

Benjamin, Walter

early work (until 1924) – develop theory of criticism

-study of Goethe's novel, *Elective Affinities*

-dissertation on Friedrich Schlegel's theory of criticism

-study of German baroque mourning plays (The Origin of the German Tragic Dramas, 1924): tragedy grounded in myth (heroic sacrifice)

Trauerspiel – rooted in history, secular drama

deals w sovereignty (function of prince in averting state of emergency)

role of prince: madness/corruption =destruction of self/court

downfall has implications for society: no easy

satisfaction from prince's downfall;

martyr – radical stoic: prove self thru struggle for

crown or a religious dispute ending in death

tyrant function: restore order in state of emergency

replace unpredictability of historical accident

// stoic technique in soul's control of emotions

(central role for chaste princess: stoicism)

secularized Passion Play, and expansion of interior space

vs tragedy's cosmic space

antagonists = schemers, intriguers =all intellect & will power

Lutherans = great German dramatists of the baroque

sole fide -> obedience

melancholy as symbol of enigmatic wisdom: prince as

paradigm of the melancholy man

allegories & emblems (of baroque vs classical Greece)

knowledge as characteristic mode of evil (exploration of

the forbidden, illusion of independence)

laughter as embodiment in matter (Lucifer)

intoxification of spoken language (vs signifying written)

sense of decline

baroque allegory = dialectic btw extremes

emblems – ambivalent, glory in multiplicity of meanings

only 1 piece of contemporary literature

1924- turns to contemporary European culture (especially modernist & avant-garde culture in France and USSR, Marxist politics, & a career as journalist & cultural critic (wrote for prominent weeklies & monthlies)

1924 = discovers Georg Lukacs' *History & Class Consciousness* (review Ernst Bloch);

= meets Latvian theater director Asja Lacis in Capri, "enflamed" by her

description of her children's theater (conceives of a proletarian children's theater)

essays on: children's literature, toys, pedagogy, gambling, graphology, pornography, folk art, art of excluded groups such as the mentally ill, food, and media (film, radio, photography, illustrated press)

frequent visits to Paris: essays on Paul Valery, Andre Gide, Marcel Proust;

visited Moscow once: essays on Russian literature & film, Lenin, Gorki, Eisenstein

new literary forms: One Way Street, 1928

G-Group : met in ateliers of artists & architects including

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Mies van der Rohe,

Eli Lissitsky (&his constructivist & proto-international style friends

Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner, Nathan Altmann, Mies &

Ludwig Hilberseimer),

Hans Richter (& his Dada friends Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp,

George Grosz, John Heartfield, Hannah Hoehc);

elements of Surrealism: Tzara, Man Ray, Max Burchardz

Benjamin's wife, Dora, a journalist, & close friend Ernst Schoen,
a musician & music theorist
journal G. Zeitschrift fuer elementare Gestaltung (G. Journal for Elementary
Form Production) - G = Gestaltung (shaping, forming – ie, away from the
idea of individual creation, towards more industrial cultural production)
helps Benjamin discover his new focus: industrial art, architecture, photography,
mass culture, & new cultural forms in France & Russia

Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism

Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But it was
Surrealism which first allowed its gaze to roam freely over it.
the crowd as veil from behind which the city as phantasmagoria beckons to the
flaneur; magasins de nouveauté (forerunner of the department store):
novelty doesn't depend on use value, is source of illusion
17th century allegory (a canon of dialectical imagery)
-> 19th century nouveauté plays similar role
Haussman's boulevards secure the city; rents drive proletariat to outskirts
alienate them from the city: become conscious of the inhuman
character of the city
bohème – professional conspirators, adversaries of leaders of
proletariat
world exhibitions as places of pilgrimage to the fetish commodity
glorified exchange value (use value receded)
phantasmagoria used to distract the working classes
St. Simon promoted national exhibitions, anticipation of global
economy, but not class struggle
arcades (1822-50): glass-covered, marble floored passages
centers of luxury goods (Balzac: "The great poem of
display chants its stanzas of color from the Madeleine to
the gate of Saint-Denis")
construction in iron: supports in style of Pomeian columns
factories look like dwellings
rail stations modeled on chalets
architecture as engineering on edge of commodities
reproduction of nature in photo (-> commercial art)
montage of the newspaper (feuilleton)
living spaces as spaces of illusions distant from places of work
detective story which investigates traces

Arcades Project