

The Work of Art in the Age of  
Its Technological Reproducibility,  
and Other Writings  
on Media

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## Dream Kitsch

## GLOSS ON SURREALISM

No one really dreams any longer of the Blue Flower.<sup>1</sup> Whoever awakes as Heinrich von Ofterdingen today must have overslept.<sup>2</sup> The history of the dream remains to be written, and opening up a perspective on this subject would mean decisively overcoming the superstitious belief in natural necessity by means of historical illumination. Dreaming has a share in history. The statistics on dreaming would stretch beyond the pleasures of the anecdotal landscape into the barrenness of a battlefield. Dreams have started wars, and wars, from the very earliest times, have determined the propriety and impropriety—indeed, the range—of dreams.

No longer does the dream reveal a blue horizon. The dream has grown gray. The gray coating of dust on things is its best part. Dreams are now a shortcut to banality. Technology consigns the outer image of things to a long farewell, like banknotes that are bound to lose their value. It is then that the hand retrieves this outer cast in dreams and, even as they are slipping away, makes contact with familiar contours. It catches hold of objects at their most threadbare and timeworn point. This is not always the most delicate point: children do not so much clasp a glass as snatch it up. And which side does a thing turn toward dreams? What point is its most decrepit? It is the side worn through by habit and garnished with cheap maxims. The side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch.

Chattering, the fantasy images of things fall to the ground like leaves from a Leporello picture book, *The Dream*.<sup>3</sup> Maxims shelter under every

leaf: “Ma plus belle maîtresse c’est la paresse,” and “Une médaille vernie pour le plus grand ennui,” and “Dans le corridor il y a quelqu’un qui me veut à la mort.”<sup>4</sup> The Surrealists have composed such lines, and their allies among the artists have copied the picture book. *Répétitions* is the name that Paul Eluard gives to one of his collections of poetry, for whose frontispiece Max Ernst has drawn four small boys. They turn their backs to the reader, to their teacher and his desk as well, and look out over a balustrade where a balloon hangs in the air. A giant pencil rests on its point in the windowsill. The repetition of childhood experience gives us pause: when we were little, there was as yet no agonized protest against the world of our parents. As children in the midst of that world, we showed ourselves superior. When we reach for the banal, we take hold of the good along with it—the good that is there (open your eyes) right before you.

For the sentimentality of our parents, so often distilled, is good for providing the most objective image of our feelings. The long-windedness of their speeches, bitter as gall, has the effect of reducing us to a crimped picture puzzle; the ornament of conversation was full of the most abysmal entanglements. Within is heartfelt sympathy, is love, is kitsch. “Surrealism is called upon to reestablish dialogue in its essential truth. The interlocutors are freed from the obligation to be polite. He who speaks will develop no theses. But in principle, the reply cannot be concerned for the self-respect of the person speaking. For in the mind of the listener, words and images are only a springboard.” Beautiful sentiments from Breton’s *Surrealist Manifesto*. They articulate the formula of the dialogic misunderstanding—which is to say, of what is truly alive in the dialogue. “Misunderstanding” is here another word for the rhythm with which the only true reality forces its way into the conversation. The more effectively a man is able to speak, the more successfully he is misunderstood.

In his *Vague de rêves* [Wave of Dreams], Louis Aragon describes how the mania for dreaming spread over Paris. Young people believed they had come upon one of the secrets of poetry, whereas in fact they did away with poetic composition, as with all the most intensive forces of that period.<sup>5</sup> Saint-Pol-Roux, before going to bed in the early morning, puts up a notice on his door: “Poet at work.”<sup>6</sup>—This all in order to blaze a way into the heart of things abolished or superseded, to decipher the contours of the banal as rebus, to start a concealed William Tell from out of wooded entrails, or to be able to answer the question, “Where is the bride?” Picture puzzles, as schemata of the dreamwork, were long ago discovered by psychoanalysis. The Surrealists, with a similar conviction,

are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things. They seek the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history. The very last, the topmost face on the totem pole, is that of kitsch. It is the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things.

What we used to call art begins at a distance of two meters from the body. But now, in kitsch, the world of things advances on the human being; it yields to his uncertain grasp and ultimately fashions its figures in his interior. The new man bears within himself the very quintessence of the old forms, and what evolves in the confrontation with a particular milieu from the second half of the nineteenth century—in the dreams, as well as the words and images, of certain artists—is a creature who deserves the name of “furnished man.”<sup>7</sup>

Written in 1925; published in *Die neue Rundschau*, January 1927. *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 620–622. Translated by Howard Eiland.

#### Notes

1. The subtitle, “Gloss on Surrealism,” was used as the title of the published article in 1927.
2. *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is the title of an unfinished novel by the German poet Novalis (Friederich von Hardenberg; 1772–1801), first published in 1802. Von Ofterdingen is a medieval poet in search of the mysterious Blue Flower, which bears the face of his unknown beloved.
3. Leporello is Don Giovanni’s servant in Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*. He carries around a catalogue of his master’s conquests, which accordions out to show the many names. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a German publishing house, Leporello Verlag, which produced such pop-out books.
4. “My loveliest mistress is idleness.” “A gold medal for the greatest boredom.” “In the hall, there is someone who has it in for me.”
5. Reference is to the years 1922–1924. *Une vague de rêves* was first published in the fall of 1924; along with Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris* (Paris Peasant; 1926), it inspired Benjamin’s earliest work on the Arcades Project.
6. Saint-Pol-Roux is the pseudonym of Paul Roux (1861–1940), French Symbolist poet.
7. Benjamin’s term here is “der möblierte Mensch.” A variant ending of “Dream Kitsch” in a manuscript copy of the essay reads:  
 “The new man bears within himself the very quintessence of the old forms, and what evolves in the confrontation with a particular milieu from the second half of the nineteenth century—in the dreams, as well as the words and images, of certain artists—is a creature who deserves the name of

‘furnished man’: the body ‘furnished’ [*meubl *] with forms and apparatuses, in the sense that, in French, one speaks of the mind ‘furnished’ [*meubl *] with dreams or with scientific knowledge.”

See Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, p. 1428. The term “der m blierte Mensch” is also a play on “der m blierte Herr” (“the furnished gentleman”), a colloquial German expression that refers to the (male) tenant of a furnished room or apartment and that Benjamin put to use elsewhere in his writings of the late 1920s. Ideas about furniture and furnishing, and about habits of modern dwelling in general, would come to occupy an important place in the Arcades Project.