

# R. B. Kitaj and Walter Benjamin

CAROL SALUS

The pairing of R. B. Kitaj, the American painter with Walter Benjamin, the German literary critic and philosopher, has often been only cursorily noted in contemporary art historical scholarship. There is a need to pursue the bond which Kitaj has found in the compelling figure of Benjamin. The artist discovered Benjamin's writings in the mid — sixties and in 1966 drew this pensive and sensitively modeled lithograph of the writer (fig. 1). Benjamin's insights and biography a source of inspiration to the artist. This study focuses upon Kitaj's tributes to Benjamin as well as some of their closely related intellectual and personal ties.

R. B. Kitaj (b. 1932) is an ex — patriot who has lived in London since 1958. A graduate of the Royal College of Art in London, he has also studied at the Cooper Union Institute in New York City, the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna and the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art in Oxford. Kitaj, it is noteworthy, has recently been hailed as the "greatest living American painter"<sup>1</sup> by William Lieberman, curator of twentieth century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. His pictures draw on history, literature, film, baseball, philosophy, social and political figures and issues. Robert Hughes, the art critic, has identified him as the "best history painter of our time."<sup>2</sup> Like Benjamin, his works often reflect his reading and book collecting habits as well as his study of leftist politics and contemporary violence.

Walter Benjamin (1892 — 1940) is considered to be the most important literary critic in the German language between the wars. His early study at the Thuringian Landerziehungsheim in Haubinda exposed him to the radical educational reformer Gustav Wyneken. Benjamin took an active part in the youth movement influenced by the antiauthoritarian aspects of Wyneken's ideas, but later broke with Wyneken when the latter urged his followers to join the war effort. Benjamin studied philosophy in Freiburg and Berlin. In Munich he pursued the study of language, partly under the influence of Martin Buber, and at Bern he wrote his doctoral dissertation on Romantic art criticism. His philosophical

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commentaries draw on Jewish mysticism, ethics, history, art, literature, drama, linguistics and political and social issue and motives. In the thirties Benjamin traveled extensively, partly a condition of his exile from Germany and worked as a literary journalist and literary critic first in the Weimar Republic and latter in Paris. It was during this time that he also became associated with the Frankfurt School, although his connection to it was never as formal as the other leading members. Most of his later writings centered on his major work, the Arcades project and reflected his increasing commitment to Marxism, whose ideas he interpreted in a highly personal way. His suicide in 1940, while trying to get into Spain and away from the Nazi invasion of Paris. occurred in the context of ill health, cardiac ailment, and the refusal of Spanish guards to let him enter Spain.<sup>3</sup>

The examples provided here illustrate how some of Benjamin's conceptions have been absorbed by Kitaj into painterly form. The *Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin (1972-73))* (fig. 2) is a commemorative icon for the philosopher. It expresses both personal and intellectual bonds Kitaj has found in the character of Benjamin. Benjamin appears with his high forehead wearing eyeglasses and holds a cigarette between his fingers as he converses in the center of a painted collage of varying types. He holds court in this Impressionist — type setting with a tumbling cast of characters. Set under a mustard canopy a rather sad — looking pretty woman with a red hat on stares into the distance. She may be waiting, or looking, for someone. Her costume with its padded shoulders and lapels indicates the period of the late thirties as her mood seems to reflect the deep seated cultural malaise of the times. The glass shattered ruins behind her profile underline the horrors of the time as Paris fell in Autumn, 1940. At the very top of this pyramid the gray—smudged faced man permeates his gangster—like neighbor who may be a pimp. It is he who holds a cigarette with his black—gloved hand for the turquoise—faced prostitute. These three eyeless creatures are rebels within capitalist society.<sup>4</sup> With her floppy green hat, the prostitute was an issue of concern to Benjamin. He wrote of the exploitative and hypocritical treatment of these woman by bourgeois society.<sup>5</sup>

Amidst the brightly colored silkscreened looking surface, the heavy handed symbolism of the red worker with his pickaxe alludes to Benjamin's marxist beliefs as well as to the erosion of society he experienced in Europe of the late thirties. The image of the proletariat symbolically

and carefully portrayed by Kitaj under the protective position of Benjamin was based upon a bronze sculpture by Max Kalish (1891—1945). Kalish's laborers such as this *Road Worker* (fig 3) were on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art when Kitaj lived in Cleveland and took children's art classes there. With its virile full-bodied vigor and force, such figures as this *Road Worker* made Kalish's reputation as a sculptor who showed the dignity and heroism of the American laborer. Kitaj adapts an archetypal image of the heroic worker to represent Benjamin's concern for the class struggle.

An autobiographical reference seems likely in the man in the gray suit with the hearing aid whose profile is fused with that of Benjamin. The artist was advised to wear a hearing aid in the late sixties and has been doing so since the mid—seventies. Kitaj, it appears, empathizes with the literary critic on a personal level in that they share similar personal histories. Kitaj's stepfather, Dr. Walter Kitaj, a research chemist from Vienna, was fortunate to successfully flee Nazi oppression and emigrate to the United States, unlike Benjamin's tragic fate under the same fascism. Kitaj's recent oeuvre deals, among many topics, with the Holocaust. He has replaced in these canvases his former picture-making techniques with their aesthetic of conjoining, with powerful figures, allegorical emblems of the human condition, treated in expressive brushwork.<sup>6</sup>

Kitaj appended a text to the *Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin)*. This system of footnotes, like a libretto, indicates further dimensions of his ties to Walter Benjamin. Although he had abandoned the union of text accompanying his paintings in the early sixties, he significantly returned to this practice for the Walter Benjamin canvas. Kitaj's text, like a huge caption in a newspaper, clarifies and supplements the painted image as he selected references derived primarily from Benjamin's unfinished Arcades project.<sup>7</sup> Benjamin in his discussion of photography in his prophetic essay "The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" elucidated on the meaninglessness of the image without the word.

At the same time picture magazines begin to put of signposts for (the viewer) right ones or wrong ones, no matter. For the first time, captions have become obligatory. And it is clear

that they have an altogether different character than the title of a painting. The directives which the captions give to those looking at pictures in illustrated magazines soon become even more explicit and more imperative in the film where the meaning of each single picture appears to be prescribed by the sequence of all preceding ones.

Kitaj must have recognized in Benjamin's writing, confirmation of his previous belief in this method of identification and co-ordination between text and image.

Benjamin's influential essay with his view of the educative role of mechanical reproduction seems appropriate to Kitaj who has been involved since the sixties in photographic materials and reproductions of all kinds. Particularly in his editions of graphics, he has recycled ready-made images by means of screenprints and lithographs which has made his art more generally available and popular.

The production and exhibition of his screenprints and lithographs parallels ideas foreshadowed by Benjamin in his 1936 essay. Kitaj, when he read the study, certainly understood Benjamin's thesis on the aura—destroying properties of the individuality of a work of art created by multiplication. Kitaj's works in print such as this screenprint *Go and Get Killed Comrade—We Need a Byron in the Movement* (1965) (fig. 4) demonstrates the new role of the artist and his technical art, an art with mechanical origins and aiming at mechanical reproduction, as Benjamin stated :

that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced.

*Go and Get Killed Comrade—We need Byron in the Movement*, a clear example of technical art as defined in Benjamin's visionary study, is one of Kitaj's many ironic comments on martyrs and heroes. This

screen-print is characterized by its hard-edge qualities and highly saturated enamel blues and greens, as popular in some of the canvases of the Minimalist artists of the sixties. Kitaj, with his knowledge of the power of mechanical images, carefully builds up a motif composed of ready-made materials.

Two photographs are used, that of a train and of a news photograph showing Hans and Sophie Scholl who were leaders of the famed anti-Nazi student group known as Die weisse Rose, one of the most courageous and moving of all Resistance groups. Kitaj utilizes the photos, the essential caption and a white rose from a seed catalogue, while the running figure parallel to the railroad tracks is an image partly based on a photograph of a New York stage production of Sartre's play *No Exit*. Not only does the iconography of this screenprint relate to Benjamin's plight during the last years of his life, but some of the potentials of the impact of mechanical reproduction he predicted are manifested here.

Another tribute to the conceptions of the philosopher, who Susan Sontag called "the last intellectual"<sup>10</sup>, is Kitaj's *Arcades (After Walter Benjamin)* (1972-73) (fig. 5). The canvas has the comic-strip look typical of Pop Art. Kitaj, however, is not a doctrinaire follower of Pop Art with its singular allegiance to a specific popular style and subject matter (comic strip, soup can, billboard). Uninspired by the popular media, he is clearly fascinated, as will be demonstrated, by Benjamin's complexity of thought and style of expression. Based on Benjamin's uncompleted cultural study of nineteenth century Paris. his *Arcades* project, Kitaj presents his knowledge of Benjamin's love and analysis of the Baudelairean city. The canvas is composed like a painted puzzle in which portrait—like figures are precisely pieced into an all—over surface design. In this high key colored oil painting Kitaj portrays passersby and shoppers in the streets, Parisians leaving and entering the clear rationality of the classicized architecture of the arcades.

To convey the ambiance of the arcades with its people, goods and events which Benjamin watched for his originally planned five—part study, Kitaj has carefully presented a fragmentary glimpse. He has placed in the fore ground a chrome yellow—faced and costumed figure. The elegant stroller with his cigarette properly fitted in its holder is not, as may appear, a characterization of Benjamin.<sup>11</sup> In the middle plane such shoppers as the blue—haired lady with her red period style trench

coat and the two other strollers in brown and black garb portray the pace and activities of consumer life Benjamin observed. He noted how the arcades and international expositions became show places for what the rich could buy or others longed to possess.

The arcades, Benjamin explained, were nineteenth century glass and iron constructions.<sup>12</sup> To suggest the light-filled atmosphere of these wonders of technology, in which the marble floors were lined with elegant shops, Kitaj placed light reflections on the right side of the painting. Next to the red-faced figure in a three-piece red suit, streaks of color reproduce prismatic light entering the arcades.

Benjamin used the term arcades to describe the phenomenon of modernity he found in these streets, shop windows, international exhibitions. He described, for example, the Paris World's Fair as a microcosm of the entire world of commodities. Ideally the exhibition of all of these commodities together would and their fragmentation. Yet, Benjamin recognized, fragmentation is exacerbated because world's fairs emphasized the individualistic acts of buying and selling rather than the more social act of meeting human needs. Benjamin analyzed this exacerbation in nineteenth century Parisian culture.<sup>13</sup>

The painting recalls Benjamin's study of the great metropolis. Kitaj portrays the arcades as a symbol of Benjamin's literary reminiscences of Paris, his daydreams, his observations of the city of pleasure with its commodities and its world exhibitions. As Benjamin strolled through the crowds, he gained insights from these kinds of subjects during his urban navigations. Kitaj considers himself also to be "a flaneur, a city walker, a city witness".<sup>14</sup>

Kitaj expresses his admiration for Benjamin in a number of revealing statements: "In the life and work and death of Benjamin, I found a parable and a real analogue to the very methods and ideas I had pursued in my own painting; a shifting urban complex of film-like fragmentation, an additive free-verse of an art..."<sup>15</sup>

Examination of another Kitaj painting, although one not dedicated to the philosopher, will further illuminate this filmic quality, this reflective sensibility the artist finds in Benjamin's writings. *Walter Lippmann* (1966) (fig. 6) with its montage-like effect of unrelated pairs of characters has a stream-of-consciousness narrative. The figures and setting suggest a puzzling stage-like presence. A yellow-haired

Scandinavian looking woman climbing a ladder in the foreground and a loosely drawn man behind her in a great brown coat, drinking wine, are held in place by green neck slings. These bands may be symbolic references or metaphors to the pair's entrapment or to their condition of being puppet-like members of society. At the top of a short flight of stairs in the background there is a slightly evil, slightly challenging encounter between a trench-coated man in shadow and an attractive woman under bright electric light. Her white coat and his black coat serve as positive and negative figures in the encounter. The pair suggest perhaps romance, intrigue, spies. At the right margin Walter Lippman, name mis-spelled, looks on as the editorialist, journalist, critic of world events, watcher. He is the commentator of Kitaj's scene. Like the forceful use of rich imagery and citations in Benjamin's works, Kitaj's oblique motifs flow together. Kitaj attempts to create the sense of rupture of narrative and episodic excitement he finds in Benjamin's dialectical thought. Such paintings as *Autumn of Central Paris (After Walter Benjamin)*, *Arcades (After Walter Benjamin)*, and *Walter Lippmann* show Kitaj's admiration and emulation of the kind of literary-intellectual art he recognized in Benjamin's works.

Kitaj's attachment to the intellect, poetic sensibility, and life of Benjamin is further revealed in his essay for *The Human Clay*, a 1976 exhibition for which the artist was singularly chosen by the Arts Council of Great Britain to select paintings for a year-long travelling instalment. Kitaj significantly identifies his goals with Benjamin's. Perhaps in his statement he seeks both a similar independence of mind and a power to elicit thought in his art as he discovered in Benjamin's words. Kitaj in one of the major essays of his career as an artist, selects a quotation from Hannah Arendt's introductory essay in *Illuminations*. By citing her metaphor for Benjamin as "the pearl diver", he binds his mission to Benjamin's accomplishments.

In Hannah Arendt's beautiful introduction to Benjamin, she likens that wonderful man to a pearl-diver who wrests what he can from the deep past, not to resuscitate the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages, but because the rich and strange things he has found in the deep "suffer a sea change" and survive—in new form and shape. That is how I want to take human images to survive—as Arendt put it,

'... as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living.'<sup>16</sup>

Kitaj's words and works, as discussed, provide testimony of the philosopher/literary critic as a source of inspiration to the artist by the insights he discovered in Benjamin's esoteric fragmented style of writing. His formulations, descriptions of economic and social phenomena, examples of the historical roles of art, literature and theatre to shed light on the present have encouraged Kitaj to attempt attainment of such brilliant portrayals of his own ideas and convictions in paint and graphics.

Further study of the relationship of the works of Kitaj and Benjamin would reveal how both men have taken literary images that appear distant and show their relation to our times. Parallels could be drawn demonstrating the artist's and the philosopher's similar interests and careful observations of the disparate energies of the Surrealist movement. Kitaj has discovered in Benjamin's intellectually complex conceptions, his observations, his fragmentary, arcane style of expression, and his personal biography an affirming source of identification and confirmation of his goals for his art.

#### Notes and References

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2. Robert Hughes, "Singular and Grand Britons," *Time*, April 6, 1987, 83.
3. Norman Fischer, "Walter Benjamin," *Biographical Dictionary of Neo-Marxism*, ed. Robert Gorman, (Westport Ct.: Green Wood Press, 1985), 64-5.
4. Catherine Klaus Schear, "Photomontage in the Early Work of R.B. Kitaj," *Arts*, September 1984, 77. Description of the under-world trio and the costume of the young woman are based on this elucidation.
5. Julian Roberts, *Walter Benjamin*, (Atlantic Highlands, N. J.: Humanities Press, 1985), 30.
6. R. B. Kitaj, Exhibition Catalogue. Marlborough Fine Art (London) November—December 1985, Marlborough Gallery (New York) March 1986. The following plates from this exhibition catalogue reveal

- the artist's deep interest in the Holocaust and its aftermath: 8, 43, 49, 51, 56, 57, 58, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 72, 76, 83, 87.
7. Michael Podro, "Some Notes on Ron Kitaj," *Art International*, March 1979, 19-20.
  8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; 1955), 228.
  9. *Ibid.*, 213.
  10. Susan Sontag, "The Last Intellectual," *New York Review of Books* (October 12, 1978), 75.
  11. Marco Livingstone, *R. B. Kitaj*, (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1985), 45  
The bespectacled man whom one might assume to represent Benjamin, was, in fact, painted from a photograph of the American comedy playwright George S. Kaufman, published in Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* (New York, 1975), 196-7,
  12. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Dephcott, (New York): Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovitch, 1978), 146-47.
  13. Fischer, 66.
  14. Joe Shannon, "The Allegorists: Kitaj and the Viewer," *Kitaj: Paintings, Drawings, Pastels*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 17.
  15. R. B. Kitaj, "Jewish Art—Indictment and Defense: A Personal Testimony," *Jewish Chronicle Colour Magazine*, November 1984, 46.
  16. R. B. Kijaj, *The Human Clay*, Exhibition Catalogue (London, Hayward Gallery, 1976), 10.

Department of Art History  
Kent State University  
Kent, Ohio. U.S.A.