Perception and Experience in Modernity/
Wahrnehmung und Erfahrung in der Moderne:
Walter Benjamin Congress, Amsterdam, 24–26 July
1997

Report by Henning Teschke

The International Walter Benjamin Association (IWBA) was founded in Amsterdam in April 1995. In July 1997 Amsterdam played host to its first Benjamin Congress *Perception and Experience in Modernity/Wahrnehmung und Erfahrung in der Moderne*. The long delay was largely due to the unexpected death of Wil van Gerven, Assistant at the Institute of Comparative Literature at the University of Amsterdam, and the IWBA’s driving force. The IWBA is based in the Dutch capital where it intends to publish its bilingual yearbook *Benjamin Studies/Benjamin-Studien*. It is to organise a Benjamin congress at different venues at three-yearly intervals. The IWBA, open to anyone, ‘provides an international platform for two main activities: the study of the life and work of Walter Benjamin and cultural analysis and critique from the interdisciplinary and international perspective forged by Benjamin’s groundbreaking initiatives in the field of the humanities.’ (*Benjamin Bulletin*)

Organisational issues dominated part of the agenda of this constitutive meeting. The honorary members were chosen: Benjamin’s two great-granddaughters Mona Jean Helga Benjamin and Kim Yvon Ingrid Benjamin, as well as Benjamin’s former neighbour and friend from Ibiza, Jean Selz. The IWBA’s advisory board is composed of Giorgio Agamben (Paris/Venice), Willi Bolle (São Paulo), Susan Buck-Morss (Ithaca), Jeanne-Marie Gagnebin (São Paulo), Klaus Garber (Osnabrück), Rodolphe Gasché (Buffalo), Werner Hamacher (John-Hopkins-University), Miriam Hansen (Chicago), Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt/O.), Martin Jay (Berkeley), Burkhardt Lindner (Frankfurt/M.), Michael Löwy (Paris), Winfried Menninghaus (Berlin), Stéphane Mosès (Jerusalem) and Sigrid Weigel (Zürich). The general assembly elected Helga Geyer-Ryan, Anselm Haverkamp, Kiernan Ryan, Sigrid Weigel, and Irving Wohlfarth to its executive committee.

The turbulent elections to the executive committee reflected the political and theoretical divergences in the international debate around Benjamin during the past decade. Substantially, the left-progressive continuation of Benjamin’s work was confronted by Benjamin’s post-modernist incorporation. Controversies also surrounded discussion importance which should be accorded to the German contribution to Benjamin-interpretation over and against the non-German one. In view of the many participants as well as the ninety contributors from fourteen
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countries, presenting their papers in five parallel workshops, there was some unease expressed over the exclusive choice of English and German as official Congress languages and the language of the bilingual Benjamin Yearbook *Benjamin Studies/Benjamin-Studien*. For it was, after all, the Parisian sky under which the Arcades spanned.

If the significance of the theme *Perception and Experience in Modernity* is not so much dependent upon the terrain it covers, but rather upon its new theoretical insights, then there was precious little that was substantially new in the nine main papers which set out the intellectual parameters of the Congress. Perhaps this was too much to expect. To be sure, this does not mean that the debate which has raged for three decades over Benjamin's philosophy of history, his messianism, Marxism, linguistic mysticism, and aesthetics, is bereft of new nuances. But these concern only selected parts of his work, not the overall (re-)interpretation of his thinking. Still, the conflicts surrounding Benjamin do not belong to the past, as Helga Geyer-Ryan wrongly asserted at the opening of the Congress. Neither the philological problems of the *Edition* (Rolf Tiedemann versus Klaus Garber) and the largely unpublished reply-letters of the Benjamin-corrrespondence, nor the conflicts which characterise a by now hopelessly segmented and mutually opaque Benjamin ‘research-community’ were openly voiced and discussed. These more general problems aside, *Perception and Experience in Modernity* was a broad enough title to allow for a whole range of new and heterogeneous perspectives on Benjamin in the workshops, and to continue or initiate the inter-disciplinary dialogue within those fragmented sub-fields.

George Steiner inaugurated the series of main presentations with a panoramic overview of central motives in Benjamin's life and work, ranging from the impact of bourgeois enlightenment embodied in Goethe, to linguistic mysticism and the influence of Wyneken, Scholem, Buber, and Rosenzweig, to Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire and on surrealism, and finally to his tragic relationship with Marxism. According to Steiner, however, no concept in Benjamin can be really understood without taking note of his Jewish background and no real insight can be gained in ignorance of his religion. From here, Steiner established the link to the future application of Benjamin. The collapse of ‘really existing socialism’ imposes an ever-increasing urgency on Benjamin's utopian socialism. At this point, the Tikkun idea which is found in Jewish mysticism enters into conjunction with the historical tasks of the present: 'making good what's left of this smashed world'. In conclusion, Steiner pointed sardonically to the gulf which has opened up between Benjamin's lifelong exclusion from the academic world and the insatiable academic voracity to which Benjamin subsequently fell prey.

Samuel Weber's exposition revolved around the *citability of gesture*. The opposition between traditional and modern art is replicated and rejuvenated in the position taken by epic theatre over and against...