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The language of things

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Who does the lamp communicate with? The mountain? The fox?
Walter Benjamin

What if things could speak? What would they tell us? Or are they speaking already and
we just don't hear them? And who is going to translate them?

Ask Walter Benjamin. In fact he started asking those quite bizarre questions already in 1916 in a text called: "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man". Of all weird texts by Benjamin, this is definitely the weirdest. In this text he develops the concept of a language of things. According to Benjamin this language of things is mute, it is magical and its medium is material community. Thus, we have to assume that there is a language of stones, pans and cardboard boxes. Lamps speak as if inhabited by spirits. Mountains and foxes are involved in discourse. High-rise buildings chat with each other. Paintings gossip. There exists even, if you will, besides the language communicated by telephone a language of the telephone itself. And, according to Benjamin's triumphant conclusion, nobody is responsible for this silent cacophony but G-D himself.

But, you may ask: what is the point of this eccentric plot? Lets pretend that the point is translation. Because obviously, the language of things has to be translated in order to become intelligible for those of us who are dumb for its silent splendour. But the idea of translation, which Benjamin has in mind, is a completely different concept of translation than the one we are used to. Because, from the most ordinary to the most sophisticated translation theories, one thing is usually taken for granted: that translation takes place between different human languages or the cultures, which are supposed to nurture them. Thus, languages are assumed to be an expression of different cultures and nations. This combination is hastily identified as the political aspect of translation and even language as such. And on this level standard translation theory is always already implicated in political practice and governmental strategies.

But Benjamin's idea of translation – at least in this text – boldly ignores this obvious and perhaps banal feature of translation. And thus, an entirely different concept of a politics of translation emerges. Instead of national languages, which are only mentioned passingly in this text, he focuses on what I would call languages of practice: the language of law, technology, art, the language of music and sculpture. And more importantly: translation doesn't take place between them, but within them. That is: between the language of things and the language of men, at the base of language itself. Thus, a few very important modifications are introduced with regard to traditional translation theory: firstly language is defined not by common origin, belonging or nation, but by common practice. Secondly, translation primarily takes place within language not between languages. And thirdly, translation addresses the relationship of human language and thing language.

Since Benjamin was perfectly aware of the romantic translation theories, which focussed on concepts like the national spirit, his feigned ignorance has to be seen as more then a bold political statement. It is a blatant declaration of irrelevance of culturalist approaches. Instead of nations and cultures, his perspective on translation takes matter and God as first reference points. And this theologico-material concept of translation radically shifts the definition of a politics of translation. It does not hover around organicist notions of community and culture. But it bluntly locates translation at the core of a much more general practical question: how do humans relate to the world?

Instead of a politics of the original content – like the nation state, the culture, the *Volksgeist* or national language – Benjamin argues for a politics of form. And the form will decide about the politics of language as such.

Potestas and Potentia

But what exactly are the political processes involved in this type of translation? Lets look at it more closely. Two languages are mediated within this process. The language of things is an inherently productive language – according to Benjamin because it contains the residue of the word of God, which created the world by talking. On the other hand there is the human language, which can either try to receive, amplify and vocalise this language by naming things, or else classify, categorise, fix, and identify its components in what Benjamin calls the language of judgement.

If we were to map this juxtaposition on more recent debates, we could also say that translation can take place within the two different spheres known as power and force – or more pompously

potestas and potentia. While the language of things is full with potential, the language of humans can either try to engage in this potential or become a tool of force. And thus translation takes place in the mode of creation as well as of force, and usually both modes are mixed with each other.

And thus, politics are played out in the forms in which the translation between the language of things and the language of men takes place. In the worst case, this relationship can take on the form of an epistemological dictatorship. That humans decided to rule over things and to disregard their message led to the disaster at Babylon. To start listening to them again would be the first step towards a coming common language, which is not rooted in the hypocrite presumption of a unity of humankind, but in a much more general material community. In this case, translation does not silence the language of things but amplifies it potential of change.

It is now clear, that in this perspective translation is highly political, because it directly addresses issues of power within language formation. It concerns the relationship of humans to the world as a whole. It addresses the emergence of practice and the languages, which correspond to it. Thus, Benjamin relates translation directly to power – by looking at the form of the translation, not its content. The respective form of translation will decide, if and how the language of things with its inherent forces and energies and its productive powers is subjected to the power/knowledge schemes of human forms of government or not. It decides, whether human language creates ruling subjects and subordinate objects or whether it engages with the energies of the material world.

While this may still sound completely unpractical for anybody, the contrary is the case. One might even say, that most human practice is constantly engaged in this process of translation. Let me give you now one very obvious example of such a translation from the language of things into the one of humans. And that is the example of the documentary form.

The documentary form as translation

A documentary image obviously translates the language of things into the language of humans. On the one hand it is closely anchored within the realm of material reality. But it also participates in the language of humans, and especially the language of judgement, which objectifies the thing in question, fixes its meaning and constructs stable categories of knowledge to understand it. It is half visual, half vocal, it is at once receptive and productive, inquisitive and explanatory, it participates in the exchange of things but also freezes the relations between them within visual and conceptual still images. Things articulate themselves within the documentary forms, but documentary forms also articulate things.

And it is also obvious, how Benjamin's politics of translation functions with regard to the documentary image. In documentary articulations, things can either be treated as objects, as evidence for human plots, or they can be subjected to the language of judgement and thus overruled. I have once referred to this condition as documentality, that is the way in which documents govern and are implicated in creating power/knowledge. Or else, the forces, which organise the relationships between them, can be channelled in view of their transformation. The documentary form can also let itself be seduced and even overwhelmed by the magic of

the language of things – although we will see, that this is not necessarily a good idea. But basically, this is how the relation between potestas and potentia is articulated within the documentary form. It is the relationship of productivity vs. verification, of the asignifying vs. the signified, of material reality vs. their idealist interpretation.

But let me make one thing very clear: to engage in the language of things in the realm of the documentary form is not equivalent to using realist forms in representing them. It is not about representation at all, but about actualising whatever the things have to say in the present. And to do so is not a matter of realism, but rather of relationalism – it is a matter of presencing and thus transforming the social, historical and also material relations, which determine things. And if we focus on this aspect of presencing instead of representation, we also leave behind the endless debate about representation, which has left documentary theory stuck in a dead end.

The power of things

But why, you may ask, is Benjamin so in love with the language of things in the first place? Why should anything that things have to say be so special? Lets simply disregard the reason, which Benjamin himself gives in his text: that the word of God shines forth through the mute magic of things. While this may sound poetical, it is rather an expression of Benjamin's pompous perplexity, then a convincing case.

Lets instead remember the role that material objects took on in Benjamin's thought later on, when he started deciphering modernity mainly by sifting through the wake of trash it left

behind. Modest and even abject objects became hieroglyphs in whose dark prism the social relations lay congealed and in fragments. They were understood as nodes, in which the tensions of a historical moment materialised in a flash of awareness or grotesquely twisted into the commodity fetish. In this perspective, a thing is never just something, but a fossil in which a constellation of forces is petrified. According to Benjamin, things are never just inert objects, passive items or lifeless shucks at the disposal of the documentary gaze. But they consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, which keep being exchanged. While this opinion borders on magical thought, according to which things are invested with supernatural powers, it is also a classical materialist one. Because the commodity, too, is not understood as a simple object, but a condensation of social forces. Thus things can be interpreted as conglomerates of desires, wishes, intensities and power relations. And a thing language, which is thus charged with the energy of matter can also exceed description and become productive. It can move beyond representation and become creative in the sense of a transformation of the relations, which define it. While Benjamin seems to hope for this kind of event, he also foresees a darker possibility of its realisation, which he calls conjuration.[1] If there is so to speak a white magic of things, bristling with creativity and power, there is also a black one, charged with the dark powers of the taboo, illusion and the fetish. The power of conjuration tries to tap into the forces of things without proper reflection, or as Benjamin calls it: without interruption by the inexpressive.[2] And it is on these unmediated and uninterrupted chaotic powers, that capitalist commodification and general resentment thrives. And to come back to the documentary mode in which those forces of conjuration can be unleashed by as well: propaganda, revisionism and relativism are all examples, of how conjuration – that is

creativity without reflexive interruption – functions within the documentary form. They engage with the forces of resentment, hysteria, individual interest and fear, which are all powerful, unmediated urges. But they do so to speak without proper translation, and thus contaminate all modes of communication with their malignant drive.

The non-public public sphere

We have seen several modes of how an internal politics of the translation affects the documentary form. How do humans relate to things? What does creativity mean in this regard? And why is it not necessarily a good idea, when it comes to documentarism? But there is also an external aspect, which is relevant for the discussion of the documentary form as translation. And this aspect addresses the documentary form as an example of a transnational language of practice. Because, although the documentary form is based on translation, in a sense it also seems to have moved beyond translation. Its standard narratives are recognised all over the world and its forms are almost independent of national of cultural difference. Precisely because they operate so closely on material reality, they are intelligible wherever this reality is relevant.

This aspect was recognised as early as the 20es, when Dziga Vertov euphorically praised the qualities of the documentary form. In the preface of his film „The man with the movie camera“ he proclaimed, that documentary forms were able to organise visible facts in a truly international absolute language, which could establish an optical connection between the workers of the world. He imagines a sort of communist visual adamic language, which should not only inform or entertain, but also organise its viewers. It would not only transmit messages, but connect ist audience to

an universal circulation of energies which literally shot through their nervous systems. By articulating visible facts, Vertov wanted to shortcircuit his audience with the language of things itself, with a pulsating symphony of matter.

In a sense, his dream has become true, if only under the rule of global information capitalism. A transnational documentary jargon is now connecting people within global media networks. The standardised language of newsreels with its economy of attention based on fear, the racing time of flexible production, and hysteria is as fluid and affective, as immediate and biopolitical as Vertov could have imagined. It creates global public spheres whose participants are linked almost in a physical sense by mutual excitement and anxiety. Thus the documentary form is now more potent then ever, and in a sense precisely because it conjures up the most spectacular aspects of the language of things and amplifies their power. At this point I would like to come back to the cautious remark made earlier: to tap into the language of things is not always a good idea and its potential is not necessarily a potential for emancipation. The asignificant flows of compressed information translate without interruption and reflection. Their forms completely ignore the different languages of things. If they are not culturally specific, they are not specific to different material realities and practices either. They only translate the requirements of corporate and national media machines.

But does this form of documentary translation have any other political potential then the one for propaganda and product placement? Yes, and here we are back to the point of the beginning. The documentary form is no national language and not culturally specific either. Thus it is able to sustain non-national public spheres and therefore also the seeds for a political arena beyond national and cultural formations. But at the moment this

sphere is entirely controlled by the dynamics of a general privatisation. It is as Paolo Virno has recently argued: a non-public public sphere.

But this does not necessarily have to be the case. And we see in experimental documentary production, that different relations to things and the social conditions in which we relate to them are possible. The reason is very simple. The rise of importance of global documentary jargons rests on the material base of information capitalism, which is defined by digitalisation and flexibility. And any documentary form, which really articulates the language of those things, also articulates precisely these conditions, that is the conditions of precarious symbolic production. The new documentary forms of production with home computers and unconventional forms of distribution thus can be understood as articulations, which reveal the outline of new forms of social composition. This form of image production is largely based on digital technology and thus tends to merge more and more with other fields of mass symbolic production. They represent so to speak a negative of a coming public sphere, which has to be developed, in order to become functionable. This form of the public has left behind its entanglement with local and national mythologies and is characterised by similar precarious and often transnational forms of work and production. And the political articulation or social composition of these mostly still dispersed and wildly heterogenous points of view and groups is anticipated in the complex montages and constellations of contemporary documentary experimental forms.

But again: their politics are not determined by content but by form. If they just try to mimick the corporate standards of the large capitalist and national affective machines, they will also to a certain extent take over their politics. As Benjamin would put it:

their modes of translation are at once to immediate and not immediate enough. Only if documentary forms translate the incongruities, the inegalities, the rapid change of speed, the disarticulation and dizzying rhythms, the dislocation and the arythmic pulsations of time, if they mortify the vital drives of matter and deaden them by inexpressiveness, will they engage with the contemporary community of matter. Only if this form of translation is being achieved, will the documentary articulation reflect and thus amplify the language of those things, which are dragged across the globe on road to commodification at neck breaking speed or again tossed away and discarded as useless junk. And by reflecting on the conditions of production in which this documentary translation is being achieved, new forms of a-national public
spheres and postcapitalist production circuits might emerge.

Obviously, whatever I said does not apply only to the documentary form but also to other languages of practice. One might make a similar argument about the practice of curating, which could translate the language of things into aesthetic relationalities. And we have also seen these past decades, how the fetish of the art object has been deconstructed and traced back to social and other relations. But in this field, a cautionary remark applies as well: to simply represent those relations in the art field is not enough. Translating the language of things is not about eliminating objects, nor about inventing collectivities, which are fetishised instead. It is rather about creating unexpected articulations, which do not represent precarious modes of living or the social as such, but rather about presencing precarious, risky, at once bold and preposterous articulations of objects and their relations, which still could become models for future types of connection.

If Benjamin's concept of translation could tell us one thing, it is that translation is still deeply political, if we literally put it to practice. Only that we need to shift our attention from its content to its form. We need to shift the focus from the languages of belonging to the language of practice. We should stop to expect that it should tell us about essence but instead about transformation. And we need to remember, that the practice of translation only makes sense, if it leeds to much needed alternative forms of connection, communication, and relations - and not of new ways of innovating culture and nation.

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1 Walter Benjamin, " Goethe's *Elective Affinities,*" trans. Stanley Corngold, *Selected Writings 1913 - 1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press (Bellknap), 1996, pp. 297 - 360.

2 P., 297