
NEW RELEASE

Resurrecting Walter Benjamin

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Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, July 2006, 248 pp.

Although Benjamin's work received scant attention from his peers while he was alive, a vast secondary literature has flowered since his untimely death by suicide in 1940. That he has become one of the great romantic figures of modern European intellectual history is due no doubt both to the unconventionality of his work and the heroic and tragic elements of his life. Denied an academic career, he lived in penury for much of his adult life; once Hitler seized power he was forced to flee Germany, first to Paris, and ultimately to Port Bou on the Franco-Spanish border where, rather than give himself up to the Nazis, he took his own life. He left a fragmentary corpus of writings that defies conventional intellectual classification. Ranging from literary criticism to metaphysics, the production and reception of art, the philosophy of history, and urban landscapes, his writing evinces what Richard Wolin calls a "profound spirit of apocalyptic immanence" combined with a "utopian sensibility." Benjamin fascinates on many levels.

Considering that much of Benjamin's work has serious implications for historical and social analysis, it is curious that he is rarely cited in anthropological discourse. One is much more likely to come upon references to him in art history, literature, film studies, or cultural studies. One of the few anthropol-

ogists who have fruitfully made use of Benjamin's ideas is Michael Taussig. Over the years, beginning with *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*, Taussig has gotten much mileage out of concepts such as profane illumination, dialectical image, and redemption.

Taussig's most recent book, *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, is a collection of eight essays which, except for the title essay which was written specifically for this volume, are based on articles published between 1993 and 2003. The reader who has encountered Taussig's earlier work will find many of his central theoretical and methodological insights reviewed and extended in this volume. He/she will also find the writing style to be familiar, either poetic or bombastic and obfuscatory, depending on her point of view. The title suggests a memorial to Benjamin, but the book is more a critique of conventional modes of interpretation in history and the social sciences, a critique inspired by Benjamin first and foremost, but also by Marx, Nietzsche, and Bataille, among others.

The peculiar thing about Benjamin's grave is that no one knows for sure where it is. There are records of his stay, death, and burial in Port Bou, but when Hannah Arendt arrived a few months after his suicide, she could not locate the grave. In his memoir of Benjamin, Gershom Scholem vented his disgust at the apocryphal memorial that had been erected by the cemetery attendants. This kind of reaction is based on the assumption that there should be a clear and direct connection between symbol and referent for something to be authentic or true, an assumption that Taussig questions as the only appropriate way to view burial, or to apprehend reality. He notes that Benjamin himself sought "meaning in the world not only from smoothly functioning symbols, as if reading from a dictionary, but also from an awkwardness of fit between signs and what they refer to, most especially when those signs cluster around death." Taussig finds evidence which suggests that Benjamin's body might have been removed from its original niche in the cemetery to a *fosa común*, or "common grave," which was part of the Port Bou burial system and a common practice under Franco's dictatorship. In contrast to Scholem, he reads Benjamin's grave as an allegory for the violence of the state, its mass torture, and its disappearance of people.

Beyond the mystery surrounding Benjamin's death and gravesite, the essays in this volume cover a wide range of topics: a Columbian peasant epic poet; commodity fetishism and the Devil's Pact; changing understandings and uses of the sea; shamanism; secrecy and taboo; the "spectral nature of police"; and the relationship between flowers and death. What at first appears an eclectic assemblage of subjects is tied together by the themes of transgres-

sion, the sacred, and estrangement. These elements make up what Taussig, following Bataille, calls a “sacred sociology” of modernity.

In the late 1930s, Georges Bataille and his colleagues conceived a “sacred sociology” aimed at uncovering the sacred in a profane and sanitized world. As Taussig explains, they understood sacred in its broadest sense, taking it to include “ambiguity, danger, excitement, and prohibition....disgust, fear, and attraction....the diabolical, the nasty, and evil itself as no less sacred than the nice things we prefer to designate with that label.” Taussig adopts this approach in an effort to transcend conventional modes of social representation rooted in Enlightenment rationality and scientific objectivity, which he sees as ultimately draining reality of the magical and mystical. It was Nietzsche, he writes,

“...who complained that we don’t think sufficiently about the fact that when we explain the unknown we reduce it too quickly to the known. That is the first problem. We strip the unknown of all that is strange. We show it who’s boss, the basic rule of a university seminar. We tolerate neither ambiguity nor that which won’t conform. The second and even greater misfortune here is that we thereby forget how strange is the known. This is why I have sought not for masterful explanations but for estrangement, the gift of ethnography no less than of literature.”

An age-old anthropological dictum is to “make the strange familiar, and the familiar strange.” Professor Taussig would have us make everything strange. To “reëchant” our profane and sterile world, Apollonian order must be countered with Dionysian irrationality and chaos, a transgressive proposition that is sure to raise some eyebrows.

Transgression plays out across several different thresholds in these essays. Using examples from Kwakiutl and Azande shamanism, Taussig draws our attention to the peculiar logic of the transgression of the sacred. While the revelation of trickery in a Zande witch doctor’s performance exposes him as a fraud, Taussig shows how the “revelation of skilled concealment” also works to ensure the belief in the witch doctor’s power. Presumably, conventional scientific analysis would stop once it has revealed the magic to be a hoax. Taussig’s sociology of the sacred goes a step further to reveal a different kind of “magic” at work, thereby preserving its strangeness. In a similar way, in some initiation rites, taboos must be transgressed in order for boys to be transformed into men. Taussig points out that this play of concealment and

revelation can also be seen in the West. In *The History of Sexuality*, for instance, Foucault writes, "What is peculiar to modern societies is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as the secret."

Estrangement of the known, which is a kind of transgression, is the other side of Taussig's sociology of the sacred. "Constructing America," one of the most interesting essays in this collection, is about an old Columbian peasant and poet, Don Tomás, who is interviewed by an unknown researcher in 1969 about the *violencia* of the 1940s and 50s. Taussig juxtaposes Don Tomás' style of archiving the past with that of the professional historian. The latter assumes a position outside and above the object of study while attempting to bring order to chaos. In contrast, Don Tomás, with his epic poems, which historians (and anthropologists) would see merely as raw material, stands both within and without the object, conveying lived experience. His style is one of "swerve and flow," "mix and motion," moving from Plato, Pythagoras and other Western ancients to accounts of local history. It is "an unpredictable back and forth between these poles of cultural reckoning, yet in the process those poles dissolved." By treating Don Tomás' verses as historiography, Taussig draws attention to the ways in which the historian's job is more art than science.

He makes a similar move in the final chapter entitled "The Language of Flowers." It begins with a discussion of Juan Manuel Echavarría's series of photographs called "Corte de Florero." Taussig then presents the plant illustrations from José Celestino Mutis' 18th century expedition to Colombia. There is a connection between them in that Echavarría mimicked the labels of the Mutis illustrations, but I think Taussig follows one with the other for rhetorical purposes as well. The artifice of the former helps to reveal the artifice of the latter. He describes how he was at first thrilled by the art in nature revealed by the plant illustrations, but then disappointed as he saw through their artifice.

"...I became self-conscious and aware of the artist arranging the flowers and stems so they conform to an aesthetic as much as a need on the part of the botanist for visual information. I had the same sensation as a medical student studying human anatomy. There was the corpse spread-eagled on its table in various shades of gray and blue with shards of yellowing fat and an insufferable odor of formaldehyde; by its side was my textbook displaying the body in shimmering symmetries of reds and blues and all the more accurate, not to mention beautiful, for

being thus rendered. So what has happened? The art in nature turns out to be an art of nature!”

This is an enchanting story of concealment and revelation, but it is at points like this that Taussig’s storytelling loses its magic for me. Is this not a commonplace observation by now? It reminded me of a similar story from W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Summing Up*. Recounting his experience as a medical student in the late 1800s, Somerset Maugham tells us how astonished he was to find that the muscles and arteries of each cadaver differed from the illustrations in the textbook, that the normal is a fiction. Is it necessary to invoke Benjamin and Bataille to make this point? After our “experimental moment” in the 1980s when we deconstructed the poetics of ethnography to death, anthropologists, perhaps, more than other social scientists should be aware of the artifice of any narrative that purports to represent reality. In this light, the line that Taussig draws between conventional analysis and the sociology of the sacred seems somewhat contrived. What exactly is this conventional mode of representation? Does it include ethnographies being produced today? Which ones? Taussig paraphrases Nietzsche in the first quotation above, but Nietzsche wrote in the 19th century. How much does the critique apply to scholarly writing in our time?

Perhaps it is unfair to judge *Walter Benjamin’s Grave* in this way. Perhaps it is Taussig’s intent to incite discussion and suggest new directions for scholarship rather than to defend a position. I would not say then that he goes too far in his application of Benjamin. One could argue that he does not go far enough. As Richard Wolin explains in *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*, Benjamin’s project in the 1930s was a “secular redemption of modern mythology.” The idea was first of all to uncover the reëchantment that had accompanied the disenchantment of the world, and then to break the spell by revealing the myth as myth. But Benjamin also saw the cultural historian’s job as redeeming the broken or silenced promises of modernity. “Benjamin,” Wolin writes, “seemed determined not to allow himself to succumb, as had the surrealists, to the magic spell of modern mythology. For this was a spell that needed to be broken. At the same time, to break the spell entailed a profound redemptory moment. For, qua fairy tale, modernity contained a promise of happiness which it fell to the critic to redeem.”

A sociology of the sacred, then, should, in addition to making strange the familiar by exposing it as myth, estrange it by appropriating and reemploying its promises in creative ways, which by the way would also count as acts of

transgression. Following Michel de Certeau, such a sociology might also study how through everyday acts of inventiveness people produce heterogeneity, thus creating resistance to the colonization of everyday life by enlightenment rationality and commoditized culture.

Walter Benjamin's Grave is a challenging but enjoyable read thanks to Professor Taussig's virtuoso style of writing. By reviving the idea of a sociology of the sacred and through the skillful use of juxtaposition and montage, he shocks us out of our everyday mindsets and points to exciting possibilities for the critique of modernity. By bringing to our attention Benjamin, Bataille, and Nietzsche, writers who have been neglected by the mainstream of anthropology, Taussig has done the discipline a great service.