

Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Film

Daniel Mourenza



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To Jan Sieber (1982–2018), *in memoriam*

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Introduction

It was 24 January 1926. Walter Benjamin had been in Moscow for over a month before he managed to fulfil one of the objectives that had first motivated his trip to the new Soviet capital: to watch Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (Bronenosets Potemkin, 1925). Willy Haas, the editor of *Die literarische Welt* and a prominent film critic, had commissioned Benjamin to write a rejoinder to an article critical of *Battleship Potemkin*, written by the playwright and novelist Oscar A. H. Schmitz. Perhaps spurred on by Benjamin's trip to Moscow—which had been, in turn, partially financed by Martin Buber as an advance for the article he committed to write for *Die Kreatur*¹—Haas had planned to devote a special issue of *Die literarische Welt* to the culture of the 'New Russia', which would eventually include three of Benjamin's articles. Film was to play a central role in the issue. Haas would write a review of Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* (Mat, 1926) and Benjamin, apart from his reply to Schmitz, would write an overview of Soviet cinema. After a long wait, Benjamin spent five hours in a small screening room in the company of only a translator. The programme consisted of three films: *Mother*, *Battleship Potemkin*, and Yakov Protazanov's detective comedy *The Trial of the Three Million* (Protsess o tryokh millionakh, 1926). Benjamin was exhausted, leaving the room before the third film ended. The last film, a comic thriller based on a play by Italian author Umberto Notari, starred Igor Ilyinsky, an actor he had seen a few days prior, in a film he detested. Benjamin, in fact, had attempted to watch *Battleship Potemkin* weeks earlier, on 16 December. However, when he arrived in the room in which it was being screened, the film was entering the final act. Benjamin did not enjoy watching *Potemkin* for the second time. In his diary, he recorded that it had been 'an exhausting, unpleasant day in every respect', describing it as 'quite a chore sitting through that many films in succession with no musical accompaniment'.² Benjamin wrote his fierce critique of

1 Benjamin effectively wrote the long article 'Moskow', published in *Die Kreatur*, 2:1 (1927–1928), pp. 71–101; also published in the *Selected Writings* (SW2, pp. 22–46).

2 Benjamin, 'Moscow Diary', p. 103.

Schmitz's article two days later, on the evening of 26 January, when he was in decidedly better spirits. The result was a sarcastic text in which he portrays Schmitz as a bourgeois intellectual who is not able to discuss the film either from a cinematic or a political standpoint. Benjamin qualifies his critique as typically bourgeois and argues sarcastically (not without a somewhat masculinist tone) that, for the decadent bourgeoisie, 'art can venture as much as it likes into the most disreputable back alleys as long as it remains a good girl in politics and does not start dreaming of class warfare'.³ Although the article centres especially on criticizing the way that Schmitz formulates his critique, Benjamin—despite his experience—vehemently defends the film, especially its depiction of the collective and the space in which their battle for freedom takes place. He also opposes the portrayal of the collective in *Battleship Potemkin* and *Mother* to the monumental quality of the productions of the German film company UFA (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft).

Moscow remained a fortress for Benjamin. He adduced several reasons for his failure to penetrate the city: the inclement weather, his inability to understand Russian, and the necessity to rely on translations, not least the lack of affection. His relationship to Soviet film was similar. When, on 5 January, he went to the Arbat cinema on his own to see Dziga Vertov's *One-Sixth of the World* (*Shestaya chast mira*, 1926), a film that had premiered in Moscow only a few days earlier, Benjamin recognized that much of the film escaped him.⁴ It was only after discussing it with Bernhard Reich—Asja Lācis's partner and Benjamin's main guide to Russian culture—that he ventured to write about the film, becoming a central part of his panoramic piece of Soviet cinema, 'On the Present Situation of Russian Film' (1927). He even attempted to acquire some film stills to accompany the article, although, eventually, Pansky—an acquaintance of Reich who worked for the State film offices—discouraged him because 'the film was not to be mentioned abroad, its footage contained clips from foreign films, their precise provenance was not even clear, and complications were to be feared'.⁵ The critique of the film in the article is unfavourable. Benjamin cites it, alongside Soviet comedies, as an example of Russians's uncritical adoption of technology. He also argues that the film, in its attempt to show the vast regions of the

3 Ibid., 1106. A draft of the article was written in the last page of the manuscript of *Moscow Diary*, although it is considerably shorter than the final text. In the English version, translated by Richard Sieburth and edited by Gary Smith, this draft is included as a footnote.

4 Ibid., p. 69.

5 Ibid., p. 104.

USSR, ends up being a mere description of peoples and landscapes. Benjamin had, in short, a conflictive relationship with Soviet cinema. In his diary, for example, he wrote that ‘Russian film itself, apart from a few outstanding productions, is not all that good on the average’.⁶ To a contemporary film historian, Benjamin’s judgements may appear overblown, given that the films he had the opportunity to see are now regarded as Soviet cinema’s finest works. His critique of Ilyinsky is similarly considered as unfair.⁷ Despite this, Benjamin is often closely associated with Soviet film, and more generally with avant-garde cinema. If anything, Benjamin’s views on Soviet cinema show that he was never a film expert nor a connoisseur, and that he did not understand the formal differences between Soviet directors, then engaged in heated debates around the medium and its relation to the political. Benjamin’s understanding of montage, for example, was always basic, even pre-technological. For him, montage consisted of the entrance of an actor into the frame or even their very gestures, rather than the change of shot. It is for this reason that Chaplin became for Benjamin the model of film montage—understanding montage as a physicality enacted through gesture. Benjamin was probably unaware of, and could hardly have understood, the debates on film montage held among Soviet directors whose films he had managed to see: Eisenstein, Vertov, Pudovkin, and Lev Kuleshov.⁸

After the two articles on Soviet film, Benjamin’s second incursion into film criticism concerned Chaplin. On 8 February 1929, and again in *Die literarische Welt*, Benjamin published a review of *The Circus* (1928) under the title ‘Chaplin in Retrospect’. Chaplin had already appeared in the articles on Soviet cinema, in which Benjamin (somewhat misguidedly) lamented the shortage of Chaplin’s films imported into the Soviet Union. In the 1929 review, Benjamin defines *The Circus* as the product of a mature Chaplin. According to Benjamin, Chaplin was the first director to construct films based on a theme and its variations—in opposition to action and suspense—as Soviet cinema would later do. The old Chaplin, Benjamin says, has masterfully learnt to repeat his best motifs; as an example, Benjamin discusses the chase scene in the fairground marionette in *The Circus*. At the end of the review, Benjamin reflects—through an article by the surrealist author Philippe Soupault—on the revolutionary character of laughter, a

6 Ibid., p. 55.

7 See Hatherley, *The Chaplin Machine*, p. 72.

8 Benjamin saw Lev Kuleshov’s *By the Law* (Po zakonu, 1926) on 16 December. The film was screened after *Battleship Potemkin*, in the same session in which Benjamin tried to watch the film for the first time.

topic that reappears in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (1935–1939).⁹

Another of Benjamin's favourites, Mickey Mouse, made his appearance in 'Experience and Poverty' (1933) as the harbinger of a new, positive barbarism. Mickey Mouse had begun to attract Benjamin's attention after a conversation with Kurt Weill and Gustav Glück in 1931. Benjamin pencilled down ideas arising from this conversation in a note entitled 'Mickey Mouse'. The destructive energy of Mickey Mouse might have motivated Benjamin to write 'The Destructive Character'; this text was also influenced by Glück and was also written in 1931. Over the years, however, Benjamin acknowledged—through the persistence of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno—the problems of the mouse's destructive frenzy, and Benjamin's attraction to Mickey Mouse waned in parallel with other intellectuals. If, in the first two versions of the 'Work of Art' essay, Mickey Mouse appears alongside Chaplin, he would disappear from the third, 1939 version. These first short texts that Benjamin wrote about film would form the basis of the 'Work of Art' essay, his longest and arguably most important text on film, in addition to being one of his most studied and discussed essays. To his argument around Soviet film, Chaplin, and Mickey Mouse, Benjamin adds other films, such as *Ben-Hur: A Tale of Christ* (dir. Fred Niblo, 1925), *Cleopatra* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1934), *Napoleon* (dir. Abel Gance, 1927), and *Frederick the Great* (dir. Arzén von Cserépy, 1922–1923) as examples of historical films. Furthermore, he adds *Irrende Seelen* (dir. Carl Froelich, 1921) and *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928) to reflect on the performance and casting of the actors. In the third version, he also adds two overtly revolutionary films: *Misère au Borinage* (dir. Joris Ivens and Henri Storck, 1933) and, this time without any critique, Dziga Vertov's *Three Songs of Lenin* (Tri pesni o Lenine, 1934). Benjamin, however, does not give further analysis of these films and there remains suspicion as to whether he ever saw them. This is indeed a trope, but also a difficulty, in Benjamin's engagement with cinema: He barely analyses specific films, as if the films can speak for themselves.

We know that Benjamin was never an expert in film, but it remains disputed whether he regularly frequented the cinema. Thanks to biographical texts, we have a better—though scarce—idea of which films he most enjoyed. In his biography of Benjamin, Gershom Scholem mentions that, when they spent some time together in Paris in 1927, they went to the cinema often. He also mentions that Benjamin admired the actor Adolphe Menjou so

9 Hereafter, I will refer to this text as the 'Work of Art' essay and will specify the version if necessary.

much that he attended every film he appeared in.¹⁰ This interest is confirmed in a letter to Alfred Cohn from the same period, in which Benjamin refers to *A Social Celebrity* (dir. Malcolm St. Clair, 1926) and *Blonde or Brunette* (dir. Richard Rosson, 1927), both of which star Menjou.¹¹ Benjamin was definitely more inclined to popular cinema, both as a moviegoer and film critic, than he was to art film. We have a clearer picture of this thanks to his letters. In his correspondence with Gretel Adorno, with whom he was especially comfortable discussing popular films, Benjamin confessed that he found Katharine Hepburn 'superb' after he saw her for the first time in a film in the summer of 1938.¹² The film in question could have been *Bringing Up Baby* (dir. Howard Hawks, 1938) or *Stage Door* (dir. Gregory LaCava, 1937), a film in which she starred along with Adolphe Menjou.¹³ In an earlier letter, Benjamin describes Norman McLeod's 1933 film version of *Alice in Wonderland*, which he saw after reading Lewis Carroll's book, as 'an extraordinary affair'.¹⁴ He also confided that he enjoyed George Cukor's film *Dinner at Eight* (1933).¹⁵ To another friend, Kitty Marx-Steinschneider, Benjamin wrote that John Ford's *Lost Patrol* (1934) was 'not entirely unworthy' of the book on which it was based, *Death in the Desert*, by Philip Macdonald (1927).¹⁶ These are the films that, in one way or another, we are certain he saw and, therefore, should be considered as possible influences on his thought on the subject.

10 Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 162.

11 Letter to Alfred Cohn, 6 October 1927 (*Gesammelte Briefe*, III, p. 293).

12 Letter to Gretel Adorno, 20 July 1938 (*Gretel Adorno and Walter Benjamin: Correspondence 1930–1940*, p. 230).

13 Howard Eiland has suggested that the film might be either *Bringing Up Baby* or *Holiday* (dir. George Cukor, 1938) ('On Benjamin's Theory of Film'). The latter was released in the United States on 15 June 1938, but it was not shown in Europe before September of the same year, which makes that possibility unlikely. *Bringing Up Baby* was premiered on 18 February 1938 and arrived in Denmark on 11 April 1938. Since Benjamin was not in the capital, but in Svendborg, it is possible that the film was screened a few months later. Finally, *Stage Door* was a production from the previous year, released in the USA in September, but shown in Europe on varying dates. The problem with claiming this film as the one that Benjamin saw is that, according to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the film was not released in Denmark until 16 August 2018, after the date on Benjamin's letter. The other complication that arises from the release dates is that the film was shown in French cinemas from November 1937. Thus, if it is true that Benjamin went to see all the films with Menjou, it is unlikely that Benjamin had not yet seen the film and therefore Katharine Hepburn.

14 Letter to Gretel Adorno, after 9 January 1936 (*Gretel Adorno and Walter Benjamin: Correspondence 1930–1940*, p. 176).

15 *Ibid.*, c.3 March 1934, p. 91.

16 Letter to Kitty Marx-Steinschneider, 15 April 1936 (*The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, p. 526).

Benjamin's film writings are scattered across articles, essays, notes, and letters, and they appear, at first sight, to be nothing but a fragmentary collection of thoughts on different figures and subjects, offering occasionally contradictory statements about the film apparatus. As such, these texts have often been discredited for failing to provide a clear account of Benjamin's theories regarding film aesthetics. A closer analysis, however, will reveal that they must be understood in a specific, shared context, and in relation to other ongoing theoretical concerns. Gertrud Koch, for example, claimed that the 'Work of Art' essay was 'the sole long and coherent text which the author wrote [...] on the subject of the new medium of the masses—film'.¹⁷ I want to show that, while the other texts devoted entirely or partially to film may seem incoherent and fragmentary, they form part of a single project: to defend film as a privileged medium in which humans could rehearse a better relationship with technology. This is not to say that all these writings form a coherent whole, given that fractures, turning points, and inconsistencies appear throughout his writings. Nonetheless, threads run through each of these texts that show Benjamin's interest in film to be, not a subsidiary subject, but a pivotal phenomenon to theorize other concerns central in his oeuvre, such as the possibility of experience in modernity, the creation of a collective body, and the mediation (*qua* medium, not means) of technology. In other words, Benjamin's writings on film are reflections of much broader historical and political phenomena.

In terms of classification, it is clear that Benjamin's writings on film escape any coherent label. Some of his interventions in *Die literarische Welt* could be defined as film criticism, while the 'Work of Art' essay could be better described as 'cinema theory' or 'media theory', although the concept of 'film theory' could also apply to some of his reflections. Thomas Elsaesser, for example, discards the term 'film theory' and opts instead for 'theory of cinema', because, according to him, Benjamin's arguments about the discontinuity of the film process and its impact on the audience concern both aesthetic and historical considerations.¹⁸ Without dismissing Elsaesser's point, I have decided to define Benjamin's approach to film in this book as 'film aesthetics', or, more generally, the 'aesthetics of film'. I do not attempt to impose this term over other possible definitions. Indeed, Benjamin's 'film aesthetics' does not fit the traditional conception of this term, as it cannot be conceived within a traditional paradigm of aesthetics concerned with

17 Koch, 'Cosmos in Film: On the Concept of Space in Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" Essay', p. 205.

18 Elsaesser, 'Cinema: The Irresponsible Signifier or "The Gamble with History"', pp. 66–67.

the philosophical consideration of beauty; it should rather be considered as part of Benjamin's revaluation of aesthetics in the 'Work of Art' essay. In that text, Benjamin urges his readers to return to a radical conception of aesthetics, which alludes to perception and sensation, to understand the changes in reception and in the relationship between audience and artwork in film spectatorship. For him, cinema is consumed collectively and with the entire body; therefore, the traditional conception of aesthetics, which is based on the individual contemplation of the artwork with the sense of sight alone, was no longer appropriate. Benjamin's aesthetics of film are, in this way, first and foremost interested in the changes that the technologies of reproduction have caused, not only in perception, but in the sensorium through which humans experience the world. This conception of film aesthetics is, therefore, historical, if not anthropological. Unlike Benjamin, Adorno addresses his reflections on film precisely as questions about the 'aesthetics of film' and argues that any film aesthetics is 'inherently concerned with society'.¹⁹ For this reason, Adorno argues that, even if it focusses purely on its technological nature, film aesthetics must include a sociology of cinema. It is no accident that Benjamin's film aesthetics, which departs from questions of film technology, develops a theory particularly focussed on issues of reception and spectatorship. For that reason, I will argue that Benjamin's writings on cinema can be considered to have developed a different conception of the aesthetic; one that focusses on the historical transformation of the relationship between observer and artwork. In doing so, Benjamin attempts to locate this new art form historically, in the transformation of our aesthetic perception. For this purpose, he analyses the changes that film has caused in classical aesthetics through concepts such as play, as derived from Friedrich Schiller, and semblance, as borrowed from Goethe. Through the notion of 'film aesthetics', then, I will emphasize that Benjamin was not only concerned with issues related to the medium, but also with matters of representation, both in terms of content and form, fundamental to the new reconfiguration of space that film had initiated.

This book will argue that Benjamin's writings on film cannot be dissociated from broader themes in his oeuvre. As such, these writings become intertwined with the major themes of his work and shed new light on his thought. The aim of this book is to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding Benjamin's theories on film while, at the same time, illuminating the philosophical and political project that underlines them. I will argue that the theories that Benjamin developed regarding film are

19 Adorno, 'Transparencies on Film', p. 202.

related to a latent notion of ‘anthropological materialism’ and, particularly, the way in which technology shapes and transforms the relation of human beings to the world. Some scholars have previously pointed to the connection between Benjamin’s writings on film and the concept of ‘anthropological materialism’ as envisaged in his 1929 essay on surrealism. For example, Miriam Hansen considers Benjamin’s writings on film in the tradition of anthropological materialism in her essay ‘Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street’ (1999) and, more systematically, in ‘Room-for-Play: Benjamin’s Gamble with Cinema’ (2004). Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen have also analysed this term and noted its interplay with Benjamin’s writings on film, especially with regard to Mickey Mouse—even if they did not discuss the role of anthropological materialism in Benjamin’s film and media theory.²⁰ Nevertheless, the concept has not been given the prominence it deserves. In recent years, however, anthropological materialism has received renewed interest from a group of young scholars, namely Marc Berdet, Sami Khatib, and Jan Sieber, among others, who have grouped themselves under the umbrella of this term, which, as Berdet argues, is not only a category and a tradition, but also a process of sensibility and actuality.²¹ I would like to claim that my work also takes part in this project of restoring and rehabilitating this concept.

Through the concept of ‘anthropological materialism’, I will argue that Benjamin’s writings on film are, first and foremost, concerned with an alternative reception of technology and the creation and organization of a collective body (*Kollektivleib*). It is worth noting that Benjamin’s idea of a collective body is far from political notions that equate a nation, a state, or any other community with a body that affirms its own identity. Benjamin’s collective body can better be described as an ‘eccentric body’, as Léa Barbisan has called it, a body without a clear identity or ego, a body that is always elusive and does not hold a coherent meaning.²² Benjamin grounds the creation of this collective body through the concept of ‘innervation’. For Benjamin, cinema acts as an exemplary space in which human beings can, through a rush of energy that regroups the apperceptions of the spectators, collectively

20 See Bolz and Van Reijen, ‘Anthropological Materialism’ and ‘Media Aesthetics’, in their book *Walter Benjamin*, pp. 55–69 and pp. 71–77.

21 ‘Anthropological Materialism’ is a project launched by an international and multidisciplinary research network, which seeks to promote new analyses of the ‘world actuality’ through the lens of this hitherto neglected paradigm (see Marc Berdet, ‘Seven Short Temporary Statements on Anthropological Materialism’).

22 See Barbisan, ‘Eccentric Bodies. From Phenomenology to Marxism: Walter Benjamin’s Reflections on Embodiment’.

adapt a non-instrumental—and, therefore, non-exploitative—technology onto their bodies, while simultaneously shaping a collective body. In the late Benjamin of ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (1940), the conversion of energy into the somatic characteristic of ‘innervation’ is discussed in relation to Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921), but, in earlier texts, it is addressed as a transference of energy between the imagination—or that which is unreachable—and the body, associated in most cases with the child.²³ Among other sources of energy, Benjamin argues that technology can provide the necessary energy to bring this collective body under control. When writing about the reception of technology by society, and film in particular, Benjamin often uses a vocabulary closely related to energy and the nervous system. Society is, as such, regarded in physiological terms as a body that receives its energy through technology. Concepts such as innervation, shock, and stimulation are mobilized to reflect on this relationship, as well as on the configurations of experience that technology makes possible. In fact, this vocabulary relating to energy and its effects on the body was very common in the writings about film in the 1910s and 1920s. Cinema was seen by many critics as a nervous stimulation of the senses, and words such as thrill, shock, and astonishment—which are later used by Benjamin—were commonly used in the film criticism of the time.

The purpose of this book is manifold. It aims to shed new light on the scholarship on Benjamin by exploring in depth the role of technology and the human body in his oeuvre and, especially, his concept of ‘anthropological materialism’. More specifically, the book attempts to contribute to the existing, though short, scholarship on Benjamin and cinema, which has already been explored by scholars such as Esther Leslie,²⁴ Howard Eiland,²⁵ and, especially, Miriam Hansen, to whom this book is—as could not be otherwise—profoundly indebted. To date, the most thorough study of Benjamin’s writings on film is her *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, published posthumously in 2011.

23 For example, in the practice of children in ‘Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theater’, SW2, pp. 201–206, and in the figure of the child stretching the hands to grasp the moon as if it were the moon, in ‘Work of Art’ (second version), SW3, n124, and ‘A Different Utopian Will’, SW3, p. 135.

24 See ‘Playspaces of Anthropological Materialist Pedagogy: Film, Radio, Toys’, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, a book in which Benjamin is a central figure; and her seminal *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, more concerned with technology; but in which film plays an important role.

25 Eiland has attempted to give a succinct account of Benjamin’s engagement with film for the book *The Promise of Cinema* in ‘On Benjamin’s Theory of Film’.

This book collects her work, not only on Benjamin, but also on Kracauer and Adorno over the course of her career.²⁶ *Cinema and Experience* can therefore be conceived as the culmination of Hansen's work on Benjamin, which occupied the last 25 years of her life. Sadly, Miriam Hansen passed away in February 2011 at the age of 61, when this book was only in an embryonic form, and I was devouring her articles and books in my postgraduate office at the University of Leeds. She would never see her book published, which appeared only a few months after her death, and the great reverberations it had on the academic fields of Film Studies and Critical Theory. This book builds on her groundbreaking research and on some of her most important findings, such as the connection between Benjamin's 'anthropological materialism' and his writings on film, the centrality of the concept of innervation in his theories around technology, and Benjamin's enlarged conception of aura beyond an aesthetic category, among other such ideas. This book also attempts to expand some ideas that Hansen suggested but left underdeveloped. For example, I will address Benjamin's interest in Chaplin in Chapter 4 as a rehabilitation of the allegorical in modernity, as Hansen implied in *Cinema and Experience* (curiously in the part of the book devoted to Kracauer's Weimar writings).²⁷ I will also contrast Benjamin's theorization of Mickey Mouse with post-humanism, as Hansen succinctly hinted in her book and several authors after her, including myself, have hitherto explored.²⁸ Departing from Hansen's scholarship, this book attempts to offer a more comprehensive and exhaustive reading of Benjamin's engagement with film aesthetics. For that reason, apart from providing a reading of Benjamin's film writings informed by the concepts of 'anthropological materialism' and 'innervation', I will pay more attention to the films, directors, and actors with which—though sparsely—Benjamin engaged.

This book also attempts to contribute to Film Studies by giving a comprehensive account of Benjamin's film writings and according him a position within the film theory and film criticism of his time. In fact, the recent wave of interest in Benjamin from Film Studies has allowed Benjamin to enter the canon of German classical film theory, a space from which he

26 These articles are: 'Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: "The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology"', *New German Critique*, 40 (1987); 'Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92:1 (1993); 'Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street', *Critical Inquiry*, 25:2 (1999); 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema', *October*, 109 (2004); and 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry*, 34 (2008). The chapters devoted to Benjamin in *Cinema and Experience* (Chapters 3 to 7) are revised and reworked versions of those articles.

27 Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, pp. 47–48.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

was previously excluded. For example, in Sabine Hake's 1993 monograph on German film criticism before National Socialism, *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany, 1907–1933*, Benjamin only appears in comparison with Siegfried Kracauer, since both theorized the urban space, its rhythms, and the visual pleasures that drive modern experience. In the recent anthology of film criticism from Germany and Austria, *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory 1907–1933* (2016), edited by Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan, Benjamin is given a much more central role. In the Introduction, the editors present him as one of the leading figures in film criticism, together with Rudolf Arnheim, Béla Balázs, Bertolt Brecht, Lotte Eisner, Siegfried Kracauer, and Hans Richter. However, only three articles by Benjamin, 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz', 'Chaplin in Retrospect' and 'Mickey Mouse', are reprinted in this volume. In fairness, Benjamin's work that can be catalogued as film criticism is considerably smaller when compared with those cited above, particularly Arnheim, Balázs, Eisner, and Kracauer, or with film critics such as Herbert Ihering, Kurt Tucholsky, and Willy Haas, who were much more prolific. The reason why the editors of this anthology grant Benjamin such a relevance today can perhaps be explained by the overall perspective of the volume: His work is not only concerned with what cinema is, that is, its own medium's specific properties, but with what cinema '*can be or ought to be*'.²⁹ Indeed, Benjamin's film writings occupy this interstitial space between what film could offer and the specific—and many times limiting—uses of film. Perhaps for this reason, and despite being written over 80 years ago, Benjamin's theories still speak to present-day readers who are interested in the ever-changing landscape of visual media. Furthermore, as this book will advance, Benjamin's 'promise of cinema' is also a 'promise of technology'. For him, technology bears within it a key to happiness (*Glück*). If humans manage to use technology without an instrumentalist and ultimately exploitative logic, Benjamin thought, technology will offer humanity all the potentials and dreams that humans have bestowed upon it. Cinema was, for Benjamin, a paradigmatic space to implement this relationship of interplay with technology, given that film forces the audience to confront technology in a playful way, avoiding the traumatic rapport bestowed by machines on an everyday basis. The cinemagoer could be empowered by the same dreams that the collective might entrust to technology—a technology that, in workplaces, in war, and even in the modern cityscape, had seemed to revolt against them.

29 Kaes, Baer, and Cowan, 'Introduction', in *The Promise of Film*, p. 1; from a quote by Rudolf Arnheim, 'Preface to the 1957 Edition', in *Film as Art* (emphasis added by the editors).

It is worth noting, though, that Benjamin always uses the word *Technik*, which means both technique and technology, and covers both the material hardware of machines and the social and political relations derived from them, instead of *Technologie*, which bears connotations of a rational process.³⁰ *Technik* is thus the space in which social relations, as well as the relationship between humans and nature, are played out. This conception, as Jan Sieber reminds us, cannot be understood as we usually understand technology, in the sense that it refers neither to a particular technological system nor to the sum of the technologies available in a given historical time.³¹ Benjamin's conception of technology, as I will develop in Chapter 1, is rather non-instrumental, whereas, at the same time, it discloses a practical relationship with the world. In short, Benjamin's *Technik* does not necessarily respond to our usual conception of technology. For that reason, other scholars have preferred to refer to it in its German original *Technik*, such as Esther Leslie, or as 'technique', like Sieber. Unlike them, in this book, I will use the word 'technology' to facilitate the reading—unless I want to stress its double meaning, in which case I will use the original German. The reader, however, should bear in mind that, every time I speak about technology in relation to Benjamin, I am referring to the term *Technik* with all its connotations.

The aim of this book is, in short, to provide a framework for understanding Benjamin's film aesthetics through the contextualization of this aspect of his thought within his wider oeuvre. To this end, I will devote a chapter to contextualize Benjamin's film writings within particular themes and arguments in his oeuvre. In the following chapters, I will assess his writings on particular films, actors, and characters against the framework presented in the first chapter. Chapter 1 will thus introduce the concept of 'anthropological materialism' and will trace it from some early texts concerned with the body, such as 'Outline of the Psychophysical Problem' (c.1922–1923), to *One Way Street* (1928) and 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929)—in which Benjamin defines the concept for the first time—to *The Arcades Project* (1927–1940) and the 'Work of Art' essay. I will argue that some concepts that are central to his writings on film, such as 'collective body', 'second technology', 'innervation', and 'second nature', should be understood in relation to Benjamin's particular conception of the body. Through these terms, I will analyse the impact of technology upon the human body and the changes in sensorial experience caused by

30 For a more detailed discussion of the term *Technik*, see Esther Leslie's preface to her *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, especially pages xi–xii.

31 Sieber, 'Técnica', p. 209.

the arrival of film. I will argue that, for Benjamin, technology, by changing the human sensorium, also transformed the relationship between observer and artwork, subject and object. This transformation will be considered, on the one hand, through the concept of the 'optical unconscious' and, on the other, through the reformulation of the realm of aesthetics as *aisthēsis*, which Benjamin developed in the 'Work of Art' essay.

Chapter 2 focusses on Benjamin's writings on Soviet film. In this chapter, I analyse the two articles that Benjamin wrote on this topic in 1927 after his stay in Moscow. I will try to understand these early articles on film in connection with later texts such as 'The Author as Producer' (1934) and the 'Work of Art' essay. I will argue that these two articles anticipate many themes that are more thoroughly developed in subsequent texts concerned with film and the politicization of art. This chapter will also discuss Benjamin's insights about the use and conception of technology in the Soviet Union. Finally, I will address the question of Benjamin's call for the politicization of aesthetics with regard to the different political groupings in the Soviet art scene through an account of his position in these debates, as well as his position on Soviet politics more generally.

Chapter 3 deals with German cinema. Although Benjamin did not write extensively about German film, I will try to answer some important questions that arise from his texts on technology and, more specifically, on technological reproducibility. Benjamin discerned a failed reception of technology in Germany after the First World War. For that reason, I will analyse the consequences of such an adoption of technology through his polemics against Ernst Jünger and thereby assess the extent to which this bungled reception had an impact on German cinema. Drawing the theoretical framework from Benjamin's remarks on the masses, I will analyse the film *Metropolis* (dir. Fritz Lang, 1927) as an example of the 'architectonic quality' that Benjamin detected in UFA productions during the Weimar Republic.³² I will also analyse the films by Leni Riefenstahl as an illustration of the corrupted representation of the masses employed by the National Socialists. Finally, I will interpret the aestheticization of politics promoted by fascism from the point of view of Benjamin's reconfiguration of aesthetics and the relationship between the historically constructed human nature and technology. I will argue that the aestheticization of politics demanded by Marinetti responded to a traditional conception of aesthetics that had been invalidated by the same technology through which he was to perceive a new form of beauty.

32 Benjamin, 'Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz', SW2, p. 18.

Chapter 4 analyses Charlie Chaplin in the context of a project to rehabilitate allegory in the 20th century. Chaplin will be evaluated in connection with the two other figures who form part of the same project: Kafka and Brecht. Benjamin approached each of these figures through the same concept of *Gestus* and the possibility of representing the alienating experience of modernity in a technologically saturated society. Benjamin discerned in film the prospect of undoing the numbing of the senses, which had become deadened as a consequence of the shock experience of modern life. This chapter will analyse Chaplin as a paradigmatic cinematic figure to counteract the alienation of human beings in modernity through his *gestic* and allegorical performance. As this chapter will argue, Chaplin was, for Benjamin, able to mimic the fragmentary experience of modern human beings through the very structure of the film medium, exploiting the '*productive use of the human being's self-alienation*' that Benjamin assigned to film.³³ Brecht and Kafka will provide clues to understand better the qualities that Benjamin so much appreciated in Chaplin.

Chapter 5 focusses on Mickey Mouse. I will address this popular icon as a programmatic companion for Benjamin in his critique of humanism in the period of the 'destructive character'. Through this, I am able to argue that the theoretical project of this later period was inherently associated with the anthropological-materialist programme of innervation in the technological organs of the collective, which had cinema at its heart. Benjamin, in fact, demands that this process of collective and technological innervation must be carried out by the *Unmensch* (inhuman) and the barbarian, of which Mickey Mouse was an exemplary exponent. For this reason, Benjamin's fragments on Mickey Mouse will be read in conjunction with texts such as 'The Destructive Character' (1931), 'Karl Kraus' (1931), and 'Experience and Poverty' (1933). Mickey Mouse appears, thus, as an example of the new, positive concept of barbarism that Benjamin develops in a period impoverished of experience and culture in general. Far from lamenting this loss, Benjamin adopts Mickey Mouse as a model for the incorporation of technology into the human body.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I will evaluate to what extent Benjamin's film aesthetics are suitable for analysing other films, apart from those considered in this book. Many scholars have argued that Benjamin's theses on film were directed first and foremost to early cinema and, therefore, cannot be applied to subsequent films and traditions. I will claim that, nonetheless, Benjamin's theories developed in and around his texts on

33 Benjamin, 'Work of Art' (second version), SW3, p. 113 (italics in the original).

film can be especially relevant for some theoretical questions arising today in relation to the adaptation of technology to the human body and to the tactility of new media. Through each of these chapters, I will thoroughly explore all the texts that Benjamin devoted to film in order to situate them within the continuing projects and fractures in his oeuvre. I also aim to provide a comprehensive framework from which Benjamin's film writings can better be understood and contextualized around film theory at large. It is my hope that this book will inspire new approaches to Benjamin's oeuvre while, at the same time, stimulating further research that takes his film aesthetics as point of departure for exploring more contemporary trends in Film Studies.

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