

Book Review: Walter Benjamin and the Media by Jaeho Kang

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In *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, Jaeho Kang strikes a near perfect balance between biographical narrative and theoretical analysis. In doing so, Benjamin's media critique is fully contextualised, removing any notion of obsolescence which may arise from a contemporary reading, writes **Andrew Molloy**.



Walter Benjamin and the Media. Jaeho Kang. Polity. 2014.

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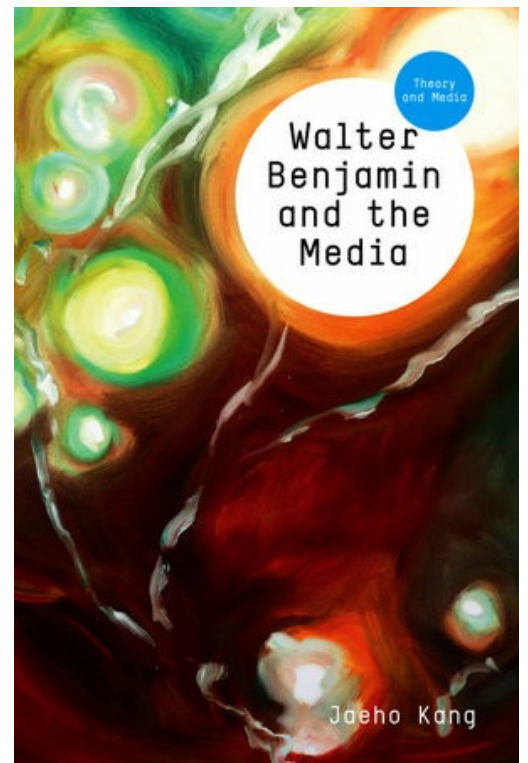
For the uninitiated, media theory appears to move as fast as the technology it studies. For somebody like myself from outside the discipline but who desperately wants to manage its broad themes to apply elsewhere, it feels almost impossible to get a foothold.

One can start with the milestones of 20th century media theory; moving from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, (1936) through Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message* (1967), arriving at Pierre Bourdieu's *On Television* (1999); but the barrage of theoretical concepts coupled with an impression of obsolescence brought about by the internet-age makes these texts difficult to apply to the likes of social media, 24-hour news, and reality television. In his book *Walter Benjamin and the Media*, Jaeho Kang transcends this problem by both contextualising the labyrinthine works of this tragic icon and convincingly explaining how Benjamin's work is as relevant to the internet-age as it was to the radio-age.

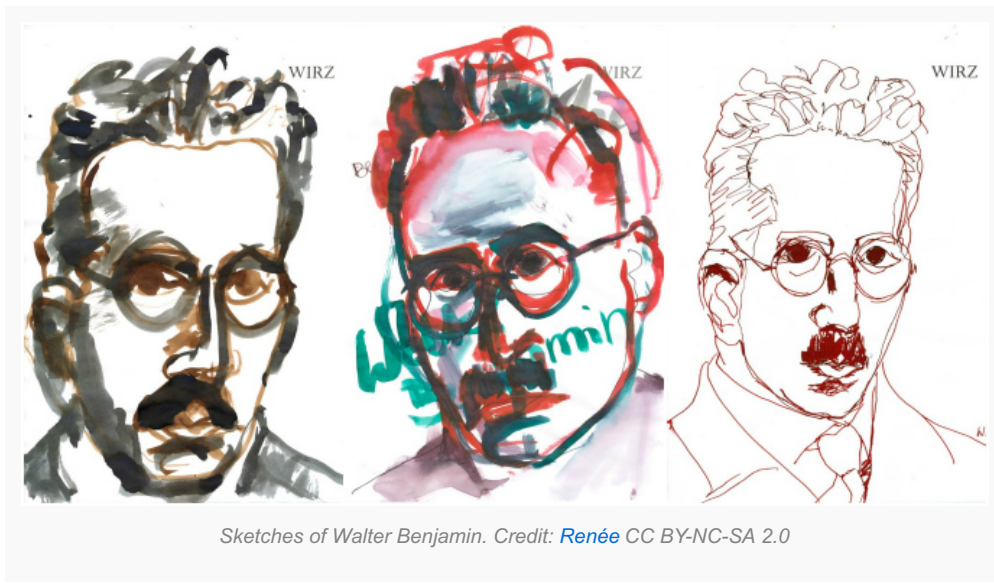
Benjamin's suicide in 1940 as he was chased across Europe by the Nazis often eclipses his literary and theoretical work, rendering him as a tragi-romantic pre-modernist icon. It feels fitting, then, that the first line of Kang's book addresses this fact and then barely mentions it again.

Instead, the introductory chapter eschews this mildly perverse heroic image and concentrates instead on Benjamin as a person; an academic, a print and radio journalist, and a media critic, operating within and influenced by the fluctuating context of Europe between the wars. The chapter begins by locating both Benjamin and his practice within a vivid historical context before moving on to trace the theorist's influences and examine these theoretical threads through Benjamin's contemporaries and his philosophical inheritors. Personally, this approach helped greatly in demystifying the reified and seemingly un-challengeable pre-Modernist era. "Benjamin's thought," posits Kang, "can be located in terms of a number of...influences...at work throughout his life" (p.16). Kang suggests that Benjamin's work is situated at the crossroads of "the four Ms: messianism, modernism, metropolitanism and Marxism" (p.19). From these broad topics four more pointed themes are identified which go to form the chapter topics for the rest of the text; "the crisis of communication; mediated storytelling; technological reproducibility; and the media city" (p.22).

In 'The Crisis of Communication' Kang pieces together Benjamin's account of the changing nature of the 'information industry' as printed media became more widespread in the late 18th century. Storytelling, as Benjamin describes it, was communicated orally; delivered by word of mouth and repeated but never faithfully reproduced. It created a



communal space between the storyteller and listener in a face-to-face relationship, and as the stories were related from generation to generation a clear sense of the communal perpetuity and shared memory was maintained. As the idea of the novel as a form of storytelling came to prominence in Europe during the 18th century, this caused a disconnect between the listener (now the solitary reader) and the storyteller (now the solitary writer). “The novelist writes for the privatised subject, who is no longer bound together with other members of society through communal ties, but remains connected only through increasingly complex and rationalised communication media” (p.36).



Sketches of Walter Benjamin. Credit: [Renée](#) CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Kang then delves into Benjamin’s thoughts on journalists, describing them as “commodified flaneurs”, whose experience and documenting of the city lead to the democratisation of printed information and the decline of bourgeois public spheres. Kang suggests, however, that Benjamin’s hope that the Soviet press of the early revolutionary period held the possibility of empowering the people to document their own stories and therefore create a “new public as collective author” is “quite naive and overly optimistic” (p.63), but the author intriguingly suggests that the rise of the internet age and, in particular, blogs and social media have given rise to a new era of informal citizen journalism with the general public becoming “the authors...and consumers of their own lives” (p.64).

In Kang’s staggeringly brave final chapter he tackles Benjamin’s posthumous sprawling masterpiece *The Arcades Project*, a feat similar to attempting to reduce and rephrase Marx’s *Capital* or Heidegger’s *Being and Time*; something that most seasoned academics would shy away from. However, I found that in the proceeding chapters enough of the abstract philosophical jargon and complex theory had been so clearly developed, aided by just enough contextual exposition, that it was clear how these ideas had developed through Benjamin’s media experience. For example, Benjamin’s loaded concept of the ‘Phantasmagoria’ is deftly handled by Kang and clearly linked to Benjamin’s earlier theorising concerning the crisis of information and the novel. The Phantasmagoria was a Parisian illusionist sideshow which used ‘magic lanterns’ to produce ghosts. For Benjamin, explains Kang, this was the inverse of the camera obscura, in that rather than reflecting the world-as-seen it places false reflections into the seen-world. The Cartesian relationship between subject and object collapses. “The phantasmagoric experience,” Kang posits, “reveals a transformation from communication involving co-presence to communication with an absent other” (p.164), be this an imaginary ghost, a radio presenter or an author.

In *Walter Benjamin and the Media* Jaeho Kang strikes a near perfect balance between biographical narrative and theoretical analysis. In doing so, Benjamin’s media critique is fully contextualised removing any notion of obsolescence which may arise from a contemporary reading. Rather, the reader sees clearly from where these potentially obtuse concepts arose, firmly placing them within their context while at the same liberating them for application to more contemporary forms of media. The conclusion of the book provides a brief critical comparative analysis between Benjamin and some contemporary theoreticians (for example explaining how Benjamin’s ‘Phantasmagoria’ links with Debord’s ‘Spectacle’ and Baudrillard’s ‘Simulacra’). By doing so, Kang not only

describes how Benjamin's ideas were formed but also how they have developed, and hints at the exciting possibility that they could be refined even further.

Andrew Molloy is an architectural PhD student based at the University of Ulster, Belfast Northern Ireland. His research centres upon trying to create a theoretical cross-disciplinary platform based on recent paradigm shifts taking place within philosophy, sociology and neuroscience. Using urban design in Belfast as a case study, Andrew hopes to critique the numerous large scale planning decisions which have defined the contemporary city and postulate a way forward. Andrew is a frequent contributor to the PLACE blog, the architecture and built environment centre for Northern Ireland, as well as writing for RSUA Perspective magazine and arts newspaper 'The Ulster Folk.' [Read reviews by Andrew.](#)

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