

Walter Benjamin's Blog

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I sit.

I write.

I open a window, and through it, I edit my blog.

I read another's blog.

I write a bit more.

I send an email.

Remembering a blog post I read earlier in the day, I use a web-based application to search for the post through my various RSS subscriptions. I copy the title of the book mentioned on the blog. I enter it into a specially designed search pane in my html-interpretation browser. I find out the book is only available in the UK. I enter the ISBN into another search interface; the book in question appears. I discover I can save ten percent if I order both the title in question and another that I've been meaning to read. I recall my credit information from the site. I place the order. I check for the confirmation email. This entire process takes three minutes.

I write a bit more.

Five days later, Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* arrives at my doorstep.

I put down the computer.

I read the book.

I write an article.

When I wrote this article, I wrote it intending for it to be a blog post. Then, as it grew steadily longer and filled with terms of Benjamin's and my own Marxist analysis, I began to think of it more as an article. This means three things: first, I began trying to use less harsh language than I do in my blog posts; and two, I did not start worrying about my veracity. Thirdly: the words were scattered in more of a vast nebula than a cloud; some paragraphs were in my blog drafts, other in "hard copy" document files, and even some phrases and fragments were lodged in email and Twitter. Later on, when all of this reading and writing was condensed into one text file, I began to think of it as not as a potential failure of organization, nor a inability to focus my intention, (nor as a failure to properly bash some public intellectuals); instead, it is kind of a neat pile of crap, which looks appropriately worked through, if not polished. My material work space includes the characteristic cluttered desk, which of course, I hardly use. But while the desk is more caricature than anything else, it appears that particular to this essay, the pieces that I have curated into an articulate exhibition of sorts, in the most market-ly paraphrasable words of Marshall McLuhan, no less than "media [that] is the message." What better serves a post-modern analysis of the digital clutter that is literature than a digital clutter itself?

I am glad that while I have strayed down this somewhat annoying self-reflexive road-often-traveled, Walter Benjamin's own work, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*—which he has been so kind as to

contribute to this particular exhibition—does not follow me down into this garden of forking paths (Stop it! Stop it!). He luckily avoids my post-modern cliché because, unluckily for him, he is now long deceased, and as such, he can no longer be anything, least of all the message. Some might say that an author particularly becomes “the message” (post-modern or otherwise) only after death, when s/he most attains the characterization that comes along with his/her work. But Walter and I disagree. In life, an author is forced to deal with his/her words on a daily basis, constantly reading and thinking over what should be already said and done. Even without the Internet, the author is constantly buried under his/her own work, imprisoned within its message, immanently accessed and not going anywhere. S/he cannot even enjoy the liberty of hurling the volume to the wall, shutting off the screen, or finding freedom in being reduced to the terse form of a quote (perhaps one of the most assured ways of being relieved of the burden of “message”). The only way for a writer to escape the message is to die. When Benjamin ended his own life to escape the Nazis it was a dramatic conclusion of what was a repetitive persecution for him: tragic for us, but for him, the final escape. Though it could hardly be assumed that he was thinking about media or messages at the time. Nevertheless, he finally finished saying what he had to say—punctuated with a pistol shot.

And yet we still read his work; at least some of us still read his work. His message is our now our message, or a fragment strewn about the metaphorical desk, more legible, searchable, or postable on some days than others. Maybe our tragedy in Benjamin is less tragic if we can turn some of this message back around to face the media: to make it less of a caricature and more of a punctuation for ourselves. Despite the ease with which McLuhan's message is reifiable as a message, we authors are still having our own troubles with the medium, and with messages in general. That is, with any media and messages not as easily deployable as a pistol.

But, onward—these forking paths are annoying, even to me.

The literary world is abuzz with... no: cancel that ugly, hive-mind phrase. There is spectre stalking... no, we've played enough of that game for now. Let us just say this: book folks are really worried, and more than they usually are.

I've recently discovered publisher's blogs; by this, I mean that publisher's have recently decided to bite the bullet and get blogs. What they are blogging about, either explicitly or implicitly, is how worried they are that they had to get blogs. They were the only folks in the world who didn't yet need blogs; what does “self-publishing revolution” mean to someone who has been professionally and successfully publishing books for years?

Authors, on the other hand, discovered blogs a little further back in the timeline. Some, mostly the one's who did not have publishers that they could treat as their own personal blogs, have embraced blogs. Others have decried them, calling out the blog for exactly what it cannot do, even though these accusations largely end back up on blogs, one way or another.

Then, though we are quickly running out of hands, there are the bloggers: the beginning of this backwardly told story. They are—for lack of a better term—the message in this essay. They are the ones who made blogs into... blogs. If it hadn't been for them, then the authors and the publishers wouldn't be talking about blogs, much less blogging about them.

This strange circle that I'm dancing of bloggers blogging about blogging is merely an irritating overuse of the letter 'g'; what the publishers and the authors are distraught over, and what they are using the Internet to do, is *writing* about the fact that they are now forced to *write on the Internet*. Books appear to be evaporating at a remarkable rate, along with magazines, journals, and newspapers. The publishers are venturing into blogs in the way that most people look to holistic treatments to deadly diseases: they are out of other options, so what the hell? It can't be worse than doing nothing, right? Into the jungle then, and let's start sucking on any funny-looking tree bark that we can. Maybe it will be the cure.

Strangely enough, the natives to the jungle, the bloggers, are now getting out of blogs just as everyone else is getting into them. It's true: look at any list of the most-read blogs in existence. Most are not blogs, but magazines, newspapers, reporters, authors, and even publishers, who are now on blogs because of what the

bloggers did. Now the bloggers are on YouTube, or Twitter, or some other liminal web app. No one is really sure where: they haven't amassed enough force in a “next new thing” to make the “death of blogs” official yet. But, Walter Benjamin is hopeful that they soon will.

Walter Benjamin does not have a blog. He has never read a blog. He does not even have an email address. He trumps all of the neo-Luddites who like to think that they are so “free” by acting as if it is 1990, without a cell phone or Internet access; *his salad tongs do not even join in the middle!* The reason that he will always win over these techno-rejectors (besides his salad utensils of choice) is that Walter Benjamin is dead. He died in 1940, according to Wikipedia, by a morphine overdose, and not a pistol shot, as I remembered. More people edit Wikipedia than edit my memories, so I will assume that Wikipedia is correct. He was dead before any of these things could be invented, and so he did not have to blog about how troublesome it is that he is required to blog. (Note to self: remove stupid reference of salad tongs; save it for a funny Twitter message.)

What I do not have to remember about Benjamin, and for which he does not need a blog to worry about, is his important comments concerning the Internet in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Thankfully, he wrote those down in a book in 1936. Even more useful is the fact that I just read this book, after purchasing it on the Internet. Here is something I can tell you about what he said about the Internet: yes, he wrote about the Internet and the fate of literature—in 1936. You may not have noticed this because he did not come right out and talk about “the Internet”. At that time, it would have confused folks because none of them had blogs yet. So, very cleverly, Benjamin wrote about film instead, because many more folks had seen motion pictures than had blogs.

Motion pictures, to those who did not have blogs in 1936, and especially to those in 1936 who discussed art in the days before motion pictures, represented a very new idea of art. The motion picture was art mass produced, and thereby, mass consumable. As Walter puts it: “Around 1900 technological reproduction had reached a standard at which it had not merely begun to take the totality of traditional art works as its province, imposing the most profound changes on the impact of such works; it had even gained a place for itself among artistic modes of procedure.”(5)

His message is about the medium: the relationship between how the art was produced and how the art was consumed created a flow of change between each. Art, which once was ensconced within a certain cultural milieu, was now presented to the masses for what it was: a product manufactured with characteristics and merits related to its creation and its production. In other words: “Works of art are received and appreciated with different points of emphasis, two of which stand out as being poles of each other. In one case the emphasis is on the work's cultic value; in the other, on its display value.” (12) The cultic value is a more transcendental, inimical value to the piece, which takes on a secret, magical aspect within society, which he refers to as 'the milieu'. On the other hand, the display value is public, and increases with the amount of people who can apprehend the piece, by their qualitative apprehension of it. “With the various methods of reproducing the work of art by technological means, this displayability increases so enormously that the quantitative shift between its two poles switches, as in primeval times [the heyday of cultic value], to become a qualitative change in nature.” (13) Apprehension of the work of art is now different directly because of its method of production. And this is no accident: “The reproduced work of art is to an ever-increasing extent the reproduction of a work of art designed for reproducibility.” (12) The production of a work of art is now self-reflexive in relation to that production; thus, the qualities of this work of art that the mass of viewers perceives are designed specifically to be manufactured and consumed in this new mode of mass-apprehension. As he continues in the footnote attached to the last: “The technological reproducibility of films is rooted directly in the manner of their production. This not merely facilitates the mass circulation of films, in the most direct way; it positively necessitates it.” Benjamin draws attention to the actual cost of making a film—such a large investment requires a mass audience. But perhaps even more directly, it is easy to confirm that any person who has enjoyed a film in the theater more than at home, in the company of friends rather than alone, or discussed the material afterwards rather than only in personal meditation, can attest to the fact that film is an art form designed with a mass audience in mind. No longer is art created to be confined to the salons and the private exhibitions; now it is made by and for the masses, and will be apprehended accordingly.

What trouble the photographic plate has caused! Sure, it can create representations that rival the most talented portrait artists, even eclipsing the whimsical art of the caricaturist with its snap-shot seizure of time and space. It must certainly be marveled for its ocular talents—its ability to capture our souls not only through its lens, but through the print; luminous in daguerreotype-sepia, gelatinous silver, or even now, Technicolor—our own images stare back at us from that uncanny rift of photographic space-time like the earth viewed from the moon. But the audacity of the photograph—the scab-capitalist rat! It produces not simply one, but a virtually unlimited number of prints from one negative! Why does it not just break into the homes of portrait artists and strangle their children? Why not simply burn down the museums, and cancel all the free-booze art openings? It would be far less cruel to conduct this demolition all at once, rather than slowly starve to death the artists that do not capitulate, the lucky ones turning to house-painting for income.

The question of photography's conquest of artistic mediums, while perhaps haunting these hyperbolic situations in some dark closet of artists' personal apocalypse, missed the important *technological* issue, in Benjamin's estimation. As the artists argued back and forth about whether or not the new technology of photography could stand in for art and whether it would replace art as they knew it, the artists stood oblivious to the fact that photography was not going to replace anything—rather than subsume it, photography was to change art, and as not a piece of art, but as a technology (15). (Marxists: may whomever has not turned their *aufhebung* alarm to 'silent mode', please do so now out of courtesy to our audience.)

This might be a good time break from the text and take a look at the sidebar—let's study Benjamin's blog roll. If you scroll down, we see some familiar names on the list. Ah yes, we can see that he is a big reader of Karl Marx's (now defunct) blog. Using trackbacks, we can see that many of Benjamin's posts directly take up the subjects of Marx's early posts. Freud is in there as well, naturally. It is interesting—is it not—that although Marx and Freud never seemed to link to each other, so many others link to them both? Such are the vicissitudes of the web, I suppose. Oh, look—I've subscribe to this feed, it's a good one: Husserl. He is... what, is it not there? I swear I remember seeing it on the list. Perhaps he removed it. No? Ah, now I remember—I did not see Benjamin link to Husserl; it was on Merleau-Ponty's blog where I saw both Husserl and Benjamin. At any rate, Merleau-Ponty does have Marx in his Top Five, and then we are only one social network away.

Husserl's phenomenology was changing the state of humanistic pursuits throughout the beginning of the twentieth century. To those familiar with the old Usenet, the idea of a rigorous, systematic science being founded upon notions bordering on the inter-subjective may seem to be nothing more than a flame-bait. But as Merleau-Ponty has posted, both as a frequent contributor on Husserl's site, and then also on his personal wiki, *Phenomenology of Perception*, the place of contact between the viewer and the phenomena is where any study, attempting to be scientific, must return. Though he doesn't seem to be posted on the wiki, in his earlier web-comic, *Humanism and Terror*, we find that this scientificity, for Merleau-Ponty, was a distinctly proletarian one: for him dialectical materialism was better phenomenology than the 'transcendental or authentic characteristics of being,' with which other (here unmentioned) followers of Husserl would become engaged. Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and even Marx might very well have left a five-star rating on Benjamin's post in which he wrote: “The tasks that at times of great historical upheaval the human perceptual apparatus is asked to perform are simply not solvable by visual means alone – that is to say, through contemplation. They are gradually mastered, on the instructions of tactile reception, by man's getting used to them.” (35) Merleau-Ponty writes in the comments, ever the film fan: “Long Live the New Flesh!” He embedded the YouTube clip as well: lovely.

“Tactile reception,” ocular or literally tactile, was not just a byproduct of the mechanical art form, but it was the fundamental design feature of this upheaval in production and perception. It does not have to do with pushing a button so much as feeling the interface, getting used to it, and exploring it. One completely underestimates technology if one wishes it to 'just do what it was designed to do'. “What happened was: when, with the advent of the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, namely photography (simultaneously with the dawn of Socialism), art felt a crisis approaching that after a further century became unmistakable, it reacted with the theory of '*l'art pour l'art*' [art for art's sake], which constitutes a theology of art. From it there proceeded, in the

further course of events, almost a negative theology in the form of the idea of a 'pure' art that rejected not only any kind of social function but also any prompting by an actual subject.” (11) The protectors of the current state of art feel threatened, and deride the new technologies for have new functions that 'pervert' the essential function of art. Not only does this deny the true force of the new technology, not to mention the actual mechanics of technology itself as a relation between production, product, and consumer, it creates a social rift between the 'new wave' and the 'old guard' of producers. If the particulars that Benjamin has in mind are not obvious, the fate of such a 'reactionary' theology is writ large: “the instant the criterion of genuineness in art production failed, the entire social function of art underwent an upheaval. Rather than being underpinned by ritual, it came to be underpinned by a different practice: politics.” (12). Marx and the other blog boys aside, the point is that even if one only follows the basic changes of a technological design of any production, then one will automatically re-evaluate everything that one thought one knew about that method of production. You would have to, simply as a consumer! Who buys a digital camera without knowing what a megapixel is? What cell phone user, through advertising copy alone, does not have an inkling of what a 3G network is? And if you don't follow the technology, then you will probably end up saying reactionary things like, “I just like land-lines better,” or, “I just really hate having a personalized home page.” It truly boggles the mind that there are folks out there that talk about their dislike for the Internet as a point of pride. People I have met who discuss their dislike of books speak in similar ways about other sorts of 'pride', some especially unsavory. 'Reactionary', of course, has its own prideful case history among the reading and the non-reading public alike—but let's try to focus on the definition of the word. Rather than receiving new things with a certain, “tactile reception”, there are many people who push it away on principle, reacting, rather than receiving. You don't have to read the entirety of the Marx-punk web-ring to understand the limited foresight of such a position, and the damaging effects of the social rift created between those who like to try new things and those who reject them outright is damning enough; just search for “contradictions of history”. Didn't find anything? Do you still use an AOL web portal or something?

Look, I know these are just some dudes blogs, but they might really be onto something here. Technology is important—most can agree on that. It can change the world overnight, and by the time we wake up the next morning (or afternoon), something might exist that we could not have even imagined the night before. So why is it that some folks think that they can dismiss a gadget only just invented? It takes weeks of practice, sometimes more, before we know all the functions, all the uses, and all the interfaces on our other gadgets with which it can communicate. Most of technology is only half-finished when it is unleashed on the world anyway. And this is good. In beta, technology is, as Benjamin said, “rather than being underpinned by ritual, it [comes] to be underpinned by a different practice: politics.” Any piece of technology that cannot be explored, experimented upon, added to, updated, hacked, or overhauled is going to move backwards as it attempts to stand still.

As rich as these blog posts are, Benjamin has logged off for good. Transmission complete. The messages have moved on, and to think of film as the new proletarian art form may seem a bit of an old meme, if not completely unlinkable. Film has clearly gone not simply to the people and the politic but both ways: reactionary and revolutionary. In doing so it has reached a lackluster middle; for every Hollywood jingoism there seems to be an anti-globalization documentary, and for every heroic war film, a film about government power gone wild. Frankly, film may be just too easy, too mass oriented. The moving image is so evocative, it is fairly simple for anyone with a camera to make a film that convincingly says anything that they like. The YouTube heroes are dead—or at least countered clip for clip by official channels that can pay their way to popularity not just with clicks, but with cash. The moving image is just too fickle, too volatile. It is impossible to say what will be the next beanie baby or the next iPod in the category of the moving image. The video artists, digital and not, retreat behind their own screens and claim that commodity is killing art, while continuing to hopefully upload exploding food products and political rants, because there is still the chance that they could become viral—as if that was the top of the food chain.

Who cares what the technology is, as long as we can sell it? At least the iPhone makes phone calls! Design is the new alchemy: re-inventing the old slogans, trying to make them gold. Not just a viral video, but a synchronized

viral-Twitter blast combined with ring-tone and downloadable smart phone app and Facebook widget, so that art might *finally* prove itself with cash. Benjamin could not foresee just how fickle the masses would become, and so eager to follow trends once capitalism invented the notion of disposable income. When Capitalism wrote the check, the artists were all-too-willing to cash, and then turn around and spend. Artists and all the rest of us connected folk need that Over-The-Air, informational Push-To-Device.

We—us of literary bent—learned to distrust the masses just as much as we avoid the merchants of swill, haven't we? We've maintained our allegiance to the Craft—whether we view it as a theological purity or a technological, “plugged-in” singularity. I try not to write for either. But I don't LiveJournal either; I write for the connoisseurs: the distinguished palate of my circle, my blog roll. (Or at least the folks that happen through on Google Image hits.) No profit, no commodification, right? Right? I suppose, for all my enthusiasm for the blogs, I am just another unlisted corner of the Internet's infinite polygon. Everywhere I turn: a wall. Or even more agonizing: empty space, filled with text or not.

I wonder who Benjamin wrote for; who really read his blog, and who did not just link to it as a means of online solidarity and self-promotion? The real information exchange is the priceless site-hit referral. Maybe he did write for the faceless proletariat. This fantasy is more comfortable than the true, horrifying mirror of “writing for the audience”, who it turns out, was not as much a discerning public, but simply ourselves. And furthermore, we are not writing for just an awkward, cute cellphone snapshot of ourselves—it is the uncomfortable part of ourselves—the part that craves attention, that fetishizes our name and hit counters. There is a desperation in the infinite personal connections promised by the Internet, gratification that might be fulfilled if only we might get into one of the sixty-plus daily BoingBoing posts, or be “featured,” “shouted-out”, or “blogrolled” by anyone, anywhere. The reality of reality culture is that when we finally get to go on stage and show ourselves for who we really are, we're exactly who we always were, and this is fascinatingly, terrifyingly boring.

Don't take my word for it that reality is spreading. Benjamin blogged about it: “[T]he weekly newsreel for example, give[s] everyone an opportunity to rise from passer-by to film extra. [...] For centuries the situation in literature was such that a small number of writers faced many thousands of times that number of readers. Then, towards the end of the last century [the *nineteenth century*, mind you], there came a change. As the press grew in volume, making ever-increasing numbers of new political, religious, scientific, professional and local organs available to its readership, larger and larger sections of that readership (gradually at first) turned into writers. It began with the daily newspapers opening their 'correspondence columns' to such people, and it has now reached a point where few Europeans involved in the labour process could fail, basically, to find some opportunity or other to publish an experience at work, a complaint, a piece of reporting or something similar. The distinction between writer and readership is thus in the process of losing its fundamental character. That distinction is becoming a functional one, assuming a different form from one case to to the next. [...] Literary authority is no longer grounded in specialist education but in polytechnic education; it has become common property.” (22-3)

Great. And I didn't even want to be on TV, I just wanted to be Henry Chinaski. My literary output, thanks to the advances in literacy, are now roughly equitable to the village bicycle, except nobody's riding.

Walter Benjamin's blog kind of sucks.

And so far, this article is joining it—seemlessly and indistinguishably linking itself to the Marxist malaise—joining the publisher's blogs in that whiny chorus: what is to be done?

Luckily enough for them, they have their Trotsky: the Amazon Kindle. That sweet, soft, i-Nternet, via which literary folks will still buy books, because there is that lovely, hip “e” in front of it. Start a new i-Nternational, because someone has to save literature from the Stalinism of YouTube. (Note to self: title a blog post “The YouTube Archipelago.” You are brilliant!)

What is our iPod moment? Please, our messiah—our iPod moment! But perhaps this is an unkind association: there are still some believing Trotskyites that actually know that they are talking about, whereas the

Kindle is just a hot Christmas gift. On the other hand, I do foresee an almost-as-tragic ice ax for the Kindle (in the form of DRM-proprietary file formats—but that is a different passion play).

Let me offer a different question: what have we done? What has this web-widened-world wrought? What have blogs offered us, if anything? Have we killed literature, or set it free? These are very un-blog sorts of questions to ask. Blogs typically deal with the present tense, as does most self-referencing culture. But if I pretend that I am asking Benjamin, then maybe I can get away with it: after all, he never had a blog, and is totally about the past. (He's dead, you know!)

Let me participate in remix culture for a moment: “The clash fought out during the ~~nineteenth century~~ [twenty-first] as ~~painting and photography~~ [print and the Internet] disputed the artistic merits of their respective products seems muddled and ill-conceived today. However, far from denying its importance, this may actually underline it. The fact is, that clash was the expression of a historical upheaval of which, as such, neither party was aware. [...] Much wisdom had already been thrown away on trying to decide whether ~~photography was an art~~ [Internet writing was a literature] (without asking the prior question: whether, with the invention of ~~photography~~, [the Internet] the very nature of ~~art~~ [literature] had undergone a change.”(15)

That wasn't very hard to predict, was it? Benjamin only published this work in 1936. Is it difficult to understand a threat to an art form as a positive force upon that art form, technological or otherwise? Well, for some in the literature business, apparently so. Though there are a few voices supporting the “upheaval” (most notable in my opinion: Andrew Sullivan in his piece for *The Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Why I Blog”), there are many voices decrying it, such as James Woods ([in podcast discussion for NYRB](#)), Nicholas Carr in his piece for *The Atlantic Monthly*, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, and many others. These stalwarts of literature are becoming agitated that print is... well, not so stalwart anymore. Apparently, books are being assassinated in their sleep by YouTube comments, unsolicited and unqualified reviews, and an spell-check ignoring Fast-Times-in-Google-Search-Bar youth culture that allows the still-brith of such Mangle-ish abominations words as “stalwarty”, and “Mangle-ish”.

In my most serious, down-to-earth writing voice, let me say that it is not difficult to appreciate these complaints. YouTube comments are just downright horrible. I love books, and think that while Amazon Reviews are not a bad-idea per-say, I know, umm... this guy... who has reviewed books that he did not read. And once I thought of starting a blog dedicated to pointing out egregious spelling errors in other blogs, until about five minutes later, when I realized what a stupid idea that was.

When I asked Benjamin what we should do about these reactionary jerks, he told he something a bit cryptic: “It has always been among art's most important functions to generate a demand for whose full satisfaction the time has not yet come.” (30) I take this not so much in the sense that any advance in technology is precipitated by an unsatisfied demand in the form of a latent contradiction inherent in the art form itself, though perhaps this is what the good Marxist meant. Rather than move to such a formulation of history, I would take it much more simply: those satisfied by the current state of art are unlikely to be interested in any possible advances in technology, thereby foreclosing its importance. My 16mm works for me; so Betamax must be useless. These folks who speak poorly of the Internet have something in common: they are all established, published writers. If they were satisfied by literature without the influence of the Internet, it is highly unlikely that they will find the new technology stimulating. Unless, of course, they felt that within art there was still something waiting to be discovered that has not yet come to pass. But if you're making a living at it, then you must be doing it right. Right?

But even this is an approximation; it would be drastically simplifying and unfair to say that those who critique the Internet's effect on literature haven't ever used powerful search engines, streaming video, or shared online resources. But what we can say is that what *they have not had interest in exploring undiscovered possibilities of the art form of literature in light of new technologies*. If one was content with the definition of literature without the technology of the Internet, why would one even consider applying the technology to expand and modify the definition of literature? These folks have already defined literature—and by this definition, the Internet is drivell.

Luckily, there are some of us who love Walter Benjamin's blog as much as we dislike the current definition

of literature. We do not dislike literature—far from it. We love literature so much because it is, and always has been, a technology. Writing, reading, and thinking are the closest technologies to the fulcrum and lever on this side of *techné*. Therefore, let's see if we can shed a little light on exactly what this new structural technology is, and how it might have already altered the definition of literature in the superstructure.

I was going to synthesize this conversation via GChat that I had with Walter Benjamin into an essay, but it was a bit difficult for me to follow, so I just left it as it was, verbatim:

Adam: So let's start at the beginning. What is the Internet?

Walter: It is largely a waste of time.

A: You think it is a waste of time?

W: It takes much longer to read than it does to transmit.

A: Access is sped up considerably over any other form of remote access, sure.

W: But it is useless! How am I supposed to read all of this?

A: You don't have to, just read the parts that you want to. It's all centralized, so it's available at any time.

W: Most of it is crap.

A: Yes, I know.

W: Did you see this yet: <http://www.break.com/index/dangerous-explosive-mallets.html> funny

A: Yes I did. Did you get that from BoingBoing

W: Gizmodo maybe I don't remember.

A: But about the Internet...

W: Remote Access of Centralized Information, RACI, call it that. Those are the two important aspects—Information that is centrally located in a networked distribution web, and Accessible remotely by nearly anyone. Everything, everywhere. Sorry to introduce an acronym, but I guess that is the way it's done these days. It is more descriptive anyway. "Internet" sounds like a venereal disease

A: a venereal disease ???

W: yes. Like a bleeding sore, very painful

A: eww. Come to think of it, venereal disease sounds kind of like a communications network.

W: There are all kinds of ways to access information, some centralized, some not

W: Many different venereal diseases too

W: but the thing about RACI is that it is all interconnected, and accessible from anywhere, so anywhere you connect you can connect to the whole thing, and access is growing fast

W: again like venereal disease

A: why is it growing

W: which venereal disease are you referring to?

A: stop, the RACI—why is it growing?

W: first because it can. A library is constrained to a building, a book to the amount of pages that can be put in a volume.

A: are you talking about digitalization?

W: yes—digitalization is the true technological break-through that allows the RACI, combined with electricity and communication networks. The Internet, or the information that makes it up, is the product, but digitalization is the technology. It's all about money, of course. Thanks to digitalization, the cost of production is nil, except for creative production. The prototype is already the product. Once it is invented it is always already produced—you can make as many as you want, delete them, and make them again. Space is no longer a factor, and with modern electronics, neither is time. It might as well be free to store information, and often is.

A: so digitalization, combined with modern communication networks, allows the Centralized Information, and the Remote Access, practically for free. With the pace of these technologies advancement, we see increasing

speed and storage capacity expanding exponentially.

W: worse than venereal disease in terms of proliferation, but less painful most of the time

A: why do you keep coming back to that?

W: I like running jokes.

A: You said it is growing because it can. Why else is access growing?

W: With the reduction of production costs to near zero, there is no place to make surplus value any longer.

In a shoe factory, one can save on materials, increase output, or get cheaper labor. With digitalization, the first two are moot. One can manipulate the talent, but it is tough to squeeze much surplus value from such a small staff of purely creative talent, whose work is mostly in their heads anyway.

W: so the capitalists must look further down the consumptive chain to extract their surplus value. After production, there must be distribution, and so they latch on to this. With RACI, access is distribution. If you can access digital material you “own it”.

W: by controlling access as best they can, they try to extract profit from it. But this is hard, because distribution is also near-free with RACI. So they have to invent toll-roads.

A: like the MPAA and the RIAA

W: the what?

A: the music and movie industries that invented “intellectual property”. By trying to build a new concept of an object of property combined with a license *not* to distribute it, and bound by a copyright that makes the process of production and distribution bound within the product a trade secret, they are breaking the bindings of the legal books to protect their tenuous hold on distribution networks

A: you haven't heard of that?

W: did you make all that up

A: no, of course not

W: it sounds made up

W: it sounds like provocateur crap

A: no, really, it is a juridico-discursive manipulation of the ideational means of distribution

W: look, proletariat all well and good, but if you don't pay the artists, they can't make music anymore

W: I happen to like Metallica, and I think they should be paid for their music

A: you like Metallica

A: okay I'll leave it alone

A: really

A: so what other toll-roads to access exist?

W: well, interestingly, toll-roads are not so common, because they, by principle, limit access. It is difficult to make money by limiting distribution, especially when the actual product cost is zero. The only commodity is access, so if you want to make money, you have to move commodity! so it makes more sense increase access to the limit of the network, because this is moving the maximum amount commodities, making the most money. If supply is near limitless, and anyone is a potential and desired customer, then price falls. The promotion of access is a more profitable goal than the limiting of access, even at such small price margins.

W: for anyone other than a service provider, pay-per-click is the most common model for extracting profit from access. Actual commerce of material goods is a big business online because it is convenient (the RACI saves a lot of overhead), but more fundamental is the competition for access. You have to find the information before you can pay for anything, material or digital. The click is the basic unit, and therefore the commodity of access as measured for profit purposes. Distribution! I can't say it enough.

W: subscription is not so popular anymore, at least for cash. But membership can include giving information to a mailing list, or by viewing a certain number of ads. All of these increase the access to information, and drive profit somewhere down the line

A: so more access equals more distribution, and therefore more money

W: yes, but specifically, well-designed access. For example, popup ads have been phased out because content providers discovered that users found them distracting, and drove away more profit in the form of basic access than it made as advertising access. Rather than brute forcing the ad, they scaled back and put them embedded within the content on the page. This increases overall access by making use of design, increasing effectiveness of the RACI and increasing profit

A: so bad design that inhibits access is weeded out?

W: precisely. Flash ads draw attention, and draw clicks, but you might get more clicks with targeted ads. Once they get to the site, of course, they again have to click to buy, but again, this is simply another step of access, and the concept of advertising is to provide the access, and then hope the product carries it the rest of the way to profit. Designed distribution by the numbers can be very effective, much more so that “bash the monkey with the perscription drug”.

A: ?

W: flash ads—you know.

W: Nevermind. But this is where it gets interesting. the sheer exponential ability of the expanding RACI allows design to attempt to increase access in very creative, and not necessarily direct ways. Spam and popup blockers are one thing, but free web apps are increasingly forming the majority of the experience of the Internet. In the model of Google, quite useful applications are designed to keep the user logged in a perpetual state of access while still completing those annoying, necessary tasks of the day. For example, while I am doing this chat interview, I am also forced to see targeted advertisements in the sidebar

A: sorry

W: its okay. It I wasn't doing this Horkheimer would be wondering why I have not contributed to his inane spreadsheet art

A: wtf is that

W: EXACTLY. But he and Hesse are having some kind of contest

W: anyway, but you see, production of information now takes a backseat to distribution of information, because the production cost is now so low. You can give the info away for free if by doing so you siphon off the access right, and you will profit much more selling this access on to others who can't attract it on their own. This is the entire philosophy of Google, and that which the RACI is really about. All the design of the web is about the increasing of mass access to mass information, as it ought to be distributed.

A: that, and various cultures of porn

W: yes, and that.

A: But one can really find amazing things on the internet, that don't seem related to profit at all, via products or distribution. Such as: Wikipedia, or scans of old illuminated manuscripts, or a guy in Portland who had ripped over four thousand out-of-print 78s to a bare-bones-ugly website that looks like he's been at it since 1994, and still he adds to it every few weeks. One can find instructions on how to make paper-mache, or how to fix a car, or how to rewire a hand-held gaming system into a baby monitor.

W: The brilliant thing is that the system has been so successful in maintain access, that those with real creativity and skill in web design and other technological projects are spending so much time logged onto the RACI that their interests and hobbies are finding homes there as well. You want to work, play, and even conduct personal relationships via the distribution tubes? Why not! You can look at tiny ads the whole time!

W: It goes back and forth, between for-profit and non-profit. A designer may set up a collaborative game site for fun, and then before he knows it, he has a startup business. Or not, if he does not want to. Because the for-profit is all about access anyway, it doesn't matter whether its a business or a hobby. The wide variety of distribution webs that add up to something as general as “access to the network” allow for a really wide amount of creativity. And so far, no one has found a way to directly co-opt any of these instances directly, because more often than not, its better to tax the access than to buy them out. Perhaps the democratization of access driven by the liberalization of digital information is allowing the Internet to flourish in a way that film never could. Film, though setting up a

groundbreaking relationship between the work of art and the consumer, still requires a dedicated production process, in most instances. But access is everything on the web—once you are online, you can do almost anything that is currently possible, and learn how to do anything that is currently possible. The horizon is expanding every day.

A: but it is not democratization exactly, is it? The Internet is anything but democratic. Resources and the corralling of talent still give an edge up those with open, yet tightly controlled distribution networks within closed systems.

W: I will admit that you are right. There is no way that the casual user can compete with a funded startup, all other things being equal. The networks of affiliation that form are also very powerful. Google is again the moderl, with their not-quite-open-source not-quite-out-of-beta product suite. It is completely free and open to access, but controlled, proprietary access. It is tough to break into the this new, digital canon. However, I would ask you to look to other, *real* open-source technology. Many open-source projects, through their collaboration of such a wide variety of talent that could never be all hired at the same time, come out with products that are much better than anything that could be produced for money. Often these products are more reliable as well. I read on Slashdot recently that the open-sourced business model, in which a free product is offered so that support can be offered at a fee, is unsuccessful because the products are often so good that they don't require enough support to make it profitable. The mass has literally made it impossible to extract surplus value, with its dedication to the proletarian ideas of the open-source.

A: You read Slashdot?

W: Of course. Don't you?

A: I have just one more question: what is your Contact Picture?

W: oh. It is the mechanical, humanoid truck, Optimus Prime.

A: I didn't know that you liked Transformers.

W: it is fascinating! They are robots, but only transform from vehicles into humanoid figures! Why humanoids? That is such a limitation for robotic design. Why not put the missiles on the vehicles, and then transform into something that can't be found, like a sewer system, or a floor plan? Or transform into a thousand-armed beast? Bipedal movement is so limiting, you fall over all the time. That's why they always go back into vehicle mode before they "roll out". Behind every automaton is a tiny human, yes? And did you ever see the series with the enemy called the Terrorcons? Do I need to spell it all out? Amazing stuff!

A: I see.

Walter, though perhaps having a poor sense of digital humor, is right. When he talks about the Internet in the same way that he talks about film, he is highlighting an important concept, and one for which we can excuse his unabashed Marxism (because he died before the times when one must apologize for it). The superstructure, by which we mean the societal status of technology and art, adapts slower than the substructure itself (2). The liberal bourgeois ideals of art and production continue to be applied, even though the technology has changed. In Benjamin's day, what the superstructure had not fully understood was that art was becoming a commodity, and as such, reproducible in mass quantities. It still sought to treat these products as each an ideal work of the artist and disenfranchise art that functioned according to other technological models, so to speak.

Today, the superstructure has fully accepted art as a commodity, but are unwilling to advance to the next stage of technology. The liberal bourgeois, outside of those who have truly understood and embraced the Internet, believes that information and persons remain individual, attributable entities. *They still believe that art and information are commodities according to the technological model of mass production.* But they are not: the new universal commodity is access, the act of transmitting and acting upon a flow or source of information. As each access reproduces the information (literally on the display of the accessing terminal, as well as in the sense of a commodity that may be now "owned" by the user) access is itself the mode of distribution as well as production, as well as the commodification of production. The digital actually makes Marx's original discoveries about labor much simpler: it

has compounded the entire production, distribution, and consumption into one abstract concept: access. This building block can be connected into an enormous chain with other entities of information, infrastructure, and users. The access must flow. Only secondarily will access lead back to exchange, for money or further, networked access. Production, distribution and consumption—the access—is now a unified, primary process. This is what the Internet is about.

This has the effect of seriously confounding the liberal bourgeois, who are deeply concerned that people and objects on the Internet may not be exactly “what they are”. But all the time they are already exactly what they are! Access is the fulfillment of a basic, distinctly humanistic technological desire: desire for information, digital content, or other communication non-physical. This is building block—access is the satisfaction of perpetual demand engendered by information. One desires the answer to a question; therefore, one follows the pathway that satisfies the desire as best as one can, the path of least resistance, or best access. Naturally, the eventual destination is not always the satisfaction in purest form. This is desire of which we speak, forever approaching, but never achieving satisfaction! But it comes damn close.

Tracking these pathways, we find that common terms of the past era of production have little meaning in this new technological zone. Accountability? What does it matter, as long as the desire can be met? Wikipedia is golden! Property? Access is the commodity; the substance is only as good as the way by which one can get at it. Stuff it, RIAA! The unity of identity? Is this the same site as last week? Is this user-name the same person as that user-name? You are no more than your social network! None of these things really matter anymore, other than as a nagging doubt from the superstructure of yesterday, when such details actually played a role in the fabrication of commodities.

The technology is already in the hands of its users. As far as digital content is concerned, we have already seized the means of production. (Though, it may be noted, material means of production are still largely out of our grasp, and not any closer through digital technology... as yet!) Now we have to figure out what to do with those tools. Desire of the users and the designers continue to spur the expansion and the unfolding of new webs and pathways—will those of us with a stake in its future be able to keep up with it, or will we be dragged down via older, liberalized modes of understanding that block continued production?

So Onward, Children of the Digital Revolution, and... oh! But wait, what about poor little literature, forgotten under the mighty feet of the web app? Literature is only a form of information, and we have already said all this at length: we promote access, and design for utilization. But aren't we a bit tired of the Marxist hard-line, the coldly rational, materialist, technologist stratagem for breaking information's capitalist shackles? “Doesn't,” those dreamers argue, as they mock those stogy revolutionaries, “Doesn't design approach a creative aspect that is quite art-like, and can show just as much ingenuity, originality, and popularity?” What of the maligned, “art for art's sake;” isn't there anything left for plain reading and writing?

I say yes, though Walter may say no. (I fear he may have now blocked my chat invitations.) He is right to say that a commitment to access is going to destroy, or at the very least irrevocably shift the command of information distribution for the old guard. Publishing, as we know it, will change even more than it has already. But this is exactly where literature will succeed, and where other media will fail—design that is fully conscious of the desire inherent in the technology of information access is not at all a new concept to literature. Literature, though perhaps it violently denies the fact whilst hurling liquor bottles, still cares for its audience, even though most of the bottles may be headed in that direction. Despite some rare and theoretically interesting exceptions, writing lends itself to being read.

What of the novel, pissed on in its time? The pamphlet, or the chapbook, often outlawed and burnt, but not so fast as they could be distributed and read? What of the limerick, the dirty joke, and the bathroom graffito? Writing, since its invention, has defied those who attempt to control its forms because it is always already seeking to be read, even while still in the brain, having not yet reached the page. Perhaps writing is the the current art form *most* interested in the concept of access, because of the very fact that it is still the hardest sort of art to absorb. I can

sense the daggers about to be flung in my direction, but I believe this is so. Art that is visual or aural in substance is easily absorbed, though proper appreciation might be another matter entirely. The literacy rate is only very recently becoming synonymous with anything like “the masses”, and anything that we know as classic literature has been plagued by a market that, more often than not, would rather burn it for heat than consume it as it was intended. And still, most modern folks will acknowledge a dislike for reading, out of pride or otherwise. Reading for pleasure is simply not common. Therefore, as writers, it is has always been as much our mission to design with access in mind as it is to enlighten, inform, and offend.

The problem today is that once we pretty much had someone when they picked up a book. No one would pick up Melville to try and see a video of a sperm whale's junk. No one would open to the letters section of the paper expecting to see cartoons... oh wait, bad example. Fine—no one would open to the letters section expecting to see a sperm whale's junk, unless it was the *New York Post* (see July 3, 2003 “Manhattan Island not Really Shaped like Sperm Whale's Junk”). Those who sought books sought them for reading, not to click past them on the way to something designed with mass consumption much more in mind. Now literature is thrown into the whirlwind of information, and is forced to compete with all the other information for the same amount of access. It's hard to say that it is fighting the good fight.

And so, we are seeing a new confounding set of dynamics within which literature must design itself. Literature is not dead, but the book may be. (And of course, it is certainly not dead, and never will be. It is foolish to think that books will vanish from this earth, because they will be around for ever. However, that is not to say that the majority of literature won't move on to another format). This is something we're all going to have to figure out for ourselves, and it's something that we're all going to have to figure out together. We are going to have to do some hard thinking as we invent, develop, and adjust to the new technologies, and attempt to think of literature as created of pure access, and not simply ink on paper. No one can guess the pace of this advancement, but most likely it will happen faster than most of us are comfortable with. Although I can't see into the future, here are some of the major changes that I see currently developing already as literature is built from the blocks of access.

- Text is shorter in length and phrase. It is editable, which can be a plus, although this feature is rarely utilized (yet) for constructive purposes. Think of the beauty and the mystery that surrounds great unfinished or fragmented works! Now every text can have that mystery, or none.
- On the Internet, text changes shape. It must flow around ads; it must take peculiarly-linked page breaks; it often succumbs to the maze of hyperlinks, which although often touted as an amazing post-structural feature, are typically labyrinthine (and often broken), excuses for footnotes. Text can also be severely limited or truncated to fit its mode of distribution, whether it be the blog post, the RSS feed, or Twitter's 140 character limit (which is quite an exercise that some people embrace, some shun, and others seemingly don't notice).
- Writing is becoming very subjective, trading canonical value for personal value. In addition, authorship can be anonymous, which is an interesting corollary to the subjective feature.
- Audience becomes not the mass—instead it is the *individual-linked-into-groups*. These social networks are even more tenuous than networks, because they grow and shrink with such small occurrences as the ebb and flow of interests, waves of enthusiasm for new things like a particular meme or a certain new game or film, and the personal social drama of friendship. Web design can attempt to create certain distribution webs, but the fundamental feature of social webs is in the popular adjective “viral”, which generally means something so small that no one can see it happening until it already has.
- Since the end of the eighteen century, the novel, and its plot of events that flow from cover-to-

cover, have been the basic paradigm for fiction. Narrative is slowly becoming divorced from plot. Narrative is the strand that leads the reader through the sentence, one at a time. But when access to information can be controlled by the user, authoritarian plots that follow a narrator or a character lose value, unless the user directly relates to these characters. Narrative must find forms that involve the user in the literature without relying upon the pure flow of characterized plot. Do not, even for a moment, consider Choose Your Own Adventure. It's been done. Think bigger. In its absence, narrative is quickly being replaced by topicality, and topoi-of-the-moment. Plot is being claimed by video games. How can literature still tell a story without telling the reader what to do and what to think? Fan fiction is at an all-time high on the Internet, despite its baseness. But what does that tell us about what the readers want? Maybe Harry Potter should have sex.

- Access designers are the new stars of the Internet world. They are the DJs, not creating the music but organizing the party and keeping it rolling. And if the party doesn't come off, you better believe everyone is leaving. This means that there is a "crate digging" going on in the Internet at all times, searching for the new, undiscovered thing, because to introduce a thing is to own it in the world of access.
- There is syntax underneath the words—programming language is now a fundamental feature of even plain text on the web. HTML may only be a glorified style sheet to many writers, but languages like XML provide opportunities to make shifting text, and literature that responds to interaction, in addition to being translatable across different systems (the compatibility of text across material systems like devices and operating systems is an issue I haven't really touched on here, but is clearly important). Page layout can now extend into the page, and occur in time as well as space. Again, those who can design such systems have a lot of creativity power.
- Literature competes with images like bikes compete with cars. Unfortunately, this will always be the case, as long as our brains are wired around our visual perception. But despite these limitations, there is plenty of ground for literature to explore. The best literature will attempt to seek itself out, and not mimic other art forms.
- There is an irrational enthusiasm for converting old literature into digital form. Of course, access is great. But we cannot recycle old forms forever. You may read an e-book, but you don't write one. If the question is limited to how the Internet will change *reading*, we have missed our mark.

Walter wishes me to remind that materialism, technological and dialectical, is not a scavenger hunt. Literature will not reveal itself in the Internet through the heavenly fire of its angels, nor will the iBook messiah appear from thin air. A creative effort is sorely needed that keeps access in hand, and used design as its tool. The Internet is a technology, and changes in its use of text affect writing as much as changes in pen design. "Vision" and "Marketing" have little to do with it, because ultimately, the mass already desire what they read.

I've finished writing an article.

Perhaps it is truer to say that I actually just stopped writing, and didn't finish at all.

I did write, and then I deleted a lot of it.

I'll soon get up, and walk around, and eventually sit.

I used Walter Benjamin as a post-modern sock puppet. I can think of several professors who would be quite disappointed in me if they read this.

When I sit down to write again, I don't know how I'll do it.

But I will sit down and write again.

I'm standing up now.

Note: All parenthetical citations are, unlike other aspects of this essay, true and legitimate quotations from Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Penguin Books, London: 2008. All page numbers refer to this edition.