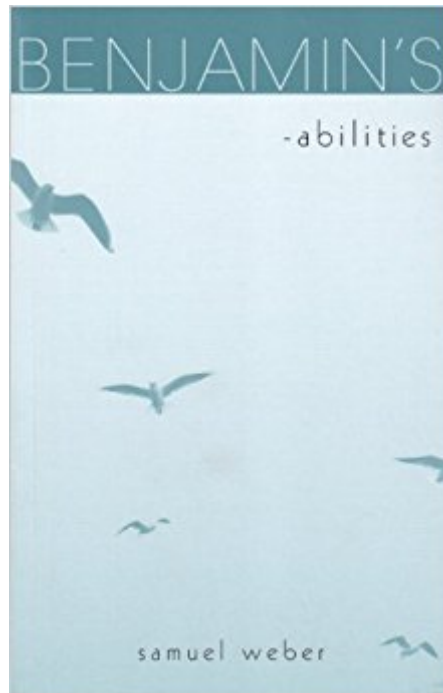




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# Benjamin's -abilities



## Synopsis

“There is no world of thought that is not a world of language,” Walter Benjamin remarked, “and one only sees in the world what is preconditioned by language.” In this book, Samuel Weber, a leading theorist on literature and media, reveals a new and productive aspect of Benjamin’s thought by focusing on a little-discussed stylistic trait in his formulation of concepts. Weber’s focus is the critical suffix “-ability” that Benjamin so tellingly deploys in his work. The “-ability” (-barkeit, in German) of concepts and literary forms traverses the whole of Benjamin’s oeuvre, from “impartibility” and “criticizability” through the well-known formulations of “citability,” “translatability,” and, most famously, the “reproducibility” of “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” Nouns formed with this suffix, Weber points out, refer to a possibility or potentiality, to a capacity rather than an existing reality. This insight allows for a consistent and enlightening reading of Benjamin’s writings. Weber first situates Benjamin’s engagement with the “-ability” of various concepts in the context of his entire corpus and in relation to the philosophical tradition, from Kant to Derrida. Subsequent chapters deepen the implications of the use of this suffix in a wide variety of contexts, including Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book, his relation to Carl Schmitt, and a reading of Wagner’s *Ring*. The result is an illuminating perspective on Benjamin’s thought by way of his language and one of the most penetrating and comprehensive accounts of Benjamin’s work ever written.

## Book Information

Paperback: 376 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press (April 10, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674046064

ISBN-13: 978-0674046061

Product Dimensions: 8.9 x 5.7 x 1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 2 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #660,446 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #200 in [Books > Textbooks >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

In this demanding book, Weber (*Theatricality as Medium*) analyzes Benjaminian theory and its potential, presenting a close reading of Walter Benjamin at his most energetic and complex. Focusing on the critic's favorite suffix, -abilities (invoked in his discussions of communicability, iterability, impartability, knowability and reproducibility), the author explores Benjamin's contention that just because something is communicable does not mean it is communicated; therefore, that sense of potential (as opposed to the activity itself) is where serious examination ought to begin. The book is not meant to be easy going and demands prior understanding of theory and critical and philosophical jargon to fully mine its gems—such as when Weber deftly extends Benjamin's seminal work on media to the present time and reasserts Benjamin's mastery of using theater as both metaphor and object of study. An essay on detail (the detail remains, even today, the uneasy residence that God is condemned by language to share with the Devil) provides lighter entertainment. Through Benjamin, Weber illuminates what happens between what is written and what is read and the true impossibility of defining any sort of straight line between those two points. (May) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

*Benjamin's -abilities* is a landmark work in the study of Walter Benjamin and in all of the many fields in which Benjamin's work has become indispensable. This book marks the culmination of the work of one of the most influential and admired critics writing today, whose work has been profoundly involved in and shaped by an innovative engagement with Benjamin. (Kevin McLaughlin, Brown University) Because no single methodology could account for all the textual maneuvers and figurations with which Benjamin saturates his variegated writings, a new book on Benjamin must also offer an entirely new way of seeing and reading-- a tall order. *Benjamin's -abilities* is just such a book. Sam Weber has long been one of the most significant and original thinkers on the international scene. This book, perhaps Weber's magnum opus, will be of great interest not only to scholars of Benjamin but also to a wide community of readers in the humanities and beyond. (Gerhard Richter, University of California, Davis) In this demanding book, Weber analyzes Benjaminian theory and its potential, presenting a close reading of Walter Benjamin at his most energetic and complex... Through Benjamin, Weber illuminates what happens between what is written and what is read and the true impossibility of defining any sort of straight line between those

two points. (Publishers Weekly 2008-03-31) Weber's close readings are illuminating. (David Gordon Library Journal 2008-06-01) In Benjamin's *À l'œuvre*, Samuel Weber takes an innovative approach to Walter Benjamin's work. In contrast to the burgeoning secondary literature on Benjamin devoted to broad themes (his "messianism," his "Marxism," etc.), Weber, who has achieved academic prominence with scholarship on the Frankfurt School, psychoanalysis, deconstruction and media culture, opens up a fertile avenue of interpretation by paying close attention to a stylistic idiosyncrasy running through Benjamin's oeuvre...[Weber] deftly navigates this labyrinth of interpretations, exhibiting a keen sense of Benjamin's singularly elusive style of thinking and writing. (Ross Benjamin Times Literary Supplement 2008-11-14) Not only the best read of 2008 but, with a shelf full of works on Walter Benjamin, the best book on him I've ever read. (Rosalind Krauss Artforum 2008-12-01)

As you might expect if you've read Weber's other astonishing work, he reads Benjamin in a Derridian way, and as a kind of Derridian himself. The result is enormously insightful and persuasive. I've always found Benjamin smart and somewhat slippery - you think you know what he is saying and suddenly he seems to veer in the opposite direction. Weber finds a startling and illuminating coherence precisely in that slipperiness.

Samuel Weber mentions at the end of this stirring engagement with the writing and thought of Walter Benjamin that this work had a gestation of about forty years. Given the patient teasing of German words and suffixes throughout, of their etymological and allegorical valences, it does not surprise that this book represents a lifetime of work and thought. The book is divided into two main parts: the first explores key forms, stylistic tics and themes in Benjamin's writing, as on media, translation and history. Weber inaugurates the second section, largely readings of Benjamin's readings or readings of others with Benjamin, with a soaring journey through *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924). The final chapter on "Seagulls" glides the reader to a gently rocking conclusion, allowing one to lean back to better focus on the horizon of one's thoughts. This book is peppered with engagements with other philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, Deleuze, Schmitt, and Derrida. One chapter possesses the subtitle: "Agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes...", perhaps revealing Weber's predilection for provocative synchronic passages. This book revealed a new Benjamin to me and I am grateful for the guiding thoughtfulness of its author.

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