



Architectural Theory Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ratr20>

Benjamin's Flu

Christophe Van Gerrewey

To cite this article: Christophe Van Gerrewey (2020): Benjamin's Flu, Architectural Theory Review, DOI: [10.1080/13264826.2020.1804981](https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2020.1804981)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13264826.2020.1804981>



Published online: 30 Aug 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Benjamin's Flu

Christophe Van Gerrewey

École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne

ABSTRACT

Walter Benjamin suffered from the Spanish Flu, but he never wrote about this global pandemic. There are three possible reasons for this oblivion, and several consequences for architecture's relationship with the current virus dominating our thoughts and activities.

KEYWORDS

Architecture; biopolitics; criticism; history; theory

Early in November 1918, Walter Benjamin came down with the Spanish flu, just like his wife, his son and his grandmother Brunella, who died of the disease in 1919.¹ This virus infected about a third of the world's population, and fifty to one hundred million people didn't survive.²

One of the things I did during the recent lockdown that I would never have done otherwise was to try to find out more about Benjamin's flu. That didn't work out—neither searching across Google, nor browsing the *Gesammelte Schriften*, the *Briefe* or the *Selected Writings*, yielded a reference to that lethal pandemic. What I did learn is that Benjamin suffered from influenza often—nearly every year. Special mention goes to the winter of 1927, when he stayed in bed for weeks, read Kafka's recently published *Das Schloss*, and was diagnosed with “a rather severe case of jaundice” instead of the flu itself. “And this right now,” he wrote to Gershom Scholem, “when I ought to be showing my face around in honor of the pieces of mine that are appearing.”³

How could it be that one of the major intellectuals of the twentieth century, and an important “thinker for architects,” didn't write one word, not even in retrospect, about an epidemic that—for now—caused countless more casualties than the disease now dominating our thoughts? One reason, obviously, has to do with historiography: the flu from 1918 and 1919 was denied its own magnitude. It became known as “Spanish” only later on, because Spain was the only European country that wasn't censoring reports. Death tolls seemed disproportionately high in comparison to other countries, where governments downplayed the pandemic to not further discourage civilians reeling from the First World War. Such a contraposition—a disease affects one third of the world's population, but it goes more or less unnoticed—is historical in itself. Today, the chances of living through that kind of moment without being conscious of its exceptionality might be at an all-time low. Since the turn of the century, nearly everything that happens is documented and mediatized to such a degree that an oversupply of material for

history books is defining for our age. Urgencies tumble over each other in the race for the prize of our attention: who can say if 2020 will be remembered not for Covid-19, but for the killing of George Floyd, or for the terrible, record-breaking heat?

A second reason for Benjamin's oblivion is theoretical. He was, at the age of 28, still preoccupied with "the metaphysics of youth"—the title given to the chapter collecting his writings from this period.⁴ Within the tradition of German idealism, writing about bodies, let alone sick ones, was unusual. There is the famous phrase from "Experience and Poverty," Benjamin's essay from 1933 in which he comments on the birth of modern architecture while depicting a postwar "landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds, and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body."⁵ Could it be that this "fragile human body" would have to wait a few more decades to move to the fore of Western thought—until 1963, say, when Foucault published *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical*? It is possible—Giorgio Agamben seems to agree⁶—that the invisibility of the Spanish flu compared to the ubiquity of Covid-19, is due to an unseen biopolitical display of power. (It is another historical irony that the lockdown has partly restored the world to conditions of a century ago: no more worldwide traveling, no more shopping on Saturday, and no longer an omnipotent global economy, but rather nation states driven to old-fashioned interventions. At the same time, this quarantine would have been nearly impossible less than twenty years ago, when only a fraction of houses and families had access to an internet connection.) Because all aspects of life must give way to the health of the human body, and to the functioning of hospitals—we thus have what we have right now.

The question of whether or not it is justified to denounce this dominance is connected to the third reason for Benjamin's puzzling silence: critical opposition—or better, critical restraint. Opposition to lockdown measures—or to the recognition of the importance of Covid-19—also, and most outspokenly, comes from suspicious figures such as the current President of the United States. It is an indication (and not the first) of the contemporary instability of the philosophical bulwark that has biopolitics—or its criticism—at its foundation. What's wrong, after all, with a state that bets on saving lives? And what is the meaning of a criticality that attacks this noble purpose? Could it be that it is no longer critical to consider biopolitics as responsible for "the emergence of modern architecture," because it has become, on the contrary, requisite to advocate for an architecture of biopolitics—of care, altruism and solidarity?⁷ Or does posing this question imply that *le regard médical* is the only decent *Weltanschauung* left?

In *One-Way Street* from 1928, Benjamin wrote: "Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to adopt a standpoint. Now things press too urgently on human society."⁸ This does not mean that criticism is meaningless—it means that no theoretical foundation for criticism is eternal, and that every possible group of ideas that can back up criticism has to be historicized. Choosing your subject—and being skeptical of those subjects that emerge as inevitable because everyone is sharing them—is therefore the prerequisite for intellectual work.

The same applies for architecture, theory and culture, and their intertwined futures. In his essay on the reproducibility of the artwork, Benjamin—to quote him once



Figure 1. Walter Benjamin and his friends at Christmas Eve, 1931 © Elisabeth Hauptmann Archiv, Akademie der Künste, Berlin.

more—wrote the well-known phrase that architecture is experienced in “a state of distraction and through the collective.” He also claimed that “architecture has never had fallow periods.”⁹ Collectively averting our gaze (also within the architectural community) from architecture—by focusing not on buildings, spaces and places and their historical and theoretical connections, but on future threats, dangerous crises and (overfunded) urgencies—might amount to trying to cure a disease by treating the symptoms but neglecting the cause. While social distancing remains recommended for the time being (fig. 1), the existence of architecture’s relative autonomy and its modest flowering, has always asked for correct distancing, and for forms of growth that don’t tolerate monoculture. It depends, in other words, on us.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Christophe Van Gerrewey is assistant professor of architecture theory at EPFL Lausanne. He is editor of *OASE* and of the Dutch-Belgian art journal *De Witte Raaf*. In 2019, he published *Choosing Architecture: Criticism, History and Theory since the 19th Century* (EPFL Press) and *OMA/Rem Koolhaas: A Critical Reader from Delirious New York to S,M,L,XL* (Birkhäuser). He writes on contemporary architecture and its histories, in (for example) *The Journal of Architecture*, *A + U*, *Log*, *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, *AA Files*, *The Journal of Landscape Architecture*, *The Architectural Review* and *Arch+*.

Notes

1. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 105.
2. Laura Spinney, *Pale Rider. The Spanish Flu of 1918 and How It Changed the World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017).
3. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 144.
4. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 3–215.
5. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 732.
6. Giorgio Agamben, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (February 26, 2020), <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>
7. The reference is to Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Bio-Politics and The Emergence of Modern Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009).
8. Bullock and Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin*, vol. 1, 476.
9. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 268.