Judge Dennis Davis and Professor David Peimer - Walter Benjamin A Renaissance Jewish Intellect of the 20th Century, Part 1

- [David] Okay.

- Hello, everybody, hi, guys.

- How are you?

- Hi, hi.

- [Wendy] Good, good, good, thank you.

- [David] Hi, Wendy, how are you?

- Oh, I'm fine, thank you, I am attending to my annoying cough, so sorry about that.

- That's okay, I do have a couple of people who do comment.

- Oh yeah, no, no, you, no, no. I went to the ENT yesterday, good news.

- Oh, good, I didn't kill you with the stuff I gave you?

- No, no, now I'm on steroids, that's fine and I should be well very soon.

- Good, I'm glad.

- [Dennis] How long is this lasted for?

Visual slides are displayed throughout the presentation.

- Started about a month ago, But I'm, you know, I have this and I was on an antibiotic and then I do have this persistent, annoying cough when I go from hot to cold and cold to hot. I usually get it in the winter, it's an irritation. And I just thought when I came to California, 'cause now I'm with my children, I'll get better in the sunshine, but I actually didn't get better. So yesterday, I had a COVID test two days ago, so I thought, okay, let me go to the doctor, although I've had both my vaccines, you know? I just thought, "Oh, I just don't feel like having all these tests continuously." So my son-in-law is very close with an ENT and a lovely, lovely guy. He's got a 22-year-old daughter and I think I might have met her, Shida, with the daughter and the ENT!

- [Dennis] Oh, wow!

- Okay, I dunno, we'll see. But this is, you know, multitask platform, so, oh look, people are

coming in. So lovely to see you both, welcome everybody. It's nice to be part of this on this wonderful Saturday morning, and hello, Judi.

- Hi, how's that?

- Good, good morning, and it's very exciting. I just am loving our platform.

- Yeah, quite extraordinary how many people are now on it.

- That's fantastic.

- It's wonderful.

- [David] Absolutely fantastic.

- Yeah, and really, sorry if we offend people from time to time, we don't mean to be, 'cause it's not really a political platform and everybody's just doing their best. And this really started off as so informal. So it's hit and miss, right guys?

- [Dennis] Absolutely!

- Sometimes we miss, but that's part of.

- Wendy, thanks to your ethos of freedom of expression, which is absolutely celebrated by everybody, yeah.

- Exactly, and sometimes it's fine to miss. Sometimes it's fine to make mistakes, we just apologise or-

- As Golda Meir, remember Golda Meir, great line, "She's the prime minister of 5 million prime ministers."

- Yeah.

- Okay, well we're now-

- We are merely lecturers of thousands of lecturers.

- So now we imitate-

- The variation of that was when the American president said, "You know, we've got these major companies called General Ford, General Motors, General Electric." He said, "I've got five million generals."

- It's true, well we've now got over 10,000. So guys it's three minutes past the hour.

- [David] We've got 10,000 professors.

- Yeah, exactly, and it's wonderful and it's wonderful to have all those opinions because it really is very enriching and the good and the bad, we take it all on board, so you know, we don't take it personally.

- Well we have a note from Marion saying, "No offence just interest, gratitude, and respect," so thank you, Marion.

- Thank you very much, all right guys, over to you. I'm sure they don't want to hear us conversing, thank you!

- Thank you, so today we are going to talk about Walter Benjamin and I have to confess in the discussions I've had with David, which would been extraordinarily and typically invigorating, one of the problems that we faced was how do you compress this into an hour? And I should, I think, say upfront that if people wish to have a second session on Walter Benjamin, we're more than happy to do it, but we felt we'd see what the appetite was, partly because he's a very complex and difficult sort of character, as it were, to unravel. These are complicated and profound ideas of many kinds and in some ways he sort of writes in a manner which is hardly anything other than opaque. So I certainly speak for myself, who's taught him in relation to law for a long, many years, have always found that somewhat difficult to convey him in the manner that I'd hoped for, but if there is an interest, of course we are more than interested.

So there's a lot to do, Let us get on with it. Walter Benjamin, I think if we could sort of capture the idea, was one of the great Jewish intellectuals of the earlier 20th century and in a way that sort of cosmopolitan Jewish intellectual because as we shall see, he was, to some considerable extent, immersed in the Jewish tradition and I'll explain that in a moment. But of course he went way beyond that in all manner of fields, some of which will be explored tonight, particularly by David, a little later. So he was born on the 15th of July, 1892, significantly to a prosperous Jewish family in Berlin. At the age of 13 and it's important he had a, after a prolonged period of sickness, and he was a man who struggled with health issues throughout his life, he went to a progressive co-educational boarding school in which he came under an influence of a whole range of liberal educators, he did attend later on the University of Freiberg in Berlin, and it was at the University of Berlin where he began a lifelong friendship with Gerhard. Later Gershom Scholem, who was a fellow student there.

And particularly if you bear in mind that Gershom Scholem, who was Gerhard at the time, who of course had significant links with Hannah Arendt, that for a later occasion, wrote a classic text on Jewish mysticism and I want to suggest to you right up front that I do think that Benjamin is this wonderful combination of both the mystical and in a sense the personification of the

enlightenment, which makes him so complicated, but this friendship with Scholem is something we'll come back to. And if you, for example, want to locate Benjamin's relationship to Judaism and capitalism, you can look at his interpretations of Kafka in the early 1930s and a particularly interesting Messianic interpretation of Paul Klee's painting, "Angelus Novus", which perhaps we can talk about. In 1919, he published his doctoral thesis on the concept of art criticism in German romanticism. Might I add, it was awarded the summa cum laude degree by the University of Bern in Switzerland. In Germany in order to lecture you have to do a second doctorate, the habilitation, and he did that interestingly enough on the origins of the German mourning-play, a term to characterise a drama that emerges during the Baroque period of artistry in the late 16th and early 17th century.

It's interesting that if you look at the second doctorate, it does, as it were, refer considerably to an article we are going to talk about soon, which is a 1921 article called "The Critique of Violence". In '36 he then produced "The Work of Art in an Age of Its Technical Reproducibility", which is the second of the fundamental works that we are going to deal with tonight. One final note in relation to this, in 1927, he commenced what was referred to as the "Arcades Project", which was a massive study of 19th century Paris, which arcades were seen by Benjamin as archetypal of images of the psychosocial space of 19th century Paris, and indeed it's an enormous work, it was never finished, but it has a huge amount to tell us about the nature of art as it transmogrified during the 19th century. But just very briefly back to the details, in 1930, he was involved in the plans for a left wing journal called "Crisis and Critique", which involved Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht. In 1933, realising what was going to happen, he departed Germany for the last time following Adorno, Brecht and others into exile.

I should add by then Adorno and Horkheimer had effectively transported the Institute for Social Research from Frankfurt to New York City and they were particularly keen on getting Benjamin to come to America, and in fact were able to get him a visa to enter the country. The truth was in 1939, he was in Paris. He was working on the "Arcades Project". He did not want to leave, he was interned for a short period, but nonetheless insisted on staying. His wife Dora, with whom he had had a very, very tempestuous relationship, and there's much to talk about in relation to Benjamin's womanising, but I will alight over that for the purposes of this discussion, wanted him to come to London but he insisted on staying in Paris. But finally when Germany invaded France in the summer of 1940, he had to escape and he sought to escape with a small group of people, the Pyrenees in attempt to enter Spain. In 1940 September of that month, he crossed the French-Spanish border and he arrived at the town of Portbou in Catalonia with a small party. It was an extremely tough journey for Benjamin who suffered from a serious heart condition, but they did succeed. And then sadly and always seems to me particularly poignant to reflect upon this, that when they finally got to Portbou in Spain, they were all informed by the Spanish authorities that they were going to be turned back and sent back to France and Benjamin realised that that was going to be the end.

And he wrote a letter which was eventually reconstructed by Henny Gurland, who was one of the people who accompanied him on this final trip. It was dated the 25th of September, 1940

and he said, "In a situation with no way out, I have no other choice to end it. It is in a little village in the Pyrenees where nobody knows me that my life will be finished. I ask you to transmit my thoughts to my friend Adorno and to explain to him the position in which I saw myself placed." It's an extraordinarily poignant letter. It was reconstructed, most people believe that he took an overdose of morphine and therefore committed suicide. The terrible irony was that the next day the Spanish authorities changed their mind and let everybody through. And so here we have this extraordinary intellectual, whose engagements with all of the people that I referred to and may I also add Hannah Arendt whom he met for the first time in 1933 in Paris. Apparently Arendt's, he met her through her first husband, Gunter, who was a distant cousin of Benjamin. And again, it is particularly interesting to reflect on their engagement, which we all shall do presently. Now I've just skipped through, in the interest of time, this extraordinary nuance biography. I know David's got some additional issues to add, so perhaps David, you'd like to add them now.

- Thanks so much Dennis, and thanks as ever, as you mentioned to Judi for helping so much. And Wendy, and also just to mention, if I may, thanks to the email from Mike and Brenda, who, we grew up in Durban together and we haven't had contact for many, many years. Brenda was friendly with my sister Laura, who lives in Jerusalem and they have a house in Portbou right close near to where Benjamin committed suicide on the Franco-Spanish border. And apparently now it's a really tourist town. That's for a whole separate discussion. Just to add a couple of things onto what Dennis was saying, where, for me, Benjamin is remarkable is that he wrote on such a broad range of topics, but with incredible insight and rigour. He wrote on philosophy, he wrote, I'm sure many know this, but philosophy, literary theory, not only German literature and history, but on Proust, on Kafka, on Baudelaire, on Goethe. And he wrote on translation theory. He wrote in politics and aesthetics, history. This sort of remarkable first half of the century, renaissance intellect and obviously, as Dennis is saying, with a fascinating influence of the Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah. So there's almost a philosophical strand, there's Jewish Kabbalah strand and Judaism, and then German literature or or rather European literature as well, you know, as perhaps the primary strands of his intellectual life.

He was very close friends with Brecht, the foremost German playwright poet of his age. In this image here on the top left, he's playing chess with Brecht. These are two images of him as well. And as Dennis was saying, we're going to focus on those two articles, on the two essays of his, "Crime", sorry, "Of Violence and War", and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Just a few little tidbits to wet the appetite on his biography. His father was a prominent banker and also he owned ice skating rinks in Berlin. His uncle was Wilhelm Stern, who was the German psychologist from Germany who was fundamental in developing the notion of the IQ. His cousin Gunther Anders was a German philosopher, an anti-nuclear activist who studied with Husserl and Heidegger. And in terms of his Jewishness, Benjamin had this wonderful phrase, we spoke about his allegiance or connection to what he called in his words, cultural Zionism. And he wrote, "My life experience led me to this insight. The Jews represent an elite in the ranks of the spiritually active, for Judaism is to me in no sense an end in itself, but the most distinguished bearer and representative of the spiritual." He was elected president of

the Free Students Association at one of his universities.

He tried to volunteer to fight on behalf of Germans in the First World War, is rejected by the army on health grounds. As Dennis mentioned, his great friend Scholem immigrated to Palestine and he constantly tried to persuade Benjamin to come and live there in the the late '20s into the '30s. Dennis has wonderfully mentioned the Frankfurt School, et cetera, we all know about, I'm sure, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and many others influenced there. He had this remarkable connection of friends, intellectual, literary, and scientific persons ranging from all of these, some of these I've mentioned, and Dennis mentioned, to Hannah Arendt. He also had a mistress, Asja Lacis who was a Latvian Bolshevik and actress. And she was also an intellectual in influence on him. He and Brecht were very close and there is his book, "Understanding Brecht", as we all know. He understood in 1932 and in the early, in late February, 1933 at the time of the Reichstag Fire, he understood precisely what Hitler was all about, the Nazis, and to get out ASAP. But this guy, you know, he doesn't take the normal path. He doesn't look only for to become a lecturer professor at universities, he's writing for newspapers, for journals. He goes to visit Brecht in exile in Sweden.

He goes to visit his ex-wife elsewhere. He goes to to Nice, he goes to Spain. He's travelling all over the place and he's writing nonstop. He becomes very friendly with Hannah Arendt, as Dennis said, the novelist Hermann Hesse, Kurt Weill, becomes friendly with all these people in Paris in the '30s. He's stripped of his, well he's one of the first intellectuals that the Nazis stripped of citizenship, is effectively stateless and homeless. Then as Dennis has mentioned, as the German Army is moving, is rushing towards Paris, he and his sister flee Paris to this town of Lourdes. Correct my translation please. And he leaves Paris a day before the Germans enter. One of the first on the list that the Gestapo have to arrest is Benjamin and they go to his apartment the next day after the Wehrmacht has entered Paris, but he's left literally by a day. And Hannah Arendt has this beautiful lecture which she gave, just going to show it here, which she gave in 1968, which was linked to the life of Benjamin and obviously his thought, where she speaks about the catastrophes that, you know, he evaded the Gestapo by a day in Paris, but he missed escaping over the Pyrenees by a day as well. And it was in the same group that Arthur Koestler as we all know, escaped as well. And Koestler also tried to overdose with morphine the night before, same as Benjamin, but they found him and managed to resuscitate him and he escaped the next day into Spain.

These remarkable, what what Hannah Arendt called these catastrophes of moments of history in these individual's lives, you know, that these people were all mixed up in. We tried to, we tried to personalise what these people were actually really going through. And at the same time, he doesn't stop being friendly with all these people. He writes his "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" in 1939-1940, while at the same time desperately trying to escape, you know, the claws of the Nazis. So all of this is going on and this active physical life, it's not the kind of little nerdy, intellectual sort of terrified, stuck somewhere. Yes, he had health problems, absolutely, but forceful, articulate, writing, meeting, travelling, connecting with people all over Europe and in the then Palestine as well. His brother, George, was killed in Mauthausen Concentration Camp in

'42. And Hannah Arendt is fundamental to delivering a lot of his writing to Adorno in New York City afterwards. So the link between Arendt and him and many of the others is crucial. The picture on the bottom, the last thing to mention, the lady at the bottom of this picture here is Lisa Fittko, who is a fascinating Hungarian Jewish lady who helped many groups of Jewish intellectuals, artists, emigres, people just trying to escape the Nazis, walk across the Pyrenees. And she literally physically helped groups go across. She then later emigrated, she fled, she managed to get out just in time with her husband, Hans. She herself went the same route through Spain to Lisbon, et cetera, to America or elsewhere. She got out, she lived in Chicago until the wrap old age of 95 after helping many people escape on physically on this route with the name Elizabeth Ekstein, remarkable woman.

A remarkable life for another time perhaps. Okay, what we wanted to do is, that's just to give us a quick sense, I think it's so important, of this guy's life intellectually and practically. Then what we wish to focus on is, as Dennis has mentioned, the two main pieces of work that he wrote from our perspective, the first one, "Violence and Law", which Dennis will speak about and then I'm going to speak about "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Knowledge only exists in lighting flashes, many of these little witticisms and phrases, aphorisms that Benjamin had, so to begin with, going to show the short film clip, which then Dennis will speak to on "Violence and Law".

- [Narrator] Divine violence is a concept developed by Walter Benjamin in his 1921 essay called "Critique of Violence". In this essay, Walter Benjamin tries to relate violence to questions of law and justice. For Benjamin, violence does not necessarily mean physical violence, he's not interested in raw violence that we would find in nature. Instead, he's interested in the violence that functions within the context of society Benjamin begins his rigorous analysis by looking at the history of philosophy of violence. Here Benjamin distinguishes two forms of law, natural law and positive law. Natural law relates people's rights to a transcendent concept that justifies the ends of violence, for example, God's justice would encapsulate the natural law. By championing the natural law, people are describing the ultimate goal in the name of which all laws should be instituted. Positive law on the other hand, refers to the human-made laws that specify an action. Primarily, positive law is concerned with the means of the law, it poses that violence is a product of manmade history. In short, natural law is preoccupied with the ends of law, whereas positive law is preoccupied with the means of law. The analysis of natural and positive law allows Benjamin to emphasise that there is always a relationship of justification between the means and ends of law. In a nutshell, both natural and positive laws try to ensure the justness of means and ends. For this reason, legal violence is always contradictory.

If violence is means to an end, violence can never be fully suitable with respect to the goal that it serves. There's simply no way to prove whether the means are right for the end. For Benjamin, it is therefore important to analyse the means and ends separately. Benjamin distinguishes natural and legal ends of violence. Generally speaking, natural ends of violence such as hitting someone in the head because they did not return your money are unsanctioned. People are pushed to resolve such disputes by legal means. Why legal? Because that

introduces the regime of fate. Benjamin claims that the legal order sees itself as preserving an order imposed by fate. Therefore, violence in the hands of individuals is extremely threatening to the state since it disavows the regime of fate. We usually assume that the legal system would not be able to exist unless individual violence was banned. However, according to Benjamin, this belief is a mere dogma. For Benjamin, the law does not preserve legal ends, instead it preserves itself. Well, where does divine violence fit in all of this?

Benjamin distinguishes three forms of violence, law making violence, law preserving violence and law destroying violence. Law making violence undertakes to transform an existing order into a new one. Examples of such violence would include wars between states, strikes over pay, and others. Law preserving violence occurs when violence is inflicted in order to preserve the legal ends. Such violence functions by instituting the regime of fate, which symbolises the idea that there is no escape from law. And finally, law destroying violence or divine violence undertakes to destroy the regime of fate. Such violence does not have a goal, therefore it functions as pure means. Divine violence destroys the regime of fate and it eliminates the dichotomy of means and ends. When exercising divine violence, people destroy the law preserving violence.

- Right, This is, can I just, sorry, let me finish that off. Let me say immediately if you're confused, I'll try as best I can in a few minutes to try to explicate this for you. I should tell you it generally takes me about seven or eight lectures with my students to get through this so you can understand the difficulty I'm in, and I must make one, 'cause I'm going to forget it, we spent a lot of time talking about the biography and rightly so. If you are interested, there's a magisterial text by Howard Eiland, E-I-L-A-N-D, E-I-L-A-N-D, and Michael Jennings called "Walter Benjamin, a Critical Life", it's a magisterial text, which essentially is well worth reading if anything that David or I told you got to you in terms of interest because it says it all in one wonderful book. But let me get back to the criticism, or the "Critique of Violence". So the difficulty which one has with Benjamin is he didn't write in English. this is German and the words in German don't necessarily translate easily into English. So let me explain what I mean.

The word kritik, which is K-R-I-T-I-K, shouldn't primarily be understood as some negative evaluation or condemnation. But in the Kantian tradition it's a question of judgement , evaluation, examination on the basis of the means provided by the critique itself. So it's a much more nuanced word that he's involved with. And then even more problematic for us is the word gewalt, which is the word he's using here. Critique of violence, gewalt, and gewalt in German has multiple meanings. It means public force, it means power, it means domination, authority, and indeed violence, so the English word violence carries very few of these senses, particularly doesn't really capture the institutional relations of power and force and domination or perhaps non-physical symbolic violence. So what I'm trying to suggest is that Benjamin's lens is far broader than simply the literal translation of the English words and one needs to bear that in mind when one interrogates his work. So how can I explain this to you in three or four minutes? I probably can't, but here's my best try. So he's talking about three kinds of violence with regard to law, law making violence, law preserving violence, and then, of course, law destroying violence. Well just let's have a look at, you see, and fundamental to all of this, fundamental to all

his friends is this, that there is no escape from violence and law.

Law is inherently in the notion of gewalt, in the notion of power, domination, authority, and indeed to some extent violence, it is inevitably and inexorably there, there is no escape from it and it's vitally important to understand that that captures the essence of Benjamin. Take law making violence, in the clip they spoke about war or revolution or colonisation. When, in fact, these activities take place they are violent acts which essentially restructure the society in a different way. You don't effectively, you may get the occasional peaceful transition into power, but for Benjamin, the vast majority of systems of law were predicated upon an initial, original violent act, which then as it were, was sanctified by the legal system that followed it. So that law making violence is the notion you can't have a legal system without some level of power, domination, authority, or indeed violence actually preceding that act. And it's important to understand that. Law preserving violence, let me give you an explanation. I was talking to David about this before and I gave him the following example. So David and I are having a dispute about property. David claims it's his and I claim it's mine.

And we finally go to court and what the court does in a foundational way is, say, to rule for David, generally it probably would never rule for me, so that's another matter, but rule for David, right? Therefore I am excluded and the exclusion is a form of violence, it's a form of power of the law asserting David's claim over mine, which means thereafter that David has, let's say, control of that property. I have no right to even go onto the property. I have no right to have any of the fruits of the property. And if you look, for example, at a country like my own, South Africa, and look at the way in which land laws were configured throughout the Apartheid era, they were unquestionably acts of violence. People pushed off the land and then told the law preserved the rights of those legal claims. And so what Benjamin is talking about is the inevitability, if I could put it that way, the inevitability of violence always been inextricably linked to the problem of law. Violence, when he talks about violence destroying the destroying concept, it is here that he brings in the divine. And it is here that it seems to me that you cannot understand Benjamin without understanding Judaism in all sorts of ways.

And it's here with divine violence that he also brings in the concept of justice. Let me give you two ideas and you can see I'm more than happy to develop this further, but if this sort of stimulates your thinking, I would've done my job. So the one is a quote from Gershom Scholem who has, both of us have said with vitally important to much of the thinking of Benjamin, and he discusses Benjamin's work and then says the following, "The definition of justice," Benjamin's justice "Is to make the Earth into a dwelling place of the Shekhinah," God's presence, the Shekhinah. By drawing the Shekhinah down to us, the phrase, the head of the Shekhinah is in the earthly realm, can sensibly be applied to justice. An increase in justice is in truth only the increase in revelation of justice, an increase in a divine power on earth, which is the Shekhinah, it is, divine violence, as it were, is the assertion of the Shekhinah on Earth. Justice is therefore the highest form of God's revelation, the highest form of reverence. The righteous ones cried for the Messiah and for him alone to reassert as it were, a new form, if you wish, of divine violence to actually reconcile the difficulties we have.

The second and final quote, "Benjamin's own words, 'If I ever had a philosophy of my own, it'll somehow be a philosophy of Judaism.'" It's a fascinating idea and let me explain therefore, this divine justice slightly more in detail just with one illustration 'cause I see time is running rather quickly and there's much to still cover. So it just happens to be serendipitously that this week if Jews had not had COVID in shul, in synagogue, they would've read from a portion of the law from the Parashat HaShavua which would've dealt with the question of the breaking of the first tablets, 10 Commandments, and and the second tablets, which were then provided after Moses had been on Sinai for 40 days, hence the holding to Yom Kippur, but that's another story. And in this particular Parashat, when Moses actually confronts God and says, "I want to see you, I want to know who you are." God says, "You can't, you can see my back."

And ultimately what the text then goes on to say is that what God is is a series of attributes for us. For those of you who understand Hebrew, and those of you who ever go to shul will know that you say this many times and particularly on Yom Kippur, many, many times in the Ne'ila prayer, the last prayer before we desperately want to get home to break the fast. But the point I want to make about this is that those 13 principles of faith in the Jewish tradition are all we can do. We can only, we can only effectively ape those principles. We can follow those principles. We do not know what the divine is. We have no idea what divine or divine justice is or divine violence in that sense. All we can do, and this is really inextricably linked to Benjamin, all we can do is to try to comport our behaviour in terms of the 13 principles of faith. In other words, principles of kindness, slow to anger, compassion, generosity of spirit, 13 attributes of a similar kind. And that means in effect that Benjamin's attempt to reconcile this concept of law and violence is the law itself can never actually produce the ethical solution that you require. Indeed, he suggested that most of law is actually derived from ancient myth and it's myth that effectively justifies law.

So that for every single person I bet listening to us here, they're going to say, "Well that's really interesting, but if we didn't have law, we'd simply have anarchy." And what Benjamin is saying is our only solution is an ethical life, is a life which comports itself with those principles of faith and if you don't do that, there is no way out. And if you think about it, living in the 1930s, under the spectre of Hitler, the idea that an ethical set of governance principles would be possible was very, very remote. Hence it seems to me that to some extent today, and we'll come back to this, Benjamin's principles, need of law, need to be relocated therein. That's the best I can do in my devoted minutes because "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is in fact even more complicated than that. So good luck to you David, as you explain that!

- Okay, thank you so much, and Dennis, thanks very much. And just for everybody to know, we've spoken a couple of times during the week and as always, Dennis's magnificent mind and imagination just keeps sparking mine and I have less sleep. So thanks for less sleep but for inspiring me. So just to go onto "The Work of Art", developing this here and we'll come back to linking them later. The other great essay of his, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", which is I think one of the better translations from the German orbit, there are

two main ideas, the idea of the mass and the idea, this is Benjamin's phrase, the aestheticization of politics. It originated with him in the '30s. It has become a kind of almost cliche catchphrase today. And we're going to talk as well about why on Earth do we even read this guy anymore, you know, who wrote in the '30s and on so many different things, et cetera? Precisely because I think there's so much that resonates around fascism, around creeping emergence of the fascist foot trade that we are all kind of in a sense almost intellectually moving on a path I think, to a large extent, globally. And you know, as it's moving again towards that, arguably, but how this links to the ideas that he originated and have become almost sort of unacknowledged but repeated phrases.

And it's important to dig a little bit deeper to question what does he really mean and how can we really connect it to today? What he means about the mass is the time of mass, possibly, anyway, mass democracies far greater than a century ago, mass media, mass warfare, mass transport, mass moments. He mentions the Autobahn, the Lindbergh flight, radio, cinema in his times, art. And for him it's about the work of art loses the so-called uniqueness. You know, you can only see the original Mona Lisa in the Louvre in Paris or whatever it is, or the sculptures, et cetera, so it's where that so-called aura or what he called the aura, which in the best translation means its unique quality, it loses it 'cause now billions of people can have their own copy of the Mona Lisa. And so in the age of technology we can have mass reproduction and how does that change the perception of art, of literature, of theatre, film as well? And of course in his time the main, the main technology used were radio and film and Goebbels and all the others picked up on this hugely and understood precisely the link between aesthetics and how that could be played in radio 'cause if you control the radio, you control the narrative and you control the aesthetics, the emotional and sensual experience of the millions and millions of listeners to the one radio voice, whether it's Hitler or whoever, you know?

In our times, Twitter, obviously, or Facebook or Instagram, whatever it is. So, and this is all obviously before TV and the internet and the explosion of social media. So it's the individual artwork loses that uniqueness, but it gains on the one hand a democratic access 'cause it means everybody in the world, ya ain't got to have the money to go to Paris and see the original of the Mona Lisa or to go to the RAC and see something of Shakespeare. You can read it anywhere, you can see it anywhere, you can stage it anywhere, you can look at pictures of Mon Lisa endlessly anywhere. So technology enables a mass democratisation of the artwork itself and it enables the paradox that everybody is seeing the one thing through the same eyes, so what it means is that the single subject, the single artwork, the Mona Lisa, the Shakespeare play, becomes mass and we all conform to oneness. We all study "Macbeth" in high school, "Romeo and Juliet", and we conform to the predominant one interpretation that may be decided by structures of power in whatever society we live in.

Certainly where I was taught "Romeo and Juliet" and "Macbeth" in Durban and et cetera, was pretty much with a one approach of the great tradition and the canon, totally taken out of Shakespeare's context, the times that he wrote him, you know, and how many, how much money he made, how much he didn't, or this or that, you know, and so many other productions

done all over. So this oneness, the irony is that there's a massive democratisation of the artwork 'cause everybody can have access to it but it means that we as individuals become part of a conformist mass. We must conform to the one interpretation of "Romeo and Juliet" or "Macbeth", yeah, whatever it is. And by conforming to the oneness, we open ourselves to the cleverness of the fascist thinkers to use it and how they can use mass reproduction to give expression to the masses but it's actually the expression of a singular thought.

During the times, as Dennis mentioned, of colonisation, the two most read books in the whole of Africa, and a very good friend of mine, Isabel, a fantastic intellectual and thinker at Wits University, and Isabel did a study, and the two books that were the most read during the history of British colonisation of Africa were the Bible, but even more, Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress". Now you can see through that a certain way of seeing the world is being pushed, a certain hierarchy, a certain interpretation is written in English, may be translated here and there and so on, and why? Because it gives a certain vision of life, of hierarchy and inferiority, superiority, the role of religion, certain religions, et cetera. So you can push a mass conformity to a one single interpretation of history, of literature, of the work of art, ironically or paradoxically, through mass democratisation, through contemporary technology which enables the access of it in the first place. Then the other idea that is so important with Benjamin is the aestheticization of politics, what does he mean?

And for him, fascism tends towards the aestheticization of politics, where politics itself is the new art. Politics itself must take on the clothing, the the trappings, the use of aesthetics. By aesthetics we mean the emotional response being elicited. We mean the use of costume, of parade, of group, of community, of a communal experience like it can have going to a play or going to a movie and how that's all manufactured consent, how it's all constructed to push, for the fascist, a single message. And he argues that the prime cannon of the mass is that communal experience in addition. We all sit in silence, in the movie house, in darkness, watching the film, the propaganda films of Goebbels or whoever, in a nationalistic fervour. In our times, internet, social media, Twitter, millions and millions of people following a narrative, which is set up by a couple of fascist-leaning minds.

And the nationalistic fervour is always the first, mobilised, obviously by the Nazis, and many others that we are all part of a community serving some greater idea, which is nationalism. It's not only about America, I'm talking, it's many countries around the world in our times. Obviously Benjamin's looking at Germany. So we have an aesthetic remedy to a political problem, an aesthetic remedy to political choice and the political issue of so-called democracy. The remedy is use the aesthetics of radio, of film, in his time, in our time, TV, internet, et cetera. And we get a temporary and bloody solution to the problems. So everybody can feel, we've all seen these mass Nazi rallies and so on. You know, the light, the fire, the cathedral of light in Nuremberg, the millions of soldiers marching, the boots, the costumes designed by Hugo Boss, as we all know, of the SS and the and and the Wehrmacht and all the others, the tanks, the endless, the aeroplanes , all the attributes of aesthetics are vitally important in conveying the message emotionally to the millions of those who watch the film or listen to the radio.

As Benjamin wrote, "All efforts to render politics, aesthetic culminate in one thing, war. War and only war can set the goal for mass movements on the larger scale while respecting a traditional system. The technological formula is as follows, only war makes it possible to mobilise all of the technical resources of today while maintaining the ruling system." So his question was, what happens with the rulers? The rulers distract from the real issue. 'Cause the real issue is the economic conditions, the inequality of payment, who's got the vote? Who hasn't got the vote? Racism, Black, white, et cetera, working class getting paid whatever, middle class, upper class, can the family have enough money for bread on the table? Jobs, losing jobs, being fired, all the stuff going on in contemporary times, which are the real day-to-day bread and butter issues of human life. And instead offer them what? Offer them performance, dress up in your military gear, dress up with your slogans, your flags, make your country great, whatever country, I'm not only talking about America, please. Put on a hat, put on a cap.

Dress pretending to be super military. Dress, cover your face in the colours of the flag, whatever country. Go marching, let's meet, let's have a parade. Building from Goebbels into today's world and we have the politics of entertainment, the aesthetics of performance, the aesthetics of entertainment. And it's enough to go and participate in the illusion of a mass communal experience. We're all there listening to the leader principle to articulate our grievances. We don't even have to agree, it's just enough to shout slogans and to scream and say, we're here. It's something greater than ourselves. The human being's longing to be part of something greater than our individual little fragile self. We give it over to the leader who articulates and says, "March here, do this, march to the front, march in front of the machine guns," the Pied Piper fable returns. But what happens, it's a brilliant diversion from the real issues which are inequality of income, access to education, to university, the cost of university, the cost of living, the cost of financing this and that, the fear of losing jobs, what's my boss going to say tomorrow if I pitch or I don't pitch?

The real day-to-day ordinary stuff. The family, how to help the family, the kids and the schooling, the pandemic, divert attention and give instead the politics of aesthetics of entertainment. And it comes from the shift of mass reproduction of art and the aesthetics changing from the cult of the unique artwork to the cult of the charismatic leader, the cult of entertainment, the cult of performance and that is enough to satisfy the human need of the ancient Romans, give them bread and circus. Give them circus, give them the entertainment and they will follow like the Pied Piper in whatever way you want and it's coming from the aesthetics of understanding the shift in how we can see the Mona Lisa or the Shakespeare today. And this is vital, this is all Benjamin's ideas, which are taken for granted today and over, you know, the decades since he wrote all this. And then you have the group, the communal group can speak to, the leaders of fascism can speak to the fantasies, we're part of a group where part of a much bigger event. And instead of resolving the contradictions of our injustice or the social lack of justice or violence in law or inequality of income, we are part of a performance for something greater than ourselves and that's enough.

The structures of power and ruling stay the same. They're not threatened because we've diverted their attention away from their real day-to-day problems of economics, family, education, schools, hospitals, et cetera, pandemics or whatever, we've diverted it away to the politics of entertainment and aesthetics and how we perceive art has changed and that has enabled the change in the way of seeing politics and the rise of the fascist in today's world, the resonance. War itself, war is aestheticized and is seen as a way for people to participate in a similar collective act of solidarity. Let's all go to war, let's conquer this. It's romanticised, it's glorified, the horrors of, you know, severed limbs and of being incapacitated and losing an arm, losing eyesight, the horrific injuries and obviously death and the coffins coming is forgotten or not seen. And war is seen as a way to participate in this romantic aesthetic, seductive act of solidarity rather than as wanton grotesque slaughter. And the preservation of the status quo of the ruling elite stays the same.

It's another way of diverting attention. So, and as Benjamin wrote quite a stunning phrase, "First everybody was living in the streets and in offices and in our furnished rooms, our railroad stations, our factories appeared to have locked us up with hopelessness," locked us up, "Then came film and it burst this prison world asunder so that now we can, in our imagination, adventurously go travelling with the illusion of being part of a community," that's Benjamin. So that modern fascists had to become entertainers. Not by chance, Stalin is a failed poet. Hitler is a failed artist and many others, the modern fascist needs understanding of entertainment, the mass media, mass entertaining and I'm not talking about highly sophisticated works of this or that or anything, I'm just talking about mass entertainment, with a distinct aesthetic and the aesthetic must appeal to the grievance of the masses and encourage them that they're personally expressing themselves by going to their demagogue of choice or illusion. And the insight of Benjamin's is to recognise that fascism can use the aesthetic entertainment to help create the movement of fascism itself.

And we have to admit whether, whether I'm going to use it today, whether it's Apartheid or the post-Apartheid or in England or parts of the EU or in America, and obviously other parts of the world, you know, that some of these guys understand it. And yes, they're cringe inducing, but they're, tacky as they may be, they understand this approach to making art, politics is the new art, the crowds, as the aesthetic created the diversion from the realities of day-to-day life. So fascism organises the masses without affecting the ruling structure of power. It allows the masses not the right to change their deprivation, but instead, "Hey, come and express yourself and let's sing together in songs!" It's a performance, it's a creative artistic act with costumes and songs and slogans and banners, caps or hats, but it preserves the ruling structure and the logical results is that fascism introduces the aesthetics of art into politics today. And it's realised that giving this illusion of solidarity and communality that we can divert or distract the attention from the real economic health and other social forces and get people to have fun, enjoy a creative expression, artistic expression of their grievance, structures of power stay the same. Democracies may be dismantled, it's irrelevant.

The followers don't care as long as they have their moment of aesthetic entertainment to

comfort them and behave and believe that they're actually being heard by their leaders. And of course they despise them. So I want you to just capture some of these main ideas. And of course as Umberto Eco said, this lovely word, the first target of attack of the fascist is what he called the intruder, call it the migration, call it the illegal immigrant, whatever, call it, the so-called other, different other within the society, the Jew, the Muslim, the Black, the whatever, et cetera, the Mexican, the Polish, you know, the refugee, whoever, the intruder, and Umberto Eco has a lovely essay about that as well. And then finally that the spectacle and the entertainment quality cannot be underestimated for a second. So what I'd like to do is hold here and we've got a little bit of time left and Dennis and I want just to share a couple of thoughts together of how to take the step forward and how to confront the both fronts of the violence and law and the massification of politics and art and the aestheticization of it, Dennis, as you were mentioning earlier today, over to you.

- Yeah, thank you, thanks, David. And there are obviously profound links between, not unexpectedly between two major texts that Benjamin would've written, but let me just try in the time available just to make a couple of points. If you, if everybody's followed David's presentation, the critical point is this massification, as he spoke of the idea that all of a sudden when I went to, whereas in the earlier period before the technological revolution, the privileged people would go to an art gallery and then engage with the art in an individual basis. It was, in a sense Benjamin is talking about the notion of the individual inextricably linked to a particular form of art form. We could get into that in great detail, 'cause it seems to me that if you, if I can say en passant, if one has a look at the "Arcades Project", it says a huge amount about the changing nature of art, including impressionism, et cetera, which is located in his analysis. But let me get back to my point, the interesting thing is that all of a sudden we can all now appreciate, the masses can now appreciate a whole range of art forms if you wish, which previously were, they were excluded from because you had to be at the particular museum or art gallery to see that, or the particular theatre to engage with that art form.

And all of a sudden that changed. And what is particularly interesting is that Benjamin, if you think about film for example, in the period that Benjamin was writing about in the 1930s, of course it's a particular kind, Western art form, particularly individualistic. When he went to Moscow, and we know he went many times, they're the kind of art film that was being developed there emphasised the collective, the nation, the collectivity as a whole. And so he had this kind of tension, if you wish, between on the one hand the notion of art promoting individual liberty, and on the other hand the collectivity. And as David rightly says, the really interesting question is that this technology democratises because it allows the masses to have access to that which they previously didn't have. It changes everything. I mean if you look at the "Arcades Project", there particularly, he was interested in arcades, why? Because he was interested in the way in which space change and all of a sudden middle class and low middle class people and others had access to all range of product services, art that they never had previously. But on the other hand, as David also makes the point that it's democratisation on the one hand and yet it leads to fascism on the other.

And where's the, where's the out? How do we, how do we resolve this particular tension? One of the suggestions I was making, and I'll leave it there, is that it seems to me, and that's why I did mention he's Jewish, a recourse to Judaism, because it seems to me that Benjamin's only out is the promotion of some form of ethical life. And let me just make this final point before handing over. If you look at, I made the point earlier, if you look at governance today, you know, governance of the world, can we really say that notwithstanding all our wonderful constitutions of which we spoke in previous sessions, thanks to January 6th, can we say that these secure for us the kind of lives we want when there's an absence of an ethical form of governance, where in a sense leaders are no longer ethical, where the kind of 13 principles of faith to which I made reference really are merely complied with in the absence rather than the presence. And that seems to me a form of inquiry which we could engage in more fully. But obviously we don't have time at the moment. So David, that's my sort of attempt if it were, to link your part to my part.

- Thank you so much Dennis. And I agree entirely that the way to link the one is the theatrical of the aestheticization of politics and that fundamental idea of, on the one hand it allows mass democratic participation, on the other hand, that precise allowance enables a singular interpretation to lead to conformity, which can lead to the control of that narrative and the using of of mass media, mass technology as a way of controlling and dismantling whatever democratic or semi-democratic institutions and all is located in the politics of entertainment, performance and spectacle. And as you're saying, it's the idea of the ethic coming from, as you mentioned, Dennis, the Kabbalah and the Jewish thought that only then can you have some sort of distinction, otherwise how to resolve on an institutional and mass society level these contradictions? So unless something of that is enabled to come through and the mass media, I think in the interest of mass consumption and mass democratisation, can push that as well, not as a sort of goody two shoes versus a baddie two shoes or as a simple right or wrong, but the question is of what on Earth does it mean to have an ethical value?

What an Earth does it mean to have a spiritual value? So if it's framed in a way that is also using the aesthetics of value, the aesthetics of spirituality and religious tradition, maybe it's possible. If it's just given as a simple, doomed to fail but if it uses precisely what everything else is using, which is the massive, the aesthetics of entertainment and performance, it has a chance I think, and to inculcate that understanding of the law, which is why showing the wonderful clip that you showed, it's using the aesthetics of entertainment to show the law can have those three different functions. You know, the use of cartoons and images, et cetera. That's as important as the message itself. Just as one little example of how to try and begin conversations amongst people using the very tools that fascism is now beginning to use 'cause fascism will always find it. So one needs to look for the other as well to use these.

- Can I just say this David, in the interest of balance and I, just tooling through some of the chat line, I don't think we can, fabulous comments by all sorts of people, which thank you very much, don't if we've got time to deal with them, But there's one just that I had to butt in because person asked a very astute question, "What about the left?" she said, you know, in other words was Benjamin only criticising the right? Absolutely not, I mean he had come to the conclusion

obviously late on that in fact Stalinism was exactly the same problematic on the left. There was, and I would suspect that he would say that today about all forms of cancel culture, et cetera, that there is exactly the same paradigm, that you have to analyse that in the other side, which just adds to what David and I have been saying, the great conundrum, how do you escape this problem? So yeah, it would be particularly ridiculous to not mention the fact that he was circumspect with regard to certain left aspects. But let's be frank about it, I mean this is a man who had escaped Germany and you know, and it was Hitler who was trying to kill him. So I can well understand why his concentration span was in that particular issue and why in fact there was so much spoken about fascism.

- Absolutely agree, Dennis. The left can be as nightmarish as the right when it becomes fundamentalist in these ways.

- Yeah, exactly, it's all about fundamentalism, absolutely.

- Yeah, okay, great, and then I just thought I'd show this very quickly, everybody.

- Yeah, why don't you show this?

- I'm sorry, I'll just show this very quickly, please. This is where he died a tiny little plaque, "To be happy is to be able to become aware of oneself without fright." And then he himself talks about document of culture not in the same document of barbarism. It's precisely what you're trying to say. That the use of the massification of media and entertainment and aesthetics can be used by the right, can be used by the left, can be used for social justice, can be used for fascism, in that meaning of the document can be used for the development of culture, and at the same time, the same document for barbarism. He understood the essential contradictory nature, I think, of society and human nature in that, okay?

- May I jump in now just to say thank you for an outstanding, outstanding-

- Yeah, Wendy, thank you.

- I think we've just touched the tip of the iceberg.

- Oh yeah.

- There's so much, there's so much more to discuss. So I'm going to just round up where we started off. If there is a request for added, for another presentation, another two or three presentations, and the request is going to come from me. So yes, please, gentlemen, that was really-

- Well, we we're happy to do that for you, Wendy.

- Brilliant, thank you. Yeah, and I think maybe we can readjust our timetable for next week, we can discuss it offline. That was brilliant, now I, go on.

- I just wanted to say that the biggest fun is the engagement before you do the lecture.

- Exactly, all the discussions. It is very interesting because, you know, I just want to just, I don't really comment ever, but you know, when I, my first degree, I started off studying music and then I majored in English, and then from English I moved onto clinical psychology. And I think that it'd be very interesting to bring a psychologist in to talk about the psychology. And my boss was Dorian Weil so this is going to, I can bring Dory to, you know, for her input and it's really going to become a very much South African platform. But what are your thoughts to add psychology to this?

- That's fine.

- Fantastic, quite interested in the input, yeah, yeah.

- Very good, very, very good. Alright, I'm going to hand over to you both to answer questions, thank you gentlemen.

- Thank you so much, Wendy, do you want to go through Dennis?

Q&A and Comments:

- Yes, I'm just trying to get them. Sorry, oh goodness, there are lots of comments here, David, that's why I'm just looking down the list, I'm sorry.

Q: "Would you refer to his writings to assist a study of an immigrant artist who I've learned was not the most emotionally balanced artist of his generation, can you point me in the direction of any specific book or piece?"

A: And I'm not sure what it is that you're, if you're talking about him himself, but I would certainly recommend the book by Eiland and Jennings, if you're talking about Benjamin, as a fantastic book.

Q: "Was there any connection between the groups that LL took across the Pyrenees and the groups that Varian Fry took across?"

A: I dunno, David, do you have an answer to that? I think she's talking about Lisa.

- No, I think it was, as far as I know, they were linked to the groups of Varian Fry took across, and I think Patrick's going to talk more about Varian Fry. And I know that, that Lisa, you know, she was the lady who, the woman who took people literally across, physically across the

Pyrenees and I think that there was a link, I don't think that Benjamin's group itself was specifically linked to Varian Fry, but we can check that.

- It's interesting that in the book by Eiland and Jennings, Eiland actually interviewed Lisa Fittko in her 90s in New York. And so if you're interested in her reaction to the Benjamin saga, there's quite a bit in that book on that, again, if anybody's interested.

Q: Suzanne asks, "Extraordinary ideas, but why is it called divine violence, why not intervention, linked to 13 principles of faith?"

A: Divine violence isn't divine violence as I tried to indicate, Suzanne, and violence in a literal English way. It's a question of authority, power, et cetera. And the idea being that the divine which we can't totally understand, does have a exerting of power. There's a fascinating discussion by Benjamin about Korah and the false priests are swallowed by the ground as a divine intervention. So we can't really understand that in particular. But the idea that he's trying to suggest is that divine authority, which is almost inexplicable to us, can only be translated through some form of mediation and I was merely suggesting the 13 principles.

Q: Monty asks, "David, I dunno what happened to his son, does he have descendants?"

A: I can't recall.

- Yeah, he does have a son. He does have a son and I'm sorry, but it slipped my mind completely. I'll check it and get back on that next week.

Q: And then here's one for you, Frida, "The mass democratisation of art mostly meant a loss of aura in art, don't you think that this loss changed our perception of art?"

A: Absolutely, Frida, but what he was talking about was the cult of the aura, the cult of the uniqueness and that singular experience of looking at the painting or going to the theatre or I suppose looking at the sculpture, reading the poem, having it read. But on the one hand, it's fantastic that you can have this mass democratisation of the art, so that means that billions of people can have access to the same piece. So it loses but it gains, it loses the rarification, the cultish quality, and it loses the semi- or quasi, almost supernaturally religious quality. And it becomes something much more of a mass democratised experience. So I think it loses the aura, absolutely, and it gains massive access so it loses that sense of I suppose, high art, elitist art for art sake, et cetera.

And it becomes massified and commodified. But on the other hand, what that leads to, itself, when it translates to society movements and what he's saying is how they bring, the fascists will bring the means of aesthetics, of art into the politics of today. You know, there's a very interesting, and I believe it's true, that Putin, over the last six, seven, eight years has employed performance artists in Moscow who have been some of his seminal guides, if you like, where

they've said not only in terms of cyber warfare and all of that, but how to generate, how to use mass media and the notion of the vocabulary of performance and theatricality in order to destabilise democratic systems in the West. And it's real, they have used chaos theory, they've used some ideas from Dadaism et cetera, et cetera, which have been incorporated into Putin's, if you like, larger group of advisors.

Q: Laurie, "Democratisation not also expand the expression of thought today, if there's only one perspective, is democratisation the appropriate word?"

A: Of course, that's the conundrum with which he's dealing, Laurie, of course, it's not about one perspective, that would be a form of violence or certainly authority. I think the central question which is posed by so much of this or, you know, is the idea of where individual freedom demands participation in the collective and the relationship with the individual in the collective, and of course that would lead to further questions now in a globalised world of how individual freedom in the collectivity sits in relation to the market economy and to the state.

These are profound questions, which perhaps if we do another session we should actually deal with. So I'm with you entirely, and thank you very much, Alan, for your compliment.

Paul Davis "Orwell wrote of changing national content into war hysteria, sorry, changing national discontent into war hysteria," yes he did.

Maureen, "Emile Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness has to be acknowledged even though you may initially have described this in a religious sphere." I agree and entirely, you know, and as time's going on.

- Can I just come in here, Dennis?

- Yes, yes, please, why don't you come in?

- Leslie mentioned in in the UK, Dominic Cummings, for those of you who don't know, was the primary advisor-

- Oh, sorry, yeah.

- Most senior advisor to the Prime Minister in England and exactly, and that was a set up theatrical performance in Number 10, explaining to journalists during lockdown that he had the right to, as you say, jaunt up north and that he had the right to break the law, but nobody else has the right, he's not punished, he doesn't use his job, he doesn't get, you know, one pound, one penny deducted from his salary. The police don't even question, nothing, et cetera. It's precisely what Benjamin would say, it's the performance of the leader using mass media, mass entertainment, the spectacle is enough to satisfy the hunger of the masses. And Benjamin had another idea, which is that you get the masses to perform the role of the people. So when you

have these Nazi mass gatherings or you have, whatever, to come back to this performance at Number 10, the journalists are out there, 30-40 journalists are in the garden at Number 10, they are performing the role of questioners, but they're irrelevant.

All that matters is what the leader says because the leader can get away with it. And with January the sixth, with so many other around the world, it's the performance of the people that matter and they're satisfied because they've had the hunger of the circus, not only the bread, to perform in the aesthetics of performance, which is an extraordinary notion of Benjamin's. It's enough to perform the role of the people and you don't actually change their daily conditions of their salary, their jobs, their education, hospitals, et cetera, and that's exactly what Dominic Cummings was doing there. He was showing, look, it's irrelevant. The rulers perform, so long as the rulers understand how to aestheticization politics, they stay in power.

Sorry, over to you, Dennis. Yeah, sorry, then there's one here I think for you. Well, let me, a comment, it's not really a question, but I will share it, "Do look at Ori Gersht's art video work, 'The Evaders' in 2009, set in the Pyrenees, alluding to his final journey or his ill fated journey to escape Nazi occupied France." Thank you very much, Anne.

Q: David, "Is the dumbing down of education intent to foster fascism?"

A: I don't know the answer to that. Well, it certainly does this, it certainly can't promote deliberation, it can't promote kind of participatory democracy. It can't promote the kind of critical discussions that we're having this evening that's for sure.

Q: Arnold, "So in Benjamin's view, there is no hope to change society as we repeat nationalistic ideas, separateness, there is no real progress, or have I misunderstood? The mass of individuals cannot hope to be raised to high level, all media, in fact, mediated by those have power, political, wealth, social status. If there were truth in the idea of democratisation, we would not experience what we have today, even in nations with universal education, healthcare, and relatively fully employment."

A: Well that's the problem, I'm with you. You know, in a sense that's what we've been trying to grapple with, does he say there's no hope? No, I don't, I was trying to suggest, Arnold, and it seems to me that the kind of conundrum that David posed, the only way out is by some recourse to an ethical life. How that is to be translated, how that's to be vindicated, wow, that's a serious question to which perhaps given the time, I'll merely say, let's make a note of this and try to engage it when we do the next session. And in fact, it'd be interesting to get a psychological position on that as well at the same time. Oh, I dunno, oh, David, I think I seem to have lost mine, if you'd continue.

Q: Okay, no problem, anonymous is asking, "Do you recognise any of these forces operating on the left of the political spectrum as well?"

A: Absolutely, I think they're equally capable, and historically it's, you know, the evidence is there whether one uses the obvious ones of Stalin and Hitler, whether it's the left or the right, 'cause we were talking about the emergence of fascism. It doesn't matter if it's left or right. So I agree entirely.

Roberta, thank you for your comment.

Q: Anonymous, "Could you comment on Benjamin's contribution to the evolution of critical theory?"

A: Yep, which I spent two years at university, been brilliantly taught by Renko, "Particularly through his association with the Frankfurt School, did really believe the principles, and it may he had realised what disruptions that ideology might cause to democracy and capitalism?" I think he did, let's never forget Hitler got in through the votes, only 34% I think, or 35%. I could be corrected, but you know, once you had a certain percentage of the vote, get in and then you do whatever you can to change it from within, not only Hitler, but many other examples. I mean, what's happening in Hungary, Poland, et cetera, the beginnings of it all.

The evolution of the critical theory, sure, I think we'd have to hold that for next week, but it's brilliant, thank you. The Frankfurt School and critical theory are so important and so influential through Adorno and Horkheimer and others that Dennis mentioned earlier, but, you know, let's do that next week, thank you, Barbara.

Okay, Valerie, "Clive James wrote in 'Cultural Amnesia', these two sentences stuck in a Walter Benjamin essay. 'There will be few perceptions gleaming through the cloud of smoke, some of them will be unique, but they will be gasping for air,'" lovely. "And Clive James wrote, 'Whether the central thesis is true is seldom questioned just at the value of his work is seldom doubted'" lovely, thank you very much, Valerie.

Miriam, "The 'Arcades Project'."

- Oh.

- The meaning, go for it, Dennis.

- No, I was going to say you're right. There are articles that are easier than the 900 page book, which by the way, was never completed. And there's a great deal of mythology about what was the book that he was carrying across the Pyrenees in his leather briefcase.

Q: Was it in fact a new work? Was it the completion of the "Arcades Project"?

A: We will never know, but why it's such a vital project is because yes, he was looking at the arcades that connected Paris and built in the late 19th century, but from that he was able to

develop an extraordinarily wide analytic, which looked at essentially the democratisation of space, which looked at the way in which art changed. I don't really think you can understand the impressionists and what came thereafter without truly absorbing what he had to say in the "Arcades Project". It's fascinating the way he shows how as the city opened up and connected, artists were now forced to confront a broader and more expansive reality than previously was the case. So it's a very, very important project. But I agree with you, I'd rather Google an article than read the 900 pages, which are seriously difficult unless you're having a problem sleeping, in which case I would recommend it.

Q: And then Ruth says, "What is the first picture?"

- Yes, what is the first picture?

- "Next to the Trump demo?"

- Sorry, sorry.

A: That was the picture from Brazil, Bolsonaro was put next to the one demonstration.

Q: Shoshana, "Could we once please have a speaker from the right?" Shoshana, Dennis and I are happy to act and we can interchange, Dennis, let's be left and right.

- I'm happy to do that if you like, right now!

- We'll do that the first 15 minutes, then we'll swap roles!

Q: I think we weren't trying to be left or right. Think we were simply trying to show fidelity. And I think this is the important point. It is an important point here. This is not an attempt to sort of, as it were, push a particular line, we're showing fidelity to a very, very famous thinker. And the the only way you can do this, you lecture honestly, is to try to get into his head and where his head takes us is where the lecture should take us. Otherwise we're actually being intellectually dishonest.

Oh, "Want to mention I suggest his beautifully crafted memoir, 'Berlin Childhood'." Yes, I agree with that, it's fabulous.

Norma, "Marshall McLuhan, 'The Medium is the Message'." That's more your shtick, David, if you want to say anything.

- [Wendy] Dennis and David, won't you please read the questions up so that people can hear them?

- Oh, sorry-

- No read out and then-

- I have tried to, sorry. Norma just writes "Marshall McLuhan, 'The Medium Is the Message'," so I'm not reading.

- Absolutely, and yeah, we can go to that more next week. Exactly what Marshall McLuhan is and in a way is really developing on some of these ideas, you know? And in our times we can look at it specifically for the internet, for the role of social media and the internet, you know, quite specifically.

- So, Wolf, thank you, and also Mayra and Naomi, thank you very much. Sharon says, "There's a wonderful sculpture in Portbou in memoriam to Benjamin by an Israeli sculpture." There is indeed, but I think you showed that clip, David?

- Yeah.

Q: Thank you very much Uta. Judy, "Did Karl Marx make the same point using religion more broadly as the opiate to the masses that you're using aestheticism for?"

A: Personally, I don't think so, but don't know, David, what do you think about that?

- No, I don't think, yeah, I don't think he would call it that, you know, art is the opiate or the aesthetics of the opiate. I think it's precisely what, when Dennis was showing the means and the end in relation to law, Benjamin's obsessed with means and the end. And I think he's looking at how is the aesthetics linked to art can be linked to politics in the 20th century and how those are a means to a political end. And in fact that's how the politics of fascism can be massaged into the majority emotionally connecting. So I think it's a much more, it's a profound connection rather than being, if you like, an escapist approach or an opiate.

- [Wendy] I think you said-

- Harnessing technological forces.

- Emotional-

- Sorry, Wendy?

- [Wendy] The emotional connection.

- Yeah, sure.

- Yeah.

- The emotional connection, exactly, Wendy, thanks.

- Marcia- Marcia, than you very much!

- Yeah, Marcia, thank you, hope you're well in Toronto. Yeah, and William absolutely does. You know, anybody who doesn't know William's brilliant art, please have a look, and his theatre work.

- Thank you Paul!

- Paul, thank you!

- Yeah, so I won't read out, but thank you Omar. Marcel, thank you, I'm not sure what Sharon, "As a caravan juts into the senior buyer."

Q: Then Paul does ask the question, "How do you think that his radio broadcast that he did affected the National Socialists?"

A: “It's an interesting question and I don't really, you know, well, it certainly didn't make them happy and in fact they were quite remarkable broadcasts to be perfectly, frank, Benjamin, but they did come, remember he left by-

- Well, I think to help there, I think it's one of the reasons that he was right at the top of the list when the Nazis-

- Yes, correct, yeah, correct, absolutely right.

And then Heather, "It looks like Benjamin may have taken entertainment philosophy from the ancient Roman emperors that their mass games and violent tendencies presented to their populace."

- They were hell bent not only be cause he was Jewish, but because of his intellectual influence coming through the radio broadcast and his writings, yeah.

Steven says "It reduces the masses to a line of one minute photographs standing before the Mona Lisa, pushing someone ahead of them aside to get their view, but do they ever look at the view again?" good point!

Q: Thank you Elaine, Jarka, "Should we not talk about art, but entertainment?"

A: Indeed, sad to think about art falling into the gutter.

- Well, that gets into low question, Jarka of high art, low art, so-called art for the masses, so-called art for the elite. It gets into that debate of the role of art in a contemporary, highly advanced political economy, which we can perhaps talk about next week as well, art and entertainment.

Q: Melvin raises the question, "Democratisation of art to the masses, the opposite effect that you proposed that it increases the aura of the artwork more rather than diminishing it."

A: But I don't think you've really grasped the point about the aura, but I'll leave that to David.

- Yeah, I think Melvin, it's fascinating the use of the word, he meant the aura was that singular experience. You know, so it's that single experience of looking at the flowers of Monet or whoever. It's that single experience of looking at the statue or the Mona Lisa as opposed to billions of people can look at it, you know, on the internet or in a book or whatever. So we can use the word aura as metaphor, but I think he was using it more literally.

- I think the only, Anonymous, yes, lecture on the Frankfurt School, very happy to do that, they're important.

- Yeah fantastic.

Q: Thank you to Martin. The anonymous attendee, "Weren't the impeachment hearings an example of performances described by David, they satisfied the need of the masses that aren't changing much?"

A: Nice question, nice observation.

- Absolutely Anonymous, I mean, I think all of this, it's the vocabulary of theatre, theatrical performance that has become the vocabulary of politics. You know, we even talk about today, how does the car perform? How's the student performed at university? Is all the vocabulary of theatrical aesthetics come into ordinary everyday experience. And of course into the role of social media, internet, et cetera, just to give one tiny example of the use of the word performance and how often do we say it was so dramatic, you know? The language of theatre has become the vocabulary or the language of mass experience, which changes it as well. I'm not judging it either way, it's just a change.

- And then finally Marcel raises the question about the role of Descartes and his writings.

- Yep.

- Yeah, I can see a link myself.

- Martin says, Martin says, "Have you guys considered a stage performance?"

- Yes, I left that aside, I was too embarrassed!

- I couldn't resist, Dennis, I'm sorry!

- So that's it, Wendy, I think we've covered everything.

- [Wendy] Thanks guys, thank you very, very much!

- Thank you.

- Thank you.

- [Wendy] That was a brilliant presentation.

- Thanks to David, thank you very much.

- Thanks so much, Dennis, thanks, Wendy, Judi.

- Thank you, thanks to Judi, thanks to David, thanks, Wendy.

- All right, see you next week to continue.

- Okay, thank you.

- To be continued.

- Thanks a lot.

- Thank you, ciao, ciao.

- Enjoy the rest of your time today, bye!

- Ciao, thank you.