
Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Michael Taussig, *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, 258 pages.

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The recording would thus be a continuation, a plumb line of magnetic tape hurled into the abyss of history, then hauled out, wet with the sticky weight of dripping speech. [Taussig p. 43]

Punctured through with an enigmatic door-shaped rectangle, *Walter Benjamin's Grave* is a volatile and exciting collection of articles. This book is presented as a loosely themed take on the writings and projects of the German cultural critic, Walter Benjamin. Michael Taussig, a professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, has eight previously published books and has carved out a unique niche for himself on the margins of ethnography and critical theory. With *Walter Benjamin's Grave*, he makes another notable contribution to this borderland terrain by presenting a command of both disciplinary perspectives and by pursuing his distinctive form of critical ethnography.

The picture on the cover of *Walter Benjamin's Grave* shows a melancholic and dreary bay; at the same time we see down a passage towards the boiling sea, whirlpools and rocks at the bottom of a cliff. The image also looks down at the silhouette of a person in a door-shaped reflection of light on glass. The door-shaped rectangle is a feature from a monument built at the site where Walter Benjamin killed himself, on the coastal border of France and Spain, while attempting to flee Nazi forces in 1940.¹ The rectangle on the cover, which is replicated through the entire book at the beginning (or is it the end?) of each chapter, can be seen as a gateway to and from the communal grave (*fosa común*), the location where Benjamin was probably interred and, "where even if you were buried at first with a name you end up nameless" (p. 17). While naming and memory are important theoretical vehicles for Taussig, it is the transgression of culturally meaningful boundaries—the passages suggested by the image of the door-shape—that

really motivates this collection. Michael Taussig examines the perennial anthropological idioms of boundaries and passages through cultural critique. Furthermore, it is in this cultural critique that he is able to both explore and incite transgressive acts, pointing towards passages and exposing the banal and sometimes dangerous word games of academic writing; the plays of mimesis and tricks of representation.

Most of the essays in *Walter Benjamin's Grave* are adapted from previously published articles and book chapters, including one that was published only in Spanish. Some of the original publications may be obscure or at least not part of anthropology's more orthodox cannon,² a fact that makes this a useful collection of disparate writings. Regardless of the fact that the articles were published over a ten-year period, this collection generally reads as a thematically coherent work. Although at times there seem to be queer echoes of repeated ideas, phrases, and idioms—remnants of the chapters' previous incarnations—this is little more than a minor irritation. One tentative criticism is that the collection might have been better framed with more extensive discussion of the role of Benjamin's theories vis-à-vis Taussig's own work. Such an explicit framing, however, would perhaps undermine the spirit of one of Taussig's key projects: agitation against academic conventions and rituals that seek to neatly contain everything within a façade of coherence. The closest thing to this is the Author's Note, a four-page introduction to the book, which I imagine was written as a pre-emptive strike—perhaps at the behest of the publisher—against plain-style zealots, the academically conservative, and others who are either baffled or suspicious of Professor Taussig's work. The Author's Note does, in any event, give a useful, if brief, framework for approaching the rest of the book:

Looking back at these essays written over the past decade I think what they share is a love of muted and even defective storytelling as a form of analysis... They also share a love of anthropological field-work, a love of the classical anthropology of so-called primitive societies, and an intense curiosity as to the displacement of Marx and Freud by Nietzsche and Bataille that such old-fashioned anthropology provokes. [p. vii]

Walter Benjamin's critical practice is only the starting point for a work that is as concerned with Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Theodor Adorno, Michel Leiris, William Burroughs and André Breton as it is with Walter Benjamin. For those unfamiliar with Benjamin, this book will point to a number of different approaches and introductions to this irrefutably important 20th-century theorist. For those more familiar with Benjamin's work, it is an opportunity to consider Taussig's long-engagement with ideas like the dialectical image and profane illumination, as well as Benjamin's highly particular style of cultural critique.

Each chapter in *Walter Benjamin's Grave* flows through thick discursive constructs, enlivened with ethnographic reverberations. The challenge in reading this collection is to see how the writing itself becomes part of the critique and description, testing the reader's capacity to read, think, and write about it. Thus a very literal and engaging narrative is mixed liberally with obtuse and esoteric references. Ethnographic fragments are carefully lifted from their environment, all the more marked for their obvious fragmentary-ness. There is no structuralist pretense to represent the whole culture here. Colombian shamans, peasant farmers, New York policemen, storytellers, and gold miners are all characters in Taussig's world. Their stories, we learn, teach us as much about the questions that we ask as they do about their own social worlds. This forms a tremor throughout the book, articulating ongoing concerns with the practice of ethnography, history and of academic representation in general. "What fun it would be" muses Taussig, "if our historians were quick-witted enough, were sufficiently brave and adept with language and image, so that they, too, instead of perfecting the culturally contrived performance of objectivity could sing us their verses—verses that gambol with truth's pretensions" (p. 60).

Taussig's use of ethnographic fragments in his writing could arguably be seen as an appropriation of stories, cutting them from their cultural milieu. It is likely that some will see this approach as opportunistic. Taussig, however, is also concerned with this. He warns against the mining of ethnographic experience, citing the dangerous ground that provides the authority to make claims about how things really work. What he advocates is an approach that highlights the mutual constructedness of the ethnographer and his or her subject. It is at the very limits of language that Taussig finds inspiration in the work of surrealist artists and writers who

resurrected the stimulating impact of the unsayable through cunningly crafted contradiction in visual image, poetry, and unusual forms of narrative. At its best this amounted to what Walter Benjamin, in his essay on surrealism, termed "profane illumination," playing off against the mystical sense of illumination (rather than Enlightenment) to give it a sense at once secularized and materialist while maintaining something mystical as well. [p. 161]

Taussig's own projects, though opaque on one level, are meant to be more transparent about the various engagements and ties that bind the ethnographer to the subject, to the academy, and to the canon.

There is perhaps a danger in Taussig's style. It is a danger, as noted by Barry Sandywell (2005) vis-à-vis Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, that "we lose the wider context, the 'movements' and long-term structural 'tendencies' in the blizzard of fragments, citations, and quotations. In sum, we fail to see the wood for the trees." As with my experience of reading Benjamin, by the end of this book I do not always know what I have pulled out of it. While it is eminently quotable it is also frustratingly challenging to plunder, as if it had a built in self-destructing mechanism. Perhaps, that too, is the point, proving to be fatally inconsistent for some while being incisive and visionary to others. Susan Sontag (1980) affably stated that Benjamin's "major essays seem to end just in time, before they self-destruct." It would not be entirely unfair to say the same of Taussig's own writing style, which has peculiar volatility that is at once enticing and challenging. Taussig, however, navigates these dangers by allowing ethnography and cultural critique to compliment and activate one another. In his own cautionary note, he warns that "we must not commit stories to the servile operation of getting them to say something that could be said otherwise—for example, to see them instrumentally, as devices to achieve some other thing, such as equality, limits to individualism, morality tales against greed, prodigality and capitalist logic" (p. 89).

Tacking between ethnographic description and critical theory, Taussig maintains a space he has been cultivating for years. And, like the Colombian peasant plantations he writes about, the amalgam of ethnographic fragments and intellectually challenging theory work together as a sustainable whole, in spite of a certain degree of opacity—a density that many would shun, preferring (to extend the metaphor) the monoculture of open sun farming, of ethnography and history where the weirdness, the inconsistencies and inexplicabilities are written out for the sake of coherence on paper and elegance of method.

Notes

- 1 The monument was built by Dani Karavan. It is worth going to Karavan's website to get a better sense of the it [www.danikaravan.com].
- 2 I am not sure that there is a clear orthodoxy in the discipline but it is doubtless that Professor Taussig has made a career as a non-conforming and famously unorthodox ethnographer. Earlier versions of two of the articles were published in the excellent journal *Critical Inquiry*.

References

- Sandywell, Barry, and David Beer
2005 Examining Reflexivity: An Interview with Barry Sandywell. *Kritikos*. November 2.
- Sontag, Susan
1980 Under the Sign of Saturn. New York: Picador.