Walter Benjamin

Drawing courtesy of Doyle Saylor
Frankfurt School and Institute for Social Research

● The Institute for Social Research was affiliated with the University of Frankfurt.

● The Institute was created in 1923. Kurt Albert Gerlach was its first head.

● The goal of the school was theoretical innovation and unrestrained social research which opposed the current trend in German Universities.
The most significant members of this school of thought were: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and later Jurgen Habermas.

All of these men believed in Marx’s theory of Historical Materialism. They witnessed the beginning of communism and the rise of fascism. They were reconciling Marxist theory with the reality of what was happening in the world in the 1920’s and 30’s.

Their ideas came to be known as “Critical Theory.”
Critical Theory

- According to Max Horkheimer, critical theory seeks to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.” (Horkheimer, 1982)
- It tries to explain what’s wrong with society and provides a script with how to transform it.
Biography of Benjamin

- Born July 15, 1892 in Berlin to an upper middle class couple.
- Was sickly as a child and spent a lot of time perusing his father’s book collection.
- While attending a very progressive countercultural boarding school he met an influential teacher by the name of Gustav Wyneken, who advocated cultural revolution of society through its youth. Wyneken’s influence can be seen in Benjamin’s early essays.
- In 1912 Benjamin enrolled at the Royal Wilhelm Friedrich University in Berlin. There he was influenced by Kant and attended lectures with Martin Heidegger.
In 1914, WWI breaks out.

In 1917 he married Dora Pollack and they had a son a year later.

In 1919 he earned his PhD at the university of Berne, Switzerland, with his dissertation entitled “The concept of Criticism in German Romanticism.”

In 1923, the Institute for Social Research, affiliated with the University of Frankfurt, was created. Benjamin and Adorno met for the first time.

In 1926 he visited Moscow.

In 1928 his academic career was cut short by the rejection of his doctoral thesis by the University of Frankfurt.

In 1930 Walter and Dora get divorced.
In 1933 Benjamin left Germany to avoid the Nazis and settled in Paris. Members of the Institute fled Germany and eventually made their way to New York where they set up the Institute at Columbia University. They obtained a Visa for Benjamin but he was not ready to leave Europe, claiming he had more work to do there.

In 1939 Benjamin was picked up by the Nazis in Paris following their confiscation of his apartment and most of his library and manuscripts. He was sent to an internment camp. His health, which was never great, continued to decline. His friends in the Institute of Social Research were able to get him released from the camp.

After his release he planned to make his way to France through the Franco-Spanish border and from there emigrate to the United States.
On September 25th, 1940, Benjamin and two other traveling refugees arrived in Portbou, at the Spanish-Franco border, extremely exhausted after their trip across the Pyrenees. Because Benjamin had no exit visa from France, the guards at the border informed him his presence on Spanish soil was illegal and they would need to deport him back to France. This return to Nazi occupied France would mean deportation and death for Benjamin. Seeing how ill he was, they agreed to let him stay overnight with plans to deport him the following day. Feeling great despair about being returned to the Gestapo and his future, accompanied by his total exhaustion from the journey, Benjamin took an overdose of morphine.
• Walter Benjamin’s grave in Portbou, Spain
Benjamin’s Major Influences

- Gustav Wynekin, who was a teacher at the boarding school in Haubinda, a progressive counter-cultural institution, was interested in exploring educational theories regarding cultural revolution of society through its youth.
- Frankfurt School early members including Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse.
- Bertolt Brecht, a playwright on whose works Benjamin wrote some of his earliest and most important essays of critical theory in regard to theatre.
- Immanuel Kant’s philosophy. Benjamin is considered a neo-Kantian philosopher.
- Gerhard (Gershom) Scholem, eminent professor in Jewish mysticism who tried to persuade Benjamin to go to Palestine with him.
Walter Benjamin and Marxism

- Benjamin was described as “probably the most peculiar Marxist ever,” meaning he is not viewed as a classical traditional Marxist. He did not write about how revolutionary class consciousness would be obtained.
- Benjamin’s writing contain elements of Jewish esoteric and messianic thinking that cannot be assimilated to the Marxist-materialist world-view.
- As a Marxist he is interested in mass culture and in the way it is packaged and consumed by the masses.
Benjamin, Adorno & the Frankfurt School

● Benjamin and the Frankfurt School did not always see eye to eye.
● The Institute was not crazy about the theological elements in Benjamin’s thoughts and tried to influence him in a more secular direction. They also did not like his brand of Marxism. Benjamin was not a classic traditional Marxist.
● Since Benjamin was receiving a stipend from the Frankfurt School, Adorno encouraged him to change some of his essays to reflect more of a traditional Marxist view.
● Adorno did not like the influence that Brecht had over Benjamin. He felt Brecht was crude and overly optimistic.
● Adorno and Benjamin also had a falling out over music. Benjamin had an animosity towards music developed as a child. He once said that music needed words in order to have political content.
Benjamin’s Writings

- 1920’s-Literary criticism of Geothe & translations of Baudelaire
- 1921-”Critique of Violence”
- 1926-1927- Moscow Diary
- 1927-”Main Features of My First Impression of Hashish”
- 1927-Started The Arcades Project
- 1928-”One Way Street”
- 1929-Wrote a series of essays on Brecht’s plays & poetry
1929-Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia
• 1934 to 1935-"Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" - Considered his most influential essay.
• 1938-Revised *Berlin Childhood Around 1900* which he had written in 1932.
• 1939-"Some Motifs in Baudelaire"
• 1940 - Theses on the Philosophy of History
Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

- Works of art had been reproduced in the past by hand.
- Mechanical reproduction of art was a whole new ballgame. Graphic art became mechanically reproducible with the woodcut which was followed by lithography which was then surpassed by photography and then film.
Even the best reproduced art is lacking presence in time and space.
The unique existence of the work of art is substituted by a lot of copies. Today people can see hundreds of reproductions of an artwork without ever having seen the original.
The original work of art has an “aura” which is created through it’s time and place in history.
Benjamin defines ‘aura’ “as the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be.
The function of the earliest works of art were based in ritual and had cult value.

Through mechanical reproduction art loses its aura and its basis in ritual. It has the potential to become a political commodity.

With photography, authenticity is not applicable.

With photography and film, exhibition value replaces cult value.
- There are many differences between an original performance in a play than in a film.
- The actor in the play interacts with the audience. The actor’s performance is whole.
- In a film the actor interacts with the camera, therefore the audience interacts with the camera. The performance is captured by film in separate vignettes.
- Benjamin creates an analogy of a surgical operation, wherein the surgeon is like the cameraman and a magician is like a painter. The magician in his healing keeps a distance from the patient whereas the surgeon penetrates the patient’s body to heal.
The political aestheticization of film lies in the director’s ability to direct our eye and senses to a particular place and view.

The speed of film distracts our concentration. No sooner have we seen one image and it is replaced. Distraction is introduced as a mode of reception.

“Distraction as provided by art presents a covert control of the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important ones where it is able to mobilize the masses.”

The individual no longer contemplates the film but the reverse occurs.

Through film and its inherent technical properties perception has forever changed.
Leni Riefentsahl (right), Director of "Triumph Of The Will" with her mentor, Adolf Hitler
Epilogue

- In the epilogue Benjamin speaks more about the aestheticization of politics and its relation to Fascism and war. He ends by saying, “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.”
Implications of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions”

- Is the loss of the aura of the art (if that really occurs) such a bad thing if it means that more people have access to the art?
- Does the power of film to move the masses in a negative way outweigh the power to move them in a positive way?
- Who is to say what is a negative or positive direction?
- Can we truly be aware of when we are being manipulated through film and other cultural avenues?
- Who benefits from mass participation of culture? The common people or the government?
- How has art in the age of digital reproduction affected individuals and society?
- Who owns the information that is available on the Internet. Who can own something that can be infinitely copied-exactly, with no difference between original and copy? Does this matter?
- What is the meaning of life?