At the Crossroads of Magic and Positivism: Walter Benjamin and Anthropology
An International Symposium at the University of Oxford, 1-3 September 2009

(Adorno, Benjamin, *Briefwechsel*, 368)

‘The direct connection drawn between the wine tax and [Baudelaire’s] “L’Ame du vin” ascribes to phenomena the very spontaneity, tangibility, and density that capitalism has stripped from them. In this kind of unmediated – I would almost say anthropological – materialism lurks a deeply Romantic element […]. [O]nce might say that [your] work has situated itself at the cross roads of magic and positivism.’
(Benjamin, *Selected Works*, Vol. 4, 101-2)

As Theodor Adorno’s response to Walter Benjamin’s *Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire* implies, anthropology plays a complex role in Benjamin’s writings, where it is situated between such divergent forces as materialism and romanticism, positivism and magic. This anthropological dimension of Benjamin’s approach is frequently cited or evoked; ‘What is the effect of industrial-capitalist technology on the organization of the human senses, and how does it affect the conditions of experience and agency, the ability to see connections and contradictions, remember the past, and imagine a (different) future?’ (Miriam Hansen). However, the possible roots and implications of this method still merit more detailed attention. To what extent was Benjamin (as a reviewer and researcher) familiar with current anthropological debates? What was the focus of his engagement, and how did it influence his own writings and methodology? Does Benjamin’s interest in the discipline change in line with his increasing focus on political questions, or does anthropology, on the contrary, provide a sense of continuity between the ‘early’ Benjamin and his later works? What role did anthropology play in contemporary political and intellectual debates, and to what extent did Benjamin participate in and contribute to such discussions?
Tuesday 1 September

1.45    Registration

2.00    Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgan (Oxford): Welcome

2.30-4.00 Session 1: Ethnology and Religion
       Michael Jennings (Princeton): Syncretism: Benjamin, Religion, Anthropology

4.00    Coffee break

4.30-6.00 Session 2: Anthropological Materialism
       Marc Berdet (Paris): The Ragpicker’s Anthropological Materialism
       Meike Schmidt-Gleim (Paris): The Revolution is Man-Made
       Paola Ferruta (Bielefeld): The Pros and Cons of the Flesh: Carnal Knowledge and Subversive Gender Anthropology
Wednesday 2 September

9.00-11.00 Session 3: Media Theory
Sabine Müller (Oxford): Von der ‘Kunst, ohne Anführungszeichen zu zitieren’: Tensions in Walter Benjamin’s Anthropologic Materialism
Mladen Gladic (Princeton): Education without Ends

11.00 Coffee break

11.30-1.00 Session 4: Dance and Movement
Gabriele Brandstetter (FU Berlin): Gehen und Tanzen: Zu einer Anthropologie der Bewegung in der Moderne
Manfred Frank (LMU Munich): Benjamin’s Anthropological Gaze: On Dancing Bodies and Moving Letters

1.00 Lunch

2.30-4.00 Session 5: Language
Sabine I. Göltz (Iowa): Language as ‘Non-Sensuous Archive’: Walter Benjamin’s Linguistic Anthropology
Juliane Prade (Frankfurt): Distinguishing mimesis: Poetic Language and the Anthropological Distinction in Aristotle and Benjamin

4.00 Coffee break

4.30-6.00 Session 6: Materialism and Ideology
Sami Khatib (FU Berlin): Walter Benjamin’s Trans-Materialist Materialism
Blair Ogden (Oxford): Cycles, Lines and Exceptions: Elucidating the Ideology of Progress in On the Concept of History

7.30 Conference dinner
Thursday 3 September

9.00-10.30  Panel 7: Photography
Katja Haustein (Cambridge): Cool Conduct? Benjamin’s Aesthetic Self in the Face of Photography

10.30  Coffee break

11.00-12.30  Panel 8: Literature and Gesture
Tony Phelan (Oxford): tbc

12.30-1.00  Closing discussion

1.00  Lunch