

**Illuminations of the Everyday:
Philosophical and Cultural Expressions of
Redemption in Weimar Germany**

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin's work has been classified either according to the principles of historical materialism, or according to the principles of metaphysics. This fragmentation of his ideas, however, obscures the real impetus of his oeuvre, particularly in the interpretation of his central notion of redemption. If instead one considers Benjamin as a critic of the everyday in search of a mechanism for change, influenced by the historical condition and his intellectual contemporaries, then we are able better to understand his narrative. The Weimar Republic was a period dominated by the dialectic between hope and despair. The intellectual sphere of Critical Theory attempted to understand their condition of alienation and establish a solution. Redemption is key to Benjamin's approach. Redemption carries the stigma of theology and has therefore been dismissed because, unlike revolution, it has no historical precedent and appears to have limited value. In common with the other Critical Theorists, for Benjamin the conditions of alienation as well as the structure of its solution were in the everyday. Through the concepts of the *dialectical image* and *now-time*, Benjamin readdresses the question of revolution, which he finds to be limited by its maintenance of linear historic time. Benjamin's redemption is an amalgam of the historic and the metaphysical and represents a powerful social critique, propelled by revolutionary rhetoric.

KEY WORDS REDEMPTION, REVOLUTION, ALIENATION, MEMORY, MYTH, METAPHYSICS, HISTORICAL MATERIALISM, HOPE, DESPAIR, EXPERIENCE, KNOWLEDGE

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The Illumination of Memory

In this paper I present the importance of the concept of redemption, as opposed to the notion of revolution, as it is observable in the philosophy of the Critical Theorist Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's conception of redemption was a unique perspective on the necessity for 'change' in the conditions of modernity. His concept of redemption developed from his metaphysical, although troubled, relationship with Judaism alongside the more materialist structure of his social and political convictions, based on both Marxist critique and an analysis of the intellectual field of his predecessors.¹ According to Benjamin the redemptive moment represents the promise of humanity's escape from catastrophe, both coming and past. Similar to the moment of revolution, redemption is characterised by the comprehension of the necessity of transformation.

Redemption and revolution are both ideas defined by human potential and individual freedom, both in the socio-political sense, as well as the fundamental sense of freedom from an alienated mind. These characteristic fulfilments can be simplified as the concept of knowledge, in that the ambition of change is always underpinned by the philosophical question of knowledge, or in the case of Critical Theory, the sense of a void of knowledge. As such, Benjamin's redemption is a philosophical classification of the process of change, with the ambition of restoring humanity's capacity to articulate real experience as knowledge and thus communicate truth, overcoming the melancholia of the modern. More specifically, Benjamin observed redemption as the only possibility for rescuing the individual from his present

¹ There is a great deal of academic work centred on the question of Benjamin's philosophical alignment; whether he is more a metaphysician or materialist. This particular essay does not have the ambition of informing on this question, however it must be noted that Benjamin's work does appear to sway between a materialist and a metaphysical emphasis. As opposed to Lukács, for example, whose work begins with a more theological/metaphysical gradient and ends unmistakably aligned to a Hegelian-Marxist materialism.

alienated, indifferent, apathetic spirit induced by the tragedy of Total War and the pressures of the modern metropolis.²

Reflecting on Benjamin's critique on society and the individual concurrently, it becomes clear that the construction of the concept of redemption develops during Germany's transitory Weimar Republic (1919-1933).³ The importance of Weimar Germany in the understanding of Benjamin's redemption is two fold. Firstly, the possibility for change appears heightened at this moment in history because of the release of traditional boundaries and the emergence of the dialectic between destruction and hope, which emerged following the devastation of Total War. Secondly, Weimar Germany was bursting with cultural expression, a quality to which the associative modernist sensibility can be extracted and reflected upon. Thus, this essay will take Benjamin's category of redemption and illuminate its critical importance in the possibility of change, through which I will reflect on the concept of redemption itself, and the underlying importance of culture in the evolving discipline of philosophy.

Because Benjamin's philosophy is validated and sustained by the cultural manifestations of redemptive potential in Weimar Germany, I will also reflect upon examples of latent redemptive instants, particularly in the works of Franz Kafka and in Surrealist art generally. Kafka and the Surrealist group were two cultural expressions Benjamin explored in order to inform his radical social critique and its contradictory impulses of hope. As a result, Benjamin projects his redemptive moment onto culture because he believed previous manifestations of knowledge were devalued by their alienation; humanity's experience proved transformed in the wake of capitalist modernity.

² To clarify the use of 'his' is not an intention to relate a specific gender to this essay, it is simply for fluidity of prose.

³ Although, it must be added here that the phenomenon discussed extends beyond this limited period, the framework of the Weimar Republic has been added for clarity sake.

Critical Theorists defined and scrutinized knowledge, the question of how humans discern truth, as the essential deviation from the classical philosophy of the Enlightenment. In Benjamin's view, experience is the dialectic of knowledge; in other words through our interactions with history we are able to discern truth. However, history, for Benjamin, no longer held a promise of change because truth was decimated by the violence of progress. In adhering to the idea of eternal progress humanity bypassed vital experiences, discarding them as obsolete, thereby structuring knowledge around the necessity of development over genuine experience. As a result of the violence of progress, Benjamin believed in a poverty of experience, defined by the terms *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*.⁴ *Erlebnis* is immediate, shock experience; the fractured experience possible in the modern condition.⁵ *Erfahrung* on the other hand, is a reflexive state of consciousness. In order for *Erfahrung* to be grasped, it is imperative that the collapse of history be redressed and genuine knowledge be recognised. The alienated individual was to be 'released' from his estranged state by the constellation⁶ of forgotten moments, of fragments of truth that lay buried in the discarded objects of the everyday. *Erfahrung* is the state of consciousness Benjamin believed to be the source of redemption; buried in the objects of the everyday disguised by routine and the acceptance of *Erlebnis*.

With a focus upon the objects of the everyday Benjamin's philosophy followed a path that had no precedent. Rather than concentrating upon a utopia estimated from the past experience historicism adhered too, Benjamin considered the moment of change, of redemption, to be a product of the discarded and forgotten moments, thereby pushing away from progress 'against

⁴ **Scott McCracken**, *The Completion of Old Work, Walter Benjamin and the Everyday*, Cultural Critique 52 (2002)

⁵ Shock and fracture here refer to alienated being rather than to Benjamin's association of these techniques with redemption.

⁶ Constellation is the term Benjamin adopted, coined in his essay on the German Tragic Drama, to define truth as a 'collection' of ideas-analogous to Rosenzweig's great figure in *The Star of Redemption*.

the grain of history'⁷. In other words, redemption is the result of a fresh interpretation and reordering of historical moments into a constellation of new insight. Building upon the frame of the disillusionment of history and the devaluation of experience, Benjamin's fundamental ambition was to orchestrate the present in order to illuminate moments of forgotten hope and redeem history from its collapse.

Benjamin's concept of redemption was contrary to his contemporaries, even among his Jewish brothers. For example, Lukács' later works can be considered Benjamin's antithesis, taking the path of a Hegelian-Marxist critique of Germany's social reality⁸. Between Benjamin's redemption and Lukács' revolution, a multitude of social critiques are discernable, all focused upon on the necessity for change. However, it remains evident that the Benjaminian concept of redemption is a pivotal philosophical expression of change developed by these emerging Jewish philosophers in the Weimar Republic. Essential to Benjamin's redemption is its association with memory; memory is the quintessence of the redemptive moment because of its association with the human potential, which lay dormant in the alienated individual. Thus the importance of redemption, as the primary path to change, and its position within memory and therefore the individual, is thus my focal argument in discerning the potential of redemption.

* * * * *

The unparalleled destruction and slaughter of WWI revealed, unequivocally, the gulf between the technical achievements of capitalism and its manifest failure to end human suffering and exploitation. Therefore rather than locating utopia from a past 'golden age,' Benjamin sought redemption in the here and now through the transfiguration of everyday life. In order to understand the notion of redemption one must consider its three parts; the initial

⁷ **Walter Benjamin**, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, Ed. And with an Introduction by **Hannah Arendt**, Trans. **Harry Zorn**, Pimlico, (1999)

⁸ After the failure of 1918-19 revolution in Hungary and Germany Lukács essay are no longer permeated by the metaphysical, although he remains utopian his fixation turns to the role of the proletariat.

alienation, its metaphysical versus materialist status, and finally its presence in the philosophy of the everyday, most significantly in the sense of awakening. Redemption reflects both a quasi-metaphysical and a tangible social and political moment, above and beyond the limitations of revolution.

Two primary notions, although touched upon above, need to be clarified; why is there an emphasis on culture? And why is the theory of redemption more fitting than revolution? It is also important to note the hope that remained in the Enlightenment concept of progress, particularly in the early boom years of the Republic. There was an inherent contradiction in the conditions of the modern; this division was essentially drawn between a sense of hope and despair, two ideas the Republic exemplified. Critical Theorists engaged with these conditions, both relating their philosophy to the underlying hope; the inherent belief in humanity and attempting to address the alienation they observed in the present. The measure of alienation in the modern age was a point of consistency among Critical Theorists, the divergence in intellectual thought followed in the form of, what could be done to salvage humanity.

The cultural realm epitomised the inherent social conditions of alienation in the city, but also, the arena of possibility. Culture becomes the focal point in Critical Theorists' evaluation of the modern condition and the process of its liberation for the fundamental reason that culture appears as, particularly for Benjamin, the arena in which moments of the real are embedded.

*"The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgement about itself"*⁹, the articulation of existence for Critical Theory was, thus, within modes of being. The concentration of the search for essence in culture related fundamentally to the considered devaluation of experience: knowledge and wisdom, and expression: the capacity

⁹ [Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament, Weimar Essays*, Trans. Ed. And with an intro by **Thomas Y. Levin**, Harvard University Press \(1995\) pp75](#)

to pass on experience. In the collapse of experience and the devaluation of history, expression had in turn been fundamentally altered. Thus, humanity was considered unable to express its being because it had been forced into ambivalence and the capacity for knowledge imploded by the adherence to progress. Expression, in turn, had become intoned in habit and the only realm in which traces of genuine experience existed was culture. The material culture of the city provided the shared collective spaces where the conscious, the unconscious, past and present met; here glimmers of the unique exist, amongst the eternal self-same of capitalism. Critical Theory observed both the patterns of cultural existence in the fetishised and familiarized commodity and in the artistic sphere of rebellion, the avant-garde. For Benjamin, as well as his contemporaries Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer, flashes of the real were hidden in the recesses of mass culture.

Culture, as a realm of critical interest, is typically both complicated and contradictory; but it is only within these contradictions that Benjamin's Theory of redemption is possible. For Benjamin, his relationship with culture is wrapped up in an analysis of its conditions; the functioning of mass-society and the commodity alongside forms of rebellion and contention in the cultural sphere, specifically the Surrealists and montage. In Surrealism the artistic technique of montage was used to reveal genuine knowledge, discoverable in the objects of the everyday; hidden amidst the curves of the familiar and the discarded, to be released by its abstraction, in a moment of shock. Benjamin uses the same process, revealing the hidden eternal meaning of the everyday. He presents the city as a living being, swaying in its alienated state between its habit and its possibility. The cultural realm shows this characteristic modern individual in the condition of reification. In the commodity, articles dressed in the familiar and the discarded, sit the isolation of the modern. For Benjamin, however, these discarded and forgotten items hold the unfulfilled '*wish-images*' of past generations and by abstracting these fragments from their

state of habit the everyday can release its hidden potential. The cultural sphere is mirrored in the historical, because these *wish-images* are in essence moments of the past that have been disregarded and ignored, but whose potential to adjust the linear temporality of history remains, regardless of its embedding in custom and the insignificant. Benjamin's messianism and materialism are joined under the condition of culture; the reified commodity represents his historical materialism, but the hidden potential of memory is in his more ambiguous metaphysics.

The metaphysical arena of culture is also addressed by its significant association with the sociology of knowledge, particularly in the growing philosophical reference to the individual. The crisis of knowledge, wrapped up in the crisis of ideology became dependent upon the individual because the notion of progress had become alienated by the unfolding devastation of WWI; the scaffolding of continuous advance had collapsed as tradition decayed under the weight of barbarism. Little was felt to be of legitimate value in a world where mechanised death and mass destruction were justified by the emptiest of abstractions. Benjamin speculated that the sense of experience as wisdom had *"fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914-1918 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world."*¹⁰ Experience had seemingly been reduced to a series of atomised unarticulated moments merely lived through, therefore, knowledge became understood as the self-reflection of humanity, rather than the transfer of wisdom. With the destruction of previously axiomatic notions of knowledge, truth and experience left a philosophical void to be filled by the ever-expanding considerations of the importance of the individual. This changing perspective is a founding move in philosophy, emblematic of 1920s Germany.

¹⁰ **Walter Benjamin**, *Experience and Poverty*, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume II 1927-1934*, (Ed) **Michael W. Jennings**; volume Eds **Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith**, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge (1999) pp731

The individual, the everyday and culture were part of the Critical Theorists rejection of the abstract, metaphysical emphasis of Enlightenment philosophers, against the totalizing rationalism of Hegel's grand historical dialectic and the narrow conception of reason, which explicitly excluded intuition or imagination. The *positive realism* of Hegelian or Marxist logic confined the boundaries of human experience and knowledge, so Critical Theorists attempted to expand, or in the nihilistic sense destroy these barriers. Against a slavish adherence to logic and scientific methodology Critical Theorists devoted their energies to a project of derealisation of the habitual, by means of shock, artistic montage and de-familiarisation, or caesura, fragmentation and awakening. Their aim was to liberate the stagnated present and, in Benjamin's case evoke the path of redemption. These modes of emancipation were familiar within the artistic sphere and were orchestrated by philosophy as the fundamental tools for combating alienation.

The individual was alienated in modernity because his experience was no longer a tangible expressible truth. Experience had become reified and therefore, for knowledge to become expressible once again, a measure of shock had to be introduced so as to denature the habitual. To put this definitively, the reality faced in the metropolis was one of alienation and the individual had become apathetic because of the suppressive reality of the city. Benjamin attributes this state to phantasmagoria,¹¹ the over stimulation of consciousness by the objects of commodity culture and the repressive nature of the mechanised stream of life. This condition of alienation was exacerbated and perpetuated by the inability of experience to be translated into knowledge. Thus, Critical Theorists faced the task of shaking the individual and humanity *awake*, so that humanity could once again function with some substance and reality.

¹¹ Phantasmagoria is a term Benjamin used in the Arcades Project to describe the affect of the commodity and the vale of the city, echoing and expanding Marx's statement on the phantasmagorical powers of the commodity in *Capital*. Benjamin cites Marx in Convolute G of the Arcades Project. The phantasmagoria epitomises the subjugation of the individual by the illusions and mystique of the metropolis.

The external pressures of the modern world, particularly the metropolis, weighed heavily upon the individual, heightening a sense of alienation. Because the city was a complex of destabilised and rapidly evolving identities it produced a growing sense of anxiety combined with fracturing social, political and cultural boundaries. However, as with the cultural sphere itself, the city was a balance between its alienating presence and its liberation; the city was also a realm defined by a sense of the malleable nature of self-understanding. In the fractured and malleable self-consciousness came a level of freedom that the individual had previously been unaware of. Within this freedom, definitively represented in the avant-garde movements, Benjamin found hope. For despite the collapse of tradition and the loss of meaning in experience there remained the possibility for freedom. Benjamin's observation of the liberating tendency of the modern condition can be attributed to his reading of social philosopher Georg Simmel. In Simmel's view, the objectification of social relations was precisely the condition needed for individual freedom. The modern individual was free because although he was dependent upon the faceless mass, he was not dependent on his relationships with specific people. In other words, the individual was free to experience and was thus released from traditional ties. The sole purpose of his existence became self-knowledge. Nevertheless, this essence of freedom was fundamentally suppressed by the over-stimulating condition of the modern. For this reason, the conditions of alienation needed to be addressed.

The individual's alienation was addressed by Critical Theorist's from the sphere of culture, because in the landscape of the city, cultural artefacts held the key to the Dialectical image; "an image that emerges suddenly in a flash...in the now of its recognisability."¹² Benjamin is referring here to the underlying potential of objects of everyday insignificance, which encapsulate long forgotten wisdom. In essence, culture offered the source of lived experience

¹² **Walter Benjamin**, *The Arcades Project*, Trans. By **Howard Eiland** and **Kevin Mclaughin**, Prepared on the basis of the German Volume Ed. By **Rolf Tiedemann**, Belknap Press (2002) [N9,7] pp473

in the constellation of fragmented moments of the present recalling genuine knowledge from the depth of myth. For Benjamin, the attention was upon discarded objects because the diminution of the present was so great it could not be recovered; the redemptive moment, its potential, flashed up¹³ unexpectedly in the fragments of culture, lying between the collapse of *aura* and freedom of expression¹⁴. Culture enveloped the resounding potential of change amidst the alienated space of modernity.

Benjamin considered humanity's salvation from its conditions of despondence to be possible through the expression of knowledge from culture. He observed redemption in the fragments of illumination, in the unexpected flashes of truth from the depths of forgotten moments hidden in the habitual. In other words, by removing an object of the everyday from its habitual position, the individual is infused with a moment of illumination and the objects, previously dismissed, are re-lived in the extraction of indifference. Similarly, the Surrealists identified everyday life under modernity as the central locus of socio-cultural inquiry, fighting against the reduction of individual expression. Humanity's moment of redemption was held, in Benjamin's opinion, in these fragments of hope sewn into the everyday. Benjamin's redemption results from the extraction of such moments formed into a constellation, thereby confronting the individual with an experience, with knowledge, previously dismissed. Therefore, manifesting genuine experience through the sphere of the everyday, through culture.

Benjamin's notion of culture and history is bound to his speculation on history by remembrance. In remembrance the past finds its primary actualisation in a renewed form.

Hope in the past, the highly redemptive, messianic impulse that is expressed in '*Theses on the*

¹³ "The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized" **Walter Benjamin**, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations*, Ed. And With an Introduction by Hannah Arendt, Trans. By Harry Zorn, Pimlico (1999) pp 247

¹⁴ **Walter Benjamin**, *The Work Of Art in the Age of Technological Reproduction*, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume III, 1935-1938*(Ed) **Michael W. Jennings**; volume Eds **Michael W. Jennings, Marcus Bullock Howard Eiland and Gary Smith**, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press Cambridge (1999)

Philosophy of History: “like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim,”¹⁵ formalises Benjamin’s seeking to transcend the destroyed past by actualising its potential in the present. Put precisely, memory and remembrance held the source of redemption, in Benjamin’s consideration because the abstract moments of memory, particularly involuntary memory, a token Benjamin discovered in Proust’s fragment on the Madeleine cookie, are flashes of truth. In memory the multi-faceted conditions of redemption can be connected, framing Benjamin’s critical path to change in the tangible image of remembrance.

It has been observed that the sphere within which Benjamin considered the potential for redemption was cultural. It has also been highlighted that the historical sphere mirrored the process in the cultural realm, thereby connecting Benjamin’s two fundamental arenas of redemption. The concept of redemption, however, is in need of further clarification. The consideration of redemption as a viable source of change was predominately the result of the growing presence of a new generation of Jewish thinkers in the German intellectual sphere, what historian Peter Gay denotes as *outsider as insider*.¹⁶ There was a newly emerging Jewish identity, with an ethos of rebellion, rejecting the optimism of the generation of German-Jews nurtured on the concept of *Bildung*.¹⁷ This *generation of 1914* that Jewish historian Robert Wohl among others have written about included a self-consciously Jewish and radical Messianic thread in their political and intellectual concerns. The radical messianism this generation observed demanded a complete repudiation of the world as it was, placing its hope in a future whose realization could only be brought about by the destruction of the old order. This radical

¹⁵ **Walter Benjamin**, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, in *Illuminations* pp 246

¹⁶ **Peter Gay**, *Weimar Culture, The outsider as insider*, Harper Torchbooks (1970) What Gay is referring to here is the growing presence of ‘new’ thought in a generation rebelling against their fathers desperation for intergration.

¹⁷ *Bildung*, is the concept of ‘education’ whereby the German-Jewish population was deemed necessary of education in order for them to assimilate into the main flock of the German Volk.

messianism was inherently both secular and theological, professing a theological revolution, or alternatively a secular redemption. Benjamin and Ernst Bloch were two particularly notable figures in this generation, for their starkly similar infusion of the metaphysical into the secular.

Redemption is a term grounded in theology, and Benjamin's connection to Judaic law cannot be denied, and yet, must also not be over estimated. The image of remembrance in Benjamin has a distinct parallel to Judaic lore, in the Jewish commandment to recall history in order to experience and thus pass on knowledge. Remembrance is also the structure of the art of storytelling. The other emphatic connection to Judaism is Benjamin's reflection upon the role of the individual in the path of redemption. The individual is responsible as part of the collective to bring about the redemptive moment, highlighted in the influence of culture and the everyday. The influence of Judaic law, even in its conceivably limited sense, framed Benjamin's image of change around the concept of redemption. Redemption reflects both the necessity for a total break in the enduring process of historicism linear history, in the nihilistic, apocalyptic sense and the hope for renewal.

For Benjamin, redemption is associated with the notion of *caesura*¹⁸, a radical break with the present, which would bring about the apocalyptic end of history and the moment of renewal. The caesura of historical time was founded in what he deemed the task of the Historical Materialist. Benjamin rejected the historicist mode of thought for its adherence to the sense of perpetual progress. By the same token, Benjamin also, in the process of an abstraction from the political, questions the strength of revolution in a purely historical denomination. Revolution denotes progress, whereby change is a simple evolution of the conditions already available. Although revolution refers to a dramatic shift the resulting state remains attached to tradition. In other words, the knowledge as defined by our history, as we understand it, restricts

¹⁸ Caesura is a term that literally means an 'interruption' or 'break.' This concept is found in a number of guises in Benjamin's work.

revolution to *progress* of the existing conditions. For Benjamin the historical materialist had the potential to break this pattern of progress by means of shock, bringing dialectics to a stand still and effectively calling an end to history. Redemption for Benjamin was, thus, the amalgamation of his metaphysical and the materialist thought.

Redemption is an abstract concept because there is no historical precedent for it; consequentially it denotes a theoretical and metaphysical moment, underpinned by its roots in Judaism. Thus, when one is attempting to comprehend Critical Theorists' relationship with redemption, one must also break with the conformity of considered tangible historic examples in order to open the realm of the seemingly impossible. This consideration of the unlikely is inherent to Benjamin's work, as expressed by Ernst Bloch in his essay recollecting Benjamin. He writes; "*Benjamin had what Lukács so drastically lacked: a unique gaze for the significant detail, for what lies alongside, for those fresh elements which...intrude in an unaccustomed and nonschematic way, things which do not fit in with the usual lot.*"¹⁹ This sense of perceiving what *could be* alongside the *already present* fits unquestionably into the notion of memory and the fragments of the forgotten; in the moment of recollection is the moment of redemption.

The 1920s was a period of hope weighed down by devastation, within which Benjamin demonstrated humanity's salvation within the manifestation of forgotten moments and memories. He deemed the devastation of the present to be beyond the limited scope of revolution; the conditions of the blasé individual had exceeded the possibility of revolution and consequently hope was tied to a Messianic-anarchism, to a total fragmentation of the present, the awakening of society from its collective dream. The everyday was a subject defined in its contradictions; this consideration is what Benjamin, grappled with in order to define his epoch. Situated in a time of conflict mediated by a sense of hope Benjamin, through philosophy,

¹⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Recollections of Walter Benjamin*, in *On Walter Benjamin, Critical Essays and Recollections* Ed. By Gary Smith pp 341

literature and artwork channelled the competing sides of the everyday in order to grasp an understanding of the present and awaken humanity from its alienation.

Benjamin came to consider the present essentially distorted, reflected in the social relations of individual, politics and culture. Man was bankrupt, torn between his reason and the unknown. Redemption embodies the dialectic between tradition and modernity, hope and despair to which Benjamin's writings respond. Similarly, Kafka positions himself on the boundary of two realms, between tradition and the big city. Accordingly, the Weimar period epitomises the conflict modernity faced. Trapped somewhere between hope and despair Weimar was pervaded by eternal moments of contradiction within which Benjamin conceived the transformation of humanity. In the despair of Weimar Germany Benjamin found traces of hope. Hence, redemption although often dismissed as abstract, was of consequence in relation to the Weimar era. 1920's Germany was a pocket of possibility surrounded by political and economic turmoil, it was the thundercloud within which the electricity necessary for change was latent.

Critical Theorists claimed not an absolute knowledge, nor humanity's inevitable progress to such an absolute. Their focus, as a result of the rejection of such metaphysical notions, was on the individual and the everyday. Philosophical reflection, therefore, concentrated upon the arenas in which the everyday and the individual could be redeemed from its tragedy: the alienation of spirit. In their view humanity had sunk into alienation as a result of the perceived infallibility and importance of 'progress' and consequently, the existence of the human animal had become devoid of meaning or knowledge. In this devastated reality humanity's only choice was to, in the Nietzschean nihilistic sense, destroy the present in order to salvage the moments untainted by the false history and false knowledge the human race had constructed. For Benjamin truth and knowledge were to be found in the moments discarded by humanity in its

haste toward progress. Therefore, focusing on moments in the everyday where humanity expressed boredom or the disruption of habitual order Benjamin attempted to display humanity's possibility of salvation.

* * * * *

Benjamin's work falls into many disparate categories; consequential the task of analysing his image of redemption is a monumental task. The scope of this essay will limit its scale, but I will be attempting to construct a clear understanding of Benjamin's notion of redemption and its significance as a pattern of thought for Critical Theory. It is possible to observe, as philosophical-historian David Ferris does, throughout Benjamin's work the relationship between history and criticism as a strand of thought throughout. Benjamin draws from both criticism and history in an attempt to craft a sense of possibility in the conditions of isolation and milieu he observed in the conditions of modernity.

This essay will be reflect on the conditions of alienation Critical Theorist's work aimed to dissect and reframe. By understanding the conditions of the intellectual sphere, we can better understand the importance of Benjamin's concept of redemption, as apart of the Critical Theorist's theories for change. I will be highlighting the vitality of the concept of redemption in relation to both its apocalyptic and restorative aspects; the apocalyptic mask sitting naturally within Benjamin's rewriting of historical narrative, and the restorative scaffolding around his aesthetic critique. The frame of redemption, in its entirety, I believe is most tangibly expressed in the concept of awakening. Awakening is inherently related to memory, which I will argue is the connecting tangent through Benjamin's concept of redemption.

From Progress to Reification

When observing the importance of Benjamin's redemption, in particular contrast to his Jewish contemporaries, an understanding of the intellectual field these men were apart of is vital. The process of contextualisation is important in this moment because of the dramatic change in impetus the philosophical realm took in its rejection of the ideals of the Enlightenment. The rejection of the Enlightenment, when considered in broad-brush strokes, was fundamentally a dispute with the essence of progress. Intellectual figures such as Georg Simmel and Max Weber contested the sense of a coherent goal in the unfolding of history and adhere to a more individualistic socio-political understanding of the modern environment. Both these intellectual figures are associated with the birth of sociology and in this sense were key figures in Critical Theory.

Weber is the focal character in many texts concerning the unfolding of the work of the Critical Theorists in Weimar Germany, and in many respects his '*disenchantment of the world*'²⁰, as highlighted by historians Zygmunt Bauman and Michael Gardiner, and his '*iron cage*'²¹ are epistemological moments in understanding the collapsing social and economic structures. However, for Benjamin, Simmel is the more influential figure, particularly concerning the importance of memory. It is possible to trace many of Benjamin's fundamental ideas back to Simmel's works. Nevertheless, both Simmel and Weber were figureheads for the Critical Theorists of 1920's Germany. They were the mentors and tutors for both Benjamin and Lukács and must be regarded as integral to the forming of the paths to change written by the Critical Theorists who followed their guidance.

²⁰ Disenchantment of the world is a concept coined to describe the modernised, bureaucratic, rationalised and secularised western society in his 'Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'

²¹ Iron Cage refers to the walls of mechanization and bureaucracy that suppress the modern individual, also to be found in 'Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism'

The other important intellectual character that must be mentioned, even briefly, is Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's paradigm of *nihilism*; the rejection of all moral and religious principles in the belief that life is meaningless, that nothing in the world has real existence, as the first moment of total rejection, was the father of Critical Theorists' pessimism. Nietzsche's nihilism goes hand in hand with his notion of the '*Last Man*';²² a figure of apathy representative of the modern man and forms the initial frame of reference for the study of the symptoms of modernity. For Benjamin, both the apathetic last man and the moment of total rejection converge in his redemptive moment, just as in Lukács these ideas can be found in his reification.

The contextualization of Benjamin's redemption must also focus upon his historical situation; Weimar Germany. The Weimar Republic, as mentioned above, embodied the changing philosophical dynamic. It symbolised a hope for a new start, particularly for the Germany of humanist philosophy and pacific cosmopolitanism, against the militaristic Germany held by submission to authority and aggression. The Republic was an ideal, a striking mix between cynicism and confidence. This characteristic division between tradition and modernity was also present in the 'Jewish question,' in the integration of the Jewish community into the German, what Gay refers to as the *outsider as insider*²³.

The Jewish question in Weimar Germany was tied up in the framework of national identity and German modernism in general. The Jewish question thus became symptomatic of the wider discourse of German modernism. Weber for example, in his context of rationalization; *the disenchantment of the world*, talks of a heightened sense of alienation in a fragmented society within which the Jew would be cast as a 'pariah.' This Jewish dilemma of belonging, of contradictory affinities is evident in German-Jewish literature, exemplified in the work of Kafka.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra, A Book for Everyone and No One*, Trans. And with an Intro by R.J.Hollingdale, Penguin (2003)

²³ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture, The outsider as insider* (1970)

'*The Castle*'²⁴ is the most poignant example of this dilemma, the Jewish tragedy of estrangement, with its vivid fictional portraits of failed assimilation. Kafka's life and impulses, like many post-assimilated Jews, represent the conflicting impulses of the German Jew. These conflicts, at the heart of modern Jewish identity offer a framework for Benjamin's notion of redemption. As Peter Gay succinctly says; "*for the outsiders of the Empire as later, for the insiders of the Republic, the most insistent question revolved around the need for man's renewal, questions made most urgent and practically insoluble by the disappearance of God, the threat of the machine and...the helpless philistinism of the bourgeoisie.*"²⁵ The answer to this question was sought amidst the wounds of civilization caused by WWI in the cultural realm of Weimar Germany.

As well as embodying the question of identity and the fever of revolution, which was perpetuated by the anxiety of disillusionment and the unknown, that plagued modernist philosophy, Weimar Germany was a hotbed for artistic expression. The Republic was characterised by open expression, in politics and culture. The projection of antagonism against the political philosophy, which had led to war and to the slaughter of millions, came in radical forms from revolution to the avant-garde. It must be noted here that this spirit does not die alongside the Republic; its expression is manifested throughout the Second World War and in the post-war period. Nevertheless, the founding spirit of hope, liberation and integration was beleaguered by a shadow of doubt and disappointment, primarily a product of the revolutionary failure in the winter of 1918-1919. This disappointment was perpetuated by further crisis, from civil war, the treaty of Versailles and the Kapp Putsch. An atmosphere of despair became characteristic in the intellectual world; wounds of WWI heightened by the short-lived revolutions and general strikes in Munich and Berlin.

²⁴ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, Trans. J.A.Underwood, Penguin Classics (2000)

²⁵ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture, The outsider as insider* (1970) pp 7

To put in simple terms, there are three periods that form the Weimar Republic. The Republic's birth between 1918 and 1923, a period defined by revolution and political and economic upheaval, including the March 1921 uprising. It is this period in which Lukács wrote *History and Class-Consciousness*. Followed by a period of relative stability from the Dawes Plan 1924 to the financial collapse in 1929, confounding both the hope of the Republic's supporters and the fierce opposition of its enemies. Finally the period between 1929 and 1933 characterised by the economic collapse and increasing disintegration of the political structure, a period of noted instability through disappointment and internal perpetuation of strife²⁶. Weimar was wrought with deep crisis, exemplified in the theoretical crisis from the Marxism of the 2nd international to the philosophy of the human sciences, crossing both Simmel's theory of alienation and Weber's theory of values as well as Nietzsche's critique of ideology. In these conditions the struggle for a succinct and definitive concept of change was confronted with a multitude of obstacles. It is therefore essential to understand this atmosphere of crisis and its intellectual substance so as to construct a total picture of the value of Benjamin's concept of redemption as opposed to revolution or reform.

As a result of the achievements and failures of the Republic those who had supported it felt feelings of cynicism and detachment and those who had opposed maintained a sense of resilient opposition, fuelled by both the perpetual sense of possibility in the maintenance of the old order and the moments of genuine fear of it succeeding. The presence of these negative associations were particularly notable following the fall out from the war. War had resulted in devastation; however, it had initially offered a release from boredom and a salvation from decadence, according to Gay, in nowhere was this psychosis more obvious than in Germany²⁷. However, Weimar's great failure was the perpetuation of traditional structures. This traditional

²⁶ Peter Gay, *Weimar Culture, The outsider as insider* (1970) pp 23-24

²⁷ *IBID* pp 11

German structure remained unshaken even following the 1918-19 revolution. In these unstable conditions the philosophical ideas for change were drafted with increasing theoretical and, in many respects, radical images; Benjamin's concept of redemption falls, notably, in this category. By infusing radical revolutionary ideas with the apocalyptic and restorative redemptive images Benjamin drew upon the atmosphere he was writing in. The historic moments of the Republic translated into a philosophical and cultural critique, highlighting both the growing sense of individual freedom in conjuncture with the maintenance of traditional restrictions. Benjamin's work rode and thrived on these waves of contradiction, settling in the intellectual atmosphere of the German-Jew. The Weimar Republic heralded the very source of humanity's salvation in the contradiction between despair and redemption mediated by the hope of illumination.

Mimesis and Melancholy

Kafka's image of the rotten epitomises the empty shell of the modern condition, from the sphere of the metropolis to the state of ruin in which experience lay. The modern condition, founded on the impairment of knowledge, truth and the decay of tradition, can be framed around the notions of reification and false-consciousness. Reification, the consideration of an abstract as concrete, has deep-seated roots in the interactions in the city. False consciousness, as the obedience to a belief considered to be fundamentally correct, relates in this context to the adherence to the principle of progress. From this framework Critical Theorists analysed the modern individual: a figurative spectre of boredom, habit and de-sensualisation resulting from the over-stimulating quality of the city landscape and prescribed an antidote to these conditions of detriment. However, despite the overwhelming and repressive mimetic quality of the metropolis (commodity fetish, the repetitive movement of a mechanized society, and the eternal self-same of history), there was a balance in the qualities of freedom the individual encountered in the city. Nevertheless, despite the opening of previously restricted arenas of interaction, the modern condition was epitomised by a sense of melancholy. The individual was subjugated by a return to myth in the form of the commodity fetish and the perpetuation of a debased tradition.

Man's existence, devoid of meaning, quality and purpose is fundamentally uprooted, lonely or integrated in superficial reality and a frantic search for meaning and authenticity. Therefore, he eventually replaces Gods with idols and becomes attached to objects. The individual is drawn into reification and false consciousness by the increasing rationalisation of the social structure. Progress, still perpetuated as the natural train of events in the unfolding of history, has led to increasing rationalisation within which the individual has become