



Anthropology & Materialism

A Journal of Social Research

1 | 2013
Across the Fields

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Walter Benjamin, Thinker of Radio Waves

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/am/432>

DOI: 10.4000/am.432

ISSN: 2364-0480

Publisher:

CETCOPRA, CRASSH - Center for Research in the Arts Social Sciences and Humanities, Fakultät Gestaltung - Universität der Künste Berlin

Electronic reference

Philippe Baudouin, « “Give Every Listener What He Wants and Even a Little More” », *Anthropology & Materialism* [Online], 1 | 2013, Online since 15 October 2013, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/am/432> ; DOI : 10.4000/am.432

This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

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"Give Every Listener What He Wants and Even a Little More"

Walter Benjamin, Thinker of Radio Waves

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Introduction

"People thought that radio had put into their hands the instrument of a vast public-education enterprise; lecture series, instructional courses, large-scale didactic events of all sorts were introduced – and ended in fiasco. What did this reveal? That the listener wants entertainment. And radio had nothing of the sort to offer: the shabbiness and inferiority of its "colourful" offerings corresponded to the dryness and technical narrow-mindedness of the pedagogical programs. There is where someone had to intervene. (...) Schoen provided the slogan: 'give every listener what he wants, and even a bit more (namely, of that which we want)'."

Walter Benjamin, *Conversation with Ernst Schoen* (1929)

- 1 Walter Benjamin seems to be one of the few philosophers who formulated thoughts about the radio and probably the only one who made such a variety of different experiments on air. Aesthetician, writer, collector, during his entire life Benjamin never stopped to look at the different manifestations of modernity. Influenced by literary, sociological and philosophical works, Benjamin's thoughts sought to clarify the role that history, politics,

culture, language or art play at a time where an unprecedented development of technology allowed great strides and the worst atrocities. Except for a first transmission in 1927, Benjamin's radio practice began in August 1929 and ended in January 1933, just a few days before Hitler became Chancellor. This period was an opportunity for Benjamin to experiment with an emergent medium. At that time, radio raised a lot of enthusiasm and many broadcasted programmes were both ingenious and original. In German media history, the few years before 1933 also stand as the last period of free cultural, political and artistic expression before the Nazis turned the new media into a tool for propaganda purposes. But what exactly did Benjamin do on radio?

- 2 Indexing all radio texts written by Benjamin is a very difficult project, maybe an impossible one. It is well known that Benjamin made an inventory of almost everything he owned or read. But not of his radio works. Neither Benjamin himself nor Adorno or Rolf Tiedemann, the editors, indexed these broadcasts. Nevertheless, we know that Benjamin produced around 90 broadcasts between 1929 and 1933. Consequently, it's impossible to consider him as a casual player in German radio programmes.
- 3 We can distinguish two main categories of works in Benjamin's radio practice. First, there are literary programmes in which the philosopher officiated as a simple journalist. Most of these programmes can be considered as adaptations of literary texts, trying to match the constraints of the new medium. We can take a census of almost 30 literary programmes made by Benjamin where we find readings, conferences devoted to famous writers, interviews, and other literary radio shows. But Benjamin also created new types of radio shows and tested a radically innovative sound broadcast material.
- 4 As *Hörspielmacher*, Benjamin wrote and produced four *Hörspiele*, several *Hörmodelle* - radio models - and *Funkspiele* - a kind of literary radio games - as well as about 45 radio shows for children, collected in parts under the title *Aufklärung für Kinder* (Enlightenment for children). Speaking to children and teenagers, Benjamin addressed an audience he was not used to. So, how did he use the microphone? What kind of tales did he tell children?

I. Wireless Tales: Witchcraft, Natural Disasters and the Ethereal World

- 5 Benjamin obviously liked to tell stories to his young listeners. He told stories of robbers and crooks: the Bootleggers overriding American prohibition, the adventures of bandits in Old Germany or even the deceptions of Cagliostro. He knew how these stories of peddlers and charlatans could at once fascinate his listeners and constitute a source of knowledge. The anecdotes he gave in these short lectures about swindlers revealed the dark side of history: the right to speak stolen from pitiful people.
- 6 This was also linked to Benjamin's theoretical research on the concept of history; a research he had been conducting for several years. Indeed, when Benjamin began to work for the radio his conception of history was changing. The most prominent change involved his conception of the historian. In the work on the *Trauerspiel* the historian was considered as an artist contemplating ideas and managing to reach an understanding of historical facts. In the late twenties Benjamin thought the historian shouldn't trust the power of contemplation anymore and should consider current events instead. In other words, the historian now had to reveal the hidden side of history, given that the historical object is never given but must always be built. To bring past events out of

oblivion, to actualise them in the present experience, and to write the story backwards: these were the new tasks of the historian.

- 7 Robbers, swindlers, and witches – to whom the philosopher gives a new life through the microphone – are forgotten people, the "dumbs" of history. And their existence is rooted in evil: the thief is someone who robs with the help of a weapon, the crook is someone who gets something from a person by artifice, and the witch is a woman who makes an agreement with the devil to cast curses. Why did Benjamin try to give these figures a place in history? Why didn't he choose to highlight the lives of the oppressed and the slaves, according to the Marxist tradition? Why did he look at malicious people? Benjamin gave a moral dimension to these problems, which is quite surprising as morality was usually foreign to his thought:

Should one really tell children such stories? About crooks and criminals who break the law to make a fortune with dollars, and who, on top of that, often succeed? Yes, that is the question, and I would really have not a good conscience, if I just stood here and fired one thieves gun after the other right next to your ears.¹

- 8 Behind the crimes and evil deeds committed by bands of robbers, fraudsters and witches, Benjamin was trying to make visible their mysterious and luminous aspects. He wanted to underline the different facets of lives rooted in evil and give his young audience an "education for ambiguity" (Merleau-Ponty 1975: 13). He was trying to show that the reality around us is mainly characterized by deep complexity and composed of many colours. The bootleggers were alcohol smugglers but also U.S. citizens who, in the early 1930s, defied the ban and rendered the absurdity and inefficiency of such laws obvious. The witches lived in the service of evil but were also the victims, from the 15th century on, of persecutions orchestrated by the Church and legitimated by political and scientific arguments. The witchcraft trials, Benjamin wrote, "were the most terrible plague of that time, next to the pest".² Fighting stigmatisation, Benjamin wanted to arise his listeners' curiosity for the history of outcasts and to make children more lucid observers of reality.
- 9 Besides the programmes devoted to witches and bandits of all kinds, another series of radio broadcasts by Benjamin was devoted to the city of Berlin. When he was working for Berlin radio for the first time, the direction of the station asked him to produce some shows about the history of the city. This constraint inhibited somewhat the freedom of the philosopher but it also enabled him to bring up autobiographical elements of his Berlin childhood. For example, in *Das Dämonische Berlin* Benjamin remembered reading Hoffmann's books as a child. In another programme, he invited listeners to go for a walk with Rellstab and Hessel. He also tried to develop a real "mythology" of the Tiergarten. Book of magic, labyrinths, old forgotten writers: Berlin is full of unknown characters and places that young listeners should discover. The fascination of children for big toy stores contrasted with the harsh world of work (that Benjamin introduced in Borsig) and the militarisation of the population (which he denounced in *Die Mietskaserne*).
- 10 In other broadcasts for children, Benjamin told stories of disasters. He recalled some of the biggest human tragedies in history: the fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii, the earthquake of Lisbon, the rail disaster of the Firth of Tay, the flooding of the Mississippi in 1927. In these radio shows, Benjamin reminded his listeners that catastrophe is a fundamental moment of historical development and a sign that makes us realise that the power we have upon nature is illusory. Catastrophes also reveal the real passions of the individual: the violence used by the U.S. government so as to force the poorest farmers to sacrifice their land in order to save the great commercial city of New Orleans threatened

by the Mississippi; the selfishness of men confronted with the distress of people surrounded by water; the avarice of Romans trapped by the lava of Vesuvius. Benjamin's broadcasts for children mirrored his vision of history: the history of the West as a field of ruins.

II. "Verehrte Unsichtbare": Kasperl and the Technological Reproducibility

- 11 "Verehrte Unsichtbare" ("Dear Invisible Listeners"): this is how Benjamin talked to his young audience. But we had forgotten his voice. In January 2011, Stéphane Hessel told me for a France Culture documentary that he had identified Benjamin's voice in a sound archive. A mischievous and cunning voice, cleverly disguised to interpret the main character of the *Hörspiel* "Radau um Kasperl". One can find this voice in the two last sound archives that remain from Benjamin's radio work.
- 12 These precious fragments left by Benjamin belong to "Radau um Kasperl", a radioplay for children he produced in 1932 for Cologne and Frankfurt listeners. Thanks to two important documents, we know the names of the actors of this radioplay, except the actor who played Kasperl for Cologne radio. Unlike the other actors' names, only the word "Kasperl" was written in front of "Kasperl". So who played Kasperl? According to Stéphane Hessel it was undoubtedly Walter Benjamin:
- When you have known someone and you hear his voice again, you immediately recognise him! A sharp and clear voice. When I listened to these radio archives, I had no doubt: Yes, it's him.³
- 13 "Radau um Kasperl" is one of Benjamin's latest radio works. Broadcasted in 1932, this *Hörspiel für Kinder* was dedicated to children. The story is the following: Kasperl is sent out by his wife to buy fish for lunch. He meets Mr. Malschmidt, the radio broadcaster, who badly wants Kasperl to come to talk on air. Kasperl doesn't agree and runs away. Trying to get away from his pursuers, he comes across places children know very well: the railway station, the funfair and the zoo, where he is finally found by Mr. Malschmidt and his friends. The final scene shows Kasperl wounded, lying on a hospital bed. Benjamin explains that the men who work for the radio have managed to record Kasperl's voice by putting a microphone under his bed. They give 1,000 Marks to Kasperl who concedes to forgive them.
- 14 How can we understand this tragic little story?
- 15 Benjamin first tried to make children aware of the different functions of the radio through humour. He also highlighted the malpractices of Weimarian radio, where programme planners were always looking for famous people in order to attract a large audience. In the beginning of the 1930's, Kasperl was one of the favourite characters of children. He was also an old popular figure of the puppet theatre. Benjamin taught his listeners the techniques of radio broadcasting in order to demonstrate that the distance between speaker and listener could be overcome. He wanted to show that it was possible to make them work together, even if that was dangerous in some cases. Indeed radio is by definition an ambivalent medium: it can be used for brainwashing. In 1930 Benjamin wrote a brief text that can be considered as an attempt to theorise radio. This text, called "Reflections on Radio", reveals his conception of the radio:

- 16 The crucial failing of this institution has been to perpetuate the fundamental separation between practitioners and the public, a separation that is at odds with its technological basis. A child can see that it is in the spirit of the radio to put as many people as possible in front of a microphone on every possible occasion; the public has to be turned into the witnesses of interviews and conversations in which now this person and now that one has the opportunity to make himself heard (Benjamin 1999: 527).

Conclusion

- 17 There are no minor writings in Benjamin's works. His broadcast stories can be conceived as a way of earning money, but they are more than that. They are also a way of rethinking education and philosophy. By talking on air, narrating the misadventures of the bookleggers, the mysteries of an unknown Berlin, or the great disasters of the West, Benjamin tried to reinvent radio.

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NOTES

1. "Soll man Kindern überhaupt solche Geschichten erzählen? Von Schwindlern, von Verbrechern, die die Gesetze übertreten, um ein Dollarvermögen zu machen, und noch dazu gelingt es ihnen auch oft. Ja, so kann man schon fragen, und ich hätte wirklich kein gutes Gewissen, wenn ich mich nun einfach hinstellen und euch so eine Räuberpistole nach der andern vor den Ohren losknallen würde." "Die Bootleggers" (Benjamin 1972, VII: 201, transl. M. Berdet and J. Sieber).

2. "den Hexenprozessen, der schrecklichsten Plage dieser Zeit, neben den Pest", "Hexenprozesse" (Benjamin 1972, VII: 149, transl. M. Berdet and J. Sieber).

3. Weblink to listen to Stéphane Hessel's testimony about Benjamin's voice: <http://www.franceculture.com/emission-les-passagers-de-la-nuit-tout-n-est-que-conte-pour-enfants-rediffusion-du-18-janvier-2011-2>

ABSTRACTS

Walter Benjamin seems to be one of the few philosophers to have theorised on the radio, and probably the only one to have produced such a variety of experiments on air. Between 1929 and 1933, he realised more than 95 radio programmes: lectures, readings, radio plays, interviews and radio stories for children. These different radio works allow Benjamin to relate to a new audience who has no prior knowledge of his essays. His radio thoughts and practices give listeners the means to change the way they use the media and the radio in particular

Walter Benjamin semble être l'un des rares philosophes à avoir tenté de théoriser la radio et probablement le seul qui ait produit et expérimenté de manière aussi intensive et créative ce médium. Entre 1929 et 1933, il réalise près de quatre-vingt quinze émissions: conférences, lectures, *Hörspiele*, entretiens et contes radiophoniques pour enfants. Ces différents travaux pour la radio offre à Benjamin la possibilité de se confronter à un public inédit qui ne connaît pas ses essais. Penser et pratiquer la radio pour donner aux auditeurs les moyens de changer leur propre usage des media et en particulier de la radio.

Walter Benjamin parece ser uno de los pocos filósofos en formular ideas sobre la radio y, probablemente, el único que haya hecho variados experimentos en este medio. Entre 1929 y 1933, Benjamin realiza más de 95 programas de radio: conferencias, lecturas, radioteatro, entrevistas y cuentos radiofónicos para niños. Esta diversidad de trabajos radiales le permite confrontarse a una audiencia inédita que desconoce sus ensayos. Se trata de un pensamiento y una práctica de la radio que ofrece a los oyentes diferentes posibilidades sobre cómo usar los medios de comunicación.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Benjamin Walter, radio, auditeur, enfants, voix, technique

Keywords: Benjamin Walter, radio, listener, children, voice, technique

Palabras claves: Benjamin Walter, radio, auditor, niños, voz, técnica

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