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Prognosis of the Unpredictable: Walter Benjamin's Persistent Political Relevance for Media Studies

> *A Brechtian maxim: take your cue not from the good old things, but from the bad new ones.*
>
> — Walter Benjamin, Diary 1938

My topic is the theoretical implications of the materiality of media. The discussion is thus largely concerned with the categories of storage and transmission, though it treats them in an abstract and critical way. I won't be examining particular examples of mediation but rather speculating upon the fact that transmission implies storage, or to put it another way, that symbolic mediation involves a moment of inscription, and that that inscription itself is a material object in the world, prey to all the unpredictable vicissitudes of time. This is perhaps most apparent when things go wrong. Rather notoriously, Walter Benjamin was said to have been carrying a briefcase of his most valuable final texts when he fled from the Nazis in 1940. His attempted escape over the Pyrenees ended in suicide, and the briefcase comes down to us only as a rumor. Nor does digital technology eliminate these perils. A friend told me recently that while researching in a European university archive she saw a dusty Atari 800 computer that contained in digital form the posthumous papers of a German intellectual. No doubt in leaving his writings behind in this way the author imagined he had ensured their survival into a predictably digital future, but now, a mere thirty years after his death, they had become for all intents and purposes inaccessible, since no one working at the archive knew any longer how to operate the obsolete technology that stored them.

2. These hazards are well-recognized, of course, but I would like to argue that even in happier cases in which the inscriptions reach posterity, that material moment retains a measure of the unpredictability that is so evident in these catastrophic instances. The processes of historical transmission are not exhausted by the transfer of content from the past through the present to the future. The material inscription through which history is preserved harbors an excess and a vulnerability in the very materiality of its occasion. This is where the inhuman time of history touches the text. Within and against that time the intermittent human efforts to reactivate the inscription communicate across its durable surface, but they do not exhaust that surface. Inscription as such carries along the permanent possibility of its absolute renewal with respect to our common future, its emergence as an utterly new text.

3. What makes a text new? This is our ultimate question, but I propose to begin exploring it through its contrary, what makes a text old? It is not the mere passage of time, for to grow old a text must be remembered. A text grows old in the communities that continue to read it, and what ages – either waxing or waning – is its authority over their memories. Beneath the memory of the text and outside of the authority it transmits lies the preserved inscription itself. What does it mean to remember a text and at the same time to preserve it? That these are not the same, and that preservation obeys what we might call the destructive logic of the archive in a necessary contest with collective memory, this is what I hope to explicate by considering a particular example of textual remembering, the appropriation of Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction" by the discourse of media studies.

4. The text was composed in Paris by a stateless German Jew at a particularly grim moment in European history. We recall the essay: nineteen dense aphoristic sections through which Benjamin marshals a discontinuous multitude of descriptive frameworks round what he sees as a contemporary mutation in the relation of cultural artifacts to the practices that give them meaning. This mutation can be perceived in the work of art in its historical exposure to technological reproduction, and in extended considerations of the photographic and the cinematic image Benjamin discerns as a consequence of this historical mutation what he calls "the decay of the aura" of the work of art and the rise of a new "reception in distraction." This paraphrase isn't meant to do much more than call the essay (if that's what it is) to mind; many of its formulations, decay of the aura prominently among them, are familiar to all serious students of media.

5. The case is singular, but its choice is not gratuitous. Media studies occupies a privileged place in the contemporary disciplinary structure of public knowledge. An examination of the integration of this particular essay into this particular disciplinary situation, even when attending to the distortions in Benjamin's position this integration must perform, confirms the uniquely relevant relation in which media studies finds itself not just to traditions of academic inquiry but to the texture of everyday life. That there are unique responsibilities that follow from that privilege is what I hope to show. So it is not in order to introduce yet another reading of Benjamin's essay into disciplined discourse but to consider what makes this essay old for media studies that we pause for a moment at the threshold of its disciplinary appropriation, what we sometimes also call, perhaps too glibly, its canonization. Though canonization itself is a contentious – and in its original religious meaning quite brutal – process, the threshold that that process attempts

to negotiate appears in itself only in the gesture of suspending judgment. So it is by no means to contest Benjamin's appropriation by academic discourse that we pause at its possibility and suspend any judgment that would involve us irrevocably in the very disputes that constitute that disciplined appropriation. This suspension and the reflections it occasions all take place "beyond good and evil," as Nietzsche would say. Rather, the question concerns what might be called the conditions of possibility of that appropriation as they appear in Benjamin's text. For Benjamin's discussion of the artwork in the age of its mechanical reproduction does not leave its own reception implicit but is quite explicit about how it is to be received. He closes the introductory section of the artwork essay with these words: "In what follows, the concepts which are introduced into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art."[1]

6. Benjamin wrote his essay in 1936. Explicitly fascist aesthetic concepts were commonly encountered then, and Benjamin will close his analysis by citing a particularly blood-curdling example from Marinetti. Yet his initial self-positioning here does not say his concepts contrast with fascist concepts alone but with those aesthetic concepts that are *of use* to fascism. Whatever it might mean for a concept to be of use to fascism, it is clear that the stakes in the reception of this essay as Benjamin understands them are very high. It is important to bear in mind that the essay was written at a moment of historical crisis, when perspectives are forced to lengthen dramatically. We find ourselves now at another moment of historical crisis, in which the entire future is visibly at stake, though I'm not sure we are as ready as Benjamin was to exploit it theoretically. This is the ultimate

question behind my considerations: how can Benjamin's inscription be transmitted from that totalitarian crisis to this globalization crisis? And what role does its institutionalized reception by media studies play in preserving or forgetting this broader critical potential?

7. Media studies is a tradition of disciplined reading. As transmitted through traditions of reading, the content of a text appears to a process of continuous concentration through the course of its sentences, their gathering into a *Geistesgegenwart* or presence of mind. The authority this content claims is its demand to be repeated in a later concentration that recognizes the appropriateness of the selection of this text from rival occasions for alternative concentrations. At this primal level, what unifies the historically diverse concentrations on the "same" text is not the positive identity of different presences of mind but their common allegiance to this original selection from among other texts that might have occasioned other concentrations. Their negative identity in a common renunciation of alternatives, before any positive identity of durable content within the concentrated experiences occasioned by the text, is the moment in historical transmission where the material dimension of the text can be seen to intrude.

8. For the actual initial selection of the text is simply its material preservation, and the texts that that primal selection rejects do not populate the archive but dissolve into the utter silence of the irretrievable past into which all matter is condemned eventually to fall. The reading that canonizes the text for posterity has always followed upon that primal selection whose results enable it to occur. The authority of the first selection – what we might call the inhuman authority of history – cannot itself be transfigured into an exemplary concentration on the text, a presence of mind, but is exposed to the destructiveness of time. All subsequent selections from among the texts surviving this

initial selection rest in concentrations that can only *claim* to speak with an authority equal to that of history. In justifying the selection of this text for preservation over against others that might be preserved, canonization seconds the primal selection through which history consigned the mass of human expression to oblivion.

9. The gravity of the responsibility bestowed by this primal selection motivates the archive, which tempers the irrevocability of subsequent selections with a preservational imperative oriented toward the impermanent material document that occasions the concentrated experiences canonization organizes. As a practical matter the archive follows from canonization, as the material corollary to the judgment by an authoritative reading that certain writings are worth preserving. And yet the archive does not preserve that reading as content but the material of its occasion. It shelters the inscription from the vicissitudes of history and in so doing acknowledges our persistent exposure to history's inhuman force. This acknowledgement is the destructive force of the archive. The archive as a theoretical locale is dedicated to this disruptive possibility of destructive tradition and not to any preservation of authorial sovereignty. Benjamin's thought never loses touch with this undisciplined dimension of the archive. Fleeing at the end toward the Spanish border he left behind in the Bibliothèque nationale a final shattered monument to that sensibility in the "convolutes" of citations and reflections that are what remain of the *Arcades Project*. The nature of that archival dimension to Benjamin's theoretical imagination, and above all its contrast with a sentimental preservation of mementos that characterizes bourgeois sensibility, can be read in an essay from 1931: the "Talk about Collecting," "I Unpack my Library."

10. What Benjamin is calling a library in the "talk" is in fact an archive. It is, Benjamin says, the particular "*copies of books*," – the italics are his – and not their content in a purely textual sense that are at stake in such a collection. The first method of procuring books that Benjamin proposes – humorously to be sure, but no less revealingly from a theoretical point of view – is writing them oneself. Such a library would in fact be nothing else than the basic form of the modern literary archive: the individual's posthumous papers. But the essay goes on to depict an archive emancipated from the intentional author-function and organized instead with reference to a far more disruptive principle of historical discontinuity. The singular consciousness, the "I" of Benjamin's title, is constituted neither at the source of the archived work as author nor at the focus of its address as reader but hovers in proximity to the outside of the unread page. Indeed, the genuine collector can be identified by the fact that he does not read the books he gathers; "the nonreading of books … [is] characteristic of collectors" (SW 2 488; GS 4 390).

11. What the archive reveals to Benjamin is the very plurality of the modes of acquisition populating it, from borrowed volumes not returned to the unpredictable contingencies of particular auctions, to the lucky find in the used book stall. The inhuman contingency of history dislodges each book from its assigned position in the cultural hierarchy and returns it to the pure potential inherent in its original unread haecceity. A sensitivity to just this discontinuity, "how books cross the threshold of a collection" (SW 2 487; GS 4 390) is what Benjamin means by collecting. "The true, and quite misrecognized passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive" (GS 3 216) Benjamin noted elsewhere. However harmless the conversational intimacy of the talk on collecting may seem, the process that underlies it – removing objects from their orderly

arrangement in boxes into "the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with wood dust, the floor covered with torn paper" (SW 2 486; GS 4 388), is a fundamentally destructive one. The unread materiality of the inscription is ripped from its congruence with the normative traditions of reading and its pristine latency renewed in light of its accidental material history.

12. It is this destructive principle of the archive that the canonization of a text risks forgetting. A well-regarded effort in contemporary media studies can offer us an example of the disciplined appropriation of Benjamin's text as canonical content. In *Remediation: Understanding New Media* by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, Benjamin, along with Marshall McLuhan, is presented as an authoritative ancestor of the theory the book is demonstrating. That theory – the remediation of the book's title – is an explanatory schema that aims to render the concept of medium dynamic, in order to comprehend the historical present as indexed by an irreducible plurality of media. The index of contemporary diversity is the "new" in the book's subtitle – not an extrinsic historical reference that would tie the analysis to the historical context of its date of publication: the liminal year 1999, but an intrinsic correlate to its own processes of theoretical comprehension. The conceptualization that Bolter and Grusin's book illustrates is oriented toward a moment of cultural newness inscribed in the changing historical now. The dynamism of remediation as a theoretical operation is its putative exposure to the dynamic now-time of history in its everydayness. Historized in this way, the notion of medium unfolds between two limiting tendencies: a logic of immediacy that is always attempting to push beyond media toward an eventual exterior, and a countervailing logic of hypermediacy that is always attempting to multiply and foreground instances of

mediation. Between these contradictory fascinations – with an unmediated reality on the one hand and an excessively mediated environment on the other – a generalized experience of mediation is evoked as the condition of analysis.

13. The process of understanding the "new" to which the subtitle of *Remediation* calls us is a continual assimilation of it to the old. We frequently find the authors performing this assimilating gesture: "Again this is not new. For hundreds of years, the remediation of reality has been built into our technologies of representation."[2] And their book concludes with the same neutralization of the new: "Our one prediction is that any future media will also define their cultural meaning with reference to established technologies. … The true novelty would be a new medium that did not refer for its meaning to other media at all. For our culture, such mediation without remediation seems to be impossible" (270-1). The efforts to find historical antecedents both for the deployments of technological media in the everyday and for the theoretical reflections upon these deployments in the intellectual tradition are the central tasks of the exposition, though in fact these two genealogies are only problematically related. This hostility to the unprecedented, I think, is not simply theoretical prudence but the high price media studies pays for its disciplinary authority over the everyday.

14. "Remediation is not replication or mechanical reproduction; however, we cannot discuss its social and political dimensions without pausing to reflect on Walter Benjamin's influential essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'" (73). Bolter and Grusin introduce Benjamin as a detour. Before remediation can be exercised as a conceptualizing procedure it must calibrate itself against this prior theoretical example, and this despite the difference between remediation and mechanical

reproduction. The three page paraphrase that follows judiciously skirts any ultimate judgment on Benjamin's theory. Only in the final summary do the authors venture to develop the contrast between mechanical reproduction and their concept of remediation. "Remediation," they conclude, "does not destroy the aura of a work of art; instead it always refashions that aura in another media form" (75).

15. This neat segregation behind the term "media form" of the two notions, destruction and refashioning, whose intimate relation is the irreducible point of Benjamin's investigation could hardly be called a theoretical response to that position. Subsuming Benjamin's decaying aura into a perennial condition of mediated communication, persistently self-identical through its various imbrications in diverse technological media, does not refute but foreclose Benjamin's reconception of a non-auratic art as a permeating apparatus. To reduce an aura Benjamin takes to have oriented the entire archaic, ritualized relation of man to his superhuman environment with the much more recent fascination of aesthetic content is to offer as explanation precisely what Benjamin thinks needs explaining.

16. For Benjamin this aesthetic fascination is the last refuge of an aura whose decay has already exposed the sacred totem and the holy relic to the pitiless light of the profane everyday, and disrupted the practices they organized. In photography and film that vestigial auratic authority surrenders its hold on aesthetics. The reproducible artwork displays a technical orientation in which it is reduced to its gestural occasion, and its spatial and temporal relations to the everyday experience of the masses that encounter it refunctioned. The artwork fashioned for mechanical reproduction presents the apparatus of art not in the traditional aesthetic form of an isolated concentration on a fascinating

object but in the collective habits its mass audience manifests in distraction. As such, the apparatus revealed by the artwork has none of the authority that attended its auratic predecessor. Authorities contend for it. Ultimately that contest is between those who would subordinate the apparatus to existing collective authority and those who discern in it an inextinguishable challenge to that authority. In the absence of authority that the apparatus reveals, the possibility of an insurrectionary innovation survives.

17. The apparatus in aesthetic theory is the counterpart to the archive in the system of transmission. Its obfuscation by a de-historicized simplification of Benjamin's concept of "aura" has dire consequences for the vision of history Bolter and Grusin's theory implicitly endorses. Their interpretation of Benjamin serves a larger theme the authors take his essay to exemplify. That theme is "technological determinism," a critical term they borrow from Raymond Williams. Williams had defined it thus:

> [Technological determinism] is an immensely powerful and now largely orthodox view of the nature of social change. New technologies are discovered, by an essentially internal process of research and development, which then sets the conditions for social change and progress. Progress, in particular, is the history of these inventions, which 'created the modern world'. The effects of the technologies, whether direct or indirect, foreseen or unforeseen, are as it were the rest of history. The steam engine, the automobile, television, the atomic bomb, have *made* modern man and the modern condition.[3]

What irritates Williams so much about this theoretical attitude is its abrogation of human historical initiative. An explanatory perspective on the present that locates the

determining instance in the independent development of technological innovation on the scale of human society thereby monopolizes the possibility of the new. “If the medium – whether print or television – is the cause, all other causes, all that men ordinarily see as history, are at once reduced to effects” (121). Human critical understanding in particular can no longer interfere with this historical process, but can at best accommodate itself to an independently ever-new technological environment.

18. Bolter and Grusin do not directly accuse Benjamin of this theoretical error, conceding merely that his essay “has often been read as an expression of technological determinism” (75). Though technology is intimately related to the notion of a communicative medium, not least through their common status as human means, and though technological developments and innovations, most centrally the advent of digital recording and computational devices, provide Bolter and Grusin with the most theoretically resonant occasions for the remediation of new media, they nowhere address the concept of technology and its relation to history directly. The danger of “technological determinism” to the theory of media survives in their account not as an articulated position but as a recurrent salutary caution against surrendering comprehensible human historical development too far to the automatic processes of technological advancement. Just as for Williams, the central example of a theory that succumbs to this temptation is the thought of Marshall McLuhan, not Benjamin. And yet even if Bolter and Grusin do not pursue it, the question concerning technology and its place in history does arise for Benjamin. And of course Williams is quite right about what is at stake in the question: “all that men ordinarily see as history,” and in particular the human initiatives that might redeem it. To what extent does Benjamin’s theoretical

sensitivity to the unsettling implications of inscription's materiality expose him to such a theoretical abdication?

19. In German the last two words of Benjamin's title "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction" are "technische Reproduzierbarkeit," which might be translated "technological reproducibility." Indeed the new *Selected Writings* does amend the translation in this way, despite the particularly strong philological legitimacy of Harry Zohn's older version. Benjamin wrote the essay in German, but it was first published in another language he knew well, French, in a translation that he and the young Pierre Klossowski produced together. There its title is "L'œuvre d'art à l'époque de sa reproduction mécanisée." The French word "technologique" was available to them, but for whatever reason they chose not to use it. By assimilating technology to mechanism, the translation loses an operative difference that will be crucial, for instance, for McLuhan. McLuhan's distinction in *Understanding Media* between mechanical and electrical technology undergirds his entire analysis, for it is only through the extension of perceptually immediate causality provided by electricity that the historically disorienting effects of technological mediation emerge into the – artificial – light.

20. For the purposes of his own analysis Benjamin saw no significant distinction at work between Enlightenment mechanism and modern technology. His essay in German doesn't use the word "technologisch," or mention "Technologie." "Technisch," the word Benjamin does use, can mean "technological" but more commonly means "technical," with overtones of "technique," and preserves a clear echo of the Greek word for art per se: *techne*. Since what is crucial to Benjamin about the techniques of reproduction in which he is interested is that they subordinate human intention to inhuman causality

without thereby dissolving human meaning, the particular logics inherent in those various techniques are a derivative concern. Benjamin is not interested in the differences between mechanical, electrical and digital technologies, but is thinking on grander historical scales, and indeed at times on the scale of human history itself. Strictly speaking, the "age of technical reproducibility" is not a discrete phase in our historical development – the period inaugurated by photography or cinema – but appears to theory as the realignment of its present moment in history with the whole of its traditional heritage. This realignment is occasioned by technological change but it cannot be reduced to an effect on the order of the material effects technological processes exploit. Indeed to the extent that technology is understood as precluding human initiative, the potential realignment between the present and the past that technical reproduction illuminates is dedicated to rescuing the possibility of that explicitly political initiative in the most radical way possible.

21. Even in Williams, the phrase "technological determinism" labels less a theoretical shortcoming elsewhere than his own conceptual impasse. "All that men ordinarily see as history" is for Williams already the domain of recognizably human actions and purposes, over against a non-teleological nature accessible to quantitative science. But technology as a concept refuses to respect this division between the intentionally human and the automatically natural. As the realization of human intentions in extended causal systems, technology as an aspect of history confounds the distinction between a domain of human spontaneity and a domain of necessary physical laws. What hides behind the simplification of technological determinism is the far more vexing problem of the inhumanity of history itself, its accidents and failures with their irrevocable consequences

that stymie recognizable human purposes. Where human purpose has no jurisdiction Williams sees the blind mechanisms of natural cause. For Benjamin, not nature but the past itself evades human purposes, and his entire effort is bent toward denying not simply technological determinism but determinism *tout court*, any theoretical appropriation of the irremediable results of history that would render a determined future inevitable.

22. In this, despite the vast theoretical differences between them, Benjamin does indeed anticipate McLuhan. It would be a mistake to assume that McLuhan's optimism is evidence of a naïve idiosyncrasy. The rhetorical ductus of annunciation into which his prose so frequently turns is a condition of his articulation and cannot be reduced to an intermittent or disposable theoretical shortcoming. The perspective to which McLuhan gives voice requires for its accurate perception this welcoming openness to what is new in the contemporary. In this McLuhan's *Understanding Media* is the inverted complement of its own antecedent from the dawn of the 20th century, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*. That dark examination of the corruption introduced into rational cooperation by an experience consistently arrested by and distorted through the means it uses to achieve its ends, a corruption that dissolves the moral standard of material efficiency into the invidious imperatives of symbolic competitions entirely divorced from any totalizing perspective, is the stern counterpoint to McLuhan's cheery acceptance of the consequences of proliferating mediation. The optimistic tone is the index at the rhetorical level of the individual hedonism animating McLuhan's discourse at the theoretical level, and from the perspective of their common analysis of cultural mediation, that hedonism replaces the standard of material efficiency governing Veblen's denunciations. That this is ultimately a matter of rhetorical strategy and not theoretical

cogency is the consequence of the fact that both of these standards, the efficient achievement of material ends and the individual realization of gratifying potentials, respond to the same loss of a secure access to a totalizing theoretical perspective on culture.

23. The disappearance of the cohesive self-evidence provided by an ultimate consensus on life and its purposes is the common historical condition of perceiving mediation *per se*, abstracted from the substance of its ends, as a historical problem. Veblen's commitment to material efficiency as a moral standard is not the result of a dour psychological demeanor but results from his theoretical positivism. In a world whose truth can only be located in observable causal connections, an action can only be objectively evaluated in quantitative terms, as the reduction of those connections with respect to the realization of the causal conditions for the repetition of that action. Against this, McLuhan's hedonism reacts against the strictures not merely of fading puritan ascesis but of positivist scientific nihilism.

24. What kind of a theoretical error is "technological determinism"? The possibility of localizing technology as the determining instance accounting for observed (psychological or social) phenomena would seem to afflict those theories that aspire to *explain* those phenomena. We have shown why we do not feel Benjamin has left us with that kind of explanatory writing. But McLuhan must bear the weight of Bolter and Grusin's rejection of technological determinism, so it is reasonable to wonder if his theory harbors that aspiration either. His book is titled *Understanding Media*; to what extent is that a matter of explaining media, or of explaining their consequences elsewhere? What indeed does McLuhan mean by "understanding"? His two prefaces do

not leave that question unaddressed. He does not, it is true, provide a direct definition of the term, but while introducing his book he does raise specifically the question of knowing. "Rapidly," he begins, "we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media."[4] Already these lines display McLuhan's characteristic rhetorical ductus: enthusiastic anticipation. The speculative horizon of that anticipation is delineated by a "creative process of knowing" a "simulation of consciousness" on the scale of human society itself.

25. This process of knowing that will soon operate at a scale beyond individual consciousness is not itself a piece of knowledge, a content, for consciousness today. Contemporary consciousness cannot yet accommodate the content that such a creative process of social knowing will produce. This current deficit is what lends urgency to conscious understanding. "The need to understand the effects of the extensions of man becomes more urgent by the hour" (6) not because of the content of the future but because of the imminence of this hyperconscious process that will render understanding obsolete. We may imagine the coming "creative process of knowing" will still in some sense be a mode of explanation, producing the hows and whys of whats and whens. But it is not those hypothetical explanations, which can only contrast with what we usually mean by the term, it is the unprecedented and therefore alien scale of the simulation of consciousness in which they will be conducted that contemporary understanding strives urgently to anticipate. Understanding for McLuhan gathers the present into its purview only with respect to the imminent arrival of this greater knowing, to which it does not

relate as explanation, but in whose advent it is already implicated. We must recognize the real character of McLuhan's rhetorical ductus of enthusiastic anticipation. *Understanding Media* is an apocalyptic, not a utopian, project.

26. Thus understanding media as McLuhan conceives them must initially contrast itself with other modes of knowledge that lack this anticipatory relation, that reduce the apocalyptic prognosis to dispassionate comprehension. The surgeon, for instance, "who would become quite helpless if he were to become humanly involved in his operation," displays a way of knowing incompatible with the understanding McLuhan advocates. Already the individual detachment of the scientific gaze has been overwhelmed by this promise of the future, and "it is no longer possible to adopt the aloof and dissociated role of the literate Westerner" (6). Understanding may deploy localized explanations as it inquires into the current consequences of what it recognizes as media, but the historical situation in which it finds itself precludes reducing understanding to those conscious explanations. Rather, understanding hosts the volatile conjunction of a modality of "no longer" and a modality of "not yet." These intersecting temporal modalities disrupt the orderly formal contrast in the present between past and future, the neutrality of time. "No longer" intrudes into the substantive present as the obsolete, provoking it to render up giddy projections of the "not yet." The force of this conjunction precipitates from abstract time a temporally inconsistent present moment in history inaccessible to neutral comprehension and beholden to an ultimate revelation by "a faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all beings" (7).

27. The theories propounded by Veblen, McLuhan and Benjamin encounter the *quotidian* as the index of a contemporary environment that in principle evades

comprehension. What appear to participants in the quotidian are the localized means to provisional ends. The theoretical crisis to which these writers are reacting emerges from the failure of these quotidian perspectives to integrate themselves into an encompassing perspective that would realize the consensual purposes organizing society as a whole. For Benjamin, the effort to reestablish an encompassing theoretical perspective on the quotidian at the theoretical level is futile – the now-time is inherently riven and unstable, connected in fact to the past and future through countless insensible similarities or transfers of force. The rhetorical excesses of Veblen and McLuhan, and in particular the fluidity of historical scales that Veblen's "barbarism" and McLuhan's "obsolescence" introduce into their descriptions of the everyday, register inadvertently this theoretical impossibility, and so remain integral to the critical value of their books. For the effort to galvanize in the present an impossible cultural totality is ultimately not a theoretical but a political project: it is the project of fascism.

28. This is, of course, a very broad and not particularly useful definition of fascism, if by useful we mean effective in identifying the characteristic features of a political movement. The charge seems hyperbolic at best and scurrilous at worst. If by virtue of their commitment to an ultimately totalizing reappropriation of the present Bolter and Grusin, and by extension media studies, are complicit with fascism, then who among us who thinks about society is not? But before we reject the term as overheated, we should recall that inadvertent complicity is not intentional collaboration; it is not our private political moralities at stake but the unpredictable future of the world. When he introduces the notion of fascism in the artwork essay, Benjamin is not discussing political movements or agents but concepts. "In what follows, the concepts which are introduced

into the theory of art differ from those now current in that they are completely useless for the purposes of fascism. On the other hand, they are useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art [*Kunstpolitik*]" (SW 3 102).

29. As we mentioned at the outset, this is something other than the claim that his concepts are not explicitly celebratory of fascism. But what might it mean for a concept to be "useless for the purposes of fascism"? How can one anticipate the political use to which a theoretical concept might be put? We need only recognize that a *critique* of fascism could hardly do without its most questionable concepts – people, leader, blood, rank and all the rest – if only as objects of denunciation and debunking. And the same goes, mutatis mutandis, for a fascist deployment of conceptual content. However thoroughly we anchor our concepts in anti-fascist connotation, to the extent that they are concepts and not just words they are objective means, and the political use to which they may be put depends on something else entirely: the intentions of the person using them. The only way to ensure that a concept is useless for the purposes of fascism is to render it in some sense useless for any definite purpose. And yet Benjamin goes on to assert that the concepts he is introducing do have a use: they are useful for formulating revolutionary demands in the politics of art. The contrast between his concepts and received aesthetic notions reduces to the contrast between realizing purposes and formulating demands in this milieu.

30. *Kunstpolitik*: this is Benjamin's term, and though the translation "politics of art" isn't wrong, the German compound harbors an ambiguity that the English phrase loses. The politics of art implies that art exists as a separate domain within which political interests, strategies, alliances can be discerned. It subsumes politics into aesthetics. In

German this subsumption might be rendered more directly as "*Politik der Kunst*," and this meaning is certainly present in Benjamin's term. But "art-politics," to render the word for the moment in clumsy literality, can be read as well in a contrary way, as the subsumption of aesthetics into politics. The reversal strips art of its self-evidence as a domain of human endeavor, ceding that self-evidence to politics, and then positions aesthetics itself as a political strategy: politics *as* aesthetics. That this meaning, too, is present in Benjamin's term is apparent when we recall the slogan with which the essay concludes: "Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art" (SW 3 122). Aesthetics itself is of use to fascism, and as long as our concepts remain entirely beholden to the play of mediation and immediacy that defines the aesthetic problem, a potential complicity will reside within them. The communism Benjamin invokes at the close, before being any particular ideology or program, is the revolutionary demand that interrupts the astheticization of politics.

31. What is fascism for Benjamin? It is not a political program, nor is it a political party. The criminal movement that is devastating his immediate social environment is for Benjamin the contemporary manifestation of a profound reaction to the inhuman power of history. A 1938 diary entry records a conversation with Brecht that lets us sense that power:

> Brecht, standing before me in the grass, spoke with rare forcefulness: "In the struggle against them, it is vital that nothing be overlooked. They don't think small. They plan thirty thousand years ahead. Horrendous things. Horrendous crimes. They will stop at nothing. They will attack anything. Every cell convulses under their blows. So we mustn't forget a single one.

> They distort the child in the womb. We can under no circumstances forget the children." While he was talking, I felt moved by a power [*Gewalt*] that was the equal of that of fascism – one that is no less deeply rooted in the depths of history than fascism's power. It was a very strange feeling, wholly new to me. (SW 3 340; GS 6 539)

32. What Brecht evokes as the intentions of a political clique is a perception of the full power of human historical expectation ("thirty thousand years") concentrated as violence on the intimate elements ("cells") of everyday experience, a force that distorts, bends, warps, *verkrümmt* the unpredictability of the human future, the child in the womb. Benjamin responds to this denunciation emotionally, sensing in himself not the power that is denounced but a countervailing power that operates on that same scale but emerges from the past to meet the criminal threat of fascism. Benjamin uses the term *Gewalt*, which points behind the intentional organization implicit in our English word power toward the brute substantiality of its occasion in the world. *Gewalt* is power, force, violence, the stuff in which authorities are manifested. The authorities that contend for power here are aligned against the image of the present as the child in the womb. Fascism asserts its implacable claim over the unpredictable potential in the present by occupying the horizon of the future. Against this, Benjamin experiences a corresponding power that would reclaim the future in the name of an alternative history that is as authoritative as that of fascism, as deeply rooted in our primal origins. That feeling announces itself as strange and unprecedented; surely not because Benjamin by 1938 held any illusions about the nature of the fascist regimes in Europe, but because the children whose image legitimates this power are essentially strange and unprecedented. When Benjamin writes

in the artwork essay that the concepts he is introducing into the theory of art are useless for the purposes of fascism but useful for formulating revolutionary demands, he is positioning them in service to that alternate and ever-new history whose force he here experiences.

33. The power of fascism is the power of despair. Not the passive recognition of desperate circumstances but the relentless power of despair itself. The authors of *Remediation* would no doubt scorn despair as an attitude reflective of technological determinism. To claim that the future is hopeless is no less presumptuous than to treat its hopes as promises. And yet despair haunts their presentation, most visibly in the oddly unifying role played by Katherine Bigelow's vivid dystopia from 1999 *Strange Days*. Lenny Nero and his "wire" that can transplant individual experiences directly from one subject to another, the psychologically-traumatized protagonist of a narrative of police corruption, personal betrayal and brutal violence in a nihilistic film noir apocalypse, introduces the theory's domain of inquiry, and Lenny's plug for the wire – "like TV, only better" – returns throughout the exposition to characterize the contradictory impetus behind remediation. What Benjamin's perspective suggests is an affinity between the theory propounded in the book and dystopic visions of a hopeless future, an affinity that lies deeper than expository convenience, and indeed far deeper than the timid insights the theory's nominal respect for historical contingency permit it. The dystopic obliteration of the future that haunts not only *Remediation* but the university in which media studies is conducted and beyond it the world we each encounter in its everyday diversity is the index of an historical despair whose political vehemence was manifested in the fascist movements of Europe. This despair is not a psychological disposition but a persistent

power in human history, and though European fascism was indeed defeated, that does not mean the despair it manifested thereby disappeared.

34. Though it lead us into apparent errors as gross as McLuhan's most dated diagnoses, media studies must never relinquish the vehemence and the urgency of its apocalyptic commitment. The investigation of media may, with the rest of social theory, have had to surrender the concrete socialist hopes that inspired so many of its pioneers. But as Benjamin reminds us, media studies does not thereby escape the revolutionary demand of history. Not because the current crisis ethically requires a particular revolutionary scheme but because the inhuman impermanence of the historical material in which that crisis is violently inscribed, the fragile remnants and the more fragile bodies that produced them, offers theory in its ultimate fidelity to the truth of the excluded middle but two alternatives: despair or its antithesis. The antithesis to fascist despair does not have the positive contours of a collective hope. It exists for the individual merely as the willful refusal to countenance the triumph of despair. Only in light of this willful refusal does the Brechtian maxim Benjamin recorded, "take your cue not from the good old things but from the bad new ones," deserve to be the motto for an insurrectionary posture of inquiry. The critical responsibility of media studies precludes it from forgetting the undisciplined space of the destructive archive, where the possibility of prognostic insights into the fragmented material of the desperate present will anticipate an eventual triumph over political despair. We cannot predict what these prognoses will be. The memory of hope itself commands us to expect them.

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (zweite Fassung)," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol 7 eds. Rolf

Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 350. Translated as: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 3: 1935-1938*. eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002. p. 102. All further references to Benjamin's writings are to these two editions and are given in the text with volume number and page. The translations have on occasion been slightly amended.

[2] Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000. p. 62.

[3] Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1974. p. 7.

[4] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Critical Edition ed. W. Terrence Gordon. Corte Madiera: Gingko Press, 2003. p. 5. All further references are to this edition.