

“On the Minute” Benjamin’s silent work for the German Radio

„...richtig von außen
kann man nur begreifen,
was man von innen kennt ...”

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1

In a letter of the 28th of February 1933, the day of the Reichstagsbrand in Berlin, Walter Benjamin wrote to his old friend Gerhard Scholem about his radio work.

“Concerning the further desiderata of your archive, namely my radio-works, not even I have succeeded in gathering these completely. I am speaking of the radio plays, not the countless lectures, a series which is now unfortunately at an end, and which are of no interest except a passing economic one.¹”

Benjamin is known for having taken inventory of almost everything he owned or ever read. Just in these days of early 1933 Benjamin had been asked to put together a list of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg’s publications. But of his radio work he never took any inventory; neither, subsequently, did his closest friends not did Theodor W. Adorno, the first publisher of his posthumous work; nor did the Adorno disciple Rolf Tiedemann, editor of the “Gesammelte Schriften” from 1972 on. For more than a half century Benjamin’s five-year long radio work from 1927 to 1932 has been unclear both in its extent and in its details. In his casual remarks to Scholem, Benjamin himself tried to conceal his engagement with the new aural medium, as if he were somehow ashamed of it.

„I did two radio lectures in Frankfurt“ he wrote early in 1930, „but now, having returned, I can get down to more useful things².“ At least implicitly he diminishes the value of these works. We now know to which lectures he is referring. The first one, “Pariser Köpfe” of January 23rd 1930, brilliantly unfolds the connections between Leon Daudet, Andre Gide and Emanuel Berl. The second dealt with the recent book on France by Friedrich Sieburg, Paris correspondent of the Frankfurter Zeitung. Both in

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1. Was die weiteren Desiderate Deines Archivs betrifft, nämlich meine Rundfunkarbeiten, so ist es nicht einmal mir selbst gelungen, diese vollständig zu versammeln. Ich spreche von den Hörspielen, nicht den ungezählten Vorträgen, deren Reihe nun leider abgeschlossen sein wird und keinerlei Interesse außer dem verflössenen ökonomischen besitzt“(b1635,40)
 2. „Ich habe in Frankfurt zwei Radiovorträge gehalten und kann mich nun nach meiner Rückkehr mit etwas zweckdienlicheren Dingen befassen.“

fact are impressive texts, made for the radio.¹ But to his friend Gerhard Scholem Ben-

23.01.1930	Pariser Köpfe	SWR	Vortrag
24.01.1930	Gott in Frankreich. Ein Versuch. Von Friedrich Sieburg	SWR	Bücherstunde



„Ich habe in Frankfurt zwei Radiovorträge gehalten und kann mich nun nach meiner Rückkehr mit etwas zweckdienlicheren Dingen befassen.“

“I did two radio lectures in Frankfurt but now, having returned, I can get down to more useful things.”

January 25th 1930

„In den nächsten 12 Tagen werde ich in Frankfurt sein, um windige Rundfunkangelegenheiten durchzuführen“

“In the next 12 days I will be off to Frankfurt to take care of nasty (“windy”) radio matters“

February 5th 1931

08.02.1931	Studio: Wie nehme ich meinen Chef?	Berliner Funkstunde	Hörspiel
26.03.1931	Hörmodell I: Gehaltserhöhung?! Wo denken Sie hin!	SWR Frankfurt	Hörspiel

3

jamin furthermore tried to impart the picture of thinking little of his radio work other than for the money. On February 5th 1931, he wrote: “In the next 12 days I will be off to Frankfurt to take care of nasty radio matters“²

As far as we know, in February 1931 there had indeed been some difficult negotiations in Frankfurt about the remaking of one of his newly developed “hear-models” which he had first done for Berlin radio. But by not saying that, it reads as if all of his radio activities were somehow “nasty”. The following considerations are concerned not so much with Benjamin’s radio work immanently but rather with the strange tendencies of self-deprecation in Benjamin’s own discussion of this work. What was it about this new “rundfunk”-medium that Benjamin had to hide from others’ eyes and even, to a certain extent, from his own?

When Benjamin did his first radio-lecture on March 23rd 1927, radio in Germany was just three and a half years old. The most intensive time began in the summer of 1929 and ended abruptly in February 1933 for obvious reasons. Walter Benjamin worked with the medium for more than half of its historical existence. In fact he could have been proud of being one of the few intellectual pioneers working for it. Why was he not? Or was he, but didn’t tell? What is the reason for his odd secrecy about the assets and drawbacks of the new phenomenon? Was he ashamed?

1. “Ich bin nicht unzufrieden,” Benjamin added, “daß mir im Organisatorischen, Technischen schon jetzt eine bestimmte Scheidung gelungen ist, indem ich fast nichts mehr von dem, was ich als Brotarbeit, sei es in Zeitschriften, sei es im Rundfunk, ansehen muß, mehr niederschreibe sondern derartige Dinge einfach diktiere. Du begreifst, dass mir dies Verfahren sogar eine gewisse moralische Entlastung gibt, indem die Hand damit den edleren Körperteilen allmählich wieder zurückgewonnen wird.“ (Benjamin VII_2,583) The term „moral relief“ insinuates a lessening and downsizing of his radio work again.

2. In den nächsten 12 Tagen werde ich in Frankfurt sein, um windige Rundfunkangelegenheiten durchzuführen”(b1634,208)

Benjamins first radio broadcast

23.03.1927	Junge russische Dichter	SWR	Vortrag
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„Last Thursday the radio presented the social and artistic relations in new Russia in an exclusive report from Moscow. This presentation will be supplemented on Wednesday this week by a lecture from Dr. Walter Benjamin, who will give from his own perspective an overview of the latest appearances on the Soviet literary scene, their importance and impact.”(Südwest Rundfunk Zeitung, 21.02.1927)

5

Let's take a look at the dates and facts, which, again, were not collected by Benjamin himself or by one his official editors. For the great work of precisely assessing and classifying Benjamin's radio work with benjaminian tools, we are indebted to Sabine Schiller-Lerg's work in the early Eighties of the twentieth century. Sabine Schiller-Lerg comes from the school of the great radio historian Winfried B. Lerg, who virtually single-handedly founded systematic radio history in Germany. Her work on Benjamin is a kind of legacy of this great scholar who died much too early in the mid nineties.

The first program Benjamin did for radio was scheduled some weeks after he came back from his two month journey to Moscow, December 26 to January 27. The program was scheduled on Thursday March 23rd 1927, from a quarter to eight until quarter past eight in the evening. "Young Russian writers" was its title. The announcement in the journal "Südwest Rundfunk Zeitschrift" published three days before said: "Last Thursday the radio presented the social and artistic relations in new Russia in an exclusive report from Moscow. This presentation will be supplemented on Wednesday this week by a lecture from Dr. Walter Benjamin, who will give from his own perspective an overview of the latest appearances on the Soviet literary scene, their importance and impact."¹ Sabine Schiller-Lerg found out that the previous week's „exclusive report“ from Moscow consisted of the reading of a letter by Bernhard Reich about the social and cultural situation in the young soviet union. Bernhard Reich, a disciple of Max Reinhardt, playwright and theatre director in Germany and Russia, had been living in the Soviet Union with his wife Asja Lacis, who still was Benjamin's great love at that time. Unfortunately, Reich's radio-letter preceding Benjamin's first radio performance is lost. Benjamin's winter journey to Lacis, living with Asja and Bernhard (and for some reasons more with the latter), was also the source of his

1. ""Am vergangenen Donnerstag beschäftigte sich der Rundfunk zuerst mit der Darstellung sozialer und künstlerischer Verhältnisse im neuen Rußland, die ein Moskauer Sonderbericht vermittelte. Diese Darstellung wird am Mittwoch dieser Woche durch einen Vortrag von Dr. Walter Benjamin ergänzt werden, der aus eigener Anschauung eine Übersicht über die neuesten Erscheinungen der sowjetischen Literatur, ihre Bedeutung und ihre Wirkung geben wird."(1614,344f)

famous Moscow Diary. The original radio script is likewise lost, however already two weeks previously Benjamin had published an article on “New poetry in Russia” in a new Amsterdam literary magazine called “I 10 International Revue”, published by the Dutch Socialist and Anarchist Arthur Lehning, a magazine unknown enough to avoid any trouble with double publication.

Reconstructing his first radio program we get a paradigmatic example of how intelligently - and even cannily – Benjamin assembled his radio work. At first, as a kind of “Thank you” he gave Bernhard Reich an opportunity to publish and earn some money in German radio. Reich, to a greater degree than Asja herself, had helped Benjamin considerably in Russia, translating newspapers and opening doors to interesting theatres, bookstores and people. The results are the subject of Benjamin's radio program. Secondly to his beloved Asja he could show a serious political engagement in additionally supplying his text to the new social-anarchist magazine “I 10” in Amsterdam. Thirdly, he gave his own first radio performance. Benjamin was not only a good author, writer, critic, observer, essayist and philosopher. He was always a good networker as well.

The gap between the first and the next presentation was about 2 ½ years long. We'll come to that point shortly.

1929, August - December

14.08.1929	Die Romane von Julien Green	SWR	Bücherstunde
15.08.1929	Kinderliteratur	SWR	Vortrag
04.09.1929	Vorlesung aus eigenen Werken	SWR	Lesung
29.10.1929	Johann Peter Hebel	SWR	Bücherstunde
31.10.1929	Andre Gide	SWR	Vortrag
09.11.1929	Berliner Dialekt	BFst*	Jugendfunk
23.11.1929	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
30.11.1929	(Sagen und Abenteuer)	BFst	Jugendfunk
07.12.1929	Berliner Puppentheater	BFst	Jugendfunk
14.12.1929	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
15.12.1929	Die Bücher von Thornton Wilder	SWR	Bücherstunde
16.12.1929	Dem Staub, dem beweglichen, eingezeichnet	SWR	Vortrag

BFSt = „Berliner Funkstunde“ (the first and only station in Berlin)

SWR = „Südwest Rundfunk“ (the only station in Frankfurt and Hessen)

12 programs in 1929

6

In the year 1929 Benjamin performed programs in front of the microphone a total of 12 times - seven times in Frankfurt and five in Berlin.

The next year, 1930, was his most productive one, with 37 programs in 12 month.

1930, January - June

04.01.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
23.01.1930	Pariser Köpfe	SWR	Vortrag
24.01.1930	Gott in Frankreich. Ein Versuch. Von Friedrich Sieburg	SWR	Bücherstunde
01.02.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
08.02.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
15.02.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
25.02.1930	Das dämonische Berlin	BFst	Jugendfunk
07.03.1930	Ein Berliner Straßenjunge	BFst	Jugendfunk
15.03.1930	Berliner Spielzeugwanderung I	BFst	Jugendfunk
22.03.1930	Berliner Spielzeugwanderung II	BFst	Jugendfunk
26.03.1930	Parallelen I - E.T.A. Hoffmann und Oskar Panizza	SWR	Vortrag
28.03.1930	Christ. Reuters 'Schelmuffsky' und Kortums 'Jobsiade'	SWR	Bücherstunde
29.03.1930	Baugeschichte Berlins unter Friedrich Wilhelm I	BFst	Jugendfunk
05.04.1930	Borsig	BFst	Jugendfunk
12.04.1930	Mietskasernen	BFst	Jugendfunk
14.04.1930	Theodor Hosemann	BFst	Jugendfunk
09.05.1930	Rezepte für Komödienschreiber	SWR	Gespräch
11.05.1930	Die Angestellten. Von Siegfried Kracauer	SWR	Bücherstunde
24.05.1930	Besuch im Kupferwerk	BFst	Jugendfunk
22.06.1930	Erzählung der Woche	BFst	Lesung

Leaving out the summer-break in August these figures show that Walter Benjamin appeared almost every week before either a Berlin or a Frankfurt microphone, 23 times in Berlin, 14 times in Frankfurt.

1930, June - December

23.06.1930	Neues um Stefan George	SWR	Vortrag
24.06.1930	Bert Brecht	SWR	Vortrag
01.07.1930	Gang durch ein Messingwerk	BFst	Jugendfunk
12.07.1930	Gang durch ein Messingwerk	BFst	Jugendfunk
16.07.1930	Hexenprozesse	BFst	Jugendfunk
20.09.1930	Vom Leben der Autos	BFst	Jugendfunk
22.09.1930	Braunschweig, Myslowicz, Marseille	SWR	Lesung
23.09.1930	Räuberbanden im alten Deutschland	SWR	Jugendfunk
27.09.1930	Wahre Geschichten von Hunden	BFst	Jugendfunk
02.10.1930	Räuberbanden im alten Deutschland	BFst	Jugendfunk
23.10.1930	Die Zigeuner	BFst	Jugendfunk
08.11.1930	Die Bootleggers	BFst	Jugendfunk
22.11.1930	Kaspar Hauser	BFst	Jugendfunk
23.11.1930	Alte und neue Graphologie	SWR	Vortrag
17.12.1930	Kaspar Hauser, ein berühmter Gefangener	SWR	Jugendfunk
29.12.1930	Karussell der Berufe	SWR	Vortrag
31.12.1930	Die Bootleggers oder die amerikanischen AlkoholSchmuggler	SWR	Jugendfunk

37 programs in 1930

The following year, 1931, likewise shows intense radio work. 21 programs in total, 12 from January to April (the equivalent of 3 every month), four in July alone etc.

1931, January - April

16.01.1931	(unbekanntes Thema)	BFst	Jugendfunk
17.01.1931	Das Leben des Antos	SWR	Jugendfunk
30.01.1931	Dr. Faust	BFst	Jugendfunk
08.02.1931	Studio: Wie nehme ich meinen Chef?	BFst	Hörspiel
11.02.1931	Theodor Neuhoff, der König von Korsika	SWR	Jugendfunk
14.02.1931	Der Erzzauberer Cagliostro	SWR	Jugendfunk
22.03.1931	Tag des Buches: Vom Manuskript zum 100.Tausend	SWR	Gespräch
26.03.1931	Hörmodell I: Gehaltserhöhung?! Wo denken Sie hin!	SWR	Hörspiel
28.03.1931	Der Zauberkünstler Dr. Faust	SWR	Jugendfunk
28.03.1931	Das öffentliche Lokal, ein unerforschtes Milieu	SWR	Vortrag
27.04.1931	Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus	SWR	Vortrag
29.04.1931	Die Bastille, das alte französische Staatsgefängnis	SWR	Jugendfunk

9

1931, May - November

09.05.1931	Von einer Italienreise: Neapel	SWR	Jugendfunk
01.07.1931	Wie die Zauberer es machen	SWR	Jugendfunk
01.07.1931	Hörmodell II: Frech wird der Junge auch noch ?!	BFst	Hörspiel
01.07.1931	Hörmodell II: Frech wird der Junge auch noch ?!	SWR	Hörspiel
03.07.1931	Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer, aus Franz Kafkas Nachlaß	SWR	Bücherstunde
16.09.1931	Wie die Tierbändiger es machen	SWR	Jugendfunk
18.09.1931	Der Untergang von Herculaneum und Pompeji	BFst	Jugendfunk
31.10.1931	Erdbeben von Lissabon	BFst	Jugendfunk
05.11.1931	Theaterbrand von Kanton 1845	BFst	Jugendfunk

21 programs in 1931

10

The last year of Benjamin's intense radio work was 1932, during which he performed only 13 programs, all of them in the first half of the year. The reason for this was that in the summer of 1932 the whole system of radio in Germany changed. a topic which I will address in more detail shortly.

1932, January - September

03.01.1932	Funkspiele: Dichter nach Stichworten	SWR	Hörspiel
06.01.1932	Das Erdbeben von Lissabon 1755	SWR	Jugendfunk
19.01.1932	Auf der Spur alter Briefe	SWR	Vortrag
21.01.1932	Länder-Querschnitt III. Frankreich in seiner Kunst	SWR	Vortrag
03.02.1932	Theaterbrand in Kanton	SWR	Jugendfunk
04.02.1932	Die Eisenbahnkatastrophe von Firth of Tay	BFst	Jugendfunk
16.02.1932	Was die Deutschen lasen, während ihre Klassiker schrieben	BFst	Hörspiel
10.03.1932	Radau um Kasperl	SWR	Hörspiel
23.03.1932	Die Überschwemmung des Mississippi	BFst	Jugendfunk
30.03.1932	Die Eisenbahnkatastrophe von Firth of Tay	SWR	Jugendfunk
16.05.1932	Das kalte Herz	SWR	Hörspiel
06.07.1932	Denksport	SWR	Jugendfunk
09.09.1932	Radau um Kasperl	WEPAG	Hörspiel

13 programs in 1932

11

1933, January

19.01.1933	Von Seeräubern und Piraten	SWR	Vortrag
29.01.1933	Aus einer unveröffentlichten Skizzensammlung: "Berliner Kindheit um 1900"	SWR	Lesung
Not Datable			
Not Datable	Briefmarkenschwindel	BFst	Jugendfunk
Not Datable	Wanderung durch die Mark Brandenburg	BFst	Jugendfunk
Not Datable	Straßenhandel und Markt in Alt- und Neu-Berlin	BFst	Jugendfunk
Not Datable	Ein sonderbarer Tag oder 30 Knacknüsse	BFst	Jugendfunk

not broadcast, started or planned			
Not broadcast	Lichtenberg	BFst	Hörspiel
started	Leben, Meinung und Taten des Hieronymus Jobs von Kortum (Jugendsendung)		
planned	Hörspiel über Spiritismus		Hörspiel
planned	Hörmodell III. Kannst Du mir bis Donnerstag aushelfen?		Hörspiel
planned	Hörmodell IV - VI		Hörspiel

86 broadcast programs, 1 not broadcast

12

Looking at the list of 86 plus programs plus made by Benjamin, it is patently obvious that Walter Benjamin was anything but a casual worker for radio. He was a professional. In 1931 he may have earned considerably in excess of 10 to 13 thousand reichsmark in fees which would be around 60 to 100 thousands Euro today.

Of course it is impossible to discuss the whole work in detail. Putting together an edition of all scripts would give us a two volume book of more than thousand printed pages. Thus I will separate his work into specific categories to just give an indica-

tion of some of the innovations which Benjamin did for radio; I will not even have time to indicate them all.

I. Readings own works (4)

04.09.1929	Vorlesung aus eigenen Werken	SWR	Lesung
22.06.1930	Erzählung der Woche	BFst	Lesung
22.09.1930	Braunschweig, Myslowicz, Marseille	SWR	Lesung
29.01.1933	Aus einer unveröffentlichten Skizzensammlung: "Berliner Kindheit um 1900"	SWR	Lesung

13

The first category assembles the readings of literary works of his own. There is nothing unusual in this. In Weimar Radio we have numerous readings of writers and poets, from the brothers Mann, Brecht, Benn, to Döblin, Zweig and many more.

II. Half Hour Book Reviews (7)

14.08.1929	Die Romane von Julien Green	SWR	Bücherstunde
29.10.1929	Johann Peter Hebel	SWR	Bücherstunde
15.12.1929	Die Bücher von Thornton Wilder	SWR	Bücherstunde
24.01.1930	Gott in Frankreich. Ein Versuch. Von Friedrich Sieburg	SWR	Bücherstunde
28.03.1930	Ingrimmiger Humor: Christ. Reuters 'Schelmuffsky' und Kortums 'Jobsiade'	SWR	Bücherstunde
11.05.1930	Die Angestellten. Aus dem neusten Deutschland". Von Siegfried Kracauer	SWR	Bücherstunde
03.07.1931	Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer, aus Franz Kafkas Nachlaß	SWR	Bücherstunde

14

Category II, the book reviews, also presents standard radio material. The only interesting fact is that Benjamin did bookreviews only in Frankfurt, where his close

friend Ernst Schoen, to whom I will refer in a minute, was editor in chief of the “Bücherstunde”.

III. Lectures (14)

15.08.1929	Kinderliteratur	SWR	Vortrag
31.10.1929	Andre Gide	SWR	Vortrag
16.12.1929	Dem Staub, dem beweglichen, eingezeichnet	SWR	Vortrag
23.01.1930	Pariser Köpfe	SWR	Vortrag
26.03.1930	Parallelen I - E.T.A. Hoffmann und Oskar Panizza	SWR	Vortrag
23.06.1930	Neues um Stefan George	SWR	Vortrag
24.06.1930	Bert Brecht	SWR	Vortrag
23.11.1930	Alte und neue Graphologie	SWR	Vortrag
29.12.1930	Karussell der Berufe	SWR	Vortrag
28.03.1931	Das öffentliche Lokal, ein unerforschtes Milieu	SWR	Vortrag
27.04.1931	Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus	SWR	Vortrag
19.01.1932	Auf der Spur alter Briefe	SWR	Vortrag
21.01.1932	Länder-Querschnitt III. Frankreich in seiner Kunst	SWR	Vortrag
19.01.1933	Von Seeräubern und Piraten	SWR	Vortrag

15

Category III is again a common format, the lecture. Early German radio schedules were full of all and any kinds of “lecture”. “All university teachers are chattering over the radio here”¹ Benjamin wrote to Scholem in 1925. Usually the authors performed their lectures themselves. Unfortunately not a single minute of Benjamin’s radio voice has survived, although of his 86 radio programs, he must himself have spoken at least 60. Benjamin’s “ecstatic recitals”, as Werner Kraft remembers it, his “beautiful full voice”, as Wolf Zucker said, “his way of speaking like a poker gambler”, as Adorno recalled, these memories make it all the sadder that we have no acoustic source of Benjamin’s voice.(2506,407)

At Category IV, conversation, we can also glance only very quickly. By the way, these two conversations never have been performed live. It was forbidden to undertake real-time conversations in radio. Almost every question and the notes of all possible answers had to be given to the surveillance councils in advance, so that it turned out to be much easier to write the whole down and read it verbally in front of the microphone as it had been written and confirmed. This was done, for example, by Walter Benjamin and Wilhelm Speyer. The given text is accordingly curious. Benjamin actually had worked together with Speyer before on his boulevard comedies and some pulp fiction novels.

1. Hier quatschen alle Universitätslehrer durch den Rundfunk (1611,1055)

IV. Conversations (2)

09.05.1930	Rezepte für Komödienschreiber. Gespräch zwischen Wilhelm Speyer und Dr. Walter Benjamin.	SWR	Gespräch
22.03.1931	Tag des Buches: Vom Manuskript zum 100.Tausend	SWR	Gespräch

16

Category V contains the most important innovations Benjamin did for radio, the so called “Jugendstunde”, that is the Young Peoples Program. This format started in Berlin in the fall of 1929 and the first presentation of this format in Frankfurt did not happen until one year later.

V. Youth Programs (49)

09.11.1929	Berliner Dialekt	BFst	Jugendfunk
23.11.1929	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
30.11.1929	(Sagen und Abenteuer)	BFst	Jugendfunk
07.12.1929	Berliner Puppentheater	BFst	Jugendfunk
14.12.1929	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
04.01.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
01.02.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
08.02.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
15.02.1930	(Zum Thema Berlin)	BFst	Jugendfunk
25.02.1930	Das dämonische Berlin	BFst	Jugendfunk
07.03.1930	Ein Berliner Straßenjunge	BFst	Jugendfunk
15.03.1930	Berliner Spielzeugwanderung I	BFst	Jugendfunk
22.03.1930	Berliner Spielzeugwanderung II	BFst	Jugendfunk
29.03.1930	Baugeschichte Berlins unter Friedrich Wilhelm I	BFst	Jugendfunk
05.04.1930	Borsig	BFst	Jugendfunk
12.04.1930	Mietskasernen	BFst	Jugendfunk
14.04.1930	Theodor Hosemann	BFst	Jugendfunk
24.05.1930	Besuch im Kupferwerk	BFst	Jugendfunk
01.07.1930	Gang durch ein Messingwerk	BFst	Jugendfunk
12.07.1930	Gang durch ein Messingwerk	BFst	Jugendfunk
16.07.1930	Hexenprozesse	BFst	Jugendfunk
23.09.1930	Räuberbanden im alten Deutschland	SWR	Jugendfunk

V. Youth Programs (49)

27.09.1930	Wahre Geschichten von Hunden	BFst	Jugendfunk
02.10.1930	Räuberbanden im alten Deutschland	BFst	Jugendfunk
23.10.1930	Die Zigeuner	BFst	Jugendfunk
08.11.1930	Die Bootleggers	BFst	Jugendfunk
22.11.1930	Kaspar Hauser	BFst	Jugendfunk
17.12.1930	Kaspar Hauser, ein berühmter Gefangener	SWR	Jugendfunk
31.12.1930	Die Bootleggers oder die amerikanischen Alkoholschmuggler	SWR	Jugendfunk
16.01.1931	(unbekanntes Thema)	BFst	Jugendfunk
17.01.1931	Das Leben des Antos	SWR	Jugendfunk
30.01.1931	Dr. Faust	BFst	Jugendfunk
11.02.1931	Theodor Neuhoff, der König von Korsika	SWR	Jugendfunk
14.02.1931	Der Erzzauberer Cagliostro	SWR	Jugendfunk
28.03.1931	Der Zauberkünstler Dr. Faust	SWR	Jugendfunk
29.04.1931	Die Bastille, das alte französische Staatsgefängnis	SWR	Jugendfunk
09.05.1931	Von einer Italienreise: Neapel	SWR	Jugendfunk
01.07.1931	Wie die Zauberer es machen	SWR	Jugendfunk
16.09.1931	Wie die Tierbändiger es machen	SWR	Jugendfunk
18.09.1931	Der Untergang von Herculaneum und Pompeji	BFst	Jugendfunk
31.10.1931	Erdbeben von Lissabon	BFst	Jugendfunk
05.11.1931	Theaterbrand von Kanton 1845	BFst	Jugendfunk
06.01.1932	Das Erdbeben von Lissabon 1755	SWR	Jugendfunk
03.02.1932	Theaterbrand in Kanton	SWR	Jugendfunk

In formal terms, we again have lectures, with Benjamin speaking himself. But as for the content we see a different Benjamin. Nowhere else he has addressed himself to his listeners so directly and immediately.

The first sentence of his first youth program in November 1929 is already programmatic.

“Also ich will heute mit euch über die Berliner Schnauze sprechen; die so genannte große Schnauze ist doch das erste, was allen einfällt, wenn man vom Berliner redet.“ Three new attitudes are obvious. First, the man who never wrote an “I” in one of his works, addresses himself in first person singular. „Today I want to talk with you about the Berlin big mouth“. Second, the “you”. More than a dozen times we find this “you” in this speech, which can vary in German between “euch” and “ihr” easily. Third, whenever possible he intersperses a joke spoken in a phatic way of speech suggesting that he and his listeners are a communion for the given time of listening. Benjamin wouldn’t have been the man he was, had he not theoretically reflected on what he was doing. In an unpublished paper from 1930 titled „reflections on radio“ we find :

“The radio listeners, quite in contrast to any other audience, receive the voice that is offered to them as they would, so to speak, a guest.”¹ That of course is a pure assumption, but possibly the best one one could get. From its very beginnings until today Radio invades the most private places of intimacy. That’s the place where voices are more important than their messages. Therefore, says, Benjamin, radio is all about “voice, diction and speech”. That “in one word, it [is] the technical and formal aspect, which in so many cases can make unbearable the issues which are to the audience most worth knowing about, whereas, in rare cases, it also can make the most obscure ones enchanting (There are announcers to whom one listens even when they read the weather forecast)”.²

1. “Die Rundfunkhörer, im Gegensatz zu jedem andern Publikum, [empfangen] das Dargebotene bei sich zu Hause, die Stimme gewissermaßen als Gast.“

Reflexionen zum Rundfunk /
 Refections On Radio
 (1930)

„Man braucht sich nur einmal zu überlegen, was es ausmacht, daß die Rundfunkhörer, im Gegensatz zu jedem andern Publikum, das Dargebotene bei sich zu Hause, die Stimme gewissermaßen als Gast empfangen.“

„Es ist die Stimme, die Diktion, die Sprache - mit einem Wort die technische und formale Seite der Sache, die in so vielen Fällen die wissenswertesten Darlegungen dem Hörer unerträglich macht genau so wie sie, in einigen wenigen, ihn an die ihm entlegensten fesseln kann. (Es gibt Sprecher, denen man sogar bei den Wettermeldungen zuhört.)“

“...the radio listeners, quite in contrast to any other audience, [receive] the voice that is offered to them as they would, so to speak, a guest.”

„It is voice, diction and speech “in one word, it [is] the technical and formal aspect, which in so many cases can make unbearable the issues which are to the audience most worth knowing about, whereas, in rare cases, it also can make the most obscure ones enchanting (There are announcers to whom one listens even when they read the weather forecast)”.²⁰

This famous sentence about the radio-weatherman is a result of his own aural experiences. Therefore Benjamin's reflections go deeper.

Reflexionen zum Rundfunk /
 Refections On Radio
 (1930)

„Nie hat es noch ein wirkliches Kulturinstitut gegeben, das sich als solches nicht durch das Sachverständnis beglaubigt hätte, das es kraft seiner Formen, seiner Technik im Publikum erweckt hätte.“

„...noch heute, nach Jahre langer Praxis, [ist] das Publikum, völlig preisgegeben, unsachverständig in seinen kritischen Reaktionen mehr oder minder auf die Sabotage (das Abschalten) angewiesen geblieben ist.“

„There has never been a real cultural institution which has not attested itself as such through the expertise which its forms and techniques awake in the audience.“

„...Even today, after years of practice, abject and inexpert in its critical reactions, the radio-audience relies more or less entirely on sabotage, that is to say, switching off.“

“There has never been a real cultural institution”, Benjamin doesn't say medium because radio in Weimar typically was seen as a cultural institution and not as a medium, “...a real cultural institution which has not attested itself as such through the

2. mit einem Wort die technische und formale Seite der Sache, die in so vielen Fällen die wissenswertesten Darlegungen dem Hörer unerträglich macht genau so wie sie, in einigen wenigen, ihn an die ihm entlegensten fesseln kann. (Es gibt Sprecher, denen man sogar bei den Wettermeldungen zuhört.) (IV,1507)

expertise which its forms and techniques awake in the audience.”¹ What Benjamin does say is the following: Radio has not yet evolved successful forms as the result of an exchange with its listeners’ reactions. From Greek theatre, Benjamins recalls, through French drama and even including sermons cultural techniques achieve their literary form from a process of exchange with audience responses. In early Weimar radio however, as yet the only real opportunity for a radio-listener to react was through sabotage, as Benjamin says literally, quote, „Even today, after years of practice, abject and inexpert in its critical reactions, the radio-audience relies more or less entirely on sabotage, that is to say, switching off.”²

So it was not by chance that Benjamin spoke in front of the young radio-listeners like a guest. Many of his preserved scripts prove this. Discursively and rhetori-

VI. Radio plays (10)

08.02.1931	Studio: Wie nehme ich meinen Chef?	BFst	Hörspiel
26.03.1931	Hörmodell I: Gehaltserhöhung?! Wo denken Sie hin!	SWR	Hörspiel
01.07.1931	Hörmodell II: Frech wird der Junge auch noch ?!	BFst	Hörspiel
01.07.1931	Hörmodell II: Frech wird der Junge auch noch ?!	SWR	Hörspiel
03.01.1932	Funkspiele: Dichter nach Stichworten	SWR	Hörspiel
16.02.1932	Was die Deutschen lasen, während ihre Klassiker schrieben	BFst	Hörspiel
10.03.1932	Radau um Kasperl	SWR	Hörspiel
16.05.1932	Das kalte Herz	SWR	Hörspiel
09.09.1932	Radau um Kasperl	WEPAG	Hörspiel
not broadcast	Lichtenberg	BFst	Hörspiel

22

cally, he took on the role of the host, a role we know so well from later American radio, but, until the late 1950s, not from Germany. The host brings guests together as a kind of super-guest. In Benjamin’s youth programs he addresses himself as both host and guest at the same time, reflecting always on the moment and the length of his speeches, repeatedly alluding to the technical situation: that he cannot be seen by the listeners and, in turn, cannot see them. In a word: in his “youth programs”, but only there, Benjamin performs as a medial narrator of a new type. From 1929 to 1931 he made almost half of the whole youth programs alone (2506,417).

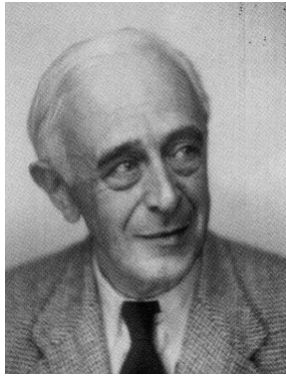
This great frequency is not simply a question of fulfilling the contracts of hack work. It was far more a question of making a contract with his listeners. To speak to listeners as a host makes no sense for a single broadcast. This approach implicitly leads to a serial format and that is the simple reason why Benjamin did so many youth programs, almost fifty in just two and a half years, two thirds of his whole radio work.³

1. “Nie hat es noch ein wirkliches Kulturinstitut gegeben, das sich als solches nicht durch das Sachverständnis beglaubigt hätte, das es kraft seiner Formen, seiner Technik im Publikum erweckt hätte.“

2. “noch heute, nach Jahre langer Praxis, [ist] das Publikum, völlig preisgegeben, unsachverständig in seinen kritischen Reaktionen mehr oder minder auf die Sabotage (das Abschalten) angewiesen geblieben.“(iv,1506)

I can only touch on Category VI of Benjamin's radio work with a few remarks: it would demand a lecture in its own right. Central to this are the so-called "Hörmodelle", models of hearing, or hear-models, a concept Benjamin developed with his friend Ernst Schoen. There has been a long discussion as to whether these plays were influenced by Brecht's Lehrstücke, but my findings would be different. "Gehaltserhöhung?! Wo denken Sie hin!" (Pay rise? What are you dreaming of!) is in fact more an almost boulevardesque role-play than a "Lehrstück", having more to do with Benjamin's sustained interest in the behavioural sciences than with Brecht. Two different types of experiments to get more money from the boss are played through. But the main feature of each Hear-Model-Broadcast was the live discussion after the show. And exactly this is the reason why most of his Hörmodell-broadcasts failed or were as he said "windig". In 1930 for example Ernst Schoen wrote to Benjamin: "The Frankfurt surveillance-council in its last meeting decided that it is forbidden to allow young people to appear in front of a microphone."¹

II.



Ernst Schoen 1953
(1894 - 1960)

24

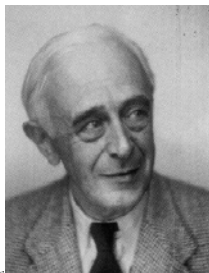
It is well known that Benjamin came to radio through his lifelong connection with Ernst Schoen. Good Benjamin aficionados also know that his school friend Schoen was the guy who fell in love with Benjamin's wife Dora Kellner in the early twenties. Schoen became subsequently one of the virtual actors of Benjamin's famous "Wahlverwandschaften"-essay.

Born in 1894, two years younger than B he also grew up in a wealthy bourgeois family in B. Very early on, Schoen received piano lessons from Ferruccio Busoni and even as a boy he was acquainted with Edgar Varese, who even taught the gifted

3. "Hören lernen, sehen lernen, fragen lernen, nachfragen, das ist die Botschaft Benjamins"(ebd). »Wenn ihr nun wißt, wie unendlich viel zu alledem zu sagen, wo zu fragen wäre, und wenn ihr euch erinnert, daß wir doch nur 20 Minuten für unsere Unterhaltung haben, dann werdet ihr finden, daß es keinen Zweck hat, mit Siebenmeilenstiefeln vorwärts zu rennen, und daß wir uns lieber für ein paar einzelne Stationen Zeit nehmen wollen« (VII, 133)."

1. "Der Frankfurter Kulturbeirat hat in seiner letzten Sitzung ... erneut einen Beschluß bestätigt, der dem Verbot gleichkommt, Jugendliche vor dem Mikrophon erscheinen zu lassen."

young man the study of harmony and Schoenberg's twelve tone techniques (146, Schillerlerg). After World War One, radio must somehow have attracted the young man, who was without question very familiar with the revolutionary theses of Busoni's "Sketch of a New Esthetics of Music". Busoni's vision of a music made directly by new tone machines presumably became the lodestar for Schoen's work in radio as we know it for the composer Kurt Weill, who regularly contributed to a radio journal for five years in the period in question.



Founder of
Radio Frankfurt,
later expanded
to SWR
(Süd-West-
Rundfunk)



Ernst Schoen in 1953
(1894 - 1960)
Program Assistant



Hans Flesch in 1931
(* 1896; verschollen 1945)
Intendant



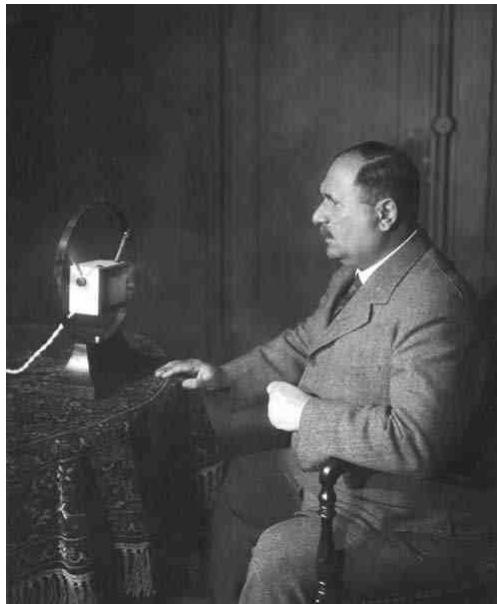
Paul Hindemith
1895-1963

25

However, Ernst Schoen became the program assistant of the very first radio station in Frankfurt, which opened up in early 1924. This radio station became one of the most innovative in Germany. It was originally founded by Hans Flesch, originally a doctor of medicine, but who was also deeply connected with the young avant garde scene in post-war Frankfurt. Hans Flesch and Paul Hindemith had each married one of the two daughters of Hans Rottenberg, the Intendant of the Frankfurt opera house who was a pioneer of new music. Years before, in Berlin, one of these daughters had been the beloved of Ernst Schoen. So when the radio opened up in Frankfurt we have another case of "Wahlverwandschaft". And right from the start Benjamin was not far away. In 1925, after his habilitation procedures failed, Schoen asked his friend to work for the associated radio journal "Südwestdeutsche Rundfunkzeitung". But at that time Benjamin still had other plans.

Radio, thanks to the way it was organized in the Weimar period, must have seemed a completely ridiculous and grotesque thing to intellectually open minded men like Flesch, Schoen or Benjamin. Their abilities to act were harshly restricted, up to the most absurd points of censorship. The republican Weimar radio was indeed censored from beginning to its end, by means of a very complicated system of surveillance committees, provincially organized but with full rights to intervene against any program planned. Programs featuring contemporary political and social issues as well as any reference to party politics were strictly forbidden. In a word: early radio in Germany was off to an unholy false start.

To understand the unique censorship of the new medium one has to remember that in Germany radio was not founded by amateurs as it was in the United States of America. It was rather built against them. Thousands of soldiers in the communication divisions on all sides of the fronts of World War One had become familiar with wireless devices which also could easily be built privately. In the US we here find the reason for the chaotic beginnings of radio, which until 1927 was dominated by tens of thousands of radio amateurs.



Hans Bredow, 1879 -1959, Founder of Weimar Radio System

29

In the end this “Funkerspuk”, the specter of radio operators as it was called, could be quite easily pacified by Hans Bredow. As the representative of Telefunken Industries, Bredow promised the exhausted crowd good jobs in a new government department to be established especially for radio matters. A few months later Bredow actually quit his Telefunken job, established a new section in the Post Office Department for wireless radio, founded the Weimar radio system four years later and remained at its head until the Nazis took power. As their American contemporaries, German soldiers from communications and information units too came out of the war with good technical skills. Many of them gathered together in the so-called councils of soldiers. Soon they were called the Zentralfunkleitung der Soldatenräte(ZFL), the central broadcast management of the soldiers’ councils. But their aims and demands were totally unclear. The “Spartakus” Federation, leading the Zentralfunkleitung, had no idea of the potential of the new media. Their main political request was solely the building of an independent telegraphy organisation.



»Furchtbare Folgen einer temperamentvollen Rede: Kampf aller gegen alle«. Karikatur von Fritz Wolf unter dem Titel »Der Reichstagsfunk«, 1929

30

A real threat of skilled and revolutionary amateurs taking over the radio was almost nonexistent in Germany. But all the greater for this was the fear of the governmental bureaucrats, the Social Democrats, as well as the conservative parties, who were all frightened of the return of this non-existent spectre. That's what radio does sometimes: making people think that something will happen again which never actually occurred. Radio in the Weimar Republic in fact was so restricted because it was part of a profound uncanny feeling in the young republic, which was still deeply affected by the lost war and its deep shocks.



Das RDR-Organ »Der Deutsche Sender« 1932 mit der Unterschrift: »Wie ein einheitlich gefasster Beschluss des Überwachungsausschusses in Wirklichkeit aussieht.«

31

Nobody demanded a free, unorganized, chaotic, just-for-fun or mostly-unregulated access to the new wireless world. Nobody thought of it as an entertainment medium. Such amateurish pragmatism was not in the thinking of the European tradition of the wireless, which first and foremost was loaded with the imperial semantics of electricity, believing in the ether as the bearer of everything – matter and even spirit and thoughts. Long before it existed, the paradigm of Radio was overloaded with a metaphysical charge and discharged itself in the psychotic fears and groundless anxieties of the actual beginning. Perhaps Benjamin's shame had its deeper roots in the reputation of the medium as the grotesque and stupid installation it in fact was. Like a terrifying monster becomes a laughable cartoon figure the stupidity and grotesqueness of Weimar Radio concealed its impermeable uncanniness. To work in this system could thus indeed be shameful.

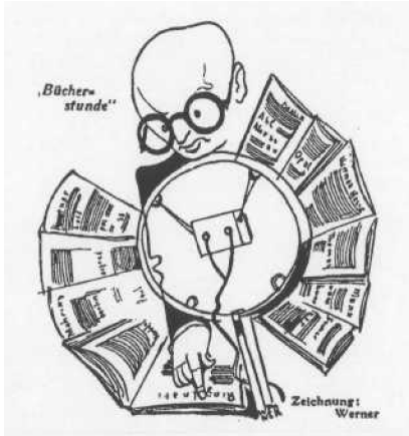


32

Fear and anxiety dominated the start of German radio in many ways. First, Hans Bredow himself, after having laboriously convinced his own government couldn't get enough voluntary entrepreneurs for the nine private companies necessary for the national start in 1923. Finally for Frankfurt he found the photo manufacturer Schleussner, who hired the 27 years old Dr. Flesch. Bredow was in a hurry. As former General manager of the Telefunken company he knew very well that only a large-scale spread of radio devices in the German population would help to get the radio industry off the ground, and bring the fabrication of radio tubes back on an international level. But to reach this goal, the ministry of the interior had to be removed from the picture otherwise Bredow would have lost control. Therefore the content of the medium had to be restricted to the most apolitical level imaginable.

Hans Bredow subsequently termed the radio a "cultural instrument". As a result every local or provincial association of teachers or federation of philologists got its place fixed in the program, including church choirs, choral societies, educational groups of any imaginable kind, including university professors and religious homilists. Except for one or other soccer reportages, which evolved from 1927 on, the concept of live-reporting didn't exist in the "cultural-task" radio of Weimar. Whether a politician

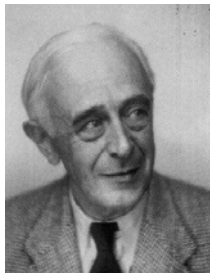
had been shot on a sidewalk, riots erupted in the streets or forest fires threatened the Berlin Grunewald – nothing was ever reported on the radio.



Karikatur des linken Fachorgans >Unser Sender< zum »Mißbrauch des Rundfunks durch die Kirche«, 1929

33

In August 1929, when Hans Flesch of Frankfurt radio was nominated for the intendency in Berlin, Ernst Schoen, by now the head of programming in Frankfurt, and his friend Benjamin published a bitter critique of the system in the *Literarische Welt* ("Literary World"). And yet one can still see how cautiously they choose their words. In



Walter Benjamin
„Gespräch mit Ernst Schoen“
(*Literarische Welt* 1929)



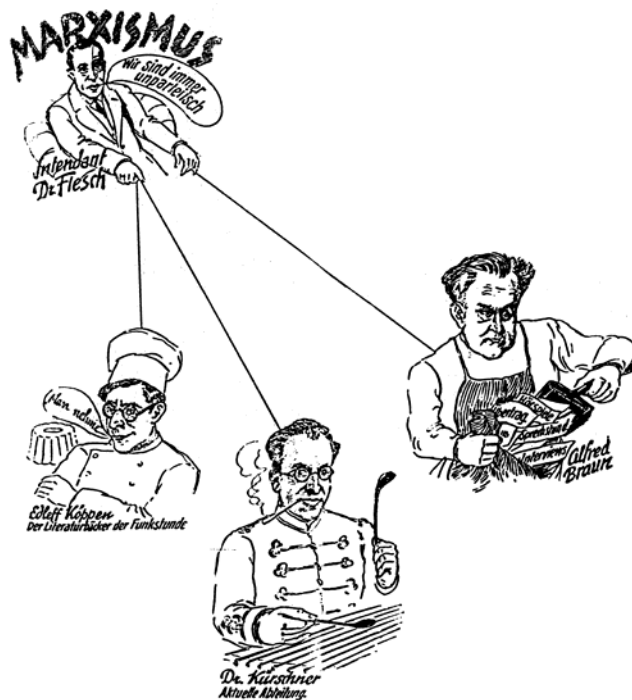
„...was ... die Programmgestaltung des Rundfunks bestimmte. Das war, kurz gesagt, die Kultur mit einem haushohen K.“

„...dies zu bewirken ist heute nur möglich mit einer Politisierung, die ohne den chimärischen Ehrgeiz staatsbürgerlicher Erziehung den Zeitcharakter so bestimmt, wie ehemals der »ChatNoir« und die »Elf Scharfrichter« es getan haben.“

34

the “Gespräch mit Ernst Schoen” Benjamin lets Schoen complain how much the Frankfurt Radio Policy was opposed to “the original aim of the system”, that is, quote,

“Culture with a C as high as a house”. But for Benjamin and Schoen the whole case was still rather difficult and so their main points sound very much hedged in by qualifying clauses: to achieve a level of good entertainment in radio, Benjamin says, „ is only possible by a politicization” of its content. This was a brave demand, but utopian in every way.



35

At least Hans Flesch, when he came to Berlin, tried something. He established an current affairs department, worked on transmissions of parliament debates and court trials, implemented mobile studios all over the capital, pioneered with the first German series containing original sound-materials of actual events, fostered the culture of live debates and expanded youth programming. Of course, Benjamin was not engaged as an expert for politics. He was engaged as expert for the comparatively old program-genre of literary narration. His editor was Edlef Köppen here pictured as “literary baker” of the Funkstunde.

We have seen already how Benjamin turned this task more and more in new directions. His work laid not so much in the focus of Flesch’s innovations, but he changed things silently his way. “Walk through a brass factory”, “True stories of dogs”, “Borsig”, the steam engine factory, “Tenements”, “On the life of cars”, “How tamers work”, - these are topics far from literature and traditions and close to what we should call “contemporary cultural narrations” done in a very modern host format. Along with the greater innovations of Flesch, all of this vanished in the summer of 1932, when the reactionary radio reform supported by caricatures like these took over the of radio and push back Weimar radio to its limited roots.

Benjamins last radio program
(probably read by someone else)

29.01.1933	Aus einer unveröffentlichten Skizzensammlung: "Berliner Kindheit um 1900"	SWR	Lesung
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36

Thus Benjamin's last live-performance now had to be in the old form. A reading – without I's and You's – of some pieces of the collection "Berlin childhood around 1900", on the January 29th 1933. The next day on the 30th, German radio experienced its first all-live reportage of an actual political event, done against all orders and regulations, breaking with all rules and prescriptions of the surveillance councils: The torchlight procession of the victorious Nazis, broadcast live and as it happened on almost all German Radio Stations.

Detlef Holz (i.e. Walter Benjamin)

„Auf die Minute“ (On the Minute)

Frankfurter Zeitung 1934

„In dieser, der Technik und dem durch sie herrschenden Menschen bestimmten Kammer, überkam mich ein neuer Schauer, der doch dem ältesten, den wir kennen, verwandt war. Ich lieh mir selbst mein Ohr, dem nun auf einmal nichts als das eigene Schweigen entgegentönte. Das aber erkannte ich als das des Todes, der mich eben jetzt in tausend Ohren und in tausend Stuben zugleich hinraffte.“

„In this chamber, designed for technology and mankind who controls technology, a new shudder came over me, a shudder related to the oldest one we know. I lent myself an ear, only to find nothing sounding in it except my own silence. But I recognized the silence as that of death, the death which just now had carried me away into a thousand ears and thousand living-rooms.“

37

Ironically or not, the last thing we learn about Benjamin's radio work is in a special report about his first program done by himself. In 1934 the Frankfurter Zeitung

published as one of his latest columns entitled “On the minute” under the pen name “Detlef Holz”, Benjamin recalls an accident while he was presenting his first live radio book-review. He nervously checked the studio-clock, thought that he had already run out of time, skipped a couple of pages, and finished. But there was silence. He had finished far too early. Quote: “In this chamber, designed for technology and mankind who controls technology, a new shudder came over me, a shudder related to the oldest one we know. I lent myself an ear, only to find nothing sounding in it except my own silence. But I recognized the silence as that of death, the death which just now had carried me away into a thousand ears and thousand living-rooms.”¹

Fear and anxiety overwhelmed Benjamin the speaker who in the end grasped what he could grasp, improvised and stumbled, and somehow made it to a happy end. The next day, so Benjamin recounts, a friend of his remembered having heard him yesterday. “It was pretty nice [his friend told him] (...) But, you know, the receivers are still a mess. Mine went off temporarily for at least one minute again.”²

I would suggest this little episode can be read as an allegory of Benjamin’s radio work in general. He recognized it as a work of silence carrying himself away dozens of times in the silence of thousands of ears in thousands of rooms. Yes, Benjamin really didn’t feel so good about working for the radio. Not because he didn’t like it, but because he couldn’t change it.

1. In dieser, der Technik und dem durch sie herrschenden Menschen bestimmten Kammer, überkam mich ein neuer Schauer, der doch dem ältesten, den wir kennen, verwandt war. Ich lieh mir selbst mein Ohr, dem nun auf einmal nichts als das eigene Schweigen entgegengönte. Das aber erkannte ich als das des Todes, der mich eben jetzt in tausend Ohren und in tausend Stuben zugleich hinraffte.(IV,2,763)

2. »Es war sehr nett«, sagte er. »Nur hapert es eben immer mit den Empfängern. Meiner hat wieder eine Minute vollkommen ausgesetzt.«