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## On 'Shock:' The Artistic Imagination of Benjamin and Brecht

Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra

*University of Cambridge, UK*, [mp592@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mp592@cam.ac.uk)

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## On 'Shock:' The Artistic Imagination of Benjamin and Brecht

Mara Polgovsky Ezcurra

### Abstract

"Shock" is perhaps the central concept of modernist aesthetics and Walter Benjamin its best known theorist. It has been well documented that Benjamin's long-lasting friendship with Bertolt Brecht and the latter's dramatic theory had a profound influence on his thinking about this notion. Brecht's techniques of interruption and juxtaposition in the practice of epic theater were in close relationship with Benjamin's use of montage as a mechanism to "liberate" meaning. Despite Theodor Adorno's and Gershom Scholem's attempt to situate Benjamin's thought in a different aesthetic tradition, Brecht's understanding of *Verfremdung* (estrangement) and Benjamin's idea of "shock" are often deemed identical. In this paper I compare both concepts, looking at their points of coincidence and tension. I also relate their development to one of the most telling friendships in the history of twentieth-century philosophy.

### Key Words

Baudelaire, Benjamin, Brecht, *Erfahrung/Erlebnis* (experience), *ostranenie* (making strange), *Verfremdung* (estrangement), shock

### 1. Encounter

"Madam, may I help you?" "Please," she said. "Their name is *manderola*," the gentleman replied. The woman had been trying to buy some almonds but could not guess their name in Italian. Having made her purchase, she walked toward the piazza. He followed her and asked: "May I accompany you and carry your package? Allow me to introduce myself: Doctor Walter Benjamin." It was the summer of 1924, in Capri. This first encounter of Benjamin with Asya Lacis, the Latvian leader of Soviet experimental children's theater, was the beginning of more than one friendship.<sup>[1]</sup> Benjamin fell in love with her.

This drove him to the Soviet Union where he became acquainted with the Russian avant-garde. It was also Lacis who introduced Benjamin to Bertolt Brecht in 1929.

The relationship between Benjamin and Brecht was one of those intellectual friendships that inspire the imagination. There was a great deal of poetry and fine sentiment in the way they treated each other. They were bound by the common fate of having to escape from Nazi Germany. From his exile in Skovsbostrand, Denmark, the playwright invited Benjamin to join him. The critic refused, as he refused to go to Jerusalem, with Gershom Scholem, and to New York, with Theodor W. Adorno and the other members of the Institute for Social Research. However, he paid long visits to his friend and kept corresponding with him. Benjamin described his stays in the green oasis where Brecht lived as "tantamount to monastic confinement."<sup>[2]</sup> There was never extended conversation

between the two men. They played chess in silence and worked on their own writing for long hours. When they engaged in discussion, they talked about the classics, Nazism, and their own literary production.

It is difficult to discuss the intellectual projects of Brecht and Benjamin, and the mutual influences between these thinkers, without taking into account this panorama of friendship and exile. Yet the relationship between these men, as thinkers, is much more complex than their friendship. It is clear that the playwright became one of the most important influences on Benjamin's thinking about modernist art. Indeed, Benjamin gave an unreserved endorsement to Brecht's epic theater.

Nevertheless, he remained distant from Brechtian aesthetic utilitarianism. The points of coincidence and tension between the two thinkers are revealed as we analyze their use of certain key concepts in modernist aesthetics. In this essay I will attempt to uncover some of these tensions (while avoiding to rigidify them or superficially resolve their ambiguity), by looking at how Benjamin's idea of "shock" compares with the Brechtian notion of *Verfremdung* (estrangement).<sup>[3]</sup>

## 2. Exile and friendship

In a letter to Scholem dated June 29, 1929, Benjamin described Brecht as a "noteworthy acquaintance ... about whom and about which there is much to be said." Some weeks later he wrote:

You will be interested to hear that very friendly relations have recently developed between Brecht and myself, based less on what he has done, of which I only know the *Threepenny Opera* and the ballads, than on his present plans, in which one cannot but be interested.<sup>[4]</sup>

These "present plans" refer to Brecht's experimentation with *Lehrstücke*, "teaching plays," which he presented in a series of publications called *Versuche* (Essays). According to Rainer Nägele, "Benjamin took a passionate interest in these essays, finding in them an affinity with a side of his work that he could share neither with Scholem nor Adorno."<sup>[5]</sup>

Soon after they met, Brecht and Benjamin became intensive collaborators. Benjamin recalls holding long conversations with the playwright about the crisis of cultural critique and the need to restore its basic function: "to teach interventionist thinking."<sup>[6]</sup> The conviction of both thinkers that criticism ought to be understood as a continuation of politics led them to plan a periodical in 1930 that, had it existed, would have been called *Krisis und Kritik* (*Crisis and Critique*). Due to financial difficulties and disagreements between the editors, the project was never realized. Yet, the surviving notes of the conversations of the two thinkers in planning the journal reveal differences in their thinking that would last until Benjamin's death. For Brecht, the critical function of thinking was associated with dialectical materialism only. Benjamin, in contrast, spoke of movements in earlier times "primarily religious, which, like Marx, instigated a radical destruction of society's icons."<sup>[7]</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, Benjamin published a series of writings

and commentaries on Brecht. The first one of these begins:

Brecht is a difficult phenomenon. He refuses to make "free" use of his great literary gifts. And there is not one of the gibes against his style of literary activity – plagiarist, trouble-maker, saboteur – that he would not claim as a compliment to his un-literary, anonymous, and yet noticeable activity as educator, thinker, organizer, politician, and theatrical producer. In any case he is unquestionably the only writer writing in Germany today who asks himself where he ought to apply his talent, who applies it only where he is convinced of the need to do so, and who abstains on every other occasion.<sup>[8]</sup>

Benjamin's reflections on Brecht were always written in this tone of adulation and empathy. He admired Brecht's determination, clarity of mind, and firm commitment to revolt against bourgeois conformism. Brecht, however, never stopped being a "difficult phenomenon" since, on the one hand, Benjamin did not think in Brechtian instrumentalist terms, and on the other, Brecht often harshly criticized Benjamin's messianic ideas. Moreover, the intellectual sympathy between the playwright and the critic aroused much anxiety among Benjamin's other friends. Adorno, Scholem, and Gretel Karplus (Adorno's fiancée and later wife) all feared Brecht's influence on the critic. Adorno called Brecht a "vulgar Marxist" and Scholem described Benjamin's approach to Marxism as a form of self-deception.

Benjamin responded to these recriminations, first, by emphasizing his affinities with Brecht and, second, by describing his own use of Marxism not as an ideology of fixed ideas but as "a way of taking position in relation to the changing situation."<sup>[9]</sup> He avoided being seen as a dogmatic representative of dialectical materialism. Rather, he projected himself as "a researcher to whom the posture (*Haltung*) of the materialist seems to be more fruitful, scientifically and humanly," than any other episteme.<sup>[10]</sup> Defending this posture was, however, rather difficult for Benjamin. In 1938, he described himself as "a man at home between the jaws of a crocodile, which he holds apart with iron struts."<sup>[11]</sup>

One of the clearest examples of the tensions and ambiguities that characterized the relationship between the critic and the dramatist is a letter that Benjamin wrote to Karplus in response to her own concerns regarding his closeness to Brecht. The letter reads:

In the economy of my existence, a few relations, that can be counted, play indeed a role that allow (*sic*) me to assert a pole that is opposite my original being...these relations have always provoked a more or less violent protest in those closest to me.... I can do little more than ask my friends to trust me ...those ties, whose dangers are obvious, will reveal their fruitfulness .... It is not at all unclear to you that my life as well as my thought moves (*sic*) in extreme positions.<sup>[12]</sup>

Soon after Brecht moved to Skovsbostrand in 1933, he invited Benjamin to join him there. Benjamin presumably declined the invitation due to his fear of the aggressive winter, the isolation that living in a Danish-speaking context would entail, and the idea of becoming financially dependent on his friend.

Yet he moved a great part of his library (which he had initially left in Berlin) to Brecht's house and visited the playwright in 1934, 1936, and 1938. During these encounters the two men listened to the news from Vienna on the radio, commented on their writings, and talked about Virgil, Dante, and Goethe.

Some of Benjamin's notes allow us to reconstruct the atmosphere of these exchanges.<sup>[13]</sup> It was often Brecht who spoke and Benjamin who listened. Brecht defended his positions with determination; Benjamin tried to leave open the possibility for a more careful consideration of the arguments at stake. "The destructive aspect of Brecht's character," wrote Benjamin, "puts everything in danger almost before it has been achieved."<sup>[14]</sup>

In general, the playwright and the critic lived differently. One was the man of the stage in search for concrete truths;<sup>[15]</sup> the other was a "distracted individual" who "had placed a secretive wall around his person."<sup>[16]</sup> Rather than setting them apart, however, these differences aroused a certain fascination for the other. As Eugene Lunn indicates, Benjamin found in Brecht a "most useful antidote to his own esoteric hermeticism."<sup>[17]</sup> Jürgen Habermas suggests that, for Benjamin, Brecht was a "kind of reality principle."<sup>[18]</sup> Yet, in spite the great influence that Brecht wielded over Benjamin,<sup>[19]</sup> both men maintained their intellectual independence.<sup>[20]</sup>

### 3. Visions of shock

Brecht is often considered the most radical theorist and practitioner of twentieth-century theater. "He was a rebel."<sup>[21]</sup> He rebelled against a "theater of illusion" or what he called "Aristotelian drama," a theater that conjures up before the audience an illusion of real events, drawing each member of the public into the action "by causing him to identify himself with the hero to the point of complete self-oblivion."<sup>[22]</sup> When one looks at this public, wrote Brecht, "one discovers more or less motionless bodies – they seem to be contracting their muscles in a strong physical effort, or else to have relaxed them after violent strain ...; they have their eyes open but they do not look."<sup>[23]</sup> A theater of illusion serves to purge the emotions of the audience, but leaves it "uninstructed and unimproved." It converts the art of theater into an article of consumption and destroys its potential of becoming a laboratory of social change. "The audience should not be made to feel emotions; they should be made to think.

But identification with the characters of the play makes thinking almost impossible."<sup>[24]</sup>

An insistence that the audience develop an entirely different, nonconformist attitude is at the core of Brechtian theory. The dramatist's understanding of art was overtly political. He saw "apolitical" art as merely the label of the artistic expressions that favored the interests of the ruling classes. Drawing heavily from Cubism and the Russian *avant-garde*, he sought to use art as a demythologizing tool that could negate the

commonplace and taken-for-granted and reveal social as well as ideological contradictions. His purpose, however, was not "to produce the joys of satirical exposure" but to "develop a *modus operandi* for radical social change."[\[25\]](#)

"The modern theater is the epic theater," wrote Brecht in 1930, placing his dramatic theory at the core of modernist aesthetics. The term 'epic' remained attached to Brecht, despite his own later attempts to refer to his work as "dialectical" or "scientific." The label is not misleading; it embraces the efforts of Brechtian drama to expose the underlying historicity of a specific social situation and inculcate in the audience a detached, distancing attitude toward the events portrayed. But the promises of epic theater go beyond a depiction of the world as it really is. The audience is to be profoundly transformed through the experience of such performances. Indeed, epic theater must plant the seeds of social transformation. In the mid-1930s, Brecht described this dramatic practice as follows:

The stage began to be instructive....Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all became subjects for theatrical representation....As the "background" came to the front of the stage so people's activity was subject to criticism ....[t]he theater became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished (*sic*) not just to explain the world but also to change it.[\[26\]](#)

As this quotation suggests, Brecht attempted to dispel the naturalist illusion of art as reflection. While naturalistic theater represses awareness to make the illusion of its authenticity more vivid, epic theater aims at creating awareness by exposing its own artifice. The consciousness of being performed on stage allows epic theater to experiment with the different possibilities of reality and, ultimately, portray both individuals and social reality as capable of being "reassembled." Yet, these processes cannot occur away from the audience. "The epic play," wrote Brecht, "is a construction that must be viewed rationally and in which things must be recognized; therefore, the way it is presented must go half-way to meet such viewing."[\[27\]](#) Hence, the narrative content ought to be presented in a dialectical, non-illusionist, and non-linear manner. This was achieved through the use of the *Verfremdungseffekte*.

In Brecht's plays actors spoke as if they were reciting someone else's words; they went in and out of character on stage; scenes formed a discontinuous montage, and were, at times, frozen into a *tableau vivant*. These mechanisms were directed at stripping events of their self-evident, familiar qualities, making them *strange*, and allowed the audience to observe their underlying causes. The process involved a moment of shock or astonishment, through which the audience realized its own previous state of unawareness.

According to Ernst Bloch, Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte* is directed against the state of alienation that results from the reification of social relations in advanced capitalist societies. As individuals become alien to the environment and to other beings, as their lives and work are reduced to the state of a

commodity, they lose their capacity to hear and see. Therefore, in order for social change to occur, said Bloch, these people had to be awakened. The experience of regaining perception is shocking, "but its effect within a purposeful context will not be uninviting."[\[28\]](#)

Estrangement evokes surprise ... and lets the beholder contemplate experience separated, as in a frame, or heightened, as on a pedestal .... This leads increasingly away from the usual and makes the beholder pause and take notice .... Thus a faint aura of estrangement already inheres in the kind of spoken inflection that will suddenly make the hearer listen anew.[\[29\]](#)

In Bloch's view, the destruction of stage illusion is not an end in itself. By inhibiting the process of identification between the spectator and the character, familiar objects and situations appear in a new light and therefore create a new understanding of human relations. A "distancing mirror" allows the public to perceive the contradictions within "the familiar."[\[30\]](#)

The production of shock in Brecht ultimately results from the abolition of the division between performance and audience. This process fascinated Benjamin. In the first version of "What is Epic Theater" (1930-31) he described it as follows:

The point at issue in the theater today can be more accurately defined in relation to the stage than to the play. It concerns the filling-in of the orchestra pit. The abyss which separates the actors from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence heightens the sublime in drama, whose resonance heightens the intoxication of opera, this abyss which, of all the elements of the stage, most indelibly bears the traces of its sacral origins, has lost its function. The stage is still elevated, but it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth; it has become a public platform.[\[31\]](#)

Through this spatial description of epic theater, we can identify strong similarities between the intellectual projects of Benjamin and Brecht and make the transition toward the analysis of Benjamin's understanding of "shock." Benjamin's notion of the politicization of art is based upon the idea of the withering of the "aura," that sacred halo that placed a *distance* between the work of art and the spectator, regardless of how close they were. In his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin analyzed the effects, both political and perceptual, of the use of new cultural technologies for the production and reproduction of art.

The mechanical reproduction of a work of art by new aesthetic practices, such as cinema and photography, dispels the "auratic traces" left upon art from its successive functions as part of religious worship and the Renaissance cult of beauty. The social bases of the demise of auratic art are, on the one hand, "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly," and on the other, "their bent

toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.”[32]

For Benjamin, the reproducibility of photos, prints, and films in the era of high capitalism destabilizes the sense of uniqueness, authenticity, and unapproachability of art. In this process, art leaves the realm of the religious to enter the world of politics:

The instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics.[33]

The privileged example of these new technologically mediated cultural forms is film. Benjamin describes it as “the art form that is in keeping with the increased threat to his life which modern man has to face.”[34] Not only does it prepare the modern man for the shocks of urban life through the constant bombardment of moving images, but it also allows a “deepening in apperception” by breaking down and enlarging time, space, and movement.

Yet Benjamin also showed great enthusiasm for the transformative political potential of epic theater to the point of comparing it to film.[35] “The forms of epic theater,” he wrote, “correspond to the new technical forms – cinema and radio.”[36] With its emphasis on montage, interruption and, most of all, in closing the distance between the audience and the characters, epic theater was for him at the core of the artistic revolution of the twentieth century:

The songs, the onstage captions, the gestic conventions of the actors set each situation off against the others. This constantly creates intervals which undermine the audience’s illusion; these intervals are reserved for the audience’s critical judgments.[37]

Aside from his intellectual interest in the critical potential of modernist techniques of interruption, Benjamin incorporated them in his own writing. Quotations appear in his texts as a means of disrupting their continuity and linearity. He introduced analogies in rapid succession (*e.g.*, “allegories are in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things;”[38] “magician and surgeon compare to painter and cameraman”[39]), and often strikes the reader by juxtaposing ideas and presenting extremely short arguments. His aphoristic writing structures the text as a montage of citations without overt correspondence among them. This allows the creation of multiple associations between written fragments and leaves the text open for innovative, “liberating” interpretations.[40] In this sense, Benjamin’s writings embody his view of history as an object of construction.

Furthermore, as Richard Shiff suggests, “Benjamin’s writing figures modernity in a language of analogy that acts upon the reader in lieu of explaining.”[41]

“The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” is the finest example of Benjamin’s use of montage. The essay, completed in 1938, is structured as a collage of discrete images of social experience that have been ripped out of their “natural”



context. They provide elements from nineteenth century Paris and more recent history, allowing Benjamin to construct a web of constellations that resembles Baudelaire's own writings.

Reading the essay for the first time produces a sense of dislocation and distress. The effect is deliberate.<sup>[42]</sup> In a letter to Horkheimer written in 1938, Benjamin said: "The better the work is composed, the more it will be able to break free from a superficial continuity."<sup>[43]</sup>

However, Benjamin's interest in fragments of experience and archaic objects is not that of the antiquarian. "He was convinced," writes Michael W. Jennings, "that the reconstruction of the nineteenth century in a manner that could expose its underlying structure might have an explosive effect on the contemporary understanding of the historical situation." He believed that "his reliance upon the constellation as a principle of essay construction might lead toward that underlying structure."<sup>[44]</sup> Thus, according to the critic, narrative continuity doomed traditional history writing to a tacit complicity with the ideology of the ruling class.

#### 4. Shock and experience

Benjamin's use of montage as a mechanism to "liberate" meaning was influenced by Brechtian techniques of interruption and juxtaposition.<sup>[45]</sup> In both instances shock appears as the primary experience of dislocation in modern life and as an aesthetic practice to free art from the enslaving and exploitative dynamics of commodity capitalism. For Benjamin, as for Brecht, shock shatters perception, exposing the discontinuity of history. Does it also lead to the attainment of class-consciousness and, ultimately, to revolution (as Brecht would claim)? In other words, do Benjamin and Brecht share the same understanding of the political effects of aesthetic shock? These questions have multiple implications. They compel us to reflect upon how Benjamin described the aesthetic techniques of epic theatre and compared them to his own work. They also demand that we differentiate the Brechtian use of *Verfremdung* from the concept of *ostranenie* ("making strange") in the work of the Russian *avant-garde*.

Furthermore, they entail a more extensive analysis of the role shock plays in Benjamin's thought.

In his writings on Brecht, Benjamin acclaimed the use of shock in epic theater as a means of revolting against all subjectivist artistic expressions and lay bare the illusory character of linear accounts of history. "It can happen this way, but it can also happen quite a different way – that is the fundamental attitude of one who writes for epic theater."<sup>[46]</sup> Indeed, Brecht's use of shock as a mechanism to "make the familiar estrange" coincides with Benjamin's project of "exploding things" from their ordinary and habitual existence as commodified "enslaved and enslaving objects."<sup>[47]</sup> Moreover, as Lunn explains, a central feature of Benjamin's method of "profane illumination" was "defamiliarizing estrangement through viewing objects up close but from many angles."<sup>[48]</sup>

The literary critic, however, does not share with the playwright the same understanding of the social consequences of shock.

One way to explain this difference is to compare their relationship to the work of the Russian writer and playwright Sergei Tretyakov. Both thinkers were profoundly influenced by

Tretyakov's experiments with theatricality. Benjamin, however, remained closer to Tretyakov than Brecht in his understanding of the effects of shock on the recipient of the work of art. As Andreas Huyssen explains:

Just as Tretyakov, in his futurist poetic strategy, relied on shock to alter the psyche of the recipient of art, Benjamin, too, saw shock as a key to changing the mode of reception of art and to disrupting the dismal and catastrophic continuity of everyday life. In this respect ... both differ from Brecht.[49]

Indeed, Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* and Tretyakov's *ostranenie* are not identical. The latter is essentially a formalist device of making things strange through the use of juxtaposition. The former involves "laying bare society's causal network." [50] Thus, while *ostranenie* is mainly focused toward disrupting the frozen patterns of sensory perception, Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is instrumentally bound to a rational explanation of the social processes to be revealed. [51]

Peter Brooker described this difference by saying that "Brecht's conception and use of *Verfremdung*...entailed a degree of political insight which thoroughly radicalized the formalist device of 'making strange'." [52]

Benjamin never mentioned this discrepancy when he discussed Brecht's work. Just as in their private conversations and letters, his texts about him were flattering and accepting. Most of his intellectual production, however, remained alien to the playwright's militant logic. While Brecht was an overt Marxist and his dramatic theory was intimately tied to a socialist transformation, Benjamin's commitment to dialectical materialism was much more irresolute. In fact, it was not the hope for a proletarian revolution but a rejection of bourgeois society and, of course, fascism, that attracted him to Marxist thought. And although he was thorough in his study of Marx and his use of dialectic materialism as a "posture," he never, in Lunn's words, "played at being a proletarian or oriented his work directly toward the working class." [53] Moreover, he did not abandon his Jewish intellectual heritage, tied to a utopian longing for the coming of a Messiah "who would redeem the past while inaugurating a secular kingdom of happiness." [54] In short, he showed great ambivalence toward the passing of tradition.

The differences between Brecht and Benjamin with regard to the politicization of art are difficult to discern in texts like "The Author as Producer" and "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction." However, when we read Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire ("The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"), Benjamin's nostalgia toward the decay of aura is made evident and the very concept of shock acquires a new inflection. Although in this second body of writings, ambivalence remains a persistent feature.

"On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" is often presented as the major critical statement of Benjamin's maturity. The text begins with a distinction of *Erfahrung* (ongoing experience or experience in the sense of learning from life over an extended period) from *Erlebnis* (mere experience or a single noteworthy

experience).[55] Benjamin made a critique of the irrationalist "Erlebnis cult" of "vitalism" by suggesting that "experience is a matter of tradition, in collective existence as well as private life." Nevertheless, *Erfahrung* "is less the product of facts firmly anchored in memory than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data (*mémoire involontaire*)."[56]

For Benjamin, "Baudelaire has placed the shock experience at the center of his artistic work." [57] The poet speaks of men "absorbing" collisions and shocks as they move through the traffic of the big city and clash with the amorphous crowd of passers-by. "At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through [them] in rapid succession," pedestrians have to stare in all directions "in order to keep abreast of traffic signals." [58] The shock the passer-by experiences in the crowd corresponds to the worker's alienating experience with the machine (as *Erlebnis*). [59] It reduces the passer-by to the state of an automaton. He becomes alien to *Erfahrung*.

Further, wrote Benjamin, "pedestrians act as if they had adapted themselves to the machines and could express themselves only automatically. Their behavior is a reaction to shocks." [60] The worker and the pedestrian seem to have completely liquidated their memories.

Benjamin proceeded to describe how, in *Fleurs du mal*, the withering of the aura is felt each time that Baudelaire refers to the act of looking. "Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned" and, when this expectation is met, "there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent." [61] In Baudelaire, however, this expectation is never fulfilled, for he describes eyes that are incapable of looking. Thus, "On Some Motifs" ends when the poet has been thrown into the crowd and tries to escape from it "with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or the wind." This frantic image indicated for Benjamin "the price for which the sensation of the modern may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock." [62]

As we read this essay, the perception of Benjamin as the one who celebrates the decay of the aura is shattered. The analogy between the alienated worker and the passer-by questions the liberating capacity of the shock experience. The constant bombardment of perception in the era of mass communication does not appear to be creating revolutionary subjects but beings that are incapable of looking. *Erlebnis* increasingly replaces *Erfahrung*. Benjamin writes a lamentation on the decay of auratic aesthetics and portrays the modern city as terrifying. In response to this text, which Adorno received with great enthusiasm, he commented that the new usage of the notion of "aura" meant the alienation of humanly constructed objects from their creators. Further, it described a process of reification that occurs as objects lose their "human trace." [63]

## 5. Concluding remarks

As has been widely discussed and memorialized, Benjamin committed suicide in the Spanish border town of Port Bou on September 27, 1940, while trying to flee from Nazi persecution. He had not been allowed to cross the border and feared that he would be handed over to the Gestapo the

following day.<sup>[64]</sup> When Brecht received the sad news, he wrote of his friend:

In the end driven to an impassable frontier

You, we hear, passed over a passable one.<sup>[65]</sup>

With the passing of this border, the relationship between Benjamin and Brecht became less and less distinct for scholars, and the critic began to be related more strongly to the Frankfurt School than to the playwright. This was partly a result of the course that followed the posthumous publication of Benjamin's writings. His last completed work that we know of is the "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written only some months before his death. According to Rolf Wiggershaus, Adorno considered that "none of Benjamin's works showed him closer to [the Institute's] intentions." It was originally planned to publish a mimeographed booklet containing the "Theses" with contributions by Horkheimer, Adorno, and Brecht. The memorial volume arrived in 1942 but, as Wiggershaus points out, "it was ... decided to do without Brecht after all."<sup>[66]</sup> In contrast, *Understanding Brecht*, a compilation of Benjamin's writings on Brecht, was only published in 1966 and translated into English a decade after.

Benjamin and Brecht shared the intellectual project of disrupting frozen patterns of perception in order to forge a new, more critical attitude toward social reality. Both thinkers saw shock as a means of shattering the conformist, blinded man who lives in a state of alienation, and make him so uncomfortably "strange" that his curiosity may be aroused. Furthermore, Benjamin celebrated the playwright's use of *Verfremdungseffekt*, as a mechanism that liberates events from the "enslaving" narrative of historical inevitability, and introduced techniques of montage and interruption to his own writing. Brecht was therefore crucial for the development of Benjamin's aesthetic theory of shock, despite the fact that this influence has not received sufficient attention. Nevertheless, Benjamin's treatment of shock goes well beyond Brecht's optimism. While Brecht embraced shock with absolute conviction, for Benjamin it entails great dangers: the likely emergence of a mass of "traumatized automatons;"<sup>[67]</sup> the vanishing of private space; the coming of an era where experience, devoid of tradition, is incapable of finding meaning.

We should not be surprised by the contradictory treatment of "shock" in Benjamin's writings, nor should we attempt to create a homogeneous whole out of his fragmented imagination. He acknowledged his tendency to oscillate between extreme and apparently irreconcilable positions and, rather than feeling concerned about it, he saw this wavering as a means of expanding his own freedom. Indeed, Benjamin's ambivalence toward the modernist use of shock gives his thinking about this concept a richness and complexity that is rarely acknowledged.

Mara Polgovsky holds a Master's degree in History from EHESS, Paris, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Latin American Cultural Studies at the University of Cambridge. Her research interests include intellectual history, aesthetics, and critical theory. She has been a visiting student at École Normale Supérieure and Harvard University.

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### Endnotes

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[1] This is how Asya Lacis recalls her encounter with Benjamin in *Revolutionär im Beruf. Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator*, ed. Hildegard Brenner (Munich: Rogner and Bernhard, 1971), pp. 41f.

[2] Momme Brodersen, *Walter Benjamin. A Biography* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 217.

[3] I follow the distinction between *Entfremdung* (alienation) and *Verfremdung* (estrangement) proposed by Ernst Bloch and translated by Anne Halley and Darko Suvin, in "'Entfremdung, Verfremdung': Alienation, Estrangement," *TDR*, 15 (1970), 120-125.

[4] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt, 1975), 20f, 34. Quoted in Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin. An Intellectual Biography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), p.122.

[5] "Body Politics: Benjamin's Dialectical Materialism between Brecht and the Frankfurt School," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), p. 164.

[6] Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke in 20 Bänden* (Frankfurt, 1967), vol. 18, 85f. Quoted in Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 125.

[7] Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke*, p. 85f, quoted in Witte, *Walter Benjamin*, p. 125.

[8] "From the 'Brecht Commentary' in *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 27.

[9] Nägele, "Body Politics," p. 162.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Macmillan, 1997), p. 155.

[12] Nägele, "Body Politics," pp. 166-7.

[13] Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal* only gives sparse accounts of their

discussions.

[14] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 119.

[15] While visiting Brecht in 1934, Benjamin wrote in his diary: "On a beam which supports the ceiling of Brecht's study are painted the words: 'Truth is concrete.' On a window-sill stands a small wooden donkey which can nod its head. Brecht has hung a little sign round its neck on which he has written: 'Even I must understand it'" (*Understanding Brecht*, p. 108).

[16] Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism. An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 183.

[17] Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, pp. 250-1.

[18] Jürgen Habermas et al., "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," *New German Critique*, 17 (1979), 31.

[19] A vivid example of this influence are the following words that Benjamin wrote in his diary after talking to Brecht: "While he was speaking...I felt a power being exercised over me which was equal in strength to the power of fascism – I mean a power that sprang from the depth of history no less deep than the power of the fascists. It was a very curious feeling and new to me" (Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 120).

Although it is less clear how Benjamin influenced Brecht's thinking, we know that, despite their intellectual differences, he had great respect for his work. After receiving the terrible news of Benjamin's death, he remarked that this was the first real loss that Hitler had caused to German literature (Stanley Mitchell, "Introduction," in Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, xviii).

[20] Brecht was highly critical of Benjamin's writings on Kafka and Baudelaire. While staying with Brecht in 1934, Benjamin wrote an essay on the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death. He asked Brecht to read it and waited with certain anxiety for his comments. But weeks passed by and Brecht did not say a word in relation to it. Incapable of asking Brecht directly about his reaction, Benjamin took the manuscript away as a form of protest. One night Brecht suddenly started talking about the essay. He told Benjamin that he had treated Kafka purely from the phenomenal point of view, detaching him from his social context. "The images are good," said Brecht, "but the rest is pure mystification. It's nonsense. You have to ignore it. Depth doesn't get you anywhere at all." (Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, pp. 109-10).

[21] Martin Esslin, *Brecht. The Man and His Work* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1960), p. 130.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] "Kleines Organon fuer das Theater," in *Versuche* (1948), 119. Quoted in *ibid.*, 133.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Peter Brooker, "Key Words in Brecht's Theory and

Practice of Theater," in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, eds. Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: University Press, 2006), p. 212.

[26] *Brecht on Theater. The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 71.

[27] Quoted by Benjamin in *Understanding Brecht*, p. 11.

[28] Bloch et al., "Entfremdung, Verfremdung," p. 123.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 125.

[31] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 1.

[32] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 217.

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 218.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 243, note 19.

[35] Primarily in the texts specifically devoted to Brecht.

[36] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 6.

[37] *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, 1935-38*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 330-331.

[38] *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 178.

[39] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," p. 227.

[40] For a discussion of how the shocking converges with the beautiful in Benjamin, see Richard Shiff, "Handling Shocks: On the Representation of Experience in Walter Benjamin's Analogies," *Oxford Art Journal*, 15 (1992), 88-103.

[41] *Ibid.*, 91.

[42] See Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images. Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 24.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] He considered montage as the "major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology" (Mitchell, "Introduction"), p. xiii.

[46] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 8.

[47] "Surrealism. The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, 1927-34*, p. 210.

[48] Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 222.

[49] Andreas Huyssen, "The Hidden Dialectic: Avantgarde-

Technology-Mass Culture," in his book, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indiana: University Press, 1986), p. 14.

[50] Brooker, "Key Words in Brecht's Theory," p. 216.

[51] Huysen, "The Hidden Dialectic," p. 14.

[52] Brooker, "Key Words in Brecht's Theory," p. 216.

[53] Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 22.

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[55] I am using the translation of Beatrice Hanssen ("Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin's Work" in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, pp. 70, note 2).

[56] Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life. Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 172.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 178.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 190.

[59] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 191.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 205.

[62] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

[63] Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 170.

[64] Mitchell, "Introduction," p. xix.

[65] Quoted in Mitchell, "Introduction," p. xix.

[66] Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994), p. 311.

[67] Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, p. 255.

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