
[24] **Walter Benjamin on Language: A Messianic Approach**

Frank Vonk (HAN University of Applied Sciences).

The German literary critic, art critic and philosopher of language Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) has reflected the way in which language manifests itself in art, epistemology, theology, politics, and literature. In many posthumously published fragments Benjamin shows how his restless mind has produced texts in which he has tried to connect the religious (Judaic) tradition with the ruinous appearance of language in many forms, trying to understand and explain its imperfection. Benjamin has covered this ruinous world in an allegoric view of language as it was done in Baroque allegories (the vanitas) showing itself in mourning-plays (Trauerspiel), nevertheless hoping for a new, better world. In a way Benjamin's concern with language shows how it is fragmented in daily speech in which, so it seems, only the communicative function has survived. The 'divine' dimension can only allegorically be considered to be relevant to this communicative function (in technology, law, art or religion). Language itself, however, encompasses all these technological, judicial, artistic or religious situations and thus inheres in all objects and events as an "intellectual substance", being included in linguistic utterances. Next to the level of the linguistic he distinguishes a level of the intellectual which as such shows itself in language and cannot be conveyed through language. To discover this intellectual substance means to critically read and analyse e.g. literature, judicial or technological texts next to discover in which way the intellectual substance manifests itself, e.g. in artistic objects or political events. The moment this divine or intellectual dimension reveals itself, Benjamin considers as a messianic moment. In many, mainly early texts Benjamin discusses his ideas about the way(s) in which reality (the linguistic dimension of real objects and their semantic dimension) and ideas or the intellectual qualities of linguistic expressions are included in language - and thus considering language as the one and only object of linguistic and philosophical research. Next to his main study on this idea "On Language as Such and on Human Language" (1916), one will find remnants of his language philosophical thinking in minor studies like "On the Program of Coming Philosophy" (1918) or "The Task of the Translator" (1921-3). In his Selected Works (Volume V) one will find a collection of relevant fragments concerning his philosophy of language. In this paper I will discuss the context of Benjamin's works on language and to look for the main sources of his language philosophical lines of thought.