

Walter Benjamin & the Nineteenth Century Today

International conference organized by

Institute of Modern Languages Research (School of Advanced Study, University of London)

in collaboration with

Textes / Littératures: Ecritures et Modèles (EA 4195, Université de Bordeaux Montaigne)

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Institute of Modern Languages Research, Senate House

Keynote speakers

Prof Michael W. Jennings (Princeton University)

Prof Marc Berdet (University of Brasilia) (tbc)

Walter Benjamin is one of the most prominent European philosophers, writers and commentators of the interwar period. Today, in the early 21st century, his work is more influential than ever and available in translation across a wide range of languages – not only his essays and articles, but also his literary texts, his correspondence, and countless notes and drafts. Among the numerous fields he investigated, his understanding of the 19th century and his conceptualization of the closely related concept of modernity are undoubtedly among his most significant achievements, although he never completed his Magnum Opus, *The Arcades Project*. Assuming with him and Michelet that “every epoch dreams the one to follow”, the time has come, nearly eighty years after his death, to review the way scholars think about the 19th century today in light of his work – and this includes critical approaches that takes issue with his ideas. The conference theme can thus be formulated in a more Benjaminian way: its “subject matter” will be to study the echoes today of how the 19th century dreamt its own future.

Considering that criticism is always a kind of historicization, the conference invites papers on comparative studies of representations of the 19th century, both, those suggested by Benjamin during the 1920s and 1930s and those of today suggested by researchers drawing on his work. This questioning will focus on concepts as well as on topics, and if required on how both are related. More precisely, how are notions such as kitsch, strolling or spleen relevant today? How might their concrete manifestations in forms such as arcades, exhibitions, illuminations, glass architecture, *Jugendstil*, advertising and barricades, enable us to rethink modernity and modernism? What topics and phenomena could be the equivalent of these categories in the 21st century: climate change & apocalypse, intimacy & privacy, social networks & exhibitionism, vegetarianism, organic foods, zombies, corpses & bodies, healthy bodies, tattoos, and so on. And how might Benjamin’s approach to analyzing cultural

representations in history, and the heuristics it implies, be useful in conceptualizing post-modernism?

Thinking about the 19th century, Benjamin focused on French figures like Baudelaire, Daumier, Haussmann. But even if we do read Baudelaire through Benjamin, we will not be reading the poet in the same way that Benjamin read him in the 1930s. What are current perceptions of Benjamin's studies of Baudelaire and the nineteenth century? And we could ask the same question for Daumier or Blanqui, among others. Also, how might a Benjaminian perspective be applied to major French writers like Flaubert or Zola, who Benjamin read but did not really discuss, despite their being deeply involved in the social and political fabric of the 19th century? Finally, which writers, caricaturists, architects or political activists might be the counterparts of Baudelaire/Daumier/Haussmann/Blanqui in non-French traditions, beginning with the U.K.?

The famous formula “Paris, Capital of the 19th century” implies that the 19th century, in Europe at least, is a single whole – and this idea is latent in Benjamin’s writings. But the dissemination of his thought beyond Europe questions such an idea, and we have to wonder if there are not several 19th centuries instead of a single one. Papers might explore this idea either by identifying national specificities (e.g. French Anglophilia, colonial influence over consumerism in the U.K., eroticism in Vienna at the turn of the century, and so on), or in a same country, by exploring economic and cultural representations Benjamin did not address, such as medical practices (e.g. psychiatric care), increase in government bonds and stock speculation, boulevard theatre and variety shows, figurative painting, survival of pop romantic aesthetics, and so on. A focus on what we might call the rearguard of modernity might be particularly fruitful.

To extend the previous idea, and because the conference will take place in London, papers might consider Victorian London, and representations of the 19th century it embodies. A comparative approach between the French 19th century as Benjamin understood it – or as we understand it today by appropriating his tools and concepts – and the Victorian period should enable us to get a better grasp of the period, and of its relevance for the present day.

Furthermore, Walter Benjamin is not the only thinker related to the Frankfurt School whose legacy enriches current research, and many scholars are working on the 19th century and the concept of modernity by combining Benjamin’s proposals with, among others, Ernst Bloch’s, Siegfried Kracauer’s or Theodor W. Adorno’s insights. How might their respective, and not always converging, views lead to a new – if not better – understanding of the 19th century and related concepts?

Possible topics for papers include, but are not restricted to:

- Benjamin’s 19th century today: concepts and topics
- Rethinking modernity and modernism in light of Benjamin
- 19th century *versus* 19th centuries / Paris *versus* other European capitals
- Benjamin’s thought & the Victorian era

- Benjamin's counterparts (Baudelaire/Daumier/Haussmann/Blanqui) in non-French traditions
- Kitsch legacies: Graphic arts, Comics, Pop music...
- Arcades, exhibitions, museums
- Intimacy & privacy, social networks & exhibitionism
- Benjamin and Post-modernism
- Benjamin's thought and apocalypse today
- Benjamin and the legacy of the Frankfurt School

We welcome joint proposals for two-speaker papers; panel or round table proposals are also welcome.

Send abstracts (300 words) with title for 20 min papers and short bio (100 words) to Jean-Michel.Gouvard@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr by **April 25th, 2019**. Organizer: Prof Jean-Michel Gouvard, TELEM, Université de Bordeaux Montaigne (France).