
Introduction

Techn* and Medi*, Keywords at Stake

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Think of the asterisks in the title as truncation symbols we would use for library searches when we intend the root word to yield a cluster of cognates. Between the two clusters of concepts we are supposed to be broaching in these pages is, to be sure, not a straightforward relation: not of chiasmus, or equation or interchange for that matter.

In the “Typewriter” chapter of his tripartite treatise on modern technological media, Friedrich A. Kittler juxtaposes Martin Heidegger’s rumination on the connection of being, hand, and writing with Walter Benjamin’s treatment of apparently the same subject. To call it a juxtaposition is not entirely correct, though. The two citations are not physically contiguous in Kittler’s monograph. And the lengths are uneven. On the side of Heidegger is a two-page excerpt from *Parmenides*, a collection based on a series of lectures the philosopher gave at the University of Freiburg in the winter of 1942-43 (Kittler 198-200); whereas on the side of Benjamin is but a one-liner from *One-Way Street*, which Kittler uses as a caption for an illustration in his book (Kittler 196). The picture, we are told, shows the writing hand of Jan Tschichold, the figure instrumental in the modernization of typography; and the caption-worthy remark by Benjamin reads, “to substitute the innervation of guiding fingers for the continuous movement of the hand.” The entirety of the paragraph this line is culled from, in a different translation, goes as follows: “The typewriter will alienate the hand of the man of letters from the pen only when the precision of typographic forms has directly entered the conception of his books. One might suppose that new systems with more variable typefaces

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would then be needed. They will replace the pliancy of the hand with the innervation of commanding fingers” (*SW* 1: 457).¹

The Heidegger text, on the other hand, posits the association of handwriting with Being and suggests that the typewriter has come along to undermine the essence of writing, which in turn compromises the essence of being.

The quasi-comparison Kittler hints at is perhaps partly mischievous.² Even so, there is enough seriousness, we should assume, in what the media theorist presents us: not so much the contrast between the hand and the fingers (intriguing though it might be) as the concept of innervation Benjamin puts forward. This merits attention for our purposes here.

The term *innervation* has appeared in some of Benjamin’s important writings including *One-Way Street* (*SW* 1: 444-88), “Surrealism” (*SW* 2: 207-21), and the first two versions of the “Work of Art” essay.³ In her informed and insightful study of Benjamin, Miriam Bratu Hansen foregrounds this notion, along with “the mimetic faculty” and “play,” as critical in Benjamin’s thesis on the human-technology relation (Hansen, ch. 5). If innervation denotes “a mode of adaptation, assimilation, and incorporation of something external and alien to the subject” in the neuro-physiological context (Hansen 132), Hansen emphatically makes the case that for Benjamin it is meant to be a learning process, both for the individual and, more significantly, for the collective.

Our publication project, to be continued in the next issue, is a follow-up to talks and presentations given at the “Technically Yours” conference held at National Taiwan University in October 2019. The objective of the conference was to rethink two important topics that had been productively advanced in the humanities over the last few decades: technique or technology or technics on the one hand, and medium or media or mediation on the other hand. These lines of inquiry do not presuppose each other—they do not need to, logically or conceptually. Yet we thought that, in recent years, we might be witnessing a critical juncture in the development of technological media that provides occasion to update the terms of

¹ Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* is abbreviated as *SW*.

² This does not seem unlikely especially when we take into account the anachronism here, with an image of Tschichold dated 1948 laced with something Benjamin composed in the early to mid-1920s. Besides, Heidegger’s view on modern technology is presumably better established in his later writings. Conversely, we can also understand anachronism as prescience and identify consistency running through a thinker’s body of work.

³ For English readers, the second version of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” is available in the Harvard edition (*SW* 3: 101-33). What is noteworthy is that passages containing the term *innervation* are missing in the third version of the essay, the version that was for a long time more widely circulated, especially in the English-speaking world, which was first introduced to this piece in the collection edited by Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations*. For the third version, see also Benjamin, *SW* 4: 251-83.

critical intervention. That occasion is the proliferation of critical discourses that champion immediacy, not infrequently in cases of ostensible hypermediacy. While this trend has broad reverberations (considering the perceived valorization of the unmediated on various fronts in theoretical engagement today, from ecological thinking to new materialism, from neuroscience-inspired philosophy to emotion studies), this concern, as laid out at the opening of our conference, has a particular local relevance. Creating new experiences through advanced technologies is now part of the national cultural policy; generous government funds are being poured in to promote the infrastructuring of immersive experience, in art projects, museums' exhibition spaces, curatorial programs, among other things. This is a much welcome direction, resolute and practical. What seems to be missing, however, are cogent accounts of these experiences other than their "newness." What is in order, we would contend, is refreshing theoretical work that explicates what exactly the novelty of the state-of-the-art technology entails. Are we better equipped now (than early moviegoers or nineteenth-century world's fairs attendees) to navigate the phantasmagoria proffered by, say, VR and AR? If prosthesis or expansion of perception is the rationale of contemporary technology, how do our physiological and mental configurations respond to the newly created sensory data other than "experiencing"? The Benjaminian scheme, which sees revolutionary potential in technology as collective innervation, would lay emphasis on non-sensuous similitudes (i.e., non-sensuous learning processes) as much as on the body as a medium. What can be gained in the current privileging of the sensuous? As new boundaries are being pushed on the level of practice, we are looking for robust theoretical ground-work.

That aspiration was at the heart of the conference concept. We thought the notion of mediation, for instance, might be of interest for a generation of critics living in a time of immediacy-generating technology—mediation, here, not really in the sense of this or that experience being made possible by particular machines, but in the broader, theoretical or philosophical sense of any sensorial experience being simultaneously a reflexive or critical act. Critics today are not obligated to repeat Benjamin's formulations, but we expect them to do better than simply make short work of the idiom of newness.

For this issue, we have five articles from our conference participants. The first four are by the invited speakers, here presenting what they are each spectacularly good at: Kate Marshall an innovative reading of the technicities of the novella genre regaining attention recently, Bernard Geoghegan a meticulous and incisive genealogy of the several lives of the thinking machine in modern history and its contemporary avatar in the Amazon MTurk labor force, Eyal Amiran a discerning

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critique not only of Big Data but also of some of the progressive thinkers on contemporary culture, and Martin Jay a breadth and depth of knowledge we are always eager to depend on. There is also an article from the German-based scholar Rui Kunze, who discusses two widely popular twentieth-century Chinese food writers whose lives and careers have been punctuated by remarkable moments of rupture and reconstruction in wartime and postwar history.

Looking back, we are grateful, more than ever, that we had the opportunity to hold a physical gathering back then—and were able to enjoy some feasts, for the mind and for the body.

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