

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 8 (2015)

History and Contemporary Literature



Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin* Ed. Lecia Rosenthal. Trans. Jonathan Lutes.

Amy Bromley

doi: [10.12681/syn.16220](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16220)

Copyright © 2015, Amy Bromley



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Walter Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin*. Ed. Lecia Rosenthal. Trans. Jonathan Lutes. London and New York: Verso, 2014. Pp.320. £16.59. (Hd.)

Radio Benjamin is the first English collection of the surviving scripts of Walter Benjamin's radio broadcasts, which aired on Radio Berlin and Radio Frankfurt between 1927 and 1933.¹ These pieces were broadcast live, meaning that there is not, and never has been, a recording of Benjamin voicing them; each was a fleeting event, now vanished but whose traces are preserved in these written texts. This volume has been able to present thirty-nine of around ninety traceable broadcasts. Due to the nature of the archive, it is a collection necessarily fragmented and pointing to its own incompleteness. In medium as well as content, these pieces speak to a double sense of dispersal: reaching many places simultaneously, but also scattering and disappearing, particle by particle. Benjamin himself was acutely aware of this as the nature of 'liveness'; the stories he chose to narrate are of memories and disasters, ancient and modern spaces, tricks of language and understanding. This collection is not only extremely alluring in the range of topics that we get to (only metaphorically) hear Benjamin speak on, but also raises again questions which are at the heart of his more established critical and theoretical reflections: questions of ephemerality and permanence; of politics, children's literature, and historical catastrophe in its fullest sense. In turn, they intersect in a number of ways with contemporary critical concerns around materiality, memory, obsolescence and archive—for which Benjamin's writings themselves are foundational.

The difficulty of working with both a material text and an absent archive of sound is foregrounded in Rosenthal's introduction: while acknowledging that the 'contingencies' and 'the difficult, complex history of the extant manuscripts' are 'part of the history of Benjamin's radio works,' Rosenthal is careful to point out that this is also 'an essential component of the medium of sound broadcast and audio performance itself' (xi). This is a condition specific to Benjamin's scripts, but which also illustrates a more general 'anarchivability' of sound (xii). Drawing on and adding to previous editors' research, Rosenthal's tables in the Appendix show how the editor has chosen to arrange the surviving material, as well as the extent to which it is only a fragment. These tables give a comprehensive account of all the traces—through advertisements and reviews—of the broadcasts, and tell us which ones are lost or missing. Rosenthal does not arrange the available texts in chronological order, but rather constellates them by genre, which is by no means a simple task: Benjamin experimented with many forms which cannot be completely encompassed by 'stories,' 'plays,' 'talks,' 'dialogues' or 'listening models.'

The narrative tensions specific to the medium, particularly in the role of the narrator-broadcaster, are bound up with radio's communication via a disembodied, 'acoustmatic' voice (xiii). In the context of *Radio Benjamin*, this absent voice is displaced onto another voice—that of a literary, written narrative. One intriguing and singular piece is entitled "Sketched in Mobile Dust": *A Novella*' (my italics).² In this Surrealist-inspired fiction, an old man traces in the sand (and in his dream) the name of a "worthless and shameful young love: Olympia" (260). The tale is framed by a narrator who watches: "O, and I thought of fruit; L, I hesitated; Y, and I was embarrassed, as if caught spying. [...] I approached. Even that didn't make him look up—or shall I say wake?—so familiar to him was my presence" (260). Is this "I" a fictional narrator, or is it Benjamin, and what kind of narrator is he? Is he still the conversant radio-host? It would have been interesting to know whether Benjamin spoke the whole story himself or had someone else read the old man's part; on this we can only speculate, but there are also radio plays in the collection which would have required multiple voices. The title 'Sketched in Mobile Dust' beautifully illustrates the collection as a whole: pictures drawn, perhaps hastily or perhaps intricately, with or on a material whose nature is to move; not to settle, not to solidify, but to disperse.³

Radio Benjamin's first section, entitled 'Youth Hour Radio Stories for Children,' in some ways looks forward to his unfinished "theatre of struggles and ideas," *The Arcades Project*.⁴ There are echoes of Paris, of iron construction, architecture and phantasmagoria throughout, in pieces such as 'The Bastille, the Old French State Prison,' 'Berlin Toy Tour (I and II)' and 'A Visit to the Brass Works.' These broadcasts were much more fleeting than the larger vision he had for the *Arcades*, but they present aspects of the same structure in microcosm. At the same time, they are more complete in themselves, and perhaps both of these points can be related to the worlds they aim to evoke for children. The youth of the audience does not require, for Benjamin, that these talks be simplified or didactic: in fact, from his earliest writings youth and dialogue were interrelated (see 'The Metaphysics of Youth' [1913-14]). The ideal listener for Benjamin has always been childlike, but not in innocence of knowledge: rather he is speaking to a listener of childlike honesty, integrity and fascination. This is imbedded in his experiments with the form of radio, which actively aims to create a critical aesthetic and political engagement with the medium. In a fragment printed in the book's final section of his theoretical 'Reflections on Radio,' he writes:

It is the critical error of this institution to perpetuate the fundamental separation between performer and audience, a separation that is undermined by its technological basis. Every child recognizes that it is in the interest of radio to bring anyone before the microphone at any opportunity, making the public witness to interviews and conversations in which anyone might have a say. ...The dull term "presentation" rules, under whose auspices the practitioner confronts the audience

almost unchallenged. This absurdity has led to the fact that still today, after many long years of experience, the audience, thoroughly abandoned, remains inexpert and more or less reliant on sabotage in its critical reactions (switching off). (364)

Again, the child is credited with a particular insight into the potential of radio, as a medium of both reception and feedback. Dialogue is fundamental to the way in which he conceptualises a critical engagement, as democratic and anti-propagandistic. Rather than technology causing isolation (in the studio), Benjamin felt his audience was particularly present and engaged in a conversation; he was aware of the homes into which his voice was being invited and scrutinised as a “guest” (364) —note that it is in no position to force its way in, since people can ‘switch off.’

These broadcasts are aware of their location on the airwaves, and alert(ing) to their cultural and political context. They were broadcast at the fraught time of Depression in Germany, and Benjamin’s last talk was given the day before Hitler was declared chancellor. On the 30th January 1933, instead of a talk from Benjamin, “the Nazi torchlight parade was sent out over the airwaves” (xxi). The stories that Benjamin tells of historical catastrophes like ‘Witch Trials,’ ‘The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii’ and ‘The Mississippi Flood of 1927,’ are necessarily constellated with Benjamin’s own time. With hindsight, the tone of these talks seems more pointed than they may superficially appear as stories for children; he utilises language and the particular present-ness of the medium in such a way as to tell two stories at once.

The scripts published here are part of a larger whole with pieces missing; or rather, *Radio Benjamin* is a central fragment upon which many different wholes converge: the vanished auditory broadcast, for which these scripts are supplements; the historical context that they are broken out of; the archive, in which there are around forty missing scripts; and Benjamin’s other writings, in which the fleeting, the incomplete, and technology are particularly prominent facets. These are embodied in the tensions between sound, print and history most famously addressed in his essay ‘The Storyteller’ (1936), where he writes: “Experience which is passed from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written versions differ least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers (*Selected Writings* III, 2006: 144). Perhaps the experience of telling stories via radio is still in Benjamin’s mind when writing this essay in the 1930s. He has – albeit not namelessly– passed experience across the airwaves, and explicitly conceived of this process as dialogic. Benjamin’s storytelling in this medium is aware of roles of both speaker and listener —it is emphatically not a One Way Street.

These stories come to us now in the form of scripts, differing as little as possible from what Benjamin is likely to have said, but edited and incomplete because they lack a voice. They have in the meantime accrued additional significances and now must be voiced in a different mode and context: to say the least, Benjamin's work has become much more widely acknowledged than it was when he was alive. This volume is likely to spark a renewed critical conversation about the radio broadcasts, and their relationship to Benjamin's other works and concerns will no doubt be a framing question; but in what mode will it be asked? Do they have a different energy, or will they be subsumed under a monologising discourse, in an academic and cultural vogue for Benjamin? Can they retain some kind of radical form and relation to an audience (a particular kind of child-like listener, who is not necessarily a child)? What might we hear in them now, in the context of contemporary criticism, as well as aesthetically and politically?

Radio Benjamin is about the bequeathing of stories, by text or by voice alone; it raises questions of losing or changing stories, and highlights the materiality and permanence of print as opposed to sound. It suggests thoughts about the political, ethical and aesthetic effects of putting historical objects back into play in different contexts. The words on the pages of this book are in some ways only blueprints that need to be given voice to be fully brought into being. Benjamin advocated a firm handling of history, that is, the historical artefact should not be preserved in isolation, treated preciously or monumentalised – it should not be soldered into a chain of historical causality, but rather made (to) live in new contexts.

Amy Bromley
University of Glasgow

¹ This is not, however, the first publication of these texts: they are included in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols., eds. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schweppenhäuser et. al. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972-1989) and *Selected Writings*, 4 vols., ed. Michael W. Jennings et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996-2003). They have been collected in German as *Aufklärung für Kinder: Rundfunkorträge*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), from which they were later recorded and distributed in audio form: *Walter Benjamin: Aufklärung für Kinder (und Erwachsene): Radio broadcasts by Walter Benjamin, 1929–32*. (Bremen: Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, 2003; 2 CDs with booklet).

² The sections are as follows: Section I: Youth Hour Radio Stories for Children; Section II: Radio Plays for Children; Section III: Radio Talks, Plays, Dialogues and Listening Models; Section IV: Writings on Radio, Off Air.

³ The phrase is borrowed from Goethe's poem, "Nicht mehr auf Seidenblatt" [No longer on a leaf of silk]. See Rosenthal, p.260, note 1.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999), translators' foreword, x.

Book reviews

Benjamin was working on sections of *The Arcades Project* at the same time as the radio broadcasts, so they may in fact be intertwined in their conceptions.