

From Reflection to Repetition: Medium, Reflexivity and the Economy of the Self

Samuel Weber

One of the things that make the writings of Walter Benjamin so intriguing is the way his thoughts on the new media emerge from a very distinctive interpretation of the old. The most elaborately articulated instance of this emergence can be found in an early text, namely, Benjamin's doctoral dissertation, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism." Although Benjamin, who aspired to become the leading critic of 20th century Germany, has in recent decades become one of the most cited of critics, his dissertation, perhaps because of its rather academic style and subject matter, has not attracted the same attention, even in literary-critical circles. And where the dissertation has been discussed, one aspect of it has been almost entirely ignored.

It is with this dimension of his text that I will be concerned in this chapter.

In order to interpret the different words employed in the title of his thesis, above all "art," "criticism" and "concept," Benjamin introduces another term that distinguishes itself from almost all the other terms he uses, which are almost all taken from the writings that he is interpreting. But in this one case, the word is not used by any of the writers he is analyzing – not Friedrich Schlegel, not Novalis, and not even by the shadowy figure who appears briefly at the beginning and toward the end of the thesis both framing and transcending the text in its entirety, namely Friedrich Hölderlin. No, this word appears to have no history, to come from nowhere and yet plays a decisive role in the construction of Benjamin's overall argument. This word is, quite simply, or not so simply, "medium".

That it should have come to play such a significant part in Benjamin's dissertation is both understandable and enigmatic. Understandable, since Benjamin himself had used the term, as well as its adjectival-adverbial variations (medial, mediality) extensively several years earlier in an important but in his lifetime unpublished essay on "Language in General and the Language of Man" (1916). In that essay he elaborates a notion of language as a "medium" in a very distinct sense, namely as a process that does not communicate anything external – a meaning, for instance. In other words, as Benjamin puts it in that essay, language is a *medium*, but not a *means* to any end external to itself. It is therefore not to be confused with any form of instrumentality, or of mediation. Rather, its function is that of imparting itself *immediately – unmittelbar* – i.e. without the mediation of anything external to itself:

Each language imparts itself in and of itself [*Jede Sprache teilt sich in sich selbst mit*], it is in the purest sense the “medium” of imparting. The medial, i.e. the *immediacy* [*Unmittelbarkeit*] of all spiritual imparting is the fundamental problem of all theory of language [...] (GS 2.1, p. 142).¹

Mediality is thus not to be confused with *mediation*, in the Hegelian (dialectical) or any other sense: it is neither a function of dialectical negativity nor of any relation to an outside. It is precisely its immediacy that anticipates the main concern that Benjamin will identify in his discussion of Schlegel and Novalis in his dissertation, as the opening sentence of its first chapter makes unmistakably clear:

Thinking reflecting upon itself in self-consciousness is the fundamental fact from which Friedrich Schlegel’s epistemological deliberations, and most of Novalis’ as well, take their point of departure. The relation of thinking to itself as it is found in reflection is considered to be the most proximate form of thinking as such, out of which all other forms [of thought] develop (GS 1, p. 18).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Benjamin would reintroduce the term “medium” in order to describe the Romantics’ valorization of reflection, even though this concept is associated first of all with *thinking* rather than with *language*. However, Benjamin’s early conception of language as essentially naming already entailed a strong reflexive element. In describing language as a medium that imparts itself, and does so immediately, Benjamin was already construing language as a process of self-reflection, a word that is a pleonasm insofar as “reflection” generally implies the return of a self to itself. This however is precisely the question that will tacitly inform Benjamin’s discussion of Schlegel and the Romantics: namely, that of the link between “reflection” and the “self”. As we will see, in his discussion of Schlegel Benjamin will seek to problematize that link and, in his strong but unelaborated allusions to Hölderlin, point to an alternative in which a certain repetition will come to replace reflection, and the first person singular – the I – will replace the “self,” albeit in a very different way from the Fichtean notion of a self-positing Ego.

Given his own earlier use of this word, then, it is therefore not entirely surprising that Benjamin would invoke the notion of “medium” in his dissertation to describe the process of reflection itself. But if it is therefore not entirely surprising, Benjamin’s use of this word in the dissertation nevertheless displays an enigmatic aspect, or at least one that is not simply self-evident. On the one hand, Benjamin contrasts Schlegel’s notion of “reflection” with that of the philosopher, Fichte, who construed it as dependent on and limited by an Absolute Ego positing itself. For the Romantics, on the contrary, the positing of an Ego was only a subsidiary, not an essential dimension of reflection, and this because the latter

1 Citations from Benjamin refer to the German edition of his *Gesammelte Werke* (1980) and are indicated by “GS”. English translations are my own.

was conceived of not as the result of an act of positing, but rather as a process that Benjamin – not Schlegel – designates as that of a *medium*:

Schlegel's concept of the absolute [...] would most correctly be designated as the medium of reflection (*Reflexionsmedium*). With this term the whole of Schlegel's theoretical philosophy may be collected and designated [...]. Reflection constitutes the absolute, and it constitutes it as a medium (GS 1, pp. 36-37).

What is surprising and intriguing about Benjamin's use of this word here is, as already suggested, that he explicitly emphasizes that this term is not to be found in the writings of Schlegel:

Schlegel did not use the term "medium" himself; nonetheless, he attached the greatest importance to the constantly uniform connection in the absolute or in the system, both of which must be interpreted as the connection of the real not in its substance (which is everywhere the same) but in the degrees of clarity with which it unfolds (p. 37 – my italics – SW).

Schlegel did not have the one word available to him, which, according to Benjamin, more than any other designates the essential characteristics of his own system of thought – namely, of that absolute reflection with which he was primarily concerned. In a footnote, Benjamin suggests that the relation of "medium" to "reflection" is double, entailing a certain ambiguity (*Doppelsinn*), which however upon further examination resolves into a consistent account:

For on the one hand reflection is itself a medium – by virtue of its constant connectivity, while on the other hand the medium in question is one within which reflection moves itself (*sich bewegt*) – for the latter, as the absolute, moves itself in and of itself (*bewegt sich in sich selbst*) (p. 36).

What then, exactly, does the word "medium" signify for Benjamin such that it becomes indispensable to him in his account of Romantic reflexivity? First of all, as we have seen, for Benjamin "mediality" signifies immediacy, the capacity to function without external mediation. The medium, whether as language in the 1916 essay or as Absolute Reflection in the 1920 dissertation, entails the potentiality, indeed the power of operating without external reference. The medium, whether language or thought, serves to develop only itself: it is a movement of the Self.

On the other hand, however, this "movement" is precisely never simply circular or self-contained: it may be "continual" or "constant" – *stetig* is the German word Benjamin uses – and it may also entail a kind of unfolding or development – *Entfaltung* – but it is also and above all, a transformation. In the first pages of his dissertation, Benjamin emphasizes this point: "Under the term 'reflection' is understood the transformative (*umformende*) – and nothing but the transformative – reflecting on a form" (p. 20). Form is already a reflective category that in reflecting itself further, alters and transforms itself. A certain alterity is thus essentially at work at the heart of the reflective movement.

The ambiguity or tension thus results between the medium as a dynamic of transformation and alteration on the one hand, and on the other as a movement of the self coming full circle in the notion of reflection. The nature of the movement itself “reflects” this constitutive ambiguity: on the one hand it is “*stetig*,” continual, on the other it moves by leaps and bounds. Benjamin quotes Friedrich Schlegel asserting that the “transition (Übergang) [...] must always be a leap [*ein Sprung*]” and comments this as follows:

This immediacy, which is originary (*prinzipiell*) although not absolute but rather mediated (*vermittelte*), is that in which the liveliness (*Lebendigkeit*) of the connection (*Zusammenhang*) is grounded (p. 27).

The medium is thus defined spatially rather than temporally – as a *Zusammenhang* rather than as a *Fortgang* – but its spatiality is in turn not at all static. It involves not just a context – which would be the most common English rendering of the German word that plays such an important role in Benjamin’s discussion of medium here, namely, *Zusammenhang*. Rather, what this word seems to imply is both a state of connectedness and a process of linkage in which connections are made and unmade through leaps and bounds rather than through continuous evolution or unfolding.

It is probably in order to elucidate this dual and conflictual conception of the medium that early on his dissertation Benjamin cites a name that will return throughout his study both to frame his discussion of the Romantic Concept of Criticism and at the same time to point beyond it. That name, as I have already indicated, is: Hölderlin. The citation seems at first sight flat and banal:

Hölderlin, who without direct involvement with the early Romantics nevertheless spoke the final and incomparably profound word concerning certain of their ideas, writes at a point when he seeks to express an intimate, highly relevant connection (*Zusammenhang*): “infinitely (exactly) connected” [*unendlich (genau) zusammenhängen*]. Schlegel and Novalis had the same idea when they understood the infinitude of reflection as a fulfilled infinitude of connectedness [...] Today we would say “systematically” for what Hölderlin expresses more simply, as “exactly” connected (p. 26).

Throughout this text, as with many others of the same general period, Hölderlin will emerge as the poet who has the first and last word – although precisely because of this claim, the word or words that Hölderlin is said to speak will remain quite obscure in Benjamin’s text. Benjamin will never discuss just what “infinite exactitude” might mean in respect to “connectedness”. But his text allows us to make connections that address the question. And ironically or not, such connections emerge as soon as we direct our attention to the way in which Benjamin “connects” his text to the texts of Hölderlin. The reference Benjamin provides in a footnote – to a text entitled “Infidelity of Wisdom” – turns out itself to be unfaithful, or, as some might say, erroneous. The quote, which is taken from Höl-

derlin's gloss to his Pindar translations, "where," as Benjamin puts it, "Hölderlin seeks to express an intimate, highly relevant connectedness," is not from the gloss to Pindar's poem, "*Untreue der Weisheit*" but rather from the gloss to another Pindar fragment, which Hölderlin translates as "The Infinite" ("*Das Unendliche*"). Benjamin's connects to Hölderlin's text through a reinscription of "the infinite" as "infidelity of wisdom."² Since, as this reinscription suggests, Hölderlin's text, which includes both his translation of certain poems of Pindar and his commentary upon them, are cited by Benjamin as being extremely pertinent to the notion of the "reflection medium", allow me to venture a rough translation of Hölderlin's Pindar translation and then translate part of its equally short commentary. First the poem:

Whether I scale the wall of Right,
 On high, or crooked deception,
 And so myself
 Circumscribing, beyond
 Myself live, of this
 I am of mixed
 Mind, to say it exactly.

[Ob ich des Rechtes Mauer,
 Die hohe, oder krummer Täuschung
 Ersteig und so mich selbst
 Umschreibend, hinaus
 Mich lebe, darüber
 Hab ich zweideutig ein
 Gemüt, genau es zu sagen.]

That the poet should be of "a mixed mind to say exactly" what he has written in the poem, Hölderlin then glosses as follows:

The fact that I then discover that the connection between right and cleverness must be ascribed not to these themselves but to a third (*nicht ihnen selber, sondern einem dritten*), through which their connection is infinitely exact – that is why I am of a mixed mind (Hölderlin 1969, p. 672).

The "intimate and profound connection" to which Benjamin refers has thus to do with – is "connected" to – the way things are linked for a finite living being – an "I" although hardly the Fichtean Ego, since unlike the latter it is the result not of a process of *Setzung* – of positing – but of a writing around and about, an *Umschreibung* through which the "I" "lives itself out," irreparably separated

2 This "reinscription" however turns out not to have been the work of Benjamin, but of the Pindar edition that he was using, which published all of the Pindar fragments under the title "*Untreue der Weisheit*" – which is initially the title of just one of the fragments. I thank Peter Fenves for this information.

from its “me” (*hinaus/mich lebe*). The process of writing here is multiple: it takes place in the poem of Pindar, and then in and as its translation and commentary by Hölderlin. In the process, the “I” of the poet splits itself into the “it” of the poetic translation – “to say it exactly” – and the I of the commentary, each repeating the other and in the process displacing it. If we focus first on the I in the poem of Pindar, it is split between climbing “the high wall of Right” and descending into the crookedness of deception, which in the commentary is then associated with “cleverness” (*Klugheit*). In the poem, the “I” negotiates this conflict between Right and Cleverness by a process of writing: it writes about it and about himself. This process of “circumscribing” however does not lead the I back to itself as in a process of reflection, but rather outside “myself”. Its life is forced beyond itself, a formulation that is left equivocal, since it is unclear just what remains of the I in this situation: Is it still alive or in some sense beyond life? The poetic I itself can only register this experience as a split, a “mixed mind to say it exactly”. But what is the “it” that wishes to speak so exactly?

That question is addressed in the commentary, in which another “I” of another poet – Hölderlin as the translator of Pindar – takes up the discourse of the Greek poet and gives it an entirely new interpretation. The poetic I is of mixed mind not simply because it is torn between Right and Cleverness but because what holds those two together, what connects them, must be ascribed to a “third” – to another that cannot even be named properly. It is this third that becomes not the subject per se, but the subject of *ascription*, to whom is “ascribed” the connectedness of the other two. Through this third, this other, “their connection” is said to be “infinitely exact” – the phrase that Benjamin then cites in his essay, coming as the third in the relationship of Pindar and Hölderlin, of Poet to Translator, Poet to Critic or to Commentator, Writer to Reader. This relationship is never simply a dual one, but involves a third, who represents the alterity of a certain history, that shows itself to be quite different from that envisaged by the Romantics and by Schlegel in particular.³ For Schlegel the work qua original is defined by its “criticizability,” through which it is lifted above its limited singularity and into the medium of reflection as the unfolding of a unified Self. For Hölderlin, and for Benjamin, the process of reflection is supplanted by a process of writing – as ascription, circumscription, translation and commentary, in which

3 As the previous note suggests, the process of editing and transmitting the Pindar poems involves much more than simply “three” persons : Benjamin’s access to Pindar, like Hölderlin’s, is mediated by countless editors and editions that constitute the history through which the text is transmitted. Nowhere is the apparent simplicity and unicity of the authorial name, “Pindar”, more misleading than here. The same could be said of “Hölderlin “, and perhaps to a somewhat lesser extent of Benjamin as well. But this process of historical transmission can hardly be assimilated to the « reflection medium » construed by Schlegel (in Benjamin’s reading at least).

reflection reveals itself to be a transformative process of repetition as reinscription. In this process the Self does not come full circle and thereby makes way for an “I” defined as singularity – which is to say, not simply as individual but as relational and differential.

It is this I in its movement beyond its own life – *hinaus mich lebe* – that discovers itself as historical. But this history is not that of the progress of self-consciousness. Benjamin’s own practice of citation exemplifies this difference. As already indicated, it is based on a confusion of two poems of Pindar that Hölderlin translates and comments: “The Infinite” and “Infidelity of Wisdom.” But this confusion, although it is far from constituting a medium of reflection, allows something to emerge that otherwise might have remained hidden. In Hölderlin’s commentary to “Infidelity of Wisdom”, there is a short phrase that suggests that Benjamin’s ascription may not have been entirely arbitrary. Hölderlin writes:

If the understanding is trained intensively/It will derive energy even from dispersion; insofar as it easily recognizes the foreign in its own honed acuity [*geschliffenen Schärfe*], it will not easily be led astray in uncertain situations (1969, p. 669).

In short, if the “understanding” is trained “intensively” – if it learns how to delve into itself properly, “it will derive energy even from dispersion” – because it will discover “the foreign” in its own ability to make distinctions, in a sharpness and acuity of mind that has been “honed” – sharpened – through contact with what is different and other than itself. It is this “training” in discovering the foreign within itself that allows it to navigate “uncertain situations” and not be led astray by them. Experience of the foreign in oneself prepares one to confront the foreign outside oneself.

Although the “medium of reflection” is the phrase in which Benjamin transcribes and translates Schlegel’s effort to relate to the other and to the foreign, he also makes it clear that in Schlegel such “honing” and “dispersion” remain ultimately enclosed and encapsulated in a notion of Reflection as a function of Self. Ultimately this is also what limits the scope and significance of the reflection-medium as Benjamin construes it in this essay. As Benjamin puts it, Schlegel never discarded the basic axiom that “reflection does not dissolve into empty infinitude but is *in itself* [*in sich selbst*] substantial and fulfilled” (p. 31). Reflection, for Schlegel, qua Medium is ultimately and originally self-identical and self-contained, because it is there from the very beginning, as expressed in the term “*Urreflexion*”: original or primary reflection. Whereas the practice of Hölderlin is historical in its process of transcription as reinscription – i.e. as a form of repetition – that of Schlegel ultimately looks back to an original beginning in which the process is already grounded. This means that what Schlegel calls “criticism”

can never really be negative or radically transformative: it must always continue and intensify what was present from the first.

It is this ultimately uncritical dimension of Schlegel's notion of criticism as reflection that provokes Benjamin in a long footnote to make the one explicitly critical remark that he allows himself in his entire dissertation.

[For Schlegel and the Romantics] Reflection can be augmented but never reduced [...] Only a breaking-off, no reduction of reflective intensification (*Reflexionssteigerung*) is thinkable. [...] On the occasion of this isolated critical remark it should be noted that the theory of the medium of reflection will not be pursued here beyond the extent to which the Romantics elaborated it, since this is all that is required to deploy the concept of criticism systematically. From a purely critical and logical standpoint it would be desirable to elaborate this theory further, beyond the obscurity in which the Romantics left it. It must be feared however that such an elaboration would itself lead only to further obscurity. Whereas certain individual aesthetic (*kunsttheoretischen*) propositions can be extraordinarily fruitful, the theory as a whole leads to logically unresolvable contradictions; above all in respect to the problem of Ur-reflection (pp. 57-58).

What Benjamin valued in Schlegel was what he himself in a certain sense brought to him, namely the notion of a "medium" of reflection, in which neither the individual work, nor its critical reception could ever have the final word. What he criticized in Schlegel, and where he felt the need to point beyond him, in part through his references to Hölderlin, was a process of criticism – the medium of reflection – understood as a movement of self-fulfillment, a movement coming full circle. Whereas for Schlegel, in Benjamin's reading, critique remains a function of the reflection medium and hence ultimately of the Self, for Benjamin the mediality of critique carries it beyond the restricted economy of the self. Benjamin mentions translation as one form in which this process takes place. But although he cites Hölderlin's commentary to his translation of Pindar, he does not elaborate it further in his dissertation.

It is in the second section of his thesis, where Benjamin expands upon the relationship of the individual work to the medium of critical reflection, that he begins to suggest how a medium might be construed that does not simply serve the unfolding of self-consciousness. The paradox is that Benjamin's use of the word "medium" antedates his analyses of what we today associate with this term: photography, radio and film, for instance. Nevertheless, his use of the term, with and against Schlegel, anticipates certain salient features of those "new" media while also indicating why Benjamin later will avoid using this term. Schlegel's insight, which Benjamin in part endorses, involves a rethinking of the status of the individual work of art. By defining the significance of a work of art in its capacity to generate reflections – in its "criticizability" – Schlegel reinscribes the significance of the individual work in its relationships to what is outside of it – to the effects it produces. This entails a challenge to traditional aesthetics,

which sees the work of art as the instantiation of a genre, or as the expression of a genius, but in any case as the vehicle of something that is meaningful and self-contained. Whereas this notion of aesthetics is linked to the notion of a meaningful work, that of medium questions the self-contained quality of the work. It is no accident that in regard to broadcast media (radio, television), one rarely speaks of “works,” but of “programs,” in French: *emissions*, in German: *Sendungen*. This shift in terminology is significant: a media “event” is defined by a dynamic relation not to a fixed genre but to an ongoing process. In contemporary art, the notions of “performance” – taken over from theater, where also there are no works, but only “plays” or, in French, “pieces” – or of installation tend to replace that of the work of art. The emphasis here is on the singular event, rather than on the enduring self-same work. It is important here to distinguish the “singular” in this sense from the “individual,” which often carries with it the literal sense of being “in-divisible”. The singular by contrast is irreducibly divisible and relational, in the sense that Lacan, in his seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, finds in Poe’s story: the singular is the “odd” – that which doesn’t *fit in*. The singular involves the exceptional, the extraordinary, the unique. But its uniqueness is not self-contained. It is *relational* through and through, in contrast to the individual, usually understood as a *substantial* self-identity.

To be sure, it is not always easy to separate these two terms – and perhaps it is ultimately impossible to keep them entirely apart. The phrase “media event” can be used to designate a happening that is both individual and singular. As individual, it is understood, and usually disparaged, as being the fully predetermined product of a general machination. But a media event could also designate a happening that cannot be identically repeated, although this does not mean that it cannot be repeated at all. In a certain sense – Benjaminian or Derridean – it can only come to be *through* repetition, but it is a repetition that does not aim at producing fully identical copies; instead it acknowledges alteration as its greatest resource.

In regard to the early Romantics, Benjamin emphasizes that Schlegel’s attitude toward the poetical work was ambivalent. On the one hand he sought to free the work from its domination by genre: the work was to be understood as a moment of the medium of reflection, forming part of a universal poetry, the essence of which was prose. But this also meant that the work was incomplete and required fulfillment through criticism as the continuation of its reflective essence:

Because each singular reflection in this medium can only be isolated and contingent, the unity of the work with respect to that of art can only be a relative one; the work remains burdened with a moment of contingency (p. 73).

The singular is still understood by Schlegel as a property of the work, and hence as part of a self-fulfilling universal. For Schlegel it is the task of critical

reflection, which is to say, of criticism as reflection, to extend and complete the singular work beyond the bounds of its contingent “aesthetic” existence:

The more closed the reflection, the more stringent the form of the work is, the more variegated and intensely (*vielfacher und intensiver*) criticism can fulfill its task of driving the work out of itself (*aus sich heraustreibt*), dissolving the original reflection in a higher one and continuing thus (p. 73).

As the word “drive” – in German: *treiben* – suggests, this process of transformation requires a certain violence to be done to the original work, which is altered in the process of transformation, driven beyond the boundaries of its initial and inherent form. A new singular event is thus produced, which in turn becomes the object of a new transformation and alteration. What however remains of the singular work or event in this process of medial transformation?



Ill 1: Der gestiefelte Kater. Kindermärchen in drei Akten (Berlin 1797) by Ludwig Tieck. Title page of first edition. “Peter Leberecht” is Tieck’s pseudonym.

And it is here that Benjamin comes upon a category that has the potential to provide a powerful critical tool for the development of medial practices that could possibly contribute to the transformation of the new media as well as the old. It is what he calls “formal irony,” which he emphatically distinguishes from all forms of subjective or authorial irony. Benjamin’s literary example is, significantly, the comedies of the German Romantic writer, Ludwig Tieck, but for those more familiar with English literature, an excellent instance could be found in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (which Benjamin does not mention). Formal irony is distinguished from criticism, insofar as the latter, so Benjamin, “sacrifices the work entirely for the sake of the one single connection (*“des Einen Zusammenhanges”*, p. 86). Formal irony, by contrast, preserves the work while redefining its significance. The latter no longer consists exclusively or primarily in its mimetic, thematic representational content understood as a self-contained referent, as what in Saussurian language would be called a “signified”, but rather as itself *significant* of something that does not appear directly. Benjamin, following the Romantics, describes such irony as “the storm that raises (*aufhebt*) the curtain” exposing “the transcendental order of art,” an order that reaches beyond the “borders of the visible work” (p. 86) In a footnote he offers a precious indication as to just what such a “transcendental order” could mean in artistic practice. It is no accident that his example is taken from theater, the sole traditional aesthetic medium that has to do not so much with works, but with “plays”. In the note Benjamin describes the actual process by which formal irony functions in Tieck’s comedies and perhaps, he adds, in “all literary comedies” as well: “The spectators, the author, the theater personnel” all “take part in the play” (*spielen ... mit*) (p. 85) In thus including spectators, author and theater personnel in the play, the generic framework of traditional aesthetic *form*, based on genre, is thus relativized and opened to its condition of possibility but which also functions as its enabling limits: audience, author, theater personnel, These factors, defining theater as scene, can themselves never be exhaustively predetermined or identified: they are singular in the sense of being always different, not just from others but also from themselves, just as the performance of one evening can never be fully identical to that of another – or even to itself.

That Benjamin uses the German word, *aufhebt*, here in its literal sense to describe the “raising” or “lifting” of the “curtain” of the work produced by formal irony is significant in at least two senses. First, it recalls the master term of the Hegelian dialectic, that which names the negative production of synthesis. Second, however, the word also underscores what is distinctively *non-Hegelian* in Benjamin’s use of it. For the singular work is never simply destroyed by formal irony. In related, theological terms, one can say that the work survives – Benjamin writes of its “*Überleben*” (p. 86) – but it is never *resurrected*. Formal irony is no

simple remake of the original. The work survives formal irony but only by being transformed by it. Benjamin emphasizes that formal irony is incompatible with the modern idea of “progress” as a goal-directed becoming. Rather, what it presupposes is more like a “chaos,” which he argues thereby emerges as the “sensual image of the absolute medium” – that is to say, a “continuum of forms” that do not depend on the representation of content for their significance. This is why the pure, “absolute” medium, lacking any determination through represented content, resembles a “chaos.” Schlegel, for his part understands such “chaos” as the negative anticipation of a “harmonious world” that inheres in it, albeit in undeveloped form.

For Benjamin, by contrast, this attempt to articulate the medial interaction of chaos and harmony, singularity and connectivity, defines the *limit* of the Romantic concept of art criticism. Once again it is to Hölderlin that he appeals in order to open a path that leads beyond this Romantic limitation. As he puts it, whereas the Romantics could only point toward this realm, Hölderlin “surveyed and dominated” it. (105n). The realm that Hölderlin is said to “survey and dominate” also involves a different notion of “medium” from that which Benjamin has hitherto attributed to Friedrich Schlegel. The “medium of reflection” that Benjamin attributes to Schlegel, who we must remember does not use the word, is ultimately understood as homogeneous, grounded in a notion of the primal reflection of a unitary Self, returning to itself through, above and beyond its reflective movement in any of its individual moments. For Hölderlin, by contrast, the Self cannot be construed apart from a singularity that is inseparable from an “I” – but from one that never comes full circle, instead remaining irrevocably dispersed in the poetic act of writing and rewriting. Instead of *reflection*, therefore, we encounter *repetition*, instead of progression, *procedure* (*Verfahrensart*), instead of prophecy pedagogy, instead of elation, sobriety or discretion (*Nüchternheit*). Benjamin quotes the following passage from Hölderlin to indicate the alternative his writing embodies, but as always with his references to this prophet-poet, without commenting or interpreting him in any detail⁴:

In order to acquire a stable (*bürgerliche*) existence for the poets, including ours, it will be good if, subtracting the difference between times and structures, they return to the *mechané* of the ancients. [...] Modern poetry is particularly lacking in schooling and craft (*an der Schule und am Handwerksmäßigen*), teaching and learning its way of proceeding, which once learned, can be reliably repeated and executed. Among humans *one has above all to pay attention to each thing*, above all to see how it is something, i.e. recognizable in its means (*moyen*) in which it appears, so that the way it is conditioned can be determined and

4 Exception made, of course, for Benjamin’s early (1915) essay, “On Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin”. See my discussion of that essay in *Targets of Opportunity* (2005) and *Benjamin’s –abilities* (2008).

taught. [...] To this pertains first of all [*einmal*] precisely that lawful calculus [*gesetzlicher Kalkül*] (p. 105 – my italics – SW).

In Hölderlin's insistence on the need "to pay attention to each thing," repetition replaces reflection, but does not abolish it. Repetition, in the sense of transformative recurrence, is what arises when reflection is no longer governed by the homogeneity and unity of a Self, which means by a self-consciousness. Instead Hölderlin describes a calculation that seeks to count on the incalculable. The "Self" is replaced by "each thing", to which poets are called upon to "pay attention". Paying attention is not the same as critical reflection: it responds but does not assimilate or appropriate; it acknowledges without knowing.

From the point of view of a Self, bent on assimilating the other and the world as its property, such a call for attentiveness can look either like "chaos" or more likely like a waste of time. What counts for this Self are proper names, not the necessary anonymity of "each thing" in its resistant singularity. The media today are largely, although not exclusively, dominated by what can be called the Economy of the Self, defined as an instance that seeks to stay the same over time and space, by absorbing and assimilating all difference and alterity. For Benjamin, both Christianity and Capitalism have contributed to the predominance of this Self (in another essay of this period, "Capitalism as Religion", Benjamin portrays Capitalism as the Heir to Christianity). The integrity of the Self manifests itself in the audiovisual media through the unwritten rule that prohibits the conditions of representation from being shown in the representations themselves: for instance, the teleprompter during television news broadcasts. This contributes to the survival of what Benjamin was later to analyze as the aura – which seeks to manifest a distance in proximity that is ultimately grounded in the ostensible self-identity of what it surrounds. Benjamin pointed to the Hollywood "star" and the European "dictator" as two instances of the survival of the "aura" – but a less spectacular contemporary example would be what in American English is called the "anchor" of news broadcasts – who precisely serves to "anchor" a movement that might otherwise explode or at least crack the frame of the isolated images presented in the Evening News. The "anchor" person "presents" the "news" as the result of relatively isolated, ostensibly independent *individual acts and events*, aided by reporters who inevitably communicate by announcing their names and the names of their "anchor" (as a sign or cue that they are done speaking and their interlocutor can take over). In the U.S. individual news programs are increasingly named after the visible "anchors", who present an image of the news as itself the product of the individuals who present it. The isolated image that presents itself as being ostensibly transparent and self-evident – and hence as requiring neither knowledge nor thought to be understood – is thus the audiovisual correlative of the individualist conception of reality itself. Such self-

evidence proceeds by excluding what Schlegel, Hölderlin and later Marx, demanded *not* be excluded: the conditions under which events take place. (Parenthetically it is interesting to note that in cinema, the English word “producers” is today reserved for those who put together the financing of a program, show or film, rather than those who actually “make” it).

What is excluded by such a conception of reality is everything that cannot fit into a closed frame or recounted within the compass of a short, archaeo-teleological story: which is to say, everything that is impersonal, relational, differential and unspectacular.

In this sense, the Benjaminian notion of the “medium of reflection” is alive and well today, present in the “reality shows” that claim to show reality as it is, which is to say, as the reflection of individual Selves on the way to prominence or oblivion – albeit without the transformative “reflection” that Schlegel also envisaged. It is also present in the personalization of televised “news” in journalists who not only “anchor” their shows but tend to appropriate it, giving their names to the programs in which they first only participate.

But this notion of Reality is never as triumphant as it sometimes seems. A notable contrast in television broadcasting can be found in the English-language reporting of Al Jazeera International, which to date is still largely excluded from US broadcast television, although it is increasingly available on the internet to a more limited audience. Al Jazeera presents the “news” deliberately and explicitly as multifarious and multifaceted, “from all angles” as they put it in their self-promotional publicity, and not as a uniform series of self-contained and immediately intelligible images. In the reporting of Al Jazeera, one can catch a glimpse of what a medium would be that is organized not around self-reflection, but around the interplay of self and other as a process of differentiating repetition.

In a different way, the spread of the internet foregrounds the importance of “links” as much as of images, of relations as much as of spectacles, and thus reintroduces a dimension of reproducibility, as Benjamin might have called it, that can trouble the domination of the Present and of the Self. The crisis in which much of the world is increasingly involved raises the question not just of “debt” and “credit” but of the “credibility” of institutions in a way that can perhaps reopen spaces that have long since been closed or blocked. But that is another story, in the process of playing itself out.

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