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978-0-521-59048-8 - Ideology and Inscription "Cultural Studies" after Benjamin, de Man, and Bakhtin

Tom Cohen

Excerpt

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figures or ciphers, Bakhtin and de Man, have been effaced (the one through embrace, the other through abjection), creating a crypt within the efflorescence of contemporary historicist styles that remains to be interrogated; second, the ocular-centric tradition by which cinema has been installed as a mimetic operation (the counter-cipher here will be "Hitchcock"); and third, the way that a transformative mode of reading I will not quite call *allographics* operates today as a form of (perhaps post post-Marxist) ideology critique, applicable to the general domain of cultural mapping. Is the call to create new networks of cultural and mnemonic trace-chains, today, merely the compulsive attempt to compensate for an increasingly inescapable fault in the referential functions of language in an *information* age – that is, a recuperative gesture? Or is it the labor by which a translation is being prepared into a different epistemological model, and with that, conception of agency?

1.

In a famous letter to Benjamin after reading *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, Adorno complains of a perceived paralysis in the former's writing project. While Adorno misreads Benjamin's allegorical style as a merely descriptive one ("at the crossroads of magic and positivism"), he presciently reflects on a malaise or arrestation present more broadly today in the "age of cultural studies." Adorno finds Benjamin's work merely, it seems, descriptive or wishful, trusting to mimesis:

The "mediation" which I miss, and find obscured by *materialistic-historiographic* invocation, is nothing other than the theory which your study omits . . . If one wished to put it drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. *That spot is bewitched. Only theory could break the spell . . .* (my italics)¹

If we take this bewitched place as at least as double – in Adorno's reading (it may refer to himself), in or beyond Benjamin's practice – the aporetic "spell" of this spot expands, reduplicates erratically. To be effective, to break its specular spell, to get away from the mimetic blind of a pretense to the sociological as such, to

¹ Adorno's letter appears in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 131.

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become political (again) requires a (re)turn to what had, ostensibly, been effaced. What is called for has itself a loaded name: theory. The first logic of this accusation is that the will to empirical or pragmatic critique has become transfixed in a specular ideality, while the theory effaced and here unread in Benjamin harbors the key to historical, transformative, in fact political work. Why this inversion, and what wider application does it have today?

As a parable of the critical "present" rather than of Benjamin's work, of being stuck in a descriptive and historicizing model that pretends to a political practice sometimes the opposite of what it accomplishes, the idea of this bewitched spot has some resonance. To open this productive misreading would involve questioning, of course, just where Adorno seems to misapprehend the performative import, in Benjamin, of particular words – among them materiality, or what he calls above "materialistic-historiographic invocation." Such an "invocation" returns decisively in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, where Benjamin explicitly questions how an alternate practice of writing-reading to current epistemocritical models – largely mimetico-historicist – is required to rupture the fixed and inherited narratives of a foreclosed notion of "history." That is, is required to open the possibility of alternative futures to what, for him, was the apparent triumph of Eurofascism, and this by conjuring alternate pasts to those produced by a received model of reference and archiving, that same historicism that still rules knowledge formation. For Benjamin, however, contrary to the mimetic implications of Adorno's complaint, such a writing practice involves a kind of séancing of the past and future. At this séance a figure of *materiality* associated with the non-human aspect of language ("materialistic-historiographic") – that is, one superseding anthropomorphism and historicism – stands in attendance.

Benjamin will give this projected *practice* different names across his text: allegory for a prolonged moment (in the *Trauerspiel*, but then it recedes), but elsewhere translation, at times the machinery of cinema (a kind of disruptive re-inscription of the sensorium), or in the *Theses*, as Adorno anticipates, "*materialistic historiography*." No doubt, the last figure seems almost impossible to read without rewriting not only its own components (material, history, graphematics) but the once benign term "allegory" itself. We will remark, for now, only that seemingly pivotal terms which thread

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Benjamin's work – allegory and “translation,” but again cinema, as well as “materialistic historiography” – all invoke parallel logics. These non-words undergo a translation of their own whose implications are not always clear: they begin as traditional and extremely mimetic categories (translation reproduces supposed originals, cinema the real, “historiography” facts) then are reflexively altered as apparatuses that engulf and actively reconfigure the mimetic as such, mnemonic policing, anteriority. Each adopts an interventionist logic that, as it unfolds, all but consumes its representational pretext. For Benjamin, mnemonic or inscriptive interventions are the most politically necessary to explore, since they alone stand to alter the archival basis by which “experience” is programmed, decisions taken. Each parallel logic or itinerary in the terms mentioned addresses the invisible manner in which representational habits like “historicism” operate to protect and enforce cognitive regimes that may be called “ideological” and destructive. (For Benjamin, these are directly linked to what is called “fascism.”)

Somehow, what Adorno will call “theory” leads back through issues of mnemotechnics, inscription, translation, “pure language,” and allegory that perhaps we – like Adorno – have lost track of. What is meant, here, by a recommended return to “theory” to break a certain appalling spell if not a return from the mesmerizing pretense that description (or context) has a socio-ontological import of its own (“magic and positivism”), to a site of anteriority, of programming, of installed and blinding epistemopolitical models, of the “materialistic-historiographic”? *Inscription*, in this sense, pretends to name not only “being inscribed” in another's textual field or narrative skeins, in invisible relations of programming and networks, but the virtual facticity of a prefigural mark or cut that cannot be preceded by a metaphoric discourse or value-formation structured “from” (or against) it. For Benjamin, “materialistic historiography” would expose the trace-chains that manage anteriority as *virtual*, together with their semantic capital and canonical accounts – and this, *en route* to a projected re-decision of sorts. Since the facticity of inscription itself is to be conceived of not as a private crypt of memory but essentially external, material in its manifestation, we will refer to this virtual act of intervention, later in these essays, as a moment of (dis)inscription and exscription.

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The "spot" in question may thus be likened to a familiar critical moment today. This moment, what I call for convenience the protocols of certain currents in "cultural studies," situates itself within an imposed history or histories. According to this map – which remains popular to the degree that diverse versions of the "present" locate themselves by its legend – the advent of what is referred to as "high" or post-structuralist *theory* was associated with a philosophically inflected amalgam of programs interfacing linguistic concerns with the redefinition of "history" (or, for that matter, human agency, meaning, impositions of power, and so on). It displayed a certain auto-reflexivity associated with its linguistic preoccupations – one that, in turn, would be eventually stigmatized variably as "modernist," as aestheticist, and so on. Against this moment, we witnessed a turn away from the fetishization of language or the text – what would have only led back, as it seemed, to close reading's tricks or new criticism, an imminently institutional form of depoliticized labor – toward political criticism. Away, that is, from "high" theory – or simply "theory" – back to real practices one could, finally, recognize as politically engaged, "secular" (in Said's sense), pragmatic. This shift, hailed as a "return to history," and hence seemingly affiliated with a cultural left or Marxian itinerary, traversed new historicism, neo-pragmatism, and a stunning array of identity political agendas. Turning away from the sterile formalism of linguistic analysis, one could not dissociate a return to the political from a return to a re-asserted agency of the subject (this time, socially constructed). To a degree such reclaimed "subjectivities" and their associated motifs (return to the everyday, to socio-figural context, the "body," to lived "life") involved a return to familiar names and mimetic epistemological models. For if, *according to this story*, a linear march of progress would be represented by the supersession of mere "theory" toward the pragmatics of history, context, the everyday, identity politics, and so on, on behalf of a generally leftist trajectory, one is struck by one odd *fact*: that throughout the period associated with this march – perhaps, most decisively, the last decade and a half – there has been a steady return to more conservative politics both within the university and in the national and global polis. What we are reminded, here, is that today more than ever the epistemological is the "political."

Thus there is a little-noted counter-genealogy to this "official"

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one – a narrative, but one which is non-linear, a narrative of folds and counter-folds, or regressions. According to this, “cultural studies” – with its return to *mimetic-humanism* and historicist methods – would appear a detour, a regressive parenthesis or counter-move to what remains a central epistemo-historical re-orientation or shift, upon the outcome of which diverse virtual futures continue to depend. One might address this unofficial “history” that hovers over and re-writes the above at the very moment it seems to have achieved its end – that is, with a sort of installed academic hegemony of “cultural studies.” The moment is interesting because it revives the possibility that linguistic preoccupations need not appear fetishized sites fixated on material signifiers’ auto-referential behavior, but operate as mnemonic technologies servicing a “transvaluation” more interrupted than gone beyond, more abjected as trauma than displaced by the intervening and inevitably mimetic programs of today’s critical “present.” From this perspective, the current shift to tele-technological networks is not an abrupt break with the traditionalist archive, so much as the acceleration and phenomenalization of what had all along been a more or less institutionalized management of cultural mnemonics, textual switchboards, canonical processings of anteriority – that is, at the very site in which humanist discourse is serviced, an overwhelmingly formalist bureaucratization.

One might recall that as part of the return to the pragmatic, there was asserted a total break between the realm of the political and something called epistemology – with which “philosophic” and linguistic trajectories of *reading* were associated. The political was designated as the realm of the mimetic. If arguments emerged that challenged that very definition of the political, they could be bracketed, since the epistemological – which is above all a certain model of how reference is to be generated, or anteriority managed – had already been declared not political, not to do with the (increasingly “global”) polis. This programming by familiar models of mimesis or historicism, what themselves stood to be transformed by movements of and within “theory,” would appear to narcoleptically re-instate what had become an intricately threatened regime of signification.

Whatever Adorno meant by “theory,” it occupies a position in this narrative of origin and anti-origin – what Benjamin might

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have termed *Ursprung*, not as site of origination but where diverse pre- and post-histories converge and stand to be re-decided.² I will argue that this scapegoating of "theory," by which we mean the more general occlusion of a *materiality of language*, can be examined in privileged ciphers and counter-narratives that continue to harass this site. In the following essays, this will occur as an attempt to re-examine the prehistory of the critical "present" itself under the signatures, at first, of "Bakhtin" and "de Man" – and, finally, Benjamin himself, as though a less explored triangulation can be drawn between these three. What we call "cultural studies" today may seem like an alluvial plain absorbing remnants from the above-mentioned sequence of post-theoretical preoccupations (new historicism, identity politics) while naming as pragmatic or political a return to representational modes – what appears, in practice, by manifesting the corresponding contradiction in the process, a "bewitched" spot. While I will further distinguish a *counter-genealogy* to this place in a moment, we cannot but be impressed with how the above narrative presents itself to us with a certain legitimizing aura. "Cultural studies" arrives as if at the "end of (critical) history" – an occurrence affiliated with a hypothetical globalization of formal democracy, with the installation of new transnational or hyper-media, the end of the Cold War. Yet there remains an unsettling subtext – and politics – that ghosts this narrative, essentially *rewriting* its political claims.

2.

As a means of conjuring this alternative site, I defer proposing merely to modify the term *allegory* – a self-cancelling, or depleted term, as we will see, all but unusable today – with a simplification like *allography*. Theory, it seems, never quite meant "theory" to begin with, but a different sort of praxis; one that, for the moment, we may call anti-mimetic, epistemo-political. Keeping something in play of what Benjamin terms "materialistic historiography,"

² The problematic of *Ursprung* in Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study, presented as the virtual or cross-site conjured by the intersection of pre- and post-historical vectors (*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*), is examined by Samuel Weber in "Genealogy of Modernity: History, Myth and Allegory in Benjamin's Origin of the German Mourning Play." *Ursprung*, as an *ur-leap* rather than "origin," opens a site in which historical inscriptions themselves can be altered or (dis)installed.

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allography suggests the shifting mechanics of a certain *technology* of inscription implied. With this word I would gesture at a conception of (dis)inscription and mnemotechnics which, however banal, might lay claim to a spectral "materiality." Such a *task* might be preceded by identifying where, if at all, the term "allegory" in Benjamin was recirculated, that is, *not* as a modified trope of literary aesthetics, but as a *techne* of historical intervention as such.³ For to ask where allegory in its prehistory (which is all that it has had, in a sense) prefigures an *allographic* practice to come, is also to note where the latter suggests not only that mnemonic otherness evinced by the facticity of prefigural inscription but the *altering* impact of material signs on (and against) anterior traces, altering or engineering the teletechnological routing and force of trace-chains, the recasting of anteriority and the production of reference.⁴

In Adorno's letter, much depends on how one reads Benjamin's use of the term materiality or "materialistic."⁵ Adorno himself is torn on this, but overcomes a certain resistance, recognizing first that it does not echo the Marxian use that he, Adorno, more or less deploys:

The impression which your entire study conveys – and not only on me and my arcades orthodoxy – is that you have done violence to yourself. Your solidarity with the Institute, which pleases no one more than myself, has induced you to pay tributes to Marxism which are not really suited either to Marxism or to yourself. They are not suited to Marxism because the mediation through the total social process is missing, and you superstitiously attribute to material enumeration a power of illumination which is never kept for a pragmatic reference but only for theoretical construction. (130)

Let us note, first, that the "violence" or violation Adorno perceives will involve the word "materiality" – yet it is a peculiar

³ The only other use of the neologism "allography" that I am aware of occurs in Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991), where it is nonetheless used of an alterity effect within the work of cryptonymy: "One might venture to call it an allography – a writing on behalf of another – but only if this 'other' is acknowledged as being non-human, unrepresentable and irremediably cryptic" (33)

⁴ This excursus may be heard as a "theoretical" supplement to essays I previously presented under the title of *Anti-Mimesis from Plato to Hitchcock* (1994).

⁵ We might think of Benjamin's use of "materialistic" as a cross between what de Man calls inscription and what Althusser implies by the materiality and semiotic rituals of "ideology" in which one is interpellated (or inscribed).

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violence ("to yourself") in that it is really a violation of a Marxian orthodox use, a catachretic deployment Adorno takes for a kind of pandering, a position he modifies momentarily as the term becomes distinct, shadowed against familiar reference. Indeed, "materiality" evokes what Benjamin in his letter of reply will term a *monad*: "In the monad everything that used to lie in mythical rigidity as a textual reference comes alive" (137) – that is, the site where an entire model of "reference" may be altered by virtue of an intervention in a meaning system, the "mythical rigidity" of inherited interpretation, a coming "alive" of the dead that leads to a virtual site of (dis)inscription. Above, Adorno remarks that Benjamin's unreferenced "materiality" seems self-cancelling in its effects ("violence to yourself"): first, it devolves to a kind of "material enumeration" that liquefies the conceptual or dialectical term and with it reference ("never kept for a pragmatic reference"), and second, it emerges as a kind of censorship at the level of parody, a precensorship: "you have denied yourself your boldest and most fruitful ideas in a kind of precensorship according to materialist categories (which by no means coincide with Marxist categories)" (130). Having begun by distancing Benjamin's prefigurative trope of materiality – rejecting it, suspecting it of aping and dismantling his own ("Marxist categories") – Adorno shifts to Benjamin's side, encouraging the development of another, this time a-referential site:

God knows, there is only one truth, and if your intelligence lays hold of this one truth in categories which on the basis of your idea of materialism may seem apocryphal to you, you will capture more of this one truth than if you use intellectual tools whose movements your hand resists at every turn. After all, there is more about this truth in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* than in Bukharin's *ABC of Communism*. (131)

Leaving aside Adorno's safeguards ("God knows . . ."), what is this "materialism" that apes while dismissing "Marxist categories," voids routine concepts of reference, links something like "enumeration" to "illumination," yet insists on miming – or preceding – the categorial or verbal-monadic site from which Adorno's more conventional usage derives (and feels itself dislocated from)? Why, moreover, does Adorno turn to Nietzsche here – in the context of what "materiality"?

What is this *materiality* which, "invoked" (Adorno's word) like

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a kind of counter-magic linked to "enumeration," is the opposite of any claim to material reference in the tradition of the Greek *hyle*, or "matter," or the body? Why, moreover, when it is encountered in the *Theses* as "materialistic historiography"⁶ – the format to which Adorno alludes – will it be associated with a virtual technique of historical intervention intended not only to counter the spell of historicism ("where historical materialism cuts through historicism" (255)), of received narratives of linear time as an empty "continuum" ("telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary" (263)), but as what stands to alter the past ("the dead") by way of a certain caesura-effect, or "standstill," in which pasts and futures offer themselves as *virtual*? Perhaps the texts of the *Theses* are sufficiently well-circulated that we may point to one or two problems without a full exegesis. What is involved is not this or that liberatory desire but a prospective warping of inscribed modalities of the sensorium, of hermeneutics, of an already formalized pretense of succession. To have accepted the history of mimetic historicism is to have acceded to one or another of inevitable future determinations that such predict or imply. For Benjamin this impasse provokes a different model of writing or inscription (what "defines the present in which (the historical materialist) himself is writing history" (262)), linked with a semi-mnemonic configuration called "shock": "Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad." For today's reader, who might think too quickly that Benjamin intends, here, only to re-accent once marginalized markers on a familiar historical map, as "new historicism" or identity politics attempts, what remains puzzling is that something termed a "monad" represents an agency of transformation – that is, something like a node, or verbal relay-network about which hermeneutic encrustations accrue. Yet this monad can be converted, in a cross-historical switchboard or cultural mnemonics, to produce new possible configurations or futures. It is a term, as we noted, allied to an alteration in systems of reference as such. The time of this occasion like the non-present of the so-called *Jetztzeit*, a "state of emergency" or *emergence*, implies a momentary voiding of received contents – as if by the sheer assertion of *formal* or

⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, 262; *Illuminationen*, 278.