</sup> It appeared that they had ruptured any existing ties. Nevertheless by 1935, Breton and Bataille had buried their hatchets and formed an alliance under the guise of a new journal entitled *Contre-Attaque*, an anti-fascist collective that was made up of surrealists and the *Cercle communiste-démocratique* around Boris Souvarine. Breton and Bataille hoped this new movement would be 'revolutionary, antinationalist, anticapitalist, and free of bourgeois morality'.<sup>128</sup>

However by the summer of 1936, several internal disagreements had divided the group (most notably Bataille's championing of a supposed strategy of 'surfascism') so that it was unlikely that any publications would appear. In a similar fashion, the Popular Front journal entitled *Inquisitions*, which stood in opposition to Breton and was established by writers such as Roger Caillois, Tristan Tzara, Louis Aragon and Gaston Bachelard, was also plagued by disputes and only one issue was

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>127</sup> Cf. André Breton, 'Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1930)' in André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), pp. 117–194 (pp. 180–181).

<sup>128</sup> Eiland and Jennings, p. 519.

finalized.<sup>129</sup> Despite these internal feuds and clashes, the lasting impact of many of these groups and gatherings during the interwar period is not to be underestimated — in particular the manner in which the French intellectual landscape was restructured to accommodate the intersections between the cultural and artistic avant-garde and the newly emerging directions of the Social Sciences.

In March of 1937, Caillois and Bataille founded the *Collège de Sociologie* at the Café Grand Véfour in Palais Royal. Often considered the last avant-garde movement of the interwar period, the *Collège* was officially introduced in the July issue of Bataille's journal *Acéphale*.<sup>130</sup> The *Collège* mainly consisted of a series of lectures held every fortnight at the bookshop *Galleries du livre*, and despite its name, its purpose was by no means didactic. Benjamin was a frequent attendant at these events, but reportedly remained, for the most part, a silent observer.<sup>131</sup> Michèle H. Richman argues that these sociologists of the 'sacred' — defined as 'any movement or cultural form responsible for promoting *unity*' — 'refashioned the ethnographic perspective to be relevant to the social and economic turbulence of modernity'.<sup>132</sup> Representing a unique 'chapter in the history of human sciences', they pioneered a new form of critical discourse 'straddling literary theory, social thought, religious and cultural studies'.<sup>133</sup>

The members of the *Collège* were keen to abandon the ideals of the surrealist movement to explore sociological concepts inspired by the legacies of Émile

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<sup>129</sup> In 1936, Benjamin had referenced the appearance of *Inquisitions* in one of his many letters to Horkheimer stating that he believed 'it could be useful for the Institute to follow the group's activities' (*GB V*, 263).

<sup>130</sup> Georges Bataille et al., 'Note on the Foundation of a College of Sociology' in Hollier, pp. 3–5.

<sup>131</sup> Cf. Eiland and Jennings, p. 589.

<sup>132</sup> Michèle H. Richman, *Sacred Revolutions: Durkheim and the Collège de Sociologie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. vii.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. viii.

Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, in particular the present of the ‘sacred’ within the secular contemporary world.<sup>134</sup> This ‘sociology of the sacred’ was not intended to be scientific but rather, as Bataille put it, ‘something of the order of a sickness, a strange infection of the social body, the senile sickness of an ascedious, exhausted, atomized society’.<sup>135</sup> The *Collège*’s focus on forms of human community and the interrelations between politics and aesthetics would capture Benjamin’s attention to the point where he himself was scheduled to contribute to the lecture series in the late 1930s on the topic of fashion before the war brought an end to the gatherings. The notable founding members of the *Collège* — Bataille, Caillois and Michel Leiris — expressed different views in relation to these topics, and their diverging tendencies were quickly identified by Benjamin who would report on their work to Horkheimer and the Institute for Social Research.<sup>136</sup>

Originally, the Institute’s members had been kept in the loop of the journal *Acéphale* through their contact with Klossowski. Horkheimer and Adorno were dismissive of *Acéphale*, perceiving it simply as the most recent manifestation of surrealist tradition: ‘As to the surrealists in toto’, claimed Adorno in connection with the journal, ‘I, too, have the feeling that irrationalist confusion begins to overgrow the great achievements of Max Ernst’.<sup>137</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno’s assumption that

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<sup>134</sup> Cf. Frank Pearce, ‘Introduction: The Collège de Sociologie and French Social Thought’, *Economy and Society*, 32.1 (2003), 1–6 (p. 4): ‘Overall, the views of Bataille and Caillois [...] remain in accord with Durkheim’s belief that all forms of social phenomena that keep recurring within societies [...] are socially produced and either themselves functional for society as a whole or a necessary concomitant of something that is functional. Thus, [such activity] is profoundly but differently social: it is sociogonic, it renews and transforms socio-cosmic meanings and interpersonal and social relations’.

<sup>135</sup> Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 261.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. *GB VI*, pp. 91–99 and pp. 202–203 in particular.

<sup>137</sup> See letter to Horkheimer on 25.1.1937 in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer Briefe und Briefwechsel, Vol 4.II: 1938–1944*, ed. by Christoph Gösde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), p. 280.

the writings of the *Collège*, and Bataille in particular, were a derivative of the surrealist movement led by Breton had an obvious impact on the regard in which they held their activities. Their perception of Bataille as a surrealist, rather than a post-surrealist, coloured their reception of his work, leading them to perceive it ‘as a failed critique of Enlightenment thought’.<sup>138</sup> Horkheimer argued that there was an unfortunate general tendency among French intellectuals to be seduced by a discursive, scientific style: ‘They prove to be true fetishists of the systematic representation’.<sup>139</sup> Nonetheless, whilst their language and methods were disparate, Bataille and his followers’ rejections of notions of civilization were arguably not all that dissimilar to the ways in which members of the Institute confronted the limitations of instrumental reason, positivism and utilitarianism. In Bataille’s version of a manifesto entitled ‘The Sacred Conspiracy’, which was published in the first issue of *Acéphale*, he argues that: ‘The advantages of civilization are offset by the way men profit from them [...] [civilized] existence is limited to utility’.<sup>140</sup> Such conclusions can be traced in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), the culmination of the Institute’s work throughout the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>141</sup>

In a 1932 article entitled ‘The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic’ which he had co-authored with Raymond Queneau, Bataille had previously debunked the orthodox Marxist conception of a dialectical natural

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<sup>138</sup> Michael Weingrad, ‘The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research’, *New German Critique*, 84 (2001), 129–162 (p. 134).

<sup>139</sup> As cited by Weingrad, p. 150.

<sup>140</sup> Georges Bataille, ‘The Sacred Conspiracy’ in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 178–181 (p. 179).

<sup>141</sup> For references to Caillois, see ‘Excursus II: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality’ in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 125–178 (p. 159).

world.<sup>142</sup> A dialectical view of nature, he maintained, was only to be achieved using psychoanalysis. For this reason, Weingrad has also argued that there are not only distinctive parallels between Bataille's work with and that of the Institute, but that they were driven by a similar logic:

[T]he desire for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the human and the natural, a need to challenge the mechanistic rigidity of orthodox Marxism, and a need to account for the irrational elements that contemporary Marxist thought was unable to account for.<sup>143</sup>

Ultimately, however, Bataille viewed nature 'as a sphere of violent heterogeneity' which cannot be tamed by philosophy: 'nature is the *fall* of the idea; it is a negation, at the same time a revolt and an *absurdity*'.<sup>144</sup>

Within most discussions of the relations between the Institute and the *Collège*, it is too often forgotten that Adorno suggested Bataille and Caillois as potential affiliate members of the Institute. In July 1937, he wrote to Benjamin:

I would [...] ask you to keep an eye out for highly qualified potential French contributors. With respect to the initial selection here, we shall certainly not be able to ignore [Raymond] Aron, [...] but we cannot leave this entirely to him [...] I have mentioned Caillois and Bataille (*CC*, 197).

It is of course likely that Adorno had met with both men on one of his visits in Paris, nevertheless it is still somewhat perplexing that he would critique their work only to then have them inducted into the inner circle of the Institute. Perhaps his reasoning was purely practical, as the Institute, exiled and on foreign soil, needed

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<sup>142</sup> Georges Bataille and Raymond Queneau, 'The Critique of the Foundations of the Hegelian Dialectic' in Bataille p. 105–115.

<sup>143</sup> Weingrad, p. 140

<sup>144</sup> Bataille, 'The Critique', p. 107.

as many co-workers and allies as possible to strengthen its international networks. The Institute's brand of Marxism was so unorthodox that most French intellectuals, especially those who were members of the Communist Party, rejected its ideology.<sup>145</sup> One could argue that Benjamin's presence in Paris was therefore vital to the Institute's European influence, as he was actively communing and networking with a vast array of intellectuals across France's political spectrum. In addition to his regular written reports and articles, Benjamin often arranged meetings and prepared the ground for new intellectual alliances.<sup>146</sup> The triangle of correspondence between Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer documents the many difficulties the Institute faced in establishing itself on foreign ground to create a new intellectual hub for Critical Theory in France. They struggled to publish the Institute's members' work in French journals such as the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and to secure contracts with French publishers.<sup>147</sup>

Relatively little is known about Benjamin's direct dealings with the *Collège* and its members, the only factual evidence that remains being his letters to Horkheimer on the subjects he encountered in their work. His responses appear to have been overwhelmingly ambivalent, as he was both fascinated and repelled by their 'anti-bourgeois' radicalism. One letter addressed to Horkheimer dating from

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<sup>145</sup> As Weingrad remarks: 'Klossowski and Aron were later somewhat critical of their German colleagues. Aron writes in his *Mémoires* [Paris: Julliard, 1983]: "Neither Kojève, nor Koyré, nor Weil rated Horkheimer or Adorno very highly, philosophically speaking [...]. The combination of economic analysis and moral denunciation [in Frankfurt School thought] better suits radical Americans than pure Marxists". Nevertheless, Aron esteemed Benjamin very highly when the two worked together on the "Work of Art" translation in 1936' (p. 137).

<sup>146</sup> In August 1937, Adorno writes to Horkheimer of Benjamin's 'indispensable' role in creating a network of contacts among French intellectuals, see Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. 16, Briefwechsel: 1937–1940*, ed. by Alfred Schmidt and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1995), p. 213.

<sup>147</sup> Horkheimer was unable to find someone willing to translate any of his work, having approached Koyré and Emmanuel Levinas.

May 1938 reveals that whilst Benjamin may have been a fringe participant in the *Collège*'s activities, he by no means publicly endorsed the members and their work. The letter, expressing Benjamin's agreement with Adorno on the matter, speaks of the 'pathological cruelty' encountered in Caillois' *La mante religieuse* (1937), in which the 'repulsive' 'character traits of today's bourgeois [...] emerge through their metaphysical hypostatization to form a remark outlined with an elegant pen on the margins of this epoch' (*GB VI*, 92).<sup>148</sup> However, there is reason to believe that Benjamin's stance in such correspondence is not to be taken at face value. His reports on the *Collège de Sociologie* were written in anticipation of the reactions of their recipients, who, as previously discussed, viewed the activities of the *Collège* with a certain amount of scepticism. A recollection by Klossowski would confirm this theory. At a gathering of the *Collège*, Adorno is said to have asked Bataille about the purpose of his organisation, to which he replied: 'Inventing new taboos'.<sup>149</sup> Whilst Adorno, somewhat taken aback, reportedly asked: 'Have we not enough taboos?', Benjamin nodded in agreement with Bataille. Nonetheless, Klossowski recalls Benjamin to have equally been 'disconcerted' 'by the ambiguity of *Acéphale*'s a-theology'.<sup>150</sup>

Klossowski claims that Benjamin's views on the development of the German bourgeoisie — namely that "raising the metaphysical and political stakes of the incommunicable" (in accordance with the antinomies of industrial capitalist society)' would have prepared a psychic terrain favourable to Nazism — were a key factor in

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. Adorno's review of *La mante religieuse* in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7 (1938), p. 410. In a letter to Benjamin, Adorno conceives of Caillois's writings as a 'faith in nature which is hostile to all and indeed crypto-fascistic' which he likens to the mysticism of Gustav Jung and Ludwig Klages or even to a '*Volksgemeinschaft* based on biology and imagination' (*CC*, 212).

<sup>149</sup> As cited by Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 461.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

his criticism of the French intellectual scene.<sup>151</sup> Benjamin therefore urged the sociologists to resist taking that ‘plunge’; ‘despite the appearance of an irreducible incompatibility’, they risked ‘playing into the hands of a “prefascist aestheticism”’.<sup>152</sup> His thinking, says Klossowski, was decisively influenced by Georg Lukács which he sought to present to this circle of thinkers:

There was no possible agreement about this point of [Benjamin’s] analysis, whose presuppositions did not coincide at all with the basic ideas and past history of the groups formed successively by Breton and Bataille, especially *Acéphale*. On the other hand, we questioned him even more insistently about what we sensed was his most authentic basis, namely, his personal version of a ‘phalansterian’ revival. Sometimes he talked about it to us as if it were something ‘esotericism’ simultaneously ‘erotic and artisanal’ underlying his explicit Marxist conceptions.<sup>153</sup>

Klossowski’s testimony in this letter gives an important insight into the nature of Benjamin’s dealings with this group and the ways in which, despite certain discords and disagreements, his attraction to the *Collège de Sociologie* was spurred on by the notable affinities between their approaches. In the characterisation above, Klossowski is also clearly drawing parallels between Benjamin and this generation of French thinkers.

Even though Benjamin may have not freely admitted this to himself, it is apparent that there were numerous correspondences between his own critical interests and those of the *Collège*, especially those of Bataille who — like Benjamin — was invested in forms of late surrealism.<sup>154</sup> Additionally, although his relations

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<sup>151</sup> Klossowski, p.389.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Allan Stoekl remarks that there are ‘many parallels between the projects of Bataille and Benjamin’. See *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, p. xxv. Similarly, Anson Rabinbach has noted that ‘[t]he association with Bataille — to whom Benjamin entrusted his



with other members of the *Collège* like Caillois remain uncertain, it is indisputable that his articles in sources such as *Mesure* and the *Nouvelle Revue Française* had an impact on Benjamin's thinking as they are cited throughout the *AP* materials.<sup>155</sup> In terms remarkably like Benjamin's, Caillois' article 'Paris, mythe moderne' (1937) turns to the works of Balzac, Baudelaire and the early detective novel (*roman policier*) to delve into the mythical qualities of the nineteenth-century literary imagination. 'The elevation of urban life to the level of myth', Benjamin quotes from Caillois in the *AP*, 'signifies right away [...] a keen predisposition of modernity' (*AP*, 555).<sup>156</sup>

What's more, it is significant that Benjamin met Bataille within the context of his research at the Bibliothèque Nationale which contributed to his wish to remain publicly neutral vis-à-vis the *Collège* and its members. This relationship not only initiated him into the inner workings of Bataille's intellectual circle but furthermore permitted him access to a great number of 'restricted' items which Bataille was able to assist him with.<sup>157</sup> Furthermore, although Benjamin happily agreed to have excerpts of his correspondence with Horkheimer on the most recent events of French literature published in the Institute's journal, he stipulated that all the parts where he was critical of the *Collège* be omitted so as not to jeopardize his cordial relations with its members. In his letter to Horkheimer from August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1938, Benjamin writes

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papers — deserves greater attention because of the natural affinity between these two early explorers of the then uncharted waters of fascist irrationality'. 'Introduction' in Scholem and Benjamin, pp. vii–xxxviii (pp. xxxiii–xxxiv).

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Entries to several Convolutés in the *AP* including [B 8a, 2], [C 8, 4], [D 4a, 2], [E 10, 3], [G 15, 5], [K 5a, 5], [L 5, 3], [M 11a, 5], [N 7, 1], [S 7, I], [V 7a, 6] and [Z 2a, I].

<sup>156</sup> Caillois' ensuing collection of essays *Le Mythe et l'homme* (1938) took these explorations of myth further. See Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

<sup>157</sup> Cf. Hans Georg Puttnies and Gary Smith, *Benjaminiana: eine biographische Recherche* (Giessen: Anabas, 1991), p. 192.

that whilst Horkheimer's 'idea of publishing a fragment of [his] letter of 28 May [...] in the Institute journal is [...] of course a doubly welcome one', he asks him 'to omit the second paragraph, beginning "Georges Bataille"':

The overall drift of the argument will not be adversely affected in any way. And in this way my own relationship with Georges Bataille will not be adversely affected either, something I would like to maintain, both because of his assistance at the Bibliothèque Nationale, and because of my plans for naturalization. — The fragment would not escape his attention since the Institute journal is openly displayed in the reading room where he often works (C, 276).

Similarly, his overwhelmingly negative review of Caillois' novel *L'aridité* was published under a pseudonym to avoid any conflict of interest.<sup>158</sup> The previously discussed ambivalence which Benjamin seemingly felt toward the Institute's work and his status in relation to its members can also be identified in his interactions with the *Collège* and his reports on their work. Furthermore, Benjamin's incontestable fascination for the *Collège's* ideas is also indicative of his unorthodox intellectual curiosity which meant that during his time in France, he was drawn to figures, regardless of their politics. Gérard Raulet pins this fascination on Benjamin's principally 'anti-dogmatic attitude' as well as his radical disregard for a meticulous classification of political positions.<sup>159</sup> What's more, it can be traced back to an ongoing strain in Benjamin's own thinking, especially with regards to the question of violence and the tensions inherent in his historical materialism.

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<sup>158</sup> Like Bataille, Caillois was very close to his contact at the naturalization office, and Benjamin feared a negative review might prejudice his case. It was published under the anagram J. E. Mabinn.

<sup>159</sup> Gérard Raulet, *Das befristete Dasein der Gebildeten: Walter Benjamin und die französische Intelligenz* (Konstanz: Konstanz University Press, 2020), p. 239.

Despite the divided opinions surrounding the *Collège* and their work, Benjamin would be historically linked to Bataille in perpetuity when he became the elected custodian of his most treasured possession, the arcades materials. As Weingrad puts it, Benjamin and Bataille's encounter 'is pregnant with possibilities for elaborating an intellectual history that convincingly links [them], and it entails significant implications for understanding post-war intellectual developments'.<sup>160</sup> And yet despite the many circumstances through which their lives were intertwined, few convincing critical attempts have emerged.<sup>161</sup> Gerhard Rupp, one of the few critics to have approached this relationship, maintains that there are three major areas of convergence between Benjamin and Bataille: Firstly, both thinkers were interested in formulating a principle which animates a society which goes beyond the sphere of production, and instead focuses on the bustling life in which goods circulate.<sup>162</sup> Secondly, in this 'archi-historic' effort, Benjamin and Bataille both developed a writing method through dialectical images.<sup>163</sup> Thirdly, Rupp maintains that Benjamin was influenced by the Bataillian idea of 'potlatch' — a Maussian-inspired principle used to critique the concept of luxury — to the point where it surpasses its use in Bataille's writing to become a part of Benjamin's intertextual practice in the *AP*.<sup>164</sup> Rupp also designates the encounter between Bataille and Benjamin as one of

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<sup>160</sup> Weingrad, p. 130.

<sup>161</sup> Although I wish to draw attention to Bataille's importance during Benjamin's Parisian exile in relation to his interactions with the members of the *Collège de Sociologie*, delving into the intellectual affinities between both thinkers in great detail lies outside of the confines of this thesis.

<sup>162</sup> Rupp, para. 11 of 31. For a more precise overview of the concept of 'potlatch', see Georges Bataille, 'The Gift of Rival: "Potlatch"' in Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 199–209.

<sup>163</sup> Rupp, para. 11 of 31.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.* Rupp cites Convolute entry [J 80, 2, J 80 a, 1] as a prime example of this influence where Benjamin speaks of the 'allegorical existence' of the commodity and its 'price tag' (*AP*, 369).

‘intraculturality’ (*intraculturalité*) in lieu of ‘interculturality’, since Benjamin’s forced displacement from Germany and immersion in French culture, history and language made their exchange one-directional (as opposed to moving both ways across the Franco-German border).<sup>165</sup> With this in mind, the move from Berlin to Paris and the Bibliothèque Nationale was not only geographical, but topological and epistemological.

As Muriel Pic contends, Benjamin, ‘constrained to caution by his financial situation’, was caught between the ideologies of his German and French peers: ‘a critique of demagogic reason which, in the disenchantment of the world, became a producer of myths’ at the Institute on the one hand and ‘an apology for the myth as a vector of elementary religious emotion to critique excess of reason’ at the *Collège* on the other.<sup>166</sup> Nonetheless, their intellectual differences notwithstanding, Benjamin and by extension the other members of the Institute, were united with the *Collège* in their opposition to the barbarism of the ‘reason’ of capitalism and progress. Benjamin’s reports in his letters to the Institute as well as his inclusion of references to Bataille and Caillois in the arcades materials demonstrate that despite his criticisms, he recognized their work and thought as being pivotal to the French intellectual developments of the interwar period. The importance of Benjamin’s interactions with the *Collège*’s members was later confirmed when Adorno was compiling materials for the first publication of Benjamin’s correspondence with

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<sup>165</sup> Rupp, para. 4 of 31.

<sup>166</sup> Muriel Pic, ‘Penser au moment du danger: Le Collège et l’Institut de recherche sociale de Francfort’, *Critique*, 788–789.1 (2013), 81–96 (pp. 94–95).

Suhrkamp and reached out to Caillois and the other members to obtain the letters they had exchanged with Benjamin.<sup>167</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 2, Benjamin had previously analysed the history of French anthropological materialism in his ‘Surrealism’ essay. The *Collège*’s engagement with the legacies of the founding fathers of French anthropology and sociology, Durkheim and Mauss, gave their work its alluring combination of a cultural critique steeped in the histories of ethnographic practice, ushering in a new era of French thought. However, it was above all Benjamin’s own position with regards to the surrealist movement and its later genealogies that drew him to the activities of these sociologists of the sacred. By establishing the *Collège*, Bataille, Caillois, Klossowski and the other members, chose to advance a diversification of surrealist practice which operated at the margins of modern-day culture, prolonging and radicalizing a surrealist engagement with Hegelian dialectics. As André Chastel writes, their return to ‘all sorts of speculations inherited from lost mythologies and cosmologies fallen into desuetude’ was designed to counter the authority of positivism.<sup>168</sup>

### **Back to Baudelaire**

In the final section of this chapter, I intend to return to Benjamin’s work on the projects associated with the *AP* which occupied him in the final years of his exile.

Towards the end of Benjamin’s time in Paris and shortly before his death, his attention was still very much taken up by his research on the arcades. Nevertheless,

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<sup>167</sup> Cf. Letter to Caillois dated 18.3.1960, Archive of the Akademie der Künste (AdK), Theodor W. Adorno Archive, Berlin, inventory no.: TWAA Br 246 <<https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/2572161>>.

<sup>168</sup> André Chastel, ‘La loyauté de l’intelligence’ in Roger Caillois, *Roger Caillois: Cahiers pour un temps* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou/ Pandora, 1981), p. 29.

his focus had started to shift slightly onto a particular part of the envisaged study, namely his work on Baudelaire. In March 1937, Benjamin proposed three different projects to the Institute, amongst them an idea of ‘entering in *medias res*, to write the preliminary draft of the chapter on Baudelaire’ (*GB V*, 489).<sup>169</sup> Horkheimer would approve the project the following month, claiming that ‘a materialist article on Baudelaire has been a desideratum for a long time’ (*GS V*, 1158). As mentioned in Chapter 1, Benjamin’s preoccupation with Baudelaire dated back to his time as a student when he had read *Les Fleurs du mal* for the first time. Now in his mid-forties, Benjamin came full circle, returning to his fascination for the poet within the context of his larger project on the nineteenth-century arcades.

The Baudelaire material was originally conceived as the penultimate chapter of the *AP* and consisted of the fifth section in the previously devised exposé; Benjamin first believed he could make use of it in an extended essay, then quickly determined that his ideas could only be properly conceived ‘as part of a Baudelaire book’ (*C*, 573).<sup>170</sup> He was, however, extremely aware of the literary market he was up against. The beginning of the twentieth century saw Gide make the infamous statement that no writer of the nineteenth century had been reviewed with as much stupidity as Baudelaire. In April 1938, Benjamin wrote to Horkheimer that he

want[ed] to show Baudelaire as he is embedded in the nineteenth century; the appearance thus created must seem new, and exert a scarcely definable attraction, like that of a stone which has rested for decades in the forest floor and whose impression, after we have rolled it from its place with more or less difficulty, lies before us extraordinarily clear and intact

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<sup>169</sup> The other suggested projects were an examination of a ‘collective unconscious’ through the works of Klages and Jung, departing from the parts of the 1935 exposé which Benjamin felt he had not properly developed as well as a comparative analysis of ‘the confrontation between bourgeois and materialist historiography’ (*GB V*, 489).

<sup>170</sup> In his correspondence with Horkheimer on the topic, Benjamin writes: ‘I really do not know how I could squeeze the critical aspects of the subject into thirty or forty pages. What I have in mind as [...] is three times that, and perhaps twice that as its minimum length’ (*C*, 556).

(C, 557).

In the same letter, Benjamin outlined his intentions for the study on Baudelaire as a ‘miniature’ model [*Miniaturmodell*] of the *AP*, claiming that he would ‘cite as sparingly as possible from the contemporary secondary literature on Baudelaire. Little that has already been said about Baudelaire will have to be repeated and [he would] not have to go very deeply into his biography’ (C, 556). Benjamin also developed a proposed schematization for the study which consisted of three sections entitled ‘Idea and Image’, ‘Antiquity and Modernity’ and lastly ‘The New and the Eversame’ (ibid.). The first part would centre on the importance of Baudelaire’s ‘allegorical vision’ in *Les Fleurs du mal* to unveil the inherent contradictions between his ‘theory of natural correspondences and the rejection of nature’ (ibid.). The second part would be dedicated to Baudelaire’s renditions of the crowd, ‘the latest and most unfathomable labyrinth in the labyrinth of the city’ which ‘places a veil in front of the flâneur’ (ibid.). Benjamin was to discuss the ‘structural element’ of such an ‘allegorical vision’ whereby ‘antiquity is revealed in modernity, and modernity in antiquity’ (C, 557). ‘Giving a form to modernity’ in such a manner emerges as the task of the modern poet (ibid.). The last planned section would then incorporate Benjamin’s discussion of the commodity ‘as the fulfilment of Baudelaire’s allegorical vision’ (ibid.). Baudelaire’s singular importance was that he had grasped the meaning of ‘the productive energy [in both senses of the word] of the individual alienated from himself’ (ibid.). The *auréole* of the commodity is exposed at the root of the eversame ‘under whose spell the poet was placed by spleen’ (ibid.). The original schematization also detailed Benjamin’s plans to compare Baudelaire with several of his contemporaries: the second part was to

consider Baudelaire's 'virtual and real encounters' with Edgar Allen Poe, Charles Méryon and Victor Hugo, the third was to deal with the 'historical configuration' of *Les Fleurs du mal* with Blanqui's *L'éternité par les astres* and Nietzsche's *Der Wille zur Macht* (ibid.).

Benjamin spent much of the summer of 1938 working on this newly conceived project which led to a complete re-evaluation and reorganization of his arcades materials. This phase of critical activity was noticeably spurred on by Benjamin's May 1938 residency at the Abbaye de Pontigny, home to Professor Paul Desjardins' 'Décades de Pontigny', an annual gathering of France's foremost writers, artists and intellectuals, where he was given the opportunity to present his work-in-progress on Baudelaire to an audience. Benjamin had received a grant from the *Caisse des Recherches Scientifiques* to visit the Foyer International d'Étude et Repos, the abbey's expansive library. Traces of his work at the library can be found in his references to the writings of Joseph Joubert, 'the last of the great French moralists' in the *AP* (*GB VI*, 288).

From around 3500 pre-existing drafts and fragments, Benjamin selected around half to be used for the Baudelaire book. In a letter to Horkheimer in September 1938, Benjamin enclosed a manuscript of the second section of the book, 'Antiquity and Modernity'. He informed Horkheimer that the book was 'meant to set down the decisive philosophical elements of the *Arcades Project* in what I hope will be definitive form' (*C*, 573). Such statements have led certain scholars and critics, most notably Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, to claim that the Baudelaire project had essentially replaced Benjamin's ambitions for a study on the arcades.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, 'Vom Passagen-Projekt zum "Baudelaire": Neue Handschriften zum Spätwerk Walter Benjamins', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 58.4 (1984), 593–657.



A major catalyst for such arguments was the discovery of a set of Baudelaire manuscripts in 1981, unintentionally uncovered by Giorgio Agamben whilst he was searching through Bataille's correspondence.<sup>172</sup> Espagne and Werner published a joint extended article on these manuscripts in 1984, shortly after the first comprehensive publication of the arcades materials in 1982. It would then take a further 30 years before the Baudelaire book would appear in print, first in Italian then in French translation.<sup>173</sup> The newly discovered manuscripts gave Agamben and his collaborators the opportunity to revise the final years in which Benjamin was actively writing and researching in Paris. The timeline of the Baudelaire project was closely entangled with the last few years of Benjamin's life. Amongst such scholarship, there seems to be a consensus that the Institute's eventual rejection of the project (as evidenced in the discussions of Benjamin's correspondence with Adorno in 1938) in addition to the disappearance of the Baudelaire manuscripts, prevented the Baudelaire book from gaining the critical attention it deserved, especially since it has been vastly overshadowed by the mother project on the arcades.

The publication of the *Passagenarbeit* edited by Tiedemann is frequently criticized for the manner in which the arcades materials were organized and for the fact that the project, despite its fragmentary and unfinished status, is often spoken of in terms that misleadingly make it out to be more established than it actually was.

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<sup>172</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben 'Dislocated Messianism: Modernity, Marxism, and Violence: On Benjamin's Baudelaire' in *Walter Benjamin and Theology*, ed. by Colby Dickinson and Stéphane Symons (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 217–230.

<sup>173</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: un poeta lirico nell'età del capitalismo avanzato*, ed. by Giorgio Agamben, Barbara Chitussi and Clemens-Carl Härle, trans. by Giorgio Agamben et al. (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2012); Walter Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, ed. by Giorgio Agamben, Barbara Chitussi and Clemens-Carl Härle, trans. by Patrick Charbonneau (Paris: La Fabrique, 2013).

Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, the translators of the *AP* into English, have argued that at ‘any rate, it seems undeniable that despite [Benjamin’s] informal, epistolary announcements of a “book” in the works, [...] the research project had become an end in itself’.<sup>174</sup> Willi Bolle has agreed with such statements, maintaining that it would be more ‘philologically’ fitting to speak of *AP* as a ‘hypertext’ or a working archive.<sup>175</sup> Buck-Morss, the first anglophone critic to approach the arcades materials in an extensive study, offered further comment on this issue within Benjamin scholarship. Even though Espagne and Werner’s article made a ‘strong case’ for the supposed overhaul of the *AP* for the sake of his Baudelaire study, she highlights that despite Benjamin’s intentions to use a significant amount of arcades material (Convolute J), the remaining 35 Convolutés are barely present.<sup>176</sup>

Evidence to support Buck-Morss’ claims can be found in Benjamin’s correspondence where he states that the ‘[Baudelaire] book is not identical to the *Pariser Passagen*. However, it not only contains a considerable part of the materials that I had collected for the latter, but also number of its philosophical contents’ (*GB* VI, 159). Writing to Pollock in 1938, he envisaged the Baudelaire work not ‘as in the Exposé, as a central chapter, but rather as an independent publication [...] an extract of the *Pariser Passagen*’ which would permit ‘a structured perspective into the depths of the nineteenth century’ (*GB* VI, 133). A few days earlier, he had contacted Scholem to inform him that if the Baudelaire project were to succeed it would generate a ‘very precise model of the *Passagenarbeit*’, ‘putting into motion the entire mass of thoughts and studies’ which he had accumulated in the preceding

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<sup>174</sup> Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ‘Translators’ Foreword’ in *AP*, pp. ix–xiv, xi.

<sup>175</sup> Willi Bolle, ‘Die Metropole als Hypertext: Zur netzhaften Essayistik in Walter Benjamins “Passagen-Projekt”’, *German Politics & Society*, 23.1 (2005), 88–101.

<sup>176</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 206.

years (*GB VI*, 131). Additionally, he confirmed that ‘[he] would anticipate that the evolution that the Baudelaire chapter [...] is about to undergo is something the other two chapters of the *Arcades* will also have to undergo *at a later time*: the chapters on Grandville and on Haussmann’ (*C*, 574, my emphasis). If taken at his written word, this would mean that Benjamin foresaw that the other planned chapters of his *AP*, as detailed in both exposés, were also to be extended to form a full-length study. Buck-Morss therefore entertains the theory that the isolation of the Baudelaire material was simply a diversionary tactic to alleviate certain pressures but also keep the members of the Institute at ease.<sup>177</sup>

In a letter to Gretel Adorno in June 1939, Benjamin described his ‘new’ work on the Baudelairean *flâneur* as an attempt to integrate ‘crucial motifs from my essay on reproduction and from the one on the storyteller in combination with the same kind of motifs in the *Arcades*’ (*C*, 609) as well as his editorial decision to organize his Baudelaire materials into ‘three distinct parts — the arcades, the crowd, the type’ since this would ‘make it easier for the editorial staff to cope with’ (*C*, 610). Such remarks give the impression that Benjamin was scrambling to make his critical efforts legible, especially by choosing to combine or solidify them with references and insertions of previously published and unpublished materials. A further fact in favour of Buck-Morss’ argument is that despite his intentions to schematize a ‘Baudelaire book’, Benjamin continued to amass materials for all the existing *Convolutes* from 1937 until 1940. Although the ‘Baudelaire book’ arguably reached a schematic and structural maturity that the *AP* would never see, and in the sense outlined above, the *AP* remained more of a hypertext than its later derivative, it

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<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

seems obvious that Benjamin's hope for the *AP* never wavered, ultimately demonstrated by the conception of the later exposé in 1939.

It was, after all, the *AP* which kept Benjamin in Paris until he was forced to flee. Despite their best efforts, many of his close friends could not convince him to leave France.<sup>178</sup> Gretel Adorno wrote to Benjamin: 'But I fear you are so fond of your arcades that you cannot part with their splendid architecture, and once you have closed that door, it is possible that a new subject could interest you again' (*GAC*, 211). 'I don't need to tell you how attached I feel to France', he told Horkheimer, 'both through my connections and through my work. Nothing in the world, for me, could replace the Bibliothèque Nationale' (*GB VI*, 373). Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire from this period became inextricably interwoven with his own experience and conceptions of exile. His depictions of the city transform it into a locus of exile, where the figure of the *flâneur* becomes anonymized through the 'veil' of the masses and consequently spatially and spiritually isolated: 'While Victor Hugo was celebrating the crowd as the hero of a modern epic', writes Benjamin, 'Baudelaire was seeking a refuge for the hero among the masses of the big city. Hugo placed himself in the crowd as a citizen; Baudelaire divorced himself from the crowd as a hero'.<sup>179</sup>

## CONCLUSION: ON THE CONCEPT OF A FRANCO-GERMAN HISTORY

Benjamin's 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' was arguably the last 'finished' piece of writing that he produced within the context of his Parisian exile. These fragments,

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<sup>178</sup> In September 1939, Benjamin was interned in a 'camp des travailleurs volontaires' in Nevers. After the diplomat Henri Hoppenot, a friend of Monnier's, had intervened on Benjamin's behalf, he was able to leave the camp by mid-November. Cf. Eiland and Jennings, pp. 648–653.

<sup>179</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, trans. by Harry Zohn et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 96.

theses, philosophical aphorisms on the subject of historical materialism or ‘a collected bunch of whispering grasses’, as Benjamin once described them to Gretel Adorno, were originally composed on scraps of paper and the backs of envelopes (*GB VI*, 435). Their format had been preceded by the montage-like format of *Einbahnstraße* as well as the entries to his alphabetized Convolutés in the *AP*. Since their wider circulation, the ‘theses’ have spurred a myriad of critical approaches and are considered an iconic distillation of Benjamin’s primary methods and ideas as can be gleaned from his statement that he had concealed their contents from himself for almost twenty years (*GB VI*, 435).<sup>180</sup> The ‘theses’ merge Benjamin’s interests in Marxism and theology, offering a reflection on the redemptive possibility of a form of messianism which would intervene in the ‘homogenous and empty time’ of history (*GS I*, 702). However, most importantly, they are directly related to Benjamin’s reflections on Baudelaire. Despite the significance of this influence, they are nonetheless rarely considered in relation to the impact of French sources on the development of Benjamin’s thought.

When composing the ‘theses’, Benjamin had written to Horkheimer to inform him that they served ‘as a theoretical framework for the second essay on Baudelaire’ (*GB VI*, 400). Several months later he writes to Adorno that ‘[the theses] in turn represent a certain stage in my reflections on the continuation of the “Baudelaire”’ (*C*, 630). And shortly after, he confirms to Gretel Adorno that the ‘theses’ have a ‘methodological’ function as preparation for a continuation of his work on Baudelaire (*GB VI*, 436). Positioning *Eingedenken* as a pivotal historiographical

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<sup>180</sup> The ‘theses’ were first published in Germany in the journal *Neue Rundschau* (no. 4, pp. 560–70) in 1950, where they attracted very little attention. They were subsequently reprinted in the first collection of Benjamin’s writings edited by Adorno, *Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955), which was arguably when they first started being properly ‘received’.

category, the ‘theses’ in many ways re-enact a Baudelairian *Rettung* [rescue] of the past. Just as Baudelaire’s poet is faced with the thronging mass of the crowd, Benjamin’s historical materialist faces the *Chock* [‘shock’] of the *Jetztzeit* [‘now-time’] of history as a ‘crystalized Monad’ which is blasted out of ‘the homogenous course’ of time (*GS* I, 698). Not unlike the exposés for the *AP*, Benjamin translated parts of his ‘theses’ into French (albeit omitting certain sections). This entails that the two versions constitute a strange multilingual mirroring of one another whilst forming part of the textual archive of Benjamin’s final written words.<sup>181</sup> The last time his work on Baudelaire was mentioned was in a letter dated May 7<sup>th</sup> 1940 (*GB* VI, 444), only a few weeks before Benjamin left Paris for the last time, first stopping in Lourdes, then Marseille and finally crossing the Franco-Spanish border to reach the Catalan coastal town of Portbou in September 1940.<sup>182</sup>

To say that the 1930s were a turbulent decade in Benjamin’s life would be an understatement. Not only did he have to contend with internal rifts within his marriage and familial relations but he was forced to permanently uproot himself from his native city, thus becoming even further isolated from his usual social circles. In addition to the various bureaucratic challenges of exile, a continuous issue was his lack of income which became a persistent concern throughout his time in Paris. It is therefore a remarkable feat that he managed to continue working and pursuing his critical interests under such conditions. As I have discussed in this

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<sup>181</sup> The reasoning behind the French translation is unclear but it may have been motivated by Benjamin’s desire to circulate his writings on Baudelaire, the ‘theses’ included, amongst his network of French-speaking acquaintances. A revised version of Benjamin’s initial translation was completed by Pierre Missac and subsequently published in October 1947 in *Les Temps Modernes* 25, pp. 623–634.

<sup>182</sup> Benjamin was accompanied on his journey by political activist Lisa Fittko who would later record her memories of their escape in her book *Escape through the Pyrenees*, trans. by David Koblick (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

chapter, Benjamin managed to build himself an impressive network of local contacts which included the editors of several French journals as well as the members of the *Collège de Sociologie* but he equally maintained his relations with pre-existing connections such as the Institute, for whom he became an important satellite associate by writing articles and surveys on French topics.

Benjamin's choice of Paris as his permanent residence in exile, in addition to his continued engagement with French sources throughout the 1930s, attest to his ongoing investment in the literature and history of his adoptive country. His time in exile gave him the opportunity to strengthen his prior knowledge of French language, literature and culture as well as further his skills as a critic, translator and journalist. Benjamin had started work on the *AP* prior to his departure from Germany and Paris was therefore destined to be the place where he hoped to finally bring the project to fruition. The move to Paris brought with it a deepened fixation on the writings and the activities of the surrealists as well as other associated movements within the broader political landscape of the French literary industry. Commissions from the Institute for Social Research such as the 'Social Situation' essay and publications in French journals such as 'Les Allemands de quatre-vingt neuf' constitute a valuable yet critically overlooked documentation of Benjamin's ongoing activity as a *Vermittler* in exile. However even the more widely discussed articles that he produced, such as 'The Work of Art', were partially written as a result of his French surroundings or were published in collaborative translation with his francophone acquaintances, which most scholarly accounts on his work from this period fail to mention. Even his very last writings such as 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte' were not only in direct response to the conditions of his exile and 'the war and the constellation it entail[ed]' but stemmed from his drafted projects on the

history of the French nineteenth century (*GB VI*, 435). This led him to articulate a concept of historical materialism which does not recognize ‘the past as it really was’ but rather holds fast to the ‘flashing’ image of the past which ‘appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger’ (*SW 4*, 391). Sadly for Benjamin, on September 26th 1940 his existence as a Franco-German intermediary had reached ‘a moment of danger’ from which there was no escape.



## **4. RECEPTION IN FRANCE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The preceding chapters have outlined how Benjamin's ambitions as a writer, thinker, translator and critic were significantly influenced by his engagement with French history, literature and culture. In addition, they have also examined the circumstances of his time living, working and collaborating with writers and intellectuals in Paris. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, Benjamin's Parisian exile not only gave him unprecedented access to the shelves of the Bibliothèque Nationale but most importantly it also gave him access to the local cultural and intellectual scene and those who were active within it. During his lifetime, Benjamin's French friends and acquaintances had already shown their admiration for his work. Nonetheless, as in the initial reception of Benjamin's works in Germany following his death, Benjamin's posthumous impact in France was a slow, steady burn, and the small flames of his legacy were only kept alight through the work of selected individuals.

Although Benjamin struggled to integrate himself fully into French intellectual circles, and this did not further his chances of seeing his works widely published in France, he still managed to leave his mark. This became apparent in the responses to the posthumous publication and dissemination of his works on French soil. The concluding chapter of this thesis therefore intends to assess what this mark represents, and it will lead on directly from Benjamin's death to discuss his posthumous reception in France chronologically. Doing this will allow me to establish an overview of the French figures that were most decisive in contributing to the circulation and translation of his writings as well as draw out the relevant differences between his French and German reception. Before surveying Benjamin's

publication history in France, it will be necessary to approach the question of his disciplinary categorization, which remains a topic of scholarly debate today, especially in Germany. This question therefore reveals inherent differences between Benjamin's posthumous public image in France and Germany. Adorno, who managed and edited the greater part of Benjamin's estate and catalysed his reception following his death, was accused by his contemporaries of altering Benjamin's image to fit that of the 'true philosopher'. The same, however, cannot be said of Benjamin's French interpreters, whose work primarily established him as a writer and literary critic for a francophone readership.

In France, Benjamin's post-war reception was shaped by two figures in particular: Pierre Missac and Maurice de Gandillac. Missac, whom Benjamin had met and corresponded with during his exile in Paris, emerged as a significant spokesperson and conservator of Benjamin's work in France following his death. Gandillac, Benjamin's principal French translator, was a Professor at the Sorbonne from 1946 until 1977. After editing and translating Benjamin's most prominent works into two volumes, Gandillac oversaw the doctoral research activities of an entire generation of post-war philosophers. Following an examination of Missac and Gandillac's work on Benjamin, I will go on to highlight further aspects of Benjamin's French reception that took place in publications such as the journal *Critique*, as well as the international colloquium on Benjamin in Paris in 1983 which played a primary role in establishing Benjamin scholarship in France.

Lastly, this chapter will reverse the question of a French influence by examining the scope of Benjamin's lasting presence within French intellectual history with reference to theoretical movements in post-war France. Delving into the posthumous dialogues between Benjamin and French thinkers — Maurice Blanchot,

Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Rancière and Jacques Derrida — in relation to Benjamin's 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' and 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' will give occasion to reflect on the extent of his critical legacy in France and its broader intersection with French responses to the work of the Institute for Social Research.

#### 4.1. HISTORIES OF RECEPTION

##### *Poète or philosophe?*

During his lifetime, Benjamin enjoyed some recognition for his cultural criticism, translation work and published writings. He was known as a writer and critic across select intellectuals networks in Europe, Israel, the USSR and the USA. Nevertheless, his academic failure and unorthodox approaches to cultural commentary and criticism meant that his contributions to philosophy and theory were not fully recognized until decades after his death in 1940. His recasting as a decisive figure within twentieth-century thought was firstly instigated by Adorno, the primary custodian of Benjamin's estate. Starting in 1950, Adorno arranged the publication of *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* for which he had written an afterword. In 1955, this was then followed by two volumes of Benjamin's collected writings that he edited with his wife Gretel Adorno and the assistance of Friedrich Podszus.<sup>1</sup> The history of Benjamin's post-war reception thus starts with Adorno's advocacy of his late friend and colleague's work in Germany. In a 1967 letter addressed to Hannah Arendt, Adorno stated:

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<sup>1</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *Schriften*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955). In 1966, Adorno then edited the first edition of Benjamin's collected correspondence with Gershom Scholem. See Walter Benjamin, *Briefe*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1966). These publications mark important milestones in Benjamin's posthumous reception in Germany as an established writer, theorist and intellectual of the twentieth century.

For me, what defines Benjamin within the context of my own intellectual existence is axiomatic: *the essence of his thinking is philosophical*. I have never been able to see his works from any other point of view, and it seems to me that this alone gives them all their weight. I am aware of the extent to which this departs from all traditional conceptions of philosophy, and moreover, that Benjamin did not make it easy for one to hold onto this view of him.<sup>2</sup>

Adorno's insistence on Benjamin's writings as forms of 'non-traditional' philosophy is indicative of his overall attitude in editing and disseminating Benjamin's works. In the decades following Benjamin's death, Adorno was placed under intense scrutiny for guarding and even shifting the nature of Benjamin's work to fit a certain predetermined framework. In *Über Walter Benjamin* (1968), Adorno denies the 'literariness' of Benjamin's writings by claiming that their imagistic quality constituted a philosophical 'rebus'.<sup>3</sup> Above all, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, the 1968 movement brought in a new wave of Benjamin readers which resulted in Adorno's interpretation of his works being challenged.<sup>4</sup> This phase, which above all highlighted Benjamin's leftist-radical practice as a writer, still forms part of many of the discussions surrounding his corpus today. The sheer scope and diversity of Benjamin's significant *Nachlass* means that even half a century after the initial circulation of his collected writings, his personality and ideas are often moulded, cast and recast by his critics, their kaleidoscopic quality, compounded with the sheer

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<sup>2</sup> As cited in *Arendt und Benjamin: Texte, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. by Detlev Schöttker and Erdmut Wizisla (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2017), p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Über Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 10, my emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the underestimation of Benjamin's Marxist leanings and the weight of his relationship with Brecht, Adorno's critics during the '68 movement were above all insistent on revealing the inherent discrepancies between his work and Benjamin's. Cf. Rosemarie Heise, 'Nachbemerkungen zu einer Polemik oder widerlegbare Behauptungen der Frankfurter Benjamin-Herausgeber', *alternative*, 11.59/60 (1968), 69–93.

quantity of his archive, resulting in a myriad of critical approaches. Indeed, it is evident that this indeterminacy, coupled with the cryptic nature of many of Benjamin's writings, has in fact contributed to Benjamin's diverse and wide-ranging afterlives within different literary and critical fields. To add to the confusion of the question of Benjamin's status as 'a philosopher and/or critic', the German concept of *Kritik* can signify both philosophical critique as well as cultural criticism, thus spawning different receptions in diverse fields.<sup>5</sup>

Critic Eckhardt Köhn makes the important observation that Hannah Arendt, Asja Lacis, Adrienne Monnier and Charlotte Wolff, who had come into contact with Benjamin and his writings completely independently from each other, all conceive of his work as being primarily that of a *Schriftsteller* (a writer).<sup>6</sup> Although works such as *Einbahnstraße* and *Berliner Kindheit um 1900* qualify Benjamin as a 'creative' writer in his own right,<sup>7</sup> this conception of his work fails to acknowledge the many theoretical concepts that define his corpus, which was retrospectively confirmed once his papers, manuscripts and notes were uncovered after his death. Arendt, I would argue, should be sorted into a camp of her own. In her posthumous profile on Benjamin reviewing his life and writing methods in 1968, she wrote:

[W]e are dealing here with something which may not be unique but is certainly extremely rare: the gift of *thinking poetically*. And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the 'thought fragments' it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Thijs Lijster, 'The Interruption of Myth: Walter Benjamin's Concept of Critique' in *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. by Ruth Sonderegger and Karin de Boer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 156–74 (p. 156).

<sup>6</sup> Eckhardt Köhn, "'Ein Letzter, wie ich es bin": Bemerkungen zum schriftstellerischen Selbstverständnis Walter Benjamins' in *Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen": Frankfurter Benjamin-Vorträge*, ed. by Lorenz Jäger and Thomas Regehly (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 1993), pp. 157–186 (p. 157).

<sup>7</sup> See also Benjamin's sonnets which he wrote to mourn the suicide of his friend, Fritz Heinle. *Sonnets*, trans. by Carl Skoggard (Hudson, NY: Fence Books, 2017).

who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange.<sup>8</sup>

Within the posthumous debates surrounding Benjamin and his work, Arendt thus emerged as a loud and unflinching voice. It was above all Tiedemann's claims that his mentor Adorno had in some way altered the course of Benjamin's writings on the arcades, in particular the exposés, that she vehemently denied, claiming that if anything the roles were reversed and that Adorno was Benjamin's 'only student'.<sup>9</sup>

In dialogue with Arendt's conception of Benjamin's poetic thinking in and through 'thought fragments', we find contemporary critic Sigrid Weigel's writing on the subject. Weigel adopts a more balanced position by defining Benjamin's methods and his creation of 'thought-images' within a 'third space' ('dritter Bereich'), as straddling the fields of both philosophy and literature.<sup>10</sup> She states that despite a lack of precision and systematic rigour, the effects of Benjamin's writing stem from his unique approach to the creation of thought and theory: 'his mode of thought *is* the very output of his theory'.<sup>11</sup> Weigel elucidates this claim with reference to Benjamin's *AP* as a 'completely new form of thought, where the whole is represented in the ruin, which becomes methodologically realized through

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<sup>8</sup> Hannah Arendt, 'Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940' in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1968), pp. 153–206, 205. In a letter to Adorno in 1967, Arendt writes that she held an image of Benjamin altogether dissimilar from his and anticipated that neither he nor Scholem would be in agreement with her views on the matter. Cf. Schöttker and Wizisla, p. 180.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Hannah Arendt, 'Walter Benjamin', *Merkur*, 22 (1968), 50–65.

<sup>10</sup> She takes this term from Benjamin himself. See *GS II*, p. 314. For Benjamin, 'the image is not a depiction or a reflection', she states, 'but a constellation of a heteronormative and heterogenous likeness, in which figures of thought are brought together with those of reality. These images are therefore not the object, but the matrix of his theory building'. Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

allegorical theories of perception and the monadological structure of phenomena'.<sup>12</sup>

Within this mode of thought, the citation takes on a 'linguistic materiality and independence, which gives it a diverse readability, yet within the context of a historical construction, also lends it a resistance'.<sup>13</sup> As has been demonstrated, Benjamin's methods in the *AP* in particular gave rise to a form of writing in which citation functions as a key element for his dialectical approach to history.

To summarize, Benjamin's manner of working and thinking across several intellectual borderlines has led to multiple contrasting perspectives which often correspond to the preferences and prejudices of his numerous interpreters, including those of his friends and contemporaries. The manner in which his status and image were subject to change and dependent on the contextual environment of his readers is thus a factor that needs to be taken into account when unpacking the history of his reception not only in Germany and France, but worldwide.

#### **Pierre Missac — The 'Old Master' of Benjamin Scholarship**

In France, Benjamin's publications in French literary journals during his lifetime were influential in shaping his reputation primarily as that of a writer of literary and cultural criticism. Pierre Missac, in a similar vein to Arendt, therefore praised his talent for 'poetic' thinking, thus siding against the portrayal of Benjamin's work by German editors Adorno and Tiedemann. Missac, like Benjamin, was not an academic, but a man of letters. Before providing an overview of the history of Benjamin's post-war French reception, I wish to dwell on his relationship with Missac — pseudonym of Pierre Bonnasse (1910–1986) — and Missac's influence on the state of French Benjamin scholarship today.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 199.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

In Kafkaesque fashion, Missac led a double life working as the director of an insurance company by day and a cultural critic by night. Missac and Benjamin were introduced to each other in 1937 by Georges Bataille. At this time, Missac was working on several pieces discussing film for *Les Cahiers du Sud*, a journal, which as discussed in Chapter 3, Benjamin was also affiliated with. Numerous references to their relationship can be found in Benjamin's correspondence, such as a letter dating from October 1938, where having read one of Missac's drafts for a piece he was preparing on the history of cinema, Benjamin invites him to his apartment to discuss its contents further (*GB VI*, 172).<sup>14</sup> The following year, Benjamin would contact Missac to confirm his own proximity to his views on bourgeois intellectualism, as developed in a piece by Missac in the May 1939 issue of *Les Cahiers du Sud* issue entitled 'Avec des cartes truquées' ['Rigged cards'].<sup>15</sup> Later that year, following Benjamin's internment at Nevers, he wrote to Missac, informing him of the conditions of the camp and recalling their last face-to-face conversation at the Café de Versailles (*GB VI*, 349).<sup>16</sup> Following Benjamin's death in 1940, Missac emerged as an instrumental figure in navigating the practicalities of physically conserving his archive, given that he located and sent Benjamin's papers to Adorno, a task which Benjamin had previously entrusted to Bataille before his flight from Paris. Although

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin's archive reveals that he was in possession of several of Missac's drafts such as his review of French dramatist Armand Salacrou's play *La Terre est ronde* (1938). See 'Pierre Missac [i.e. Pierre Bonasse], Le Theatre: [über] Armand Salacrou, La terre est ronde', Archive of the Akademie der Künste (AdK), Walter Benjamin Archive, Berlin, inventory no.: WBA 231 <<https://archiv.adk.de/objekt/2578396>>.

<sup>15</sup> See *GB VI*, pp. 290–291. Missac writes: 'The presence of consciousness in the man of action goes hand in hand with the recognition of his limits by the intellectual. This double reconciliation is perhaps the task of the young bourgeois, who refuse to be fooled, without ignoring the ties which hinder them'. 'Avec des cartes truquées', *Les Cahiers du Sud* (1939), 423–27 (p. 427) <<https://www.retronews.fr/journal/les-cahiers-du-sud/01-mai-1939/717/2012803/60>>.

<sup>16</sup> See *GB VI*, p. 353. Considering that Benjamin was limited to eight letters a month, it seems notable that he would go to the effort of remaining in touch with this particular acquaintance.



Missac is usually mentioned in studies that deal with Benjamin's French reception, his own relative obscurity in France means that those accounts do not often reference the extent of his advocacy of Benjamin's ideas. Missac is one of the few early French figures who explicitly engaged with Benjamin's writings, and he was also the first critic, in France as well as internationally, to reference the *AP* in a book-length study.

The first of Missac's publications which helped keep Benjamin on the map in France was his translation of Benjamin's 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', which appeared as 'Sur le concept de l'histoire' in the October 1947 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*.<sup>17</sup> Over the course of the following decades, a steady stream of articles on Benjamin in journals such as *Critique*, *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui*, *Revue d'esthétique*, *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, *Change* and *Le Promeneur*, then followed.<sup>18</sup> Many of these pieces contain useful indications on the current state of Benjamin reception in French circles. An example would be the piece 'L'éclat et le secret: Walter Benjamin', which appeared in *Critique* in 1966, where Missac states:

In France, a lot remains to be done. The first volume of [Benjamin's] translations aroused so little interest that the idea of publishing another was abandoned [...]. How many people are even familiar with the name of Benjamin?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Les Temps Modernes*, a journal which only ceased publishing in 2019, was the brainchild of Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Missac's translation appeared amongst pieces by high-profile contemporaries Maurice Blanchot, Marguerite Duras, Violette Leduc and Nathalie Sarraute.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. amongst others, 'Walter Benjamin en France', *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui* (1969); 'Stéphane Mallarmé et Walter Benjamin', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 43.2 (1969); 'Éloge de la citation', *Change*, 22 (1975), 133–151; 'Ce sont des thèses! Sont-ce des thèses?', *Revue d'esthétique* 8 (1985), 199–202; 'L'ange et l'automat', *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* (1975); 'Walter Benjamin, de la rupture au naufrage', *Critique*, 395 (1980), 371–381; 'Walter Benjamin à la Bibliothèque nationale', *Bulletin de la Bibliothèque nationale*, I (1984); 'Sur un nouvel avatar du flâneur', *Le Promeneur*, XXX (1984).

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Missac, 'L'éclat et le secret: Walter Benjamin', *Critique*, 231–232, 1966 (p. 693). Missac is referencing the first selection of Benjamin's writings, which was published several

Thankfully, the initial lacklustre response to Benjamin's works in France did not deter Missac from continuing to review his writings and recent criticism. In the 1969 piece 'Du nouveau sur Walter Benjamin ?', Missac recounts the controversy surrounding Benjamin's posthumous publication for a French audience.<sup>20</sup> This was in response to several scathing articles in the German press on Adorno, Tiedemann and Scholem, which criticized the manner in which they had failed to communicate the essence of Benjamin's persona and writings faithfully in their treatment of his estate.<sup>21</sup> Missac, showing himself to be intimately familiar with Benjamin's relationships and correspondence, is able to retrace the complicated history of his oeuvre. Ultimately, Missac sides with the critics by claiming that despite his respect for their work, Scholem, Adorno and Tiedemann are all guilty of advancing their own agenda within their posthumous interpretations of Benjamin's writings. Yet the article also shows that he is still hopeful at the prospect of new directions and revisions of the Benjaminian archive; above all he envisions a collaborative Franco-German approach:

Germanists and academics could play an interesting role [in relation to Benjamin's work], that of catalysts or mediators. In doing so, they would be able — to a certain extent — to repair [...] the harm caused by their country to the man they should have been proud to

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years before in 1959 by Julliard (only four years after the first publication of his writings in Germany).

<sup>20</sup> 'The controversy that has been unfolding for several months in Germany around Walter Benjamin must be brought to the attention of the French public'. Ibid., p. 682.

<sup>21</sup> The initial article which catalysed the so-called scandal was by Helmut Heißenbüttel in the March 1967 issue of *Merkur*. This was then followed up a by a special issue of the *alternative* which contained similar accusations. Although Adorno's disciple Tiedemann attempted to appease the critics in an article for *Das Argument* in 1966, that same year Heißenbüttel but also Arendt would publish retorts in *Merkur*.

welcome and that each testimony of indifference or miscomprehension betrays once again.<sup>22</sup>

Missac's *Passage de Walter Benjamin* appeared in 1987 with Éditions du Seuil. He had laboured over this work for five years and it would eventually be published shortly after his death. His lifetime's work would be recognized by German Benjamin scholars when it was published in German translation in 1991 by Suhrkamp, the principal publisher of Benjamin's works.<sup>23</sup> *Passage* is not an analytical book in the conventional sense, nor does it make many scholarly references or rely on external sources. Rather, Missac adopts the method of 'indirect critique', which in a Benjaminian manner allows him to focus in on various details in order to create an assemblage or mosaic of juxtaposing elements. Missac's 'indirect' method thereby sees him engaging with Benjamin's life and works 'almost through stealth, or even unawares, *en passant*, in accordance with the method by which Benjamin made his best finds as a collector'.<sup>24</sup> Accusing existing criticism of 'not finding an appropriate point from which to regard Benjamin's oeuvre', Missac sets himself the task of 'not betraying the model' Benjamin himself provided.<sup>25</sup>

In her introduction to her English translation of *Passage*, Shierry Weber Nichol森 notes that Missac's book 'derives its authority from its author's half century of intimate involvement with Benjamin's work'.<sup>26</sup> An important aspect of

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<sup>22</sup> Missac, 'L'éclat et le secret: Walter Benjamin', p. 698.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamins Passage*, trans. by Ulrike Bischoff (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991). What's more, Tiedemann would pay homage to Missac in a piece entitled 'Ein Mittler Benjamins', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 254 (1986), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Missac, *Water Benjamin's Passages*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nichol森 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Shierry Weber Nichol森, 'Translator's Introduction' in *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, pp. viiii–xvii (p. viiii).

Missac's approach is the question of distance that the critic should adopt in relation to the material at hand, which highlights a pertinent issue at an early stage within Benjamin's posthumous reception: either the critic takes up a position too close to the work itself, the criticism thereby becoming merely an imitation, or they are too distant and Benjamin's work is simply adapted and assimilated into a pre-existing field.<sup>27</sup> In a review of Missac's book for *Critique*, Rainer Rochlitz<sup>28</sup> summarized this in the following observation:

Missac's book is a testament to his frustrations. Missac, whose loyalty to his friend has never wavered, finds himself obliged to protect him from amateurs, to surround him with a thousand precautions, to disillusion all those who believe him to be easily accessible. Not that you don't have to love Benjamin; it is about the prevention of claiming his work for the wrong reasons.<sup>29</sup>

In the chapter 'Glass Architecture', Missac focuses on Benjamin's work on the arcades as well as his essay on Paul Sheerbart by constructing an alternate history of glass architecture from a range of literary and philosophical perspectives. This is just one instance of many in the book which sees Missac participating in a re-enactment of Benjamin's own methods; *Passages* is packed with allusions, each paragraph a stack of papers that need to be closely studied by the reader. In this vein, Missac was also one of the first critics to address Benjamin's potential affinities with other

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<sup>27</sup> Missac, *Walter Benjamin's Passages*, pp. 15–16.

<sup>28</sup> Rainer Rochlitz (1946–2002), a French translator, art historian and director of seminars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, contributed a great deal to publicizing the writings of Benjamin, Georg Lukács and Jürgen Habermas in France.

<sup>29</sup> Rainer Rochlitz, 'Benjamin écrivain: la fidélité de Pierre Missac' in Rainer Rochlitz, *Le Vif de La Critique, Vol. 1: Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Christian Bouchindhomme and Geneviève Rochlitz (Brussels: Lettre Volée, 2010), pp. 105–14 (p. 105). Rochlitz also comments on the notable absence of Missac's memories of Benjamin: 'Obviously, Pierre Missac avoided writing a personal book, "the story of a friendship", with all his might, but above all he refused to repeat the faults of Max Brod's book on Kafka, which Benjamin had denounced' (pp. 106–107).

writers and thinkers, including Bataille, Giraudoux, Mallarmé, Joë Bousquet, Wittgenstein and Guy Debord. Rather prophetically, Missac in many ways predicted the course of global Benjamin scholarship in addition to pioneering a more ‘popular’, alternative reception of Benjamin’s works outside of the usual confines of academia.<sup>30</sup>

### **Benjamin in the Post-war French Press**

Whilst in Germany the journal *alternative* became the main mouthpiece for Benjamin criticism, especially throughout the 1960s,<sup>31</sup> in France, the first posthumous criticism on Benjamin was primarily instigated by the aforementioned *Critique*, a monthly literary, philosophical and artistic journal founded by Georges Bataille in 1946.<sup>32</sup> Bearing the subtitle ‘Revue générale des publications françaises et étrangères’ (‘General review of French and foreign publications’), *Critique*’s initial editorial board had Bataille as director and included Maurice Blanchot in the editorial committee.<sup>33</sup> Even though many of its contributors were drawn from Bataille’s inner circle, the review managed to maintain a diverse set of themes and texts. Bataille scholar Michel Surya therefore remarks that ‘one could not fail to be first struck by the apparent disparity of the themes and texts appearing in the table of

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. amongst others Carol Jacobs, *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) and Frances Cannon, *Walter Benjamin Reimagined: A Graphic Translation of Poetry, Prose, Aphorisms, and Dreams* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Examples of articles include Heinz-Dieter Kittsteiner, ‘Die geschichtsphilosophischen Thesen’, *alternative*, 10.56/57 (1967), 243–251; Helmut Lethen, ‘Zur materialistischen Kunsttheorie Benjamins’, *alternative*, 10.56/57 (1967), 225–234 and Helga Gallas, ‘Wie es zu den Eingriffen in Benjamins Texte kam oder Über die Herstellbarkeit von Einverständnis’, *alternative*, 11.59/60 (1968), 76–85.

<sup>32</sup> In particular, issues no. 162 (1960), 231 and 232 (1966), 267 and 268 (1969), 329 (1980) and 431 (1983).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: La mort à l’œuvre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 426.

contents of the first issues of *Critique*'.<sup>34</sup> Major post-war thinkers Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida were subsequently all on the advisory board in the 1960s. In contrast to Bataille's earlier ventures, namely *Acéphale* and *Documents*, *Critique* managed to stand the test of time despite numerous financial difficulties, and it became a major organ for French Benjamin scholarship.

Aside from *Critique*, Benjamin's writings started to appear in translation in a range of other publications. In 1954, *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, founded by Maurice Nadeau, published recollections on Benjamin by Adrienne Monnier and Jean Selz, but also featured translations of Benjamin's essay on Johann Jakob Bachofen and excerpts from *Berliner Kindheit um 1900*.<sup>35</sup> The journal *Europe*, which had translated and published Benjamin during his lifetime, featured Benjamin's commentary in a special issue on Brecht in 1957.<sup>36</sup> The editorial of the issue praises Benjamin as 'one of the most brilliant and profound German essayists of the century'.<sup>37</sup> In 1959, Maurice de Gandillac's translation of several 'Œuvres choisies' ('Selected Works') by Benjamin was then published by Julliard. The cover text for this collection reads:

Connected with Rilke, Kafka and Paul Klee, Benjamin is exemplary of the type of German of high culture ['haute culture'] with cosmopolitan friendships and connections.

The essays gathered in this volume constitute the first ensemble of Walter Benjamin's work made available to French readers. They will uncover a profound and diverse intelligence, a passionate interest for all forms of literature, for philosophy, linguistics and popular art.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 430–431.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, 11 (1954).

<sup>36</sup> *Europe*, 133–134 (1957), p. 132.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Walter Benjamin — who went into exile in France during the advent of Nazism — stands out as the most brilliant and subtle mind — in the interwar years — to have been produced by a Germany that was no longer in Germany.<sup>38</sup>

Gandillac offered French readers a small prefatory biography, followed by translations of Benjamin's 'Kritik der Gewalt', 'Schicksal und Charakter', 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', 'Die Wahlverwandtschaften', 'Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire' and 'Der Erzähler'. Since these pieces were all published in Benjamin's lifetime, they were readily accessible to Gandillac in their original language. This particular selection of works appears to have been based on Benjamin's *Schriften* (1955), edited by Adorno. In 1971, two further volumes entitled 'Myth and Violence' and 'Poetry and Revolution' were published by Denoël which featured Gandillac's translation work.<sup>39</sup> Gandillac's translations would then eventually serve as a departure point for the three-volume *Œuvres*, which would be published by Folio in 2000 with additional translations by Rainer Rochlitz and Pierre Rusch, and is considered the official translation of reference for present-day readers. The publication of the three-volume collection, which is organized thematically rather than chronologically, marked an important step in making the great breadth of Benjamin's writings accessible to a wider francophone readership.

It is important to note that Gandillac's role as Benjamin's primary translator following his death was not entirely coincidental. Gandillac, a near-contemporary of Benjamin's, was Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne (1946–1977), and would

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres choisies*, trans. by Maurice de Gandillac (Paris: Julliard, 1959).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Œuvres I: Mythe et Violence* and *Œuvres 2: Poésie et Révolution*, trans. by Maurice de Gandillac (Paris: Denoël, 1971). These volumes were prompted by the essay collection entitled *Illuminationen*, ed. by Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1961). This collection had also been released in English translation in 1969. See *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books). It was reedited and rereleased as *Essais I: 1922–1934* and *Essais II: 1935–1940* in 1983.

advise the doctoral work of Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In addition to his academic achievements, he was the primary translator for a range of notable German thinkers and writers, including Novalis, Brentano, Lukács, Bloch and Nietzsche. His translation of the latter's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in particular solidified his position as an important Franco-German intermediary in the field of philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Considering his profile, Gandillac, who witnessed Benjamin's emergence onto the French literary and intellectual 'scene' first-hand and already had a proven track record of translating German theory and philosophy, was the obvious choice for Benjamin's primary translator. Aside from Gandillac, Rochlitz and Rusch, Jean Lacoste completed the first French translation of *One-Way Street* ('Sens Unique') under *Les Lettres Nouvelles*' house imprint in 1978.<sup>41</sup> Benjamin's 'Les Allemands', which had previously appeared in *Europe*, was published as a book by Hachette in 1979.<sup>42</sup> In the same year, this was followed by two volumes of Benjamin's collected correspondence.<sup>43</sup>

Following a flurry of translations and publications in the 1960s and 1970s, Benjamin's name started to circulate outside of the intimate network of French figures he had known during his lifetime. The eighties then saw a noticeable surge in

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<sup>40</sup> Gandillac also served as the general editor, alongside Gilles Deleuze, of the French translation of the Colli-Montinari critical edition of Nietzsche's collected works. To get a fuller sense of Gandillac's wide-ranging critical interests as well as the figures he interacted with see *L'Art des confins: mélanges offerts à Maurice de Gandillac*, ed. by Annie Cazenave and Jean-François Lyotard (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985) which includes essays by Deleuze, Derrida, Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy and Paul Ricœur.

<sup>41</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Sens unique: précédé de Enfance berlinoise et suivi de Paysages urbains*, trans. by Jean Lacoste (Paris: Les Lettres nouvelles/ M. Nadeau, 1978).

<sup>42</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Allemands: Une série de lettres*, trans. by Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt (Paris: Hachette, 1979).

<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Correspondance, Vol. 1: 1910–1928 + Vol. 2: 1929–1940*, trans. by Guy Petitdemange (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1979).



critical interest and Benjamin's connections to French literature and culture began to be more widely recognized. Rochlitz, in a 1987 article for *Critique*, commented on this phenomenon:

Following a period of relative obscurity, then of growing fame amongst *connoisseurs*, Walter Benjamin has become [...] a figure of reference. The publication of the book of *passages* promises to be the pinnacle of a glory that is truly deserved, yet perhaps not what he would have wished for. In the cult of which he is the object, a tasteful scepticism towards modernity is intertwined with a nostalgia for a truthfully unenviable past, revolt, literary taste and a desire for knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

In Germany, Benjamin had slowly begun to enter academic discourses in the 1960s. In 1972, the first international Benjamin congress took place in Frankfurt to commemorate what would have been his eightieth birthday. The congress, which included a keynote paper by Jürgen Habermas, was taken as an occasion to question Benjamin's *Aktualität* ('actuality') at a time when his reception in West Germany was still limited to select intellectual circles.<sup>45</sup> Benjamin's 'official' public entrance into French academia would take place at the international conference 'Walter Benjamin et Paris' held 27–29th June 1983, marking a watershed moment within his French reception. The conference was organized by the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, with support from the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*, *La Maison des Sciences de l'Homme* and the *Goethe- Institut Paris*, and was catalyzed by Rolf Tiedemann's recent work on Benjamin's posthumous publications.<sup>46</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> Rainer Rochlitz, 'Benjamin écrivain: la fidélité de Pierre Missac' in Rainer Rochlitz, *Le Vif de La Critique, Vol. 1: Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Christian Bouchindhomme and Geneviève Rochlitz (Brussels: Lettre Volée, 2010), pp. 105–14 (p. 105).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. the conference proceedings *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. by Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972).

<sup>46</sup> Tiedemann's own study on Benjamin's work, *Studien zur Philosophie Walter Benjamins* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965), was translated by Rochlitz in the years following the

event took place one year after the German publication of the *AP*, which Rochlitz references in the quote above.

The Paris conference proceedings were published in 1986 and constitute a vital piece of documentation within the history of Benjamin's lasting significance on French soil. The conference had brought together a myriad of international scholars — its contributors including Maurice de Gandillac, Pierre Missac, Giorgio Agamben and Susan Buck-Morss — and was organized around the themes of 'childhood and exile', 'literature and criticism', 'aesthetics and politics', 'myth and history' and lastly 'time and text'. In his introduction to the publication, editor Heinz Wismann states that the conference was the direct result of the 'keen interest that Benjamin's work had begun to garner in France, after having been practically ignored for some time'.<sup>47</sup> This had been preceded by almost two decades of criticism marked by the aforementioned controversy surrounding the ideology and nature of Benjamin's writings in both Germany and Italy. The French approach then, states Wismann, was an opportunity to reinvolve major questions at a distance from such disputes, with a decisive emphasis on 'the legitimacy of a constellation, of which Paris became an incontestable symbol'.<sup>48</sup>

The proceedings also include work by Klaus Garber, one of the critics to have initially documented Benjamin's reception history from its early stages.<sup>49</sup> Garber claims that Benjamin's case, within the context of twentieth-century

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conference. See Rolf Tiedemann, *Études sur la philosophie de Walter Benjamin*, trans. by Rainer Rochlitz (Arles: Actes Sud, 1987).

<sup>47</sup> Heinz Wismann, 'Liminaire' in *Walter Benjamin et Paris: colloque international 27–29 juin 1983*, ed. by Heinz Wismann (Paris: Cerf, 1986).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Klaus Garber, *Rezeption und Rettung: Drei Studien zu Walter Benjamin* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1987).

philosophy, is without precedent.<sup>50</sup> The first international congress in France confirmed the reigning perception of Benjamin's corpus as not that of a German but primarily that of a European author, who was never fated to leave Europe's shores.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Garber remarks that it was only through the efforts of an international research community that a deepened understanding of Benjamin's *AP* in particular was gained.<sup>52</sup> Whilst the first publication of the known *AP* materials appeared in Germany, a further manuscript was uncovered in Paris by Agamben. The scattered nature of Benjamin's estate in many ways reflects his multifaceted, international approach to his subject matter.

The 1980s saw the publication of Christine Buci-Glucksmann's *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (1984), one of the first book-length studies to have appeared on Benjamin's writings in France.<sup>53</sup> That same year, Jean Ballard, editor of *Les Cahiers du Sud*, published his correspondence with Benjamin.<sup>54</sup> Benjamin's habilitation thesis and his doctoral dissertation were also translated and published, in 1985 and 1986, respectively.<sup>55</sup> Translations of further collections of essays, Benjamin's Baudelaire materials and some of his radio programmes from the 1930s shortly followed.<sup>56</sup> As a result of the increase in translations of Benjamin's

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<sup>50</sup> Klaus Garber, 'Étapes de la réception de Benjamin' in Wismann, pp. 917–984 (p. 917).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 983.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Buci-Glucksmann's study was translated into English in 1994 and constitutes an example of Benjamin's French reception spawning further receptions in other languages. See *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (London: Sage, 1994).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Jean Ballard and Walter Benjamin 'Correspondance' in Walter Benjamin and Jean Ballard, *Les camps en Provence: exil, internement, déportation, 1933–1944* (Aix-en-Provence: Alinéa, 1984), pp. 47–61.

<sup>55</sup> *Origine du drame baroque allemand*, trans. by Sibylle Muller (Paris: Flammarion, 1985) and *Le concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemand*, trans. by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Anne-Marie Lang (Paris: Flammarion, 1986).

<sup>56</sup> See *Rastelli raconte...et autres récits*, trans. by Philippe Jaccottet et Maurice de Gandillac, (Paris: Seuil, 1987), *Trois pièces radiophoniques*, trans. by Rainer Rochlitz (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1987) and *Paris, capitale du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, trans. by Jean Lacoste (Paris: Cerf, 1989).

work and the academic attention his writings had received in the 1980s, the early 1990s then witnessed the release of a range of critical studies on Benjamin by French scholars.<sup>57</sup> In 1991, Folio released Benjamin's *Écrits français*, a collection of his collaborative translation work as well as pieces he wrote in French during his Parisian exile.<sup>58</sup> The publication intended to convey 'a precise image' of Benjamin's 'diverse' relations with the French language, signalling its importance to a comprehensive understanding of his life and work.<sup>59</sup> It also features recollections by Adrienne Monnier, Jean Selz and Gisèle Freund, further solidifying Benjamin's role and impact on French intellectual circles. As Christine Schmider writes, these 'French writings' constitute 'what is specific to the Benjaminian approach: a thought dedicated to mediation, passage and intercultural transmission, and which takes note, at the same time, of political actuality and the battles to be waged'.<sup>60</sup> What's more, she argues, these works can be considered, above all, as autobiographical works, in which the concept of 'survival' is played out, both on the level of the work itself as well as within the life of the author in exile.<sup>61</sup>

In parallel with the gradual release of the German critical editions of Benjamin's works edited by Christoph GÖdde and Henri Lonitz with Suhrkamp from 2008, French Benjamin scholars and translators Michel Métayer and Florent Perrier have worked on publishing Benjamin's *Œuvres et inédits* with Klincksieck since

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<sup>57</sup> See amongst others Catherine Perret, *Walter Benjamin sans destin* (Paris: La Différence, 1992), Rainer Rochlitz, *Le désenchantement de l'art: La philosophie de Walter Benjamin* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992) and Stéphane Moses, *L'ange de l'histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

<sup>58</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Écrits français* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).

<sup>59</sup> Jean-Maurice Monnoyer, 'Introduction' in Benjamin, *Écrits français*, pp. 9–73 (p. 72).

<sup>60</sup> Christine Schmider, 'L'exil parisien de Walter Benjamin: traduire pour exister' in *Migration, exil et traduction*, ed. by Bernard Banoun, Michaela Enderle-Ristori and Sylvie Le Moël (Tours: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, 2018), pp. 165–182 (para. 23 of 23) <<http://books.openedition.org/pufr/9224>>.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

2011.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the translations of works which had not previously been circulated in French, these volumes provide the reader with critical commentaries and flesh out the collected works previously released under Gandillac. They serve as a contemporary indicator of the ongoing interest in distributing Benjamin's works in the French language today.

Unlike the post-war responses to Benjamin's work in West Germany, his initial reception in France was capable of singling out the significance of his affinities with French literature and culture. In opposition to Adorno's controversial insistence on Benjamin's status as purely that of a *Philosoph*, Benjamin's French readers and translators, such as Missac and Gandillac, were primarily fixated on his talents for 'poetic thinking' as an important essayist of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, this did not prevent Benjamin's entry into academic discourses as evidenced in the first international conference in Paris that was dedicated to his ideas. Furthermore, the 'unclassifiable' nature of Benjamin's corpus meant that it appealed to a number of post-war French thinkers who were all operating at interdisciplinary boundaries and actively redefining the critical function of philosophy in France.

#### 4.2. TRACES AND LEGACIES

Based on the claims made in the preceding sections of this chapter, it would perhaps be too much of a stretch to identify specific currents of thought and theory that Benjamin initiated in France. As previously discussed, Missac, in his use of

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Werke und Nachlaß: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 21 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008–2021); Walter Benjamin, *Critiques et recensions: œuvres et inédits 13.1 and 13.2*, trans. by Marianne Dautrey, Philippe Ivernel and Christophe Jouanlanne (Paris: Klincksieck, 2018); Walter Benjamin, *Sens Unique: œuvres et inédits 8*, trans. by Christophe Jouanlanne (Paris: Klincksieck, 2019).

‘indirect’ criticism both in and through Benjamin’s writings, is perhaps the closest to a direct French Benjamin disciple. Nonetheless, following the posthumous circulation of Benjamin’s works in the 1950s and 1960s, it is apparent that his ideas were significant for a number of post-war French writers, theorists and philosophers.

In the second half of this chapter, I will identify several post-war dialogues between Benjamin and France’s intellectuals. The texts which I will examine span the period from the 1960s until the early 2000s, by which point Benjamin’s works were starting to become a recognized subject of study at several French institutions. Evidently, my accounts will not be fully exhaustive and could easily merit a further study of their own. For this reason and to give structure to such a broad and varied intellectual and philosophical landscape, this subchapter will focus on two essays by Benjamin that appear the most dominant within the context of his posthumous French reception and will provide the thematic and conceptual focus of my arguments: Firstly, ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ and secondly, ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit’.<sup>63</sup>

These texts, which are now firmly canonized in the field of translation and media studies internationally, found a particular resonance in post-war France. Written at the beginning and the tail end of Benjamin’s career respectively, ‘The Task’ and ‘Work of Art’ will thus function as two case studies in my examination of Benjamin’s reach into the writings of France’s most eminent writers and thinkers who were all actively involved in establishing his works outside of a German context. It seems fitting and perhaps not entirely coincidental that his preface to his first book-length translation from the French and the ‘Work of Art’, an essay he translated in collaboration with Klossowski in Parisian exile, attracted the most

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<sup>63</sup> Henceforth referred to as ‘The Task’ and ‘Work of Art’.

attention in France. In ‘The Task’, Benjamin issued his now famous statement that a translation creates an ‘afterlife’ from the original text (*SW* 1, 254). Indeed, the original’s work’s ‘afterlife’ is the very thing that makes translation possible. In the following analyses, Benjamin’s claims will be put into the context of his works’ own French ‘afterlives’.

A predominant preoccupation for post-World War II French thought and theory was consumer culture and the impact of capitalist-driven technologies. ‘Post-modern’ philosophy, as it has come to be defined in response to Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* (1979), presented a perfect breeding ground for a reception and development of Benjamin’s ideas as it drew on the lineage of French surrealism and the avant-garde, but equally on the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>64</sup> In deciphering such patterns from a variety of perspectives from some of France’s leading writers and philosophers within my concluding discussion, I intend to keep the question of Benjamin’s ‘French’ presence open and looking towards the future.

The most famed encounter between a French post-war theorist and Benjamin can be found in Jacques Derrida’s corpus, who emerges as the thinker to have singularly and explicitly engaged with Benjamin’s writings the most extensively. Derrida’s work on Benjamin has received the most attention (within both critical camps) and has sparked renewed readings of Benjamin’s claims to the extent that in some instances, critics have generated new interpretations of Benjamin’s works in and through Derrida’s. Samuel Weber argues that Derrida is the ‘thinker who more

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<sup>64</sup> In his comprehensive critical account of France’s key post-war thinkers, Vincent Descombes delineates the transition between a generation influenced by the ‘three H’s’: Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, and that of the post-1960s generation inspired by the ‘three masters of suspicion’: Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. See Vincent Descombes, *Le même et l’autre: quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

than any other has taken up the legacy' of what he terms Benjamin's '-abilities'.<sup>65</sup> Derrida, alongside my focus on the work of Blanchot, Barthes, Baudrillard and Rancière, will constitute a recurring thread in what follows, and I will end this chapter with a discussion of his Adorno Prize acceptance speech of 2001, which ushered in a new century of Benjamin reception. From a wider angle, I therefore intend to contribute to an interrogation of the parallels between the fruits of Frankfurt School labour and the activities of their French intellectual counterparts in France. By doing so, I will combine my reflections on Benjamin's position within the context of a French postmodern philosophical landscape with the discourses surrounding the delayed reception of Frankfurt School Critical Theory in France.

### **Translation and/as Survival**

Although Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* did not receive the glowing reviews he had hoped for in his day, its preface piece, 'The Task', has posthumously become a popular subject in the fields of the philosophy of language, translation studies and beyond.<sup>66</sup> It holds a unique place in Benjamin's corpus in its combination of early philosophical and philological interests, whilst simultaneously incorporating his conception of cultural *Kritik* and the messianic. Recent years have seen a revival of interest in the essay, particularly within the context of a globalized world where the increase in technological innovation has led us to re-question the nature of language and by extension the act of translation. Belgian theorist Paul de Man went so far as to claim that 'in the profession you are nobody unless you have

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<sup>65</sup> Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) p. 122.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Inês Oseki-Dépré's *De Walter Benjamin à nos jours: essais de traductologie* (Paris: Champion, 2007).



said something about this text'.<sup>67</sup> Gandillac's translation of Benjamin's preface initially instigated the first critical responses in France with the most notable references in works by Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida.<sup>68</sup>

Blanchot, now considered an instrumental pioneer in literary theory, made his mark on the French intellectual scene with his continuous return to the 'question of literature'.<sup>69</sup> It is only recently that Blanchot's efforts as a translator in his own right, most notably of Kafka and Heidegger, have come to be recognized, even within the specialized context of Blanchot scholarship.<sup>70</sup> Such a preoccupation led to his engagement with Benjamin's writings. In a short article entitled 'Traduire' ['Translating'], which was included in the essay collection *L'Amitié* [*Friendship*, 1971], Blanchot responds to Benjamin's 'The Task'.<sup>71</sup> Blanchot had previously referenced Benjamin in a fragment entitled 'Rupture du temps: révolution' ['A Rupture in Time: Revolution', 1968] and he had worked with Benjamin's aura concept in the 'Ars Nova' chapter in *L'entretien infinie* [*The Infinite Conversation*, 1969].<sup>72</sup> It also seems worth noting that from 1940 until 1941, Blanchot developed a

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<sup>67</sup> Paul De Man, "'Conclusions" Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"', *Messenger Lecture*, Cornell University, March 4, 1983', *Yale French Studies*, 69, 1985, 25–46 (p. 26).

<sup>68</sup> A more contemporary response can be found in the work of French translator and philosopher, Antoine Berman. See *The Age of Translation: A Commentary on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'*, trans. by Chantal Wright (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. 'Literature and the Right to Death' in Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 300–344. Critic Vivian Liska notes that even though Benjamin and Blanchot 'are considered two of the most important theorists and literary critics of the last century — the two who grant literature the most radical and decisive role in critical thought — their affinity is not obvious and has been rarely examined'. 'A Same Other, Another Same: Walter Benjamin and Maurice Blanchot on Translation', trans. by Naomi Conen, *German Quarterly*, 87.2 (2014), 229–245 (p. 229).

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Maurice Blanchot, *Traduire Kafka*, ed. by Éric Hoppenot, Arthur Cools and Vivian Liska (Paris: Kimé, 2019).

<sup>71</sup> This had been preceded by an essay on translation entitled 'Traduit de...' ['Translated from...'] in 1949. See Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, pp. 176–190.

<sup>72</sup> 'A Rupture in Time: Revolution' in Maurice Blanchot, *Political Writings: 1953–1993*, trans. by Paul Zakir (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 100; 'Ars Nova' in Maurice

relationship with Bataille (to whom *L'Amitié* is in part dedicated). The intellectual friendship between Blanchot and Bataille can be deciphered in their works and has been considered by critics on both sides to have been a decisive factor.<sup>73</sup> Blanchot thus constitutes a further figure in the orbit of intellectuals in exchange with Bataille.

From the opening lines of 'Traduire', Blanchot acknowledges Benjamin's 'The Task' as the starting point for his piece: 'From one of Walter Benjamin's essays, in which this excellent essayist speaks to us of the task of the translator, I will draw several remarks on this particular form of our literary activity'.<sup>74</sup> What follows is not necessarily a critique, but rather Blanchot's attempt at engaging in a dialogue with the premise of Benjamin's text. Additionally, the discovery of three unpublished pages of notes Blanchot took whilst writing 'Traduire' has revealed that despite the published text referencing Maurice de Gandillac's translation, he had worked on his own translation of Benjamin's preface which he cites from in the article.<sup>75</sup> What we then find in this essay is a fascinatingly multi-layered approach which sees Blanchot working through Benjamin's text by translating it on his own terms, yet also simultaneously referring to and relying on the version by Gandillac. Alexis Nouss is amongst the critics to have praised Blanchot's reading of the essay, whilst insisting on the affinities between the two thinkers. He claims Blanchot's work on the essay best articulates that which is decisively lacking in other

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Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), pp. 345–350.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Michel Surya, *Georges Bataille: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 312; Dan Taylor, 'Death, A Surreptitious Friendship: Mortality and the Impossibility of Dying in Bataille and Blanchot', *Angelaki*, 25.6 (2020), 3–18.

<sup>74</sup> Maurice Blanchot, 'Translating' in Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 57–61 (p. 57). All references will hereafter appear in-text as 'T'.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *Cahier Blanchot*, ed. by Eric Hoppenot and Dominique Rabaté (Paris: L'Herne, 2014), p. 55.

publications on the preface: ‘the revelation of the differences in the historical-messianic becoming [le devenir historico-messianique] of languages’.<sup>76</sup>

Like Benjamin, Blanchot’s text wishes to oppose the conventional idea of translation as a reproductive and direct transmission of meaning, but also intends to highlight the importance of the figure of the translator themselves. Indeed, Blanchot’s piece is very much written in praise of the translator, who as ‘the enemy of God, seeks to rebuild the Tower of Babel’ with little to no recognition for their work (‘T’, 58). Where Benjamin and Blanchot’s reflections converge is in their conception of what Benjamin terms ‘reine Sprache’ (‘pure language’) in his essay, which constitutes an essential part of the translation process: ‘It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work’ (*SW* 1, 261). It is precisely in the ‘differences’ between languages that the translator is able to thrive in their work. Thus, according to both Blanchot and Benjamin, the concept of ‘Fremdheit’ (‘foreignness’) is intrinsic to each individual language since it is inherently incomplete, a factor that can only be overcome through the translator’s unique position in inhabiting the gaps within and between languages. In this manner, Blanchot states that the translator

is the secret master of the difference of languages, not in order to abolish the difference but in order to use it to awaken in his own language, through the violent or subtle changes he brings to it, a presence of what is different, originally in the original (‘T’, 59).

Translation ultimately emerges as ‘the very life of this difference’ (*ibid.*).

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<sup>76</sup> Alexis Nouss, ‘La réception de l’essai sur la traduction dans le domaine français’, *Traduction Terminologie Rédaction*, 10.2 (1997), 71–85 (pp. 81–82).

Just under a decade after the publication of Blanchot's piece, Derrida published 'Des Tours de Babel' (1980), which likewise takes Benjamin's essay as its subject. According to Gil Anidjar, it forms part of a series of texts which see Derrida's 'most explicit, extended discussion of the name of God'.<sup>77</sup> For Derrida, Babel is exemplary 'of divine law as it institutes and forbids translation'.<sup>78</sup> However, translation as such is entirely conceived following Benjamin's definition of it as a 'holy growth of languages'.<sup>79</sup> Whereas Blanchot's earlier response has received comparatively little critical attention, Derrida's interpretation of 'The Task' has since been included in the wide critical canon which now surrounds the essay and its sustained influence. Like Blanchot, who laboured at his own translation of Benjamin's text on translation, Derrida declares a similarly self-referential aspect to his work:

From its height Babel at every instant supervises and surprises my reading: I translate, I translate the translation by Maurice de Gandillac of a text by Benjamin who, prefacing a translation, takes it as a pretext to say to what and in what way every translator is committed — and notes in passing, an essential part of his demonstration, that there could be no translation of translation ('DTB', 117–18).

One of the central focuses of Derrida's piece is Benjamin's statements on the *Über-* and *Fortleben* of a text through its translation (commonly translated as the work's

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<sup>77</sup> Gil Anidjar, 'A Note on "Des Tours de Babel"' in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 102–103 (p. 102).

<sup>78</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', trans. Joseph F. Graham in Anidjar, pp. 102–33 (p. 102). Hereafter referenced in-text as 'DTB'.

<sup>79</sup> Derrida's later piece 'Force of Law' (1989) and its post-scripts 'First Name of Benjamin' (1989), which have thus far represented the main focus of scholars interested in the relationship between Derrida and Benjamin, will not be discussed here but can be read as a continuation of Derrida's critical pursuit of the messianic, initially addressed in 'Des Tours de Babel'.

‘afterlife’ in English).<sup>80</sup> Since the publication of Derrida’s text, this concept has received wider traction and attention beyond the field of translation studies.<sup>81</sup> In 1997, Nouss wrote in his introduction to the special issue of *Traduction, Terminologie, Rédaction* dedicated exclusively to ‘The Task’:

Among the best known ideas in Walter Benjamin’s essay that found a large audience, beyond the reading and commentary by specialists in the field, is that of the survival granted to a work by the plurality of its translations, that of a destiny in translation ensuring survival.<sup>82</sup>

It is in this sense that Benjamin’s preface, writes Derrida, ‘circulates without cease among the values of seed, life and especially “sur-vival” [...] right away everything moves in about *übersetzen*, *übertragen*, *überleben*’ (‘DTB’, 114). As a semiotician, Derrida chooses to highlight the network of meaning which can be garnered from the networks linking the acts of translating, transference and ‘sur’-vival (understood in the literal sense as an ‘over’ living). What’s more, taking his cue from the essay’s title, Derrida identifies the ‘problem’ of Benjamin’s translator as ‘the transmission of the family seed’ whereby they are placed ‘in a situation of debt’ (‘DTB’, 112). The task of translation is posited as an act that the translator inherits, thus representing

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<sup>80</sup> Benjamin uses the term *Überleben*, the term that would translate to ‘survival’, only once in the essay and places it in quotation marks. As Carolin Disler notes: ‘It is unusual to find the verb *fortleben* (or noun *Fortleben*) in any but the largest German dictionaries [...]. This suggests that *fortleben* was not at all common currency at the time that Benjamin wrote his essay.’

‘Benjamin’s “Afterlife”: A Productive (?) Mistranslation In Memoriam Daniel Simeoni’, *Traduction Terminologie Rédaction*, 24.1 (2011), 183–221 (p. 204 n34). Derrida returned to Benjamin’s concepts of *Über-* and *Fortleben* in the last interview he gave for *Le Monde*, where he reiterated many of his ideas from ‘DTB’, arguing that ‘survival’ (in its many senses) was a recurring presence in many of his works. See ‘Je suis en guerre contre moi-même’, *Le Monde*, 18 August 2004 <[https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/08/18/jacques-derrida-je-suis-en-guerre-contre-moi-meme\\_375883\\_1819218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/08/18/jacques-derrida-je-suis-en-guerre-contre-moi-meme_375883_1819218.html)>.

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>82</sup> Nouss, p. 9.

‘an indebted subject, obligated by a duty, already in the position of heir, entered as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of sur-vival. The sur-vival of works, not authors’ (‘DTB’, 114). Derrida conceives of the *Fortleben* (*survie*) of the work through translation then, not as an ‘after’ living (in a chronologically temporal or reviving sense), but rather in line with Benjamin’s view that ‘the work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of its author’ (ibid.). So as ‘continuation of life rather than life *post mortem*’ (ibid.). This coincides with Benjamin’s definition of *Fortleben* as a ‘transformation and renewal of the living’ (ibid.). Most importantly, as Caroline Disler notes, the term does not denote an interruption of life; there ‘has been no death, no damage, no catastrophe to the original’ but rather ‘metamorphosis, evolution, transformation, renewal, renovation, supplementation’.<sup>83</sup>

A further engagement with Benjaminian *Fortleben* can be found in Derrida’s conception of the ‘à-traduire’ of a text, which represents an understanding of texts already containing their translation (irrespective of whether or not it is ever written). Derrida in part paraphrasing Benjamin states: ‘If the translator neither restitutes nor copies an original, it is because the original lives on and transforms itself’ (‘DTB’, 121). The translation, Derrida claims, ‘will truly [*en vérité*] be a moment in the growth of the original, which completes itself in enlarging itself’ (ibid.). The work’s *Übersetzbarkeit* (translatability) is inherent, making the actual act of translation a fulfilment of a pre-existing promise ingrained in the work to begin with:

The original requires translation even if no translator is there, fit to respond to this injunction, which is at the same time demand and desire of the original. This structure is the relation of life to sur-vival. [...] If the structure of the work is ‘sur-vival’, the debt does not

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<sup>83</sup> Disler, p. 193.

engage in relation to a hypothetical subject-author of the original text — dead or mortal, the dead man, or ‘dummy’ of the text — but to something else that represents the formal law in the immanence of the original text. Then the debt does not involve restitution of a copy or a good image, a faithful representation of the original: the latter, the survivor, is itself in the process of translation. The original gives itself in modifying itself; [...] it lives and lives on in mutation (‘DTB’, 116-17).

In an earlier essay entitled ‘Living On: Border Lines’ (1977), Derrida had already claimed that

*Übersetzung* and ‘translation’ overcome, equivocally, in the course of an equivocal combat, the loss of an object. A text lives only if it lives *on* [*sur-vit*], and it lives on only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable [...]. Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language. Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. The triumphant translation is neither the life nor the death of the text, only or already its living on, its life after life, its life after death.<sup>84</sup>

Derrida’s engagement with the concept of *Fortleben* also leads him to fully embrace Benjamin’s messianic conception of language and its transference through translation (as in the aforementioned conception of ‘pure’ language). Translation, the debt inherited by the translator, in this sense permits languages to be messianically fulfilled. As Benjamin writes in ‘The Task’:

[If these languages] continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life [*Fortleben*] of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it is translation that keeps putting the hallowed [*heilig*] growth of languages to the test (*SW* 1, 257).

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<sup>84</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On: Border Lines’ in Harold Bloom et al., *Deconstruction & Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. 75–176 (pp. 102–3).

According to Derrida, the Tower of Babel ‘does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues [*langues*]’.<sup>85</sup> Rather, ‘it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification’.<sup>86</sup> The ‘sacred’ or ‘hallowed’ (*heilig*) growth of languages in Benjamin’s words, or their ‘irreducible multiplicity’ in Derrida’s, ultimately amount to a similar conclusion: the act or task or translation remains infinitely unfulfilled. As Disler phrases it, what one finds in both texts is an ‘open acknowledgement of *ewiges Fortleben*’.<sup>87</sup> Since *Fortleben* does not bring with it death, or a ceasing or perishing, by implication translation is equally never ‘fully’ achieved, and so it also represents a debt or promise that remains eternally unpaid. As such, the crux of the issue of translation is that it never truly ‘ends’. Whilst Derrida is aware of the potentially unfulfilled promise of a multiplicity involving ‘the reconciliation of languages’; he nonetheless concludes that ‘a promise is not nothing, it is not simply marked by what it lacks to be fulfilled’.<sup>88</sup> Translation, as a promise, is already ‘an event, and the decisive signature of a contract’.<sup>89</sup> It is precisely what acts as a life-giving force for the translator who must embrace that the ultimate ‘reconciliation of languages’ remains untouchable.

Blanchot and Derrida, in their readings of Benjamin’s treatise on the act of translation, bring new light to many of his claims. In both cases, Gandillac’s translation of the preface is used as guide, which prompts the two thinkers to attempt their own translation of the original into French, giving their critical responses a unique self-referential quality. For Blanchot, Benjamin’s conception of the

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Disler, p. 209.

<sup>88</sup> Derrida, ‘Living On: Border Lines’, p. 123.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.



‘pureness’ and ‘foreignness’ of language emerges as a key aspect of the translator’s work who possesses the ‘secret’ ability to build a text based on ‘difference’.

Derrida’s messianic development of the ‘à-traduire’ of the work through Benjamin’s definition of *Fortleben* leads to his understanding of the text as triumphant only in the event where the complexity of its translatability allows it to live on and on [*sur-vit*].

### **Art, Aesthetics and Politics**

Benjamin’s conception of language and translation were not the only facet of his corpus that captured the attention of post-war French theorists. In 1965, Pierre Bourdieu and his research associates published *Un Art Moyen [A Middle-brow Art]*, which demonstrated that the mass practice of amateur photography was a sociological and cultural phenomenon worth investigating. The collection of essays contained many of Bourdieu’s later theories at a formative stage, such as his reflections on habitus and taste. It is therefore of interest to note that when commenting on the paradoxical ‘temporal dimension’ of popular photography (i.e. the ability to ‘dissolve’ everyday reality ‘into an infinity of fleeting profiles like dream images’), Bourdieu references Benjamin:

[Photography] provides the means [...] to capture absolutely unique moments of the reciprocal situation of things, to grasp, as Walter Benjamin has shown, aspects, imperceptible, because they are instantaneous, of the perceived world, to arrest human gestures in the absurdity of a present made up of ‘pillars of salt’.<sup>90</sup>

By the time the cataclysmic events of May 1968 rolled around, Benjamin’s theories on photography had entered French discourses on art, politics and technology.

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<sup>90</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 76.

A further key thinker to have come into contact with Benjamin's work from as early as 1960 was Roland Barthes.<sup>91</sup> Similarly to Bourdieu, Barthes was particularly taken with Benjamin's ideas on photography. Barthes was likely to have been introduced to Benjamin's work by Klossowski, who was a neighbour and close friend. However, even if this had not been the case, Barthes made around a dozen known public references to Benjamin. For the most part, these were made in interviews from the late 1970s but not in any of his written work.<sup>92</sup>

On a biographical level, Barthes and Benjamin's career trajectories were not dissimilar. Like Benjamin, Barthes remained on the fringes of French academia and built his career on writing for various journals. As a result, a further similarity to be noted is that Barthes' corpus, like Benjamin's, does not conform to pre-existing disciplines and is difficult to classify or liken to a particular strand of theory. Kathrin Yacavone, one of the few scholars to have looked into the affinities between Barthes and Benjamin,<sup>93</sup> defines their common approach as a 'monadological method', which 'translates into a relative lack of retrospective systematization that assimilates the object of investigation into a larger deductive system of thought'.<sup>94</sup> It is in relation to this 'monadological' approach that Yacavone identifies Benjamin and

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<sup>91</sup> The first known public reference to Benjamin by Barthes was in relation to Benjamin's conception of the gesture in epic theatre in a preface to a French translation of Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939). See Roland Barthes, *Œuvres Choisies, Vol. 1* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 1075.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Kathrin Yacavone, *Benjamin, Barthes and the Singularity of Photography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 14.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. also Katja Haustein, *Regarding Lost Time: Photography, Identity, and Affect in Proust, Benjamin, and Barthes* (Oxford: Legenda, 2012) and Antonin Wiser, 'Constellations marginales: Roland Barthes avec Walter Benjamin', *Fabula/ Les Colloques* (2018) <<http://www.fabula.org/colloques/document5767.php>>.

<sup>94</sup> Yacavone, p. 4.

Barthes' common interest in photography: 'both writers may aptly be seen as pursuing a general phenomenology of the photographic image'.<sup>95</sup>

Nonetheless, despite this shared investment in one of the major cultural phenomena of the twentieth century, along with writings on similar subjects and writers (Proust, Baudelaire, Brecht, Fourier), Barthes' explicit references to Benjamin in his writings are few and far between. For critics, though, this does not detract from the authority of Benjamin's influence, since Barthes' referencing in his work, not entirely unlike Benjamin's own, was famously unreliable.<sup>96</sup> In 1977, a shortened version of Benjamin's essay 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie' ['A Little History of Photography'] was featured in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, which was taken from Gandillac's original translation in the 1971 edition of Benjamin's *Œuvres*.<sup>97</sup> A reference to this particular translation can be found in the bibliography of Barthes' *La chambre claire* [*Camera Lucida*, 1980]. Benjamin's essay, featured under the title 'Les Analphabètes de l'avenir' ['The Illiterates of the Future'], was praised by the editorial as 'one of the most important [texts] ever written on photography, in particular on the portrait, which appears here as a common thread'.<sup>98</sup> The article, the first French publication of Benjamin's essay to do so, was illustrated by several photographs which, rather intriguingly, are reproduced in Barthes' *La*

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>96</sup> As Antoine Compagnon has noted, Barthes was never in the habit of properly referencing other writers — his *Collège de France* seminar bibliography was entirely 'second hand' and he did not double-check sources. See Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes: De Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

<sup>97</sup> Barthes had also contributed to issues of *Critique* which, as previously mentioned, would go on to publish a special issue on Benjamin in 1969 whilst Barthes was on the journal's advisory panel. Barthes also periodically published his work in the journal of the Centre d'Études des Communications en Masse. This research centre was founded in 1961 under Georges Friedmann, a sociologist who had links with Horkheimer. Cf. Barthes' account of the centre, 'Le Centre d'études des Communications de Masse: Le C.E.C.MAS.', *Annales*, 16.5 (1961), 991–992.

<sup>98</sup> *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Spécial Photo 2 (1977), p. 1.

*chambre claire*. These two indications reinforce the idea that Barthes was aware of Benjamin's writings and had even closely followed them in French translation at the time of their publication. Over half a decade later, Barthes would then state in an interview that '[t]here are only a few great texts of intellectual quality on photography'.<sup>99</sup> 'I don't know of very many', he claimed, however there is 'Benjamin's text, which is good because it is premonitory'.<sup>100</sup>

The year before Benjamin's essay on photography was featured in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Jean Baudrillard's *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* [*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1976]<sup>101</sup> was published in Gallimard's prestigious series *Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines*, alongside the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel Foucault. To most Baudrillard scholars, *SED* is his most important work. Originally a Germanist, Baudrillard was decisively influenced by a host of German-speaking theorists and philosophers, including Marx, Freud, Mauss and Nietzsche as well as Benjamin.

In *SED*, these influences are compounded with Baudrillard's interest in theories by pioneering scholar of French sociology and anthropology Marcel Mauss, whose legacy was perpetuated by Lévi-Strauss' founding of structural anthropology. Most importantly, he derives great inspiration from a further descendant of Mauss: the work of Bataille from whom Baudrillard originally takes the term of 'symbolic exchange'. In the 1970s, Baudrillard had assumed a Bataillan position of 'aristocratic critique' of capitalism, which rested on an understanding of capitalist tenets of labour, utility and savings as being an unnatural contradiction to humanity's

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<sup>99</sup> Roland Barthes, 'On Photography' in Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, trans. by Lydia Coverdale (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), pp. 354–60 (p. 354).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Hereafter abbreviated to *SED* and referenced in-text.

inclinations to ‘expend’ for pleasure’s sake (e.g. in festivities).<sup>102</sup> Baudrillard critiques Marxism’s focus on exchange value, which for this reason is limited to ‘petit bourgeois critique, one more step in the banalization of life toward the “good use” of the social’, thus ‘merely’ representing ‘the disenchanting horizon of capital’.<sup>103</sup> Bataille, on the other hand, states Baudrillard ‘sweeps away all this slave dialectic from an aristocratic point of view, that of the master struggling with his death’.<sup>104</sup>

It is from this radical perspective that Baudrillard focuses on the postmodern phenomenon of simulacra. In the chapter entitled ‘The Industrial Simulacrum’, he demarcates the gradual shift from the novelty of objects dating from the industrial revolution to their current status as ‘signs with no caste tradition that will never have known restrictions on their status, and which will never have to be counterfeits, since from the outset they will be products on a gigantic scale’.<sup>105</sup> The question is therefore no longer that of ‘origin’ which has been stripped of all relevance, instead their meaning can solely be derived from ‘within the dimension of the industrial simulacrum’ (*SED*, 132). The era of technological reproduction, the concept of ‘original’ versus ‘counterfeit’ reveals an endless series of ‘indistinct simulacra of one another’ (*ibid.*). In fact, according to Baudrillard, the very obliteration of the ‘original’ is the very condition that makes production possible at all. Industrial production is no longer ‘*the* process at the origin of all the others’, but rather

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<sup>102</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, ‘When Bataille attacked the Metaphysical Principle of Economy’, trans. by D.J. Miller, *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 11 (1987), 57–62.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 2017) p. 132.

conversely constitutes ‘a process which reabsorbs every original being and introduces a series of identical beings’ (ibid.).

Alongside the work of Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, often considered an integral figure with the discipline of media theory, Baudrillard most significantly draws inspiration from Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay. Baudrillard identifies Benjamin as the first thinker to have highlighted the consequences of the reproduction principle, his work demonstrating ‘that reproduction absorbs the process of production, changes its goals, and alters the status of the product and the producer’ (*SED*, 133–34). In particular, Benjamin is singled out for his ability to understand ‘technology as a medium’ rather than a ‘productive force’, essentially representing ‘the form and principle of an entirely new generation of meaning’ (*SED*, 134).

In this manner, not only does Baudrillard base his own concepts in relation to new media and technology on Benjamin’s essay, but Benjamin also forms part of his critique of the shortcomings of Marxist theory, specifically in his designation of the importance of reproduction at the level of what Marx designated ‘the faux frais’ of capital (e.g. media, advertising and mass communications). Whilst Marx once stressed the revolutionary essence of production, Benjamin, states Baudrillard, foresaw that the real ‘revolution’ lay in *re*-production, making the simulacrum — the outcome of reproduction — the more relevant historical development (ibid.). Baudrillard, similarly to Benjamin, therefore also stresses the ‘ephemeral’ nature of ‘serial reproduction’, resulting in a reversal of the hierarchies between ‘dead’ and ‘living labour’: it is a matter of a reversal of origin and end (*SED*, 134). Just as Benjamin had once emphasized the increased ‘machination’ of art through the emergence of photography and cinema, Baudrillard wishes to demonstrate that ‘the

entire order of production is in the process of toppling into operational simulation' (*SED*, 135). Marx's writings on the capitalist commodity are no longer directly applicable, since 'referential reason' has been replaced with the 'vertigo' of production; signs have been exchanged for simulacra (*ibid.*).

Whilst Baudrillard's account of the 'Work of Art' essay draws out its many intersections with notions of capital, labour and the commodity, it does not address its more famed arguments about art's revolutionary political potential and Benjamin's subsequent development of a *Kunstpolitik*. In the essay's closing lines, Benjamin speaks of the 'aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism' (*SW* 3, 122). 'Communism', he writes, 'replies by politicizing art' (*SW* 3, 122). Nonetheless, Derrida and Rancière, each in their own manner, take up these claims in their work.

Shortly after the release of *SED*, Derrida's *La Vérité en Peinture* [*The Truth in Painting*, 1978] was published. In this collection of essays (constructed in 'four movements'), Derrida departs from Cézanne's statement — 'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you' ('Je vous dois la vérité en peinture et je vous la dirai') — to reflect on the interdependence of the artist's spoken word and praxis. Painting and text are represented as being irreducibly intertwined. The common 'trait' between the four essays is Derrida's attempt to delineate what he terms the *passe-partout*: the 'emblem' of the space 'between the outside and the inside, between the external and the internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified'.<sup>106</sup> The essay from the collection which represents Derrida's arguments most effectively, entitled '+R (par-dessus le marché)' ['+R (Into the Bargain)'], was first published in *Derrière le*

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<sup>106</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 12.

*Mirror* in 1975, following his visit to an exhibition by Italian painter, Valerio Adami. The essay was originally rendered in 18 point type, without conventional formatting or framing (or *passe-partout* in Derrida's words).<sup>107</sup> Amongst the works by Adami that Derrida discusses is a charcoal drawing on paper which depicts Benjamin in a ruminative pose, his name spelled out above his brow (see fig. 3).

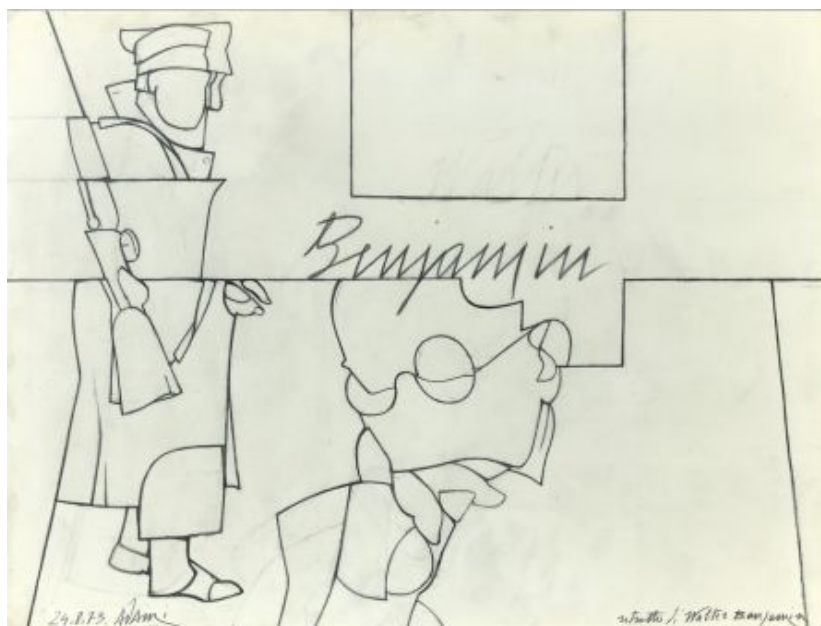


Figure 3: Valerio Adami, *Ritratto di Walter Benjamin* (1973), Charcoal on Paper, 36 x 48cm <<https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/RITRATTO-DI-WALTER-BENJAMIN-/AA80C2F06D003BB1>>

The pose, a characteristic now closely associated with Benjamin's likeness, is based on a pre-existing photograph. In the left corner, Benjamin is flanked by an abstract figure, dressed in military garments and brandishing a rifle. In both explicit and subtle ways, Adami's literally and figuratively draws references to Benjamin's ideas on photography, work of art's 'reproducibility' but equally to the political context which the 'Work of Art' essay was written in. He thereby invokes the complexity of the relations between text and image which Derrida wishes to explore. More

<sup>107</sup> '+R (par-dessus le marché)', *Derrière le miroir*, no. 214 (1975).



specifically, Derrida writes, ‘it has to do with the letter and the proper name in painting, with narration, technical reproduction, ideology, the phoneme, the biographeme, and politics, among other things and still in painting’.<sup>108</sup> Marian Hobson, in describing Adami’s work, stresses its ‘network of philological and phonetical relations between concepts’.<sup>109</sup> The ‘phonemes’ or ‘graphemes’ that one encounters ‘move [the viewer] out from the enclave of the drawing and the text’.<sup>110</sup> Adami’s use of text and graphical shapes and lines thus simultaneously constructs and deconstructs meaning.

For Derrida, Adami’s citing of Benjamin’s name and likeness is an instance of ‘powerful, sober and quotation, in the Brechtian sense of the *gestus* broken off to suspend identification’.<sup>111</sup> The visual quotation of Benjamin’s works thus ‘become the legend, a dependent piece, place, analysed, interpreted by the Portrait’ (‘+R’, 176). Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay is cited by Derrida to remind the reader/viewer that Adami’s drawing is also in itself a reproduction of a reproduction:

[A]s soon as the technique of reproduction reaches the stage of photography, a break line and also a new front traverses the whole space of art. The presumed uniqueness of a production, the being-only-once of the exemplar, the value of authenticity is practically deconstructed (‘+R’, 175).

Art in Derrida’s reading of Benjamin stops harbouring religion, ritual and the aura, to give way to the political which becomes its foundation. Mallarmé, who has previously been discussed in relation to Benjamin’s works, is pegged by Derrida as

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<sup>108</sup> Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, p. 10.

<sup>109</sup> Marian Hobson, ‘Scroll-Work’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 4.3 (1981), 94–102 (p. 98).

<sup>110</sup> Hobson, p. 98.

<sup>111</sup> ‘+R (Into the Bargain)’ in Derrida, *Truth in Painting*, pp. 149–82, 175. Hereafter abbreviated as ‘+R’ and referenced in-text.

the originator of an art or poetics no longer grounded in ‘pure’ art (+R’, 176). When commenting on Adami’s ‘citational, parodic’ title, *Ritratto di Walter Benjamin* [*Portrait of Walter Benjamin*], Derrida remarks on Benjamin’s theory of the portrait, which represents the ‘transitional role on the frontier between “ritual religious art” and “technical reproducibility”’ (+R’, 178). The portrait photograph therefore emerges as ‘the remainder, the last resistance of ritual’: ‘When the face begins to disappear or, [...] no longer to occupy the top or the center, the legend (*Beschriftung*) becomes necessary’ (ibid.). In Adami’s work, the subject (Benjamin) has disappeared (*disparu*), Derrida therefore compares the white spectacles depicted in the portrait to the ‘deserted streets of Atget’s Paris’ which Benjamin denoted as the ‘scene of a crime with political significance’ (+R’, 179).

Combining Benjamin’s theory of the reproducible image with Adami’s artistic practice, Derrida deciphers ‘a political cartography’ where ‘material thoughts, technical processes, war machines or political apparatuses’ are evoked (+R’, 180). Adami’s portrait of a reproduced photographic portrait ‘in the age of mechanical reproduction’ succeeds in denouncing the ‘historical compromise’ between the practical arts and photography (ibid.). This ‘cartography’ of Benjamin unfolds ‘on limits, on lines of fracture or confrontation, in places of effraction: frames and frames of frames’ (ibid.). In the last few lines, Derrida’s cites Benjamin’s aforementioned affirmation in the *Kunstwerk* essay: ‘To the aestheticisation of politics that is driven forward by fascism, communism responds with the politicization of art’ thus making it the ‘legend’ captioning the essay, to which he needs to return and re-return (+R’, 181).

Whilst Derrida, for the most part, embraced Benjamin’s ideas which he frequently referenced in his work, Jacques Rancière’s relationship to Benjamin is a

little more ambivalent. Given that both thinkers have assumed similar positions in their approach to philosophy and history, a comparative reading of their work follows rather naturally. Alain Badiou remarks that Rancière's work occupies the space 'between history and philosophy, between philosophy and politics, and between documentary and fiction'.<sup>112</sup> In addition, Rancière, like Benjamin before him, places a decisive emphasis on the category of the literary and its wider importance in deciphering the histories of past and present. Within this context, Kristin Ross notes that Benjamin and Rancière share the same predilection to '[blast] a unique experience of the past out of the "continuum of history" for the purpose of wresting meaning from the past for the present'.<sup>113</sup> Originally affiliated with an Althusserian-inspired brand of Neo-Marxism in the 1960s, Rancière soon distanced himself from the school of 'philosophy of order'.<sup>114</sup> Althusser and his followers' responses to the 1968 uprisings left a bitter taste in his mouth, and so Rancière set out to elaborate alternative understandings of politics and the proletariat.

In reference to Benjamin's posthumous reception, Rancière claimed that his work was made 'hostage in the open or latent conflict between modernism and postmodernism', but identified him as the thinker to have 'dealt most seriously with the implications and contradictions of the dreaming cogito, with the contradictory outcomes of the duplicity involved in the modernist thinking of emancipation'.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Badiou as cited by Gabriel Rockhill, 'Editor's Introduction: Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception' in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. xi–xvi (p. xi).

<sup>113</sup> Kristen Ross, 'Translator's Introduction' in Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. vii–xxiii (p. xxi).

<sup>114</sup> Badiou as cited by Rockhill, p. xii.

<sup>115</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Archaeomodeln Turn' in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. by Michael P. Steinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 24–40 (pp. 24, 31).

Despite these intellectual similarities and Rancière's attraction to his work and ideas, many of his engagements with Benjamin's writings were founded on disagreement. One notable example are his multiple references to the key conclusions Benjamin draws in the 'Work of Art' essay, which Rancière in turn utilizes to establish his own conception of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. In *Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* [*The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 2000], Rancière attributes the resonance and success of Benjamin's arguments on the repercussions of art's subjection to mechanized technologies to their cross-over 'between the categories of Marxist materialist explanation and those of Heideggerian ontology'.<sup>116</sup> Nonetheless, Rancière uses Benjamin's essay as a historical touchstone to argue that such links between the aesthetic and the onto-technological belong to an era that has faded, and as such have become 'the aesthetic regime of the arts' associated with the 'incoherent label' of 'modernity' (*PADS*, 19). There is an 'aesthetics at the core of politics', he claims, 'that has nothing to do with Benjamin's discussion of the "aestheticization of politics" specific to the "age of the masses"' where politics is subjected to a performative mobilization (*PADS*, 8).

Instead, for Rancière, aesthetics operates

as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience (ibid.).

Politics, on the other hand, 'revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of

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<sup>116</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, p. 28. Hereafter referred to in-text as *PADS*.

spaces and the possibilities of time' (ibid.). More specifically, politics is marked by its ability to reconfigure such a 'distribution of the sensible' ('partage du sensible') which 'defines the commonality of a community, in introducing subjects and objects, in rendering visible those who were not, and in making understood speakers who had only been perceived as noisy animals'.<sup>117</sup> In this manner, aesthetics and politics become consubstantial as they are both united in their aims to record, distribute and redistribute aspects of sense perception. Thus, the relation between aesthetics and politics is understood in the image of an inversion, as 'the relation between this aesthetic of politics' and the 'politics of the aesthetic' — defined by Rancière as the

way in which the practices and forms of visibility of art themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration, in which they distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular.<sup>118</sup>

Rancière declares art political not because it conveys an understanding of the 'state of the world' or a representation of societal structures, conflicts and identities, but rather because it is able to take 'distance' from such functions, 'because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space'.<sup>119</sup>

Benjamin's warnings against an 'aestheticization of politics' were founded on the realities of a threatening ideology which was staged and distributed through

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<sup>117</sup> 'I call the distribution of the sensible', writes Rancière, 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts' (*PADS*, p. 19).

<sup>118</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Aesthetics as Politics' in Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. by Steve Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), pp. 19–44 (p. 25).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

an aesthetics that had quickly become weaponized under technologies of reproduction. In particular, Benjamin's essay is therefore concerned with the 'Echtheit' ('authenticity') of the art work which becomes political in the instant that 'the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production' (*SW* 3, 106). Benjamin's conception of 'Echtheit', understood as 'the quintessence of all that is transmissible in [the work of art] from its origin on' is equated with the art work's loss of aura, which 'withers' within the context of the increase of its mechanical reproduction (*SW* 3, 103–104). As Kevin Newmark remarks, Benjamin's 'loss of aura' is not all that far removed from Rancière's "'dismantling" of the ethical and mimetic orders that he always associates with the aesthetic regime'.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, the decisive factor differentiating the two conceptions is that they are 'valorized oppositely' with Rancière's redefinition of the aesthetic regime representing a reversal of the model once proposed by Benjamin in the 1930s.<sup>121</sup>

For the mechanical arts 'to be able to confer visibility on the masses, or rather on anonymous individuals, they first need to be recognized as arts', argues Rancière, meaning that they need to be practised or perceived 'as something other than techniques of reproduction or transmission' (*PADS*, 28). Contrary to Benjamin's logic then, Rancière insists that it was only because the mechanical arts made the 'anonymous masses' their subject matter that they became an art form in the first instance: 'The fact that what is anonymous is not only susceptible to becoming the subject matter of art but also conveys a specific beauty is an exclusive characteristic of the aesthetic regime of the arts' (*ibid.*). Added to this 'specific beauty' is a notion of aesthetic experience which 'is effective inasmuch as it [...]

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<sup>120</sup> Kevin Newmark, 'A Poetics of Sharing: Political Economy in a Prose Poem by Baudelaire', *Symposium*, 15.2 (2011), 57–81 (p. 62).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

grounds the autonomy of art, [...] to the extent that it connects it to the hope of “changing life””.<sup>122</sup> Rancière’s conception of experience within the aesthetic regime thereby ‘carries the burden of maintaining the unbreakable link between democracy, equality and fraternity’.<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, for Benjamin also, the loss of aura is inextricably tied to his conception of the *Erfahrung* of modernity. Once the ‘Echtheit’ of art becomes threatened under reproduction, so too is its ‘historical testimony’ (*SW* 3, 103). As a result, the disappearance of ‘Echtheit’ within the art work is tied to human experience more broadly. Not dissimilarly, Rancière conceives of ‘the distribution of the sensible’, within which the art work operates, as ‘a certain sensory fabric, which defines [humanity’s] way of being together’.<sup>124</sup> ‘Politics’, he concludes, ‘is about *the transformation* of the sensory fabric of “being together”’.<sup>125</sup>

Ultimately, Rancière’s re-examining of the categories of aesthetics and politics as well as their co-substantiation places him within the proximity of the German critical theories of not only Benjamin, but also Adorno, who was heavily invested in redeveloping conceptions of art and aesthetic experience within the framework of socio-political transformation. ‘Artworks’, Adorno argued, ‘correspond to the objective need for a transformation of consciousness that could become a transformation of reality’.<sup>126</sup> Like Benjamin and by extension, Adorno, Rancière’s understanding of politics and aesthetics was centred on the act of creating

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<sup>122</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes’ in Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2015), pp. 115–133 (p. 116).

<sup>123</sup> Newmark, p. 64.

<sup>124</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2021), p. 56.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

<sup>126</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1999), p. 243.

‘dissensus’, on activities of egalitarian innovation which disrupt prior organizations of space, time and the senses.

My discussions of the influence of Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay show that as early as the mid-1960s, he had become a figure of reference on the subject of visual technologies and modern aesthetics in the field of post-war French theory. Whilst Baudrillard’s *SED* builds on Benjamin’s understanding of ‘technology as a medium’ to expose the simulatory nature of *re*-production under capitalism, Derrida and Rancière, each in their own manner, revisit the essay’s famous dictum on the ‘aestheticizing of politics’ to explore the post-war complexities of the visual arts and the ‘aesthetic regime’ at large.

#### **CONCLUSION: ‘MAKING A SCARF OUT OF A POEM’ — THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL & POSTMODERN LATENESS**

On September 22, 2001, Derrida was awarded the Theodor W. Adorno Prize by the city of Frankfurt.<sup>127</sup> His acceptance speech for the prize acts as a testimony to the consciousness of France’s post-war generation of thinkers and their ambivalent relations to the members of the Institute for Social Research.<sup>128</sup> The speech will therefore serve as part of the concluding reflections of this thesis, bringing the threads and correspondences which have been referenced thus far into the twenty-first century.

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<sup>127</sup> Founded in 1977, the prize is awarded every three years on September 11th (the day of Adorno’s birth) and seeks to reward outstanding boundary-breaking work in the fields of philosophy, the social sciences and the arts.

<sup>128</sup> Derrida’s speech was originally published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, under the title ‘La langue de l’étranger’ (‘The Language of the Stranger’). It then went on to appear as a book under the title *Fichus* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2002), later to be translated and included in *Paper Machine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).



Bookended by opening and closing remarks which he chose to deliver in German, Derrida's address circled around the concept of language; 'language of the other, the visitor's language, the foreigner's language, even the immigrant's, the émigré's, or the exile's'.<sup>129</sup> The language of exile is a topic that recurred in Derrida's body of work, especially in his later life. Despite his acceptance as a French 'native', Derrida's relationship with the language and culture of his adopted country was by no means a simple one.<sup>130</sup> This complexity is a further parallel that can be drawn with the two figures which feature heavily in his Frankfurt address: Adorno and Benjamin. The question of the ethical status of the (forced) intellectual migrant in exile appears in many guises in Derrida's writings. As Jean-Philippe Deranty remarks, Derrida wrote 'about ethics and justice during his tribulations as an intellectual in migration; his reflection, like Adorno's, arose from the damaged life of a modern expatriate'.<sup>131</sup> And so Derrida's speech sees him

divided between, on one side, the laws of hospitality, meaning the desire of the grateful guest who ought to be addressing you in your language, and, on the other, my unshakeable attachment to a French idiom, without which I would be lost, more than ever an exile ('FA', 169).

Despite the prize's namesake, Derrida's speech was as much devoted to Benjamin as it was to Adorno, describing them both as 'adoptive fathers' ('pères d'adoption') ('FA', 174). His position in relation to them is construed, then, as that of an heir, yet

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<sup>129</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Fichus: Frankfurt Address' in Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 164–82 (p. 165). Hereafter referenced in-text as 'FA'.

<sup>130</sup> Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other: The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. by Patrick Mensah (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>131</sup> Jean-Philippe Deranty, 'Adorno's Other Son: Derrida and the Future of Critical Theory', *Social Semiotics*, 16.3 (2006), 421–433 (p. 428).

Derrida's descendance is not given or natural, but explicitly chosen. What's more, Benjamin and Adorno's status within the genealogical lineage of Derrida's work is applied not only to himself, but to an 'us', designating the other French thinkers of his generation. A similar feeling of intellectual debt can be found in statements made by Lyotard and Foucault, who each attributed a certain degree of influence to the Frankfurt School (even if this influence, as I will discuss shortly in the case of Foucault, was marked by considerable delays).

Opening his speech in German, the native language of these once exiled thinkers and the language historically most representative of modern philosophy, is a significant moment in recognizing that debt for Derrida. Following his opening, Derrida goes on to cite from a letter Benjamin wrote to Gretel Adorno when he was interned at Nevers in October 1939, the content of which forms the focus of his address. In it, Benjamin recounts a strange dream:

one of those dreams, the likes of which I may have once every five years, that center around the motif of 'reading'. [Adorno] will remember the role played by this motif in my reflections on epistemology. The sentence I spoke aloud at the end of the dream happened to be in French (C, 614).

The sentence Benjamin remembers pronouncing, 'Il s'agissait de changer en fichu une poésie', he also translates into German: 'Es handelte sich darum, aus einem Gedicht ein Halstuch zu machen' ['It was about making a scarf out of a poem'] ('FA', 165).

As discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis, Benjamin, rather controversially, attributed a central and historically important role to the dream. As I have noted, his insistence upon the structures and political power of the dreaming collective was the frequent source of his intellectual disagreements with Adorno. It

therefore is no great coincidence that Derrida revisits both thinkers' perspectives on this issue in his speech. The scarf dream, as a recurring thread and case study, becomes grounds for Derrida to echo a Benjaminian approach to the subject of the dream as a whole: 'What is a dream? And dream-thought? And dream language?', he asks, 'Could there be an ethics or politics of dreaming that did not yield to the imaginary or to the Utopian, and was not an abandonment, irresponsible, and evasive?' ('FA', 168).

In a further meshing and multi-layering of Adorno and Benjamin's voices, Derrida cites a passage by Adorno: '[Benjamin] overcame the dream without betraying it [ohne ihn zu verraten] and making himself the accomplice in that on which the philosophers have always agreed: that it shall not be' ('FA', 168). The 'impossible possibility' Derrida perceives in Benjamin's unorthodox approach thus becomes the mantra of his speech: 'We shouldn't be affected by "that on which the philosophers have always agreed," namely the first complicity to break up and the one you have to start by worrying about if you want to do a little thinking' (ibid.). Overcoming the dream without betraying it, claims Derrida, allows us 'to wake up, to cultivate awakeness and vigilance, while remaining attentive to meaning, faithful to the lessons and the lucidity of a dream' (ibid.). For Hent de Vries, Derrida's contrasting of dreaming versus 'waking' and 'awakeness', as well as representing 'a *Leitmotif* running through the whole history of thought', is suggestive of a

dual aspect theory of *Aufklärung* and critique [that] sees whatever presents itself historically and empirically, psychologically and sociologically, under two radically contrasting, indeed, contradicting and mutually negating, perspectives, each of them

animating an undeniable element of thought, albeit in a different — and, it is suggested, opposed — intentional mode.<sup>132</sup>

Marrying the Benjaminian dream about ‘reading’ and making poetry with Adorno’s ‘hesitation’ ‘between the philosopher’s “no” and the ““yes, perhaps, sometimes that does happen”’ of the poet, the writer or the essayist, the musician, the painter, the playwright, or scriptwriter, or even the psychoanalyst’, Derrida equally assumes this ‘double legacy’ as an ‘heir to both’ (‘FA’, 166).

Ultimately, Derrida’s speech can be seen within the wider historical context of the relation between the German and French camps of Critical Theory. His words are almost confessional in tone:

[There] are voices in me. All of them seem to be saying to me: why not recognize, clearly and publicly, once and for all, the affinities between your work and Adorno’s, in truth your debt to Adorno? Aren’t you an heir of the Frankfurt School? (‘FA’, 176).

In his address, Derrida goes so far as to envision a potential study of ‘a comparative history of the French and German legacies of Hegel and Marx’ (‘FA’, 177). Through an Adornian ‘hesitation’ and a Benjaminian ‘impossible possibility’, Derrida officially declares deconstruction a descendant of Frankfurt School dialectics.

In the decades preceding Derrida’s speech, the intellectual correspondence between the first generation of the Frankfurt School and French post-war theorists was nowhere near as evident. In a 1983 interview, Foucault detailed his fascination with ‘a minor historical problem’ for which he had not found a solution: despite members and affiliates of the Frankfurt School being exiled in Paris throughout the

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<sup>132</sup> Hent de Vries, ‘Jacques Derrida and the Theodor W. Adorno Prize of the City of Frankfurt’, *MLN*, 131.5 (2016), 1276–1294 (p. 1287).

1930s, the expected exchange between Frankfurt School theory and French philosophy never occurred.<sup>133</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, the Institute was able to set up a satellite headquarters in Paris thanks to the hospitality of the *École Normale Supérieure*'s director Célestin Bouglé. Its journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, was also no longer able to appear in Germany and was housed with Alcan from the early to late 1930s. However, as Louis Pinto remarks, 'this presence went hand in hand with some sort of intellectual invisibility'.<sup>134</sup> For Bouglé and others such as Raymond Aron, who edited and managed the journal, this affiliation seemingly left no traces. Instead, most of the members of the Institute eventually emigrated to the UK and the USA, where, as is now well-established, they were much more widely received. For this reason, Foucault and his contemporaries were completely oblivious to German Critical Theory. 'When I was a student', Foucault stated, 'I can assure you that I never once heard the name of the Frankfurt School mentioned by any of my professors'.<sup>135</sup> In the same interview, Foucault also explicitly confesses that had he been introduced to their work, he 'would have avoided many of the detours which [he] made while trying to pursue [his] own humble path — when, meanwhile, avenues had been opened up by the Frankfurt School'.<sup>136</sup>

Foucault's perplexity at this strange missed opportunity is shared by many scholars who lament the lost historical occasion of potential intellectual collaboration and exchange. Especially since many thinkers of the French

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<sup>133</sup> Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977–1984*, trans. by Alan Sheridan and Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 17–46.

<sup>134</sup> Louis Pinto, 'The Importation of the "Frankfurt School" (and "Critical Theory") in France' in *Ideas on the Move in the Social Sciences and Humanities: The International Circulation of Paradigms and Theorists*, ed. by Gisèle Sapiro, Marco Santoro and Patrick Baert (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 143–175 (p. 147).

<sup>135</sup> Foucault, p. 26.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

‘postmodern’ generation had openly admitted the influence of German philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. The ‘importation’ of Frankfurt School theory was thus marked by a considerable lateness. It was only in the 1950s that Adorno and the School were reintroduced, with translations of Adorno’s work and an article by Communist Kostas Axelos appearing in *Arguments*.<sup>137</sup> In 1958, Lucien Goldmann, French Marxist and Professor at the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales*, invited Adorno to attend and participate in a seminar at the *École Pratiques des Hautes Études* (EPHE), which would be followed by an invitation to the Colloque de Royaumont, an international conference on the sociology of literature in 1965.<sup>138</sup> Marcuse, on the other hand, enjoyed the honour of being invited to the EPHE as a visiting professor on numerous occasions throughout the 1960s. Marcuse’s publications had also been translated in the 1960s, Horkheimer and Adorno, on the other hand, were not widely translated into French until the 1970s.<sup>139</sup>

In their study *L’absolu littéraire* [*The Literary Absolute*, 1978], post-structuralists Jean-Luc Nancy et Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe would write that what interested them most about German Romanticism

is that we still belong to the era it opened up. The present period continues to deny precisely this belonging, which defines us (despite the inevitable divergence introduced by

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<sup>137</sup> Kostas Axelos, ‘Adorno et l’École de Francfort’, *Arguments*, 14 (1959), 20–22.

<sup>138</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Lucien Goldmann, ‘Discussion entre Lucien Goldmann et Theodor Adorno extraite des actes du deuxième colloque international sur la sociologie de la littérature (Royaumont, 12–14 Janvier 1968)’, *Revue de l’Institut de Sociologie*, 3–4 (1973), 525–542. For a more extensive insight into Adorno’s relationship to France, see Frank Müller, ‘Correspondances critiques’, *Recherches Germaniques*, 49 (2019), 91–101.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros et civilisation: contribution à Freud*, trans. by J.-G. Nény and B. Fraenkel (Paris: Minuit, 1963); Theodor W. Adorno, *Théorie esthétique*, trans. by M. Jimenez (Paris: Klincksieck, 1974); Max Horkheimer, *Théorie traditionnelle et théorie critique*, trans. by C. Maillard and S. Muller (Paris: Gallimard, 1974). For a comprehensive overview of the translated works of the Institute’s members (including Benjamin), see the critical bibliography by Gerhard Hoehn and Gérard Raulet, ‘L’École de Francfort en France: bibliographie critique’, *Esprit*, 17.5 (1978), 135–147.

repetition). A veritable romantic *unconscious* is discernible today, in most of the central motifs of our ‘modernity’.<sup>140</sup>

To uncover such ‘motifs’ within modernity, they write, ‘required all the lucidity of a Benjamin’.<sup>141</sup> By choosing to remain in Paris and adopting a more peripheral status with regards to the Institute, Benjamin managed to reach a French audience a lot earlier than many of the other members of the Institute for Social Research.

Although Benjamin’s time in exile must be considered with regard to his relations to the Institute, who were the main source of financial support for his projects, Benjamin’s public image in France, both before and after his death, was primarily shaped independently from that of his Frankfurt School colleagues. His position as a fence-sitter with regards to academic and non-academic convention and disciplines means his reception took place within an array of literary, critical and philosophical fields. Despite his wider international reception being delayed until the 1980s, Benjamin and his works had already had a premature reception amongst select intellectual circles.

This chapter has revisited aspects of both of these receptions, in particular the posthumous translation, circulation and interpretation of his works in the nation of Benjamin’s exile. As I have demonstrated, immediate post-war responses to Benjamin’s works in France took place in the more niche intellectual spaces of Missac’s *Passage* and of post-war literary journals such as *Critique* and *Les Lettres Nouvelles*. In addition, however, his writings formed part of the wider developments of the vanguard of French Critical Theory, where his ideas offered a lens through

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<sup>140</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. by Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 15.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

which to process the status of language, aesthetics and visual phenomena and their relation to politics, specifically within the period following the countercultural movements of the 1960s. Such engagement, I argue, propelled him to the status of a ubiquitous and significant, yet largely unacknowledged presence within the writings of France's leading writers and thinkers.

Prior to 1969, Benjamin's public image in France was arguably more that of a 'marginal' or 'mystic'. What's more, as Hoehn and Raulet note, this Benjamin whose acquaintances ranged from Gide and Malraux to Green and Bataille, was 'more French than German'.<sup>142</sup> In the early 1970s, around the time that Gandillac published two further volumes of translations, Benjamin then began to gain more acknowledgement for his contributions to the field of historical materialism.<sup>143</sup> This was confirmed by the organisation of the first international conference 'Walter Benjamin et Paris' and its accompanying proceedings in the early to mid 1980s. It was at this point that Benjamin benefitted from an additional subsequent reception within the context of the delayed French reception of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.<sup>144</sup> Benjamin thus formed part of a larger constellation of influential German thinkers who were received in post-war France. Nonetheless, his history with the language, as well as the relationships he formed with a host of French writers and intellectuals before and during his exile, means that his case must ultimately be considered separately from that of his Frankfurt School colleagues. Benjamin's intimate connection to French literature, culture and thought constituted an essential

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<sup>142</sup> Hoehn and Raulet, p. 136.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.



part of his oeuvre. This afforded him an afterlife within French intellectual history that was far more impactful than he could have ever foreseen in his lifetime.

## CONCLUSION

The world of Benjamin's writings, writes Jürgen Habermas, resembles a 'surrealistic scene': 'Scholem, Adorno and Brecht form a peaceful symposium at the round table, under which Breton or Aragon are squatting whilst [Gustav] Wyneken is standing at the door' as they engage in 'a dispute about [Bloch's] *The Spirit of Utopia* or [Klages'] *The Spirit as Adversary of the Soul*'.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the intellectual impact of his friends Scholem, Adorno and Brecht has been discussed at length in studies detailing Benjamin's work, the French influence is rarely attributed a lasting significance for the course of his life and career and has remained 'below the table', so to speak. This thesis has argued that Benjamin's investment in French language and history was not only evident from a young age but grew in his later career to become a key part of his legacy as a comparative, transnational and bilingual thinker, writer, translator and intellectual.

Despite the wide-ranging nature of Benjamin's critical interests, French texts, figures and historical events are a continuous and consistent thread throughout his body of work. His writings then, in particular the *Passagenarbeit*, take place within the framework of a Franco-German 'correspondence', in which literary and philosophical traditions from both nations compete and intersect with one another to form the basis of the majority of his conceptual developments. Viewed from the perspective of such influence, his most widely discussed pieces such as his treatise on the act of translation and the 'Surrealism' and 'Work of Art' essays, receive a renewed significance and meaning, especially in relation to the intertextual links that stretch across the entirety of Benjamin's corpus.

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik — die Aktualität Walter Benjamins' in *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. by Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), pp. 174–223 (p. 176).

Furthermore, one of the key aims of this thesis has been to examine how such influence was not necessarily one-directional. Benjamin's time in Parisian exile catalysed a series of collaborative translations and intellectual exchanges as well as a succession of self-perpetuating afterlives within the works of post-war French theorists such as Blanchot, Barthes, Baudrillard, Rancière and above all, Derrida. In this manner, a Franco-German 'correspondence' not only took place within Benjamin's works, but equally in his relationships and posthumous reception in France. This 'correspondence' — within the implicit grander framework of associated terms 'constellation', 'passage', 'intertext' and 'montage' — has been demonstrated to constitute the foundation of Benjamin's methodology as a writer, specifically in his engagements with French literature and culture. Benjamin's multilingual, transnational and intertextual corpus can thus be primarily defined by its sublation of French intellectual currents.

In the four chapters, I have responded to research questions which address the different facets of the influence of French writings and figures on Benjamin's life, career and reception. Rarely considered more than a minor detail within most biographical and critical accounts, Benjamin's exposure to the French language as a child in both domestic and educational settings undoubtedly spurred on his later readings of French authors and work as a translator of poetry and prose. Such linguistic expertise means that despite his corpus revealing an interest in works from a range of international contexts, their significance does not compare to the extent of his intimate engagement with French sources. What's more, his investment in French contemporary literature was integral to his career as a journalist in the Weimar Republic and would spark a renewed understanding of the politics of the European intelligentsia as well as incite his formal experiments with montage and the *kleine*

*Form*. By emphasizing the complexities of his fascination with the works of André Breton, Pierre Naville and Louis Aragon, in particular, I have established that Benjamin's own intellectual development as a writer and thinker was heavily impacted by surrealist modes of thought. Coupled with his increasing awareness of historical materialism, Benjamin's incorporation of surrealist methodology such as textual montage, mythologies of the outmoded and a dialectics of the dream in his project on the nineteenth-century Parisian *passages* amounted to an unprecedented constellation of poetic, artistic and citational practice.

As I have discussed, this indebtedness to French surrealism caused intellectual friction amongst his peers, specifically with Adorno, for whom Benjamin's conceptual mingling of the collective dream and a socio-economic apprehension of commodity fetishism pushed too far against the grain of the Institute's Marxist consensus. Following Benjamin's death, Adorno would retrospectively remark that Benjamin viewed his task not as

reconstructing the totality of bourgeois society but rather in examining its blinded, nature-bound and diffuse elements under a microscope. His micrological and fragmentary method therefore never entirely integrated the idea of universal mediation, which in Hegel as in Marx produces the totality. He never wavered in his fundamental conviction that the smallest cell of observed reality offsets the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Benjamin's materialist approach then saw him relating phenomena 'directly, in their isolated singularity, to material tendencies, and social struggles', rather than elucidating them as 'products of the social whole'.<sup>3</sup> This approach took place in dialectical opposition to forms of estrangement and reification, which hold the

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), p. 235.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

danger of transforming ‘all observation of capitalism as a system itself into a system’.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin’s ‘profane illuminations’ countered such capitalist systems and were based on his encounters with surrealist practice, which as Enzo Traverso phrases it, transforms ‘modernity into a realm of aesthetic pleasure [and is capable of] avoiding both commodity reification and productive, utilitarian rationalization of time’.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis has thus argued that Benjamin’s is a hybrid form of Marxism, primarily defined by its ambivalence between fulfilling Marxist predicates whilst simultaneously engaging with the oneiric demands of a surrealist configuration of human experience. As has been analysed, Benjamin’s engagement with questions regarding ‘the irrational aspects of social processes’ can be understood within the context of ‘Gothic Marxism’, a term originating from a surrealist effort to view Freudian theories of the unconscious through a Marxist lens.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin’s appropriation of montage methods in his work, as argued by Ernst Bloch, resulted in ‘philosophical cross-drillings’ that gather

material from much improvisation which would have previously been random, from much emphasized interruption which would have previously merely remained unemphasized disturbance; it takes intervening means from despised or suspicious forms and from forms which were formerly second-hand.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 462.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Bloch, *The Heritage of Our Times*, trans. by Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Oxford: Polity Press, 2018) p. 240.

As Benjamin had witnessed through his exposure to the surrealist works of Aragon and Breton amongst others, montage provided a means ‘towards new “passage-forming” through things and towards the display of what ha[d] previously been extremely remote’.<sup>8</sup> His reconciliation of a collective unconscious with a Marxist focus within his rendition of nineteenth-century Parisian history must therefore be considered in parallel with such surrealist theoretical advancements. ‘[I]n what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of the Marxist method?’ asks Benjamin in the *AP* (*AP*, 461). This question saw him carrying ‘the principle of montage into history’, ‘assembl[ing] large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components [in order] to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event’ (*ibid.*).

As proposed by Michael Löwy, Benjamin’s thought should be considered within the greater historical trajectory of surrealism as a movement and its indebtedness to German Romanticism. In a further passage in the *AP*, Benjamin cites Emmanuel Berl who argues that ‘[i]nstead of following the course of the modern world’, the surrealists took on the task of relocating ‘themselves to a historical moment [...] anterior even to the development of Marxism: the period of the 1820s, 30s and 40s’ — in other words the period of utopian Socialism that saw the emergence of the likes of Blanquism (*AP*, 698). My discussions of Benjamin’s references to surrealism in his works reveal that it was precisely this return to the ‘lost worlds’ of utopian socialism which drew him towards the movement which was suspended between ‘the experience of freedom’ and ‘the constructive, dictatorial side of revolution’ (*SW* 2:1, 215). Marxism, for Benjamin, is thus ‘a question of

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

enriching revolutionary culture with all the aspects of the past that bear Utopian hope within them'.<sup>9</sup> His reworking of Marxism consists in 'a critical reformulation' which integrates 'messianic, romantic, Blanquist, libertarian and Fourierist "splinters" into the body of historical materialism'.<sup>10</sup> Such a fusion results, as Löwy states, in a 'Marxism of unpredictability' whereby history is opened up to new and unforeseen outcomes, interrupting the continuities of the 'natural' laws of social and economic structures.<sup>11</sup>

The simultaneous 'hybridity' and 'unpredictability' of Benjamin's intellectual output was thus the result of an ongoing 'correspondence' between the genealogies of Marxism and surrealism, which, as I have sought to demonstrate, was prompted by his comparatist approach to European intellectual history. The occupational hazard of conducting such a study of Benjamin's work is nonetheless the claim that everything must be viewed 'comparatively'. In the interests of maintaining a balanced perspective, it should be emphasized that Benjamin did in fact work on a number of topics during his exile which were not directly related to French writers or spurred on by his Parisian environment. Notable examples that have not been discussed in detail in this thesis include his pieces on Franz Kafka which were composed in 1934 and 1938<sup>12</sup> as well as his essay 'Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker' ['Eduard Fuchs, the Collector and Historian'], centred on cultural Marxist and art historian Eduard Fuchs, which he worked on from 1935 until 1937.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005), p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See 'Franz Kafka' (*GS II*, pp. 409–438) and 'Max Brod, Franz Kafka' (*GS III*, pp. 526–529).

<sup>13</sup> *GS II*, pp. 465–475.

In keeping with the claims proposed here, however, Benjamin's interest in works written in German can often if not always be perceived in relationship to his research on French figures. The aforementioned pieces on Kafka are representative of this: Benjamin viewed some of the conclusions he had reached on Baudelaire's writings as being intricately linked to his experiences of writing about Kafka.<sup>14</sup> A series of letters in 1938 reveal to what extent his interpretations of Kafka were intertwined with the development of his ideas on Baudelaire as well as the arcades. Alongside his undivided devotion to the plans for his Baudelaire 'book', Benjamin was 'intermittently' reading about Kafka.<sup>15</sup> In a letter to Scholem in June 1938, Benjamin describes Kafka's work as 'an ellipse with foci that lie far apart and are determined on the one hand by mystical experience (which is above all the experience of tradition) and on the other by the experience of the modern city dweller' (C, 563). The important distinction Benjamin makes in Baudelaire's poetic universe between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, the former being an accumulation of previously 'lived' experiences which are passed on through time, the latter being the immediate, fragmented impressions of the modern city, is equally applicable to Kafka's texts.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, Kafka's host of 'assistants', 'lawyers', 'villagers' and 'officials' are seen to inhabit a similar role to the 'type' ('Typus') of the flâneur. Just as Baudelaire's urban stroller experiences the shock-like experiences of modernity, Kafka's characters are subjected to a similar 'state of intoxication', signalling the process of a 'sickening' ('Erkrankung') of tradition (C, 595; 565). The Kafka works thereby emerge as further exemplars of the inherence of Benjamin's comparative

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Michael Jennings, 'Between Allegory and Aura: Walter Benjamin's 1938 Reading of Franz Kafka', *Journal of the Kafka Society of America*, 12 (1988), 42–50 and Rolf J. Goebel, 'Paris, Capital of Modernity: Kafka and Benjamin', *Monatshefte*, 90.4 (1998), 445–464.

<sup>15</sup> See C, p. 554.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *GS I*, pp. 605–653.



Franco-German perspective to his practice as a *Vermittler* who thrived in his position *in-between* languages, nations and literatures.

Benjamin's relationship with French sources is an all-encompassing, continuous thread that runs through his entire career, so much so that there remain further areas of interest to be addressed for the role of French language, literature and culture to be fully explored. Firstly, a closer engagement with the nature of Benjamin's comparatist approach would offer an enriching perspective through which to analyse his body of work. As argued in Chapter 1, Benjamin's status as an intermediary critic lent his writings a unique comparative and transnational outlook when critiquing and commentating on literary, social and political matters in France, Germany, Russia and beyond. It raises the question of how his comparatism relates to Stefan George, Ernst Robert Curtius and Heinrich Mann — three other German intermediary figures of his generation — who all incorporated their own respective relationships with French language and literature into their work.<sup>17</sup> What's more, Benjamin's comparative practice was often the result of his engagement with other transnational or intermedial works, and as such can be conceived of as a comparative critique of comparative practices in itself, lending it a self-reflexive quality and a 'double' insight into the literary and artistic happenings of his day, specifically in relation to the international nature of European avant-garde movements.

A second area of further study would be to extend the focus from France onto the other spatial and geographical regions which Benjamin's corpus invites us to investigate, especially his writings based on his experiences of the USSR and his

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<sup>17</sup> On this subject, see Christoph Perels, 'Stefan George in Paris: Rekonstruktion einer literarischen Szene', *Hofmannsthal-Jahrbuch*, 20 (2012), 173–197; Stephanie Müller, *Ernst Robert Curtius als Journalistischer Autor (1918–1932): Auffassungen über Deutschland und Frankreich im Spiegel seiner publizistischen Tätigkeit* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2008); Manfred Flüge, *Traumland und Zuflucht: Heinrich Mann und Frankreich* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2013).

time in Italy.<sup>18</sup> This would allow for an interrogation of possible conceptual similarities between these different national contexts, further augmenting the notion of Benjamin's work as that of a transnational comparatist whose ideas and methods were fuelled by his exposure to the events and happenings outside of German borders, a notion which has been proposed in this thesis. To what extent, beyond the French context, can Benjamin's works therefore be read within the framework of transnational transfer of culture, knowledge and intellectual traditions?

As hinted in the final sections of the fourth chapter, Benjamin's resonance within the works of several French post-war thinkers could also benefit from further consideration, particularly with regard to the belated wider European reception of the writings of his peers at the Institute for Social Research. What has been made clear within the analyses of Benjamin's works is that his conceptions of language, translation and visual technologies found a specific audience within the major works of the writers and theorists of the French post-war period, which have since been identified as pivotal in the development of the current status of Critical Theory worldwide. As can be surmised from my discussions of Derrida's Frankfurt prize acceptance speech from 2001, his relationship to Benjamin would certainly merit a more thorough study to unpack the reciprocity between their ideas.<sup>19</sup>

In this respect, one facet of Benjamin's work that has not been addressed at length in this thesis which deserves to be acknowledged when drawing a

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. amongst others 'Neapel' ['Naples'] (*SW* 1, 414–421), 'Die politische Gruppierung der russischen Schriftsteller' ['The Political Groupings of Russian Writers'] (*SW* 2.1: 6–11), 'Moscow' (*SW* 2:1, 22–46) and 'Programm eines proletarischen Kindertheaters' ['Program for a Proletarian Children's Theatre'] (*SW* 2:1, 201–206).

<sup>19</sup> Edmund Chapman's *The Afterlife of Texts in Translation: Understanding the Messianic in Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) has already engaged with Benjamin and Derrida's conceptions of 'afterlife' in relation to their understanding of the act of translation.

comprehensive picture of his work, is the role of the messianic for his thought.<sup>20</sup> In the world of Benjamin's philosophy, the messianic is plucked from its theological context to address and problematize teleological conceptions of history in order to achieve what he defines as 'the ultimate condition' or 'highest metaphysical state' of history, a stand-still moment in which 'real' time under capitalist progress is suspended (*SW* 1, 37).<sup>21</sup> In the early 1990s, following the *Mauerfall* which spelled the demise of Communism in the West, Derrida published *Spectres de Marx* (1993), a work that envisioned a '*messianicité sans messianisme*' ('a messianicity without messianism'). With a nod to the ghost or 'spectre' of Communism which is said to 'haunt' Europe in the opening of *The Communist Manifesto*, Derrida, in partial reference to Benjamin, removes the messianic from its religious context to align it with the spectral. Benjamin had previously located the task of the historical materialist in coming to terms with 'weak messianic power' (*SW* 4, 389). Derrida assumes this task by taking a Marxist inheritance of history as the 'experience of the emancipatory promise' to construe a messianism that deals a blow to 'the teleological order of history'.<sup>22</sup>

Returning to Derrida's Frankfurt address will allow me to make several final remarks regarding the claims and methodology of this thesis in order to establish its position in relation to other academic fields. Derrida's address is above all focused on the notion of language: 'What will a responsible politics make of the plural and

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<sup>20</sup> In a letter to Scholem in 1928 Benjamin writes: 'I should not deprive the Jewish world inherent in my thought of its defenses, if [...] it should manifest itself. [...] I should surround it with the protective cloak of my instructive preoccupation [...] with things French and German' (*C*, 327).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Sami Khatib's "*Teleologie ohne Endzweck*": *Walter Benjamins Entstellung des Messianischen* (Marburg: Tectum, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 74, 96.

the singular’, he asks, ‘starting with the differences between languages in the Europe of the future, and, as with Europe, in the ongoing process of globalization?’ (‘FA’, 164). Over two decades have passed since Derrida posed this question, during which scholarly conceptions of language have expanded in parallel with the ongoing issues arising from rapid globalization, giving way to an increased critical focus on multilingualism, transnationalism and comparative or ‘world’ literatures. Benjamin’s ideas on the ‘form’ of translation as well as the effects of technologies of mechanical reproduction must now be viewed in relation to a world where linguistic transfers can occur instantaneously with a few taps, clicks or whispers into an electronic device. The humanities, more so than ever, have been compelled to consider the work of poets, writers, historians, theorists and philosophers within the context of an era where hybrid cultural, linguistic and national identities, the modern ease of travel and mobility as well as the challenges of migration and exile have become important circumstantial factors. The claims proposed here in relation to Benjamin’s hybrid, migratory corpus advocate a concern for diverse, multilingual, intertextual and intermedial encounters and their results and thus extend more widely to the fields of Comparative and World Literature and Translation Studies.

Additionally, my arguments on Benjamin’s writings and his intellectual afterlives have advanced a challenge to the manner in which literary and philosophical traditions are transmitted and retransmitted. In *Inheriting Walter Benjamin*, Gerhard Richter speaks of the

experience of the heir as the one who both receives and transmits a tradition is marked by a freedom that is conscious of its un-freedom (as it relates and answers to what came before

it) *and* that affirms its own status as freedom precisely by striving to discover how to relate to the tradition in a new and singular way.<sup>23</sup>

In designating his inheritance of surrealism in the terms of a ‘philosophical Fortinbras’ in 1928, Benjamin embraced his role as the heir of an intellectual movement which stretched back to German Romanticism and French Symbolism and was headed towards sacred sociology and situationism (C, 342). Suspended between the simultaneous status of ‘freedom’ and ‘un-freedom’, Benjamin faced the task of translating his often ambivalent understanding of French intellectual history into his work which was certainly not made easier by his penchant for reading across a diverse spectrum. In addition to tracing the origins and results of Benjamin’s process of a Franco-German ‘correspondence’, I have therefore also proposed a reconsideration of notions of inheritability and transmissibility in my intertextual discussions of his engagements with a variety of French writers and their works.

The first conference dedicated to Benjamin in 1972 on German soil kick-started a critical concern with the *Aktualität* of his oeuvre. Since then, half a century has passed and Benjamin’s writings have managed to reach readers and scholars worldwide. And yet, it still appears that his work maintains an actuality that sees itself constantly renewed.<sup>24</sup> In our evolving relations with media, technology, language and the arts, Benjamin’s critically comparative, transnational and transhistorical offerings provide a lens through which to see and process events of

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<sup>23</sup> Gerhard Richter, *Inheriting Walter Benjamin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 7. Italics in the original.

<sup>24</sup> So much so, that the term ‘actuality’ has become a conceptual buzzword within scholarship. Cf. amongst others Irving Wohlfarth, ‘Einige schwere Gewichte? Zur “Aktualität” Walter Benjamins’ in *global benjamin: Internationaler Walter-Benjamin-Kongreß 1992, Vol. 1*, ed. by Klaus Garber and Ludwig Rehm (Munich: Fink, 1999), pp. 31–55; *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Lynda Nead and Laura Marcus (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1998) and Carlo Salzani, *Walter Benjamin and the Actuality of Critique: Essays on Violence and Experience* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2001).

the past, present and future. In spite of, or perhaps partially due to a certain delay in the reception of Benjamin's corpus (a lot of which still remains to be translated today), his actuality has been subject to a certain 'belatedness' which has seen his work read, translated, circulated and interpreted in a multitude of contexts, both within and outside the academy.<sup>25</sup> The afterlives of the archive that he was able to preserve and pass on demand to be interpreted always one more time anew. The task of the critic, so Benjamin wrote, 'is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them' (*SW* 2:2, 464). Only this will prevent a reduction of literature to historical 'material', allowing it to become 'an organon of history' (*ibid.*).

In March of 2021, a list of 318 names was circulated in the French media for a project entitled *Portraits de France*, which was conceived with the intention of diversifying the names of streets and public buildings by honouring the immigrants and refugees who have made their mark on France's collective memory. As stated by the project's scientific committee, the list brings together writers, poets, musicians, soldiers and athletes — 'men and women, who "chose" France, rendered service to the *République* or contributed to the richness and diversity of our history, our cultures, our sciences or our destinies'.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of their legal status (naturalized or 'foreign'), the common denominator for these personalities is their strong relationship to France, whether this be from the centre or the periphery. Benjamin's

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<sup>25</sup> For a further conceptualization of literature of the modern period and 'late' style, see Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>26</sup> 'Recueil des Portraits de France', Ministère de la Cohésion des territoires et des relations avec les collectivités territoriales (2021), p. 8 <<https://www.cohesion-territoires.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2021-12/2021-11-25-Portraits-de-France-web.pdf>>. An accompanying exhibition, entitled *Portraits de France*, took place from December 2021–January 2022 at the *Musée de l'Homme*.

name is listed alongside Guillaume Apollinaire, Émile Zola, Tristan Tzara, Frantz Fanon and Julien Green, amongst others. Having dedicated a sizeable part of his career to reading, translating and conceptualizing French works, Benjamin, with his legacy of a Franco-German ‘correspondence’, continues to generate interest as he becomes increasingly acknowledged as a notable contributor to the histories of France’s literary and philosophical cultures.

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