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The *Flâneur* in the Borsig Locomotive Works:

Walter Benjamin, the Berlin Radio Youth Hour, and the Pedagogy of Memory

Among the great cities of the world, few match Berlin for the fascination of their multifaceted and complex spaces, practices, and forms of public memory. From the vast modernist factory halls of the Siemensstadt to the shaded research institutes of Dahlem; from the many memorials found around the city commemorating shattering violence and genocide to the ongoing use and reuse of the remaining structures of Nazi representative architecture like the Olympic Stadium and the former Tempelhof Airport, Berlin's urban fabric weaves together numerous contrasting threads of representation and memorialization. Recent writers from wide-ranging backgrounds including Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Yoko Tawada, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Wladimir Kaminer have found Berlin a unique site and setting for an ongoing conversation on identity, memory, place, and meaning. One scholar in particular, however, a thinker whose attention to the neglected, discarded, fragmentary material so often thrown off by the overt and tacit violence of urban modernity, presents a study in contrasts commensurate with Berlin, the city in which his experience and critical optics were first formed: Walter Benjamin. While Benjamin's greatest essays have occasioned vast and intensive critical commentary, neglected corners of his work remain. This essay attends closely to one of them for its merging of the themes of memory and experience in the urban fabric of the modern technological economy: Benjamin's radio address for young people entitled "Borsig," which describes a visit to the machine works of that name in the Berlin district of Tegel. In it, Benjamin explores how the trivial details of modern life become the foundation of an active practice of historical memory. His voice leads his young listeners on a historical and auditory adventure that resolves into an

educational process. The seemingly private is rendered public; the apparently insignificant is rendered political.

Benjamin's Early Career: Scholarship, and Education, and Radio

For today's scholars with the luxury of hindsight, Benjamin's work overflows with fascination and critical energy, and places him securely among the visionary critics of the twentieth century. His writings, and in particular his best-known essays like "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility," demand careful, layered, sophisticated reading, and reward that reading with rich reflection on their varied subjects. During Benjamin's life, however, he faced a constant struggle to make a living. Setbacks regularly shadowed his productivity. One of these setbacks presents a particularly harsh irony, because it foreclosed the possibility of a career path most closely associated with scholarship, with the origins of knowledge, and with youth, all of which intrigued Benjamin intellectually: teaching. This was the failure of his attempt to present to the University of Frankfurt in 1925 his *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel* as a habilitation thesis that could qualify him for a university professorship (Eiland and Jennings 231). In the fifteen years remaining to him, he never taught students formally.

After this forced abandonment of his somewhat ambivalent academic ambitions, Benjamin wrote for a wide range of venues in his constant search for work that could support him and his family while enabling him to advance his critical-scholarly ideas. This search eventually yielded a recurring task that expanded his creative activity into new technologically mediated spheres while also, for a time, producing reasonable remuneration: he became a regular

contributor, particularly between late 1929 and early 1933, to the growing medium of radio. The stations established in Berlin (*Funk-Stunde Berlin AG*; founded 1923) and Frankfurt (*Südwestdeutsche Rundfunkdienst AG*, founded 1924) only a few years before (both originally as private joint-stock companies) engaged him dozens of times to speak on and contribute to their programs. The 2014 publication in English translation, edited by Lecia Rosenthal, of a wide selection of the extant transcripts of Benjamin's radio work has made this material newly accessible for English-language scholars. These writings have also been recently translated into French and Italian (Benjamin, *Burattini, Streghe E Briganti*; Benjamin, *Ecrits Radiophoniques*). All of this work owes a significant debt to the scholarship of Sabine Schiller-Lerg, who tracked down many of the extant transcripts in the early 1980s. In Rosenthal's words, "despite their thematic and formal richness, and notwithstanding the seemingly inexhaustible interest in all things Benjamin, the radio works have received surprisingly little critical attention" (xi). Their increased accessibility is welcome, and this essay provides an initial close reading of one representative text among them.

Benjamin's radio work showed many affinities with teaching, and he reflected upon the resulting didactic themes in a range of other writings. Through it he spoke regularly to large audiences in his own voice, drawing them into vivid explorations of the worlds of the past and the present. The intended audience for a large portion of Benjamin's radio work provides perhaps the most revealing contrast between his reputation as an esoteric, complex scholar and the ways in which his radio work crossed into the sphere of teaching: Benjamin gave a large portion of these radio addresses specifically in programs intended for young people, titled by the stations *Jugendstunde* [Youth Hour] or in at least one case in Frankfurt *Schulfunkstunde* [School Radio Hour] (*Radio Benjamin* 377-86). In *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, Jaeho Kang reflects

extensively on Benjamin's identification of radio with "a new media environment that requires completely new principles of pedagogy" (70). In his radio work, Benjamin came closest to practicing such principles. In late 1929, as the radio work was commencing, he even published an essay entitled "A Communist Pedagogy" that reflects upon the relationship between the education of children and of "adult masses" (*Selected Writings, Vol. 2* 273-75). Gillian Lathey further reflects on the relationship between pedagogy and the representation of the city of Berlin. Pedagogy is also a recurring motif in Eiland and Jennings (94-96; 218-19).

The Berlin Radio Youth Hour: Listening for Historical Possibility in the Space of Technical Modernity

The addresses presented on Berlin Radio's Youth Hour stand out as particularly intriguing, for they focused for a period of approximately a year in 1929 and 1930 on subjects related to the city of Berlin itself. They can thus be read both together and against the work on Paris and its arcades that Benjamin had begun in earnest as early as 1927, and that in 1930, as he commenced the most intensive period of his radio work, he characterized as "the theater of all my struggles and all my ideas" (Eiland and Jennings 285). Though Benjamin himself played down the significance of all of his radio works, they reward close attention, for they offer expansive resonances with many of the rich threads of his methods and ideas (Rosenthal xvii). In them Benjamin presents an observing persona, one who takes listeners, through a vivid spoken style, on imagined journeys to destinations both everyday and strange.

In these works, the minutest details merge with grand historical themes. When explored today, these addresses suffer a double remove from the immediacy of their original presentation:

not only have they lost the character of representing a lived experience of Berlin's present, but they must also be experienced through the reading of written transcripts rather than heard in Benjamin's own voice. This attenuated immediacy, however, makes the addresses all the more fascinating as sites of critical access to Benjamin's critical-dialectical methods. A major scholarly exception to Rosenthal's comment on the lack of critical attention to the Berlin radio addresses, Jeffrey Mehlman's *Walter Benjamin for Children*, adopts a metaphor from a pair of the best known of the Berlin addresses, those entitled "Berliner Spielzeugwanderung" [Berlin Toy Tour], drawing a link between them and Benjamin's better-known writings: "these scripts at times take on the uncanny cast of Benjaminian miniatures, theoretical 'toys' [...]" (4). Although several of the addresses known to have been given in the series appear completely lost, the extant texts and known themes that focused specifically on Berlin, all delivered in 1929 and 1930, include puppet theater, Berlin dialect, street markets, tenements (translated "rental barracks") "demonic" Berlin (on E.T.A. Hoffmann), a street urchin (translated "guttersnipe"), two explorations of toys as part of Berlin's urban fabric, the Borsig locomotive and machine works, the painter Theodor Hosemann, a visit to a copper works (lost), another to a brass works, and "The Life of the Automobile" (lost) (Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin* 377-85). Later addresses given in the Berlin Radio Youth Hour, like "The Bootleggers" and "Cagliostro," both of which Mehlman uses extensively to establish his reading of the addresses that focuses on themes of fraud and catastrophe, no longer took Berlin itself as their subject (Mehlman 7-11; 52-58). As sites of theoretical play, even playfulness, however, these works concentrate the stakes of Benjamin's methods and goals, revealing moments of insight as sparkling as those of the creative miniatures in *One-Way Street*.

In the Berlin radio addresses, the first-person observer of the city stages himself, for an audience of young people, moving, seeing, and hearing—all through speech. Berlin's past and present flow together in them, offering views into the city's lived and living history. The radio stations, in their program listings, further noted Benjamin as the "presenter" of many of the addresses, and the "I" of the first-person observer therefore shades into an autobiographical representation. Berlin's past is Benjamin's past, as is revealed by two of his most directly autobiographical works: *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1932-1938) and "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932). Gerhard Richter places these two written texts at the center of his analysis in his *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography*, and concludes that "the images of the subject that emerge from these autobiographical reflections inform Benjamin's entire corpus" (33). Mirko Hall, building on Richter, argues that "sound first occupies a prominent discursive role in Benjamin's two autobiographical studies" (84). Curiously, neither notes that they were conceived and written contemporaneously with Benjamin's period of closest engagement with the radio medium, and with two of Benjamin's essays that directly explore the radio medium: "Reflections on Radio" (1931; unpublished at the time) and "Theater and Radio: The Mutual Control of their Educational Program" (1932) (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 543-44; 84-86). New translations of these essays also appear in *Radio Benjamin* (363-68). Mehlman's work provides the appropriate link between these autobiographical narratives of the self and the radio work by positing that the radio addresses represent "the closest we can hope to come to the transcript of a psychoanalysis of Walter Benjamin" (5).

The Berlin radio addresses extend these past-oriented reflections on autobiography and the self into Berlin's present, building a multi-layered aural representation of the city. The linguistic correlative of this process is the present-tense narration that suffuses the Berlin radio

addresses. The Berlin aurally imagined by Benjamin thus becomes a space in which the dialectical-materialist form of historical understanding that he most thoroughly explored in his essay on “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian” strives toward realization as “an afterlife of that which has been understood and whose pulse can be felt in the present” (Amidon and Krier 247). Benjamin’s goal with this claim is to develop the possibility of a historical knowledge that serves not primarily to create hierarchy and authority in the service of the domination of others, but to bring into consciousness the traces of a past that can illuminate the present and its political tensions, and therefore potentially assist in the formation of a more just future. Dialectical-materialist history, therefore, is history in which memory becomes public on the way to becoming political. The radio addresses explore the possibility of the transmission of knowledge adequate to such a history: the observer stages the city, the city recursively stages the observer, and the audience attends to this process through listening. The *flâneur* becomes teacher.

The story of the inception of the Berlin radio addresses is a story of two friendships. These were with two figures who never attained the intellectual prominence of several of Benjamin’s close interlocutors and correspondents like Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Bertolt Brecht, or Gershom Scholem. They nonetheless accompanied Benjamin through many of the stations of his personal and intellectual journey in the 1920s and early 1930s, and made the radio work possible both institutionally and conceptually. These friends were Ernst Schoen, who mediated Benjamin’s engagement by the radio stations, and Franz Hessel, whose thoughts on Berlin as encountered in the experience of the *flâneur* developed in concert and collaboration with Benjamin’s parallel interest in Paris.

Ernst Schoen and Benjamin first forged a friendship as children at the Kaiser Friedrich School in Berlin-Charlottenburg. Eiland and Jennings give their relationship special prominence,

and describe it, alongside his similar friendship with Alfred Cohn, as uniquely close: “none of his later friendships were marked by the trust and intimacy that characterized his adult relationship to Cohn and Schoen” (22). Their friendship developed into a lively correspondence, one that grants a wide range of insight into Benjamin’s early thought, including experiences ranging from his reactions to the outbreak of First World War to the selection of his dissertation topic on Romantic art criticism to the emergence of his sympathy for communism. By 1924 Schoen had become a director of programming at the radio station in Frankfurt. While Benjamin was unable to parlay this connection into a salaried position at the station in that year, due apparently to his excessive salary demands, this situation did not affect his relationship with Schoen, and they continued to work closely together. In 1929, Benjamin published a “Conversation with Ernst Schoen,” which explored the educational possibilities of radio (Eiland and Jennings 220; 330-331). In 1932, their work together on the Frankfurt Radio Youth Hour led to a collaboration that resulted in productions that expanded the artistic scope of Benjamin’s writing. These were two radio plays for children, “Much Ado about Kasper” and “The Cold Heart.” Schoen, a talented composer, wrote music for the latter (Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin* 219-48). Their paths diverged after 1933, with Schoen establishing a tenuous foothold in London, and Benjamin in Paris. Their correspondence nonetheless continued to the end of Benjamin’s life.

Franz Hessel was the other friend whose relationship with Benjamin left a significant intellectual stamp that finds expression in the radio addresses. Hessel’s exchanges with Benjamin deepened his appreciation for the figure of the *flâneur*, and created links in Benjamin’s thought between Berlin and Paris as sites of experience. Eiland and Jennings—biographers not prone to the overuse of superlatives—state:

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the long walks Benjamin took with Hessel in Berlin and Paris in the twenties[...]. In their walks through the streets of the metropolis, Benjamin must have had the

glimmerings of ideas that would come to fruition in what is surely the most gripping analysis of modernity to be produced in the twentieth century” (255-56).

The first short essay exploring the ideas that became Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* was written in late 1927, possibly with Hessel’s direct collaboration (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 871-72). In October of 1929, just as the radio work was getting seriously underway, Benjamin published a richly enthusiastic review of Hessel’s book *On Foot in Berlin* that he gave the title “The Return of the *Flâneur*.” In it he specifically asks the question whether a figure that emerged from a Parisian milieu can adequately represent the experience of Berlin: “What it [the city] reveals is the endless spectacle of *flânerie* that we thought had been finally relegated to the past. And can it be reborn here, in Berlin of all places, where it never really flourished? [...] The *flâneur* is the creation of Paris” (Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 2* 263). The answer, generously mediated through Benjamin’s subtle rhetoric, is of course yes, for “the philosophy of the *flâneur* has never been more profoundly grasped than in these words of Hessel’s” (265). Eiland and Jennings also note the significance of this review (329-30). The *flâneur* thus becomes a figure capable of interrogating not just Paris, but also Berlin, just at the moment when Benjamin encountered a medium that could allow him to narrate to audiences listening in real time the experience of observing the city.

“Borsig”: Theory, Experience, and Experiment

Among the Berlin radio addresses, one in particular, “Borsig,” stands out for its uniquely dense warp and weft of Benjaminian themes and figurations. Curiously, while scholars like Lathey, Mehlman, Baudouin, and Rosenthal who have engaged closely with the radio works often take note of this text for its representation of industrial labor and production processes,

none has engaged in a close reading of it. The one exception is Thomas Klikauer, who highlights its representative qualities among the radio addresses, but also does not read it closely. In it the material of the past becomes the production of the present—both industrially and conceptually—and together they resolve into future potential. The specular, narrating presence of Benjamin’s “I” tracks alongside the production of the Borsig works across time and space, rendering these together through the authorial voice carried upon the airwaves. This voice furthermore stages itself not as authoritative, but always as a mediated conduit to the experience of the world. The eye and ear of the *flâneur* become the voice of the teacher, leading listener-students into the world of experience out of which knowledge grows. The authorial “I” scans with its narrated gaze from the local to the global, from the instantaneously ephemeral details of industrial production across vast temporal and spatial expanses. Like the *flâneur* whose wandering, observing presence suffuses Benjamin’s work on Paris, Benjamin’s scholarly-critical gaze dissolves and resolves the material of the past, seeking openings to the possibility of ongoing critical engagement in the present, and to the political and cultural forms of the future.

The long and often interrupted gestation of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* spanned the entire period of the production of the radio addresses. As Benjamin traveled between Frankfurt and Berlin to deliver them, he began developing the project that would fill his years of exile in Paris. As the project grew, he cycled through stages of collecting the vast variety of source material that he built into the project’s complex montage of quotation and interpretation. Benjamin returned time and again to the figure that provided metaphorical, historical, and even methodological grounding for the sprawling project, and which he had already confronted in his exchanges with Franz Hessel: the *flâneur*. In the *Arcades Project*’s source material as well as in the several essays on nineteenth-century Paris and the work of Charles Baudelaire that Benjamin

wrote as direct or indirect exposés of the project, the *flâneur's* sensations generate a mode of experience adequate to the emergence of a historical understanding of the modern city. Susan Buck-Morss quotes the *Arcades Project* in explaining the constitutive distinction that Benjamin makes between different modes of experience, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, by relating one specifically to the *flâneur*, which she sees as a figure of idleness: “Benjamin’s distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* paralleled that between production, the active creation of one’s reality, and a reactive (consumerist) response to it: ‘*Erfahrung* is the product of work; *Erlebnis* is the phantasmagoria of the idler” (38). Eiland and Jennings read Benjamin’s essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” to develop a more variegated reading of the distinction:

Long experience [*Erfahrung*] is understood as an accumulated body of knowledge, a seasoned wisdom not only retainable in human memory but transmissible from generation to generation[...]. Isolated experience [*Erlebnis*] emerges [...] as a form of immediate experience bound to the shocks encountered by individuals among the urban masses; far from being retainable or transmissible, isolated experience is usually parried by consciousness in such a way as to leave a trace in the unconscious (643).

Benjamin’s “I” of the Berlin radio addresses stages this distinction dialectically, linking the immediacy of *Erlebnis* and the reflexivity of *Erfahrung*. The “I” figures itself as a real-time observer, but for an audience that is present only aurally. For that audience, therefore, experience must become reflection to enable knowledge, and Benjamin’s “I” strives to make this possible. The representation of the Borsig factory, the most vividly described site of industrial production among all his radio subjects, builds the distinction into pedagogical form, developing for an audience of young people a sophisticated representation of the processes and stakes of industrial modernity.

“Convolute M,” near the center of the immense *Arcades Project*, makes the figure of the *flâneur* the focus of direct inquiry. Here, as in many other parts of the project, modes of public

transportation become the technological correlative of modes of experience: omnibuses, trains, streetcars—they all place individuals into social proximity in new and revealing ways. The *flâneur's* interiority, however, heightens the stakes of urban transport. In the middle of *Convolute M*, Benjamin explores the social consequences of a psychological assertion by Georg Simmel that: “Therefore the one who sees, without hearing, is much more [...] worried than the one who hears without seeing. This principle is of great importance in understanding the sociology of the modern city” (qtd. in Mehlman 5). This little psycho-social aphorism encapsulates the experiential world of the radio addresses, and particularly that of Borsig. Benjamin’s “I” takes young listeners into a space largely closed to the public eye, and they hear a vivid sound-portrait of it. They hear without seeing, discharging some of the shocks of the city’s experiential world. The anxiety of invisibility is transformed into a mutual experience of observation that generates the possibility of knowledge. *Erlebnis* becomes *Erfahrung*.

Reading “Borsig”—Hearing Memory

“Borsig” commences with a sentence built around the participial form of *Erlebnis* [*erlebt*]: “we have now experienced a great deal of Berlin” (50). This is indirect experience, however, for it comes by way of Benjamin’s “I” reviewing the subject matter of previous Berlin radio addresses, which he does particularly with respect to those focused on Berlin street life: markets, commerce on the streets, traffic. Benjamin’s “I” thus initiates his narrated observational journey to the Borsig works in the mode of experience ascribed by Buck-Morss to the idler-flâneur: *Erlebnis*. In “Borsig,” Benjamin’s “I” seeks to engage the observational mode of the *flâneur* precisely to explore a fascinating site not just of the history of industrial production, but

of its presence and present. Buck-Morss's choice of a quotation from the *Arcades Project* reveals the stakes involved: "Time becomes 'a dream-web where the most ancient occurrences are attached to those of today [...]" (39). Benjamin's narration weaves just such a web, which he enunciates to his young listeners.

After reviewing several of the themes of previous radio addresses, Benjamin's "I"—here pluralized to "we"—makes a strikingly causal claim about Berlin's rapid growth into a large city. Heavy industry and trade, he asserts, are the "thing that has allowed Berlin to become a city of three million inhabitants—of which we are but a few—and it's perhaps to this that we owe our knowing each other as Berliners [*miteinander Bekanntschaft machen*]" (50). Here, the past is rendered public. Benjamin's "I" claims that Berlin industry links historical change in economic processes to the sphere of the social, and ultimately to the radio voice's social knowledge of the listening audience. Immediately the "I" further emphasizes the social stakes of industrial production by initiating the discussion of the "single company" involved through statistics about the workforce that embed it as a population within Berlin's greater one: "I'll be showing you an industry [...] just one single company, to be exact, in which you'll find one-thousandth of Berlin's three million inhabitants. It's actually even more than that: the workforce at Borsig, which I will tell you about today, is 3,900 strong, plus 1,000 clerks[...]" (50). This establishing paragraph-sequence thus links modes of experience and sensation, historical change, industry, and the social world of Berlin.

Benjamin's "I" imagines his young listeners, almost as *flâneurs*-in-training, having already achieved some knowledge of Borsig through observation on excursions or field trips. The passage begins by staging what appears to be a straightforwardly decorous educational scene of homage to great Berliners of the past: "On your class trips to Tegel, your teacher has surely

shown you the villa belonging to the Humboldt family. I mean the two brothers Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt [...]” (50). Another layer of historical and pedagogical reference then appears here. This is, of course, to the establishment of the University of Berlin that now bears the Humboldts’ name. Immediately, however, Benjamin’s “I” irreverently turns the educational romance of teachers and revered historical educators against itself. The Humboldts “sit atop the columns in front of the university, as if they still haven’t graduated or they’re playing hooky” (50-51). With this humorously jarring change of tone, two significant thematic elements of the radio addresses flash into view. The first is a moment of conspiratorial solidarity between the narrating voice and the imagined young listeners: the world of adult authority may be everywhere present, but cannot participate in the listening experience through the paying of attention in the same way as the young audience can. Benjamin’s “I” can speak to the young audience as if in the absence, if only momentary, of parental authority. Youthful transgressions become possible. Mehlman reads the conclusion of “Berlin Toy Tour II” for both its affinity with the figure of the *flâneur* and a similarly conspiratorial moment between Benjamin’s “I” and his young audience (67-69). The second of these thematizes a state of mind that parallels, if perhaps in an attenuated fashion, the experience of shock in the modern city: scenes of astonishment. The youthful listeners are led to places where they are staged as surprised or startled. Here, upon entering a “hall” just inside the entrance gate of the Borsig factory complex, this emotion is produced by seemingly trivial part of the immense industrial landscape just opening up to the listener: the row of stands that holds the employees’ time cards.

In imagining the young audience in a state of astonishment, Benjamin’s “I” comes perhaps closest to revealing one of Benjamin’s own intellectual fascinations: the knitting together of past, present, and future as the only adequate form of historical representation. In the

factory's timekeeping system, the past of work done, the present of workers on or off their shifts, and the future payments that will be derived from the information on the cards become readable together through a single somewhat ephemeral object. That same object links a written trace of the past labor of the workers to its ongoing economic transformation into a monetary wage, becoming a correlative of Marx's description of the alienation of value from the labor of the worker that enables the circulation of capital and profits of the capitalist. The vast racks of time cards thus evoke, especially through the imagined astonishment of the young audience, the "dialectics at a standstill" that Benjamin so famously explored in Convolute N ("On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress") of the *Arcades Project* (Pensky 193).

Together these widely varied objects and elements perceived and related by Benjamin's "I" resolve into a montage of observed objects, places, and people. The narrating "I" of the radio address adds temporal dimensions to this montage as well: the past of the objects and people, the present of the imagined experience, and even the future of production and exchange. The "I" cuts from one place—and one time—to another, bringing the radio address into contact with two other artistic forms that fascinated Benjamin for their techniques of montage, photography and film. Each carried the potential to make the experience of shock aesthetically and politically productive. Michael Jennings's vivid title for an exploration of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, "The Mausoleum of Youth," manifests the stakes of Benjamin's interest in montage, and their significance for his methods in a directly autobiographical context. Hall argues similarly: "One should not underestimate the importance of montage for Benjamin as a progressive artistic medium" (95). The simple structure of the Berlin radio addresses may appear to leave montage in the background. It nonetheless remains just as powerfully and poignantly

present, nowhere more so than in the layered histories and clanging industrial cacophony of the Borsig works.

Upon entering the Borsig plant complex through the red brick gate, Benjamin's "I" narrates an experience that links his language to that of another major theorist of the representation of modern experience, one with whom, at the time he was giving the Berlin radio addresses in 1929 and 1930, he had recently developed an increasingly close personal and intellectual friendship: Bertolt Brecht. Benjamin had apparently sought Brecht's acquaintance as early as 1924, but his overtures took some time to be reciprocated (Eiland and Jennings 221). Erdmut Wizisla emphasizes that Brecht's didactic theories of the *Lehrstück* (learning-play) fascinated Benjamin during the period of the radio work. As Brecht developed his theories of estrangement [*Verfremdung*] during the 1930s, he was in close contact with Benjamin, and after they both left Germany in 1933, they often spent long stretches together at Brecht's summer home in Denmark (Eiland and Jennings 321-23; 451-66).

The radio program on Borsig reinforces the Marxist values that Benjamin and Brecht would explore in their discussion during the 1930s. The first encounter with the Borsig plant is an experience of estrangement: "the first thing that would strike you would [...] be how difficult it is to find your way around, how foreign [*fremd*] the place feels [...]" (51). Immediately he also links this feeling of estrangement to language that brings together the sphere of identity, the sense of *belonging in* the plant, with economic relations, the sense of *belonging to* the plant. This is done with the German verb *gehören*, which connotes the ownership of property and the sense of belonging to a community. The translator of "Borsig," Jonathan Lutes, meets the challenging task of rendering these layers—in the spirit of Benjamin's own fascination with translation—by the use of the English word "business": "[...] how someone who doesn't work at the factory has

no business being here at all [*wie man gleich merkt, daß hier eigentlich jemand, der nicht zum Werk gehört, gar nichts zu suchen hat*]” (51; Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* 112). Borsig’s workers identify powerfully with the firm, but they nonetheless remain subject to the alienation of their labor into profit. Massed labor, like all social activity, is a form of public action founded upon knowledge and memory.

Benjamin’s “I” now turns its interest to the structures and infrastructures of the plant complex, its railways and canals, its some 20 workshops and erecting halls, its not-quite-complete, not-yet-landmark twelve-story office tower built with “beautiful glass bricks [*glasierten Ziegeln*].” His language builds poetic and onomatopoeic power through vivid accretions of technical terms, their compound consonants hissing and banging and chuffing like the locomotives and boilers and machines produced by the firm. Several such word-trains culminate in a scene imagining the young listeners being asked which parts of the production complex they might like to enter and observe directly. This hypothetical question accelerates into an astonishing pileup of German compound nouns that is impressive enough visually, but in Benjamin’s on-air pronunciation could hardly fail to produce listeners shocked into submission by the noise-language of industrial high technology: “low-pressure rotators with high-pressure leveraging [*Niederdruckläufe mit Überdruckverschaufelung*]” (52). Rosenthal reflects on how Benjamin’s voice, all traces of which unfortunately appear to be lost, would have transmitted these sounds to his young audience (xii-xiv). And indeed the young listeners are, in Benjamin’s representation, left slack-jawed. It is precisely the experienced disconnect between language and knowledge that leads to this state: “You’d stand there with your mouth agape and understand what it is to know German” (52). Having engaged his audience’s commingled senses of wonder and ignorance, Benjamin’s “I” makes the choice for them of what part of the complex to visit:

Borsig's own internal educational division, the apprenticeship department, in which "almost 300 apprentices, for the most part children of men who have been employed at the plant for some time, are molded into future workers" (52). This department even contains an example of that site of proletarian edification through the technological reproducibility of images that Benjamin found so intellectually gripping and politically important a few years after this radio address: a cinema. The strength and profitability of the capitalist corporation stands recursively linked to the personal lives and identities of its workers—and education and film together participate in the advancement and propagation of this production process.

The Task of the Locomotive

The remainder of the "Borsig" radio address, over 50%, takes the text's established, dialectically charged network of themes and concepts and re-orientes them around the Borsig firm's original, best-known, and most publicly visible product: the steam locomotive. The locomotive, while otherwise never the specific object of one of Benjamin's critical or creative texts, here receives its due as perhaps the most powerfully symbolically charged master figure in Benjamin's thought about the emergence of industrial-technological modernity in the nineteenth century. In "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian," Benjamin notes several nineteenth century commentators who saw in the locomotive an allegory of the embodied figures of religious transcendence, becoming for them an "angel," or the "saint of the future" (Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 266). Convolute U of the *Arcades Project* is dedicated to the fascinating if initially somewhat counter-intuitive juxtaposition of "Saint-Simon, Railroads." All through the huge collection of material in the *Arcades Project*, and in particular in Convolute U where

Benjamin turns to the analysis of the economic institution in which it was deployed as the most impressive technological element, the locomotive tracks through the textual montage as a recurrent motif. It does so in concert with Saint-Simonianism, the French utopian political movement that showed near-infinite enthusiasm for technological progress and indulged lavishly in allegorical figurations of technological objects. Benjamin's final interpretive passage in *Convolute U* (U18,5) shows ultimately why the railroad required such attention. It contributes materially to the social processes of class as he developed them out of and beyond Marxist concepts: "The historical signature of the railroad may be found in the fact that it represents the first means of transport—and until the big ocean liners, no doubt also the last—to form masses. The stage coach, the automobile, the airplane carry passengers in small groups only" (Benjamin, *Arcades Project* 602). The railroad, both institutionally and symbolically, concentrates the elements of dialectical-materialist thought and representation.

In the last segment of his address, which likely filled some 10 minutes of airtime, Benjamin takes his young audience into numerous stations of the building of a steam locomotive. He never neglects, of course, to link the process to greater political-economic concerns, from the financing of a large order of locomotives by Serbia through war reparations to the impressive division and saving of labor through highly refined technological processes. And he never fails to engage his young audience not only in the imagination of what they could see, but also what they could hear:

Every year around 600 locomotive boilers are forged here. The noise that greets us sounds like the 600 are being forged right now and all at once. Forty to fifty people might be at work in this giant hall. And since it's over 100 meters long, the individual naturally disappears. But that's the remarkable thing: the noise is deafening yet you barely see anyone" (52).

This passage develops into a metaphorically dense explanation of modern large-scale industrial organization. “Such a system [...] is called vertical integration. One imagines the iron lying in the farthest depths of the Earth and then the production process rising higher and higher, refining itself more and more, until it culminates in the finished product, in this case the locomotive” (53). Borsig, almost alchemically, transmutes material and technological resources, knowledge, and labor to bring into existence the massive locomotives that dominate the transportation of their day. An allegorically parallel historical process creates public from private, future possibility from past practice.

The address moves toward its conclusion with a discussion of something not always associated with large firms: Borsig’s ability to rapidly customize orders for customers. These might be locomotives for Brazilian railroads, which even in the twentieth century fueled locomotives with wood because of the high cost of other fuels, or fireless steam locomotives for facilities like chemical plants or stockyards that could be endangered by fire or soot, and were therefore built not with boilers but with large high-pressure steam tanks that would be filled from external sources at a safe distance. As always, Benjamin’s “I” returns his gaze regularly to Berlin’s past and present. He tells of an episode where the rapid response of Borsig personnel to a developing catastrophe saved the day. Technological catastrophes initiated by natural disasters like storms, including the great Mississippi flood of 1927 and the collapse of the Firth of Tay railway bridge in 1879, were common subjects in Benjamin’s radio addresses both during and after the Berlin period. In this case catastrophe is averted by the competence of the firm: a partial collapse during the construction of the Berlin subway under the Spree River threatened to flood the entire project. Borsig’s ability to engineer and construct overnight five massive specially designed pumps to remove the water and allow the tunneling machinery to be restored saved the

subway (53-54). Mehlman reflects extensively on the theme of catastrophe in the radio addresses, but not upon this mutual implication of natural and technological elements that characterizes Benjamin's discussion of a wide range of disasters (22-37).

The final sections of the address draw back from the cacophony of the factory to return to the description of individuals linked to Borsig in the present and the past. These include particular ways that the firm employs and remunerates specialized labor. The young audience hears of locomotive painters taking their lunch on the factory floor. They meet the "construction supervisors [*Richtmeister*]" who accompany the shipment of Borsig machinery to customers' facilities all over the world, sometimes for years at a time, to assure correct installation and initial operation. Once again here Benjamin's "I" foregrounds the question of knowledge. "How," he asks, "do I know this?" (54). He knows it because of the Borsig's firm's own internal forms of publicity, which take discrete forms of experience and make them widely knowable. The firm has an internal newspaper, and it links personal identification with the firm to the economic incentives deployed to manage it efficiently:

[The newspaper described] notably, all the latest technical engineering inventions. There were also articles by workers, advice columns, and sometimes even complaints. And above all, each issue has a directory of people who have suggested improvements for whatever aspect of the company they were especially familiar with. These suggestions are reviewed by the front office and sometimes remunerated [*prämiiert*] (54).

The firm's newspaper thus connects the experiences of employees, the dissemination of specialized knowledge, and the firm's compensation and incentive systems into a further network.

The address concludes with a long paragraph that collects and stitches together the text's historical and conceptual threads: technological change, property relations, industrial production,

sight and sound, potential, knowledge, education, identity—all past, present, and future, and all linked through the vast and protean diversity of the city of Berlin. Benjamin's "I" departs from the locomotive erecting halls and returns to the outer precincts of the Borsig complex. Here the tone—and the grammatical mood—of address make a subtle but significant shift. The narrative voice speaks in the subjunctive mood, for the first time acknowledging that the sphere of the imaginary is as important to the experience of these radio addresses as is the reality so strikingly portrayed in them: "Had you accompanied me to Borsig, right at the start you would have seen something that, in closing, I will tell [*erzähle*] you about now" (54). The young audience members no longer participate in a grammatically unmediated indicative-mood verbal-textual representation of reality, but return to their position before the radio receiver, seeing the described scenes only in their mind's eye. What they imagine are two antique Borsig products displayed on a pedestal in the courtyard of the complex. Here Benjamin's language revisits tropes from earlier in the text, imagining past, present, and future together with near-simultaneity. These two antique machines are "rather like memorials" (54), but not quite. They make a public presentation of the firm's past, but still only to an internal audience, and divorced from any integration with contemporary production or experience. They therefore cannot represent fully the kind of dialectical-materialist history that successfully liberates the future through knowledge of the past.

Benjamin also fulfills his earlier promise to his young listeners to return to the story of the Humboldt brothers. He does this through reflections on the long corporate life of the Borsig firm, which in 1930 was already 93 years old, and on its founder August Borsig's fascination with exotic plants that impressed even Alexander von Humboldt, the most famous German naturalist of his time. Benjamin's final sentence, however, returns to the master figure that

dominated the address, the steam locomotive. Just as Alexander von Humboldt himself witnessed the celebration of the production of Borsig's 100th locomotive in 1847, the listeners hear of the celebration of the production of the 12,000th. It was a special design built to advance the rationalization and standardization of the locomotive fleet of the Deutsche Reichsbahn, newly consolidated out of the older state railways of the German kingdoms and principalities into a single, massive national monopoly. Benjamin calls it "the model for all locomotives of the Deutsche Reichsbahn" (54).

Conclusion: The Future of Memory

Here, as the address closes, readers today can hardly but remind themselves what was, in 1930, still in the future of Berlin. The apocalyptic-messianic visions of Benjamin's late writings do not prefigure this future, but they uncannily contain its possibility in their dialectical standstill of past, present, and future: Berlin's history as the capital of a regime that administered an unparalleled genocide, which led to the city's own subjection to an orgy of fathomless destruction to the eradicate of the power of that perpetrator administration. The Berlin of today has, therefore, accreted a perhaps uniquely layered accretion of memorial sites. The Borsig complex no longer builds locomotives. But it designed and built hundreds of locomotives that transported the Nazi war machine and its millions of victims, many of which remain in existence today, some even operational. They are the focus of great fascination among military and railroad history buffs. Benjamin's theory of history makes possible the understanding of all of these elements together, for it links such objects, their past use, and the present and future fascination that they exercise long after their everyday function has vanished. The radio address

on Borsig becomes, therefore, far more than a theoretical “toy.” It is a theoretical model, one constructed, like the nineteenth-century engineers’ scale models of locomotives and ships built as proofs of the feasibility of the envisioned products of their work, to help bring about a future. Benjamin represents his “I” as if he were experiencing the visit to the Borsig works as an idling *flâneur*, but he narrates it to his young audience as a teacher. This dialectics of roles—observer, narrator, scholar, teacher—enables a vision of the full historical scale and scope of one of Berlin’s great industrial enterprises, one that made not just German but also world history.

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