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Deconstructing Walter Benjamin

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Miklos Legrady



Miklos Legrady, cultural revolution, acrylic on canvas, 2005
18" x 24" - 45.72cm x 60.96cm

I'm going to hurt your feelings and it's going to upset you, but Walter Benjamin did not say what you think he said, nor what they said about him, nor what we learned in school. It is hard to believe we held illusions as articles of faith for decades, but then think of medieval monks in flea-ridden cassocks who counted angels dancing on the head of a pin. We're not that far ahead; we also hold political beliefs that look plausible at the moment but seriously need corrections on the basis of fact.

At the core of Benjamin's argument is *that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art*. He's wrong in that books are made by mechanical reproduction yet stories and authors retain their aura as much as any work of art. Munch's *The Scream* is known from reproduction yet remains haunting, as haunting as any Raven perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door. Without its aura, an image is illustration, not art. Benjamin's error comes from a materialism which says that the only meaning of art lies in an accurate rendition of reality, the essence of art is pictorial reproduction.

Some find Benjamin complex and difficult; there's reason for that but not what we'd expect. When we read something that contradicts our expectations, we generally skip that sentence; here we eventually find ourselves with shreds and hanging chads. The difficulty in reading Benjamin is not intellectual comprehension; it is in matching what we read to what he's supposed to have said: we must censor the text to meet our expectations. Many of us stop reading when unable to reconcile such contradictions between fact and fiction, and so we leave Benjamin behind as "difficult." It is near impossible to interpret Benjamin according to the mythology woven in his name.

Walter Benjamin has been praised as an early Marshall McLuhan, a social scientist able to discern the cultural effects of media. Yet on reading the text we find a political message that strays from the truth and then ignores it. Where we thought "The Work Of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" was research similar to

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today's academic scholarship, it is in fact Marxist propaganda. History reminds us that Marxists saw truth and accuracy as useful when convenient; we cannot read Benjamin innocently when the work has political priorities.

Walter Benjamin's thesis insists that all we can ask of art is to reproduce reality. He writes that authorship, creativity, and aesthetics are outmoded Fascist concepts, and the only valid art is that made by the working class for political use. Benjamin is himself writing propaganda without concern for accuracy. He shares flawed assumptions, fact and fiction twisted to fit political theory; the reductions, contradictions, and leaps of faith are obvious.

Benjamin rejected aesthetics whereas science shows that beauty and its complex differentiations are crucial for mental health. In the 1970s Abraham Moles and Frieder Nake analyzed links between beauty, information processing, and information theory. Physicist Paul Dirac said that if one works at getting beauty in one's equations, and if one has a really sound insight, one is on a sure line of progress. Denis Dutton was a philosophy professor and the editor of *Arts & Letters Daily*. In his book and Ted Talk called *The Art Instinct*, he suggested that humans are hard-wired to seek beauty. "There is evidence that perceptions of beauty are evolutionarily determined, that things, aspects of people and landscapes considered beautiful are typically found in situations likely to give enhanced survival of the perceiving human's genes."

One Communist writer who later left the party in disillusionment was Arthur Koestler. In *The God That Failed* and *The Invisible Writing* he described the logical contradictions and resulting *sacrificium intellectus* that Communist writers suffered. The resulting emotional damage may well explain Benjamin's catastrophic failure of morale and his subsequent suicide in a moment of crisis.

Arthur Koestler wrote of Benjamin's death in France during the 1940s in *The Invisible Writing*. "Just before we left, I ran into an old friend, the German writer Walter Benjamin. He was making preparations for his own escape to England. He has thirty tablets of a morphia-compound, which he intended to swallow if caught: he said they were enough to kill a horse, and gave me half the tablets, just in case. The day after the final refusal of my visa, I learned that Walter Benjamin, having managed to cross the Pyrenees, had been arrested on the Spanish side, and threatened with being sent back to France the next morning. The next morning the Spanish gendarmes had changed their mind, but by that time Benjamin had swallowed his remaining half of the pills and was dead."

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