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Benjamin in Paris: Weak Messianism and Memories of the Oppressed

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Benjamin in Paris
Weak Messianism and Memories of the Oppressed

> "Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. The introductory poem of *Les Fleurs du mal* is addressed to these readers. Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points. What they prefer is sensual pleasure; they are familiar with the "spleen" which kills interest and receptiveness….the least rewarding type of audience."[1]

Why envisage readers at all? Why, if at all, difficult ones who prefer sensual pleasure? Put otherwise, why invest in the possibility that other humans might continue to have the willpower and concentration, the interest and receptiveness to read and recollect what I write? Why should I even care for those who have gone before me or those still to come? Imagining, as Benjamin did in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", that Baudelaire envisaged readers who would struggle with lyric poetry—if they took it up at all—leads me to imagine that Benjamin may have been just as compelled to envisage readers who would struggle with his work, most likely readers who have been or are being oppressed, readers for whom understanding essays, much less poetry, is unthinkable, unimaginable. What was at stake for Benjamin in imagining difficult readers? Why address them at all, challenging their desires, willpower and concentration?

Benjamin observed that Baudelaire expected to be read by the least indulgent of readers and nonetheless his poetry became canonical for 19th century modernism. Similarly, by the fairest of judgments, Benjamin's works were as little read in the second two fourths of the 20th as Baudelaire's in the last half of the 19th century, and yet, at the beginning of the 21st century Benjamin's writings seem destined to receive just as much if not greater attention than Baudelaire's. Indeed, Benjamin seemed acutely aware of the role his writing could play in how future readers go about dealing with their own relationship to past and future readers. Reflecting on such mediations in his unpublished collection of theses "On the Concept of History" Benjamin wrote:

> […] there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this.[2]

How should we understand an agreement and expectation of this nature? And why would Benjamin use the cryptic claim that every generation is "endowed with a *weak* messianic power"? Moreover, how does the past have a claim on what I do today and why should

[1] Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Belknap Press, 2003), 314.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte" in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften I* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977), 252.

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the claim be settled at all? Is settling with the past worth what it might cost me? Finally, how does being a historical materialist affect such expectations and claims?

For Benjamin, the problem became how to continue being theoretically critical, while not losing touch with a potential audience during his exile in Paris. He focused on the issue of accessibility and influence, concerns that we deal with in our struggle to grapple with the nexus of politics and communal aesthetics and the (non-) reading habits of the general populace. If no one could comprehend or was even willing to read his texts, what hope was there for any kind of social transformation? Almost irrationally, however, and despite the success of fascist movements in Germany, France and Italy, Benjamin continued to believe that the individual could create his own content and did not have to have content created for him. Indeed, the real source of creativity and of the prospect for creating one's own content, rather than having it dictated to us, is to create opportunities for "*unwilkurliche eingedenken*" (non-arbitrary occurrences of thinking) to occur; that is, for the exercise of "*memoire involuntaire*" as opposed to the intentional structuring of social relations through "*memoire voluntaire*". The latter necessarily takes form as the collectively dominated existence of the individual and is susceptible to the machinery of political tyranny, that is, susceptible to the forcible violation of will by another. This was the case in Germany at the end of the Weimar era, solidified by the lock-step march stipulated by the vitriolic, anti-Semitic rhetoric endemic to Nazi ideologues and popularized by filmmakers such as Leni Riefenstahl.[3]

Despite his loss of homeland, Benjamin still hoped for the renewal of the culture of his youth, a culture which, after all, provided him with a love for life and the socio-intellectual tools to criticize the political machine that disowned him. Countering his adherence to a neo-conservative Marxist socialism, Benjamin retained faith in the individual member of the proletariat, who becomes aware of the possibility to determine his own cultural content. His belief in the possibility of the individual member of the proletariat to become conscious of exploitation was essential for how Benjamin proposed to counter what Baudelaire claimed was the dominating sign of modernity: suicide. This only indicated the loss of hope for the future and the impotence to engage in the social reconstruction and redistribution that are at the core of Marxist ideology. However, classical Marxists disavow the possibility for individual class members to fully come to terms with their own conditions of exploitation and alienation on an individual basis. Instead, they counsel submission to communist solidarity. For a Benjaminian, this is merely the flip-side of totalitarian domination.

Towards the end of his life Benjamin points out time and again in his writings that suicide is the sign of modernity. It is significant because it is the only control left for the unfulfilled modern worker, oppressed and alienated by working conditions and an oppressed way of life that sucks the desire to continue living out of his soul. What causes Benjamin to make a judgment of this nature and what are the consequences for those of

[3] For an analysis of the role that Riefenstahl played as the leading propagandist for popularizing the Nazi image and Hitler's persona, see Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism" in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981; essay first published in 1974), 73-105. Of course, the definitive exposition of fascism and its cultural and political correlations is still Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1973, first published 1951 and 1948), especially "Antisemitism as an Outrage to Common Sense," 3-53.

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us still living under such conditions? To begin with, consider Benjamin's remarks about the connection of temporality and the criteria for distinguishing between a mechanical impersonality of historicism and the work of historians aware of the redemptive possibilities in their works of narration. Returning to the theses that he gathered in "On the Concept of History", he notes that:

> Historicisim contents itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history. But no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one. Thus, he establishes a conception of the present as now-time shot through with splinters of messianic time.[4]

Splinters of messianic time are shot through a conception of now-time (*Jetztzeit*), a term which Benjamin introduced earlier in his body of writing as a model of messianic time.[5] The retelling, recalling and recounting of historical events should not occur in terms of the victorious narration of fascist triumphs over the weak and disinherited, over those who continue to nourish their differences from the forces of homogenization and reproduction at work in the assembly lines, workshops and newspapers of the factory age. Rather, a narrative of 'now-time' shot through with splinters of 'messianic time' is characterized by a discomfort introduced into every age, inspired by those earlier generations, whose disparate, oppressed and forgotten voices, voices that are submerged in our social unconsciousness and material conditions, are heard once again—if heard at all—as so many dissatisfactions with the status quo. Those generations were, and are, dissatisfied with the world as it is and only by telling these can their suppressed hopes for the realization of an ideal that promises a better world be voiced anew. For Benjamin, not only conceiving but also forming a 'truly' revolutionary class can only begin by providing for occurrences of now-time that carry with them ways of redeeming the past, redeeming those dead who continue to lay claim to our sensibilities for what counts as tasks worthy of our consideration. For those who listen to and retell stories of the oppressed in a messianic spirit, happenings do occur as a standstill in time where a 'stand' is taken in the present *vis a vis* a specific past. Form where I stand with respect to the forgotten and oppressed I interact with the material traces redolent in *this* current event (*this* person, *this* thing) in such a way that I elicit an actual discomfort when physically suffering the splinters of now-time. This discomfort can be expressed in writing.

In his earlier work, Benjamin envisions this process of taking a stand as a kind of 'suffering engagement' by reading one's current social conditions in correspondence with an analysis of past events; readings that take place in such a way that the retellings of the past embed one more auratically in the workings of our present conditions. This is Benjamin's "*Verstecksleh're*"—a method of 'teaching' that I develop here using the language of dialectic immediacy and mediation and which takes written form by way of withholding one's personality, one's dominating subjectivity, for the sake of adopting

[4] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 397.
[5] Ibid, 396.

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a mode of presentation that is indirect. The indirection that is accomplished through writing is contrasted by Benjamin's contention that presenting ideas directly leads to their pragmatic appropriation by politicians for their own ideological agendas of domination and, in turn, fascist projects. To avoid the fascist consequences of reading our social conditions for the sake of direct intervention, one has to obscure one's intention, juggling the aesthetics of theology in the air, for example, as indirect modes to effect social transformation, a mode that I align with what Benjamin refers to as weak messianism.

However, using the *Verstecklehre* to understand Benjamin's concept of weak messianism raises questions of effectivity and ethicality, of aligning theory with concrete events happening on the ground. This was especially significant for someone like Benjamin, alone and in exile and running from the Nazis. As a historical materialist, Benjamin approached this problem by writing on specifically concrete issues such as the material conditions of the cities in which he lived or the social, political, and cultural relations of Europeans in general. He immersed himself in his material conditions by taking up the work of other authors immersed in similar topographies, such as Proust, or those from whom he elicited memories and fragmented stories of the cobblestones and boulevards of Paris and the barricades and revolutions with which the masses acted out their passions, such as Blanqui. Benjamin inspires his current and future readers not only by immersing himself in the materiality of others, but by also taking up the lost or overlooked threads of writing in the lives of forgotten authors. Exemplary of his critical approach are the very different reviews he wrote on Sternberger's *Panorama* and Béguin's *Ame romantique et le rêve*. The relentless unveiling and deconstruction of Sternberger is matched by the measure of critical assessment he provides in praising Bêguin's work.[6]

As any reader of Benjamin's writings can appreciate, as important as what he wrote and for whom he wrote is how he wrote. He used the aesthetic terms of theology as indirect modes of communication to parry the conformism he thought was contributing to mobilizing the masses in support of fascism. He wrote on the country and the city, maintaining that the cities had become places where the idyll of the country is crushed and has to be redeemed. Cities embody the loss of nature as the loss of aura, leading to his remarkable claim that "The moon and the stars are no longer worth mentioning."[7] Consider Benjamin's employment of a reverse kind of aesthetic deformity that uses theology as a ploy to arrest the inexorable march of historical progress. His story of the hunchback in the puppet, with which he begins his theses on the philosophy of history, stands for the selective use of religious heritage and theological language as attempts to transform the reading habits of a public that is no longer engaged in the political process, but which is inscribed in the illusions of the marketplace. These public masses pay to be entertained and thus willingly submit themselves to the manipulations of modes of communication and commodification; supported by their own desires for self-deception, they become distanced from ethically effective social engagement. Apparently, Benjamin thought that for aesthetic indirection to have direct socio-ethical implications the guise of theological language is required —at least as long as the messianism is weak and not

[6] Benjamin, "Review of Sternberger's Panorama" in *Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 145-158.

[7] Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" in *Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 28.

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strong. It is socially effective, since employing an indirect, weak form of messianism means that the reading audience has to think for itself, critically assessing rather than being dictated to and fed images and ideas designed to transform it into an uncritically obedient body politic. In other words, we read Benjamin in order to avoid the dangers of a fascist manipulation of aesthetics and learn how to assess and modify our speech-acts. Even more urgently now than before, in an age of the powerful social controls exercised by commercial broadcasting and the internet industry, do we need to read and hear the kinds of speech-acts and storytelling which challenge the deleterious effects of media forms that manipulate the masses intentionally and unethically. Such is the work of Benjamin's final major composition, "Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire."

In that work, Benjamin presents his readers with a series of images exploring resistance, revolution, the bohème and the flaneur as well as memorable depictions of the phenomena of the feuilliton, the ragpicker and the gambler. Benjamin begins with images of the more than 4,0000 barricades erected in Paris during the revolution, inviting us to imagine an act of resistance set in the context of assessments of those very barricades by other intellectual activists, such as Marx, Fourier, Hugo, and—especially—Baudelaire.[8] Remaining true to his socialist concerns, Benjamin included the plight of the working class in his topographical assessment, noting how the "workers who imbided that wine displayed their enjoyment—full of pride and defiance—as the only enjoyment granted them."[9] Benjamin's reference to the image of the rag-pickers is particularly stimulating, since they represent the pauperism of the New Industrial Society and its refusal to provide them with the opportunity for healthy lifestyles or rewarding work. Their proliferation incited Benjamin to raise the question: "Where does the limit of human misery lie?"[10] He raised that question, however, to establish a 'memorable' connection for us—his future readers—to the actual revolutionaries, who at least in part sympathized and identified with the rag-pickers with respect to their precarious future. In all strata of society, those with dreams are those engaged in shaking the very foundations of the society that exploits them and others. Whether shaking those foundations occurs directly or indirectly becomes the critical divide between whether the dialectic of exploitation recycles itself progressively or spirals into an ethically sensitive and transformative socio-political change.

Consider Benjamin's assessment of Baudelaire's peculiar way of expressing his concern for how penury and alcohol consumption drown one's misery were different for members of the exploited masses and the "cultural man of leisure." For the strident Marxists resorting to violence to propel their end-justified means the *modus operandi* to 'fix' the problem of exploitation was to force direct participation by members of the masses—clamoring for wine—into politics and revolution. They did so by bludgeoning them in their 'drunken' or 'drugged' state into an amorphous body conscious of its class identity and thus ready to be mobilized *en masse* for the material violence of class warfare. Baudelaire, by contrast, sought to influence the masses indirectly through culture, through poetry and prose and, like Benjamin, through the aesthetics of theology. Benjamin cites Baudelaire's theological poem "Cain and Abel" to highlight the difference between these

[8] Ibid, 6.
[9] Ibid, 7.
[10] Ibid, 8.

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two modes, reflecting on Baudelaire's poem as the kind of public speech-act that "turns the contest between the biblical brothers into one between eternally unreconcilable races."[11] This enables Benjamin to talk about Marxist class conflict, since the proletariat can be identified as those who are descended from the race of Cain, "those who possess no commodity but their labor power."[12] The poem is part of a cycle called "Revolte" that concludes with another theological poem, which in Lemaître's assessment requires Baudelaire to alternate between images of Satan as the "author of all evil" and "the great victim".[13] What interests Benjamin even more than superficial moral judgments is the question of "what impelled Baudelaire to give a radical theological form to his radical rejection of those in power."[14] Independently of both, Baudelaire seems to have used the image of Satan for equivalent 'class' associations: "To him, Satan spoke not only for the upper crust but for the lower classes as well." More importantly than the content of the image, we can begin to grasp to what extent images played a critical role in Benjamin's work by being more sensitive to how he responded to the level of Baudelaire's personal entrenchment in his own productions. This is evident in comments such as: "Satan is the real stake in the struggle which Baudelaire had to carry on with his own unbelief."[15] Thus, reading Benjamin sets parameters for determining the possible lineaments of our own topographies, with which we can assess the personal struggle going on in Baudelaire himself, a struggle he addressed in his public poetry by appealing to threads of thought derived from ancient theological narratives. However, that struggle would not be nearly so significant for us now, if it did not also provide us with topographical contours for socio-political interpretations.

Referring back to the story of Cain and Abel Benjamin focuses our attention on the conflict between country and city. The city is the place of rancor and false ideas, violence, boulevards, the marketplace, exploitation and oppression, whereas the country is idyllic, gentle, a forested and lush environment, where the stars and the moon can still be a source of wonder and conversation. At this point, the thread of "which audience an author has in mind" needs to be taken up again as well. This thread becomes necessary, since constituting one's audience is determined not only by what one says but how one says it. According to Benjamin, Baudelaire wrote not only for the oppressed masses from Benjamin's neo-communist perspective, that is, for the revolution, but also for the "higher voice" of the executors from the perspective of the theocracy, the divinely mandated king.[16] By contrast, Benjamin wrote for readers enthralled with the development of a popular press and thus already beginning to acquiesce to the formative pressure of capital investment and socio-economic changes. Mass demands for daily access to subscriptions helped form the monetary gateway to information and launch the advent of the advertisement industry. His conclusion was that: "It is virtually impossible to write

[11] Ibid, 9.

[12] Ibid, 10.

[13] Ibid. The reference from Benjamin is to Lemaître's *Les Contemporains* of 1895. A successful literary critic who also wrote in the genre of the feuilleton, given his frequent references to his work, Benjamin most certainly was aware that Lemaître also wrote a play called *Révoltée* in 1889, most likely inspired by Baudelaire's work.

[14] Ibid

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid, 12.

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a history of information separately from a history of the corruption of the press."[17] What becomes relevant in this judgment on corruption is that the press—journalism and mass media—remains directly influenced by capitalist interests, which use the burgeoning ad industry to sustain a mode of communication that minimizes critical discourse. This becomes ever more evident in our age of instant messaging and the explosion of internet commerce fueling contemporary forms of mass communication.[18]

The counterpart to the corruption of the press is the necessity for writers to enter into the dynamics of the market by selling their products, abandoning any Romantic illusion of a pure phenomenon entitled "art for art's sake."[19] However, the issue is not that simple since Benjamin notes how Baudelaire qualified his belief in writing for the market by choosing to write for the "least indulgent reader." On the one hand, Baudelaire was aware that there is no dispassionate perception when coming to the marketplace, implicitly questioning the validity of the so-called objective mode of engagement adopted from scientific models. What actually appears to be the case is that everyone relies on themselves to survive, to make a profit, to make a killing. Quoting Baudelaire, even literature has become "…primarily a matter of filling up lines."[20] However, Benjamin assigns a mixed function to Baudelaire's figure of the flâneur, who in his very mode of unhurried 'wandering' indicates that he desires to be at one with the crowd and yet remain objective and separate, allowing himself not to be subjected to the modern forces of commodification. Rather, his fundamental trait is that he attempts to submerge or drop the traces of his humanity within the very crowd and urban environment, which both delights and distracts him with curiosity or apathy, with interest or revulsion. This material engagement of the flâneur reveals how boulevards and arcades become the modern venue for exploring the relationship between exterior environment and interior psyche for those who live in cities and are alienated from nature. For Benjamin, the involvement of an individual with his environment is transformed, evidenced in the 19th century by the popular consumption of a series of published physiologies, which led to forming a media that nourished curiosity on a mass-scale and distracted readers from political engagement. Linked to the obscure science of phrenology, writers pandered to the popular belief that humans, like things, could be classified according to their external physical traits and thus botanized or categorized according to types. He canvassed various popular presses in order to indicate how they were not only subject to manipulation by economic, capitalist interests, but also by those wishing to disseminate their positive 'scientific' versions of social behavior and organization. Sowing seeds of racism and sexism involves the forms of typecasting still favored by journalists for mollifying the masses and selling their columns.[21]

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[17] Ibid, 13.

[18] Note examples of small-town presses being more conservative, such as the Sun News than those in LA or NYC.

[19] Which means giving up the image of the isolated, Romantic artist who is somehow politically disengaged and creates for the sake of creating—every product has a potential political purpose and how things enter into collections as possessions has social *and* political relevance.

[20] Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" in *Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 13.

[21] See for example the kind of racist journalese of Bill O'Reilley and Fox News broadcasters in general in the aftermath of the human and environmental disaster wreaked by hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in September 2005.

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Arguably even more complicated, however, are the relationships of highly educated and sensitive writers to their social environment. In order to explore this phenomenon, Benjamin analyzed Hugo and Baudelaire with respect to their particular relationship to the crowd. Hugo had a double life, either viewing the crowd as an object of contemplation with the big city taking shape as a convoluted natural-supernatural realm, much like a forest or animal kingdom, or as a surging ocean within which he could lose himself when in exile.[22] From the vantage point of the lonely, quiet life of contemplation, Hugo was truly at home in the spiritual world of his imagination, but it was a world that was peopled by meaningless apparitions. As Benjamin points out, the throng of spirits imagined by Hugo in the loneliness of his exile in England was transformed into the cohorts of his ideas and became his audience. He could imagine the acclaim he would receive from 'his' audience and, in fact, after his return to Paris "on his seventieth birthday, the population of the capital streamed toward his house on the avenue d'Elyau, the image of the wave surging against the cliffs was realized and the message of the spirit world was fulfilled."[23]

Baudelaire, on the other hand, became one with the crowd in his poetic rendering of the experience of spleen. Unlike the expectation—and fulfillment—of acclaim experienced by Hugo, Baudelaire was acutely conscious of his place in the crowd, as a ragpicker or flâneur. He was even more conscious of his failure, which was indeed borne out in his own lifetime, even though he was to become the seminal poet of modernity after his death. In Benjamin's judgment, and despite his success, Hugo could never fashion an enlivening connection between his ideas and the crowd. Hence, he sought heroes from among the masses, the prostitutes and ragpickers on the street. According to Benjamin Hugo's insight was that "the hero is the true subject of *modernité*. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernity."[24] For this reason, Benjamin points out how Baudelaire opposed Romanticism, especially Hugo's kind of Romanticism, and especially its expression in the novel.[25]

What was at stake for Benjamin, however, is the greater issue of the ultimate affirmation of life. Romantics transfigured renunciation and surrender, making those modes of living palatable and even preferable. Moderns, on the other hand, indeed those who were truly modern, transfigure passions and resolution in order to invigorate the daily struggle to earn the right to live meaningfully: "What the wage-earner achieves through his daily labors is no less impressive than what helped a gladiator win applause and fame in ancient times. This image is of the stuff of Baudelaire's best insights; it derives from his reflection about his own situation."[26] I am saddened by Benjamin's conclusion. However, "it is understandable if a person gets exhausted and takes refuge in death. Modernity must stand under this sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality inimical to this will. Such a suicide is not resignation but heroic passion."[27] Was

[22] Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" in *Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 35.

[23] Ibid, 38.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Of course, for Benjamin this meant that what was popularized with Hugo was a social mode of hoping for the possible heroic rise of the downtrodden to lead exemplary, bourgeois lives as in *Les Miserables*. Baudelaire would choose the prostitute and gambler as heroic 'anti-heros'.

[26] Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire" in *Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 44.

[27] Ibid, 45.

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Benjamin himself content with providing a ground to justify suicide, even as an ennobling passion? Pursuant to realizing that the color scheme of modernity was limited to black and white, did Baudelaire and Benjamin after him just give up the fight? What are the deeper structural tendencies in the work and living relations of our human communities that drive us to such inner negotiations and tragic negations? Should we even cultivate such heroic passion?

CONCLUSION

The essay on Baudelaire and the entirety of the citations accumulated and arranged in the *Arcades* project[28] were Benjamin's attempt to delineate the conditions established in 19th century Europe for his own writing in the early, splintered years of the 20th century, the period of *Jugendstil* or art noveau. His essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Reproducibility," however, was his parallel attempt to set forth the means to critique the processes of mass communication that have ultimately led to the gross injustices and the manipulation of human engagement in a modern world, in which political figures exploit economic forces. By setting forth this critical juggernaut, Benjamin may have hoped to inspire a rereading of the results that the technological reproducibility of art exercised both on its degenerative and fructifying possibilities.

And it is indeed the case that Benjamin showed concerned for the masses, but not in the way that Marx did, reducing the masses to the object of a manifesto to 'lead them by the nose' and accept solidarity for the sake of the revolution, a process which they could never understand. The most that they could understand was their suffering, and if they banded together they would attain power. However, they would always need an enlightened leader. Like Baudelaire, Benjamin wrote for the least indulgent of readers, but in his case that meant that he wrote for the unique and irreplaceable members of the proletariat with the conviction that they could understand their exploitation and alienation and could, each on his own, work for individual and collective redemption. They could do so, but only by understanding their own conditions through indirect means of communication, thereby coming to a better understanding as to what degree they were subject to the perils of distraction and manipulation by tyrannical ideologues or unconscionable capitalists. In the age of technological reproduction that distraction is controlled by popular media, such as journalism and film-making, to the degree that a "reception in distraction" of this nature finds its "true training ground in film." Even more than journalism, though, film has become the epitome of mass manipulation because of its shock effects. These make its 'cult value' recede into the background and encourage an evaluating attitude that requires little or no attention: "The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one."[29] As a follower of Benjamin one needs the kind of critical ethical and intellectual prowess that only weak messianism can provide, in order to resist the kinds of distraction that lead to the danger of fascism.

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[28] See Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, edited by Rolf Tiedermann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982). This complex work, unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime—and perhaps meant to remain so—has as its impractical goal the citing/sighting of all of the moments in history in their entirety.

[29] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" in *Walter Benjamin's Selected Writings, Volume 4*, 267.

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Messianism comes to bear for Benjamin, because it is the messianic figure for whom the masses yearn and whose coming signals the transformation of the socio-political order. Given those traditional notions, Benjamin finishes what many of his later readers have come to consider his masterpiece of social critique—"The Work of Art…" essay—by reflecting on war and the aesthetics of war, reflections which provide the indirect foundation for his later theses on the philosophy of history. Increasing proletarianization and the proliferation of the masses are two sides of the same process, and "Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations."[30] It seeks to have the masses express themselves, while not giving them any rights and keeping the property relations intact that the masses seek to redistribute. "*The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life*."[31] Fascism violates the masses with its *Führer* cult. Its counterpart can be seen in the violation of films and other visual media, corporate newspapers and entertaining news shows, pressed into serving the production of ritual values. These habit-forming values of a mindless mass only force consumers onto their material knees. However, "*All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war*. War, and only war, makes it possible to set a goal for mass movements on the grandest scale while preserving traditional property relations."[32] Those are the political terms and consequences of 'not' writing for the "least rewarding type of audience." That our contemporary forms of mass communication mobilize technological resources while maintaining the structures of unjust property relations corresponds to the transformations that can only be addressed in the language and ethical force of a messianic consciousness and critical approach to life. However, messianism needs to be weak, that is, the forms of communication need to be indirect and challenging, since direct forms of communicative manipulation lead to the exercise of political force or strong messianism, which is yet another name for fascism. Indeed, what fascism expects is an "artistic gratification of a sensory perception altered by technology….evidently the consummation of *l'art pour l'art*."[33] For humankind, once an object of contemplation for the gods has, with its self-alienation, "reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure."[34] We have reached the point where we enjoy killing ourselves and each other. How tragic! *Avec la memoire de Benjamin*, I again ask, why write?

[30] Ibid, 270.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

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