

John Plotz: From the Goldfarb Library at Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book, a podcast dedicated to making sense of contemporary problems by activating writing from the past. We believe you can only notice what's exceptional and unprecedented in the present if you take a hard look at what's gone before. You could say we look backward to see into the future. Over the next half-hour we'll explore a couple of works in depth and conclude by pointing you towards further reading on the topic. Recall This Book is hosted today by Elizabeth Ferry, an anthropologist now writing about gold and Columbian and Mexican mining and finance, and by me, John Plotz a professor of Victorian literature currently writing a history of science fiction and fantasy. Today we're joined by media historian Lisa Gitelman as we explore *old new media*. Our conversation will cover the difference between unique artworks and those destined for mass circulation and then we'll also ask which old media innovations were most comparable when first introduced to new arrivals like Twitter and block-chain.

John Plotz: We'll also end with recommendations for further reading and we will also debate whether Kipling was paying a compliment to the newest technology of his day when he compared radio to a delirious dying man psychically channeling Keats' "Eve of St. Agnes." So welcome to Recall This Book. So there's a line from "We won't get fooled again" by The Who, that I often think about: "here comes the new boss, same as the old boss." So because I'm the kind of nerd who studies the ways that women novel readers in the 19th century were depicted as sex addicted zombies, and the ways that people feared moviegoers in the early 20th century were going to be robbed of their free will by the flickering power of the screen.

John Plotz: That quote about new and old bosses helps me think about the way that some of our contemporary fear of the internet age, the age of electronic transmission gets amplified when we look back into the past. How much of what we fear in today's changed forms of attention, of reading, of watching, of texting falls into the category of here comes the new media revolution, same as the old media revolution? And how much of it is just genuinely new? Are we heading towards or have we already entered a cognitive upheaval that is caused by the way that big data streams all around us now and carries us off into parts unknown?

John Plotz: Today's authors are Walter Benjamin and Rudyard Kipling, both from the beginning of the 20th century. An unlikely pairing, but as the old jingle said, they may be two great tastes that taste great together. So to explore that set of questions around old and new media, we are

very lucky to have Lisa Gitelman join us today. She is a professor of media studies at NYU, and the author of numerous works in the field of media studies, including two books that form a perfect introduction to this topic. From 2006, *Always Already New: Media history and the Data of Culture*, and in 2014 *Paper Knowledge: Towards a Media History of Documents*. Lisa, welcome to this Public Books podcast.

Lisa Gitelman: Well, it's a delight to be here. Thanks a lot John.

John Plotz: So, in a more perfect world, I actually think we could just devote ourselves to exploring and reading aloud from Lisa's own writing on this topic. But as you know, the format of this podcast asks its hosts and its guests to choose texts from the past that seem to shed a sideways light on our own present situation. The idea is to try to shake up the terms of present debate by considering how the topic--in this case, *what is a new media and how different is it from old media?*--was approached in earlier times when a different version of this question came up. So Lisa, you brought with you today a timeless essay by Walter Benjamin, timeless but first published in German in 1935, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." And for those of you following along at home, you will find a link to Harry Zones, English translation of the essay on our website. Lisa, can I ask you to just tell us a bit about the essay and why you chose to discuss it?

Lisa Gitelman: Sure. So this is a classic essay. I think if you shook awake any media studies major in the world over in the middle of the night and said, "Benjamin," to them, they would without thinking, draw something from this essay and whisper back to you, "Aura." A-U-R-A.

John Plotz: Yeah, and if you said Benjamin to you, they would say, "No. *Benjamin*."

Lisa Gitelman: Yeah, somehow we say it that way. But anyway, it's a classic essay. It was written by Benjamin in the 1930s as you said. He was a German Jew in exile in Paris under kind of extreme duress at a moment of great kind of unknown in the world, both personally and politically. Very unsettled times, or uncertain times. And this was a political condition, a personal condition as well as something having to do with media because Benjamin was really kind of clocking in new media of reproduction, textual reproduction and imagery production. The essay has a lot of different moving parts to it. It's complex. There are lots of pieces in addition to this word *aura* that comes up. Importantly, it's an essay that focuses on the ... What Benjamin says is the kind of power and in this case, positive power of photography as a new art form and cinema as a new kind of mass art form as well. So I thought

it was very appropriate because it's Benjamin thinking about new media at a moment when the question of media seemed important in lots of different ways.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's great. Lisa, can I ask, I mean it's totally to put you on the spot and you don't have to have an answer on this, but you mentioned photography and film are the moving picture as the two new ones. Can you sort of position those two for us in terms of how, what Benjamin is doing with putting photography, and which actually isn't that new in 1935 but like photography and film, which is pretty new?

Lisa Gitelman: Pretty new, yeah. Sure. Benjamin sort of picks up photography as a contrast to painting or to the original graphic arts. And that's where the idea of aura comes in. A painting has this uniqueness, an aura, a presence if you like. A kind of autographic essence that photography doesn't, it doesn't make any sense to say which is the original photograph. We seem to be in a completely different domain when we get to photography, and Benjamin wants to theorize that. He wants to see its kind of political ramifications in terms of the cultural politics, but also in terms of some kind of Utopian future for a kind of proletarian good place to live.

Lisa Gitelman: And cinema comes in as kind of the second act there, because I think Benjamin again in this essay is quite optimistic. He's looking at Soviet cinema and seeing cinema as a way, first that workers can represent themselves, that sort of every man can be in film the way Soviet cinema was then sort of charting a course. But he also thought about film as a kind of training-ground for our modern existence, right? That it was a training in the apparatus of modernity in some way, if used correctly. If used in the ways that his exploration of photography seem to suggest new mass democratic forms might have.

John Plotz: If you had to think about the new forms right now that lined up with photography and film the way Benjamin is, do two things come to mind for you as one of them works like the way Benjamin is saying photography did, and one of them is working the way he said film is?

Lisa Gitelman: Well I mean we hear the same things about digital media, right? In a way when you get to a place when you're saying, well what's the original of a photograph? You're talking about the *memescape*, you are now in the place of absolute non-originals and we have to ask, "Is there cultural politics to that? Is it the one that Benjamin expected?" I'm not so sure. There are other parts in this essay where he dwells on, again on the worker being able to represent themselves in cinema, but even in print, in newspapers that everybody can write a letter to

the editor instead of authorship being this sort of sacrosanct domain. And there I think all of our contemporary digital media have really played a role in making us all authors. And I think in the 1930s that was still a kind of radical realization that we were reaching a place where we could all be authors, instead of just all be audience.

John Plotz: Yeah. Actually Elizabeth, I was wondering as an anthropologist, if you have thoughts about that funny thing in Benjamin where he actually seems to be complaining because people have too much access to the means of production, that is that now everyone can be an author and therefore the category of author, I'm not sure he uses the word debased, but he certainly uses the notion of like something like the authority of authorship being undermined. And I feel like nowadays we often hear that touted as the great democratic equalizer of.. everybody can have their own YouTube channel. So, did you ever take on that Elizabeth?

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, John. So I agree. So in this passage that you're talking about, he begins by saying that for centuries, a small number of writers were confronted by many thousands of readers, but that now the distinction between author and public is becoming smaller and smaller. And is, he says, about to lose its basic character. And clearly that distinction is way smaller than it was even then. That process has gone way farther. But I also think there is a kind of ambivalence in the passage about the tension between the democratization of the means of cultural production, and the decline of expertise. And it's kind of interesting since he's himself a writer. So maybe that's ... He has a certain sense of proprietariness, but it also seems connected to what you were saying before Lisa, about the sort of mood of the text.

Elizabeth Ferry: I totally agree that this is basically a very optimistic text and a call to pay attention to the positive possibilities of these changes in mechanical reproduction. But there's also some ambivalence earlier as well. So, for instance, when he introduces the term *aura*, he says that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. And you know, goes on to talk about the shattering of tradition. So, when an object or a work of art was traditionally unique and authentic and made authentic by its context, then it had this aura and that aura was the aura of tradition. So the kind of ripping away from that aura constitutes he says, a tremendous shattering of tradition, which is the adverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind.

John Plotz: So Elizabeth, are you saying then that we haven't come that far from 2018, that the same forms of anxiety around new media and the

notion of purely falsified photographs as Lisa was saying, or purely random YouTube where everybody's dog has their own YouTube channel, that that same fear of loss of authenticity, that fear that I think Marx talked about of all that is solid melting into air, just feels like a repetition compulsion?

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, as usual I want to say Yes and No. It seems to me ... Let me say it this way, I like the method that Benjamin and other people use of sort of thinking about one particular, in this case, technological change. And then what are its cultural and social ramifications? I find that very compelling. Obviously I'm not unique in finding this out. So based on that method, you would then assume that these are different changes. Different technologies will have different kinds of effects. And I sign onto that idea, more or less. I think the anxiety surrounding these changes is a lot more enduring than we might think. You talked about this before John, about the 19th century women-readers of novels were sex-crazed maniacs or whatever it was you said. And I recently read an article about sort of scare in the early 90s that was expressed in a whole bunch of different news stories about women who became addicted to the internet or addicted to their computers and left their marriages and neglected their children. So, that seems really similar.

Lisa Gitelman: Yeah. I mean I think there's a way in which, without even realizing it, we've sort of let authenticity go and Benjamin put it in (again seeing the contrast between the original work of visual art and the photograph) put it in terms of the kind of cultic presence of the artwork and that that cult presence was partly, as you say, made out of context. The fact that so few people would ever be able to see it, or even know what it looks like, and that we've let go in ways that I think we don't even acknowledge day to day. It's not part of our framing understanding of what we're doing now that that's gone.

John Plotz: Actually, Lisa, can I jump in on that? You mentioned to me in conversation a distinction between the autographic meaning that kind of authentically primary place and time located artwork versus the allographic meaning of the artwork, whose identity is actually bound up in reproduction/replication. So as somebody who studies 19th century novels, that's all about the allographic quality. So, did I just hear you say that where we are now is that we don't treat the autographic as having any primary aesthetic status at all? That it's all allographic all the time?

Lisa Gitelman: Well, no, I think we've tipped certainly, but we still cherish things from the hand of the author, the hand of the artist. We live in a

celebrity culture and that means sort of association possessions are still valuable to us. We haven't trashed, you know-

John Plotz: People still pay \$30,000 to be with Britney Spears just before she goes on, like to be in the room where it happens.

Lisa Gitelman: True, and you can have a blockbuster museum show now that will make a rare painting accessible to millions.

John Plotz: Specifically talking about the notion that the presence-

Lisa Gitelman: Yeah, it's a handy distinction from Nelson Goodman about artworks that depend upon the autographic original and art forms that are more allographic, so I'm thinking about a piece of music. It's not like the piece of music exists in its essential essence someplace. It has to be in its reproductions. So it has a whole career. And we could ask all kinds of things about the conditions of the reproduction of pieces of music to learn more about the pieces of music. This is that old joke, so the Mona Lisa is in the Louvre Museum in Paris, where is *Hamlet*? *Hamlet* is everywhere, right, that its reproductions are.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, that's great. Actually that might be a good time for us to pivot to turn to the podcast's second text, which is a short story by Rudyard Kipling, and yes, that is the same Rudyard Kipling you might remember fondly from childhood for *The Jungle Book* and for adventure stories like *Kim*.

John Plotz: And of course you might also remember him not so fondly for his horrifying poem from 1901 "The White Man's Burden." So he has a complex legacy for sure. But today I thought we could look at "Wireless," which is a short story he first published in 1902, and you will also find it on our website. So in brief, this is a story from the very early days of radio. In fact, the first line of it is, "It's a funny thing, this Marconi business." And it seems to be a story about a radio transmission. Only, it switches midway through from being about radio transmission, literally moves into another room to a very different kind of transmission, which is a tubercular young man, a druggist who suddenly finds himself in a trance state channeling Keats.

Lisa Gitelman: I don't know what to make of this wacky story, but you know, I think you're right that it does point to the persistence of the aesthetic and aesthetic works in the kind of ethereal realm. Both a kind of a subconscious, this person has obviously metabolized Keats in some way.

Elizabeth Ferry: There's a really interesting doubleness in the story because in some ways the radio transmission is like the transmission of the Keats poem to the consumptive assistant. And in some ways it's different. So, yeah, there's this sense of the aesthetic ether as to opposed to a kind of atmospheric ether and you know, the whole kind of difficulty of transmission and sort of coming through in bits and pieces is reproduced in both cases. But for the enthusiasts, the radio enthusiasts who are trying to make this connection, it said several times that, "Okay, we're transmitting to Poole" I think, but it could be anywhere. This is just ... It happens to be to this place that we're transmitting. And then also it doesn't really matter what we say. Whereas in the case of the Keats poem, it definitely matters what is said. There's this kind of constant revision trying to get it right. And it also matters that it's this particular consumptive guy. Something, there's a sort of sense that something about the tubercular spores are like the receptors for this message.

John Plotz: Okay. So Elizabeth, I'm going to push back on that one a little bit because I think he becomes a reception station in the same way that the radio station is ripe to receive. So ultimately--this is a minor plot twist and believe me, it's not a spoiler for the story--but it turns out they never get their reception from Pool that they were looking for, but they do overhear a couple of ships in the North Sea, maybe talking to one another and that's because their induction microphone is set up in just the right way. And at one point the narrator of the story says about the tubercular young man that he's quote "an induced Keats" and so induced there might mean like induced in a medical trance state, but it also means induced like an inductor microphone, which I imagine is the kind of microphone we're actually talking into right now. That is that it's a microphone that can somehow capture the sounds out of the air. You know, just because of a quirk of configuration.

Elizabeth Ferry: I see what you're saying. Like I think you're right that there's like a convergence in the forms of transmission with him as a reception station. But I still see a difference between the two modes because not only do the words really matter, but it seems to really matter that this guy has tuberculosis as Keats did, and Keats died from tuberculosis, and that you know, there's this kind of essential connection to them between the two of them, between Keats and the receptor, which goes beyond the ... which isn't transferrable.

Lisa Gitelman: I think I agree. I was going to sort of pick up a different thing and agree that it seems like this is a story that picks up a question for the future. And to the extent that it picks up the question of the future

about like the mathematical theory of communication, it's picking up that question of whether we need to think in terms of semantic content at all. And you know, semantic content in this case is poetry.

Lisa Gitelman: I think the story also picks up a kind of neat question for the present of 1902 about *wirelessness*, because nobody really understood I think really what *wireless* was, and I just wanted to clock in for a second that it really just been 60 years or so that people had been clocking in in *wirefulness*, right? The world was really newly wired in some way that had suddenly, I think of suddenly, 50, 60 years become intuitive, and wireless comes along and just seems like the radical unmaking of modernity in the name of some future modernity. And I think that that's where some of the uncanniness of the story and the context come from.

John Plotz: That's great. That actually completely goes to my future recommendation, which is the Henry James story about a telegraph operator. So I think that's a really good point about the wired and the wireless. And I actually kind of want to use that to pivot to 2018 a little bit and again ask that question of like, so what is the contemporary analogy there? Where we thought we understood, you know, we thought we understood the worldwide web, but now there's suddenly Web 2.0 where there's the sort of the new iteration of that. What's the equivalent for us of the thing that we clearly have to grapple with, but we were just getting used to the last digital revolution and all of a sudden this new one comes along.

Elizabeth Ferry: Well, I'm not sure this is the best analogy, but I guess that the emergence of block-chain, currencies that are based on blockchains is something that people feel we're hovering on the brink of a whole new way of thinking about exchange and the ... what underwrites it, and that we just got used to things like credit cards and so on. I suppose that could work as an analogy.

John Plotz: And so Elizabeth, for those of us, and I'm not saying I'm one at all, but for those of us who were ignorant of the nuances of blockchain, just ... Don't tell me the insides of blockchain, but tell me that takeaway for what you think is significant about the implications of blockchain's kind of open sharing of information or however you understand it.

Elizabeth Ferry: Oh boy. I bet I could have predicted you would ask me that. So what people who are very excited about blockchain say is that because it is based on this idea of a distributed ledger, a sort of open ledger that everybody has equal access to and that is kind of immutable--because of the way it's The code is set up, that is the past is immutable--that it



does away with the need for banks or centralized authorities to be issuing currency and then that has all of these implications that there ... its supporters think are super liberatory and its detractors think are potentially catastrophic.

John Plotz: Oh my God. So it's the ultimate allographic transactionality because everything is available, is verified precisely by it being replicated in different forms.

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah, exactly.

Lisa Gitelman: Yeah. I'd probably maybe add a postscript to that. I think blockchain is ... we're trying to wrap our minds around it. It does depend on massive computing power, right? So it has this big ecological dimension to it that people are rightly getting quite concerned about.

John Plotz: That's really interesting, because I was pursuing a different chain of thought and I was thinking of it in terms of social mediation and this could easily be because I'm the parent of teenagers, but I was thinking about that notion of that what's really at stake is the amazing way that people build out their social networks without relying on face-to-face interaction. That is that we ... Of my generation anyway, we have this kind of fear of the idea of a presence that is a presence of electronic mediation. But I think that a younger generation has no fear about that, that they take for granted that it's not a ... we don't live in an age of transmission of a kind of one-to-x transmission. We live in an age of an x to x interaction.

Lisa Gitelman: Well, and it's an absolute publicness that is in keeping with the Blockchain technology, that I mean ... And yet John, you managed to get out of bed in the morning. You know, this doesn't sound like Utopia to me, or a very sort of positive, optimistic turn. And yet we've been pretty upbeat.

John Plotz: Yeah, well I actually-

Lisa Gitelman: Where do you see hope here?

John Plotz: Well see to me, I mean, but everybody else thinks I'm insane. But I actually think that one of the things that's really interesting about the mediated age that we live in is that the constraints of reproduction are actually enabling constraints by the following analogy, that Twitter is like haiku. I mean, I'm sure people have said this, so forgive me because I'm missing the people who've pursued this argument. But of course you can understand Twitter as just free stream of

consciousness venting. I can't think of anyone who actually just vents on Twitter, but I'm sure there must be people who do it, but you know ... But on the other hand, that limit of characters kind of feels like the haiku limit. And so you're, in other words, producing a new kind of ... a set of paradigms for what it means to have an aesthetic relation. Yeah, an enabling constraint.

John Plotz: So in *Wireless*, one thing that's notable is that Kipling keeps running through different metaphors for how poetic inspiration might look like in inductive microphone. So he says, "In my own brain something crackled." Like at the moment that he recognizes that this is Keats, and he's talking about his brain as if it were a radio, you know, a circuit or a magnetic loop that's closing.

John Plotz: You know, in other words, new metaphors that allow us to reconstitute an aesthetic. Lisa is looking at me with a gentle smile. Like, "Oh, you poor sap. I can't believe that."

Lisa Gitelman: I mean, I guess, going back to Benjamin, one of the things that you know, even though this essay is quite optimistic in many of its ... if ambivalent.. in many of its observations, he did see with incredible kindness the way that the emergence of fascism was in a sense the kind of anesthetizing of politics. And I think we need to have kind of similar concerns today about our media and centralization and decentralization, those questions of long standing. But also how power is mystified, aestheticized, and the like.

John Plotz: So that actually brings us to the final portion of this podcast, *Recallable Books*. So Lisa, what book are you going to urge our listeners to recall from the library or head off to find at their local bricks and mortar, cat-friendly, hippie-teenager-employing style bookstore, that I know you frequent.

Lisa Gitelman: Okay. Well I prepared something. Since we were talking about an essay, Benjamin's essay, I brought along just another essay. So low stakes.

John Plotz: Awesome.

Lisa Gitelman: There is a recent essay by the sociologist Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe, called "The Migration of the Aura, or how to explore the original through its facsimiles." And this is an essay that explicitly takes up Benjamin's essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" and does some new things with it. In particular they are looking at digital reproductions. And what, if Benjamin is looking

at photographs, what digital imagery can do or say to help us with thinking about the same kind of questions at the present moment. I should say that this essay appears in a book called *Switching Codes* that was edited by Thomas Barcher and Roderick Coover.

John Plotz: That's awesome. Thank you so much Lisa, and I'm sure we can put a link to that up on the website so that people can figure out a way to access it. Thanks. And Elizabeth, what about you?

Elizabeth Ferry: Yeah. So I also want to talk about an essay called "Mobile Phones and Mipoho's Prophecy: The Powers and Dangers of Flying Language." And it's written by my colleague, anthropologist, Janet McIntosh here at Brandeis. And she's interested in the ways people in the town of Malindi, Kenya text on their cell phones. And they use two different languages when they're texting English and Kigiryama, which is a local language. They use them about different kinds of things. The English is often about things that have to do with mobility, youth culture and cosmopolitanism and the Kigiryama is often in situations that have more to do with family, respect, obligations, formality.

Elizabeth Ferry: And by the same token, the English is often abbreviated in these kind of condensed forms that we can recognize in texts. I think it's similar to us, whereas the Kigiryama is always fully spelled out. So there's a sort of ...this really reproduces ideas that people have about these two languages and the kind of social interactions that they represent. So I think it's a really good example of how there's both the endurance of forms of social life that predated texting and the particular platform of texting and how it might change things. So I recommended it to you and it's available on our website.

John Plotz: Awesome. Thanks Elizabeth, and we can also put up a link to that and I'm actually going to use a little bit of *praeteritio* and say, "I'm really sorry. I would love to recommend Henry James' "In the Cage", but I am sort of committed instead to recommending one of the first post-H.G. Wells stories, which is E.M. Forster's 1909 *The Machine Stops*. And we'll have that up ... the text of that in full on the website. So that brings us to the end of this really fascinating discussion and this Public Books podcast. So once again, Elizabeth, thank you for being my co-host, and Lisa Gitelman, thank you very much, delighted to have you as a guest in these inaugural few.

Lisa Gitelman: Great to be here.

John Plotz: Awesome. Well we'll have you back, I hope. Okay. All right, good bye for now.

Elizabeth Ferry: Recall This Book is the brain child of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. It's recorded and edited in the media lab of the Brandeis Library by Plotz, Ferry, and a cadre of colleagues here in the Boston area and beyond. Sound editing is by Anil Tripathy in the anthropology department, and production assistance, including website design and social media is done by Matthew Schratz from the English department. Mark Delello overseas and advises on all technological matters and we appreciate the support of the university librarian, Matthew Sheehy and Dean Dorothy Hodgson.

John Plotz: We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, or suggestions for future episodes. You can email us directly or contact us via Twitter or on our Facebook page and our website or [recallthisbook.org](http://recallthisbook.org), where you'll also find links to the text discussed today and suggestions for further reading and listening.

John Plotz: Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcasts, and to share the episode with friends via social media or however else you do that, including hollering out the window. For a podcast with no commercial affiliations and no budget for publicity, your kind words are the single best way and maybe the only way to get the word out. From Recall This Book, this is John Plotz along with Elizabeth Ferry and Lisa Gitelman saying thanks for downloading or streaming this show about old and new media, and about Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" and Rudyard Kipling's story, "Wireless."