

# PL317 Walter Benjamin: Theory, History, Context

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Office Hours: by appointment (before or after class)

## Course Description

This course provides a survey of the work of the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), one of the most significant thinkers of the twentieth century. It will explore Benjamin's diverse oeuvre, from his writings on history, politics, and aesthetics, to those on urban life, experience, and technology. Though grounded on weekly close readings on the level of the paragraph and the sentence, the course will also jump out of the texts when necessary, to take account of larger cultural, political and philosophical currents. It will do this by placing Benjamin within a network of his contemporaries and interlocutors, including minor figures such as the palm-reader Charlotte Wolff and the fashion-journalist Helen Grund. It will also find context outside of the classroom, by engaging with Berlin, the city of Benjamin's birth, to explore how his work can be traced onto our present city and our political situation. By the end of the course, students will have a wide and detailed appreciation of Benjamin's work and be able to produce rigorous yet creative responses to it.

## Requirements

### Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

### Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, two absences from twice-per-week courses or the equivalent (e.g. one absence from a once-per-week course) should not affect the participation grade or require documentation.

If a student is unable to attend a class, it is required to email the instructor at the earliest possible opportunity. If a student is ever late to a class, it is also essential to email the instructor.

Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

### Assessment

Seminar preparation and participation | 35%

- Students will be expected to have prepared well for each seminar and, if this isn't possible on a given occasion, to communicate that to the instructor prior to the class.
- Given the texts under consideration aren't always easy, seminars are intended as a forum of engagement and inquiry. Students shouldn't necessarily come to class with fully-formed ideas, but questions and responses to Benjamin's work, both critical and sensitive.
- To keep the classes open and flexible, there will be no regular slots for presentations, but from time to time students can volunteer to present, whether solo or as a small group. These presentations will remain relatively informal and part of the usual dynamic of the class. They might be an attempt to outline a concept or an idea or some context. The instructor will seek volunteers over the course of the semester, but if students have a particular interest in a certain topic, please let the instructor know at any point.
- Given speaking in class or groups is a particular skill, and suits people more than others, students can demonstrate engagement in other forms. This would include emailing the instructor with further reflections after a seminar or showing additional reading and/or activity outside of class time. Feel free to speak to the instructor at any point about what best suits you to achieve what you want for this grade.
- Overall, the grade for 'preparation and participation' is broken down in two sections with some feedback given at mid-term:
  - 17.5% for weeks 1-7
  - 17.5% for weeks 8-14

Writing and responses | 65%

- For this part of the assessment, students are expected to complete two tasks: (i) a creative project/response and (ii) an academic essay. These two assignments should reach at least 5,000 words in total by the end of the semester, and 2,000 words should be handed in at the mid-term.
- The proportion between the creative response and academic essay can be split equally (i.e. 50:50, or 2,500 words each). The proportion should be 25:75 (so 1,250:3,750 words).
  - For the midterm, a total of 2,000 words should be submitted. This mid-term will count towards the final mark but it will also act as a chance to receive feedback. The work should appear finished (i.e. with references and formatting complete), but it can still be tentative and be open to further development. The midterm should contain both the creative response and also sign of an academic engagement, roughly in the form of the final. Supervisions will be provided in week 3 to go over the assignment. A rubric for both assessments will be provided at a later date (feel free to ask the instructor for this).
    - The creative project/response can be written (for example, diaristic, reflections, listing), but also be in another form (for example, it could be visual, durational, filmic, a comic, a zine, or another form developed in dialogue with the instructor). The size and scope of anything non-written should be discussed and approved by the instructor. Ideas and inspiration can be found here and will be updated over the course of the semester.

- The academic essay should be well researched, formally written and show close engagement with Benjamin's texts. Ideas and inspiration can be found here and will be updated over the course of the semester.
- Overall, this grade is broken down in two sections with some feedback given at mid-term:
  - Midterm 27.5% (due 20 October @ 21:00)
  - Final 37.5% (due 15 December @ 20:00)

### Policy on Late Submission of Papers

Essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded up to one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where a professor agrees to accept a late assignment, it should be submitted by the new deadline agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are also entitled to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and feedback during instructors' office hours.

Students receive mid- and end-of-semester grades for their seminar work. Students are entitled to make an appointment with an instructor to discuss seminar participation, or may be asked to meet with the instructor at any stage in the semester regarding class progress.

### Grade Breakdown

Seminar preparation and participation | 35%

- 17.5% for weeks 1-7
- 17.5% for weeks 8-14

Writing and responses | 65%

- 27.5% Midterm (due 20 October @ 21:00)
- 37.5% Final due: 15 December @ 20:00

### Schedule

#### Week 1

5 September

Theory, history, context: an introduction.

7 September

Method, history, historiography, temporality:

Read prior to class: Convolute N 'On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress' of *The Arcades Project* (1927-40). Some selections will also be provided on the time of fashion, from Convolute B.

#### Week 2

12 September

Memory and childhood: rainbows, books, toys, radio, theatre.

Preparation to be confirmed via email.

14 September

Method, history, historiography, temporality:  
Read prior to class: 'On the Concept of History' (1939).

**Week 3**

19 September

NO CLASS  
Supervisions instead. Sign up via email.

21 September

Memory and childhood: *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (1932-38) – taught through a walk through the Tiergarten with Benjamin's great-daughter Flossie Draper.  
Preparation and details to be confirmed prior to the class.

**Week 4**

26 September

Mourning and memory:  
Read prior to class Benjamin's writing on food from 1930.

28 September

Memory and experience: youth and adolescence.  
Reading and tasks to be sent prior to class.

**Week 5**

3 October

NO CLASS | FEDERAL HOLIDAY

5 October

Cards, hands, fate, character:  
Read prior to class: 'Fate and Character' (1921).

**Week 6**

10 October

Continuation of work on 'Fate and Character'.  
Assignment workshop. Sharing of projects in class.

12 October

War, violence, resistance:  
Read prior to class: 'Critique of Violence' (1921).

**Week 7**

17 October

1918-19 German/November Revolution walking tour with historian Nathaniel Flakin. Details to be confirmed.

19 October

War, violence, resistance (continued):

Read prior to class: 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), 'Theories of German Fascism' (1930), 'The Weapons of Tomorrow' (1925).

Mid-term due: 20 October @ 21:00

**FALL BREAK:**

24 October: no class.

26 October: no class.

**Week 8**

31 October

Cities and spaces:

Naples, Moscow, Paris; aquariums, arcades, hotels, streets, hotels, boulevards. Preparation to be sent via email prior to class.

2 November

Literature, modernism, experimentation:

Read prior to class: 'Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929), 'Hashish Notes' (1928-).

Midterm grades will be returned by 3 November 2023

**Week 9**

7 November

Sleep, dreams, interpretation:

Read prior to class: 'Dream Kitsch' (1927), Benjamin's own dreams. Details to be sent via email prior to class.

9 November

To the sky/cosmos:

Read *One Way Street* (1928) prior to class with particular attention to the final fragment 'To the Planetarium' (1928). Other readings might be sent before the class.

**Week 10**

14 November

Photography and nature:

Read prior to class: 'Little History of Photography' (1931) and 'News about Flowers' (1928).

16 November

Trip to the planetarium or to the photography museum.  
Decision and details via email.

**Week 11**

21 November

Art and politics:  
Read prior to class: 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility' (1936).

23 November

Supervisions and catchup.  
Sign up available via email.

**Week 12**

28 November

Poet and flâneur: Charles Baudelaire.  
Read prior to class: 'Central Park' (1939) and 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' (1939).  
– with Lisa Robertson.

30 November

Author and interior: Marcel Proust.  
Read prior to class: 'The Image of Proust' (1929).  
– with Rebecca Comay, Anne Carson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

**Week 13**

5 December

Writer and activist: Bertolt Brecht.  
Read prior to class: 'Commentary on Poems by Brecht' (1939) and 'Author as Producer' (1934).  
– with Asja Lācis, Helene Weigel.

7 December

Visit to the Brecht-Weigel-Museum and to the grave of Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel.

**Week 14**

12 December

Final week: what was missing, what's next?  
Final assignment troubleshooting.

14 December  
As above.

Final due: 15 December @ 20:00