2007 VOl 7 Issue No. 2 — Walter Benjamin and the Virtual

> EDITORIAL

This edition of *Transformations* focuses on the influence Walter Benjamin continues to have on contemporary thought. It seeks to create a dialogue between contemporary scholars, theorists, and writers from a range of disciplines and practices with Benjamin's ideas on politics, art, and representation in the context of a shift from mass to global culture. In this increasingly privately mediated culture, virtually transmitted communicational artifacts are playing an important role in not only shaping the nature of representation, but the nature of being human itself.

Two things prevail in the essays presented in this collection. The first is the intense interest in the work of Benjamin coupled with a desire to re-invest it meaningfully into theories concerning the living relations of each author's world. The second is the diversity of positions, terms of engagement, and interpretations of Benjamin's work the authors herein adopt. Perhaps this second feature ought to have been expected, for just as the virtual dispersion through the media has diluted the power of the producer to determine the meaning of the artifact, so too, a diversity of approaches, interpretations, and applications can be expected to be taken in relation to Benjamin.

One ought not look for uniformity of thought or agreement in this collection of essays, therefore. Taking steps often either already taken or sometimes just foreshadowed by

Benjamin, many of the writers assemble not one, but a multiplicity of ideas that produce a complex theoretical machine which will, of their own nature, resist becoming totalised into a single theme or idea. It follows then that each reader may find (and/or create) a number of themes and ideas running concurrently, connecting some of the ideas suggested by some essays to those suggested by some others. Other concerns emerge only gradually – "between the lines" so to say – as threads establish themselves and grow, apparently independently, while reading essays sequentially. And sometimes one might simply imagine a ghostly figure or mirage that appears suddenly to connect or reflect a conceptual structure or ideational formation suggested elsewhere, perhaps in this collection, but, perhaps also, in some other text.

Such is the nature of, and diversity in, the work of Walter Benjamin (one might add, a diversity reflected here). While this finally intensifies the reader's task of interpreting and translating each author's essay, it also enriches this encounter. Thus while this introduction aims to precise the concerns of this issue and each writer's essay, the job of rendering whole and legible the collection belongs to each reader. Like reading Benjamin, this is a complex task and it requires each reader to relate their own sense of the work of art in a globally mediated culture to that which is transmitted virtually by and in this collection. Perhaps then, and only by translating the thoughts that appear herein into one's own concrete experience, will the hall of mirrors that threatens to become an endlessly mediated virtuality be transformed and a real politics emerge.

Mika Elo's "Elemental Politics" reconsiders Benjamin's thought on photography, language, and politics in the light of the present attempts to re-theorise the image in the age of its digitisation. Elo argues that this transformation ought to be regarded as a secondary development in the photographic image in which digitisation reveals (and revisits) not so much questions latent in photography itself, but rather how digitisation can be regarded as an evolution and translation of the photograph and the form of visual language(s) it has generated. Now, however, with photography's nature becoming more conscious in its secondary development, the questions raised by digital photography serve to highlight the underlying operations of what Benjamin termed "pure language" and the elemental political relations language establishes. For language is the foremost mediation technology, and it is that which enables humans to communicate, and through such communication, establish and alter social bonds and cultural relations.

In "Benjamin, Trauma and the Virtual,"Allen Meek examines how technologically mediated (virtual) traumatic memories can prize open the seal that history creates to conceal the victory of the "present" over the "past." While all transmitted technological mediations are by nature dislocated and dissociated from time and space, and hence virtual, there lurks

beneath the leaky seams of their spatio-temporal dislocation the stories and "traditions of the oppressed." Meek shows that notions of "past" and "present," mediation and reality, are actually cognate terms and, following Benjamin and Deleuze through Bergson and Freud, refrains a dialogical image of "past" and "present" framed in *the actual* and *the virtual*. With this assemblage, Meek argues that "[t]he task" of media theorists is "to seize upon images of . . . traumatic experience and re-mobilise them in the context of potentially liberatory narratives."

Julie Doyle's "Cybersurgery and Surgical (Dis)embodiment" takes Benjamin's analogy of the surgeon and the painter literally to deconstruct medical discourses of the human body. Concluding that the body's fate, under the microscopic eye of the new, non-invasive surgical technologies, has been to become diffused into the technology and that its mediation has now become the body's actual embodiment, Doyle demonstrates how modernist discourses of vision continue to struggle with, and largely overcome, experiental forms of knowledge. In contrast to other writers in this volume, Doyle concludes that the "understanding of embodiment" that remains dominant in social, cultural, and historical discourses is that formed on the basis of the exercise of "power" founded by "masculinist discourses" that privilege vision and mind over the tactile and the physical.

Marita Bullock's "Fossilising the Commodity" considers how postmodernism and capitalism have conjointly reformed modernity's contradictory sense of consciousness of time and history, updating what Baudelaire describes as the eternal and transitory, the mutable and the immutable, into a new-old dynamic. In a paradox that tests the frozen immutability of the discarded object on the one hand, and the permanently unstable fluxus of capitalism's revolutionary devices and inventions on the other, Bullock examines how artist Ricky Swallow's re-working of "recently outdated" commodities can be seen to signify both an increasingly rapid decline of the present into archaeological relicry while simultaneously feigning an on-going mimesis of life in a never ending passage of renewal – fossils of eternally dying life or unceasing living death.

Warwick Mules's "Aura as Productive Loss"begins by fossicking through the architecture of Benjamin's thought. In this substrate, Mules finds hidden in the vanishing signs and marks of the aura the on-going trace of an imaginary origin. In this origin, aura stalks the object/subject world created in and shared by the relationship between artifact and viewer. Mules then re-injects Benjamin and his ideas to again examine and develop an insightful critique of the capitalist phantasmagoria. Mules finally invokes media producers and theorists to reconsider the role of the auratic in "deflecting" the senses and alleviating the craving for origins.

Similarly, but to different effect, Martin Dixon's "The Horror of Disconnection"finds residual aura in the breakdown, or to be more precise, the malfunction, of technology. In this sonically jarring moment, a latent conflict in the human psyche, notably the struggle between the creative and the destructive in the libidinal life-death force, is again released. Yet at the instant that technical failure blurs the line between animate and inanimate objects, life itself can still sometimes be heard, squealing pitilessly amidst the deranged and unmusicated distortions of its technological disruption. Then out of the stillness of the now silenced wreckage comes the ego's revitalising creative force, that dark and sometimes antisocial impulsewhich threatens to re-arrange everything, even if it means its own destruction. Dixon's essay takes its last unaided breath while shaking hands with Benjamin before following Virilio and technology into the diving bell bound for the abyss.

Amresh Sinha's "Politicizing Art"dredges through Benjamin's *oeuvre*, focusing on Benjamin's political commitment to antagonise fascists' attempts to control life by aestheticising politics through the return of art to the service of ritual and tradition. Following Benjamin, Sinha finds redemption for technology only when directed at the discarded, the uselessness of art, and at the leisurely, unemployable, and un-commodified aspects of life that art can sometimes represent. Finding greatest empathy, like Benjamin, in the reception of art, rather than its production, Sinha sees (a lost?!) opportunity in the repetitive mimesis between audience and mediation, a mimesis that, in its very essence, carries the residual of its own conclusion.

Catherine Russell's "Dialectical Film Criticism" also dredges through the "convolutes" of Benjamin's thought and considers concepts such as the dialectical image, the collector, and the quotation to situate his work within contemporary cultural as well as film discourses. Russell then proposes her own critical method of "dialectical film criticism" which she implements in a number of analyses of films by the Japanese director Naruse Mikio as well as Ivy Meeropol's *Heir To an Execution: A Granddaughter's Story* (2004) and Christoph Giradet and Matthias Müller's *Kristall*.

Kristen Daly's "The Dissipating Aura of Cinema"takes another perspective on the relationship between critic and auteur, artist and audience, textual objects and those who encounter them, and argues that Benjamin's analysis of cinema was not fully realised until films became digitised. Pre-empting arguments introduced by later writers, Daly argues that the dissipating aura of the original has forever altered power relations between viewers and producers. In what Roland Barthes termed the "birth of the reader," Daly finds new opportunities for whoever watches films, not only in extending their meaning as interpreters, but now too, in creatively interacting with them, thus forever "shattering" the role of who determines the

meaning of art. Daly's pivotal essay raises core questions posed by the onset of the digital era.

Simon Lindgren takes up the challenge of critically analysing the dawning digital era and explores the new communities created through *YouTube* and *flickr* technologies. Seeing the user of these techniques as contemporary *flâneurs* and *flâneusen*, Lindgren sees evolutions taking place – particularly in developments of participatory culture – that approximate earlier formations of modernity found in the Paris arcades. Adapting his understanding of the *flâneur* with an amended understanding of the psychoanalytical notion of ego-representation and the "mirror" phase, Lindgren finally proposes a new form of self-reflexivity based on the repeated reproduction of "self" in the *YouTube* and *flickr* communities.

Shifting to an art critic's perspective, Daniel Palmer asks how present day art critics might attain or maintain the *critical distance* needed for judgment in the face of their immersion into contemporary virtual art. With the aid of Benjamin and Adorno, Palmer revisits art historical and art critical debates concerning aesthetics and contemplation and returns with an idea of *Contemplative Immersion.* In a move that could converge – even if only tangentially with Deleuze – Palmer's hybrid concept of contemplation places the body of the critic – who is no longer the mouthpiece of a privileged and rarefied community but rather the assertive "immanent" body of the everyday net-art observer – at the centre of the critical process.

A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul's "Tillers of the Soil/Travelling Journeymen"explores the re-coordination of the transposition, translation, and commodification of a number of village dwellings from around the world, and the stories such buildings yield in a rural setting south-east of Berlin. In the midst of this Northern temperate simulation of the tropics, Engels-Schwarzpaul investigates the prospect of a critical politics emerging from what might be, at first sight, regarded as a straightforward reversal of colonial relations between the European voyeur self and the pacified exotic other.

Finally, John Grech's "Paradise Regained?"imagines what a future community guided by Benjamin's critical insights might be like. In identifying that community, Grech turns to anthropologist Pierre Clastres and the social structures of the un-mediated political communities of South America. By considering how Indian societies enable people to pursue their interests without fear of violence or coercion, Grech suggests that the individuals making up a global community are paramount, over and above law and convention and other normative codes (including the grammars of language) that seek to govern a communicative society. Henceforth, individuals, in this futuristic society, retain the right to mediate and transform the social bonds and cultural relations they share with others, just as

each individual retains the right to use whatever means they, as autonomous independent actors, determine are appropriate to their needs.

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John Grech
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