

Theory Centre Course Proposal (2022-23)

Course Title: The Benjamin Constellation

Course Term: Winter 2023

Instructor's name & home dept: John Vanderheide, Dept of English and Cultural Studies, Huron

Rationale: The work of Walter Benjamin is at the core of Frankfurt School historical materialism and remains a crucial source for many writers of contemporary theory and criticism worldwide. This course provides a survey of Benjamin's thought as it evolved roughly between 1916-1940. Accompanying our readings of Benjamin's own work will be a chorus of Benjamin scholars and adaptors, contextualizing Benjamin's ideas historically and philosophically, not to mention intimating future adaptations of those ideas in a wide range of (inter)disciplines: art criticism, cultural anthropology, cultural studies and media studies included.

Course Description:

In a letter to a friend, Walter Benjamin once described his philosophical career as divided into two "cycles of production." As he describes them, the first concerned itself primarily with German arts and letters, culminating in his 1928 monograph on the 17th century Baroque theatre, *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. In the second, Benjamin shifted historical ground to the 19th century, focusing especially on French art and culture of the period, intending to culminate the cycle in a completed version of *The Arcades Project*. As invested in historical research as he was, and in these two particular centuries and epochs of European history especially, Benjamin consistently approached the past and its epochs never just in themselves, but always relationally to his own technologically and politically volatile present moment, determining what past and present might illuminate about one another when "arrested" together in the monad of a dialectical image. This insistence on relational thinking seems an invariant or constant feature across whatever "cycles of production," or "periods" (anarcho-messianic versus Marxist, etc.) may be said to mark his writings: a striking characteristic of the way Benjamin thought about most of the things that concerned him. For he appears to have been consistently unable to think—for example—history without theology, theology without politics, politics without art, art without technology, language without gesture, the tragic without the comic, experience without ecstasy, nor eternal transience without transient eternity. This course studies the constellation of theoretical and critical relations which Benjamin delineated across his career, and the ways in which contemporary theorists and critics are reading that constellation in relation to our own still all too fateful present, a century later and counting.

Schedule:

Week 1: Introduction to the course

Weeks 2-5: Writings from the first cycle of production (1916-1928)

Weeks 6-9: Writings from the second cycle of production (1928-1940)

Week 10: Cultural anthropology after Benjamin (Taussig, Tsing)

Week 11: Aesthetics after Benjamin (Ngai, North)

Weeks 12-13: Course conference

Tentative Readings for Weeks 2-5

Primary: “Two Poems by Friedrich Holderlin,” “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” “Fate and Character,” “On Perception,” “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”; “Theological-Political Fragment,” ‘Notes toward a work on the category of justice,’ “Critique of Violence,” “Capitalism as Religion,” *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (excerpts)

Secondary: Benjamin Commentaries by Judith Butler, Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, Peter Fenves, Werner Hamacher, Annika Thiem, and possible others

Supplementary texts: Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (excerpts); Paul Scheerbart, *Lesabendio* (excerpts), and possible others

Tentative Readings for Weeks 6-9

Primary: *One-Way Street* (excerpts), “Chaplin,” “Kafka,” “Communist Pedagogy,” “Theories of German Fascism,” “Surrealism,” “Doctrine of the Similar,” “On the Mimetic Faculty,” “Experience and Poverty,” “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” “The Storyteller,” “The Sociology of Language,” “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” “On Scheerbart,” “On the Concept of History,” *The Arcades Project* (excerpts)

Secondary: Benjamin commentaries by Susan Buck-Morss, David Ferris, Michael Jennings, Byung-Chul Han, and possible others

Supplementary Readings: Auguste Blanqui, *L'éternité par les astres*; Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, “Production/Reproduction”; possibly others

Tentative Readings for Week 10

Primary:

Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (excerpts)

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (excerpts)

Tentative Readings for Week 11

Primary:

Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick* (excerpts)

Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (excerpts)

Method of Evaluation:

Attendance: 5%

Weekly responses x 4: (5% each): 20%

End of term course conference presentation (7 pages or 15 minutes): 20%

Term paper (20-25 pages): 50%

Further details provided in completed syllabus