



LAURENCE RICKELS and SAMUEL WEBER. Photo: ALEXANDER GIL.

Theory on TV/On a Role

LAURENCE RICKELS TALKS WITH SAMUEL WEBER

On the Coast and in Europe (the other coast) — and, according to the theory surf report, in the Land Down Under — Samuel Weber counts as top theorist in the happy haunting grounds demarcated by deconstruction (Derrida and de Man), critical theory (Walter Benjamin), and psychoanalysis (Freud and Lacan). In a series of essays on the media, and on television in particular, which can be found collected (and edited by an Australian for a Californian press) under the title *Mass Mediauras*, form technics media, Weber turns up the contrast on the live medium to show up its fundamental and uncanny spectrality. But the dislocations of life and death, presence and distance around the tube in no way contradict or hinder the interventionary thrust of television, for example as major part and portrait of the military-technological control panel. One piece of Weber's background that may be less well known, but which gives another turn on the contrast in the interview that follows, is his extensive collaboration with the Frankfurt Opera, which for a time helped place the Frankfurt theatre scene on the center stage of rethinking *mise en scene*. For me this interview passes through the kind of transference we all reserve for our teacher-fathers, even when the topic to be addressed is as post-Oedipal or pre-Oedipal as TV.

Laurence Rickels: How do you come to your speculations on the technical media. I realise that the relay or dislocations to which you assign tele-viewing does have precedents in your work. But how would you explain the turn to media in the range of your reading?

Samuel Weber: It came with a gradual realisation that when one discusses texts with most people there is so often an implicit reference to the non-textual which is generally being attributed to, identified with a certain type of visual perception. That is, when people say "there is no outside the text," or "what a ridiculous statement," it's because they're referring to a sense of reality that seems to me to be based on a certain experience of visual perception. In other words, what is visually perceived, objects and so on, is what is real. It's what allows one to be so confident that one can be certain where textuality starts and stops. In some sense visual perception, not as such of course, but an experience of visual perception seems to frame the discourse on language, which of course is something I'm continually concerned with. Then the next step is to realise that the transformations of the media, particularly audio-visual, tele-visual media, are being played out against this background of a certain experience of visual perception, the fairly unquestioned basis of what most people consider to be

real. Reality and identity are both derived from a relatively unreflected sense of visual perception. What has long struck me is that the ambiguities and the mediated quality of this experience of visual perception, its self-evidence is being increasingly shaken but also exploited by a medium such as television. And the fascination and power of the media have to do with this way in which it both continues, prolongs a certain sense of self-evident reality associated with the audio-visual perception, and the media, in particular, television, but not exclusively, are both reinforcing this and at the same time are exacerbating the uncanny qualities of the experience.

LR.: You also take up a certain challenge posed, I guess, by the popularity of cultural studies when you produce a reading of the media technological frame, of that which the consumerism of shows precisely overlooks in order to join in a *Beavis and Butthead*-style running commentary in lieu of any analysis whatsoever. It sounds like you're saying that the frame of our discourse on language is the TV set's frame. And it's not a container, though it pretends to be a container.

SW: Exactly.

LR: You seem to diagnose a certain crisis, in TV land, a crisis involving the disowned ambivalence and dislocation implicit in tele-

viewing. What opens up is a kind of *Lichtung* or "clearing" for really murderous all-out attempts at interventionism.

SW: I like your reference to *Lichtung*, particularly in relation to television. The usual translation of *Lichtung* is "clearing" and clearing suggests a kind of locus amoenus in the forest. You're far away from antennas in the middle of some bucolic German forest, and then you come upon this clearing with light streaming in through the trees. Nothing could be further from modern technology. But of course the way it's used it can also be translated as "lighting," and the way Heidegger is using it, and the whole approach to light and phenomena is really much closer to the ambivalences of the TV screen than it is to the safety and the repose of the forest clearing. And if you read more in Heidegger you realise it's something he shares with Benjamin: the clearing is also the clearing in the sense of bulldozers — clearing the forest away. So in this one word you have the little bucolic safe hope of a locus amoenus, you have the lighting in all of its electrical as well as natural ambiguity, and then you have the bulldozers: *Räumung*, which both Benjamin and Heidegger use emphatically, and which although it literally means "spacing," actually, idiomatically means "clearing away." As in Californian mini-malls, wiping everything out. If you take all of this together you

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get a nice condensation of the ambiguity in Heidegger which stretches from the yearning for a natural haven to the most violent intrusions of technology — also in the most ambiguous sense, because it's not a constructivist metaphor, which is the way one would usually think of technology as opposed to nature. It's not just building, it's clearing, it's lighting, it's making lighter, with all the ambiguity of the term. This also helps situate Heidegger with respect to the effects of modern media which also don't build, are not constructive — they're also not simply destructive — but there's certainly clear and light in this flickering ambiguity of the term *Lichtung*.

By dragging in *Lichtung* in this way you offer a better way of problematising precisely the ambivalent status of the frame with respect to perception in general and to the perceptual experience through the media in particular. One has the feeling that one is confronted with a reality that is self-contained and demarcated, a kind of immanent

reality. And it is this sort of feeling that television both plays with, emphasises, appeals to and at the same time renders uncanny. For instance in various kinds of reporting you'll have of course the temporal limitation of the sound bite but there are also far reaching limits and reductions along for the whole approach to "the event." In fact the notion of the event is almost synonymous with something that can be localised without remainder, that can be encapsulated. The rules of the game define it and about all you know when you leave, is just who's won and who's lost. It strikes me that when you have reporting, as recently in Africa, about very complex events, the historical dimension is totally omitted, and instead you get a focus on what seems to be concrete: proper names, faces. For example a political movement will be reduced to a proper name or a government or regime will be reduced to a figure, a face, and a proper name, once again. Television is powerfully complicitous in this sort of simplification, which leads to all kinds of not just essentialisms in a general sense but also quite easily to a kind of racist thinking.

LR: TV seems to be very much the culture of what goes on right in front of it, even when one isn't watching it all that attentively, or so it might seem. One available outlet for acting out in front of the tube or monitor is called role playing which relies precisely on pseudo-historical markers and place names to invite projection into make-believe situations over time. I'm wondering if that isn't part of the shared frame of the paranoid and the naive receptions, the co-ordinates are essentially accepted, only the projection or rather the content of the projection changes.

SW: It occurs to me that the ways in which role playing is referred to are really very different from what the actual performance of a role, for example in a theatrical setting, in fact involves. The usual talk of role playing is as if a role were constituted by a delimitable set of rules or habits applicable to individual instances. It's interesting to think how that transforms what actually goes on in a stage role. When you learn a role you learn lines but the application is more like asches game in that the lines that you learn are totally

dependent on the the other's move, what Walter Benjamin for example talks about in his Kafka essay in terms of the *cues*. There's a very complex interaction in the playing of a role. It's not a dialogue; it's much more mechanical, aleatory, and at the same time so interesting in its alterity. It's this it seems to me that gets omitted very often when people join a role playing society. All this presupposes precisely that you are master of space and time, or dimensions of difference, of interruption and so on. Whereas a theatrical performance of a role shows how incredibly decisive timing is. An accomplished role player may well be the one best able to react to unforeseen elements. But just imagine in a theatrical setting how everything changes if you alter the timing of the way you say something. It brings in precisely this dimension of non-containable otherness or exteriority.

Laurence Rickels is the author of The Vampire Lectures, Aberrations of Mourning, The Case of California, Acting Out in Groups, Nazi Psychoanalysis, and The History of Cinema. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

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