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Review of Sam Weber, Benjamin's -abilities.

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I.

The "Benjamin industry" incessantly produces new works and new readings, which stretch the interpretation of his writings in the most diverse directions. A constant trend, well established in American academia, has worked for years in ascribing Benjamin to the deconstructionist camp. Samuel Weber is one of the most acute and astute readers of Benjamin's work, and his new book is one of the most interesting and original books on Benjamin published in English in recent years. It also represents the highest point of this way of reading and interpreting his work. The volume collects twenty essays which were written in the time span of forty years and is divided in two parts: *I. Benjamin's -abilities*, and *II. Legibilities*. The second part collects essays on various aspects of Benjamin's work belonging to different stages and times of Weber's reading of the German philosopher, whereas the essays collected in the first part were written more recently and constitute a sort of *organon*, an interpretive grid or pattern through which to read the essays in the second part and Benjamin's work in general. The approach is—brilliantly—"textual": the readings adhere closely to the text, to the analysis of single words but also of syntactical and even grammatical constructions; in particular they pay minute attention to the German text and the problems and inconsistencies of the English translation. The focus is thus on *language*, on the language Benjamin deploys in his writings but also on Benjamin's theory of language, which is read—correctly—as the foundation of any interpretation of Benjamin.

What guides Weber's reading, as explained in the introductory chapter, is the observation that "throughout his life, Benjamin tended to formulate many of his most significant concepts by nominalizing verbs, not in the usual manner but by adding the suffix *-barkeit*" (4), which in English can be written either -ibility or -ability. Examples of these *-abilities* are *Mitteilbarkeit* (communicability), *Reproduzierbarkeit* (reproducibility), *Erkennbarkeit* (recognizability) and *Lesbarkeit*(legibility). Weber reads this widespread and persistent tendency to form concepts by recourse to this suffix not merely as a stylistic idiosyncrasy, but as the sign of a deeper connection between the linguistic constructions and Benjamin's mode of philosophizing. He finds a confirmation, or "second inspiration," in Derrida's explanation of the term "iterability"—a source that for Weber "has always been profoundly related to Benjamin's writing" (4): "iterability" must not be confused with "iteration"; it rather involves a distinctive mode that cannot be situated in terms of the traditional opposition and hierarchy that subordinate "possibility" to "reality" or "actuality." Iterability is a possibility that is *necessarily* inscribed *as possibility* in the structure of the mark, thus a *structural possibility* which is the power or potentiality to repeat or be repeated, a potentiality "at work" even where it seems factually not to have occurred.

Weber reads the same structure in Benjamin's penchant for forming key concepts in terms of their *-ability*, that is, as "structural potentiality," rather than in terms of their "actuality" as mere facts (6). This process of nominalization is thus for Weber a mode of conceptualizing "virtualities": precisely by recurring to the nominalization of verbs—which in German are also named *Zeitwörter*, "time-words"-- Benjamin inscribes a "virtual condition" in his

conceptualization, "inseparable from time insofar as it involves an ongoing, ever-unfinished, and unpredictable process" (7). "Time" as virtual condition is connected to a second notion that is central for Weber, the "extreme": "virtual" conceptualization decomposes—*deconstructs*—phenomenal experience by departing from its traditional role of establishing sameness precisely by activating the "extreme," thereby marking "the point where a phenomenon is constitutively implicated in what it is not, in what is other and external, in what resists comprehension and containment" (8). The "extreme" as "virtual rearrangement" does not exclude, but rather presupposes, *repetition*, but as a movement of *differentiation*, of *variation*, of *alteration*: "By driving complex phenomena to their extremes, the concept reveals not what makes them like other phenomena, their common denominator, but rather what separates them, distinguishes them and makes them '*einmalig-extreme*': incommensurably once-and-for-all" (8-9). The power of conceptualization is thus a power of "singularization," one that takes the phenomena to their ever singular extreme, thereby causing them "to *part company with themselves*, with their Self, not in order to dissolve them into some greater generality, but rather to reveal their distinctive, incommensurable spatial-temporal singularity as a measure of *change* and *alteration*" (9, emphases added). This conceptual rearrangement must remain "virtual," though it is simultaneously "necessary"; a "re-ordering" as an "order," a command or a challenge: what results can never be fully *self-present*, "for such a presence would reduce the *uniqueness—das Einmalige*—by treating it as though it were identically or essentially repeatable *as the same*" (9, emphases added). This "virtualization" is, according to Weber, accomplished by Benjamin's nominalization of verbs through the suffix -*barkeit*.

Weber's language—a language that is certainly not Benjaminian—clearly and unambiguously tells of the interpreting matrix through which he approaches Benjamin's texts. The task is thus to see whether this matrix really helps to uncover the "truth-content" of Benjamin's writing or rather imposes an extraneous—though acute, brilliant, and perhaps even compatible—"theory" onto his corpus. To this purpose, I will focus on certain aspects of Weber's readings, since it is not possible to pay due attention to the extreme complexity and articulation of all the essays and their arguments.

II.

The second chapter construes a genealogy of the -*abilities*, referring them back to Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* and Hölderlin's mode of poetizing. Kant, Weber writes, resorts at certain key points to conceptual formations which are similar to, and probably influenced, Benjamin's mode of conceptualizing: *Bestimmbarkeit*(determinability) and *Unmittelbarkeit* (immediacy). In the judgements of nature, which Kant names "reflective judgements," *Bestimmbarkeit* must be distinguished from *Bestimmung*, determination, since "nothing in nature is effectively determined by the *ability to judge*. No objective concept is produced or invoked, nothing is cognized. Only an abstract principle is produced—purposiveness without purpose" (12). This, however, demonstrates its universal validity through its links to *Unmittelbarkeit* (immediacy) and *Mitteilbarkeit* (communicability, or, in Weber's own translation, "impart-ability"): in an aesthetic judgement the pleasure or displeasure called up is *immediately* attached to the judgement, without the mediation of concepts; this in turn is experienced as *determinable* only insofar as it is felt to be immediately and universally *communicable*. *Communicability* thus takes the place of the objective, conceptual universality that defines judgement, in the sense of the determination of a particular by the universal. Kant's -*abilities* then designates a possibility not in

the sense of a mode of *actualization*, but rather as an experience that is related to cognition—a singularity is apprehended in a way that renders it universalizable—but is nevertheless non-cognitive in the sense of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

Benjamin first deploys this conceptual structure in the 1914 essay, "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin," where the primary focus is no longer knowledge, as in Kant, but rather language, or better, the potentialities of language which, "qua signifying process, entail *impossibility* no less than *possibility*" (14). This is precisely the "virtuality" of language, which, because it can never hope to be fully exhausted in any one realization, remains open to the future. As never fully *actualizable*, virtuality involves an "experience of *movement* and *alteration* rather than a reproduction of the same—or of the self" (15). This Weber reads in Benjamin's analysis of *das Gedichtete* (the poetized) in Hölderlin's poems: as the sphere of the poem's truth, distinguished from the poem itself, in *das Gedichtete* the category of possibility predominates as the "potential existence" of determinations that in the poem are actually present. The "potential determinability" of the poetized *virtualizes* [*sic*] the determinations present in the poem—and others as well—by reinscribing them in a text—the aesthetic commentary—that renders them "possible, potential, virtual perhaps" (18).

Chapter Three extends the analysis to the notion of *Kritisierbarkeit* as deployed in "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism" (1919). As is well known, criticism for the Romantics—and as interpreted by Benjamin henceforth—is not primarily evaluative, but rather involves the "fulfilment" (*Vollendung*) of the individual work, a fulfilment which is at the same time a completion and a consummation, a consumption and a dissolution. Criticism for the Romantics dissolves the singular artwork by exposing its relations to all other works and finally to the "idea" of absolute reflection which constitutes the idea of art: "if the work is finite, criticism *infinitizes* it" (22). This absolute infinitude does not involve, for Weber, the progressive realization of a self-identical ideal, but rather the articulation of a medium, of which criticism as experiment constitutes an instance of "unfolding": "As individuation of the general medium of reflection, the individual work can fulfil its function only insofar as it is driven out of and beyond itself, and this is ultimately dissolved in—and into—the critical process. The 'value' of the work can thus be measured by the degree to which it allows this process—this criticism—to take place" (26). This is the concept of "criticizability." The individual work "survives" through criticism, but that means for Weber that it "survives" as a different kind of writing, as a writing—we have already guessed—of *difference* and *alteration* (28). Criticism is read here as a process of *recombination*: it stages the process of self-transformation of the work "in a movement that breaks with the vicious circle of self-reflection by generating something else. Out of the mise en abyme of self-reflection emerges the uncanny recurrence of what is like but never the same" (30).

The following chapter is devoted to what is perhaps the central concept of this book: *Mitteilbarkeit*, which is usually translated as "communicability," but which Weber translates as "Impart-ability." The analysis begins revealingly with the adoption by Weber of the definition of "virtual" he finds in Deleuze's *Différence et répétition* (*Difference and Repetition*, 1968). The virtual must above all be clearly distinguished from the "possible": whereas the latter's relation to the real is one which rests on similitude and identity, the former presents a relation to the actual which rests on *alteration* and *differentiation*. Whereas the possible is simply subordinate to the

real, is expected to realize itself in the continuity of an entelechy, the virtual cannot be simply defined in opposition to the real; it possesses its distinctive and proper reality, defined as both *singular* and *differential*. The virtual becomes eventually *actual*, but only in *altering* itself; it realizes itself not in staying what it was but in becoming something *different* (32).

This definition is applied to Benjamin's analysis of language in the 1916 essay, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," and in particular to the notion of *Mitteilbarkeit*. In this essay, *Mitteilung* is what defines the linguisticity of language: not intended as "communication" (à la Habermas), but rather, etymologically, *mit-teilen*, "divide or part with," that is, a "partitioning with," a "sharing," a process constituted first of a division and then of a sharing. Weber finds a similar connotation in the English verb "to impart" and thus translates *Mit-teil-barkeit* as "Impart-ability" (41). He notes that Benjamin plays with a term strictly related to it in the essay, *un-mittelbar*, immediate: the impart*able* [Mitteil*bare*], Benjamin writes, is immediately [*unmittelbar*] language itself. The *impart-ability* that constitutes language as medium, Weber argues, is un-mediated, im-mediate: "not a means to an end, nor a middle between poles or periphery, but also not simply the opposite of means, which is to say, an end in itself" (42). Language retains one decisive aspect of the means, namely the fact that it is not self-contained, complete, perfect or perfectible: "it is simply *there*, but as something that splits off from itself, takes leave of itself, parts with what it was to become something else" (42). *Unmittelbar* is thus that which is defined as the potentiality of taking leave of itself, of altering itself, of becoming something different: "as medium, language *parts with itself* and can thus be said to constitute a medium of virtuality, a virtual medium that cannot be measured by the possibility of self-fulfilment but by its constitutive alterability" (42). An alterability that, however, never consummates or realizes itself fully: it does not *actually* become something else, but rather names the *structural potentiality* (Derrida) of its leave-taking.

This structure is used to interpret two central concepts in *The Arcades Project*, *Erkennbarkeit* (recognizability) and *Lesbarkeit* (legibility), through a reading of some entries in Convolute "N." Both relate to the "dialectical image," which, for Weber, is construed by Benjamin as both *disjunctive* and *medial* in its structure, "which is to say, as both *actual* and *virtual* at the same time" (49, emphases added). The exploded elements in the dialectical image "are never simply 'there,' nor do they establish a new continuum. They remain *virtual*. Their *virtuality* expresses itself in *virtual* concepts, Benjamin's *-abilities*" (50, emphases added). The dialectical image is not readable, but becomes readable, recognizable, only at a critical point. What the dialectical tension, from which the dialectical image arises, implies is not, Weber writes, an act of reading, but the *virtuality* of the image becoming readable. Finally, Weber also assigns a function to *actuality*: "The fact that this movement of becoming-readable remains virtual does not prevent it from having its *specific actuality*" (50, emphasis added), but it is an actuality of which, as in Deleuze, one must emphasize the *divisive effects*, that is, the "ability" to penetrate a historical situation once it has been set apart into pre- and post-history. As such, Weber concludes, Benjamin's thought anticipates Derrida.

Chapters Five and Six focus on *Übersetzbarkeit* (translatability) as deployed in the 1921 essay, "The Task of the Translator," and constitute the core of the entire analysis. Again, Weber recurs to Derrida's notion of "iterability" as "necessary possibility" in order to define Benjamin's *-abilities* as "quasi-transcendental, structuring possibilities": the aim is "to shift the emphasis from

the ostensibly self-contained work to a relational dynamic that is precisely not self-identical but perpetually in the process of alteration, transformation, becoming other" (59). Translation is thus a central figure because it represents the relationship to, and transformations into, one another of languages and of language as such. Translatability is defined by Benjamin as an intrinsic trait of certain works themselves, and this means that these can no longer be considered self-sufficient, independent, autonomous or self-contained: "the work can only be itself insofar as it is transported elsewhere, altered, transformed—in short, translated" (61). The original work can only be itself, and only survive, insofar as it is able to take leave of itself, go outside itself, be transformed and become something else; it acquires significance only through what comes after it: "to signify is to be transformed." Again Weber emphasizes that "what characterises Benjamin's language […] is the critical movement of departure, of taking leave, a movement that moves outward and away" (66). The central concept of "afterlife" (*Nachleben and Fortleben*) is here defined not simply as what comes "after" life has gone, but rather as a life which is "'after' itself—that is, constantly in pursuit of what it will never be" (66). Works are translatable because they have afterlives, but they have afterlives because in their life they are always already departing and taking leave from themselves. Translation thus embodies the historical dynamic of languages, which drives each given state beyond itself and makes it something else. It is at this *difference* (which is also *différance*—though Weber never uses the Derridean term—that is, both structural and temporal) that the intention of the translator aims: "at the difference between languages, not in general, but in their specifically different ways of meaning the same things. And this difference between languages is in turn related to an extra-linguistic differentiation, through which the work tends, as a temporal-historical event, to separate from the referents that initially made it meaning-full" (71).

A fundamental concept for Weber's discourse is then that of *Ursprung* (origin) as defined in the *Trauerspiel* book: neither an absolute beginning, nor a passage from formlessness to form, nor a function of becoming or passing away, but rather the historical emerging of an event which involves both *singularity* and *repetition*:

An "origin" is historical in that it seeks to repeat, restore, reinstate something anterior to it. In so doing, however, it never succeeds and therefore remains "incomplete, unfinished." Yet it is precisely such *incompleteness* that renders origin *historical*. Its historicality resides not in its ability to give rise to a progressive, teleological movement, but rather in its power to return incessantly to the past and through the rhythm of its ever-changing repetitions set the pace for the future. (89)

Translation is at work in this movement in which the original defines itself through the ever-incomplete attempt to restore and reinstate itself and is "caught up in a process of *repetition* that involves *alteration* and *transformation*, *dislocation* and *displacement*" (90, emphases added). Translatability is thus a property of the original work, but in the sense of a potentiality that can be realized and is related to the afterlife of the original as already irrevocably departed from itself. Translation therefore does not "communicate" meaning, but rather signifies the movement of symbolization, which moves between the original and its displacement in repetition and dislocation. "Translatability is the never-realizable potential of a meaning and as such constitutes a way—a way of signifying—rather than a what" (92).

The following chapter analyzes the "cit-ability" of "gesture" in Benjamin's writings on Brecht, especially "What is Epic Theatre?" in both the 1931 and 1939 versions. Gesture, for Weber, articulates the complex and conflictual relation of old and new, tradition and transformation, and its "citability" requires a new type of logic, in which—again—"*identity* and *difference*, *repetition* and *transformation* are not construed as mutually exclusive" (97, emphases added). The importance of the notion of citation, or "citability," for Benjamin is well known. Weber underlines its connection with the Brechtian gesture in order to emphasize the *dynamic* aspect of the two terms. Gesture involves not the fulfilment or realization of an intention or of an expectation, but rather its disruption and suspension: it interrupts the action or the plot, and its structure is thus a peculiar kind of *fixation*. Gesture simultaneously interrupts and gives form; it breaks the ongoing sequence but also fixes it in a determined space and time, and this constitutes its dialectical structure. Weber reads this dialectical structure as emphasizing the tension and suspension of the gesture, which interrupts an intention but retains at the same time its tension, and remains thus *ex-tended*: "gesture, insofar as it is citable, interrupts *itself*, and indeed only 'is' in its possibility of becoming other, of being transported elsewhere" (103). This possibility is however arrested, "fixed," in what Benjamin calls *Zustand*: Weber reads this term as a "stance" (-*stand*) marked by the prefix *zu-* as a "to or toward," that is, a stance-toward-something-else, or also a *di-stance*, which is to say, a "configuration that is not simply stable or self-contained but above all *relational*, determined by the *tension* of its *ex-tension*, by its relation to that which it has interrupted and from which it has separated itself" (103-104). In interrupting the action and impeding its progress, the *Zustand* initiates a different sort of movement, that of *Nachdenken*, or after-thought. The "after" defines the disjunctive gesture as a "tendency to always come too late, and yet at the same time never to arrive fully; it belongs to the future, never simply to the present or to the past" (105). The mode of being of the epic theater is thus the possibility of being read both as *potentiality* and as *alterity*, the possibility of becoming other than what is currently present or presented. The central category in this interpretation is again that of *repetition*, which is, as we already know, not the confirmation of an original identity, but rather its *transformation*: "it is this that endows the gesture with its singular *citability*. Gestures are always citable, in principle because they are themselves the result of a repetition and a separation" (109). And, again, this is what constitutes the *virtuality* of the media, or the media as virtuality:

the medium is never simply actual, never simply real or present, much less "the message" that it seems to convey. Rather, it consists in the suspension of all messaging and in the virtuality that ensues. Such virtuality makes its force felt as *intervention*: the media is what *comes between*, stretching apart everything that would be present to itself. (113)

Chapter Eight rehearses again the central argument of the book, the nominalization of verbs through the suffix *-barkeit* as a mark of possibility or potentiality as *virtuality*, this time in relation to the question of "style" and Benjamin's own peculiar style of writing. Finally, Chapter Nine concludes the first part with a short analysis of Derrida's *-abilities* and constitutes the key to understanding Weber's reading of Benjamin. Derrida is here defined as "the thinker who more than any other has taken up the legacy of Benjamin's *-abilities*" (122), or, better, the thinker who has made *explicit* "what had been largely *implicit* in Benjamin," namely "the convergence of what […] [Derrida] designates as 'structural possibility' with a no less structural, or rather destructuring, 'impossibility'" (123, emphasis added). The question we have to address concerns then the meaning of the term "implicit": was Benjamin a precursor of Derrida? Or, rather, has

Benjamin been read here through a prefabricated interpretive matrix, a "theory," namely Derrida's deconstruction, which has been simply superimposed on the text?

III.

We should pause now in order to reflect on a few points. The first is precisely the question of *language*, namely the language Weber uses in reading Benjamin. I want to question the need to use a discourse extraneous to Benjamin in order to interpret his work. It is not that the language of deconstruction or of Deleuzian repetition is not compatible with Benjamin's language and discourse; to the contrary, many interesting *correspondances* can be found and it is certainly valuable, from a purely Benjaminian perspective, to pursue these *correspondances* in order to "telescope the past through the present" (*The Arcades Project* N7a,3), to uncover the truth-content of the text by undoing the material content, in short, to read Benjamin in a Benjaminian way. However, this is not what these readings do: they reframe the text by imposing a new, extraneous discourse, almost a transcendental master code, as if Benjamin's own language were insufficient for the task. Moreover, the substitution risks falling into the trap Benjamin himself wanted to avoid: that of construing a "theory" through which to approach the text.

The major problem I find in Weber's reading, however, is with the category of *virtuality*, which he places at the center of Benjamin's philosophy. And here the issue is not merely one of terminological inappropriateness or imprecision, but rather one of *structural* importance: it is not only that the term "virtual" rarely appears in Benjamin's writings; rather, as Sigrid Weigel (in her *Body- and Image-Space* [1996]) among others has emphasized, the central place Weber assigns to it is occupied instead by the notion of *actuality* and *actualization*, which, as *Aktualität*, *Aktualisierung* and *Vergegenwärtigung*, literally crowds Benjamin's writings of the late 1920s and of the 1930s. *Aktualität* must be read in the *sui generis* Benjaminian way, in connection with *image* and *reading*: in short, the interpretive act, as implicitly or explicitly theorized by Benjamin at least from the figure of criticism in the book on German Romanticism, and then in the essay on translation, in the idea as constellation in the *Trauerspiel* book, in the "image" of Proust, and finally in the dialectical image, implies the *actualization* as "*presentification*," the making present and actual, of an image of the past through its mirroring in the present. This is clearly explicit in the notion of *Darstellung* of the *Trauerspiel* book, in which truth is "made present [*vergegenwärtigt*] in the dance of represented ideas" (*Gesammelte Schriften* 1.1:209/*The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* 29), in the notion of criticism as "completion [*Vollendung*] and consummation [*Ergänzerung*]" of the original work (*GS* 1.1:78/*Selected Writings* 1:159), in the Proustian *mémoire involontaire* as "rejuvenating [*verjüngenden*] force" through which "what has been is reflected in the dewy fresh 'instant' [*Nu*]," and "a painful shock of rejuvenation pulls it together once more" (*GS* 2.1:320/*SW* 2:224), in citation as theorized in the Kraus essay, and finally in the dialectical image, where *actualization* means the "polarization" of the presentation through the present, which becomes a "force field" where past and present "interpenetrate" (*The Arcades Project* N7a,1). *Actualization* is the process in which the image as constellation (be it in translation, criticism, quotation, montage or dialectical image) becomes *readable*. Weber puts *virtuality* precisely in the place Benjamin assigns to *Aktualität*.

This is not the place to produce more textual evidence, but I believe it essential to insist on this point. *Actuality* as driving force of the interpretive act does not necessarily falsify Weber's argument, especially in relation to the endlessness and structural incompleteness of the process:

Bilder, images, as constellations are constructions bound to the present, to their *Aktualität*, and thus always changing. The task of the "reader"—like that of the translator, the critic, the historian, the philosopher—is that of always renewing, of always "actualizing" the text and the original. Weber is therefore absolutely correct in emphasizing the importance of the category of "time." However, the insistence on the "virtuality" of the process, especially in connection to the Derridean, structural "indeterminability" and "indecidability" (126), seems to project the long shadow of Paul de Man and his influential 1983 reading of "The Task of the Translator": "virtuality" dangerously resonates with de Manian "impossibility"—impossibility to translate, to interpret, to read.

It is in this context that the question of *correspondance* becomes important. It is a central issue in the whole of Benjamin's writings, from the early essays on language to the construction of the dialectical image, and "repetition," in the Deleuzian connotation used by Weber, indeed presents an interesting assonance or *correspondance*. In the evolution of Benjamin's writing, *similarity* becomes an important motif at least from the writings on childhood and education of the 1920s, is explicitly theorized in the 1929 essay on Proust, in the two 1933 essays "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty," in the works on Baudelaire, and it takes a central place as methodological cornerstone of *The Arcades Project*. In the essay on Proust, for example, resemblance is the mechanism that makes for the *mémoire involontaire*: the discrepant connection that puts together wakeful state and dream world, "in which everything that happens appears not in identical but in similar guise, opaquely similar to itself" (*GS* 2.1:314/*SW* 2:239). In the "image" of Proust, resemblance constitutes the temporality of the image, the eternity of "intertwined time" [*verschränkte Zeit*], a time "folded" [*verschränkt*] upon itself, in which similarity and *correspondances* rule. This structure becomes essential for the constellation that constitutes the dialectical image, characterized by *resemblance and synchronicity*: the image emerges from the perception of "nonsensuous similarities" that link one "*Jetztzeit*" with another.

Many other examples could be presented, and indeed the *correspondance* with Deleuzian repetition is worth pursuing. However, a characteristic that becomes central in Benjamin's construction is the *dialectical* structure of the similarities, a dialectics certainly *sui generis* and as distant from the Hegelian *Aufhebung* as the Deleuzian or Derridean "difference," but nonetheless constitutive and fundamental for Benjamin's argument. In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze attacks the dialectics by identifying it with the "labour of the negative" and replaces it with Nietzschean *affirmation*: *difference is affirmation*; it is not the negative which is the motor, but rather positive differential elements that determine the genesis of both the affirmation and the difference affirmed. I am not sure how much this construction would fit Benjamin's discourse, but most of all I do not see the necessity of superimposing an anti-dialectical schema on it; the risk is that of distorting Benjamin's text in order to "adapt" it to extraneous exigencies. Dialectics is thus necessarily downplayed in Weber's readings.

Where dialectics become essential is in the notion of *Konstruktion*, which is the fundamental structure of the dialectical image and of the methodology of *TheArcades Project*, but, it can be argued, is implicitly present as well in the figures of criticism, translation and quotation, that are central for Weber's argument. The *construction* of a constellation with the present is the labor of *actualization* that *fixates* an image by arresting the dialectical movement—the movement of what Weber calls *repetitions* and *transformations*: "history is the subject of a *construction*," Benjamin

writes for example in Thesis XIV of "On the Concept of History," "whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]" (*GS* 1.2:701/*SW* 4:395; emphasis added). This arresting-that-actualizes *is* the act of criticism, *is* translation, *is* quotation, *is* the dialectical image or any other interpretive act. The methodological exigencies of *Konstruktion*are, however, ill at ease with Weber's *virtuality*: the infinite, *virtual* potentialities of language must come to a standstill, must be fixated in a singular act of interpretation; *readability must become reading*. The process will immediately restart anew, but this does not impugn the need for the act of interpretation to take place *actually*. *Destruktion* is certainly as fundamental as *Konstruktion*—de(con)struction of the organicity of the work (through criticism), of the "original" (through translation, quotation and reproduction), of the commodity world (through collection), of the phantasmagoria of modernity and the continuum of the history of the victors (through historical materialism)—but only as preliminary moment: the fragments must be picked up (as the ragpicker does) and rearranged in a—dialectical—*construction*, one that *actualizes* and *politicizes* the interpretive act.

IV.

It is not possible here to summarize and analyze in detail the eleven remaining essays constituting the second part of the book. Each essay presents an extremely detailed, complex and acute analysis of some aspects of Benjamin's work that would deserve a discussion exceeding the scope of this review. I will therefore merely list the themes considered by Weber, pausing, however, to emphasize some aspects which are relevant to my argument.

Chapter Ten analyzes the question of history and the genealogy of modernity in reference to the *Trauerspiel* book. The incipit revealingly establishes a connection between the problematization of the representation of history made by poststructuralism (in opposition to Habermas) and Benjamin's discourse, and the essay then revolves around the analysis of *Ursprung*. This argument is also central to various essays in the first part of the book, so we already know that *Ursprung* is read as a figure of *repetition*, *difference* and *recombination*. Chapter Eleven focuses on the central notion of "awakening" as the articulation of that non-synthetic relationship between concepts which Benjamin put forward as exigency in the 1918 "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." This non-synthesis relates concepts to one another while preserving their differences and, in "awakening" as experience of the threshold (*Schwelle*), is related to *Ursprung*: a function of repetition and iteration from which, and only from which, the "singular" can emerge. Chapter Twelve is an acute reading of the relation between Benjamin and Carl Schmitt and centers on the category of "extreme," which the two thinkers shared as methodological demand: we have already seen the importance, for Weber's argument, of the "extreme" as "virtual rearrangement"; the essay finally counterposes Benjamin's strategy in the *Trauerspiel* book to Schmitt's theorization of the "extreme" as sovereign decision in *Political Theology* (1921). Chapter Thirteen reads Agamben reading Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" and the essays on Kafka in *State of Exception*, rehearsing the argument about *Mit-teil-barkeit* (impart-ability) and the analysis of language. Chapter Fourteen analyzes the question of "name" and allegory, especially in relation to Scholem's reading of the two 1933 fragments entitled "Agesilaus Santander," while Chapter Fifteen focuses on Benjamin's reading of Paris—from a Derridean perspective.

It is worth dwelling a bit longer on this essay for a couple of reasons. Weber—as many others have done—utilizes Derrida's notion of "generalized text" in order to analyze Benjamin's notes on Paris. As is well known, under this label Derrida meant that any process of articulation—whether discursive or non-discursive—operates in the manner of a text, insofar as meaning determines itself through the differential relations in which it is engaged. The city thus "can be read" as a text. The differential process, however, entails the *deferring* of meaning, which therefore can never be self-contained or complete (228). The text is thus "readable," but can never be wrapped up in a definitive or conclusive meaning. At this point Weber affirms that Benjaminian (or Derridean) reading is "tied not to the universality of the concept or that of 'theory,' but to the critical moment of *singularity* that marks the *disjunctive convergence* of the two: of the general and the particular, the theoretical and the practical" (231). That is, the "reading" cannot be tied to a "theory," cannot approach a text through a preordained matrix; but is this not what Weber precisely does, interpreting Benjamin through the theoretical schemas of deconstruction? The following paragraph adds an important corollary: this way of "responding to singularity […] does not lead to general conclusions that can be extrapolated from their singular occurrences and made into elements of a universally valid system of knowledge or even a methodology. *Benjamin has no methodology*, no more than does Derrida" (231, emphasis added). This statement is certainly adventurous, if not patently false, considering that the question of "method" emerges as the central preoccupation in the notes for *The Arcades Project*, especially in Convolute "N," which is the attempt to define a methodology for "reading" the prehistory of modernity. Such a methodology can quite easily be identified as a constant in Benjamin's approach to "texts" and to "reading," from the early essays to the late notes. We should also recall Benjamin's polemical exchange with Adorno about this subject: apropos of "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," but also of the methodology of *The Arcades Project* in general, Adorno repeatedly urged Benjamin to support with a "theory" what otherwise would be only a "wide-eyed presentation of mere facts" (*Briefwechsel 1928-1940*, 365/*The Complete Correspondence* 281). Benjamin, for his part, tried to demonstrate that not a "theory," but rather a "method" was the basis of his reading: not a theory, which would set *a priori* the agenda and the goals of interpretation, but a method, which establishes an open-ended—but nonetheless structured—approach to the text ; and this method is precisely *Konstruktion*—and not merely *de-construction*. If the deconstructive moment is fundamental, it must be completed by a moment of *construction*, the instant in which the text—the city, history—becomes finally readable.

To conclude this very brief overview, Chapter Sixteen focuses on the notion of "detail," Chapter Seventeen reads the 1921 fragment "Capitalism as Religion," Chapter Eighteen reads Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* as a *Trauerspiel* (and also as a *deconstruction* of modernity) and Chapter Nineteen analyzes the task of reading, and writing on Benjamin. Noteworthy in this essay—and in the following one—is the attention that Weber finally devotes to the question of the "image": as in the *Darstellung* of the *Trauerspiel* book, the truth of a "text" cannot be "seized" or "grasped" in a concept (*Be-griff*), cannot be "possessed" in an act of cognition (298). It rather "congeals" around an image, which Weber prefers to relate to the *Sprung*, the leap which separates—*differentiates*—cognitions from cognitions, rather than to the constellation which holds together the ideas. Weber recognizes that commentary, critique and translation are some of these images/figures or, he emphasizes, *Schrift-bilder*, "writing-images." Chapter Twenty

concludes the book with the reading of one of these *Schriftbilder*, "Seagulls," published in 1930 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* as part of a cycle of short pieces under the heading *Nordic Sea*.

V.

Benjamin's work contains instructions on how it should be read; it provides a "method" which almost prescribes a reading that will be polarized by the present, that is, driven by the notion of *Aktualität*. It asks to be read *historically*, to be put into a constellation with our present. It asks that our reading recognize its nonsensuous correspondences with our time, that its historicity be "unfolded" and its *Ursprung* unveiled. It asks to be "mortified" and "ruined"—*de(con)structed--* and its truth-content represented. As a cultural artefact, it asks to be violated and read against the grain of its time and our own and thus re-inscribed in new practices, re-assembled and re-made always anew. To look for *correspondances* with contemporary practices of interpretation is certainly part of this process: deconstruction, Deleuzian repetition, allegory, the focus on language, on the text, on the metropolis, the virtuality of the media, and many other contemporary interests can enter into fruitful constellations with Benjamin's work and perhaps help to unveil its truth-content. However, this does not mean approaching his work with a pre-established "theory," a discourse and a language external to it, in order to co-opt him as a predecessor. His method—and precisely "method" as the rejection of any "theory"—presents a coherent politics and ethics of interpretation: a perpetual vigilance and attentiveness to the text that goes beyond the minute analysis of its language and rather calls for its continuous renewal and "actualization." Weber's readings are brilliant, extremely acute, thorough, complex and articulated, but fail to meet this ethical demand.

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