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A TRANSGRESSION NOBODY (BUT LATER ANYBODY?) WANTED: WALTER BENJAMIN'S "DAS KUNSTWERK IM ZEITALTER SEINER TECHISCHEN REPRODUZIERBARKEIT"

We are indebted to Theodor W. Adorno and his wife Gretel, for publishing their posthumous two-volume German edition in 1955 (*Schriften* 1-2) of central texts by Walter Benjamin, whose work during his exile years for obvious reasons had been largely overlooked. As well as we are to Hannah Arendt, for publishing in 1968 a selection of them in English translation with the title *Illuminations* and a thorough introduction by herself and complementing it with her treatise on Benjamin and Brecht, *Men in Dark Times*. In their respective spheres of action, together they initiated the process of elevating Benjamin's contribution as a cultural philosopher to its subsequent highly respected status.

It is however crucial to our understanding of his endeavours to study them in the contemporary context he aimed them for. A tricky case in point is his essay "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit", which is more generally known today by the title of the Arendt edition, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". With its partially contradictory contrasting of an apparently antiquated aesthetic aura of the unique work of art with the assumed promises for the artistic future through mechanical reproduction, in his essay Benjamin pushes his argument to extremes and aims at a radical transgression of contemporary aesthetic theory. As I shall demonstrate in more detail, it was an attempt at transgression which nobody in his personal circle of acquaintances welcomed. Quite the reverse: from Brecht to Adorno, they all criticized it severely, but did so from incompatible points of view. In short, writing and publishing it proved an uphill battle. It fell between all stools, and might have been left there, were it not for the retrospective magnanimity of Theodor and Gretel Adorno. Why it grew to become such a famous and widely used study text in university curricula is moreover a good question but may precisely be due to its combined challenge of insistent sincerity and inherent imperfections.

Biography

Janne Risum is Emeritus Associate Professor of Dramaturgy at the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University, Denmark. She was co-editor and author of the Danish standard work, *Dansk teaterhistorie* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2 vols, 1992-1993). She is a long-standing member of the International Federation for Theatre Research and of its Historiography Working Group; and has moreover been active in Association for Nordic Theatre Scholars since its foundation. She has published widely in English and other languages on past and present theatre and acting in Europe and in Asia, including on Meyerhold and on gender issues. Her PhD dissertation in English on the Soviet tour of the Chinese male performer of female roles Mei Lanfang and his Beijing opera troupe in 1935 and its effects, *The Mei Lanfang Effect* (2010), was based on extensive archive studies in Russia and elsewhere, as are her subsequent follow-up articles exploring complementary aspects of this seminal event.