

## BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis's

*Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*

*Benjamin Brewer*

Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis, eds.  
*Sparks Will Fly: Benjamin and Heidegger*.  
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This is a book *long* overdue. While many thinkers, scholars, and theorists are indebted to the thought of both Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger and write about them regularly, and while there have been monographs addressing them together, this volume constitutes the first edited volume of its kind in English – a dedicated and sustained attempt to question the relation between the works of Heidegger and Benjamin.<sup>1</sup> In light of the recent publication of the *Black Notebooks*, the confrontation between, to quote the editors' introduction, "Walter Benjamin, the cosmopolitan Jew, and Martin Heidegger, who preferred his peasant hut in remote Todtnauberg to city life" (xi) seems especially timely; even beyond this, however, the relation is both fascinating and urgent, and its stakes are not simply comparative.

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First and most simply, their relation is not entirely posthumous. As Peter Fenves's contribution demonstrates convincingly, they were, at the very least, "entangled," having both attended Rickert's 1913 summer seminar, whether or not they met one another. Even if their paths had not crossed so directly, they would still be connected through Hannah Arendt, who is one of the first people to claim their proximity as thinkers.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, though Heidegger's famous lack of engagement with his contemporaries also touches Benjamin, Benjamin speaks of Heidegger at several moments in letters, dating from his time as a graduate student up until the last decade of his life.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the title of the volume itself comes from a letter to Gershom Scholem in January 1930 where Benjamin, speaking of the *Arcades Project*, writes:

For this book as much as for the *Trauerspiel* book, I cannot dispense with an introduction which will treat of a theory of knowledge and this time above all a theory of knowledge of history. It is there that I will find Heidegger on my path and I anticipate certain sparks to fly from the clash between our two modes, so very different, of considering history.<sup>4</sup>

In another letter to Scholem from April of the same year, Benjamin writes that he and Bertolt Brecht are planning a reading group for the summer of 1930 in which they will "reduce Heidegger to rubble."<sup>5</sup> Much earlier, in 1920, he even lamented (again to Scholem) that Heidegger had already written a habilitation on the topic he himself had hoped to write on, taking the opportunity to pronounce that, despite Heidegger's penchant for "philosophical grandiloquence," the habilitation is ultimately in fact little more than "a bit of good translation work."<sup>6</sup> Clearly Benjamin thought of his own work – at least to some extent – in relation to Heidegger's, though it is ambiguous in the letters whether this is a case of the narcissism of small differences or the recognition of a genuine philosophical enemy.

And this brings us to the second and more compelling reason: their thoughts circle – relentlessly, almost uncannily – around the

same questions and problems: history, language, technology, art, and memory, to name only a few. And while, for someone who reads both seriously, the connections often loom such that it can be difficult to read one without feeling that the other is looking over one's shoulder, the singularity of each as a thinker and writer nonetheless shines through and problematizes even the most compelling similarities. Indeed, perhaps what is most notable about both Benjamin and Heidegger *is* their idiosyncratic ways of dealing with similar themes and problems, an idiosyncrasy that cannot be disentangled from the commitment they share to constantly working *within* the entanglement of writing and thinking. As Benjamin says at the beginning of the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, "it belongs to philosophical writing to stand anew at every turn before the question of presentation," and both Benjamin and Heidegger are exemplars of what it means to pursue the consequences of this thought doggedly, though in markedly different ways.<sup>7</sup> Given this configuration of undeniable idiosyncrasy and uncanny similarity, it is not only scholarly erudition that motivates thinking Benjamin and Heidegger together but also rich (and, even now, largely unexplored) possibilities for pushing each of them to the limits of their own thinking and language, bringing out their respective potentials and limitations through a posthumous *Auseinandersetzung*.

Which is a long way of saying that, to quote Heidegger, "in titles of this form sometimes everything comes down to the inconspicuous little conjunction 'and'" (GA 13: 157). An explicit concern for the richness of this "inconspicuous little conjunction" is one of the virtues of this volume. Many of the contributions directly take up the question of what it might mean to write about Heidegger *and* Benjamin – certainly a live problem, given the extent to which both thinkers put the status of "historical" and "comparative" scholarship into question. Peter Fenves's contribution, for example, develops the quantum notion of "entanglement" in order to think the conjunction of Heidegger and Benjamin in a way that is thoroughly historical yet not reliant on the positivist and historicist assumptions that underlie the idea of

“influence” (23). Gerhard Richter and Ilit Ferber open their respective chapters by explicitly addressing the question of “comparison,” suggesting that what is at stake would not leave untouched two pre-existing bodies of work (28, 67).

The volume has the further virtue of being both an excellent “first” and a “proof of concept,” by which I mean it convincingly demonstrates the range of possibilities for thinking Heidegger and Benjamin together. The final two essays of the volume, for example, both take up the problem of politics in relation to the “Work of Art” essays of each – that is, Heidegger’s “Origin of the Work of Art” and Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility,” though they do so to quite differing effect. Vardoulakis reads the two essays together along the axis of a critique of *immediacy*, claiming that the two essays “are not only, or even primarily, about art. Heidegger and Benjamin use the work of art to articulate an argument against immediacy,” a “remnant of the onto-theological tradition” (237). By reading them together, Vardoulakis argues that they both take the artwork as an opportunity to stage a critique of immediacy and thus “articulate a political ontology of the artwork,” before deploying Benjamin in order to argue that Heidegger nevertheless ends up constructing an immediate relation between art and politics (between the work of art and the notion of a people), which is “precisely [the] sense of immediacy that reproducibility seeks to repudiate” (252).

Ferris, on the other hand, reads the two essays by way of the question of the “uselessness” of art and the possibility of art’s significance beyond the tradition of art as “beautiful semblance,” which has often enlisted art into the service of securing the meaning of politics (260). It is on this basis that Ferris undertakes an illuminating examination of the role that relations of extremity play in Benjamin and Heidegger’s respective ways of thinking history. He ultimately shows how Heidegger’s thought can help diagnose the danger that, in trying to articulate a theory of art “useless” for fascism, Benjamin may also render impossible the alternative he wants to pose – the famous “politicization of art” by communism (276). Reading Ferris and Vardoulakis’s

contributions together provides a powerful example of how the conjunction of Heidegger and Benjamin is a site for readings that are neither predictable nor simply comparative.

This is, however, only one example in a volume full of interesting moments like this. The contributions of the volume are grouped under five headings: knowledge, experience, time, Hölderlin, and politics. “Knowledge” comprises Peter Fenves’s “Entanglement – of Benjamin and Heidegger” and Gerhard Richter’s “Critique and the Thing: Benjamin and Heidegger.” Fenves, as has been mentioned, reads the relation between Heidegger and Benjamin by way of their “entanglement,” which he traces back to the summer 1913 seminar of Heinrich Rickert. Fenves simultaneously traces the differing ways in which both Heidegger and Benjamin articulate critiques of Rickert’s idea of “completed life” (*vollendetes Leben*) while developing the notion of “entanglement” as a schema for understanding their relation beyond the notion of “influence” (14). Richter argues that both Heidegger and Benjamin rethink Kantian critique by way of meditations on the “thing.” Insofar as Benjamin’s preoccupation with critique and Heidegger’s thinking of the thing are both well known, Richter’s essay does a convincing job of showing it is the interrelation of these two that is at stake in both Heidegger and Benjamin. It is also worth noting that, aside from their value as compelling theoretical readings, the level of philological erudition and historical detail in these two essays makes them invaluable resources to future researchers.

“Experience” comprises Ilit Ferber’s “*Stimmung*: Heidegger and Benjamin” and A. Kiarina Kordela’s “Commodity Fetishism and the Gaze.” Ferber’s essay examines the notion of *Stimmung*, more well-known as a Heideggerian preoccupation, but which, thanks especially to Ferber’s own work on melancholy in Benjamin, is increasingly recognized as an important preoccupation of Benjamin’s as well.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, Ferber argues that *Stimmung* provides each with distinct ways of displacing the subject-object distinction, opening up a thinking of truth before or beyond that distinction. Kordela’s essay focuses on Benjamin’s famously (perhaps notoriously) difficult understanding of “allegory” by

way of the (Marxian) commodity and the (Lacanian) gaze. Heidegger is brought in as a foil at several points, though, to be frank, I have a hard time recognizing Heidegger in the Lacanian caricature Kordela presents.<sup>9</sup> That being said, Kordela's reading of Benjaminian allegory is a significant contribution in its own right, both convincing as an argument and novel as an exegesis.

"Time" comprises Paula Schwebel's "Monad and Time: reading Leibniz with Heidegger and Benjamin" and Andrew Benjamin's "Time and Task: Benjamin and Heidegger Showing the Present." Schwebel situates Benjamin and Heidegger in relation to the way they each take up Leibniz's concept of the monad (and its reception by Husserl), and uses this to bring out the intertwined but distinct ways in which each of them argues for the "openness of the past." Schwebel's reading of Benjamin here is truly illuminating and marks a real contribution to Benjamin scholarship.<sup>10</sup> Andrew Benjamin focuses on Heidegger and Benjamin's differing concepts of the "present," more specifically the way in which the idea of the present moment is related to the announcement or call of a *task*.

"Hölderlin" comprises Antonia Egel's "Who Was Friedrich Hölderlin? Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, and the Poet" and Joanna Hodge's "Sobriety, Intoxication, Hyperbology: Benjamin and Heidegger Reading Hölderlin." Egel's essay begins by arguing that it is not simply "Hölderlin" but the figure of "the Poet" as such that is at stake in both Heidegger's and Benjamin's readings of Hölderlin, and then argues that the different ways they employ this figure of the "poet" is important for understanding other key differences between them, especially their politics. Hodge's essay – a rich and dense exploration of the tension between singularity and communicability in language as it plays out in Heidegger's and Benjamin's respective readings of Hölderlin – argues that Heidegger's readings permit "the return...of a dangerous but irrepressible intoxication, which disrupts any attempt to soothe the turbulence of Hölderlin's vision" (193).

Finally, "Politics" comprises three essays: Ziarek's "Beyond Revolution: Benjamin and Heidegger on Violence and Power," Vardoulakis's

“A Matter of Immediacy: The Political Ontology of the Artwork in Benjamin and Heidegger,” and Ferris’s “Politics of the Useless: The Work of Art in Benjamin and Heidegger” (the latter two essays are summarized above). Ziarek problematizes the notoriously enigmatic figure “divine violence” in Benjamin’s early essay “Critique of Violence” by way of Heidegger’s thinking of a “violence-free reign” (*Ge-waltlose Walten*) in *The History of Beyng* (GA 69: 8/8). Ultimately connecting this transformation of *Walten* to the idea of *Lassen* (and *Gelassenheit*) in Heidegger, Ziarek sketches a Heideggerian critique of the metaphysical dimension of Benjamin’s “divine violence” while also elaborating the complicated problematic of the role *Walten* plays in Heidegger’s being-historical thinking.

Surveying the contributions as a whole in this way, it becomes clear that the volume is, to a certain extent, more “about” Benjamin than Heidegger. This is not a failing – it would be petty and misguided to insist on “balance” in such a project – but it is noteworthy, especially since the editors write in the introduction that “the different contributions to this volume do not seek to side with one or the other thinker” (xiv). Certain contributors explicitly *do* “pick sides” – most notably Kordela, Egel, and Ziarek – but even where other contributors don’t do so in a straight-forwardly argumentative or polemical sense, one nonetheless notices that enlightening and transformative engagements with Benjamin number higher than such engagements with Heidegger. There are, of course, several novel and important readings of Heidegger here – most obviously Richter, Hodge, Ziarek, and Ferris – but the pattern is nonetheless apparent in reading the volume as a whole.

That, however, simply means that many unexplored possibilities remain open for those willing to enter this volatile conjunction – and necessarily so. I say “necessarily” because the field of possible topics is far too vast for any one volume to cover, though *Sparks Will Fly* covers an impressive area. Accordingly, I’d like to conclude by offering a few possible areas for further research that came to me while reading *Sparks Will Fly*.

First, one could imagine an entire volume dedicated to the different constellations of third parties that connect Benjamin and Heidegger, especially poets. Though the volume dedicates a section to Benjamin and Heidegger's relation to Hölderlin, their relation to Hebel remains to be explored. Both Heidegger and Benjamin note the way Hebel's use of dialect places him in a strange position in regard to "German" literature, yet Heidegger sees in this a disclosure of the link between language and homeland (GA 13: 156), while Benjamin insists that Hebel's brilliance is precisely the cosmopolitanism of his relation to this homeland.<sup>11</sup> One could also imagine a fascinating study of their respective relations to Stefan George and the *George-Kreis*, which Egel mentions but does not unpack.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the constellation of Heidegger, Benjamin, and Arendt, though it is mentioned in many of the essays, awaits a serious treatment.<sup>13</sup> Finally, beyond particular poets they have in common, it is notable that both Benjamin and Heidegger designate a particular poet as "the poet" – for Heidegger, Hölderlin, for Benjamin, Baudelaire – and see the task of reading them as one of paramount importance for thinking modernity and technology.

Which brings us to the areas beyond these connections, of which I want to briefly mention only two. First, the preoccupation they share with both rethinking history and transforming what it means to think historically. Recall Benjamin's words from the letter from which the title of *Sparks Will Fly* is taken: "it is there [the problem of historical knowledge] that I will find Heidegger on my path and I anticipate certain sparks to fly from the clash between our two modes, so very different, of considering history." While several essays in the volume talk about history – it is nearly impossible to talk about either Benjamin or Heidegger without mentioning history at some point – there remains *much* to be said on the topic. More specifically, to take just one example, the complicated relation between history and theology in both thinkers would be an explosive – if difficult – undertaking. It is not only the concepts of "messianic time" and "divine violence" in Benjamin and of the "last god" or the "flight of the gods" in Heidegger that are at stake, but also, more fundamentally, the aporetic relation of

history to something that exceeds it, something that cannot be reduced to or contained by history itself, even if it also cannot be encountered “outside” of history. As Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project*: “in remembrance [*Eingedenken*] we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.”<sup>14</sup> Second, and deeply related to the problem of history, is a serious confrontation between Heidegger and Benjamin on the question of *technology*. Both thinkers take technology to be an unavoidable question for the historical present, though in radically different ways. To the extent that Heidegger insists technology is the contemporary “sending” or “destiny” of being itself, he also famously argues that the essence of technology is nothing technological, but rather *Ge-stell*. Accordingly, Heidegger insists that the reign of the technological does not *arise* from the invention of certain machines or technological advances, but rather that these advances and inventions are possible only because being had already begun to give itself as the measurable, the manipulable, the available (GA 79: 9/8). Benjamin, a historical materialist – however strange a materialist he may be – thinks the rise of technological modernity as a complex intersection of ontological possibility and concrete, material developments like the printing press and the photograph. As he says in the “Work of Art” essay, “The work of art has always been reproducible in principle [*grundsätzlich*]. . .but technological reproduction is something new.”<sup>15</sup> A serious reading of the different ways Heidegger and Benjamin think about technology could proceed not only by way of the historical problem of its “emergence” that I have haphazardly sketched here, but also by attending to the ways each understands the political and social opportunities and dangers technology presents, as well as the ways each understands it in relation to language and the possibilities of poetry. These are, of course, only examples meant to illustrate how deeply the question of technology runs in both thinkers, and to illustrate further how much remains to be said by bringing them into dialogue with each other on this question.

This is only a very limited selection of possible areas of further research. The sparks will continue to fly from this encounter between Benjamin and Heidegger, but thanks to Andrew Benjamin and Dimitris Vardoulakis's *Sparks Will Fly*, not only have we been offered a glimpse into the richness and depth of this field of inquiry, but we now have a group of exemplary essays to stand as proof for just how timely and fruitful this encounter can be.

#### NOTES

- 1 Most of the thinkers I have in mind as writing on both Benjamin and Heidegger regularly are those whose works are situated at the intersection of German studies and deconstruction – Alexander García-Düttman, Werner Hamacher, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Sam Weber, to cite only a few of the most prominent examples. Gerhard Richter, in a footnote to his contribution to the volume, also notes Giorgio Agamben as an example (57n4). In terms of previous work comparing and contrasting the two directly, two articles bear special mention, not least because they are cited by several authors in the current volume. The first is Rebecca Comay's "Framing Redemption: Aura, Origin, Technology in Benjamin and Heidegger," originally published in *Ethics and Danger: Essays on Heidegger and Continental Thought*, ed. Arleen B. Dallery, Charles E. Scott, and P. Holley Roberts (Albany: SUNY,

1992), 139–68; the other is Howard Caygill’s “Benjamin, Heidegger, and the Destruction of Tradition,” originally published in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–31. A. Kiarina Kordela’s contribution to *Sparks Will Fly* takes up both of these articles explicitly and develops their insights. For examples of monographs on Benjamin and Heidegger, see Marc Crepon, *Les promesses du langage: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2001); Alexander García-Düttman, *The Gift of Language: Memory and Promise in Adorno, Heidegger, Benjamin, and Rosenzweig*, trans. Arline Lyons (London: Athlone, 2000); Mathias Giuliani, *Histoire, langage et art chez Walter Benjamin et Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2014); and Charles de Roche, *Monadologie des Gedichts: Benjamin, Heidegger, Celan* (Paderborn: Fink, 2013).

- 2 Hannah Arendt, “Walter Benjamin,” in *Menschen in finsternen Zeiten*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Piper: Munich, 2012), 253.
- 3 Gerhard Richter points out that Heidegger heard Arendt give a lecture on Benjamin when she returned to Freiburg in 1967, and that Heidegger mentions Benjamin (obliquely) in a letter to her in August of that year: “the day after our meeting, on Friday, July 28th, I found the passage that goes with the Mallarmé quotation in Benjamin,” in Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger, *Briefe 1925–1975*, 3rd, expanded edition (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2002), 155f. There is also evidence to suggest, as Richter further points out, that Heidegger had read Benjamin’s “The Artwork in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” See Burkhardt Lindner, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” in *Benjamin-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, ed. Burkhardt Lindner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), 240. For a masterful reading of Benjamin’s essay in the context of a larger discussion of Heidegger and art, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La vrai semblance* (Paris: Galilée, 2005).

- 4 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 506. The translation quoted here is from Joanna Hodge's contribution to *Sparks Will Fly*, 197.
- 5 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 513. Quoted in Hodge, 198.
- 6 Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 246. Quoted in Hodge, 197.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 207. Hereafter GS.
- 8 Ilit Ferber, *Philosophy and Melancholy: Benjamin's Early Reflections on Theater and Language* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013).
- 9 See, for example, the claim that "for Heidegger there is the possibility that a moment can occur at which history becomes fully conscious of itself (not unlike Hegel), whereas for Benjamin an unconscious surplus always exceeds any historical consciousness (not unlike Lacan)" (106–7), which is preceded by the sentence, "on the one hand, there is Heidegger's invocation of the subject' at the 'moment of clarity,' in which 'the moment of origin' and that of 'resolute decision' can potentially be realized in history" (106). The claim that Heidegger's thinking of history has anything to do with a self-conscious subject seems to me false on its face and symptomatic of the way Koredela superimposes Lacanian concepts onto Heidegger's text; as Ferber's contribution demonstrates (though one could cite any number of other secondary sources on this topic), one of the fundamental concerns of Heidegger's entire philosophical effort is to resituate thinking beyond or before the subject-object distinction. Dasein is many things, but it is emphatically *not* a subject. This is not to mention that Heidegger's thinking of history is fundamentally committed to a radical notion of *concealment* that is not merely the "not-yet-unconcealed." It could be granted to Kordela that Heidegger's "concealment" is not a thinking of the unconscious, but only on the condition that it is immediately added that the entire paradigm of consciousness and the unconscious is foreign to Heidegger's way of thinking.

- One could, of course, imagine a reading that argues that there are residues of subjectivity, consciousness, and self-consciousness in the foundations of Heidegger's thinking of history, but Kordela pursues no such reading here.
- 10 Schwebel mentions in a footnote at the beginning of the essay that the material is based on a forthcoming monograph, *Walter Benjamin's Monadology*.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, "Johann Peter Hebel: Zu seinem 100. Todestage," GS, vol. 2, 277. See also, in the same volume, "»El Mayor Monstruo, Los Celos« von Calderon und »Herodes und Marianne« von Hebel: Bemerkungen zum Problem des historischen Dramas," 246–76; "J. P. Hebel: ein Bilderrätsel zum 100. Todestage des Dichters," 280–83; and "Johann Peter Hebel," 635–40.
- 12 She does, however, refer readers to a dissertation that treats the connection: Sara Jean Ogger, *Secret Hölderlin: The Twentieth-Century Myth of the Poet as Authored by the George Circle, Walter Benjamin, and Martin Heidegger*, Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Princeton University (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 2000).
- 13 One would probably want to start not only with Arendt's introduction to Benjamin's *Illuminations*, but also with the longer version in her essay "Walter Benjamin" in *Menschen in finsternen Zeiten*, which is, coincidentally enough, immediately preceded in that volume by "Martin Heidegger ist achtzig Jahre alt." See Hannah Arendt, *Menschen in finsternen Zeiten*, ed. Ursula Ludz (Piper: Munich, 2012).
- 14 Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999), 471. For the German see GS, vol. 5, 589.
- 15 GS, vol. 1, 474.