

Samuel Weber

*on Benjamin's  
'-abilities'*

One of the most important tendencies to emerge in literary studies over the past few decades has been the extension of its techniques – close reading, rhetorical textual analysis, and, more generally, analyzing and interpreting so-called signifying processes – to nonliterary objects and artifacts. The results of this extension have not been one-way. At the same time that techniques of literary analysis have refined the interpretation of nonliterary artifacts, confrontation with nonlinguistic, nondiscursive media has made literary critics aware of the distinctive characteristics of their own

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medium in ways that were not previously available to them. It has also called into question some of the most powerfully entrenched conceptual polarities that have traditionally informed literary studies, and aesthetics more generally: namely, form/content, fiction/reality, author/audience, genre/work.

Much of this development, whose immediate causes can be retraced to the impact of structuralist semiotics in the 1960s, was already at work long before Saussure's notion of linguistic value as differential signification was rediscovered by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Jacques Lacan – to name just a few of those whose writings contributed to a new sense of textuality in general, and of literary textuality in particular.

One of the most prescient of their precursors was Walter Benjamin. Trained in philosophy, literary studies, and art history, Benjamin articulated an approach to the newer media of photography, film, and radio. These, in turn, have exercised an increasing influence upon a variety of fields and practices, including those today ranged under the general rubric of 'cultural studies' and 'media studies.'

For many years I have been reading Benjamin's writing with an eye to understanding just what it was that enabled him, a scholar trained in traditional disciplines, to pass so effectively from an analysis of 'old' media to an interpretation of 'new' media. I have become convinced that part of the secret lies in fact that we must include among the 'old' media not just those that were institutionalized as the objects of academic 'aesthetic' disciplines – such as literature, painting, theater, architecture, and music – but also, and perhaps above all, *space, time, and language*. (To be sure, the latter three were also studied by disciplines, namely, geography, geometry, history, and linguistics, but they were

not instantiated in what might be called 'aesthetic objects' as were the former.)

When traditional media are defined in this way, it becomes clear that they are not simply wiped away or suspended by some radical "epistemological break" – a notion derived from the French historian of science Georges Canguilhem and popularized by Michel Foucault. Rather, they come to be *reconfigured* by the so-called new media. What is 'new' about these media is thus better understood as a recombination than as a *creatio ex nihilo*.

If this conception of the 'new' is retained, then it would have considerable implications for the construction of the 'new' disciplines of 'media studies.' For instance, the study of language, literature, art, philosophy, etc. – rather than being simply superseded by that of television, Internet, film, radio, etc. – would have to be integrated into those disciplines. A major task would then become *selecting* and *organizing* rather than *purifying* the new discipline of all traces of the older, so-called obsolete ones. This would hold true not only for philosophy, as the study of the history of concepts, including those employed in aesthetics, but for other disciplines as well, such as economics and history (including those of technology, science, military strategy, etc.).

From this point of view, the study of Walter Benjamin that I am currently completing involves more than the examination of the work of a single writer and critic, however interesting. For the problems that Benjamin's writing engages and articulates concern an unusual yet exemplary experience of the interplay between old and new media. Benjamin, who was extremely attuned to the problem of *experience* in its relation to media, insisted, from his earliest writings on, that experience could and should not be reduced to a function of

*cognition*, exemplified for him in the Critical Philosophy of Kant. Instead, Benjamin held that experience was a function not just of concepts but also, and above all, of language.

This, in turn, required him to rethink traditional conceptions of language in order to extricate both the theory and the practice of language from what he considered to be the impasse of a certain humanism, which ultimately subordinated language as a vehicle either of *meaning* or of *being* – but in both cases of a problematic and unreflected theology, however 'secularized' its form.

This dual and complementary effort to rethink language, both as theory and as practice, impelled Benjamin to develop an alternative approach that would no longer consider language as either an instrument (of designation, expression, or meaning) or a self-contained *logos* (creating or performing that which it named). The alternative toward which he found himself drawn (although by no means in an entirely consistent or deliberate manner) was that of determining language as a 'medium' – but in a sense that broke with the traditional denotation of the word. For Benjamin, language as medium was not simply an interval or bridge *between* fixed poles or places: subject and object, man and world, God and the universe. Rather, he developed a notion of *linguistic mediality* as a movement of *division* and of *separation* – of what I call 'parting with' as the condition of a *sharing* and *imparting*.

All of this, and more, is condensed in the German word he used, *Mittelbarkeit* – often translated simply as 'communication.' Since Benjamin insisted that we are not to understand language primarily and essentially as a conveyor belt of meanings, this translation is unsatisfactory. A more literal rendition is helpful. When literally rendered in English, the

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German word *says* (although does not obviously *mean*) something like ‘parting’ or ‘partitioning with.’ *Teilen* means to divide; and *mit-* is generally equivalent to ‘with’ (or co-). This suggests that language divides and divests itself in order to impart.

But translating *Mittelbarkeit* as ‘parting with’ brings to the fore something rather curious in the English expression. We normally understand to ‘part with’ as to separate from something, to give it up or relinquish it. But if this is the meaning of the expression, then why or how should it employ the preposition ‘with,’ which usually suggests some kind of ‘togetherness’ – precisely what the ‘parting’ (or even *Teilen*, in the sense of *division*) seems to exclude?

If imparting, ‘communicating,’ is one of language’s essential functions, then this can only happen if the medium can ‘part with’ itself in order to ‘impart.’ In parting *with* itself, language establishes a relation to itself – one precisely of separation, division, alteration. As signifying medium, language only ‘is’ in taking leave of ‘itself.’ That is to say, of its ability to *stay the same over time*, to return to its point of departure, and thus to be self-identical in any given instant.

But this is tantamount to saying that language can never be described or pointed to in the present indicative. As ‘parting with,’ it is always in the process of taking leave of whatever ‘state’ it happens to be in. It is a ‘medium,’ not in occupying a middle ground between two poles or two presences, but rather in *exposing* any present meaning that it seems to articulate as a *potentiality* forever to come – in short, as an ‘-ability.’

It is just this ‘-ability’ – which defines the mediality of the medium, whether language or other – that orients my study of Benjamin. This ‘orientation’ is, however, forever changing, just as the notion

of mediality as ‘parting with’ implies change and alteration. It is therefore appropriate that this ‘-ability’ articulates itself in Benjamin’s writing practice not as a noun, but as a *suffix*. As a suffix, it stamps the noun with the irreducible quality of possibility.

Perhaps this is why Benjamin recurs again and again to this suffix in formulating many of his most decisive concepts. Beginning with ‘impart-ability’ (in German, as we have noted, *Mittelbarkeit*), Benjamin, throughout his writings, develops a series of such ‘-abilities,’ or, in German, *-barkeiten*. These include: *Bestimmbarkeit* (determin-ability), *Kritisier-barkeit* (criticiz-ability), *Übersetz-barkeit* (translat-ability), *Zitier-barkeit* (cit-ability), *Reproduzier-barkeit* (reproduc-ibility), *Erkenn-barkeit* (know-ability). As a suffix, such ‘-abilities’ relativize the substantive, or noun, that they follow, and on which they, literally, *depend*, to which they are *appended*. What is designated as an *-ability* is thus never self-sufficient or self-subsistent, never fully realized or realizable: its reality depends on the future, but on a future in which the reader is inevitably implicated.

To determine mediality as an *-ability* constitutes therefore not just a constative description of a medium, nor even a performance of it, in the sense of its actualization. Rather, it entails an appeal to readers or listeners, who find themselves addressed by this *-ability*, to participate in a process of partitioning that involves a readiness to take leave of the present or, better, to allow what is present to *part with itself* and to make room for something else. As *-ability*, mediality thus always entails the process by which intramediality becomes *intermediality*, opening itself to the advent of other media.

From this perspective, the ‘work of art,’ traditionally understood as the *in-*

*dividual* instantiation of a genre – a ‘novel’ or a ‘tragedy’ – tends to appear as the always *singular* displacement or translation of other media. The “epic theater” of Brecht, for instance, is interpreted by Benjamin as the staging of what he calls – or rather, cites as – “the citability of gesture.” Citability, usually associated with language and in particular with written texts, *parts* with this medium in order to enter into relation *with* ‘gesture,’ involving a bodily movement that points away from where it is situated. Whether or not this movement is *consummated* depends not on itself but on others: audience, readers, or interpreters. Benjamin’s -abilities always involve such an appeal to transformative reinscription on the part of those others who are its destined addressees.

It is no accident that old and new media converge in Benjamin’s discussion of Brecht’s theater. Theater spans the gap between old and new media, between “cult” and “exhibition value,” as Benjamin calls it in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility.” For the great resource of theater, old as well as new, is, according to Benjamin, that of “exposing the present” (*Exponierung des Anwesenden*). And it is such exposure, in which all enclosure becomes unhinged, that marks Benjamin’s theory of media no less than the mediality of his writing, which is always exposing the established sense of the words it uses by turning them inside-out.

This is obviously a very different conception of ‘medium’ and of ‘mediality’ than those that are familiar to many today. But to the extent that they provide an alternative scheme for approaching the instability of representations in the audiovisual media, they will hopefully prove useful for a reconsideration of those media, including the uses to which they are generally put.

William F. Baker

*on the state of  
American television*

It elects presidents. It wins wars. It is both a mirror and an engine of our culture. Television is, undeniably, an extremely influential force in our country. And television viewing has never been more a part of our lives. Last year, Nielsen Media Research reported that during the 2004 – 2005 season, the average U.S. household tuned in for eight hours and eleven minutes per day. This is 2.7 percent higher than the previous season, 12.5 percent higher than ten years ago, and the highest levels since Nielsen Media Research began measuring television viewing in the 1950s.

However, instability, invention, and revision are now at work in every aspect of the medium – from content to viewer-

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