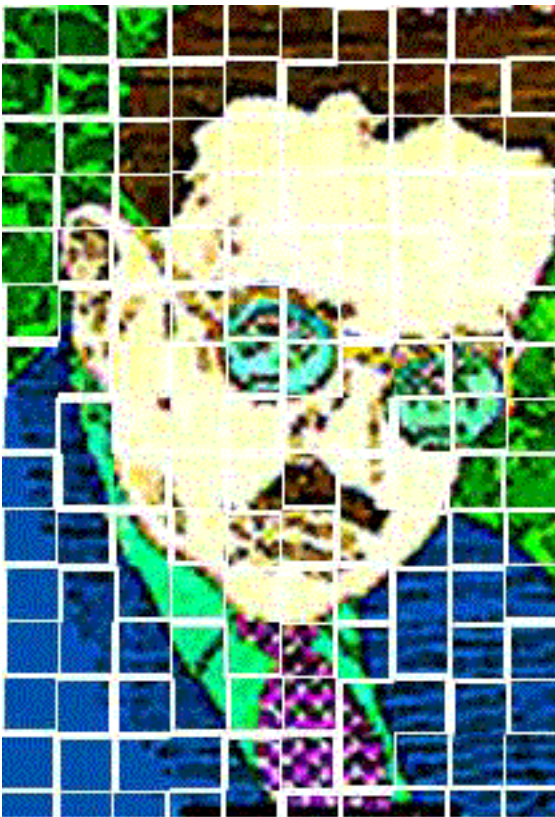


Review

Mike Wayne

Esther Leslie: *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*.
London: Pluto Press, 2000, pp. 256

Redeeming Walter Benjamin



The title of Esther Leslie's book on Walter Benjamin juxtaposes his name with the subtitle, 'overpowering conformism,' in a deliberately ambiguous way. For there are many Walter Benjamins. Even when he was alive, Benjamin presented and developed different facets of his theoretical influences to different, even antagonistic, close friends.¹ After his death, these ambivalences helped to foster almost as many Benjamins as interpreters of him. The contemporary reception of Benjamin is likewise a site of struggle. This would not have surprised Benjamin for whom historiography was always a mediation of contemporary political interests. Today, either Benjamin can be constructed as a resource which can help overpower the pervasive conformism of cultural and academic life, or that very conformism will absorb and overpower Benjamin, integrating him into the latest fashionable capitulations to the status quo, from postmodernism to cybermaterialism. There are nine references in Leslie's bibliography to Trotsky and this gives an indication of the unflinchingly radical intervention and reconstruction of Benjamin which her book undertakes.

Born in the last years of the nineteenth century, steeped in German high culture, growing up in a middle-class household, Benjamin's interests oscillated between two poles. He was preoccupied with developing a historiographic methodology which could understand the nineteenth century as prefiguring the twentieth century, without falling into the twin traps of celebrating the onward march of historical progress or lamenting an irreversible decline. This was combined with an attempt to engage productively and soberly with the world in which he came to political maturity: the world of economic

crisis, war, the mass media, monopoly capitalism and an expanding proletariat.

Leslie's book has the merit of providing a coherent overview of Benjamin by drawing on his scattered writings and numerous drafts and unfinished works which he left, while also locating him in his historical context and his relations to the political and cultural currents of the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout her book, Leslie stresses Benjamin's contribution to a theory of technology. She is at pains to point out that the German word *Technik* compacts within it a sense not only of the material hardware of technology, but also the specific techniques which are developed to deploy the technology and the relation of both to the social relations of the time. Thus Leslie locates her subtle and complex accounts of Benjamin's work within the master concept of the forces and relations of production. Benjamin's interests in technology are wide ranging, from media technologies of radio, print, film and photography, to broader cultural transformations such as lighting and technological developments in architecture.

For Benjamin the pervasive impact of technology reconstructs subjects' experience of themselves and the world around them. The First World War, a recurrent topic for Benjamin, represents the nadir of humanity's alienation from and domination by technological forces it itself has created. Yet in line with the Marxian narrative which Benjamin has to tell, 'these same technologies,' Leslie reminds us, 'can be converted into the basis for an abolition of alienation through a collective incorporation into the self.'² Central to this narrative is the movement from a nineteenth-century conception of the private self, to the twentieth-century where life has become collective, public and political. Technologies have contributed to this transformation and through media technologies these transformations have to some extent been known, understood and experienced.

Benjamin's discussion of photography illustrates this narrative. In the mid-nineteenth century, this relatively primitive technology records, in family portraits, the rising bourgeoisie's 'sense of wealth and security . . . as [a] palpable photographic component of their social reality, transmitted in the visual effect of a buffering, enveloping aura.'³ For Benjamin, reading these early photographs 70 years later, this auratic quality is manifest in the protective, cushioning ovoid shape in which the subject is placed surrounded by darker edges. There is a perfect alignment between the primitive technology and the social class it depicts. But by the time Benjamin himself, as a young child in turn of the century Wilhelmine Germany, is posing in the studio for family portraits, the photograph betrays the insecurity and paralysis of a class unable to use a developing technology progressively. The technological development of light-sensitive lenses 'banishes darkness and records appearances as in a mirror'⁴ while the industrialisation of photography emphasises less a special singular auratic moment captured, then transitoriness and repeatability -- a key theme in Benjamin's well known essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.' The aura is dispelled and with it develops the potential for photography and its subjects to break out of the bourgeois private interior and enter the public collective spaces of production and reception. Yet now there is a misalignment between technological potential and the dominant social class who shape the direction of this as in all technology. After 1880, photographers impersonate the style of the mid-

nineteenth century studio portraits, retarding the technological destruction of the aura and reintroducing a 'fake aura' using specific techniques of re-touching and printing. This tethers the technology to the past because of a 'deadening incapacity to innovate within the medium and investigate its formal and aesthetic possibilities.'⁵

Wind the camera of history forward to 1914 and this reading of photography becomes an allegory for a much more fundamental and destructive misalignment between technological potential and social relations dominated by capital. But technology is a site of struggle and Benjamin seeks out those techniques which anticipate the collective interests and ties which conflictual property relations repress. Thus Benjamin applauds the photographer, August Sander's portfolio of types, which maps the physiognomics of collective forces crystallising in individual bodies. Even more attuned to the modern age is constructivist modernism, which uses montage to reconfigure image fragments to reveal social relations which naturalistic photographic practices cannot penetrate to. Montage, Benjamin suggests, has a privileged relationship to modernity because the process of assemblage out of disparate materials has an affinity with the relationship between workers, technology and nature.

There is a link between montage and Benjamin's own methodology in his unfinished work, *The Paris Arcades*, which is essentially an assemblage of quotations leanly interspersed with some commentary of his own. Here Benjamin explores Paris as the 'capital' of the nineteenth century. He seeks to 'discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event.'⁶ While for Lukacs, the socially resonant or typical was to be found in culture's immersion into the great dramatic forces, events and individuals of their time, Benjamin works with the seemingly inconsequential, the marginal, the humble and unnoticed material. Thus Benjamin is able to engage much more productively than Lukacs, with popular culture and everyday experiences. Benjamin discusses the trash, kitsch, waste and remaindered material of the past.

Leslie gives a very lucid account of how, for Benjamin, there is an affinity between allegory and modernity. Allegory articulates the fragmentary experience of life under conditions of commodity fetishism. But at the same time, it may offer a critique of this experience by establishing, in a flash, connections between things in which we intuit the social relations of the epoch.⁷ For Benjamin, Paris is the prototype or ur-form of 'capitalist bourgeois civilisation.' It is here for example, in the world expositions, where technology, culture and capital coincide in a utopian vision that equates industrialisation with progress and technological rationality with reason itself.⁸ Yet even this phantasmagoria (Benjamin's word for reification) is not pure ideology. For it contains within it wish-images that are authentically connected to a collective fantasy. The point is that all the prosperity and plenty which the 'bountiful usages of new technologies' promise, cannot be realised within the social relations of production. As Leslie notes:

Dreams may contain clues to the better order, or detail hopes and aspirations of the not- yet real but potential. It is not so much a question of awakening from the dream, but making the dream come true.⁹

The potentialities trapped within the current forces and relations of production, are a key concern for Benjamin. Leslie's extensive discussion of Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay illustrates this and is particularly useful as she considers all three drafts and not just the third draft which was eventually published and has since become the most well known in the English language. The problem with this third draft is that it was subject to 'revisions' imposed by the Institute of Social Research. Two categories which were marginalised in that final draft, but which once restored to the essay, foreground Benjamin's concern with the forces and relations of production, are 'First Technik' and 'Second Technik.'

First Technik represents a 'primitive' mediation of nature (but one that is still very much dominant) and is characterised by the attempt to dominate nature. It is fused with ritual and magic which manifests itself today as commodity fetishism. Second Technik represents a potential invested in advanced capitalism in which play, experimentation and variation in use and deployment characterise the technology and the social relations it is embedded into. In Benjamin's 'anthropology of industrialized humanity,'¹⁰ film, in both its production and reception, exemplifies the potential of educative play which rehearses 'new social relations and new techniques of intercourse.'¹¹ Yet film, like all technologies, can of course be used regressively. Integrated into the Nazi propaganda machine, film offers visual representations of the masses to the masses, but not political representation.¹² This is the basis of Benjamin's famous diagnosis that fascism is the aestheticisation of politics (the 'magic' of First Technik) to which we could add that advertising is the aestheticisation of social life. Today, with political and social life dominated by public opinion surveys, focus groups and consumer feedback mechanisms, the populace are consulted only to better understand how the agenda of capital can be rammed through.

The centrality of the forces and relations of production to the concept of Technik allows Benjamin to construct a dialectical account of 'progress' which is fully alive to the regression and barbarism of capitalism; and it facilitates a dialectical account of regression which never forgets the potentialities for interrupting in the leap of revolution, the historical continuity of capitalism.

These themes come to the fore in Leslie's penultimate chapter, a brilliant reading of Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History.' Here Leslie effectively recovers what many have read as Benjamin's disillusioned parting of the ways with Marxism, for the authentic revolutionary traditions of Bolshevism. The 'Thesis' is centrally concerned to critique the Stalinist Marxism which holds that there is an objective historical teleology in which the victory of the working class is guaranteed. And it is also concerned to critique Social Democracy which also assumed that historical progress and reform will unfold automatically within the parameters of capitalism. On the eve of the Second World War, these philosophies of history are thoroughly bankrupt. The struggle in the present is also, for Benjamin, a struggle to *redeem* the forgotten past of its misery, its broken hopes, its waste. Benjamin understands the past 'from the perspective of lost opportunities, now potentially viable.'¹³ This concept of redemption is one sense in

which Benjamin mobilises the discourse of theology, which others have read as evidence of a burgeoning religiosity to replace his dying Marxism.

The 'Theses' opens with a strange and powerful image, which 'snaps thought into being.'¹⁴ An automaton puppet that plays an unbeatable game of chess, Benjamin tells us, is secretly operated by a hidden hunchback. Benjamin allegorically associates the puppet with historical materialism and the 'small and ugly' hunchback with theology. Leslie dismisses those interpretations of this image which see it as evidence of 'ardent religious commitment' on Benjamin's part, and instead suggests that theology is here in effect a code word for the whole question of human agency, consciousness and the self-activity of the masses which Stalinism, masquerading as 'historical materialism' (the quotation marks are Benjamin's), has kept out of sight, in favour of the automated road to victory.

Leslie's final chapter is devoted to the way Benjamin has been remembered and used within cultural theory. She begins with some reflections on the images of Benjamin used on book covers. Benjamin is typically constructed as 'a solitary, lonely, melancholic intellectual' and writings on Benjamin's life seem to construct him as 'caught up from early on in a disastrous biographical unfolding.'¹⁵ Leslie offers a Benjaminian critique of this rendition of Benjamin:

The star cult, promoted by the capitalist entertainment industry through fan clubs and spectacles, conserves the magic shimmer of the artificially boosted commodified star personality. Benjamin is bathed in auratic light. Photographs of a man caught with his eyes unfocused behind moon lenses appear poised to conjure up fantasies of immediate knowledge of the author and a romantic empathy with his mortal suffering.¹⁶

This individualising and de-historicising of Benjamin cuts him off from the political history 'in which and against which he was engaged actively.'¹⁷ Leslie critiques the way Benjamin has been remembered by writers such as Zygmunt Bauman, who constructs Benjamin in his own image, committed to a liberal politics of indeterminateness;¹⁸ Scholem constructs a Judaic Benjamin which 'bemoans' his Marxism; Jameson feels severed from Benjamin, who lived in another historical time, pre-postmodernist. These readings of Benjamin, as with many others, can only be sustained by lifting him out of his dialogue with left politics. Benjamin's interest in Marxism stems from the latter's engagement in the practical experience of daily life. Difficult though Benjamin may be to read, he is committed to making experience intelligible and historical knowledge lucid. Leslie's book gives us a Benjamin that speaks to the crisis of our times and aids greatly in helping make our experiences, their technological mediations, and our historical moment, intelligible and, potentially, alterable.

Notes

[1](#) E. Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno*, University of California Press, London, 1982, pp. 149-279.

[2](#) Leslie, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 86.

[3](#) Leslie, pp. 50-51.

[4](#) Leslie, p. 55.

[5](#) Leslie, p. 54.

[6](#) W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1999, p. 461.

[7](#) Leslie, p. 199.

[8](#) Leslie, pp. 119-120.

[9](#) Leslie, p. 121.

[10](#) Leslie, p. 182.

[11](#) Leslie, p. 160.

[12](#) Leslie, p. 164.

[13](#) Leslie, p. 211.

[14](#) Leslie, p. 172.

[15](#) Leslie, pp. 208-9.

[16](#) Leslie, p. 211.

[17](#) Leslie, p.213.

[18](#) Leslie, pp. 214-215.