

Panel 30

Writing, Aesthetics and the Politics of Engagement

From Stereotype to Structure:

Benjamin, Adorno and the Fictionality of the Graphic Novel

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This paper examines the narrative and structural dynamics of the graphic novel in relation to the critiques of mass culture developed by Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Taking as a starting point the apparent aesthetic rupture between mid-century “picture novels” and contemporary graphic novels such as *Maus*, *Fun Home*, and *Unterzakhn*, the paper interrogates how graphic novels negotiate the legacies of “low” culture—serialization, stereotypes, and repetition—through strategies of self-reflexive fictionality. Building on Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of the culture industry, it argues that these works reconfigure the very elements once deemed manipulative or anti-experiential into instruments of formal and political complexity. At the same time, following Benjamin’s notion of the “decline of experience” in modern narrative forms, the paper considers how graphic novels attempt to restore or simulate lost experiential depth not by abandoning mass-cultural forms but by refashioning them. The aim is to demonstrate that graphic novels do not merely elevate comics into literary status but challenge the boundaries of fictionality itself through parodic repetition and medium-specific storytelling.

Biography

Fanke Wang is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the School of International Chinese Studies, East China Normal University, Shanghai China. She has long specialized in Western literary theory and the philosophy of literature, with a particular focus on the works of Walter Benjamin. Wang studied at Beijing Foreign Studies University, the University of Göttingen in Germany, and Fudan University, where she received her Ph.D. in German Studies. Her scholarly contributions include a number of influential essays on Benjamin’s early thought, media theory, and aesthetics, published in top Chinese academic journals such as *Foreign Literature Review*, *Literary Research*, and *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*.

Wang is also a prominent translator of Benjamin’s work into Chinese, including *Radio Benjamin* and *Sonnets*, and has helped introduce Benjamin’s lesser-known writings to broader audiences in China. Her work has garnered several awards, including the Fujian Provincial Social Science Excellence Award and recognition from major public literary institutions. In recent years, she has delivered over 50 invited lectures and public talks at leading universities and cultural venues across China, playing a key role in the dissemination and reinterpretation of Benjamin’s ideas in a Chinese intellectual context.