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978-0-521-86458-9 - The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin

David S. Ferris

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Walter Benjamin*

For students of modern criticism and theory, Walter Benjamin's writings have become essential reading. His analyses of photography, film, language, material culture, and the poet Charles Baudelaire, and his vast examination of the social, political, and historical significance of the Arcades of nineteenth-century Paris have left an enduring and important critical legacy. This volume examines in detail a substantial selection of his important critical writings on these topics from 1916 to 1940 and outlines his life in pre-war Germany, his association with the Frankfurt School, and the dissemination of his ideas and methodologies into a variety of academic disciplines since his death. David Ferris traces the development of Benjamin's key critical concepts and provides students with an accessible overview of the life, work, and thought of one of the twentieth century's most important literary and cultural critics.

David S. Ferris is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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“Images – my great, my primitive passion.”

Walter Benjamin

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Preface

To present the work of Walter Benjamin in the form of an introduction requires a willingness to face the challenge posed by a body of work recognized for its range and the difficulty of its concepts, as well as this critic's recursive and frequently elliptical writing style. But these are not the only reasons that an introduction to Benjamin is challenging. Another, potentially more important reason is given by Benjamin in a note he writes for himself in 1930–31:

Examine the sense in which “Outlines,” “Guides” and so on are touchstones for the state of a discipline. Show that they are the most demanding of all, and how clearly their phrasing betrays every half-measure.

In many respects, any introduction to Benjamin will now be a reflection of the state of the discipline since his work has found its way into so many corners of the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, an introduction makes demands that the professionalization of critical writing happily ignores. These demands increase greatly when the subject is Walter Benjamin. Faced with a critic who had the clear-sightedness to see his own work as “a contradictory and mobile whole,” the task of grasping the nature of that whole, its contradictions, its mobility, almost ensures that every phrase betrays a measure not yet achieved. Yet, there is some justice – of a Benjaminian kind – in such a betrayal. If an introduction has a story to tell, it should be such a story. Only then can its most important task be fulfilled: to point beyond itself while laying the paths that lead towards the challenges posed by Benjamin's work.

Today, foremost among these challenges is the sheer amount of material that has been made available by the collected editions of his writings and letters published in Germany. Recently, the publication in English of Benjamin's *Selected Writings* has provided access to the many additional texts, fragments, and notes that were only available in German. Despite the amount of this material, many of the works available before the appearance of the *Selected Writings* still claim the attention of an introduction since it is with these works that many students have their first experience of Benjamin. Accordingly, most

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of the works that make up the canon of Benjamin's *œuvre* are presented here. Within these works, emphasis has been placed on the writings that allow a sense of Benjamin's critical development to appear. Because of the desire to keep this series of introductions to a reasonable length, it was, unfortunately, not possible to present some works that might otherwise have been included, such as, for example, the essays "Unpacking My Library," "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," and "Problems in the Sociology of Language." Other works are mentioned only in passing whenever they have direct relevance to another topic or concept. Throughout, the organizing principle has emphasized those works that map the ways in which Benjamin's thinking evolves from the metaphysical tendencies of his university years through to the dialectical and materialist analyses of his last years. Almost everywhere, the mobility of this evolution is tempered by the contradictions it produced – contradictions that propelled much of Benjamin's best work even if many of them were to remain unresolved if not unresolvable.

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List of abbreviations

The following abbreviations and short titles refer to works listed below. In each case, the abbreviation will be followed by a page number (e.g. C, 21), or in the case of the German edition of Benjamin’s writings, by volume, part, and page number (e.g., GS 7.2, 532). On occasion, some of the translations used in this volume have been modified from the published versions. Full bibliographical information for the volumes listed below is included in the Guide to Further Reading.

AB	<i>Adorno and Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940</i>
AP	<i>The Arcades Project</i>
C	<i>The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1920–1940</i>
Chronicle	<i>A Berlin Chronicle</i>
Friendship	<i>Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship</i>
GB	<i>Gesammelte Briefe</i>
GS	<i>Gesammelte Schriften</i>
OGT	<i>Origin of the German Tragic Drama</i>
SW	<i>Selected Writings 1913–1940</i>