

The silenced medium: theoretical re-reflections on a media theory of Walter Benjamin*

O medium silenciado: re-flexões teórico-comunicacionais sobre uma teoria dos media em Walter Benjamin

MAURÍCIO LIESEN**

Universidade de São Paulo, Escola de Comunicações e Artes,
Núcleo de Estudos Filosóficos da Comunicação. São Paulo-SP, Brasil

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a communicational and theoretical reflection on the conceptual difference between medium (Medium) and means (Mittel) proposed by Walter Benjamin in his essay *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, written in 1916. The present text discusses that such terminological refinement grounds a communication theory in opposition to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Through a revision of the Brazilian versions of some Benjamin's texts, this paper intends to restate the question of the medium in the work of the German philosopher: question that is often silenced in the national translations.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, medium, media theory, communications theory; media philosophy

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta uma reflexão teórico-comunicacional sobre a divisão conceitual entre medium e meio proposta por Walter Benjamin em seu ensaio *Sobre a linguagem em geral e sobre a linguagem humana*, escrito em 1916. Argumenta-se aqui que tal refinamento terminológico fundamenta uma teoria da comunicação contrária à arbitrariedade do signo linguístico. Por meio de uma revisão das versões brasileiras de alguns dos mais influentes textos de Benjamin, busca-se recolocar a questão do medium na obra deste filósofo alemão, muitas vezes silenciada nas traduções nacionais.

Palavras-chave: Walter Benjamin, medium, teorias dos media, teoria da comunicação, filosofia dos media

* Translation by Katia Fonsaca, student of the Anglophone Modernities Master's Program at Potsdam University.

** Postdoc at the Universidade de São Paulo. Between 2012 and 2014 he was a visiting researcher at the University of Potsdam (European Media Studies). He holds a PhD in Communications Sciences from Universidade de São Paulo (USP), a Master's Degree in Communication & Culture from Federal Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (Brazil 2010) and has a BA in Communication Sciences from Universidade Federal da Paraíba (Brazil 2007). E-mail: mauricioliesen@usp.br

P

The silenced medium: theoretical re-reflections on a media theory of Walter Benjamin

1. See Muniz Sodré (2012), in which the author considers that the field of Communication is in trouble; in his recent works, Ciro Marcondes Filho (2010a, 2010b) throws the provocative statement that, in Brazil it has never been researched what communication is; see also José Luiz Braga (2010) and his argumentation on the importance of casting research questions and specific methodologies of Communication to observed phenomena.

IN THE CANONICAL desert of the communication theories in Brazil¹, the work of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) looks like one of the few oasis, whose source is far from being used up. Always referenced, his texts seem to resist the destructive power of shallow discussions and the eagerness to academic legitimacy through out-of-context quotations. Benjamin's texts are considered required reading for almost every degree in Communication Sciences, and at least three of his essays would be in any contemporary theory of communication's compendium: *A short history of photography* (1931), *The author as producer* (1934), and *The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). These essays have substantiated the assertion that both cinema and photography – and by extension any other *means of communication* in what could be understood as an anticipation of Marshall McLuhan (1964) – change people's perception. Therefore, Benjamin's work has become a pillar of the effect-oriented studies on means of communication, which did not hesitate to use the term *media* to refer to these technologies studied by him.

Nevertheless, it is at least curious that the concepts medium and communication in Benjamin's work have been rarely questioned by the field of communication, which keeps having him as a key-author. In his most important texts Benjamin himself openly criticized the instrumental conception that suggests terms like means, material, mass media, channel and platform are the same thing. This theoretical silence can be understood when comparing the Brazilian translations, which do not call attention to the differentiation of these terms in Benjamin's work mainly because the word medium has not played an important role to the fields that produced these versions to Brazilian Portuguese, i.e. Social Sciences, Philosophy and Literary Criticism. This issue should be embraced by the theorists of Communication. Therefore this essay raises questions that help understand better the concepts medium and communication ignored by the Brazilian sociology-based academic tradition, which focused mostly on the concepts of experience and perception. Firstly, the term medium in Walter Benjamin's work is going to be introduced. Subsequently, arguments for Benjamin's pioneering ideas are going to be given considering the recent debates in Germany, since he provides the fundamentals of a communication theory contrary to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and based on the conceptual difference between medium and means.

MEDIUM ≠ MEANS

Benjamin's difference between medium and means was first made clear in the essay entitled *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (1916), which

can be read as a treatise on the magic of language. This hermetic text, that makes reference to the Old Testament and has a mystical and revealing tone, was intentionally written to form a set of theoretical reference trusted at the beginning only to a few friends. However, as the philosopher and distinguished scholar of Benjamin's theory of language Winfried Menninghaus affirmed in his book *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie* (1980), Benjamin's *On Language...* "reveals one or most likely the very foundation of his entire work" (Menninghaus, 1995: 49)², for it presents all essential theorems and terminologies that base a non-instrumental and non-semiotic theory of communication³.

All at once, Benjamin's theoretical audacity:

What does language communicate? It communicates its corresponding spiritual being. It is fundamental to know this spiritual being communicates itself *in* the language and not *through* it. There is also no such thing as the speaker of the language, if it intends to mean one communicates oneself through language (Benjamin, 2010: 31-32).

Further, he adds:

Every language communicates itself into itself, and carries the purest sense of communication's "medium". The medial is the spiritual communication's *immediacy*, which is the most fundamental problem to the theory of language, and if one wants to call this immediacy magic, then the original problem of language is its magic (Ibid.: 32).

The challenge is to unfold this conceptual origami in a way it can be later re-folded without being torn. In the beginning of his essay Benjamin assumes language is in everything – and not only in human beings –, being also a principle directed towards communication. This principle was also named communicability [*Mittelbarkeit*] (Krämer, 2008: 43). Regarding this, every language, as a medium, would have a spiritual being that do not take part in expression and therefore cannot be communicated through language, but only inside it. Nevertheless, these statements remain still quite obscure. If language is defined with relation to notions as spiritual being, medium, communicability, immediacy, magic and expression, then these terms must be clarified.

Benjamin affirmed the spiritual being is this *itself* that communicates *itself in language*. "That means that what communicates itself in language is not language itself, but something that differentiates from it" (Benjamin, 2010: 31). Therefore, the spiritual being does not participate in the expression because it shows itself *in language*, and not *through* it. That is the fundamental difference between medium [*Medium*] and means [*Mittel*] in Benjamin's theory. According

2. All citations from works originally written in German, when the sources in Portuguese were not referenced, are translations of the author of this article. Its translation into English was almost totally based on Liesen's Portuguese version; a couple of times Jephcott's translation of Benjamin's "On language as such..." was used to comparison of some key-terms. In: *Selected Writings v. 1*. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (eds.) Edmund Jephcott (trans.), 62-74. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

3. This article focuses on the concept of medium in Benjamin's *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* to highlight its importance to the recent theoretical debates in the communication field. To a in-depth analysis of the establishment of Benjamin's Philosophy of Language - not only from his antecedents as Johan Georg Hamann and in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, as well as from a standpoint of its consequences to the Philosophy of Language - see *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*, by Winfried Menninghaus (1995) and, more recently, the book *Es spricht der Mensch: Walter Benjamins Suche nach der Lingua adamica*, by Anja Hallacker (2004).

to Benjamin, the belief that language is a means of communication constitutes what he came to criticize as the “bourgeois conception of language: the word is comprehended as a means of communication, its object the thing, and its sender a human being” (Ibid.: 34). In other words, one would communicate something to someone when one names this “something” through words. His critique points out to the division between spiritual being and linguistic being: “this differentiation is very important to the investigation of the theory of language” (Ibid.: 31). The linguistic being – in the form of the linguistic sign – is only one component of language. Benjamin highlights an aspect which had not been considered by the theories of language of his time. According to him, language is a medium in which its spiritual being communicates itself. Menninghaus explains that Benjamin does not understand communication as “the exchange of fixed predicative contents, but as a non-predicative process of representation and comprehension, in which the ‘primary’ semantics of words and sentences serve as a, nevertheless important, background” (Menninghaus, 1995: 16). And what is the connection between these two dimensions to Benjamin? As he says,

the spiritual being is identical to the linguistic being only insofar as it is communicable. What the spiritual being is able to communicate is its linguistic being. Hence, language communicates the linguistic being of things, but the spiritual being [is communicated] only if it establishes an immediate connection with the linguistic being (Benjamin, 2010: 32).

That is the *magic* of language. Medium is not the same as means, hence it should not be understood as a vehicle, a channel. For Benjamin the medium is what makes communication possible. The German philosopher Sybille Krämer sheds light on the issue: “The media found the possibility of communication, but they are not the means of communication” (Krämer, 2008: 48). She also adds: “The medial is the ability to express itself – in other words, with no interference from outside” (Ibid.). The immediacy of the medium is its magic.

“What does language communicate? It communicates itself” (Benjamin, 2010: 32). With that, Benjamin expands the understanding of language to beyond its instrumental or semiotic conception, since for him language “is the immediate expression of what communicates itself in language.” (Ibid.: 31). To communicate and to show acquire similar dimensions in his theory, as Krämer explains: “People and things can express something at the moment they show something from themselves. In other words, one does not communicate, language communicates” (Krämer, 2008: 46). That means the communicable is immediate in language. “What is said *in* language is not expression itself, but communicability” (Ibid.: 47).

These assertions can be verified in the uncommon example given by Benjamin on the language of the lamp: the lamp is not communicated through the language of the lamp because its spiritual being is not the lamp itself. The language of the lamp communicates “the lamp-language, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression. For language works like this: the linguistic being of things is its language” (Benjamin, 2010: 32).

At this point, the difference between human language and the language of things in general is presented. Human beings communicate their spiritual being when they name things, since “the linguistic being of human is to name things” (Ibid.: 33). Once more, Krämer provides a helpful explanation on this passage: “If the lamp expresses itself at the moment it illuminates, then one expresses and shows oneself when one names things” (Krämer, 2008: 46).

The name is taken as the language of the human language and, as Benjamin himself (2010: 35) highlights, the genitive here does not indicate the function of means, but rather the function of medium, for the human being communicates the spiritual being while naming things. In other words, here lies the critique of the arbitrary relation between words and things. “That does not mean a mimicry between language and things, but constitutes the experience of a third: in a relation of expression” (Menninghaus, 1995: 20). Thus, the word has to communicate something beyond itself, because

to communicate *through* language transforms language into an arbitrary system of verbal signs that is used as a communication tool. There is the speaker where in this arbitrary sense something is communicated *through* language. However, according to Benjamin, the speaker is not a mere instructive philosophical-linguistic fact (Krämer, 2008: 45).

However, before one makes metaphysical accusations against the theory of communication that is being outlined here, it is valid to point out that Benjamin considers existence and language as two sides of the same coin. It justifies the importance of his observations on *revelation* – concept took from a theological context – and its strong connection with the immanence rather than the transcendence of things. For this reason the concept of revelation “is better comprehended as the always inaccurate reflection of the experience that shows immediately (magically) in the formulated a non-formulated power, in the pronounceable something that cannot be pronounced, and in a predicative declaration the indescribable (Menninghaus, 1995: 21). In other words, the revelation in the language takes place exactly in itself, even though it is not able to be communicated by verbal contents. “The ineffable is a feature of every speech” (Ibid.: 22). At this point, besides his critique to the instrumentality

P

The silenced medium: theoretical re-reflections on a media theory of Walter Benjamin

of language, Benjamin paradoxically condemns the thesis of any meaning beyond language.

Furthermore, the linguistic immediacy is conceived as a doubleness: on one hand, extensively, between language and things; and on the other hand, intensively, between the language movement principle and the being of a speaker or a work. “The connection of these two elements of linguistic non-instrumentality leads Benjamin to the concept of a ‘immanent magic’ of the ‘concrete linguistic elements’” (Menninghaus, 1995: 40). In communication there is a connection between the sphere of the namer and the of the names. As Benjamin points out:

The humankind is tied to the language of things through words. The human language is the name of things. With that one cannot assume the conception of the bourgeois perspective of language, in which words occasionally relate to things and are established signs of things (or of its recognition) through a given convention. Language never gives *mere* signs (Benjamin, 2010: 41).

If the *immediacy* of the spiritual being’s communication is magic, its emergence is produced by the naming of things: through the *translation* of the language of things – a silent language – into that of human. However, it is important to emphasize that “the translation of the language of things into the human language is not from the soundless into something able to be pronounced, but rather the translation of the unnamed into the named” (Ibid.: 42). By applying the concept of translation, Benjamin grants a visualization of the medium in motion, for “the magic power of language can be reconstructed as its translatability (Krämer, 2008: 49). Thus it is with the use of these lens suggested by Krämer (Ibid.) that Benjamin’s exploration in the biblical passages of the Genesis and the Fall of man are apprehended, once the extensive employment of biblical excerpts to the formulation of his media theory should not be understood as theological. It is also important to mention the analysis of Bible texts were fundamental to the linguistic theories of the German baroque and romanticism, of which Benjamin was familiar with (Menninghaus, 1995: 43). In fact Benjamin even tried to anticipate any possible criticism by affirming that he had taken the Bible and the philosophy of religion as a meditation on the nature of language: “It is a gesture of rearticulation and resignification as done in artworks and other theoretical texts. It is not a source of a revealed truth” (Benjamin, 2010: 38).

Benjamin observes that in the Genesis creation myth the making of nature took place through the word while man came from earth. Thus, the gift of language was given to man, the one who was not created from the word.

Following Benjamin's interpretation one can say that for God language was the medium of creation. While for man language was a mere instrument, a means of knowledge. The birth of human word emerges at the moment of man's Fall, of his banishment from paradise. The Fall of man marks the birth of the human word, in which man no longer lives immaculate: "the immanent magic steps out to express as it were outside, in order to become magic. The word must communicate something (beyond itself). That is the true Fall of the spirit of language" (Ibid.: 44). As Krämer clarifies:

God creates while naming things; that is an unmasked and "pure" form of the magic of language, in which language is used to act immediately for it produces reality. Man's fate lies in the loss of this form of linguistic power and, with that, his linguistic creativity can (still and only) be exercised as translation (2008: 52).

Subsequently, Krämer concludes: "When God speaks he creates; when man speaks he translates" (Ibid.: 53).

Hence, the translation is the manifestation of the concept of medium. Thus, the medium of the linguistic formation is conceived as a unique entanglement between reception and creation: "The translation is the conversion of a language into another through a *continuum* of metamorphosis. These *continua* of metamorphosis, and not zones of resemblances and equivalences, are what traverse the translation" (Benjamin, 2010: 42). Therefore the medium does not transmit, it translates while manifesting itself. With his references to the Bible, Benjamin intends to show that the human language is a hybrid between medium and instrument: "at the same time, the medium is the human language of creating and receiving, of the immediacy and the mediacy, of the expression and the sign, of magic and technique (Krämer, 2010: 53).

RE-FOLDING

Whether, up to the present moment, the form or the application of this media theory based on the relevance of the medium to the detriment of the "verbal contents" seems obscure, Benjamin himself - as points out Winfried Menninghaus (1995) - provides more concrete examples that permeate all his work: his considerations on the *tone*, the *style* and the *linguistic form*. Even before the emergence of the connotation theory, the tone came into sight in the Benjaminian work as something that does not show itself through verbal contents, but immediately in language itself (Ibid.: 13). In its turn, unlike the verbal contents, the style "is neither a formalism that can be subtract nor a mere filter of representation, but rather the style lets perceptible, above all, the spiritual content of an epoch, therefore developing in itself a feature that provides meaning" (Ibid.: 13-14).

Consequently, the style is not a psycho-individual phenomenon of an author, but the expression and the founding element of a communication of the artistic production and the historical experience. With regards to the linguistic form, it appears in Benjamin's studies on the tragedy: an allegory that means joy (verbal content) expresses in itself at the same time the tragic (Ibid.: 14).

However, given the spatial and thematic limitation of this article, a more detailed attention on these issues cannot be provided here. Also, considering the great deal of effort to unfold the term medium in this essay, a short review is needed with the aim of making more visible the folds made here. Thus, following Menninghaus' argumentation, here are the basic premisses of Benjamin's media theory: 1. every person, event or thing has a "spiritual being"; 2. every "spiritual being" communicates as immediate feature in "expression"; 3. any expression can be conceived as a kind of language without having the word language vanishing as a metaphor; 4. language in the sense of expression is not separable from its own spiritual being.

Language therefore communicates its corresponding spiritual being, which communicates itself in language and not through language. Language as something that communicates itself in itself can also be interpreted as the linguistic form, as a content in itself, even before the well-known assertion *medium is message* by McLuhan. However, this interpretation already appears in Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy (Menninghaus, 1995: 11), still little discussed in the theories of communication.

Considering the materialistic relation between language and things suggested by Benjamin, it is possible to infer that the spiritual being is immanent, i.e. I am put in the world of things which speak to/inside me. Something happens to me: transcendence can just come through the materiality of the world. The Benjaminian theory expresses simultaneously the impossibility of the existence of an out of language and the communion of all things.

The immediacy - the magic - is the key to differentiate the concept of medium from the concept of means, that is of an instrumental conception of language as the instrumental relation of a given signifier to a signified - being the latter the verbal content of the former. Therefore, the medium "is the component of representation without being its means" (Menninghaus, 1995: 17). Hence, the medium is a concept that cannot be grasped by the instrumental relations (a means to an end) of the technical rationality. Thus, the magical perception and representation are identified in the most common and general area of experience, i.e. in the *language as such*, in the limits of sensation and sense (meaning) "The direct correlation between this formal way of existence of the magic of language as a - fugacious between sensation and sense - manifestation, a

coming, is a moment of both ‘objective’ as well as theory-of-reception-oriented infinitude” (Menninghaus, 1995: 18).

But the point that has been made here focuses on the clear separation of the terms means and medium as a turning point, connected by the Benjaminian theory, for the media theory. This theoretical formulation provides the basis of a non-instrumental media theory as well as inaugurates the elaboration of a standpoint upon the communication phenomenon. Taking it even further and considering the critique that argues against the theories of arbitrariness of the linguistic sign – since for Benjamin a word does not represent a convention –, it will be debated in the next section that probably Benjamin’s theoretical formulation preceded a contemporary theoretic-medial approach which aims at bringing new perspectives to sustain the specificities of a communication theory.

UNFOLDING

The differentiation between an approach directed toward what is transmitted by linguistic signs, and the approach of what is translated *medially* was demarcated by Sybille Krämer, in the book entitled *Medium, Bote, Übertragung* [Medium, Messenger and Transmission] , published in 2008.

According to her argumentation, the difference between medium and sign should not be comprehended as two different categories that serve to different kinds of objects. It is not that there are things that allow themselves to be treated as signs and others as media. Krämer explains these are actually two different perspectives: “From the semiotic perspective the ‘hidden’ of the sense lies behind the sensation; from the semiotic point of view, on the contrary, the ‘hidden’ of the sensation is behind the sense” (Krämer, 2008: 34).

In other words, the sign must be perceptible, but what in the sign is perceptible is secondary: the meaning is what matters, that is what is usually taken as absent, invisible, or even immaterial. In general, the sign is conceived as a linguistic mark that is in place of something else, indicating something beyond its own materiality. The medium, on the other hand, works differently: what is perceptible is the message itself, which emerges during the medial event. The medium is the secondary: it neutralizes itself; it evades while functioning. Unlike the sign relation, in which the meaning lies behind the sensory, the medial perspective suggests that an invisible medium hides behind a visible message (Ibid.: 35).

The conception of medium as what hides itself at the moment of its manifestation is extensively developed in the work of the German philosopher Dieter Mersch (2002, 2006, 2008, 2010), whose proposition leads to a negative

media theory. According to Mersch, the media hold the capacity of hiding their mediality to the same extent that they produce mediating effects: “Their presence has the format of an absence” (Mersch, 2008: 304). The structure of the medial cannot be mediatized. It shows itself. Only the mediality of means shows to be true. What can be observed is not the medium itself, but rather its phenomenal appearance as mediality, for the medium is to be taken as what makes something that has no physical structure present – except for the materiality of the platform that while experienced cannot be thematized. Hence its negativity. For this reason the media are the conditions of the possibility of perception and difference. They are the very conditions of any communicational and perceptual process insofar as contemplation and observation are possible through difference and mediality.

The unfathomability of the communicational process due to the medium immediacy also reverberates in the Brazilian communication field through the most recent works of the theorist *Ciro Marcondes Filho* (2010b). Although *Marcondes Filho* does not make direct reference to Benjamin’s mystical theory of language, his theoretical concerns encompass the basic concepts of the field and through a large bibliographical review he constitutes a theory aimed at the concept of communication, which is then defined through existential and event-based parameters. According to *Marcondes Filho*, the communication marks a distance – the existential separation between two beings –, although during the limit-experience this difference becomes transparent (but not surmountable). Communication is transformation; and one is transformed only in the instants of intense communication: his theory is interested in the figuration of what he defines as a communicational event, influenced by the Hegelian and Deleuzian thought.

The idea here is not to assert a direct contribution of the Benjaminian thought to the philosophical-medial field of studies, which specially in Germany strives to form a renewed theoretical basis to the communication field; the intention is rather point out that the attempt to think about the specificity of the medium and of the communication by neither posing sociological nor linguistic questions can be already found in its initial form in *Walter Benjamin*’s work. Therefore, it is safe to say that in a certain way Benjamin preceded the contemporary search for a theoretico-epistemological basis of communication.

Benjamin made considerable advances in the direction of the experience of language in order to track the moments of intensity of the linguistic representation and the perception. If the Brazilian communication theory, largely influenced by Benjamin’s thoughts, still does not pay a more careful attention to his problematization of the concepts of medium, mediality and

communication, one can suspect that in his most known texts those terms do not play an important role. Actually, a more attentive look repudiates that supposition. If the term medium is applied in those texts, the assumption it relates to his 1916 essay seems plausible. The problem is when the translations made replaced the term without paying attention to its conceptual subtleties. When the medium does not translate, silence remains.

A MATTER OF TRANSLATION

As said before, this article asserts that the Brazilian translations of Benjamin's most important texts did not pay attention to the differentiation of certain terms in his work. That is not to question the quality of the translations. On the contrary, those are also responsible for the formation of the theories of communication. The focus here is that they served to other fields: mainly to Social Sciences and – why not to ask? – also to Social Communication, whose composition, already marked in the name of the field, is influenced by the former. Hence the difficulty in casting theoretico-communicational questions, what led to a rather scant attention to the conceptual refinement of key terms such as communication and medium.

Therefore the focus now is directed to the term medium in the two most known of Benjamin's texts: *A short history of photography* (1931), and *The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). In the first text, the word medium appears only once. In the latter, twice. In both texts the term medium was strictly connected with the discussion of the concept of aura, important in both works. Benjamin rarely used the word medium in other of his texts as many times as he used in *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man* (Mersch, 2006: 64).

In *A short history of photography*, the word medium appears when Benjamin makes a comment about a photo of Kafka as a child:

Dies Bild in seiner uferlosen Trauer ist ein Pedant der frühen Photographie, auf welcher die Menschen noch nicht abgesprengt und gottverloren in die Welt sahen wie hier der Knabe. Es war eine Aura um sie, ein Medium, das ihrem Blick, indem er es durchdringt, die Fülle und die Sicherheit gibt (Benjamin, 1992: 54-55).

This is the Brazilian translation made by Sérgio Paulo Rouanet:

Em sua tristeza, esse retrato contrasta com as primeiras fotografias, em que os homens ainda não lançavam no mundo, como o jovem Kafka, um olhar desolado e perdido. Havia uma aura em torno deles, um meio que atravessado por seu olhar lhes dava uma sensação de plenitude e segurança (Benjamin, 1987: 98).

The word medium was then interpreted as means, having the strength of Benjamin's concept lost in translation. It is worth recalling that his seminal text on language not only provided the basis to the critique of the technical rationality. Even the concept of aura is also derived from magic as being what is immediate in the medium. The aura is above all, in the previous case, the medium itself. It is the counterpart of the instrument. "The aura constitutes the measurement, the criterium and, at the same time, the concept that contrasts the sphere of the mechanical reproduction" (Mersch, 2006: 69).

That is clearer in his *The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Its first edition was published as a translation into French made by Pierre Klossowski in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, in May of 1936. This version was criticized by Benjamin in a letter sent to Horkheimer on May the 27th of the same year: "The first chapters, that Klossowiski translated without consulting with me, contain a number of incomprehensions and alterations" (Benjamin, 2007: 61).

The first Brazilian translation of that essay, made by Carlos Nelson Coutinho, was published in the *Revista Civilização Brasileira* in 1968 (May/August, year IV, n.º 19/20) and based on the third version reviewed by Benjamin and published by Theodor Adorno in 1955 in the collection *Schriften*. In 1969, José Lino Grünewald publishes a translation in the book *A Idéia do Cinema*, also edited and translated by him, choosing the first version of the essay, that later was edited in the Coleção Os Pensadores of the publishing house Abril Cultural. Sérgio Paulo Rouanet's translation of Benjamin's *The Work of...* is very well known and was published in 1985 in the collection of essays *Magia, Técnica, Arte e Política*. Rouanet based his translation on the second version of the essay, expanded by Benjamin between December 1935 and January 1936.

The two occasions in which the term medium was applied in *The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction* are in the beginning of the third part of the text, a bit before Benjamin's classic definition of aura: "Die Art und Weise, in die menschliche Sinneswahrnehmung sich organisiert – *das Medium, in dem sie erfolgt* – ist nicht durch natürlich sondern auch geschichtlich bedingt" (Benjamin, 1992: 14, emphasis added). And in the sequence: "Für die Gegenwart liegen die Bedingungen einer entsprechenden Einsicht günstiger. Und wenn *Veränderungen im Medium der Wahrnehmung*, deren Zeitgenossen wir sind, sich als Verfall der Aura begreifen lassen, so kann man dessen gesellschaftliche Bedingungen aufzeigen" (Ibid.: 15, emphasis added). In the first extract, both in Grünewald's and in Rouanet's interpretation, the word medium was translated as means. This is Rouanet's version of the last extract cited above: "Em nossos

dias, as perspectivas de empreender com êxito semelhante pesquisa são mais favoráveis, e, se fosse possível compreender as transformações contemporâneas da faculdade perceptiva segundo a ótica do declínio da aura, as causas sociais dessas transformações se tornariam inteligíveis” (Benjamin, 1987: 170). Here the *medium of perception* was converted into “faculty of perception”. In Grünewald’s version of the same part, that expression was translated as “the means in which perception operates” (Grünewald, 1969: 65).

What was lost in those translations were the inferences based on the mysticism of language about the concept of aura. The way the human sensuous perception arranges itself is associated with the medium. Therefore it is neither instrumental nor only adapted to the platform. From that perspective, *The Work of...* can be understood as a history of the technical and the mediality. As Mersch highlights: “the figure of the cutting and the editing represent the medial conditions that emerge in the forms of perception, which motivate breaks and displacements” (Mersch, 2006: 69). The mediality and its effects over the modes of experience was well described by Benjamin. If the medium of language embodies the ineffable properties of language itself, then the medium of the time perception that Benjamin mentions is made evident by the fall of the aura – and what is aura but the ineffable element of perception of an artwork? Thus, Benjamin’s text is the description of a new mediality - having the cinema as his point of departure - and its relation with the perceptible experience. By contrast, the German word means, *Mittel*, is continually associated to the means of production, the means as platform or instrument, as confirmed in the following passage: “The Dada wanted to produce the effects that nowadays the audience wants to see in the movies by using the means [*Mitteln*] of painting (or literature)” (Benjamin, 1992: 37).

However, the differentiations between the concepts medium and means in relation to the concept of aura and mediality in *The Work of...* should not be hurriedly exposed: that is still a topic that demands inquiry, exceeding the scope of this paper.

Final remarks

A theoretico-communicational reflection on a Benjamin’s media theory from the conceptual division between medium and means was the main objective of this article. Flexing the most recurrent readings of his work until it impels to a reversion gesture. A shift of perspective. A modest displacement of some concepts that are used to being applied in a certain way, and that usually enlighten the “impacts” of technologies into the social and perceptual field in order to foreground a contemporary restlessness i.e. the legitimacy of

a media and communication theory. What is here asserted is that Benjamin's work can cast light on a differentiation between a field of study and a course. The basis for a communication theory: separation of medium and means. A break with the conception of medium connected with a technical platform. The characterization on a medial perspective: the observation of what shows itself *in* language instead of what takes place *through* it. Medium as translation. Retaking the theological presuppositions of communication and their reversion into the materiality of the materiality of things. Immanent desire for transcendence.

Revisiting authors to cast communicational questions appears as a programmatic possibility of research. If, as Muniz Sodré affirmed (2012), the field of communication is in trouble not only because it does not possess a theoretical canon but also for it has not got over the functionalism of the *mass communication research* yet, it would be worth adding that the field of communication will never stop getting in trouble while it does not cast questions by its own. The matter is not to think communication as a field – once as a field it allows varied approaches and theories – but actually to think about possible conditions for a course (of theories of media and of communication) that questions what can only be questioned by it, issues that problematize the fundamental concepts of its object. However there is a considerable movement that negates the “object” of communication, justified by the insistence in the autonomy and authenticity of the field, it has to be pursued: if one wants to work through a theoretico-communicational perspective, the medium and the communication will always be the points of departure.

A canon is made of readings and criticisms. Walter Benjamin's configuration of a media theory still needs to receive a more careful look, as well as the recent founding propositions of a communication theory. There will always be a need to review originals and compare versions. Aiming that in this continuous flow of transformations the quite common discourse about the lack of theoretical references to the Brazilian communication field become just a matter of translation. **M**

REFERÊNCIAS

- BENJAMIN, W. *Magia e Técnica, Arte e Política: ensaios sobre literatura e história da cultura*. Tradução Sérgio Paulo Rouanet. 3ª ed. São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1987.
- _____. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*. 22. ed. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992.
- _____. *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: Kommentar von Detlev Schöttker*. 3. ed. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2007.

- BENJAMIN, W. Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen. In: TIEDEMANN, R. (Ed.). *Walter Benjamin - Sprache und Geschichte: Philosophische Essays*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010, p. 30-49.
- BRAGA, J. L. Nem rara, nem ausente – tentativa. *MATRIZES*, Ano 4, n. 1, p. 65-81, 2010. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v4i1p65-81>
- GRÜNEWALD, J. L. (trad. e org.). *A Ideia do Cinema: Ensaios de Walter Benjamin, Eisenstein, Godard, Merleau-Ponty*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1969.
- HALLACKER, A. *Es spricht der Mensch: Walter Benjamins Suche nach der Lingua adamica*. München: Fink, 2004.
- KRÄMER, S. *Medium, Bote, Übertragung: kleine Metaphysik der Medialität*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008.
- MARCONDES FILHO, C. *Princípio da Razão Durante: Nova Teoria da Comunicação III [Tomo I]*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2010a.
- . *Princípio da Razão Durante: Nova Teoria da Comunicação III [Tomo V]*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2010b.
- MCLUHAN, M. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. [S.l.]: New American Library, 1964.
- MENNINGHAUS, W. *Walter Benjamins Theorie der Sprachmagie*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995.
- MERSCH, D. *Was sich zeigt. Materialität, Präsenz, Ereignis*. München: Fink, 2002.
- . *Medientheorien zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 2006.
- . Tertium datur: Einleitung in eine negative Medientheorie. In: MÜNKER, Sefan & ROESLER, Alexander (orgs.). *Was ist ein Medium?* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008, p. 304-321.
- . *Posthermeneutik*. Hamburg: Akademie-Verlag, 2010.
- SODRÉ, M. Comunicação: um campo em apuros teóricos. *MATRIZES*, v. 5, n. 2, p. 11-28, jan./jun. 2012. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v5i2p11-27>.

Paper submitted on September 17, 2012 and approved on November 30, 2013.