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# Walter Benjamin

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SELECTED WRITINGS

VOLUME 2

1927–1934

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Translated by Rodney Livingstone  
and Others

Edited by Michael W. Jennings,  
Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith

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# Dream Kitsch

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## Gloss on Surrealism

No one really dreams any longer of the Blue Flower.<sup>1</sup> Whoever awakes as Heinrich von Ofterdingen today must have overslept.<sup>2</sup> The history of the dream remains to be written, and opening up a perspective on this subject would mean decisively overcoming the superstitious belief in natural necessity by means of historical illumination. Dreaming has a share in history. The statistics on dreaming would stretch beyond the pleasures of the anecdotal landscape into the barrenness of a battlefield. Dreams have started wars, and wars, from the very earliest times, have determined the propriety and impropriety—indeed, the range—of dreams.

No longer does the dream reveal a blue horizon. The dream has grown gray. The gray coating of dust on things is its best part. Dreams are now a shortcut to banality. Technology consigns the outer image of things to a long farewell, like banknotes that are bound to lose their value. It is then that the hand retrieves this outer cast in dreams and, even as they are slipping away, makes contact with familiar contours. It catches hold of objects at their most threadbare and timeworn point. This is not always the most delicate point: children do not so much clasp a glass as snatch it up. And which side does an object turn toward dreams? What point is its most decrepit? It is the side worn through by habit and patched with cheap maxims. The side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch.

Chattering, the fantasy images of things fall to the ground like leaves from a Leporello picture book, *The Dream*.<sup>3</sup> Maxims shelter under every leaf: “Ma plus belle maîtresse c’est la paresse,” and “Une médaille vernie pour le plus grand ennui,” and “Dans le corridor il y a quelqu’un qui me veut à la mort.”<sup>4</sup> The Surrealists have composed such lines, and their allies among

Cinema kiosk in front of the Strastnoy monastery, Moscow, 1932. Photo by Alexander Rodchenko. Courtesy Alexander Lavrentiev, Moscow.

the artists have copied the picture book. *Répétitions* is the name that Paul Eluard gives to one of his collections of poetry, for whose frontispiece Max Ernst has drawn four small boys. They turn their backs to the reader, to their teacher and his desk as well, and look out over a balustrade where a balloon hangs in the air. A giant pencil rests on its point in the window sill. The repetition of childhood experience gives us pause: when we were little, there was as yet no agonized protest against the world of our parents. As children in the midst of that world, we showed ourselves superior. When we reach for the banal, we take hold of the good along with it—the good that is there (open your eyes) right before you.

For the sentimentality of our parents, so often distilled, is good for providing the most objective image of our feelings. The long-windedness of their speeches, bitter as gall, has the effect of reducing us to a crimped picture puzzle; the ornament of conversation was full of the most abysmal entanglements. Within is heartfelt sympathy, is love, is kitsch. “Surrealism is called upon to reestablish dialogue in its essential truth. The interlocutors are freed from the obligation to be polite. He who speaks will develop no theses. But in principle, the reply cannot be concerned for the self-respect of the person speaking. For in the mind of the listener, words and images are only a springboard.” Beautiful sentiments from Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto*. They articulate the formula of the dialogic misunderstanding—which is to say, of what is truly alive in the dialogue. “Misunderstanding” is here another word for the rhythm with which the only true reality forces its way into the conversation. The more effectively a man is able to speak, the more successfully he is misunderstood.

In his *Vague de rêves* [Wave of Dreams], Louis Aragon describes how the mania for dreaming spread over Paris. Young people believed they had come upon one of the secrets of poetry, whereas in fact they did away with poetic composition, as with all the most intensive forces of that period.<sup>5</sup> Saint-Pol-Roux,<sup>6</sup> before going to bed in the early morning, puts up a notice on his door: “Poet at work.”—This all in order to blaze a way into the heart of things abolished or superseded, to decipher the contours of the banal as rebus, to start a concealed William Tell from out of wooded entrails, or to be able to answer the question, “Where is the bride?” Picture puzzles, as schemata of the dreamwork, were long ago discovered by psychoanalysis. The Surrealists, with a similar conviction, are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things. They seek the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history. The very last, the topmost face on the totem pole, is that of kitsch. It is the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things.

What we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it

yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior. The new man bears within himself the very quintessence of the old forms, and what evolves in the confrontation with a particular milieu from the second half of the nineteenth century—in the dreams, as well as the words and images, of certain artists—is a creature who deserves the name of “furnished man.”

Written in 1925; published in *Die neue Rundschau*, January 1927. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 620–622. Translated by Howard Eiland.

## Notes

1. The subtitle, “Gloss on Surrealism,” was used as the title of the published article in 1927.
2. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is the title of an unfinished novel by Novalis, first published in 1802. Von Ofterdingen is a medieval poet in search of the mysterious Blue Flower, which bears the face of his unknown beloved.
3. Leporello is Don Giovanni’s servant in Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*. He carries around a catalogue of his master’s conquests, which accordians out to show the many names. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a German publishing house, Leporello Verlag, which produced such pop-out books.
4. “My loveliest mistress is idleness.” “A gold medal for the greatest boredom.” “In the hall, there is someone who has it in for me.”
5. Reference is to the years 1922–1924. *Une vague de rêves* was first published in the fall of 1924.
6. Pseudonym of Paul Roux (1861–1940), French Symbolist poet.

and justify them. This task would of course be insoluble if their behavior really were—as radio managers and especially presenters like to imagine—more or less impossible to calculate, or simply dependent upon the content of the programs. But the most superficial reflection proves the opposite. No reader has ever closed a just-opened book with the finality with which the listener switches off the radio after hearing perhaps a minute and a half of a talk. The problem is not the remoteness of the subject matter; in many cases, this might be a reason to keep listening for a while before making up one's mind. It is the voice, the diction, and the language—in a word, the formal and technical side of the broadcast—that so frequently make the most desirable programs unbearable for the listener. Conversely, for the same reason but very rarely, programs that might seem totally irrelevant can hold the listener spellbound. (There are speakers who can hold your attention while reading weather forecasts.) Accordingly, it is the technical and formal aspects of radio that will enable the listener to train himself and to outgrow this barbarism. The matter is really quite obvious. We need only reflect that the radio listener, unlike every other kind of audience, welcomes the human voice into his house like a visitor. Moreover, he will usually judge that voice just as quickly and sharply as he would a visitor. Yet no one tells it what is expected of it, what the listener will be grateful for or will find unforgivable, and so on. This can be explained only with reference to the indolence of the masses and the narrowmindedness of broadcasters. Not that it would be an easy task to describe the way the voice relates to the language used—for this is what is involved. But if radio paid heed only to the arsenal of impossibilities that seems to grow by the day—if, for example, it merely provided from a set of negative assumptions a typology of comic errors made by speakers—it would not only improve the standard of its programs but would win listeners over to its side by appealing to them as experts. And this is the most important point of all.

Fragment written no later than November 1931; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 1506–1507. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Mickey Mouse

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From a conversation with Gustav Glück and Kurt Weill.<sup>1</sup>—Property relations in Mickey Mouse cartoons: here we see for the first time that it is possible to have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen.

The route taken by Mickey Mouse is more like that of a file in an office than it is like that of a marathon runner.

In these films, mankind makes preparations to survive civilization.

Mickey Mouse proves that a creature can still survive even when it has thrown off all resemblance to a human being. He disrupts the entire hierarchy of creatures that is supposed to culminate in mankind.

These films disavow experience more radically than ever before. In such a world, it is not worthwhile to have experiences.

Similarity to fairy tales. Not since fairy tales have the most important and most vital events been evoked more unsymbolically and more unatmosphärically. There is an immeasurable gulf between them and Maeterlinck or Mary Wigman.<sup>2</sup> All Mickey Mouse films are founded on the motif of leaving home in order to learn what fear is.<sup>3</sup>

So the explanation for the huge popularity of these films is not mechanization, their form; nor is it a misunderstanding. It is simply the fact that the public recognizes its own life in them.

Fragment written in 1931; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, 144–145. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.

## Notes

1. Gustav Glück (1902–1973), perhaps Benjamin's closest friend during the 1930s, was director of the foreign section of the Reichskreditgesellschaft (Imperial Credit Bank) in Berlin until 1938. He was able to arrange the transfer to Paris of the fees Benjamin received from his occasional contributions to German newspapers until 1935. In 1938 Glück emigrated to Argentina; after World War II, he was a board member of the Dresdner Bank.
2. Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949), Belgian writer and dramatist, was one of the leading figures of the Symbolist movement at the end of the nineteenth century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1911. Mary Wigman (1886–1973) was one of the greatest German dancers of the twentieth century. A pupil of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze, she developed her own school in Dresden and Leipzig, creating expressionist solo and group dances that were mainly performed without music except for percussion accompaniment. The idea was that the shape of the dance would emerge from the dancer's own rhythmic movement.
3. This refers to a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm—"The Boy Who Left Home in Order To Learn the Meaning of Fear"—which also served as a principal theme in Wagner's version of the Siegfried legend.

## In Almost Every Example We Have of Materialist Literary History

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In almost every example we have of materialist literary history, what we find is a thick-skinned tracing out of the lines in the works themselves, whose social content—if not social tendency—lies partly on the surface. In contrast, the sociologist's detective-like expectation, which this method above all others might be expected to satisfy, is almost always disappointed.

Literary history burdened by value judgment. The scientific value of my theory of the fame of great works.

The enjoyability of all works of art: not simply because they can be explained but because—thanks to these explanations—they become the repositories not only of abstract or specific truth-contents, but of truth-contents that are shot through with material contents.

For the true critic, the actual *judgment* is the ultimate step—something that comes with a struggle after everything else, never the basis of his activities. In the ideal case, he forgets to pass judgment.

On the point that criticism is internal to the work: in the case of great works, art is merely a transitional stage. They were something else (in the course of their gestation) and become something else again (in the state of criticism).

Fragment written in 1931; unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. *Gesammelte Schriften*, VI, 172. Translated by Rodney Livingstone.