Walter Benjamin

‘Mediation, which is the immediacy of all mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic.’

The link to Walter Benjamin is more than close. His essay on ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ has become a classic of media theory. This is largely due to the fact that Benjamin is seen as a pioneer in the discovery of a conditional relation between technics and art, technology and perception, media, and the senses. In each case, the way art, perception, and the senses are presented is not only preformed but practically constituted by media, technics, and technology. Because of his artwork essay, Walter Benjamin has been characterized as an early proponent of the media generativistic position. So why include Benjamin when attempting to give a hearing to critical voices that are opposed to a constitution-theoretical understanding of media?

With one exception, the contemporary media debate consistently overlooks a text written by Benjamin in 1916 titled ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, in which he introduces the concepts ‘communication’, ‘medium’, and ‘mediation’ in a way that definitely does not support or promote the generativistic tone of the media debate, which all too willingly sees Benjamin as a decisive time keeper. The fact that this early essay on language is almost never interpreted as an insightful media-theoretical source is also due to the author himself: Benjamin wrote these pages less for publication than self-understanding. Benjamin thus produced a cryptically laid out and hermetically held document that he only shared with friends as a sign of his personal esteem. I will now turn to the text itself, although I do not intend to discuss its linguistic content; this has already been done superbly by Winfried Menninghaus and, more recently, Anja Hallacker. Rather, I am looking for traces of a media concept in Benjamin’s early work that is shaped by a divergence between the medium and the technical instrument. This media concept will come to light as soon as the non-trivial meaning of the idea that language is a medium of communication is understood.

A media theory could not begin in a more unspectacular way: Benjamin explains that communication requires a medium, which he then calls ‘language’. In contrast to their traditional meaning, however, these three concepts – ‘communication’, ‘medium’, and ‘language’ – assume an unfamiliar
meaning in Benjamin’s text, and this unfamiliar meaning must be partially reconstructed in order to push forward to the essence of the media concept in Benjamin’s early work. Here is a hint as to where this essence is to be found: the relationship between these three concepts is conceived in such a way that ‘translation’ emerges as the core task of mediation.

‘Language’ as Medium of Communicability: Reconstruction of a Concept

A reconstruction of Benjamin’s early understanding of language can be explicated in six steps:

(1) **Language**: Benjamin understands ‘language’ as a ‘tendency [...] toward [...] communication’. He also calls this principle ‘communicability’. This is the first conceptual shift: with his use of the concept ‘language’ Benjamin diverges from the notion of a language spoken by speakers, for '[l]anguages [...] have no speaker'. It thus becomes possible for Benjamin to concede the existence of languages of technology, art, justice, and religion, but at the same time to emphasize that these languages are not verbalized; instead, the legal decisions of justice, the terminology of technicians, the design vocabulary of art, and the reports of revelations in religion represent something that lies itself ‘in the subjects concerned – technology, art, justice, or religion’. Moreover, communicability is an attribute that applies not only to cultural spheres – ‘symbolic forms’ in Ernst Cassirer’s sense of the term – but also to animate as well as inanimate nature. For Benjamin, therefore, there are ‘languages of things’ – he mentions here lamps, mountains, foxes – even if their languages are ‘imperfect’ and ‘dumb’. And lastly there is also the language of God: in the creation story God creates by speaking. Therefore: ‘The existence of language is coextensive [...] with absolutely everything.” And conversely: for Benjamin there is no ‘existence' that is ‘entirely without relationship to language’. Existence is thus related to language and communicability like the front and back sides of a page. This is possible in that Benjamin bids farewell to three attributes that are commonly associated with the concept of language: language is not to be understood as the use of signs, it is not tied to vocalization, and it also does not depend on conscious awareness. So what is ‘language’?

Because language is identified with the principle of communicability and this principle corresponds to everything that somehow constitutes our experiential world, it is necessary to look more closely at how Benjamin understands ‘communication’.

(2) **Communication in language versus communication through language**: ‘What does language communicate? It communicates the mental being
A formulation could hardly sound more conventional, yet what is funny about Benjamin’s thought lies less in what communicates – the mental being – than in how it communicates: ‘It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself in language and not through language.’ It comes down to this phrase: to communicate ‘in’ and not ‘through’ language. Communicating ‘through’ language is what is typically understood by the use of spoken language. Benjamin also refers to this as the ‘bourgeois conception of language’, which he considers invalid and empty and characterizes as follows: ‘It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being.’ Whenever people communicate through language in the conventional sense by someone communicating something to someone else, words are employed as means and instrument. In that case, words make something appear that is itself not linguistic ‘nature’: ‘The word must communicate something (other than itself).’ But Benjamin characterizes this as ‘the true Fall of the spirit of language’, for it assumes that ‘the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention’. In short, ‘communicating through language’ makes language into an arbitrary verbal sign system, which is employed as an instrument of communication. The location where language in this arbitrary sense is communicated through is the speaker, yet ‘being a speaker’ is precisely not a revealing fact for Benjamin’s philosophy of language. Against the background of this ‘bourgeois’ concept of language, therefore, I will now question what Benjamin means by ‘communicating in language’.

(3) ‘Communicating oneself’ versus ‘communicating something’: this is a decisive point that reveals how Benjamin’s concept of communication differs from our everyday notions. It is already clear that language should not be understood as signs, and it should also not be conceived as means. Benjamin calls such a language, which surpasses its semiotic and instrumental functions, ‘expression’; more precisely, language becomes a ‘direct expression of that which communicates itself in it’. Benjamin thus refers to ‘expression’ as something that is not communicated through language, but rather something that communicates itself in language. For Benjamin, therefore, ‘communicating oneself’ is more like revealing oneself. From this perspective it is understandable why Benjamin attributes language to things as well as people: they can both express something by revealing something about themselves. The lamp reveals itself by affording light. Unlike the concept of ‘communicating something’, therefore, the idea of ‘communicating oneself’ involves a unidirectional movement that is not geared towards reciprocity.
But what does ‘communicating oneself’ mean when it refers to people? Benjamin’s cryptic idea is that people do not communicate themselves; rather, what is communicated is language itself: ‘All language communicates itself.’ In other words, while the lamp expresses and reveals itself by emitting light, people express and reveal themselves by naming. It has already been explained that according to Benjamin a ‘mental being’ communicates itself in language, but how is this ‘mental being’ related to ‘naming’? At this point I will turn to Benjamin’s concept of ‘communicability’.

(4) Communicability: ‘That which in a mental entity is communicable is its language. On this “is” [...] everything depends.’ If ‘mental being’ and ‘language’ coincide, therefore, it is because this mental being itself consists in communicability. That which expresses itself in language is not a communication (which is expressed namely through language), but rather it is communicability itself. Benjamin liked using the suffix -able or -ability, such as the words ‘reproducibility’, ‘criticizability’, ‘citability’, translatability’, etc. Samuel Weber associated the use of the suffix -able with a particular ontological mode: the communicable is not the same as the communicated or the communication. While the communicated and the communication refer to actual tangible operations, the communicable corresponds to another ontological mode, which is not real but rather virtual. This does not mean that it is simply possible and thus waiting to be realized; rather, by ‘virtual’ Weber understands that for Benjamin the communicable is an ability that is effective without mediation and thus does not depend on intervention from outside. Benjamin actually writes: ‘This capacity for communication is language itself.’ Every language thus communicates not something but rather itself. According to Weber, it is precisely the immediacy of this effect that constitutes the mediality of language. I now come to Benjamin’s concept of media.

(5) Medium, Expression: Allow Benjamin to speak for himself: ‘The language of an entity is the medium in which its mental being is communicated.’ And: ‘[A]ll language communicates itself in itself; it is in the purest sense the “medium” of the communication. Mediation [...] is the immediacy of all mental communication.’ As Benjamin here explicitly associates mediation with immediacy, it is clear that mediation is based precisely on not serving as means. Media offer the potential to communicate oneself, but they are not a means of communication. The immediacy of media is only another expression of their non-instrumentalizability for the purposes of communication and semiosis. The medium is not to be understood as a vehicle for transferring content; rather, it makes it possible for something to communicate itself. Mediation is thus the ability to express
oneself without the intervention of an external means. That is the basic idea informing Benjamin’s early approach to media. Benjamin also describes the immediacy of the medium as ‘magical’.³⁴

(6) Magic, Translation: In light of Benjamin’s attempt to keep everything that has to do with instrument, means, or mediation away from the concept of media and thus also from language, it is important to understand his characterization of this immediacy as ‘magical’: ‘Mediation, which is the immediacy of all mental communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic.’³⁵ The medium (and thereby language) thus has its own non-instrumental effect, which Benjamin calls the ‘magic of language’. But how can this non-causal effectiveness be understood?

I will reveal the answer up front: the magical effectiveness of language can be reconstructed as its translatability. Just as Benjamin sees the magic of language as the ‘primary problem of linguistic theory’, so is it ‘necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory’.³⁶ But how can the idea of translatability explain the magical power of language, which must at the same time also explain the process of mediation? And what does it mean to explain the process of mediation as translation?

In order to find an answer to this question, I will stop reconstructing purely conceptual relationships at this point and turn to a narrative dimension in Benjamin’s language essay. It involves the biblical story of the Creation and the Fall of Man, which Benjamin interprets as an illuminating linguistic-theoretical resource.

Making Language Mediate: On the Interpretation of Genesis

Benjamin notes that God’s creation of nature differs significantly from his creation of people. Nature emerges from the word, but people emerge from the Earth. ‘This is, in the whole story of the Creation, the only reference to the material in which the Creator expresses his will, which is doubtless otherwise thought of as creation without mediation.’³⁷ As compensation for this ‘earthly’ origin, ‘man, who is not created from the word’ receives ‘the gift of language’.³⁸ For God, therefore, language ‘served him as medium of creation’,³⁹ but for people this God-given gift becomes a mere instrument. This reveals something about the role of naming: God creates by naming, yet people name themselves: ‘Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name.’⁴⁰

With the transition from divine to human language, however, the function of naming changes: for people, naming is no longer a medium that causes
the immediate creation of the named, but rather it is ‘only’ a means of cognition. The human cognitive faculty, which depends on the instrumental use of language, becomes a focal point if you will: it becomes a form of compensation for the loss of a demiurgical potential. Language as cognitive organon represents people’s limited ability to create, and it is precisely the original divine creative power that people must renounce.

Benjamin clarifies this idea with his interpretation of the biblical story of the Fall of Man: ‘[T]he Fall marks the birth of the human word, in which name no longer lives intact.’ The difference between good and evil, which is now revealed to people, introduces a form of language usage that is no longer based on ‘creation through naming’, as there is no evil in paradise to refer to by name. Moreover, the human use of language now aims at forming judgements. In the judgement something is communicated through language, as the word becomes a sign. Because the word communicates something (besides itself) Benjamin – as already mentioned – considers this ‘the true Fall of the spirit of language’. If the word communicates something in this superficial sense, Benjamin considers this ‘a parody – by the expressly mediate word – of the expressly immediate, creative word of God.’ The Fall of Man marks the loss of linguistic immediacy, thus ‘making language mediate’. The cognitive judgement thus takes the place of the creating name. It is also the judging word of God that expels people from paradise with a sentence, yet at the same time the linguistic power of forming judgements is left to the people. The world-generating creativity of God thus becomes the world-judging cognitive faculty of people. In cognition, language is no longer ‘spontaneous creation’, but rather it becomes a kind of conception, and this conception is translation. If people give names to things, this naming is based on the silent language of things and thus on how ‘the language [of things] is communicated to [man]’. For ‘conception and spontaneity together, which are found in this unique union only in the linguistic realm, language has its own word [...] It is the translation of the language of things into that of man.’ God thus creates by naming; this is an undisguised, ‘pure’ form of linguistic magic that is effective without mediation because it brings forth reality. People lost this form of linguistic power, and from that point on they were able to exercise their linguistic creativity (only) as translation.

The Medium as Translation
These reflections now come full circle. A conceptual reconstruction of Benjamin’s reflections on language as a medium leads to the concept of ‘translation’, which Benjamin continued to explicate throughout his life.
My supposition was that because ‘translation’ constitutes the foundation of Benjamin's theory of language it also outlines his concept of media. Perhaps it has already become apparent in my discussion of Benjamin's interpretation of Genesis how this can be understood.

According to the terms of the biblical narrative, God's language creates but does not translate. Benjamin thus projects onto God the idea of language as a medium of undisguised non-instrumental creative power. That is the origin of the magic of language. Human linguisticality must then be considered, on the one hand, as a break with the divine language, but it can also be considered, on the other hand, as a form of its preservation.

The break is reflected in the linguistic divide between what can be communicated in language and what can be communicated through language. Henceforth, language is always twofold: as unmediated expression and as arbitrary sign, as ‘communicating oneself’ and as ‘communicating something’, as a medium of immediacy and an instrument of mediation. The preservation is reflected in the compensatory creative power granted to people through language and naming: people do not actually create the world, but they are able to create judgements about the world. This ability is solely due to the fact that human language can be considered a translation of the communicability with which God originally distinguished things by naming and creating them.

For God as well as people, therefore, language is a medium. As language is humanized, however, a decisive metamorphosis in the function of mediality occurs: when God speaks, he creates; when people speak, they translate. ‘Translation’ thus becomes a trace and symptom of the dichotomous condition of being human. The creation of people already distances them from the rest of nature, as they alone emerge from a synthesis of the palpable, corporeal earth and the breath of God-given linguisticality. And this linguisticality is fundamentally ambivalent: language is a medium for people in creation and conception, immediacy and mediation, expression and sign, magic and technology.

It could also be said that God's language creates because it is a ‘pure medium’ and its performativity is complete. Human language is not a pure medium, but rather a hybrid of medium and instrument; it has become technical, an organon of cognition, and its performativity is only limited.

In light of Benjamin's reflections, therefore, what a medium means for human practices is precisely misunderstood when the attribute of being an instrument or a sign is falsely included in the concept of media itself. In fact the reverse is true: the meaning and function of ‘media’ for people can only be defined through the tension, difference, or even dissonance
between media and technical or symbolic means. And the concept of translation reveals how mediality surpasses technical production and symbolic representation.

I will return to the concept of translation later.