

Walter Benjamin as the “Last European”: The Transfer of Walter Benjamin’s Ideas to American Cultural Studies

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Walter Benjamin’s posthumous reception was significantly broader than the one during his lifetime, particularly in the one country he had never succeeded to visit (although he had intended to), the United States of America. In the current article, we suggest, that while beginning to widen in American intellectual circles, the acknowledgment of the philosopher’s legacy happened later in a narrower academic context, rehabilitating the philosopher who had never had the chance to work in a university due to a failed 1925 habilitation. The majority of Benjamin’s works were disseminated in various non-academic journals and magazines, making the process of translation and publication of his texts more difficult than it usually is for scientists. We suggest that, firstly, Benjamin’s reception in the USA established his image as a provocative essayist stepping far beyond Marxist frameworks (as opposed to how his first publisher and friend Theodor Adorno presented him through a thoroughly-selected collection of writings that had been translated into English for the first time), exploring such topics as Messianism, mass culture, and everyday practices. Our second suggestion is that Benjamin’s legacy appeared to be fruitful for American cultural studies whose representatives rejected ideas of the teleology of culture embedded in the original British program, and turned to “practice theories” which presented everyday practices significant in themselves, not as privileged sites of ideology.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, cultural studies, Theodor Adorno, practice theories, American cultural studies, cultural transfer

In the present study, the hypothesis that the German philosopher Walter Benjamin helped American researchers in the field of cultural studies abandon an idea of teleology, then advanced and legitimized the interest in everyday life, common practices, and local subjects is defended. Interpretations of Benjamin’s ideas that were presented in American cultural studies played a role in Benjamin’s images existing in American humanities nowadays. However, it is important to consider that the reception of the ideas of the German thinker greatly influenced the development of the field of cultural studies in the USA. These intertwined and interdependent processes will be the subject of the current paper. The stylistics of Benjamin’s works, which in a certain moment of development of the humanities and social sciences appears to be marginal, becomes a part of a mainstream line of “cultural turn” in the second half of the 20th century.

The most relevant methodology to solve this problem is a theory of cultural transfer as developed by the French cultural historian Michelle Espagne. A polysemy of the no-

tion of “transfer”, used both in the humanities and in economics (as a transfer of financial currents), is of great importance for Espagne. This being said, Espagne considered intellectual and artistic life to be a priority for the research of the possible inter-weavings of people and objects, and their symbolic interpretation. The phenomena chosen for analysis are not isolated, but constitute a part of the historical process. Espagne’s theory is aimed at breaking down a well-established idea of homogeneity and the closedness of space. Besides this, while analyzing a cultural transfer, it is incorrect to merely study the “influences” that one author can have on another, as the import of certain ideas is as important in defining their new meaning and their export.

Currently, the theory of cultural transfer is well-established and its principles are renowned. As S. L. Kozlov wrote (2019: 15–16), we assume

as given all conclusions and formulae, which were revealed during long-standing discussions of issues of cultural transfers . . . : (1) cultural transfer is a process, based not on a passive, but an active role of importer-recipient, consciously choosing and broadcasting one or the other element of foreign culture; in this sense cultural transfer is always based on preliminary construction of image of foreign culture, its Gestalt; (2) cultural transfer is a process, determined not by a passive reception of foreign impact, but primarily by importer-recipient’s own problems . . . ; (3) as a result of a cultural transfer imported (or designed to be imported) element from foreign culture undergoes a more or less deep transformation: in the process of integration of this element to a new cultural system composition, structure and cultural function of this element is deformed; in this respect result of the transfer is never entirely congruent with the original project.

The subject of our investigation will be the reception of Walter Benjamin’s ideas in the American context. This transfer was launched in the 1950s after Benjamin’s 1940 death, in an intellectual context that was significantly different from the one in Europe in the 1930s. Walter Benjamin never visited the USA and never wrote in English; his native cultures were German and Jewish (Benjamin was deeply interested in issues of Jewish social and political self-identification and Jewish mysticism throughout his life). Benjamin was engaged in the research of French culture and Paris (his mega-project *Arcades* was devoted to 19th century Paris), and the philosopher fled from Nazi Germany to Paris in 1933. Benjamin’s life was cut short in 1940: he committed suicide while attempting to cross the France–Spain border (any attempt of crossing the border was terminated by the Nazis). His tragic death formed an image of a victim of the Nazi regime around Benjamin. As Arendt remembers, Benjamin called himself the “last European” in the eyes of a hypothetical American public in case of his relocation to the USA.

Let us characterize the main stages of the intellectual biography of Benjamin, and outline the key contexts of the spread of Benjamin’s ideas during his lifetime. The first context is academic. Benjamin tried to build a university career, but this attempt was not successful. In 1919, he earned his Ph.D. cum laude with the dissertation *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*. By 1925, Benjamin had prepared the text of a

second dissertation *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. His second habilitation (thesis defense), which was expected to take place in Frankfurt University, opened a potential possibility for teaching in the university, but it never happened. Professor Franz Schultz (the chair in German literary history) told Benjamin, after reading the text of his dissertation, he would withdraw himself as advisor, and recommended Hans Cornelius (the chair in aesthetics and art theory) for the role. Cornelius evaluated the work negatively, claiming that “Benjamin’s work was “extremely difficult to read,” something no doubt experienced by every subsequent reader” (Eiland, Jennings, 2014: 231). After that, the Faculty of Philosophy recommended Benjamin to call off his application, which he did. Benjamin did not make any further efforts to continue his scientific academic career.

Later, Benjamin concentrated on a career in German journalism, and this period concurred with the blossoming of the press in the Weimar Republic. Benjamin was published in such editions as the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the *Berliner Tageblatt*, the journal *Die Literarische Welt*, and signed an agreement with Rowohlt Verlag for the publication of three of his works, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, *Goethe’s Elective Affinities*, and *One-Way Street*. As a result, (until the arrival of the Nazis in 1933), Benjamin held a solid place of a critic for some time, while not burdened with academic liabilities. Benjamin’s critique was dedicated to literature and the cinema; Benjamin paid special attention to French culture, hoping to establish himself as “the leading German commentator on French culture” (251). His notes belonged to the genre of feuilleton: “The *kleine Form* or ‘little form’ that resulted came rapidly to be identified as the primary mode of cultural commentary and criticism in the Weimar Republic” (258). After his trip to Paris in the mid-1920s, Benjamin turned to the analysis of popular urban practices and mass culture, where “the turn to the popular brought with it a reconsideration of what it meant to write criticism in a politically and historically responsible fashion” (257).

Nevertheless, Benjamin’s writing preserved an imprint of the academic style, which allows us to ascribe a variety of his works to classical texts in social theory. Benjamin realized his academic aspirations not in a university, but within the framework of The Institute for Social Research (the Frankfurt School), collaborating with Theodor Adorno. The Institute for Social Research was founded in 1923, its first director was Karl Grünberg, and the research of the Institute was focused on the history of the labour movement and socio-economic studies. After Max Horkheimer became director in 1931, the Institute became oriented towards a more-theoretically profound scholarly endeavor since “economics and history were substituted by social philosophy, whose overall goal was a ‘philosophical interpretation of the vicissitudes of human fate—the fate of humans not as mere individuals, however, but as members of a community’” (Dmitriev, 2004: 339). Under Horkheimer’s supervision, *The Journal for Social Research* was created, in which Benjamin was published (he became a fellow of the Institute in 1935). In the winter of 1926–1927, Benjamin travelled to Moscow (his *Moscow Diary* was written as a result of this trip). The pretext for the trip was a nervous breakdown of his lover, the Latvian actress, Asja Lācis, who lived in Moscow during that period. The trip became possible thanks to VOKS, the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries,

and motivated Benjamin to reflect about the necessity of joining the Communist Party. The reasons against such a decision must have outweighed the supposed benefits, for Benjamin never joined the Communist Party.

From the beginning of the 1930s and until the end of his life, Benjamin was published in the *Journal for Social Research* and thanks to the Fellows of the Institute, obtained the possibility to emigrate to the USA in August, 1940 (they helped him get a visa, which is an invitation to the Institute for a position of a research scholar). In the meantime, certain intellectuals labeled Adorno's harsh editorial policy on Benjamin's works as censorship. For example, in 1938, Adorno wrote a letter to Benjamin that The Institute for Social Research refused to publish his work *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*. Adorno "judged the essay's aggregate method of construction a failure" (Eiland, Jennings, 2014: 622), and accused Benjamin of positivism and "vulgar marxism" peculiar to Brecht. Consequently, the middle section of the essay was published as a separate paper in the *Journal*, titled "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire".

Adorno understood Benjamin's full dependence on the Institute at the end of the 1930s as Benjamin's only source of income: "he felt he could dictate not just the choice of subject matter but the intellectual tenor of Benjamin's work . . . he calmly and firmly pressured Benjamin . . . to produce writing that would in fact approximate his own" (624). In addition, since 1939, Benjamin had expressed a wish to emigrate to the USA (The Institute for Social Research had already moved to New York by that time) due to the growing concern of war and the rise of anti-Semitism in France; only Adorno and his colleagues could facilitate this transfer. In 1955, Adorno published a two-volume edition of Benjamin's writings (1955). The meaning of the publication of this edition, as important as it was, was twofold. On the one hand, its publication inaugurated a history of the posthumous reception of Benjamin's works. On the other hand, since the 1960s, Adorno's position towards Benjamin (in the first place, his selection of Benjamin's works for an edition) had begun to be criticized in the German Federal Republic. The writer Helmut Heissenbüttel, in the July 1967 issue of the journal *Mercur*, accused Adorno of controlling Benjamin's legacy, and Arendt agreed with that statement (678).

"Saturnine Hero": The Transfer of Benjamin's Ideas to the USA

Benjamin's reception in the USA was launched by the 1968 publication of an anthology of selected essays titled *Illuminations*, from the American publishing house Harcourt, Brace & World. The book also included an introduction by Hannah Arendt, published beforehand in the same year in the *New Yorker* magazine. In this article, "Walter Benjamin (1892–1940)", the critic was included in a broad American intellectual context for the first time.

Arendt constructs the image of Benjamin as a thinker who is trespassing the borders of one genre of writing or professional occupation. While describing the academic twists of his career, Arendt ascribes a nearly-mystical meaning to the element of bad luck in Benjamin's biography. Arendt laid the foundation for the mythologization of Benjamin's

biography, turning the reader's attention to the tragic parts of his life and his lack of belonging to a specific literary or scholarly genre. Arendt wrote that "posthumous fame seems, then, to be the lot of the unclassifiable ones" (Arendt, 1968: 3).

Fredric Jameson's essay, "Walter Benjamin, or Nostalgia", was published in the American literary journal *Salmagundi* practically simultaneously with Arendt's essay in the winter of 1969–1970. It was significant as one of the first essays in English about Benjamin, "marking one of the first essays in English on Benjamin by someone who did not know him, and one of the first to be published in an English-language literary journal" (Grossman, 1992: 419). Jameson considered Benjamin's allegorical thought as his principal feature and saw revolutionary potential in his nostalgia, "a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude" (68). From Grossman's perspective, due to the emphasis on the allegorical nature of Benjamin's thought, Jameson assimilates it with the model of Marxist hermeneutics that he later pursues (its more refined development is found in the 1981 book *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*).

In 1979, the American critic Susan Sontag dedicated the essay "Under the Sign of Saturn" to Benjamin, which was published in *The New York Review of Books* magazine, and was included as a preface to a collection of selected essays, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (1979), in the same year; in 1981, a collection of Sontag's criticism *Under the Sign of Saturn* was published, which included a homonymic essay. In Sontag's opinion, melancholy profoundly influenced Benjamin's intellectual work. Like Arendt, Sontag observes an unusual historical approach of the critic. If such an approach is the equivalent of Benjamin's attention to quotation that does not require analysis and is a self-sufficient category for Arendt,¹ the transformation of temporal categories into spatial ones in Benjamin's autobiographical works is significant (for example, in *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900*) for Sontag.

Sontag's essay about Benjamin is addressed to a wider audience than Arendt's. Sontag was regularly published in such magazines as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*, and maintained contact with a large number of writers, artists, and rock musicians. Sontag is said to be the only celebrity among American critics,² and her influence on a wide audience was exceptional.

Sontag refused to consider Benjamin as a representative of merely Marxist thought. While speaking about his autobiographical works, she creates an image not of a Marxist

1. "From the Goethe essay on, quotations are at the center of every work of Benjamin's. This very fact distinguishes his writings from scholarly works of all kinds in which it is the function of quotations to verify and document opinions, wherefore they can safely be relegated to the Notes . . . The main work consisted in tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state, as it were" (Arendt, 1968: 47).

2. "In our time, how many American critics have been celebrities? How many have had the kind of name recognition that allows them to be casually mentioned in a mainstream Hollywood movie, or enough star power to be featured (along with their apartments) in *People*, the magazine which pretty much invented today's celebrity culture? Not many. Almost none. Maybe, when you get right down to it, only one. Susan Sontag" (During, 2012).

theorist, but of a European intellectual with an outstandingly rich cultural background and tendency for self-destruction, intensified by tragic historical circumstances: she wrote, “At the Last Judgment, the Last Intellectual—that Saturnine hero of modern culture, with his ruins, his defiant visions, his reveries, his unquenchable gloom, his downcast eyes—will explain that he took many ‘positions’ and defended the life of the mind to the end, as righteously and inhumanly as he could” (1981: 134).

Sontag, Arendt, and Jameson published their essays in literary magazines aimed at wide intellectual circles, but the recognition of Benjamin’s legacy in the academic landscape happened afterwards. In the 1980s, the Harvard University Press took an interest in Benjamin’s works. Right after having been assigned as an Executive Editor of the publishing house, Lindsay Waters began negotiations with the head of Suhrkamp Verlag, Siegfried Unseld, about the possibility of publishing a selective edition of Benjamin’s writings in English.

Waters first heard about Benjamin from his colleague, the literary critic and a representative of deconstructionism, Paul de Man. It is evident from Waters’ recollection about meeting the Board of Syndics that, if Benjamin was known to anyone from American Academia, it could be only in narrow circles of neo-marxists and deconstructionists (such as Fredric Jameson and Paul de Man) not represented in the Board. Waters would write that “But when we got to the Syndics meeting I was overwhelmed by worry. How could the august Syndics approve the publication of volumes of a man whose dissertation at the University of Frankfurt was turned down? Who was this schlemiel³ Walter Benjamin, the little rag-picker? How could publishing thousands of pages of this slacker-dude’s essays and notebooks be grand enough for Harvard University Press?” (2011). However, according to Banks, the sociologist Daniel Bell demonstrated the necessity of publishing full volumes of Benjamin’s selected writings, saying “Because he is a critic, and he’s not a theorist. If he were a theorist, he’d have presented his ideas systematically, and we could publish a well-chosen selection of his work that would represent his thinking beautifully, but he’s a critic, not a theorist, which means his ideas are scattered across all the pages of his work, and the only way to publish his work adequately is to publish hundreds and hundreds of pages of it so readers can see how his ideas emerge as he gets caught up in analyzing hundreds of concrete situations” (2014).⁴ After the publication of the book *The End of Ideology* in 1960, Bell was a rather influential thinker, and his voice could influence the decision of the Board.

Sontag’s and Arendt’s essays were used as prefaces to Benjamin’s first volumes of selected writings in English. Daniel Bell did not write about Benjamin, but from recollections of his colleague Lindsay Waters, we can see how he promoted translating and publishing the philosopher’s works in English.⁵ Waters considers Bell a cultural conservative,

3. A “Schlemiel” is a Yiddish term meaning an “incompetent person” or “fool” (Yidish-English-Hebreyish-er Verterbukh, cited by <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schlemiel>).

4. We cannot guarantee a precise transcription of Bell’s speech by Waters as the cited phrase is not a stenograph of Bell’s direct speech, but is reconstructed by Waters in a memoir.

5. Arthur [Arthur Rosenthal, director of Harvard University Press from 1972 until 1990.—*M. Ch.*] was convinced and the Board was convinced, and we have now published about three thousand pages of Benjamin’s

but Bell's resemblance to Benjamin could be in an overlapping scientific methodology: Bell was not interested in grand explanatory theories like Talcott Parsons' models. On the contrary, "Dan was an essayist who focused on particulars, like Benjamin. In some way, though he'd have denied it, he was in tune with the postmodern—he certainly analyzed it as well as anyone with his idea of the post-industrial age" (Waters, 2011). In his book, *The End of Ideology*, Bell criticizes a theory of mass society (belonging to such grand theories) that Arendt and Adorno stood by, considering it not as a description of Western society, but as an ideology of Romantic protest against contemporary life.

The Director of the New York Institute for the Humanities, Eric Banks, notices, in the article "Walter Benjamin's Afterlife", that "the complicated publishing history of Benjamin's writings in many ways was tied up with the reception and popularity of *Work of Art*" (2014).⁶ Due to the public's focused interest in this work, Benjamin was considered primarily as a representative of Marxist aesthetics, and as an intermediary between the stricter thinkers of the Frankfurt School and the "troublemaker" Bertolt Brecht. The volume of *Illuminations*, edited by Arendt and containing only 10 essays, was sold out soon after publication and "students could be seen with photocopied versions of Benjamin's essay on the fate of art in the wake of the invention of photography and film" (Ibid.), which at that time signified both the obscurity of the critic (it was a small print run of the volume) and the relative popularity of his media theory, compared to his other scientific interests.

The publication of the separate works of the critic in New Left Books publishing house was "a fascinating set of essays and books, but one that failed to give the full scope of Benjamin's interests and writings" (Ibid.).⁷ According to Banks, it was Lindsay Waters as Harvard University Press's executive editor who did "as much as possible to ensure that every inch of Planet Benjamin, craters and all, is visible" (Ibid.).

In 1996, the first volume of the author's selected writings was published; three years later, a second one was published, which, however, caused material losses for the publishing house: "After the accolades piled on the press for the first volume of the collected writings, and with *Arcades* in the works, Waters figured that the public was ready for a massive dose of Benjamin. Volume 2 was almost 900 pages, covering Benjamin's fecund output between 1927 and 1934, and it shocked Waters to see how poorly it did" (Ibid.). In 1999, the Harvard University Press published a translation of Benjamin's unfinished project *Arcades*, to which he had devoted the last 13 years of his life. Despite financial misfortunes from the accompanying publication of the second volume of selected writings,

writings, including an edition this spring of his Early Writings, 1910–1917. I could not have done it without Dan. Arthur would not have been convinced, nor would the Syndics have been" (Waters, 2011).

6. The essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* was published in 1968 in the first collection of Benjamin's essays in the English literary journal *Illuminations*, prefaced by Arendt and translated by Harry Zohn.

7. From 1973 till 1979, from the English publishing house New Left Books, four editions of Benjamin's essays, translated in English, were published: *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1973), *Understanding Brecht* (1973), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977), and *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (1979). Stanley Mitchell and George Steiner, to name a few, contributed to the publications.

the Harvard University Press continued translating and publishing various essays by Benjamin, his correspondence with Gershom Scholem and Theodor Adorno, and, in 2014, published the critic's most detailed biography in English to date (Eiland, Jennings, 2014).

To a large extent, Benjamin's reception in the wider intellectual environment occurred due to these translations. As well, Arendt's and Sontag's essays introduced the figure of Benjamin to broader circles in the USA. In Benjamin's case, the history of his publications matters, because his works during his life were published not in academic issues, but in various journals and magazines as essays.⁸ In the following section, I will examine Benjamin's reception in American academic circles, mainly among researchers specializing in cultural studies.

The History of Walter Benjamin's Reception in American Cultural Studies

During the discussion of the future of the public intellectual that took place in 2001, the American journalist and founder of the online-journal *Feed*, Steven Johnson, named Benjamin a role model due to his eclecticism, the interest in combining high and low culture, and his attention to the transformations in technology and media. Calling Benjamin and American intellectuals of the new generation funny, Johnson rejects giving such a definition for Adorno (Donatich et al., 2001). An opposition of Adorno and Benjamin (in favor of the latter) in their approach to the research of culture characterizes the tendencies of cultural studies in the USA.

British cultural studies have their own history of the reception of Benjamin (the most notable work, reflecting on Benjamin's heritage, is a book by Terry Eagleton *Walter Benjamin; or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, published in 1981).⁹ Nevertheless, for British researchers, Benjamin rather stays in the Marxist framework than crossing its borders. Ioan Davies, in his *Approaching Walter Benjamin*, demonstrates this difference in the example of the selection of Benjamin's works for translation in Britain and the USA: "In Britain the task of compiling and issuing translations has been largely in the hands of the *New Left Review*, and, to a lesser extent, *Screen*; in the United States the works have been published by Helen Wolff at Harcourt Brace Javonovich and occasionally by the *New German Critique*. The approach to publication has displayed dramatic differences. New Left Books has issued collections of Benjamin's work which explore themes of his own which appear to be part of a wider Marxist debate: *Understanding Brecht*, *Charles Baudelaire*, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, *One-Way Street*, and *Aesthetics and Politics* (debates between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno). Helen Wolff has published collections of a random nature, *Illuminations* (issued in Britain by Jonathan Cape) and

8. As Jeffrey Grossman notes, "an archaeology, in Foucault's sense of the word, of Benjamin's emergence as a literary figure after World War II must therefore take into account the rather problematic history of his publications" (1992: 414).

9. As Grossman demonstrates, "Eagleton adopts Benjamin's discursive style in his struggle to wrestle a neo-Marxist practice from the hands of such 'post-Marxists' as Michel Foucault" (1992: 421–422). This being said, Benjamin's messianism symbolizes for Eagleton (despite the fact that he discovers positive moments in messianism) a lapse into idealism, symptomatic of Marxist cultural theorists in the 20th century.

Reflections, which emphasize the eclecticism of Benjamin's imagination. Thus, while New Left Books has attempted to put Benjamin in the context of a European political-aesthetic debate, Harcourt Brace has delivered the provocative (Jewish) essayist" (1980: 67). Davies notes that each new publication of Benjamin in English reveals to readers not only the critic's new dimensions, "but the ideological proclivities of those writers who adopted him" (68).

Before defining Benjamin's relevance in American cultural studies, it is worth exploring the difference between the American and British versions of cultural studies. On the one hand, it does not seem to be the easiest task, as the project of cultural studies implies both inter-disciplinarity (or even an anti-disciplinarity¹⁰ as some researchers insist) and internationality. Nevertheless, it is possible to record certain distinctions. Firstly, numerous researchers notice a higher level of institutionalization of cultural studies in the USA compared to Great Britain, which is a consequence of a general cultural turn of a large part of academic research in the country. As Bender and Schorske note, "in the 1930s, the national crisis was economic. Depression vaulted economics and the social sciences to center stage, to lead the academy's response to society's ills and needs. In the 1960s, with capitalism returned to strength and ethnic and gender questions challenging the status quo in fundamental ways, culture replaced the economy as the crisis area. Therewith the humanistic disciplines—especially English and history—became the principal carriers of the academy's social-critical function" (1998: 9). Cultural studies are well-financed and hold an important position in the university world. In 1992, Stuart Hall discussed the dangers of the "explosion of cultural studies' in the USA, their rapid professionalization and institutionalization" (1992: 285). According to Hall, the institutionalization of cultural studies leads to their de-politization: in his understanding, cultural studies were initially aimed at challenging established academic practices built on the elitism of academia.

Besides this, American cultural studies are connected with a tradition of new ethnography, "rooted primarily in anthropological theory and practice" (Nelson, Treichler, Grosberg, 1992: 14). Although cultural anthropology is a separate field from cultural studies, it is also engaged in issues of identity, history, and social relations. The American anthropologist James Clifford announced that anthropologists can nowadays contribute to a "genuinely comparative, and non-teleological, cultural studies, a field no longer limited to 'advanced,' 'late capitalist' societies" (1992: 104).

Cultural studies were influenced by diverse intellectual and political traditions, the frameworks of which discussions were held about the notions of modernity and mass society. In the USA, cultural studies emerged institutionally in the sphere of communications because this disciplinary field was affected by the debates about the role of mass society in the USA after World War II. The British tradition of cultural studies is also tied to the research of communications (Stuart Hall's work *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse* can be remembered, for example), but it was born within the "new left".

10. "Indeed, cultural studies is not merely interdisciplinary; it is often, as others have written, actively and aggressively anti-disciplinary—a characteristic that more or less ensures a permanently uncomfortable relation to academic disciplines" (Nelson, Treichler, Grosberg, 1992: 1–2).

American cultural studies distance themselves from a Marxist doctrine, although a disposition to turn to cultural practices was laid in the initial program of cultural studies by the founders of the program, Raymond Williams, Richard Johnson, E. P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall. In the article “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms”, Hall outlines the two foundational paradigms of cultural studies: culturalism and structuralism. Both paradigms object to a Marxist metaphor base/superstructure and an ‘economistic’ definition of determinacy. This being said, a culturalist paradigm “stands opposed to the residual and merely-reflective role assigned to ‘the cultural’. In its different ways, it conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices; practices; and those practices, in turn, as a common form of human activity . . .” (1980: 63). According to Hall, the future of cultural studies lies in the synthesis (and mutually reinforcing antagonisms) of the two paradigms, neither of which is a self-sufficient mode of research. Hall’s article can be considered a historical milestone in a general turn to practice theories in cultural studies as described by Andreas Reckwitz. In Reckwitz’s opinion, this turn began in the 1970s with the emergence of dissatisfaction “with both classically modern and high-modern types of social theories” (2002: 1). As culturalism, in Hall’s opinion, “constantly affirms the specificity of different practices” (Hall, 1980: 69), practice theory “. . . ‘decentres’ mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary” (Reckwitz, 2002: 259).

Summing up, “grand theories”, built in the form of structuralism, become insufficient for an explanation of social reality, and estrangement from such theories is interdisciplinary and joint—it happens both in the social sciences (the social constructivism of Berger and Luckmann against structural functionalism, for example) and in the humanities (the “cultural turn”).

Having outlined the main particularities of American cultural studies that are partly embedded in the original conception of this program, I can move to the role of Walter Benjamin’s reception in this academic field. The upswing in interest in Benjamin’s works in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s did not last for a long time. Despite some evidently-Marxist works (“Author as the Producer”), for Birminghamians, Benjamin was not an author sufficiently interested in the relationships of power and the economic determinants of culture. At the end of 1980s, in both Britain and the USA, interest in Benjamin’s heritage was renewed. In cultural studies, a transition is made (under the influence of post-structuralism) to a less teleological conception of science—without “the notion of history as moving inexorably to socialism” (McRobbie, 1992: 149). In studies of popular culture, new possibilities are opened when this culture begins to represent a self-sufficient interest for researchers, and is not seen as an instrument of ideology and propaganda;¹¹ thanks to feminism, an importance of biography

11. In the book *What is Cultural History?*, as an example, Peter Burke uses an approach of Michel de Certeau that he used in the book *The Practice of Everyday Life* about everyday life in France in the 1970s: “The practices he analysed were those of ordinary people; everyday practices such as shopping, walking a neighbourhood, arranging the furniture or watching television . . . Where earlier sociologists had assumed that ordinary people were passive consumers of mass-produced items and passive spectators of television programmes, Certeau, by contrast, emphasized their creativity, their inventiveness” (2004: 77).

and autobiography increases in cultural studies. Benjamin's works meet all these requests in cultural studies.¹² An interest in everyday life in urban modernity was a source of attention in Benjamin's *Arcades*, where the figure of the flâneur, an aimlessly walking city dweller, becomes the focus of the research. As for (auto)biographical works, one can name *Berlin Childhood Circa 1900*, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, or *Moscow Diary*, since these works are of interest not only as texts, but also as self-sustained cultural objects.¹³

As McRobbie observes, German and American scientists also began taking interest in Benjamin's contribution to modern Jewish messianism. The discrepancy between Benjamin's views and orthodox Marxist tendencies of his time—from Soviet to German—later contributed to a more detailed interest to his figure in American academia. In the 1930s and 1940s, Jewish intellectuals immigrated to the USA, but they were either non-Marxists to begin with (Hannah Arendt, for instance) or they changed their views drastically, albeit conserving a genetic connection with Marxism (as did Adorno). These thinkers consequently implanted German (or, if you will, Jewish-German, due to its cultural genesis) left-liberal thought to American academic science, which was a cause of attention to Benjamin's heritage.

If the most renowned of Benjamin's works was *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (interpreted as a contribution to the Marxist theory of art), such autobiographical works as *Moscow Diary* (published in the American journal *October* in 1985) and *A Berlin Chronicle* (1979) were also translated and published in the 1980s. As McRobbie notes, in the 80s, Benjamin was both "a representative of and critic of that moment which was so formative for the new left generation of the late 1960s who turned away from the anti-intellectualism of the 1950s and 1960s" (1992: 154).

In the 1950s and the 1960s, a discussion about the value of modern mass culture emerges in the USA. Hohendahl wrote that ". . . Adorno and the Frankfurt School did not play a central role; still, their arguments were picked up and utilized by the 'cultural' camp,¹⁴ while their opponents, mostly social scientists, branded the defense of high culture as elitist and ultimately undemocratic . . . Even Clement Greenberg, not known for his admiration of mass culture, felt that the media provided 'some sort of enlightenment' for the masses" (1992: 95). On the contrary, sympathy is drawn to Brecht's and Benjamin's art, for whom "low culture was already recognized as a powerful force offering many opportunities for political intervention [to a social life]" (McRobbie, 1992: 154).

Unlike Adorno, Benjamin was not willing to "profess a faith in Marxism" (155) while analyzing modern culture. He was interested not in history as a progress, but in the ruins,

12. As Angela McRobbie notes, "the loss of faith in Marxism has been replaced by a concern for the previously uninvestigated broad cultural setting for the texts and images whose analysis took up so much time precisely because they were seen as being the privileged sites of ideology" (1992: 149).

13. "*One-Way Street*, for example, is generally seen as a kind of literary montage strongly influenced by the visual work of John Heartfield rather than a critical essay in the traditional sense" (McRobbie, 1992: 150).

14. "Cultural camp" is regarded as American intellectuals, who saw mass culture as a threat due to its impersonality and lack of standards (see the essay "A Theory of Popular Culture" by Dwight MacDonald, published in the *Politics* journal in 1944).

remains, and souvenirs of the past. Benjamin “developed a cultural vision of the city as layered and labyrinthine rather than as being simply the highest expression of bourgeois civilization” (Ibid.). An essence of this approach can be seen in an unfinished project *Arcades*, criticized by Adorno, but consequently taking an important place in the history of cultural studies: *Arcades* was translated in English by Harvard University Press, and Susan Buck-Morss dedicated a book to analysis of this work (Buck-Morss, 1989). Benjamin worked on *Arcades Project* from 1927 till his death (there is a legend that the last version of *Arcades* was in Benjamin’s heavy suitcase that he carried during a difficult hike of the Pyrenees mountains while attempting to cross the Franco-Spanish borders, and that the suitcase vanished after his death). This project resulted in a massive text, divided into chapters—“Fashion”, “Boredom”, “Dream City”, etc. It is not fully clear whether Benjamin planned to restructure the text, or it was to be published like this. His *Arcades Project* was meant to be “a theory of modernity, philosophy of history, a verbal montage of urban imagery, and a reflection on the meaning of consumer culture from the viewpoint of memory and experience” (McRobbie, 1992: 156).

As Angela McRobbie notes, despite some incoherency of Benjamin’s ideas in the sphere of analysis of culture (for example, in the research of fashion), he speaks about the polysemy of the cultural symbol and forming a precise denotation only at the stage of reception of a cultural product. Benjamin is engaged in the archaeology of commodities and the images of consumer culture, and this makes his approach similar to practices of semiology and cultural history. Benjamin’s objects of attention were urban practices, such as promenades and the coffee-shops culture, which did not constitute a conventional subject of academic research at the time, but are presently included in the sphere of research of everyday culture. An attention to practices is one of the mottos of the “New Cultural History” that impacted all spheres of cultural history¹⁵ (Burke, 2004: 57–58). Such a turn was caused, among other things, by the convergence of history and anthropology. Burke’s observation about the cultural historians’ withdrawal from the Marxist approach to “an alternative way to link culture to society, one that did not reduce it to a reflection of society or a superstructure, the icing on the cake” (40) can be equally attributed to Benjamin, but in this case, we are talking not about the 1960s, but the beginning of the 1930s.

A distinct place in the American reception of Benjamin’s heritage is his aesthetic theory. In Susan Buck-Morss’ opinion, Benjamin returned the original (ancient Greek) meaning to the word “aesthetics” as “perceptive by feeling”, making its field of inquiry not art, but reality (1992: 6). If the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* was traditionally considered Benjamin’s most important contribution to aesthetic theory, Buck-Morss focuses the readers’ attention to his book *The Arcades Project*, whose central theme is a “structural transformation in the relationship of consciousness to reality—specifically, fantasy to productive forces” (1989: 125). If Adorno considered bourgeois art separate from reality, which helped sustain its utopian impulse, Benjamin insisted that modern industrialism fused art and technology. In *The Arcades Project*, Ben-

15. Cultural practices were an important object of the research of Norbert Elias, Pierre Bourdieu, Roger Chartier, etc.

jamin analyzed public spaces of the 1930s as modern phantasmagorias—the perception of Paris arcades or World Fairs was “natural” from a neuro-physical point of view, but their function was flooding the senses of a spectator and causing the collective experience of sensory overstimulation. Buck-Morss considered that the actuality of Benjamin’s observations of the arcades, urbanism, and expositions only increased in the second half of the 20th century (340). Alexander Gelley noted that Benjamin’s aesthetic focus was “the perceptual and experiential potential of the social collective” (1999: 953), and considered his aesthetic theory as “extraordinarily prescient”, since “current theoretical discussions deal exhaustively with aesthetic dimension of media technologies or, inversely, with analogues to older aesthetic categories” (954).

To summarize, we can say that Walter Benjamin became a popular figure both in academic sphere and in a broader intellectual context after his death. Despite the fact that Benjamin was a notorious critic during his lifetime (especially between 1925 and 1933), one could hardly have predicted such a rise of his popularity in the second half of the 20th century. As a result of the transfer of Benjamin’s ideas to American culture, a paradoxical phenomenon emerged—a tendency that was marginal for 1920s–1930s German academic research (even among neo-Marxists), but in the 1970s, appeared to suit a period of conflict with “grand theories”. A transfer occurred not just to a different cultural environment, but also to another period of the conception of sociocultural and cultural-scientific knowledge.

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Вальтер Беньямин — последний «европеец»: трансфер идей Вальтера Беньямина в американские культурные исследования

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Несмотря на то, что Вальтер Беньямин был известным критиком при жизни (особенно в период 1925–1933 годов), вряд ли можно было предсказать такой рост его популярности во второй половине XX века, особенно в стране, которую ему так и не удалось посетить (хотя именно туда он планировал иммигрировать) — в США. Рецепция творчества Вальтера Беньямина началась в широком американском интеллектуальном контексте, а затем интерес к его наследию возник и в американских академических кругах, что способствовало академической реабилитации философа, не получившего возможность работать в университете по причине неудавшейся габилитации в 1925 году. Большинство оригинальных работ Беньямина были опубликованы в многочисленных неакадемических газетах и журналах, что создало дополнительные трудности при переводе и публикации его текстов на английском языке. В нашей статье мы, во-первых, выдвигаем гипотезу о том, что рецепция Беньямина в США способствовала созданию образа провокативного эссеиста, шагнувшего далеко за пределы строгих марксистских рамок (в отличие от образа Беньямина, представленного первым издателем и другом Беньямина Теодором Адорно посредством тщательного подбора материала для первого англоязычного собрания сочинений Беньямина), который исследовал такие темы, как мессианизм, массовая культура и повседневные практики. Во-вторых, мы предполагаем, что наследие Беньямина оказалось плодотворным для американских культурных исследований, чьи представители отвергли идею телеологии культуры, заложенную в оригинальной британской программе, и сконцентрировались на теориях социальных практик, рассматривавших повседневные практики не как выражение определенных идеологий, а как обладающие самостоятельной значимостью.

Ключевые слова: Вальтер Беньямин, культурные исследования, Теодор Адорно, американские культурные исследования, культурный трансфер, социальные практики