



Perception and Experience in Modernity (Benjamin Studien/Studies 1)

Helga Geyer-Ryan

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The first volume of Benjamin Studies publishes the keynote lectures of the first Congress of the International Walter Benjamin Association, which took place in Amsterdam, July 1997. Its title bears witness to the most central concepts of Benjamin's philosophy of culture. Strongly influenced as he was by Kant, Benjamin never lost his inclination to analyse the components of reality as fashioned by ourselves. Because he was also a materialist, for him the modes of fashioning were shaped in turn by the times and places we occupy in history. As a consequence, Benjamin's theory assigns a pivotal role in the interaction between the world and its inhabitants to the media: language with its plethora of discourses, the arts, and the whole technology of reproduction. The historical and social development of the media is, translated, according to him, into our instruments of perception, and this perception constructs the elements of the world, the knowledge of this construction and the knowledge of the constructor. The self-knowledge of the constructor is what we call 'experience'. Within this broad epistemological framework, the diversity and complexity of Benjamin's project acquires a fundamental coherence and is therefore able to accommodate the temporal volatility of the phenomena of our world. It's not surprising, therefore, that Perception & Experience offers the most stimulating variety of topics, and that the keynote lectures reflect merely an intensification of interest in certain areas within a much larger field of investigation. The texts presented here pinpoint the central preoccupations of today's debates amongst Benjamin scholars, preoccupations which are themselves responses to our own historical imperatives.

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