

Benjamin and Adorno on Art and Art Criticism

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Critique of Art

Thijs Lijster

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements			
Ał	bbreviations	9	
In	ntroduction: Critique of Art	11	
1.	J 1	19	
	1.1 Introduction	19	
	1.2 The birth of autonomy	24	
	1.3 The artist in the marketplace	31	
	1.4 Art versus society	50	
	1.5 Conclusion	65	
2.	Ends of Art	71	
	2.1 Introduction	71	
	2.2 Annihilation of semblance: Baroque allegory	72	
	2.3 Allegory and commodity	81	
	2.4 Proliferation of the aesthetic: technological reproducil	bility 87	
	2.5 Adorno's dialectic of semblance	96	
	2.6 Culture industry: the social liquidation of art	98	
	2.7 Modernism: self-critique of semblance	107	
	2.8 Conclusion	119	
	Excursus I – The (N)everending Story	123	
	Hegel and the beginning of the end	124	
	Danto's post-historical pluralism	129	
	Vattimo's weak reality	136	
	Conclusion	142	
3.	Experience, History, and Art	147	
0	3.1 Introduction	147	
	3.2 Benjamin's concept of experience	148	
	3.3 Experience and history	158	
	3.4 Art history and monadology	169	
	3.5 Adorno: experience and mimesis	177	
	3.6 Natural history	189	

	3.7	The tendency of the material and the crystallization of the	
		monad	194
	3.8	Conclusion	199
Ex	curs	us II – Base and Superstructure Reconsidered	207
	Stru	uggling with a metaphor	208
	A fa	rewell to Marx	214
	A p	arallax view on historical materialism	218
	Cor	nclusion	225
4.	The	Art of Critique	229
	4.1	Introduction	229
		Benjamin's reading of the early German Romantics	230
		Revolutionary criticism	236
		An exemplary piece of criticism: Benjamin's Goethe essay	250
		Adorno's immanent criticism	259
		The necessity, and impossibility, of criticism	267
		Adorno's Mahler	277
	4.8	Conclusion	286
Excursus III – Where is the Critic?		293	
		e and fall of the critic	294
		y criticism?	302
		critic as intellectual	306
	Cor	nclusion	311
Conclusion			
	'A d	istance, however close'	313
	The	'actuality' of Benjamin and Adorno	318
	Cri	tical models	322
	Pos	t-Fordism and the new spirit of capitalism	328
	Bec	oming life versus resistance	333
Ap	pen	dix – Notes on a Camp	339
Bibliography			351
In	dex		363

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Der arme Schlucker, der mit leerem Magen über den Büchern sitzt, wird erst durch ein Werk, das die Menschen aufsehen läßt, zu erweisen haben, daß er etwas anderes ist als ein Müßigganger.

– Walter Benjamin

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Abbreviations

ANS

References to the writings of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno are given first to the English translations (if available) and then to the German original. Where no English translation was available, translations are my own. With regard to the German original, roman numerals refer to Walter Benjamin (1974-1989) *Gesammelte Schriften (I-VII)*, edited by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp); Arabic numbers refer to Theodor W. Adorno (1973-1986) *Gesammelte Schriften (1-20)*, edited by G. Adorno, S. Buck-Morss, and R. Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp). For references to German texts not included in the *Gesammelte Schriften* and English translations, I have used the following abbreviations:

Theodor W. Adorno Nachaelassene Schriften, published

ANS	Theodor w. Adorno wachgelassene schrijten, published
	by the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv. Frankfurt am Main:
	Suhrkamp.
ABB	Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin (1994)
	Briefwechsel 1928-1940, edited by H. Lonitz. Frankfurt
	am Main: Suhrkamp.
ABC	Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin (1999) The
	Complete Correspondence 1928-1940, translated by N.
	Walker. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
AP	Walter Benjamin (1999) The Arcades Project, translated
	by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin. Cambridge MA: The
	Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
AT	Theodor W. Adorno (1997) Aesthetic Theory, translated
	by R. Hullot-Kentor. London: Continuum.
BB	Walter Benjamin (1966) Briefe (1-2), edited by G.
	Scholem and Th. W. Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp).
CI	Theodor W. Adorno (1991) The Culture Industry, edited
	by J. M. Bernstein. New York: Routledge.
CM	Theodor W. Adorno (1998) Critical Models, translated
	by H. W. Pickford. New York: Columbia University Press.
CWB	Walter Benjamin (1994) The Correspondence of Walter
	Benjamin, translated by M. R. Jabobson and E. M.
	Jacobson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
DE	Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002)
	$Dialectic\ of\ Enlight enment.\ Philosophical\ Fragments,$
	translated by E. Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

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- EM Theodor W. Adorno (2002) *Essays on Music*, edited by R. Leppert. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- HTS Theodor W. Adorno (1993) *Hegel. Three Studies*, translated by S. Weber Nicholsen Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- INH Theodor W. Adorno (2006) 'The Idea of Natural History', translated by R. Hullot-Kentor. In: R. Hullot-Kentor (2006) *Things Beyond Resemblance. Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno.* New York: Columbia University Press. 252-269.
- ISM Theodor W. Adorno (1976) *Introduction to the Sociology* of Music, translated by E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury Press.
- ISW Theodor W. Adorno (1971) *In Search of Wagner*, translated by R. Livingstone. London: Verso.
- M Theodor W. Adorno (1992) *Mahler. A Musical Physiog-nomy*, translated by E. Jephcott. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MM Theodor W. Adorno (1974) *Minima Moralia. Reflections* on a Damaged Life, translated by E. Jephcott. London: Verso.
- ND Theodor W. Adorno (1963) *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton. London: Continuum.
- NL Theodor W. Adorno (1991-92) *Notes to Literature* (1-2), translated by S. Weber Nicholsen. New York: Columbia University Press.
- O Walter Benjamin (1977) *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by J. Osborne. London: NLB.
- P Theodor W. Adorno (1981) *Prisms*, translated by S. and S. Weber. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- PNM Theodor W. Adorno (2006) *Philosophy of New Music*, translated by R. Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- QF Theodor W. Adorno (1992) *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays* on Modern Music, translated by R. Livingstone. London: Verso.
- SW Walter Benjamin (1996-2003), *Selected Writings* (1-4), edited by M. Jennings et al., translated by E. Jephcott et al. Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Introduction: Critique of Art

Digressions, incontestably, are the sun-shine; – they are the life, the soul of reading; – take them out of this book, for instance; – you might as well take the book along with them.

– Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman

When, soon after the financial crisis of 2008, several European governments announced plans to cut budgets for art and culture, a heated public debate erupted. The opinion pages in newspapers, and blogs, overflowed with comments from all kinds of people – everyone from representatives of the cultural sector (such as curators, actors, critics and so on) to philosophers, and from politicians to 'the man in the street' - arguing for, or against, the need for art in society. All sorts of demonstrations were organized against the budget cuts, for instance in Italy, Hungary, and the Netherlands. Opponents of the cuts had it that art promotes civilization and solidarity, or brings us into contact with something higher, or with ourselves; that it is a mirror of society, or simply part of our tradition, and for all these reasons deserves government support. Cutting subsidies was considered to be nothing other than a one-way ticket to barbarism. Meanwhile, supporters of the cuts asked why taxpayers should support the extravagance or 'hobbies' of others, or should promote works of art that the general public considered incomprehensible, obscure, or downright banal. Atonal music and avant-garde works such as Duchamp's urinal often functioned as whipping-boys for their arguments.

What was most striking in this public discussion was how difficult it seemed to be to come up with decisive arguments about why art mattered. The autonomy of art, which was dearly won in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, now presented itself as a problem: artists and art enthusiasts seemed unable to provide a *raison d'être* for what, to them, was evidently valuable. Thus, they unwillingly confirmed the opening lines of Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970): 'It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist' (AT, 1; 7, 9). Adorno was pointing up a crisis in art and aesthetics – a crisis one might describe, following art theorist Jean-Marie Schaeffer, as a legitimation crisis.¹ In my view, this crisis has by no means ended since Adorno wrote *Aesthetic Theory*. If anything, it has gotten larger

Schaeffer (2000), 3.

and larger, as the debate on subsidies shows. Ever since art emancipated itself from church and state, it has seemed to flail around without a function, while attempts by philosophers and the historical avant-gardes to provide it with a new one have failed. Artists, philosophers, critics and the public have often considered art's unbridled freedom a mixed blessing: the lack of guiding principles and the sense that 'anything goes' raise questions about the value, function and responsibility of art in society. This is precisely why the same question comes up again and again in the course of modernity: Why art?

It is this question around which the present study navigates, although I certainly do not claim to provide the reader with a definitive answer. This question of the function of, and the need for, art can be approached in many ways, but in my view it can never be merely an empirical question. Although sociological research into the actual function of art in people's lives is certainly of interest to me, I am primarily concerned here with the philosophical question of how this function should be considered. My guides in approaching this question are two German philosophers and critics from the early and middle twentieth century, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969). This book is largely an investigation into their work, and into the relations between them. Undoubtedly, their theories are among the most interesting and sophisticated in twentieth-century philosophy of art and art criticism. But, one may ask, why not choose others who, it could be argued, have equal status, such as Georg Lukács or Martin Heidegger, or later thinkers such as Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida? There are several reasons. First, there are few philosophers who were more acutely aware of the shifts in the social function and significance of art in their time. The interaction between these thinkers – which is documented in their lively correspondence as well as in essays in which they respond to each other – ushers in some of the most crucial and fascinating discussions taking place at the crossroads of aesthetics and politics: on the relation between art and historical experience, between avant-garde art and mass culture, and between the intellectual and the public, to name but a few.

Second, I believe that their work contains certain elements that have been forgotten, neglected or perhaps been too quickly dismissed in contemporary art theory. They emphasize the utopian, emancipatory and critical potential of art – that is, the ability of the work of art to break through, at least momentarily, the mythic veil that capitalism has cast over society. The work of art, they argue, allows us to view history and society in a different light. It is, in their view, nothing less than a bearer of truth. This truth, however, is accessible only through art criticism. The art critic can thus be said, as Benjamin puts it, to 'complete' the work of art. These

ideas, which were central to Benjamin's and Adorno's work – art as a form of (social) critique, art as a bearer of truth, and art criticism as a condition for disclosing this truth – are not the kinds of idea that are particularly *en vogue* today. I deem them crucial, however, to the belief that works of art have something to say to us.

This already points to the subtitle of the present book. It can be read in three ways, each referring to a separate aspect. In the first place, a 'critique of art' can be read in the Kantian sense, namely as an investigation into the boundaries of what art can say or do. In my view, these boundaries are socially and historically determined. That also means that I regard the question that is traditionally central to aesthetics, namely 'What is Art?', as secondary to the question of what art does, that is, of how it functions in the world and why it is important. Here I should mention that, when I speak of art, I have in mind not just the visual arts but also literature and music, which play a prominent part in the writings of Benjamin and Adorno.

The second way in which the subtitle can be read already betrays my hypothesis regarding art's function. As I will argue, art can and should be conceived of as social critique. In arguing this, I am not primarily addressing artists, or urging them to produce so-called 'committed' art and criticize social or political structures. Rather, I want to address theorists of art, and to argue that art should be *interpreted* as critique and should be *granted* the social and historical significance it still deserves.

This is not to say, of course, that theorists should ascribe meanings to works of art in any way they please. As I will argue, by putting itself in a reciprocal and transformative relation to the singular work of art, art criticism can function as an 'interpreter' of that work of art and as a 'medium' between it and society. And this brings me to the third meaning of the subtitle. 'Critique of art' refers not only to art criticizing, but also to art that is criticized, namely by art criticism. The German word *Kritik* can mean both philosophical and social critique, as well as literary and art criticism. Although some theorists argue that these two meanings have nothing in common aside from their etymological root, I will argue that, at least for Benjamin and Adorno, they are inseparably connected. The 'critique of art' depends on art criticism, and hence art criticism is also a form of critique.

The first objective of this study, then, is to shed new light on the work of Benjamin and Adorno, and the relations between their work. To be sure, much has already been written about the famous 'Benjamin-Adorno

² Nevertheless, in recent years the idea of politically committed art has enjoyed something of a renaissance. I will come back to this point in the conclusion.

dispute' or 'debate'. Their differences of opinion about the utopian potential of mass culture, for instance, are textbook knowledge and are part of every introduction to cultural or media theory. However, despite the familiarity of this discussion, and arguably even because it has turned into something of a caricature of itself, the precise details of their relationship have hardly been explored. Although their correspondence is elaborately discussed by Susan Buck-Morss and Richard Wolin, for instance, neither of them takes into account Adorno's post-war writings, most notably Aesthetic Theory.3 Smaller studies have explored and compared their views on specific subjects, such as philosophical form, photography, and surrealism.⁴ A systematic comparison between these two philosophers, however, has yet to be written. The present study will not be able to fill this void completely, since it is primarily concerned with Benjamin's and Adorno's views on aesthetics and art criticism. More specifically, I will discuss how they address three problems: the 'end of art', the problem of the relation between art and history, and the problem of the relation between art and criticism. Although my investigation will also lead me to their philosophies of history and theories of experience, other domains which would deserve further research fall outside the scope of this book, such as their philosophies of language and their moral philosophy.

The literature on Benjamin and Adorno has focused primarily on the differences between them – their so-called 'controversy' or 'dispute'. They are often set off one against the other, as the representatives of two opposite sides in a debate on mass culture versus elite culture, the one mounting a 'rescuing' critique, the other an ideology critique (Habermas), or a discontinuous as opposed to a teleological (Hegelian) view of history. Furthermore, there is a certain tendency, as Michael Steinberg has observed, to see their relationship as similar to that between Mozart and Salieri, in the sense that Adorno is considered to be the stubborn theoretician fettering the tragic brilliance of Benjamin. 5

Now, obviously, the differences between these philosophers are considerable, and in the following chapters I will provide a detailed discussion of

³ Buck-Morss (1977), Wolin (1994), Chapter 6.

⁴ See Weber Nicholsen (1999), Chapters 4 and 5, and Wolin (1997). Some other studies, essays and volumes in which aspects of their thinking are compared are Kaiser (1974), Chapter 1 of Hanssen (1998), Hullot-Kentor (2006) and several of the contributions in Ross (2015).

⁵ Pensky (1993), 227 (Pensky refers to an unpublished manuscript by Steinberg). In an even more striking simile, Giorgio Agamben compares Adorno to a witch who turns the 'prince of history' into a frog with the 'magic wand of dialectical historicism', while Benjamin is the fair maiden kissing the frog and thus bringing the prince back to life. See Agamben (1993), 133. I will discuss Agamben's view of the Benjamin-Adorno dispute in Chapter 3.

them. However, in focusing on these differences and disputes, many theorists have tended to overlook the considerable similarities between their theories, thus failing to appreciate the close collaboration and 'philosophical friendship' they themselves spoke of in their letters. In this study, I will regard the relationship between Benjamin and Adorno less as a 'dispute', and more in terms of this philosophical friendship and the mutual influence it entailed. Moreover, Benjamin's influence did not end with his untimely death in 1940. I agree with Britta Scholze's argument that Benjamin, more than any other philosopher, is explicitly or implicitly present in each and every one of Adorno's writings. ⁶

In my attempt to bring them closer to one another, I will read the one through the other. This means that, even when they are not explicitly referring to each other, using the same philosophical terminology, or conversing with each other, one can still conceive of their texts as addressing the same problems. These problems are the ones I have referred to above, and they define the structure of this book. The first chapter, 'Autonomy and Critique', is a historical and sociological prelude to the philosophical problem that is my main concern: that of the function of, and the need for, art in society. I will provide a short 'genealogy' of the autonomy of both art practices and theory, starting with the genesis of the discourse on autonomy in the eighteenth century. Using examples of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century art that Benjamin and Adorno also addressed, this chapter also functions as a historical contextualization of their aesthetic theories (although I do not explicitly discuss those theories here).

The second chapter, 'Ends of Art', is concerned with the most famous of Adorno's and Benjamin's 'disputes', about the latter's essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' (1936). That essay, I will show, does not stand on its own, but draws on many themes in his early work, most notably from his book on German Baroque drama. Taking into account the context of Benjamin's work-of-art essay, I will argue that his 'dispute' with Adorno is not essentially about mass culture, but rather about the 'end of art'. I thus investigate how the idea of the end, or 'liquidation', of art, as both philosophers sometimes call it, functions in their works. The end of art can mean two things for both: first, the immanent dissolution

⁶ Scholze (2000), 33. Benjamin himself once said to his cousin Egon Wissing that 'Adorno was my only disciple'. See Eiland and Jennings (2014), 359.

⁷ I am aware that such a 'homogenizing' way of reading is out of step with the times, especially considering the theoretical reflections on 'oeuvre' and 'authorship' by theorists such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Nevertheless, I believe it to be a fruitful strategy for reconsidering and rereading certain texts by Benjamin and Adorno.

of the semblance of the work of art and, second, the proliferation of the aesthetic brought about by technological reproduction. Their debate on the work-of-art essay ultimately comes down to the way they perceive the relation between these two 'versions' of the end of art.

After having concluded in Chapter 2 that art still has a historical role to play, I will investigate how Benjamin and Adorno regard the relation between art and history in the third chapter, 'Experience, History, and Art'. They conceive of the work of art as a repository of experience: the way in which people perceive and interact with their world and with one another is recorded in works of art. Art, in other words, is a medium of experience. However, since experience is, in their view, subject to historical change, works of art are also a form of 'unconscious historiography', as Adorno puts it. They even argue that modernist art should be understood as expressing the experience of the impossibility of experience in modernity. This impossibility of experience is caused by an alienation and a reification of consciousness, which also affect our conception of history itself. Much has been written about Benjamin's critique of the concept of historical 'progress', but Adorno is still often considered an inverted Hegelian who regards history as an unstoppable process of decline. As we will see, however, his philosophy of history draws heavily from Benjamin's, and a fresh reading of it may also shed new light on his philosophy of *art* history – most notably, his notorious theory of the 'tendency of the musical material'.

In the fourth chapter, 'The Art of Critique', I will show that, according to both Benjamin and Adorno, art criticism is essential both for the ontological existence of works of art and for our experience of them. Both philosophers conceive of works of art as essentially unfinished and fragmentary, and hold that the objective of art criticism is to 'complete' the work. This implies that, even though art still has social and historical significance, it can have this significance only if it is interpreted and criticized. I will point to the similarities and differences between their concepts of criticism, which I will illustrate through a close reading of their texts on Goethe and Mahler.

In each chapter, I will discuss Benjamin and Adorno side by side. Thus, the book is structured somewhat like a fugue, in which a subject is stated and then counter-stated in a dialogic and contrapuntal way, enhancing and contributing to its progressive development. Any discussion of the writings of these thinkers themselves demands an almost musical structuring, as it were, with the same themes and lines recurring in different registers. All their philosophical concepts are linked to each other, and often have a slightly different meaning, depending on the contexts in which they occur. Benjamin once wrote in a letter that he had 'never been able to do research and think

in any sense other than [...] a theological one, namely, in accord with the Talmudic teaching about the forty-nine levels of meaning in every passage of Torah' (CWB, 372; BB 2, 524). Benjamin's writings, like those of Adorno, demand an almost Talmudic way of reading and interpreting, in which every concept changes according to the passages they are compared with or the problems they are confronted with. And, though I try to do justice to the aesthetic side of their works, any presentation of Benjamin's and Adorno's ideas will inevitably tend to obscure the literary and essayistic aspects of those works, necessarily treating them as content taken out of their form.

Again, in emphasising the close affinity between Benjamin's and Adorno's theories, I do not mean to obscure their differences. I will discuss these at the end of each chapter, as well as in the conclusion to this book. There is a 'distance, however close' between the two philosophers, as Shierry Weber Nicholsen puts it in reference to Benjamin's definition of the aura – that is, differences so subtle that they themselves sometimes overlook them.8 Only by putting our finger on these differences, can we recognize the full extent to which their theories overlap. But, as I have suggested above, my attempts to bring Benjamin and Adorno closer are borne not merely of historical interest. There are strategic reasons, too, to reread their work. These reasons comprise the second overall objective of my study: to show that Benjamin's and Adorno's theories, taken together despite the differences between them, could contribute to contemporary debates taking place at the crossroads of aesthetics and politics. I like to think of this strategic reading in terms of a metaphor of Plato, from his dialogue *Phaedrus*, where he compares the human soul to a charioteer who is driving a chariot. The chariot is being pulled along by two winged horses, which are, however, quite different in temperament, and sometimes wish to go in opposite directions. Benjamin and Adorno too, have their differences, of course, in terms of both opinions and their character, and their work often goes in opposite directions. At the moment, however, I think it is of greater importance to investigate to what extent their thoughts move in the same overall direction.

In his *Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes: 'The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink' (AP, 476; V/1, 595). In other words, the phenomena the historian writes about, and the way they write about them, are influenced by the time in which they live. That is certainly the case for the present study. I have done my research on Benjamin's and Adorno's work, not out of pure historical interest, but based on the

assumption that their theories are still topical. However, I will be of more service to the reader than the Benjaminian historian by making visible the inscription of the present. This is why I have included, between the main chapters, which are historical and exegetical, three smaller essays. I have called these excursuses, because they digress from the straight path that an academic study would standardly be expected to take. In each excursus, the issue I have just discussed in the preceding chapter is transferred to our own time and examined in light of more-recent debates.

In the first excursus, I will show how the 'end of art' debate reocurred at the end of the twentieth century, after a whole series of end-of... debates that came along with postmodernism. I will discuss how it has been conceived of by several authors, most famously Arthur Danto and Gianni Vattimo. Both of these thinkers, however, neglect crucial aspects of the 'end of art' discussion in Benjamin's and Adorno's work. This allows them to conceive of the end of art as an accomplished fact, instead of a historical chance, as the latter do. But this also means that they cannot account for the *need* for art in people's lives, and for our society - surely a crucial matter. The second excursus starts from a problem with which we find ourselves confronted at the end of the third chapter: how the artwork relates to history. I will discuss the most notorious historical answer to this question: the base-superstructure model. Although this model has been rightfully criticized, especially the dogmatic variants of it, I look at whether there may still be something to it. By using Benjamin's and Adorno's 'monadology', which I discuss in the third chapter, I attempt to combine historical materialism with what psychoanalytic theory calls the 'parallax view'. The third excursus, finally, deals with an altogether different problem, the role of the intellectual, and most notably that of the art critic. Recently, there has been much debate about the 'crisis' of, or the death or disappearance of, criticism caused by democratization and the loss of aesthetic standards. Drawing on Benjamin's and Adorno's views on art criticism, which I discuss in the fourth chapter, I will argue that the art critic still has an important public role to play in contemporary society.

The excursuses are written in a style somewhat different from that of the main chapters, and are more experimental, adventurous and speculative than they are. They are just first attempts, in the way of hints, to make Benjamin's and Adorno's thoughts fruitful for certain contemporary debates. Juxtaposing past and present, academic form with essay, and historical exegesis with experiment, I follow Benjamin's observation, 'method is digression' (O, 28; I/1, 208). However, I will leave it up to the reader to determine which parts constitute the *real* digression.