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Modernity and Redemption in Benjamin’s *One Way Street*

For Walter Benjamin and some of his contemporaries, especially Siegfried Kracauer, the feuilleton as a literary genre was an answer to the question of how to represent, reflect, and criticize modern experience in writing. It provided an opportunity for a new type of writing that was the near cousin of modern forms of visual art like the snapshot and the film. It could capture experience right away, *in situ*, isolate it, and interpret it.¹

Considering the fact that work on his *Arcades Project* was cut short by his suicide, perhaps Benjamin’s most complete attempt to bring the promise of this modern type of writing to fruition comes in his *One-Way Street*, a book which in both form and content attempts to construct out of modern fragmentation insights into modernity as a whole.

1. *The Flaneur and the Ragpicker*

The promise Benjamin saw in feuilleton writing doesn’t meant that he thought the feuilleton was always a vehicle for a modern form of truth. For Benjamin, there was a tension between a cheapened version of the feuilleton which turned political writing and social commentary into an object of light entertainment. He criticized feuilletonists like Kurt Tucholsky, for example, for supplying bourgeois audiences with a worldview — narrowly focused criticism or commentary that could took up an object or urban phenomenon and glibly interpreted according into some readymade mold to make it ready for easy consumption.²

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I think what Benjamin is talking about is, if anything even more familiar to us today in the form of a particular type of op-ed or movie review: the “hot take” as it’s sometimes called. It, in effect, packages an aesthetic experience or political opinion turning it into a commodity that can be consumed, assimilated into one’s personality and worldview, and, nowadays, shared.

Clearly, however, Benjamin found something worthwhile in the feuilleton form. He wrote admiringly of Baudelaire’s prose poems which appeared in the feuilleton of French newspapers in the 19th century. He saw Baudelaire as the first writer to recognize the figure of the flaneur, passively wandering metropolitan environments, styling himself and consuming experiences — as an essential new modern phenomenon.³

What did Benjamin admire in Baudelaire’s writing? Unlike the flaneur or the conventional feuilletonist, Benjamin suggests, Baudelaire refused to succumb to the impulse to package modern experiences in his writing, but instead tried to figure and transfigure them into some kind of poetic truth.

In a long essay on Baudelaire, conceived as part of a longer book, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” Benjamin discusses Baudelaire’s ambivalence about the rapidly expanding market for the written word and for feuilletons in particular in 19th century France. Baudelaire, Benjamin says, was realistic about the need to sell his thought — but anxiously described himself as something of a prostitute of ideas.⁴ The prose-poems Baudelaire published in the feuilleton section were not as popular or lucrative as those of his contemporaries. Benjamin attributes this to a more complex relationship to modernity. Baudelaire does not write as or for the flaneur.

Rather, he is a kind of “ragpicker” — Benjamin adapts this image from Baudelaire’s poetry. He does not package the modern phenomena themselves to provide a consumable object for his audience; he, rather, collects the detritus left over from these phenomena — the excesses, the discarded advertisements, the mistakes, and assembles them into a constellation or presentation that Benjamin thinks sheds light on modernity itself.

So Benjamin writes of Baudelaire that “divorced himself from the crowd as a hero,” exposing himself to the shocks of modernity but resisting them, and, at the same time, setting himself the task at the same time of “giving shape to modernity.” It is this task that Benjamin also sets for himself in One-Way Street: a rag-picking prose-poetry that exposes itself to the modern world, but attempts at the same time to divorce itself from it, and in so doing find a position from which a different shape for it can at least be imagined.

Benjamin also sought develop a theoretical background for this kind of fragmentary work. He explicates this theory in the famously difficult “Epistemo-Critical Preface” to his book On the Origin of the German Tragic Drama [Trauerspiel]. This preface was written around the same time as Benjamin’s was composing One-Way Street while he live on the Italian island of Capri in 1924. Kracauer, for one, saw an affinity between the books such that he saw fit to review them together in the Frankfurter Zeitung.

In the preface, Benjamin proposes a new way of understanding philosophical writing, which is based in part on Benjamin’s idiosyncratic understanding of Talmudic scholarship and messianism. I now want to attempt to untangle some of the philosophical and theological complexities of that preface, and show how they’re at work in One-Way Street.

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5 Ibid., 53-54.
6 Ibid., 96, 110.
2. The Theory of Ideas

As I said, the “Epistemo-Critical Preface” is extremely difficult, so I don’t want to get into all of the thorny theoretical and interpretive issues here. But I do want to focus on the model of philosophical writing that Benjamin advocates.

In the *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin’s attempted *Habilitationsschrift*, takes as its subject matter the *Trauerspiel*, historical dramas produced in Germany during the 16th and 17th centuries. Typically evaluated by literary scholars, according to a classical concept of tragedy, *Trauerspiel* belonged, according to Benjamin, to an entirely different genre or, to use Benjamin’s language in the book, an entirely different idea, whose features were unique to the socio-political context in which it emerged. Benjamin’s book proposes to outline the idea of *Trauerspiel* in a way similar to the ragpicker methodology I outlined above — by determining and interpreting the excesses that fall outside the concept of tragedy and orienting them in a kind of mosaic out of which the idea of *Trauerspiel* is constructed.

Benjamin, then, doesn’t just find fault with literary critics who apply the wrong concept to the study of *Trauerspiel*, he finds fault with their very method of evaluation, which he regards as typical of academic, philological, and philosophical analysis in general. This is a top-down conceptual understanding that regards the concept as preeminent and tries to fit the phenomena beneath it — or, at the very least, to evaluate them according to their relationship to the concept. This is, of course, worked out differently in different domains, but what these philosophical approaches share is a kind of idealism that privileges the conceptual over the phenomenal, or the objects themselves.

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Benjamin proposes instead a bottom-up philosophical analysis, that starts not with the concept but with the phenomena themselves. In the case of the *Trauerspiel* book, this is the plays themselves, but in the case of urban modernity it is the rags, advertisements, street signs, chance encounters, and musings that take place on the street themselves.

How, though, are these remnants supposed to cohere into any kind of philosophical truth? The answer that Benjamin gives in the “Epistemo-Critical Preface” revolves on a religious conception that he derives in part from his understanding of religion. Just as interpretation of law in the Talmud, for example, is oriented toward the word of God, Benjamin regards the interpretation of the fragments of art or modern experience as requiring an orientation toward the whole.

Given the historical complexities of philosophical interpretation, nothing like this kind of closure is ultimately possible. “It is not in the power of mere thought to confer on it such closure,” he writes. As a result, it is incumbent upon philosophical writing, in the model of the religious treatise, to constantly begin anew, but without giving up on the ideal of some kind of doctrinal completeness. New phenomena require new interpretations and new orientations toward the whole or, as Benjamin calls it, the idea.

Philosophical “method,” Benjamin writes, is, under these condition, “detour” (*Umweg*, or the long way around). This long way around involves rejecting immediately available conceptual interpretations of, for example, the modern phenomena. It rejects the conventional philosopher or art critic’s immediate understandings and instead seeks to interpret the fallen world as a collection of fragments. It sees things, in other words, from the ragpicker’s perspective. It removes things from their pre-interpreted, readymade contexts and sees them

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9 Ibid. 1.
10 Ibid., 2-3.
instead as ruins with what Benjamin sometimes calls a melancholy gaze. He evokes this idea in *One-Way Street* when he writes, “After a convivial evening, someone remaining behind can see at a glance what it was like from the disposition of the plate and cups, glasses and food.”

This backward gaze makes things available for a new kind of reflective interpretation. Specifically, Benjamin writes, this kind of interpretation, while also conceptual, is unlike traditional interpretations not oriented toward what is average in the phenomena. It does not seek to identify common characteristics that signal that the phenomena “belongs” under a particular concept. Instead, genuine philosophical writing should be oriented toward what is extreme in whatever phenomena is under discussion — what falls outside the traditional conceptual understanding.

Benjamin cites an example from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which he understands as a *Trauerspiel*. A naïve critic, understanding the play in terms of the concept of classical tragedy, sees Hamlet’s contingent death at the tip of Laertes’ sword as “undermining the tragic character of the drama,” since Hamlet’s downfall doesn’t follow inexorably from some tragic flaw. But, for Benjamin, we should displace the play out from under the concept of classical tragedy, and see it as a kind of ruin analyzable in all its particularity without being prejudiced by any conceptual understanding. What emerges under this philosophical gaze is what is unique and extreme in the play. These unique, extreme features emerge not as some kind of slip-up or artistic failure but as something essential. In the case of Hamlet’s death, it is now no longer seen as a flaw in construction, but an expression of the contingency, lack of meaning, and existential hopelessness fundamental to the play and the idea of *Trauerspiel* as a whole. Benjamin’s method

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12 Benjamin, *Origin of German Trauerspiel*, 137.
thus involves what Adorno called “micrological” analysis that zeroes in on apparently insignificant features that lie outside the normal course of experience.

But just because Benjamin’s methodology aims at overcoming concepts and aiming at the particular, doesn’t mean it is not also at aimed at something higher. The role of the philosophical writer is, Benjamin’s writes, between that of the artist who concerns himself with presentation and that of the scientist who aims at something above the purely phenomenal.¹³

As I suggested already, Benjamin thinks that something higher is unlocked through a constellation or mosaic of interpretations of the unique and extreme found in these ruins or fragments. This is the whole or idea toward which a configuration of fragments aims. The point then for the philosopher is not just to make insights into particular phenomena — insights that break apart traditional and cliched conceptual interpretations of those objects. But to organize those insights into some kind of whole that outlines an idea — whether it be the Trauerspiel or modernity itself, as was Benjamin’s goal in part in One-Way Street and more comprehensively in his unfinished Arcades Project. In so doing, Benjamin thinks the phenomena are redeemed. They are returned to the whole from which they have fallen.

3. The Idea on the Street

So how does One-Way Street aim to fulfill this conception of philosophical writing? The idea that Benjamin is attempting to construct — or at least evoke — out of the fragments that make up One-Way Street is modern subjectivity, specifically the contradictions in bourgeois individuality that he thinks are beginning to show and will continue to crack. As he put it in a

¹³ Ibid., 8.
fragment called “Fire Alarm,” the concept of “class war” distracts attention from the fact that “whether the bourgeoisie wins or loses the fight, it remains doomed by inner contradictions.”

The title *One-Way Street* hold at least two meanings for him. It evokes modern experience in straightforward way: urban, unidirectional, progressive — or at the very least moved inexorably forward, episodic, and disjointed. One thing comes after another without any necessary connections to be found. It also serves as an organizing analogy for the book itself. The book is a street, which he names in the dedication Asja Lacis street, after the Bolshevik actress he was involved in while writing it.

The fragments or feuilletons take their titles from parts of the urban environment one might see while walking down a street: “Filling Station,” “Theses Spaces for Rent,” “Stand-Up Beer Hall.” Each feuilleton is an occasion for reflections on disjointed aspects of architecture, recent history, mundane aspects of daily life, dreams, and so forth. The dual meaning of the title is important because part of Benjamin’s methodology involves blurring the lines between content and form. The manner of presentation — the assemblage of feuilletons — should cohere with what is being presented — the nature of modern subjectivity. This works in both directions: it’s a two-way street. While the form of the book reflects its content, its content also reflects its form. That is, in the individual analyses in each feuilleton frequently reflect on the modern form and purpose of writing, or, even more explicitly, on the position and role of the writer.

Although Benjamin’s reflections appear occasional and disjointed they nonetheless drive at the same idea. They are continually beginning again, but nonetheless trying to shed light on the same truth. Let me try to show this in action in a single fragment from the book, called

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“Construction Site,” which I will juxtapose with the book’s final fragment, “To the Planetarium.”

I’ll quote “Construction Site” in full:

> It is folly to brood pedantically over the production of objects—visual aids, toys, or books—that are supposed to be suitable for children. Since the Enlightenment this has been one of the mustiest speculations of the pedagogues. Their infatuation with psychology keeps them from perceiving that the world is full of the most unrivaled objects for children’s attention and use. And the most specific. For children are particularly fond of haunting any site where things are visibly being worked on. They are irresistibly drawn to the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one. The norms of this small world must be kept in mind if one wishes to create things specially for children, rather than let one’s adult activity, through its requisites and instruments, find its own way to them.\(^{15}\)

This feuilleton functions within the context of the whole book on a number of different levels.

First and most straightforwardly, it is a rumination on the changing experience of childhood in post-Enlightenment modernity. A focus on psychology leads to an intense focus on designing and building objects and environments specifically for children. But, given Benjamin’s interests in the rest of the book, we see that children are not special in this regard, but that modern technology is more generally involved in the creation of a new relationship between humankind and our environment. “In technology,” as Benjamin puts it in “To the Planetarium,” “a *physis* is being organized through which mankind’s contact with the cosmos take a new and different form from that which it had in nations and families.”\(^{16}\) But as the child’s experience shows, there is something wrong about the technical and psychological view assumed by the Enlightenment pedagogue. The attempt

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 95.
to provide the ideal experience for the child through technical calculation proves a failure. In a similar way, humankind’s attempts to use technology to master nature lead to war and destruction, as Benjamin details in “To the Planetarium.”

The better course, Benjamin writes, is to understand technology not as an attempt by man to master nature but to master “the relation between nature and man.” In the same way, he recommends that toy designers better understand the relationship between children and their environment. In the juxtaposition of these two fragments, I think, we get a sense of the promise of Benjamin’s project. Through the juxtaposition of literary reflection — rather than through rigorous logical or conceptual analysis — Benjamin attempts to evoke the idea or the truth, rather than capture or circumscribe it.

Finally, in Benjamin’s description of the child’s world, we also clearly see echoes of his own understanding of philosophical writing. Like the child he describes, Benjamin proposes to turn his gaze as a writer on things that are being worked on — and, in particular, on the detritus this work generates. Moreover, just as the child play’s with this detritus in order to create a world within this world, Benjamin proposes through his literary play or method to construct an image of the world within it — one that evokes significance that will otherwise pass by unnoticed.

This reflects his Baudelaire-inspired understanding of writing as something active that needs to try to give shape to modernity, instead of simply succumbing to it. As he puts it in the opening to One-Way Street, “Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.”

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17 Ibid., 94-95.
18 Ibid., 21.