

# Walter Benjamin and surrealism

## The story of a revolutionary spell

Michael Löwy

'Fascination' is the only term that does justice to the intensity of the feelings Walter Benjamin experienced when he discovered surrealism in 1926–27. His very efforts to escape the spell of the movement founded by André Breton and his friends are an expression of the same fascination. As we know, it was this discovery that gave birth to the 'Paris Arcades' project. Writing to Adorno in 1935, Benjamin describes the genesis of the *Passagenwerk*, which was to preoccupy him for the last thirteen years of his life, in the following terms: 'It opens with Aragon – the *paysan de Paris*. Evenings, lying in bed, I could never read more than two to three pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down.'<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin stayed in Paris during the summer of 1926, and again in the summer of 1927, after his trip to Moscow. It was probably at this time that he became acquainted with Aragon's book (which was published in 1926) and with other surrealist writings. Why the immediate attraction and the inner turmoil? The insightful account given by Gershom Scholem, who visited Benjamin in Paris in 1927, sheds some light on the reasons for what he calls his friend's 'burning interest' in the surrealists: he found in them 'a certain number of things that had suddenly come to him over the previous years'. In other words, he 'read those periodicals in which Aragon and Breton proclaimed things that coincided somewhere with his own deepest experience'.<sup>2</sup> We shall see later what those 'ideas' were.

We do not know if Benjamin met Breton or other surrealists at this time: there is nothing in his correspondence to suggest that he did so. On the other hand, according to Scholem (in his Foreword to the *Correspondence*), he did exchange letters – now 'lost' – with the author of the *Surrealist Manifesto*.<sup>3</sup> A trace

of this discovery can – up to a point – be seen in the book Benjamin published at this time: *One-way Street* (1928). So much so that Ernst Bloch thought fit to describe it as 'a model for a surrealist way of thinking'<sup>4</sup> – a statement which is both greatly exaggerated and, in the last analysis, inaccurate.

Benjamin is in fact attempting to escape what he saw as a dangerous fascination, and to bring out the *differentia specifica* of his own project. In his letter of November 1928 to Scholem he explains that he felt the need to 'distance this piece of work from an over-ostensible proximity to the surrealist movement. Understandable and well-founded as it may be, that proximity could prove fatal to me'. This did not, however, mean that he refused to take on board the *philosophical heritage* of surrealism.

### A Gothic Marxism

What does this 'understandable' and even 'well-founded' 'proximity' consist of? Margaret Cohen's recent *Profane Illumination* suggests an interesting hypothesis by describing both Benjamin and André Breton as adepts of a 'Gothic Marxism' – as distinct from the dominant version, which has metaphysical materialist tendencies and which is contaminated by the evolutionist ideology of progress. It seems to me, however, that the author is on the wrong track when she describes the Marxism of both Benjamin and the surrealists as a Marxist genealogy that is fascinated by the irrational aspects of the social process; as a genealogy that tries to study how the irrational penetrates existing society, and dreams of using the irrational to bring about social change.<sup>5</sup> The concept of the 'irrational' is absent from the writings of both Walter Benjamin and Breton; it relates to a rationalist world-view inherited from the philosophy of the

Enlightenment, which is the very thing both our authors are attempting to *transcend* (in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*). The term ‘Gothic Marxism’, on the other hand, is illuminating, provided that we understand the adjective in its romantic sense of a fascination with *enchantment* and the *marvellous*, as well as with the spellbound aspects of pre-modern cultures and societies. We find references to the English Gothic novel of the eighteenth century and certain German romantics of the nineteenth at the heart of the work of both Breton and Benjamin.

The Gothic Marxism common to both would appear, then, to be a historical materialism that is sensitive to the *magical* dimension of past cultures, to the ‘black’ moment of revolt, and to the illumination that rends the sky of revolutionary action like a bolt of lightning. ‘Gothic’ should also be understood literally as a positive reference to certain key moments in profane medieval culture: it is no accident that both Breton and Benjamin should admire the courtly love of medieval Provence, which they both view as one of the purest manifestations of illumination. I stress the ‘profane’ aspect because, for the surrealists, nothing was more abominable than religion in general and the apostolic Roman Catholic religion in particular. Benjamin rightly stresses the importance of ‘the bitter, passionate revolt against Catholicism in which Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Apollinaire brought Surrealism into the world’.<sup>6</sup>

In order to understand the true nature of Benjamin’s profound affinity with the work of Breton, Aragon and their friends, we must look closely at ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, which

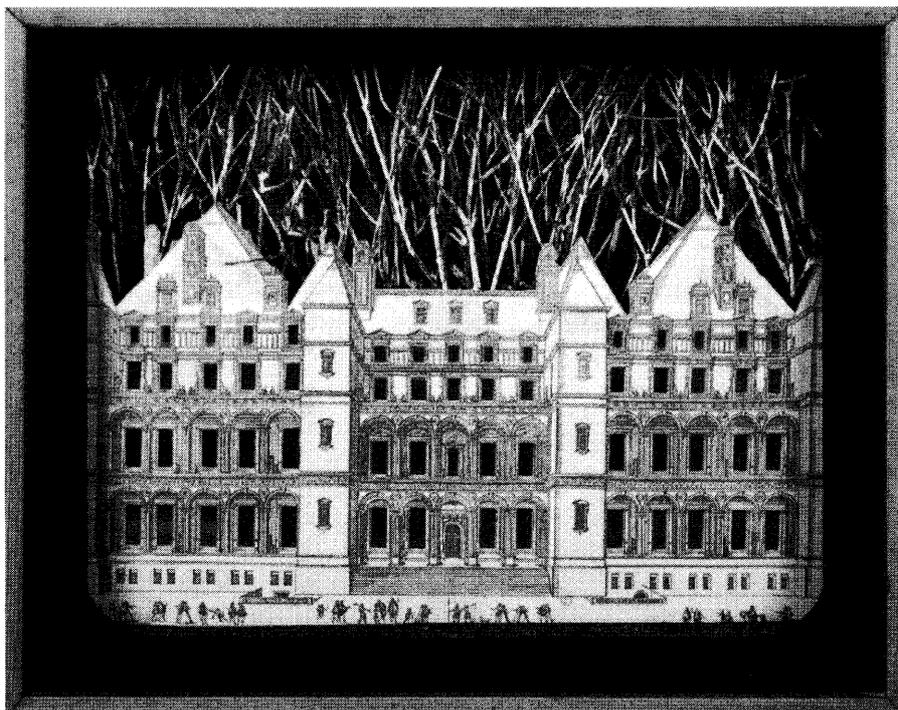
Benjamin published in the journal *Literarische Welt* in February 1929. Written in 1928, this extraordinarily rich text is difficult, sometimes unfair, and often enigmatic, but it is always visionary and bejewelled with strange images and allegories. It is not a piece of ‘literary criticism’ in the normal sense of the term, but a poetic, philosophical and political essay of prime importance, and it is shot through with dazzling and surprising ‘profane illuminations’. Without making any claims to exhaustivity, let us try to reconstruct some of its essential moments.

In Benjamin’s view, surrealism is anything but the work of ‘yet another clique of literati’ – he attributes that view to the philistine experts he ironically describes as ‘know-alls’.<sup>7</sup> Surrealism is therefore not an ‘artistic movement’ but an attempt to explore the sphere of poetry from within, thanks to a set of magical experiments (*Erfarungen*) with revolutionary implications. More specifically, it is a ‘visionary’ movement which is both profoundly *libertarian* and in search of a possible convergence with *communism*.

It is precisely because it corresponds so closely to the approach Benjamin had adopted over the previous ten years that the surrealist approach inspired a ‘burning interest’. Inspired by an anarchist sensibility – or a revolutionary-nihilist sensibility, to use one of his favourite terms – that has something in common with Sorel (see the 1928 ‘Critique of Violence’<sup>8</sup>), Benjamin discovered communism thanks to the beauty of Asja Lacis in Capri in 1923, and Marxist philosophy thanks to a reading of Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*. Although he decided, after many hesitations,

not to join the communist movement, he still remained a sort of close sympathizer *sui generis*. As is clearly obvious from the ‘Moscow Journal’ of 1926–27, his lucidity and critical distance mark him out from the typical fellow traveller. And his critical distance no doubt springs from the refreshingly libertarian current that continues to flow (sometimes underground) throughout his work.

The libertarian dimension of surrealism also appears in a more direct fashion: ‘Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom.



The Surrealists have one.<sup>9</sup> In the immense literature devoted to surrealism over the last seventy years, it is rare to find such a significant formula, or one so capable of expressing, thanks to a few simple and trenchant words, the unbreakable kernel of darkness in the movement founded by André Breton. According to Benjamin, it was ‘the hostility of the bourgeoisie toward every manifestation of radical intellectual freedom’ that pushed surrealism to the left, towards revolution and, after the Rif war, towards communism.<sup>10</sup> As we know, Breton and other surrealists joined the Parti Communiste Français in 1927.

The tendency towards politicization and growing commitment does not, in Benjamin’s view, mean that surrealism has to abandon its magical and libertarian qualities. On the contrary, it is those qualities that allow it to play a unique and irreplaceable role in the revolutionary movement: ‘to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution – this is the project about which surrealism circles in all its books and enterprises. This it may call its most particular task.’<sup>11</sup> If it is to accomplish this task, surrealism must, however, abandon its unilateral stance and accept an alliance with communism:

For them it is not enough that, as we know, an ecstatic component lives in every revolutionary act. This component is identical with the anarchic. But to place the accent exclusively on it would be to subordinate the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between fitness exercises and celebration in advance.<sup>12</sup>

### A new romanticism

What is this ‘intoxication’, this *Rausch* whose energies Benjamin is so anxious to win for the revolution? In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin refers to intoxication as an expression of the magical relationship between the ancients and the cosmos, but he implies that the experience (*Erfahrung*) and the *Rausch* that once characterized that ritual relationship with the world disappear in modern society.<sup>13</sup> In the *Literarische Welt* article, he appears to rediscover that relationship, in a new form, in surrealism.<sup>14</sup>

This argument runs through many of Benjamin’s writings. The revolutionary utopia implies the re-discovery of an old, archaic or prehistoric experience: matriarchy (Bachofen), primitive communism, the classless, stateless community, a primal harmony with nature, the paradise lost from which we were driven by the storm of ‘progress’, or the ‘earlier life’ in which the adorable springtime had yet to lose its scent (Baudelaire). In all these cases, Benjamin is not

recommending a return to the past but – in keeping with the dialectic of revolutionary romanticism – a digression through the past and towards a *new future* that can integrate all the conquests modernity has made since 1789.<sup>15</sup>

This is equally true of the modern intoxication of the surrealists, which can in no sense be related to the archaic intoxication of ancient times. Benjamin stresses the distinction between lower or primitive forms of intoxication – religious or drug-induced ecstasy – and the higher form produced by surrealism at its best moments: a profane illumination, ‘a materialist and anthropological inspiration’. The notion is rich, but difficult to define. This non-religious form of *Erleuchtung* can be found in both courtly love and anarchist revolt, in *Nadja* and in the mystery that is present at the heart of everyday life. A successor to the philosophical realism of the Middle Ages which Breton claims as his own in his *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*, the profane illumination of the surrealists lies in ‘magical experiments with words’ in which ‘slogans, magical formulas [*Zauberformel*] and concepts’ intermingle.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst our prosaic and limited capitalist/industrial modern civilization – the world of the Spiesser and bourgeois philistines – is characterized, as Max Weber saw so lucidly, by the disenchantment of the world, the romantic world-view – and surrealism is ‘the tail of the romantic comet’ (Breton) – is primarily inspired by an ardent, and sometimes despairing, desire to re-enchant the world. The difference between surrealism and the romanticism of the nineteenth century is, as Benjamin well realized, the profane, ‘materialist and anthropological’ nature of surrealism’s ‘magical formulas’, the non-religious, and even deeply anti-religious nature of its ‘magical experiences’, and the post-mystical vocation of its ‘illuminations’.<sup>17</sup>

When he examines the surrealists’ illuminations, Benjamin pays particular attention to their discovery of the revolutionary energies that appear in ‘the outmoded’, in ‘the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photographs, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos’.<sup>18</sup> What is ‘the relation of these things to revolution’? Benjamin never explains. Is it a sign of the precariousness, the historicity or mortality of bourgeois structures, monuments and institutions? Or is it an ironic and subversive commentary on the bourgeoisie’s pretensions to being ‘new’ and ‘modern’?<sup>19</sup> The remainder of the paragraph appears to take us in a different direction as it deals with urban poverty and even ‘the proletarian quarters of the great cities’: ‘no one before these visionaries

and augurs perceived how destitution – not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects – can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism'.<sup>20</sup> Paris itself, 'the most dreamed-of of their objects', is also a source of revolutionary experience to the extent that 'only revolt completely exposes its Surrealist face'.<sup>21</sup> Benjamin's argument oscillates between these different approaches; they are not necessarily contradictory, but nor do they express a univocal criterion. Unless that criterion is the 'trick' that consists in 'the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past', or in other words in seeing a very 'object' in terms of its future – imminent—revolutionary abolition.

Benjamin does, however, criticize surrealism for being 'enmeshed in a number of pernicious romantic prejudices' and for being 'an inadequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication'.<sup>22</sup> Thus, 'the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic), as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance'.<sup>23</sup> The criticism is all the stranger in that the surrealists – unlike Benjamin (see his 'Hashish in Marseilles'<sup>24</sup>) – were never very interested in experimenting with the use of drugs, and always took more interest in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* than in the actual consumption of that soft narcotic.

Benjamin's essay abounds in profane illuminations, but none is more surprising or uncanny – in the sense of the German *unheimlich* – than the urgent appeal for 'the organization of pessimism'.<sup>25</sup>

### **An organized pessimism**

In Benjamin's view, nothing could be more derisory and idiotic than the optimism of bourgeois parties and social democracy, whose political programme is no more than 'a bad poem on springtime'. Dismissing this 'unprincipled, dilettantish optimism', which is inspired by the ideology of linear progress, he sees in pessimism the effective point of convergence between surrealism and communism. It goes without saying that he is not referring to a contemplative and fatalistic feeling, but to an active, practical and 'organized' pessimism that is totally dedicated to preventing, by all means possible, the advent of the worst.

What does the pessimism of the surrealists consist in? Benjamin refers to certain 'prophecies' and to Apollinaire and Aragon's premonitions of the atrocities to come: 'Publishing houses are stormed, books of poems thrown on the fire, poets lynched.'<sup>26</sup> The impressive thing about this passage is not only the accurate

premonition of an event that was indeed to occur six years later when the Nazis made bonfires of 'anti-German' books in 1934; we have only to insert the words 'by Jewish (or anti-fascist) authors' after 'books of poems' – but also and above all the expression used by Benjamin (it does not appear in either Apollinaire or Aragon) to describe these atrocities: 'a progrom of poets'. Is he talking about poets or Jews? Or are both threatened by this disturbing future? As we shall see later, this is not the only strange 'premonition' to be found in this surprisingly rich text.

One wonders, on the other hand, what can be meant by the concept of pessimism, as applied to the communists; after all, their doctrine of 1928, which celebrates the triumphs of the building of socialism in the USSR and the imminent collapse of capitalism, is a fine example of the optimistic illusion. Benjamin in fact borrows the concept of the 'organization of pessimism' from an essay he describes as 'excellent', namely Pierre Naville's *La Révolution et les intellectuels* (1926). A close collaborator of the surrealists (he was one of the editors of *La Révolution surréaliste*), Naville had recently opted for political commitment to the communist movement and wanted his friends to follow his example. He called upon them to abandon 'a negative and anarchistic attitude' in favour of 'the disciplined action of class struggle', and to 'commit themselves resolutely to the revolutionary path, the only revolutionary path: the Marxist path'. As we have seen, Benjamin adopts the same broad attitude to the surrealists as Naville, but he remains much more open to the libertarian moment of the revolution.

According to Pierre Naville, pessimism is surrealism's greatest virtue, both in terms of its current reality and, even more, its future developments. In his view, pessimism is rooted in 'the reasons that any conscious man can find for not conforming, especially morally, with his contemporaries', and it constitutes 'the source of Marx's revolutionary method'. Pessimism is the only way 'to escape the incompetence and disappointments of an era of compromise'. Rejecting the 'crude optimism' of a Herbert Spencer – whom he charitably describes as a 'monstrously shrunken brain' – or an Anatole France, whose 'vile jokes' he finds intolerable, he concludes: 'we must organize pessimism.' The 'organization of pessimism' is the only slogan that can save us from death.<sup>27</sup>

Needless to say, this impassioned apologia for pessimism was far from representative of the political culture of French communism at this time. Before long, Pierre Naville was expelled from the Party: the

logic of his anti-optimism led him to join the ranks of the left ('Trotskyist') opposition, and he became one of its most important leaders. The positive reference to Naville and to Trotsky himself in Benjamin's article – it appears in the context of a critique of the concept of 'proletarian art' – at a time when the founder of the Red Army had already been expelled from the CPSU and exiled to Alma Ata, is a good example of his independence of mind.

According to Benjamin, the central question posed by Naville's book is 'where are the conditions for revolution? In the changing of attitudes or of external circumstances?' He joyfully notes that 'Surrealism has come ever closer to the Communist answer.' And what is that answer? 'Pessimism all along the line. Absolutely. Mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity, but three times mistrust in all reconciliation: between classes, between nations, between individuals. And unlimited trust only in I.G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the air force.'<sup>28</sup>

In this passage, which is a striking example of profane illumination, Benjamin goes far beyond both Naville – even though he does adopt the same spirit of distrust and rejection of compromise – and the surrealists. His pessimistic-revolutionary vision allows him to glimpse – intuitively but with a strange accuracy – the catastrophes that lay in store for Europe, captured perfectly by the ironic 'unlimited trust'. Even though he was the greatest pessimist of them all, Benjamin obviously could not foresee the destruction that the Luftwaffe was to inflict on the cities and civilian population of Europe. Still less could he imagine that, barely fifteen years later, I.G. Farben would become famous for manufacturing the Zyklon B gas that was used to 'rationalize' genocide, or that its factories would employ hundreds of thousands of slave labourers. And yet Benjamin was the only one of the Marxist thinkers or leaders of his day to foresee the monstrous disasters that could be spawned by an industrial/bourgeois society in crisis. If only because of this paragraph – which is inseparable from the rest of the article – this essay of 1929 has a unique position in the critical or revolutionary literature of the interwar years.



Jiri Kolár, *Dva potahy*, 1952

### A revolutionary alarm

The article's conclusion is a fairly unconditional celebration of surrealism, viewed as the heir to Hebbel's 'anthropological materialism', as well as to Georg Büchner, Nietzsche and Rimbaud – a surprising collection of precursors. According to Benjamin, this new materialism is not the same as the materialism of Vogt and Bukharin, which he describes as 'metaphysical'; it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that he had read Lukács's critique of Bukharin's materialism, which had appeared in 1926. Precisely what does he mean by 'anthropological materialism'? Benjamin does not really explain, but he suggests that it means the realization that 'The body is a collectivity, too.' It is only when revolutionary tension becomes a 'bodily collective innervation' and a 'revolutionary discharge' that reality will 'transcend itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*'.<sup>29</sup>

What does the *Communist Manifesto* demand? Benjamin does not answer that question, but he does add a commentary that concludes his essay: 'For the moment, only the surrealists have understood its present command. They exchange, to a man, the play of human features for the face of an alarm clock that

in each minute rings for sixty seconds.’ The assertion is astonishing in more than one sense: on the one hand, it seems, despite all the criticisms of their limitations, to describe the surrealists as the only group to have come to terms with the demands of Marxism – and to disparage the role of other Marxist intellectuals (Bukharin?). On the other hand, far from being identified with Aragon’s *Vague des rêves* (cited at the beginning of the essay as a typical example of ‘the heroic phase’ of the movement in which its ‘dialectical kernel’ was still embedded in an opaque substance), the surrealist movement is directly associated with the dialectical image of the alarm clock and wakefulness.

What is the meaning of this enigmatic allegory of an alarm clock ‘that in each minute rings for sixty seconds’? Benjamin is probably suggesting that the unique value of surrealism resides in its ability to see every second as the narrow door that allows the revolution to enter – to paraphrase a formula that he would not use until much later. From beginning to end, the essay is about the revolution, and profane illuminations are meaningful only in so far as they all refer to that ultimate and decisive vanishing point.<sup>30</sup>

An analysis of the role of surrealism in the *Passagenwerk* would require a separate article. Let me simply draw attention to one aspect that is directly related to the conclusion of the *Literarische Welt* article. The difference, or even the contradiction, between the surrealist approach and that of the *Passagenwerk* has often been described as a dichotomy between dreaming and wakefulness. And the first drafts of the project do contain this assertion:

Differences between the tendencies of this piece of work and Aragon; whilst Aragon perseveres in the realm of dreams, my goal here is to find the constellation of wakefulness [*Erwachen*]. Whereas there are still impressionist elements in Aragon – ‘mythology’ – and whilst it is that impressionism that is responsible for the book’s many shapeless [*gestaltlosen*] philosophemes, my ambition is to dissolve ‘mythology’ into the space of history. And that can obviously only be done through the awakening [*Erwekung*] of an as-yet-unconscious knowledge of the past.<sup>31</sup>

Given that this text was written at much the same time as the 1929 article, it is difficult to reconcile it with the image of permanent wakefulness as the quintessence of surrealism. Unless, that is, we take the view – which seems the most likely hypothesis – that the criticisms are specifically directed at Aragon and perhaps the ‘heroic stage’ of the movement, but not the surrealism of the years 1927–28. Significantly neither ‘mythology’, ‘impressionism’ nor ‘shapeless philosophemes’ figure amongst the many criticisms

Benjamin addresses to Breton and his friends in the *Literarische Welt* article.

What is more, we cannot reduce the position of the *Passagenwerk* to a static dichotomy between dreaming and wakefulness: Benjamin’s ambition – like that of Baudelaire and André Breton – is to create a new world in which action will finally become dreaming’s *sister*.

**Translated by David Macey**

## Notes

1. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*, edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, translated by M.R. and E.M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1994, p. 488. Benjamin published some passages from Aragon’s book in the journal *Literarische Welt* in 1929.
2. G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Faber & Faber, London, 1982, pp. 134–5.
3. Foreword to Walter Benjamin, *Correspondence*, p. xii.
4. Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice, Polity, Cambridge, 1991, p. 334. For a pertinent critique, see Michel Izard, ‘Walter Benjamin et le surréalisme’, *Docsur* 12, June 1990, p. 3.
5. See Margaret Cohen, *Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, pp. 1–2.
6. Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, New Left Books, London, 1979, p. 227. Ernst Bloch is no doubt a typical representative of ‘Gothic Marxism’. He makes no secret of his admiration for medieval fairy tales and Gothic cathedrals – especially in early works like his *Geist der Utopie* (1918–23).
7. ‘Surrealism’, p. 225.
8. In *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, pp. 132–54.
9. ‘Surrealism’, p. 236.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 236.
12. *Ibid.* Benjamin also speaks of binding ‘revolt to revolution’.
13. *One-Way Street*, pp. 103–4.
14. Cf. Margaret Cohen’s comments in her *Profane Illumination*, pp. 187–9.
15. On the question of revolutionary romanticism, see Robert Sayre and Michael Löwy, *Révolte de mélancolie: Le Romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité*, Payot, Paris, 1992.
16. ‘Surrealism’, p. 232. Benjamin attributes – wrongly in my view – this type of magical experimentation to ‘the whole literature of the avant-garde’, including futurism (*ibid.*). And he complains – again, wrongly in my view – that the surrealists’ inadequately profane conception of illumination is illustrated by the episode dealing with Madame Sacco, the fortune-teller evoked by Breton in *Nadja*. Annoyed by this ‘humid backroom of spiritualism’, Benjamin exclaims (‘Surrealism’, p. 228): ‘Who would not wish to see these adoptive children of revolution most rigorously severed from all the goings-on in the conventicles of down-at-heel dowagers, retired majors and émigré profiteers.’ Like the other figures in *Nadja*, the image of the ‘fortune-teller’ is completely profane and has no ‘spiritualist’ meaning for Breton.

17. An excellent definition of profane illumination – illustrated by the way the surrealists look at Paris – can be found in Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1982, p. 132. Wolin explains that, like religious illumination, profane illumination captures the energies of spiritual intoxication in order to produce a ‘revelation’, a vision or an intuition that transcends the prosaic state of empirical reality; but it produces that vision without resorting to dogmas about the beyond. Benjamin clearly saw the intoxicating, trance-like effect induced by the surrealist ‘romances’ in which the streets of Paris are transformed into a phantasmagorical wonderland, in which the monotony of conventions is rent asunder by the powers of *objective chance*. Once we have walked through these enchanted landscapes, we can never again experience life with our usual complacency and indolence.
18. ‘Surrealism’, p. 229.
19. Cf. Rainer Rochlitz’s pertinent remarks in his *Le Désenchantement de l’art*, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, p. 156: ‘Surrealism demonstrated how the image could fulfil a revolutionary function: by describing the accelerated ageing of modern forms as an incessant production of the archaic that reveals the real meaning of contemporaneity. In the ruins of modernization, it revealed the urgent need for a revolutionary upheaval.’
20. ‘Surrealism’, p. 229.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 230.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 237, 236.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 237. It seems to me that Rainer Rochlitz is mistaken when (*Le Désenchantement de l’art*, p. 154) he interprets this passage as Benjamin’s farewell to surrealism: ‘If reading and thinking are also forms of illumination and intoxication ... there is no longer any justification for surrealist irrationalism.’ Benjamin hopes to transport the surrealist experience on to alien terrain: that of effective action. No doubt rightly, Georges Bataille rejects this fusion: ‘artistic experience cannot be instrumentalized for political action.’ As we saw earlier, the concept of ‘irrationalism’ is absent from Benjamin’s essay, and he displays no desire to reject the ‘magical experiments’ of surrealism. What is more, Benjamin’s suggestion – winning the energies of intoxication for the revolution – is by no means a mere political ‘instrumentalization’ of art.
24. In *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, pp. 215–24.
25. ‘Surrealism’, p. 237.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
27. Pierre Naville, *La Révolution et les intellectuels*, Gallimard, Paris, 1965, pp. 76–77, 100–117.
28. ‘Surrealism’, p. 238.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 239.
30. Jacques Leenhardt has some very interesting remarks to make about the relationship between *rêve* and *réveil* in Benjamin, but it seems to me that he is mistaken when he sees the image of the alarm clock in ‘Surrealism’ as ‘the image of a certain conception of rationalist thought’ (J. Leenhardt, ‘Le passage comme forme d’expérience: Benjamin face à Aragon’, in H. Wisman, ed., *Walter Benjamin et Paris*, CERF, Paris, 1986, p. 165). It never entered Benjamin’s head to define surrealism as a ‘rationalist’ form of thought – the concept is as absent from the article as its opposite – ‘irrationalism’. The characteristic feature of the surrealist approach, and that adopted by Benjamin in this essay, is that it is irreducible to the ‘classical’ and static dichotomy between ‘rationality’ and ‘irrationality’.
31. Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, Vol. I, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1980, pp. 571–2.

## CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CULTURAL VALUES

### INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

## TIME AND VALUE



Lancaster University  
10th - 13th April, 1997

- \* Time-consciousness and the Body
- \* Narrative and Memory
- \* Time and the Political
- \* Tempo and Technology
- \* Nature and Kairos

#### Speakers include:

**Barbara Adam, Arjun Appadurai, Dede Boden, Mick Dillon, Elizabeth Ermarth, Sarah Franklin, Annette Kuhn, Ernesto Laclau, Scott Lash, Alphonso Lingis, Niklas Luhmann, Michel Maffesoli, John Milbank, Chantal Mouffe, Peggy Phelan, Richard Roberts, John Urry, Slavoj Zizek.**

*Details from: June Rye, CSCV, Lancaster University  
Bowland College, Lancaster LA1 4YT  
Telephone: (01524) 592497 Fax: (01524) 594238  
Email: J.Rye@Lancaster.ac.uk*