

WALTER BENJAMIN

The **Colour** of Experience



Howard Caygill

ROUTLEDGE

WALTER BENJAMIN

'This is a stunning work, offering the most compelling account of which I am aware of Benjamin's project and how it works itself out across the range of his writings.'

Jay Bernstein, University of Essex

The writings of the Weimar philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin continue to provoke controversy in the fields of philosophy, critical theory and cultural history.

In this major reinterpretation, Howard Caygill argues that Benjamin's work is characterised by a focus on a concept of experience derived from Kant, but applied by Benjamin to objects as diverse as urban experience, visual art, literature and philosophy. The book analyses the development of Benjamin's concept of experience in his early writings, showing that it emerges from an engagement with visual experience, and in particular the experience of colour. By representing Benjamin as primarily a thinker of the visual, Caygill is able to bring forward previously neglected texts on inscription and the visual field and to cast new light on many of his more familiar texts.

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For Gillian

In the blinding light before the Kremlin gate the guards stand in their brazen ochre furs. Above them shines the red signal that regulates the traffic passing through the gate. All the colours of Moscow converge prismatically here, at the centre of Russian power.

Walter Benjamin, *Moscow*

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Walter Benjamin's enigmatic legacy has generated a vast and growing body of commentary and interpretation. His contributions to metaphysics, theology, cultural history and literary and art criticism are at once forbiddingly abstract and sensitive to the most inconspicuous, concrete detail. A broadcaster on children's radio during the Weimar Republic, he was also the author of some of the most esoteric philosophical texts to be written in this, or any, century. Such paradoxes, alongside the circumstances surrounding the preservation, publication, and translation of his writings, have resulted in a proliferation of *à la carte* Walter Benjamins: the Marxist literary critic, the theologian, the surrealist, the philosopher of language, the philosopher of history, the born again romantic, the melancholic, and even the 'swinger' . . .

The reading of Benjamin ventured in this book tries to avoid adding another dish to the menu. It is modelled on Benjamin's own method of 'immanent critique' which refrains from biographical speculation, explicit polemic with other critics and the use of the first person singular. The reading is nevertheless informed by three interpretative strategies which arise from its particular cultural context and stage in Benjamin's reception. The first is an emphasis on the philosophical aspect of Benjamin's thought, especially with respect to the Kantian origins of his concept of experience. The second is the argument that Benjamin's concept of experience leads him towards the transformation of philosophy into cultural history, while the third is the claim that the model of experience informing Benjamin's work emerges from the visual rather than the linguistic field.

Much of this book was written in Paris, in a quiet street off the Boulevard de Clichy. I would like to thank my friends in Paris – Richard Beardsworth, Pablo Caravia, George Collins and Catherine Morel – for their company and critical inspiration. I wish also to thank Jay Bernstein, Greg Bright, Jon Cook, Judith Mehta, David Owen, Edi Pucci and Alan Scott for their criticism of the work in progress. I promised long ago to dedicate this book to Gillian Rose; now it must be dedicated to her memory.

REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

Published texts are listed under date of publication; unpublished texts by date of composition. The page number cited after the date of publication or composition refers to the English translation if available, or to the German collected works; I have modified translations wherever necessary.

The following abbreviations are used to refer to the major collections of Walter Benjamin's work, in German and in English translation:

- GS *Gesammelte Schriften*, vols I–VIII, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–.
- C *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, eds Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trs Manfred R. Jacobsen and Evelyn M. Jacobsen, Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1994.
- CB *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, tr. Harry Zohn and Quintin Hoare, London: NLB/Verso, 1983.
- I *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, London: Jonathan Cape, 1970.
- OWS *'One Way Street' and Other Writings*, tr. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London: NLB/Verso, 1979.
- SW *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913–1926*, eds Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- UB *Understanding Brecht*, tr. Anna Bostock, London: NLB/Verso, 1973.

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of Baudelaire's works is a very short one, but it already bears historical scars which must be of interest to critical observers.

(Walter Benjamin)

The reception of the work of the Weimar philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) has vindicated his own insight into the ways in which the past is continually transformed through its interpretation by the present. The body of his writings bears the scars of the various disputed phases of its postwar reception, whether Marxist, theological, cultural critical or philosophical. In each case, the reception has selectively shaped the *oeuvre* by bringing out a particular feature or phase of Benjamin's authorship and discreetly tucking away the others. The effect is an inevitable levelling of Benjamin's work, and the reduction of its constituent paradoxes into stages of a developmental narrative or *Bildungsroman*.

Benjamin himself proposed a distinction between two phases or 'production cycles' in his work, a claim which, characteristically, he then immediately qualified. In a letter to his friend Gerschom Scholem of 30 January 1928 he described himself at work on a project which, if completed, would bring to a close the *One Way Street* production cycle (*Produktionskreis*) in the same way that 'the book on the German mourning play closed the Germanistic one'.¹ His reference is to the *Arcades Project* – 'The Paris Arcades: A Dialectical Faerie' – which, in spite of his hope that this would be the 'work of a few weeks,' was to occupy him for the remaining twelve years of his life and would never be completed. By regarding the *Arcades Project* as a continuation of *One Way Street* Benjamin points to a substantial overlap of several years between the two cycles, for while the latter was not published until 1928, its origins may be traced back to the city writings of the early 1920s, such as the work on the German Inflation of 1923, and the seminal essay on Naples written with Asja Lacis and published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1924.

The schema of two overlapping production cycles is complicated by further discontinuities within and continuities between the two phases acknowledged by Benjamin. His work may be subdivided into a number of smaller periods and even discrete genres which in their turn overlap each other. The first 'Germanistic' phase of his authorship comprises three further phases: the writings associated with Benjamin's participation in the pre-1914 Berlin Youth

Movement, his academic work at the Universities of Freiburg, Berlin and Bern (1912–19), and his postwar translations and cultural criticism up to and including his failure to habilitate with the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* at the University of Frankfurt in 1925.

The second 'One Way Street' phase is also internally divided, this time by a persistent overlap between the *Arcades Project* and the work on German literature. In a letter to Scholem of 20 January 1930 from Paris, Benjamin reflected on his achievements since embarking upon the *Arcades Project* in 1928. He now describes his two main objectives as continuing work on the *Arcades Project* and gaining the laurels 'as the foremost critic of German literature'.² The latter required no less than the 're-creation' of the genre of literary criticism, a genre which Benjamin claimed had not been taken seriously in Germany for fifty years.

To the chronological divisions between the various phases and periods of Benjamin's authorship may be added a number of generic distinctions between the kinds of work that he wrote. From the generic perspective Benjamin's criticism may be divided into three distinct, but again overlapping groups of writings spanning all phases of his authorship. These groups comprise the short critical article, the academic metacritique and the works of philosophical criticism.

The first group of writings comprises the scores of short, critical reviews which were written quickly, indeed from the mid-1920s often dictated, and destined for rapid publication in the booming Weimar newspaper and weekly review market. This source of income largely ceased after the Nazi seizure of power in 1933 and Benjamin's flight to Parisian exile, although he was able occasionally to publish in the French press and in Germany under pseudonyms. During his period of exile Benjamin turned to the detailed historical research in the Bibliothèque Nationale associated with the *Arcades Project*, supported by stipends from among others the Institute for Social Research headed at this time by Max Horkheimer. Benjamin described his short critical reviews positively as the tactical manoeuvres of the 'strategist in the literary struggle' and negatively as 'hackwork' but in any event did not rate them as a significant part of his oeuvre. Nevertheless, although occasional pieces, the short reviews are model contributions to the difficult genre of the short critical essay and often yield invaluable insights into the development of Benjamin's thought.

At the opposite end of the generic spectrum are what may be described as academic treatises which combine historical research with metacritical reflection on the theory of criticism. The first contribution to this genre was Benjamin's doctoral dissertation at the University of Berne entitled *The Concept of Art Criticism in Early German Romanticism* (1919) to which may be added the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* with its metacritical 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' (1928) and the incomplete *Arcades Project* with its metacritical supplements *The Author as Producer* (1934) 'Convolut N'

(mid-1930s) and the *Theses on the Philosophy of History* written at the beginning of 1940.

The third generic group of Benjamin's writings emerges between the short critical notices and the academic treatises and comprises Benjamin's major critical essays. These writings confront criticism and philosophical reflection, an innovative synthesis first fully achieved in the essay on *Goethes Wahlverwandschaften* (1922) and then developed further in the essays on Proust, Kraus and Kafka. In these and other extended critical essays Benjamin realised his ambition to create a new genre of criticism. In the genre of 'immanent critique' Benjamin brought together philosophical reflection and the close reading of a literary text in a way that continues to provoke fascination and controversy among his readers.

Viewed from another perspective it is possible to regard the phases of Benjamin's work as thematically unified. The overlap between the two cycles may be read as indicating some continuity between the work on the German mourning play and the genealogy of modernity ventured in the *Arcades Project*. The continuity between them may be described in terms of the development of a Kantian concept of experience through an extension of a Nietzschean method of active nihilism. The themes of experience and nihilism are evident in all phases of his authorship, from the work of the Youth Movement period, through the mystical and religious anarchist writings of early 1920s and into the Marxist work of the early 1930s. The concepts of experience and nihilism offer a thread of continuity in discontinuity between the 'Germanistic' analyses of the decay of Christian experience following the Reformation undertaken in the *Origin of the German Mourning Play* and the decay of modern experience described in the *Arcades Project*.

An anticipation of Benjamin's concept of experience may be found in a note dating from 1887 in which Nietzsche raised the possibility of an ambiguous nihilism, one which was both active and passive. Nihilism could be interpreted both as creative – a 'sign of strength' and a 'violent force of destruction' – and as a 'decline and recession' in which 'the synthesis of values and goals (on which every strong culture rests) dissolves'.³ Benjamin's work may be read as an exploration of the ambiguity of nihilism, an attempt to establish a 'method called nihilism' which would offer both a diagnosis of the experience of a passively nihilistic culture as well as identifying the chances for an active nihilism emerging within it. His analysis of passive nihilism focused on the 'decay of experience' – Nietzsche's dissolution of the 'synthesis of values and goals' – provoked by the destruction of traditional forms of community and their relations to nature by the development of capitalist social relations and technology. This analysis, however, is inseparable from an assessment of the chances for an active, even religious nihilism which nests within the decay of experience, manifesting itself above all in the experience of destitution.

The Benjamin of this book attempts to extend the concept of experience bequeathed by Kant by transforming it into an anti-Hegelian but nevertheless

speculative philosophy of history inspired by a Nietzschean active nihilism. This is a Benjamin whose project is the exploration of the possibilities of a discontinuous experience of the absolute, a project whose beginnings may be traced in the early philosophical writings and whose implications are followed through in the later criticism and cultural history.

Yet this is not to argue that for Benjamin philosophy is a master discourse which holds sway over his critical and historical investigations. The concept of experience itself necessarily exceeds philosophy, and puts into question the relationship between philosophical reflection and its objects. To a large extent Benjamin's thought may be understood as an attempt to extend the limits of experience treated within philosophy to the point where the identity of philosophy itself is jeopardised. In place of a philosophical mastery of experience, whether that of art, of religion, of language or of the city, Benjamin allows experience to test the limits of philosophy. The work of philosophical criticism according to the 'method called nihilism' allows experience to invade, evade and even ruin its philosophical host.

One of the ways in which Benjamin makes philosophy vulnerable is to insist that experience is not primarily linguistic, that it does not take place within the field of linguistic signification. This flies in the face of recent interpretations of Benjamin's philosophy as 'metacritical' and in the lineage of Georg Hamann's linguistic critique of Kant's concept of experience.⁴ Here, on the contrary, it is argued that the inspiration of Benjamin's speculative concept of experience is less linguistic than chromatic, that the paradigm of experience for him is not linguistic signification but chromatic differentiation. In Kantian terms his concept of experience emphasises the complexities of intuition – the 'axioms' or 'things seen' – over those of the understanding – the 'acroms' or things spoken. The result is a concept of experience far more recalcitrant to philosophical reflection than the linguistic metacritiques of the concepts of the understanding.

The recasting of Benjamin's concept of experience bears with it severe implications for the understanding of his critical and historical work. The focus upon the colour of experience reveals a Benjamin who is above all a thinker of the visual. Instead of the visual being regarded as an appendage to the linguistic, as in the many readings of Benjamin's theory of allegory, it is here given its proper dignity, shifting the motivation of Benjamin's work from problems of signification and expression to those of inscription and the mark. This shift opens up a previously underestimated dimension of his work and brings forward previously neglected (and hence untranslated) texts on inscription and the visual field. It also casts a new light upon many apparently familiar texts such as the *Work of Art in the Epoch of its Technical Reproducibility*.

These arguments are developed through four chapters which combine historical, philosophical and critical analysis. The first and perhaps most philosophically challenging chapter focuses upon what Benjamin described in

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his early writings as the 'comprehension' and 'recasting' of Kant's concept of experience. What may appear to more impatient readers as unnecessarily drawn-out philosophical and philological work on the early writings is necessary in order to question the universally accepted assumption that Benjamin's thought begins in a linguistic metacritique of Kant. The second chapter explores the implications of this new concept of experience for Benjamin's literary criticism, showing how the concept of experience was both the condition of his critical insights while at the same being modified by them. The third chapter reconstructs Benjamin's analysis of the experience of the visual and the work of art, while the fourth presents Benjamin's analysis of the experience of modernity in terms of his work on the city and urban experience. The work ends with an afterword which revisits the theme of 'the messianic' in Benjamin's thought and seeks to relocate it within his speculative concept of experience.



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THE PROGRAMME OF THE COMING PHILOSOPHY

Past things have futurity.

Walter Benjamin, *The Metaphysics of Youth*, 1914

The concept of experience

All of Benjamin's writings, whether dedicated to literature, art history or the study of urban culture, may be read as anticipations of a 'coming philosophy'. At the heart of this new philosophy is a radical transformation of the concept of experience bequeathed by Kant's critical philosophy. The matrix for this transformation is to be found in the few short published articles and numerous unpublished fragments surviving from the period between 1914 and 1921. These difficult, opaque and often unreadable texts are crucial to any interpretation of Benjamin's thought. In them Benjamin distanced himself from the tradition of academic neo-Kantianism in which he had been trained at the universities of Freiburg, Berlin, Munich and Bern¹ and sought, in the words of a letter to Gerhard Scholem, dated 22 October 1917, to 'comprehend [Kant] with the utmost reverence, looking on the least letter as a *tradendum* to be transmitted (however much it is necessary to recast him afterwards)' (C, 97–8). The subsequent development of his thought may be understood in terms of such a 'comprehension and recasting' of Kant's transcendental concept of experience into a speculative one.

The 'philosophy of the future' intimated by Benjamin and partially realised in his later works introduced the 'absolute' or 'infinite' into Kant's deliberately finitist concept of experience. Benjamin pursued this course in a way which deliberately rejected both the direction and the implications of Hegel's earlier speculative transformation of Kant's philosophy in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The 'coming philosophy' is an anti-Hegelian speculative philosophy driven by the nihilistic refusal of any attempt to grasp or comprehend the absolute through finite categories.

The ambition to extend and transform Kant's concept of experience is the thread which runs through Benjamin's otherwise disparate early writings. Although the transformation of Kant's transcendental into a speculative concept of experience is first declared programmatically in the 1917 fragment *On Perception* and the 1918 *On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy*,²

intimations of it pervade the writings of this period. It informs and motivates Benjamin's acknowledged contributions to linguistic, aesthetic and political philosophy³ as well as his less familiar work in the fields of mathematics, geometry, logic and the philosophy of colour.⁴ In these writings Benjamin questions not only the structure of Kant's concept of experience, but also its basic assumptions that (a) there is a distinction between the subject and the object of experience and (b) that there can be no experience of the absolute.

Benjamin's recasting of Kant's concept of experience challenged not only the norms of Kant exegesis, but more significantly the very self-definition of philosophy. His extension of the bounds of experience to include 'sooth-saying from coffee grounds' threatened to dissolve the bounds of sense that were so carefully demarcated by Kant and policed by his philosophical heirs. For Kant, the parameters of possible experience are constituted by the faculties of intuition, understanding and reason anatomised in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. He assigns to intuition the pure forms of intuition (space and time), to understanding the twelve categories of the understanding (unity, plurality, totality, reality, negation, limitation, substance, causality, community, possibility/impossibility, existence/non-existence, necessity/contingency), and to reason the ideas of reason (God, World, Soul). In elaborating his concept of experience, Kant rigorously distinguishes between the contributions made by each faculty to experience. Nevertheless, the critical philosophy hinges on the conviction that it is possible to establish a relationship between intuition and understanding given the rigorously prescribed conditions of the subsumption of the material of sensibility intuited through space and time under the categories of the understanding. However, critical philosophy denies legitimacy to any supposed relationship between intuition/understanding and the ideas of reason.

In his critique of Kant's concept of experience, Benjamin not only extended the neo-Kantian attempt to dissolve the distinction between intuition and understanding, but went further in seeking a (expressly non-, if not anti-Hegelian) concept of 'speculative experience'.⁵ This recast the distinction between intuition/understanding and reason into an avowed metaphysics of experience in which the absolute manifests itself in spatio-temporal experience, but indirectly in complex, tortuous and even violent forms. In this way Benjamin evades Kant's exclusion of the absolute from all but moral experience without accepting the Hegelian view of a developmental history of spirit, or the continuous process of mediation between the absolute and spatio-temporal experience.

The proposal to break down the distinctions between intuition, understanding and reason has led historically either to a revival of pre-Kantian dogmatic metaphysics or to a form of Hegelianism. Benjamin, aware of both possibilities and of the traditional Kantian objections to them, nevertheless insists on a 'transformation of the transcendental philosophy of experience