BENJAMIN'S WAGER ON MODERNITY: GAMBLING AND THE ARCADES PROJECT


Walter Benjamin wrote about gambling during his youth and the topic remained important through his project on the Parisian arcades that dominated the last decade of his life. In the Arcades, Benjamin analyzes gambling in relation to capitalism, religion, and psychoanalysis, and to our experience of time. Like prostitution, with which it is paired in Convolute O, gambling is a kind of ritual or game with a long history that has taken on a new guise in the exchange economy of capitalism. Benjamin believes that a genealogy of the practice can uncover aspects of its former, transformative meaning, expressed in bodily innervation. I claim that gambling is related to Benjamin's idiosyncratic idea of prophecy, in which looking toward the past opens up new possibilities of meaningful experience. It signals a possible rupture in capitalistic society, one that has revolutionary political potential, precisely because the practice is so ubiquitous.

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