Pop-up theory: distraction and consumption in the age of meta-information

R.L. Rutsky

Abstract
The cable television program Pop Up Video seems to serve as a textbook example of distraction in an age of information. Yet, distraction, at least as Walter Benjamin used the term, was never simply a matter of a deficit of attention, but always implied a scattering or dispersion, which Benjamin saw as constitutive of modern mass culture. Exploring this notion of distraction as dispersion in relation to Pop Up Video and other ‘meta-forms’, this article seeks to show how Benjamin’s idea of ‘reception in a state of distraction’ continues to provide insights into how information is disseminated and consumed in contemporary media and information culture.

Key words
aura • Beavis and Butthead • consumption • distracted reception • information dispersion • music videos • Mystery Science Theater • pop up videos • self-reflexive television • Walter Benjamin

Meta-television, meta-information

The notion of ‘pop-up theory’ may suggest to some readers a kind of ‘instant theory’: a theory that is easily accessible, uncomplicated, and reduced to its most basic, most comprehensible elements. Here, it may seem, theory becomes little more than a series of icons and menus: theory as graphical interface. This would also be to say, of course, that pop-up theory is theory become ‘pop’: popularized but also ‘dumbed-down’, subordinated to the images and commodity values that make up popular culture. Yet, I would like to suggest that ‘pop-up theory’ may also suggest something about how, in an age of information, popular culture has come to be imagined, disseminated, and consumed. In this sense, pop-up theory refers as much to our interactions with popular visual and information...
culture – to how we view and consume it – as it does to any particular cultural object or text.

Nevertheless, ‘pop-up theory’ refers here, as well, to a specific television program: *Pop Up Video*, which was introduced on US cable television’s VH-1 music channel in 1996, where it rapidly became the channel’s most popular show. The program’s success led to its appearance on Canada’s MuchMusic channel in 1997 and, more recently, to a *Pop Up Video UK* version. The show has also spawned a *Pop Up Video Trivia Game*, and its highly recognizable format has been imitated and parodied in numerous venues. That now-familiar format involves taking already completed – and often outdated – music videos and remotivating them for media-savvy users by adding informational and satirical commentary on top of the videos themselves.

*Pop Up Video* may therefore be seen as part of that subgenre of television programs that are defined by their meta-televisual status, programs whose raison d’être is precisely the ironic or satirical re-presentation of pre-existing materials, from music videos to old movies to other television shows. Discussions of *Pop Up Video* frequently note its resemblance to programs such as *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *Mystery Science Theater*, which similarly frame their materials from the perspective of fans or viewers watching, commenting upon, and playing off and with these cultural ‘objects’.

In such shows, the situation of viewing or reception itself becomes central to the shows’ format. Of course, the subgenre of meta-television has a much longer history, which would include many local ‘Midnight Movie’ programs that employed wisecracking, often campy hosts (e.g. Elvira) to remotivate low-budget, kitschy horror and science-fiction films for hip, late-night consumption. More recently, the cable network E! and Comedy Central have made the ironic meta-televisual format a staple of their programming strategies, with shows such as *Talk Soup* and *The Daily Show* built almost entirely on trendy, ironic re-presentations of other television programs.

As these examples indicate, meta-television shows have flourished, particularly on cable networks such as E!, MTV, VH-1, Comedy Central, and the Science Fiction Channel. For these networks, meta-shows convey a certain knowing – at times even smug – hipness about the media world. They also have the advantage – since they make use of already existing viewing materials – of being extremely economical to produce. Because of their cost-effectiveness, these shows do not need to attract the huge number of viewers necessary to traditional network television in order to be profitable. Indeed, these shows are *not intended* to appeal to a mass audience, but to a select demographic: youthful, generally well-educated viewers with discretionary income. The format and attitudes of these shows are therefore designed to distinguish this audience – who tend to appreciate irony and the satire of media forms – from more mainstream viewers. For these viewers, the appeal of these shows is based on this differentiation, which furthers their sense of being among those who are in the cultural know, those who are ‘in on the joke’.

Yet, in an age when popular culture and media seem to be constantly expanding, when no one can ‘take in’ all the movies, videos, television shows, CDs, MP3s, comic books, websites, fashions, and techno-gear that popular culture currently makes available for consumption, this sense of being among the pop-cultural
cognoscenti has become increasingly important, and increasingly difficult to maintain. Amidst this plethora of cultural information, it is easy to see why meta-cultural forms and formats have grown increasingly popular. As Steven Johnson (1997) notes in *Interface Culture*:

Metaforms prosper at those threshold points where the signals degenerate into noise, where the datasphere becomes too wild and overwrought to navigate alone. In these climates, all manner of metaforms appear: condensers, satirists, interpreters, samplers, translators. They feed on surplus information, on the bewildering sensory overload of the contemporary mediasphere.

(p. 32)

These meta-forms, in other words, serve as a kind of informational survival strategy, a way of filtering or managing the ‘overload’ of images, sounds and data that make up contemporary media cultures. Through these forms, viewers and consumers attempt to maintain a sense of control over the burgeoning world of media and information culture.

Yet, meta-cultural television shows such as *Mystery Science Theater*, *Beavis and Butt-Head* (*B&B-H*), and *Pop Up Video* not only cite or sample other media, they also make the process of audio-visual consumption part of their very format. It is worth noting, however, that in each of these shows, the process of reception/consumption is presented differently, in terms that are specific to particular media. In *MST3000*, for example, the viewing experience is explicitly framed through the *movie screen* on which the show’s characters are ‘forced’ to watch ‘bad’ horror and science-fiction movies. Indeed, as these characters provide humorous commentary on the film’s action, we see their silhouettes at the bottom of the screen (see Figure 1).

The audience for the show is therefore positioned as if they were seated behind the characters in the same movie theater audience. Similarly, the framing device in *B&B-H* is ostensibly the *television screen* on which the show’s characters, seated on a couch in a nondescript living room, watch and comment upon various music videos. Here, however, the audience viewing the program is positioned facing Beavis and Butt-Head as they watch, so that it is their viewing tastes and addled commentaries that become as much the object of the show’s parody as the music videos themselves. While *Pop Up Video*, like *B&B-H*, presents and parodically comments upon music videos, the show does not frame these videos through the device of characters watching a television or movie screen, but instead takes as its model a *computer screen*. The program adds information and playful commentary to these videos via ‘pop-up’ text boxes, which mimic the pop-up menus, dialogue.

![Figure 1 MST3000: commentators’ silhouettes at the foot of the screen.](image-url)
boxes, and information screens of computerized graphic interfaces. Indeed, the show has been described as an example of 'hypertext television' (Suck, 1997).

Of course, Pop Up Video is hypertextual only in the sense that it simulates the look of computerized hypertext and hypermedia. Its 'pop ups' are not interactive; viewers cannot choose from among the links or 'pop ups' that appear on the screen. Still, Pop Up Video's attempt to reproduce the format of computer-based hypertext suggests that the model for audio-visual reception (or consumption) has in fact shifted from movie to television to computer screen. Indeed, Johnson (1997), writing before Pop Up Video had appeared on the air, argues that this shift is already implicit in televisional meta-forms, which he sees as 'a kind of advance guard, a television pilot for a series that will run on another medium':

They are all straining to do something within the TV box that cannot be done, for fundamental technical reasons. [These] forms are finally all about meta-information – or better yet, flexible meta-information. For the first time in its history, television has begun to offer its viewers different lenses through which to view the 'real' content, which turns out to be another television show. The raw data can now be consumed through different mediations. You can watch the music video directly on MTV, of course, but you can also watch it through the filter of Beavis and Butt-Head, with their staccato comments running in the background. (pp. 36–7)

For Johnson, television meta-forms presage the ability of computer and information technologies to re-present, mediate, or filter cultural information as 'meta-information' – something that television, and presumably film as well, could only do imperfectly. In contrast to these new technologies, Johnson argues, 'the information that arrives on your TV screen is hardwired and inflexible; you consume what the networks tell you to consume' (p. 37). Johnson's argument here is a common one among advocates for new digital technologies: while 'old media' such as television and film offered only a fixed flow of information from producers to consumers, information technologies allow information to be freed from the constraints of 'mainstream' media channels, spread across multiple locations, thus enabling consumers to access and use data as they see fit. Viewers therefore become active users rather than passive receivers, able to manage and filter data for themselves, to choose not only what information they will consume but how they will consume it. Thus, in an age of meta-forms and meta-information, consumption necessarily becomes a matter of meta-consumption.

As I hope to show, this account of the 'freedom' that information technologies supposedly offer to consumers is highly problematic. Yet, it has the advantage of pointing to the relationship between reception/consumption and that 'bewildering' diffusion of information that makes up the 'contemporary mediasphere'. Indeed, the more that information proliferates or spreads, the more desperately do we feel the need to see ourselves as autonomous, active consumers. It is precisely this drive to consume that fuels the trend toward meta-forms and meta-information, which become increasingly necessary to maintain this sense of ourselves as in control of our own consumption. In this context, Pop Up Video, with its meta-televisional format and its simulation of computerized hypertext, serves to exemplify the
processes through which contemporary media and information are selected, re-presented, disseminated, and consumed. The ‘pop ups’ of *Pop Up Video* are, in fact, perfect illustrations of this diffusion and consumption, thematizing how information tends to ‘pop up’ in different, and sometimes surprising, contexts.

**Reception in a state of distraction**

If, however, *Pop Up Video* draws from and gestures toward computerized meta-information and hypertext, it is still a television show. The ability to re-present and recontextualize audio-visual information for consumption cannot, then, be seen merely as a product of digital technologies. Indeed, the re-presentation and dispersion of information that makes meta-information – and meta-consumption – possible continues to be based upon what Walter Benjamin (1969) referred to as mechanical or technical reproducibility, and upon that mode of reception that Benjamin saw as inseparable from technical reproduction: ‘reception in a state of distraction’ (p. 240).

‘Distraction’ was, of course, the concept that Benjamin, following the lead of Siegfried Kracauer, linked to the reception of films, of architecture, and, arguably, of mass culture in general. Unlike the rapt attention or concentration demanded by the traditional work of art, the film is ‘taken in’ in an incidental, distracted fashion, which ‘requires no attention’. As Benjamin (1969) observes in a well-known passage:

> Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise ... The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one. (pp. 240–1)

If we take this definition at face value, *Pop Up Video* might seem to offer a textbook-perfect example of contemporary pop-cultural ‘distraction’. Even without being ‘popped’, music videos have frequently been seen as exemplifying the very height of distraction – as, for example, Andrew Goodwin (1992) has suggested in his book on music television *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*. Music videos were, in fact, never intended to be watched with single-minded concentration but, rather, in an incidental or casual fashion. Music television, much like radio, generally serves as a background for other activities, attracting viewers’ attention only sporadically and often incompletely. As Blaine Allen (2002) observes:

> The momentary structure of [music television] suggests that we are invited to join and drop out at will (or to pass over the station while grazing the channels with a remote control), or to let the television play like a radio until a piece of music or other sound might attract us to pay attention and watch. (p. 228)
Yet, it is not only the cluttered, highly segmented context in which they appear that promotes the distracted reception of music videos; the videos are themselves designed for distracted viewing. As promotional vehicles, music videos (much like television commercials) tend to emphasize striking visual elements over narrative continuity, foregrounding spectacular images, eye-catching graphics, novel formal techniques, and disjunctive editing, which are organized – sometimes quite loosely – around the song and its performance. Thus, as Andrew Darley (2000) points out, music videos are defined by their ‘hybrid character’, which ‘is manifest at the level of the individual text through the pervasive manner in which tapes appropriate and incorporate images, styles and conventions from other types of image and image form’ (pp. 115–16). Music videos have, in other words, always relied upon a highly referential or intertextual aesthetic, based on selecting, recombining, and representing formal and cultural elements. Such an aesthetic assumes, and perhaps even solicits, a distracted reception or consumption, in which one’s attention is continually divided, scattered among a variety of quickly shifting audio-visual elements.

In this context, ‘popped’ videos would seem to divide viewers’ attention even further, since one’s focus is split not only among different musical and visual elements, but is also extended to the textual information that is added to the videos. In order to read the comments and informational tidbits that ‘pop up’ on the screen, one’s attention must either shift away from the images and song (relegating them to the background) or, at the least, be spread among these elements. One’s attention is, in other words, scattered. Moreover, as with ‘unpopped’ music videos, the viewer’s attention is also dispersed temporally. Since neither images nor text stay on the screen for long, both visual and textual information are presented as momentary, disposable, here one moment and gone the next. Here, information, as the very idea of the pop-up suggests, is itself figured as ephemeral – as is its reception or consumption.

Not surprisingly, then, the concept of distraction has often been applied to our interactions with computer and information technologies. Most of us have heard the claim that in an age of information, we have all become increasingly distracted, increasingly divided in our attentions, shifting our focus from moment to moment in order to keep up with the rapid pace and ever-increasing quantity of information. In short, we have become increasingly prone to what some have called a cultural ‘attention deficit disorder’ (Shenk, 1997: 36). Too much information, too fast, we have been told, leads to an inability to focus, to a lack of concentration. Thus, some critics have argued, we come to feel beset by an overload of information, unable to direct our attention toward any particular point or goal.

Yet, distraction, at least as Benjamin used the term, was never simply a matter of a ‘deficit’ in attention. Distraction serves to translate Benjamin’s use of the German Zerstreuung, whose root word, the verb streuen, is similar to the English ‘strew’ or ‘strewn’. Thus, as Samuel Weber (1996) has noted, Zerstreuung carries a spatial connotation – and, indeed, a dynamic component – which is largely lost when this term is translated as distraction or absent-mindedness (p. 92). Moreover, Zerstreuung was an important term not only for Benjamin, but also for Heidegger, who – as Derrida (1991) observes – emphasized precisely its spatial dimensions, its
sense as a scattering, a dispersion, a dissemination. This is not to say, of course, that *Zerstreuung* – for either Heidegger or Benjamin – does not include some sense of the lack of attention that the English word ‘distraction’ conveys, only that distraction is more appropriately understood as including this sense of a dispersive, scattering movement.

Indeed, re-thinking distraction in terms of dispersion is particularly helpful in understanding Benjamin’s often oblique statements on the topic – and, as I want to argue here, to understanding popular media and information culture more generally. Anyone who has read Benjamin’s famous essay on technical reproducibility will recall that he associates distraction with the *reception* of films (and architecture). What is often forgotten, however, is that, for Benjamin (1969), this ‘reception in a state of distraction’ is matched by a similar quality within films themselves, as he implies in noting that film ‘meets this mode of reception halfway’ (p. 240). What allows film to meet this distracted reception halfway is its ‘shock effect’, which Benjamin links to the fact that ‘the spectator’s process of association’ is ‘interrupted by [the] constant, sudden change’ of cinematic images (p. 238).3 In other words, cinematic images are, in Benjamin’s view, themselves ‘dispersed’ or ‘torn apart’ [*zerstückelt*] in contrast to the sense of totality that has been associated, particularly in German aesthetic philosophy, with the traditional work of art.

Some film scholars have concluded that Benjamin overestimated the disjunctive effect of films, that he was naive about films’ ability to re-establish continuity at the level of editing and unity at the level of meaning. Benjamin, however, was well aware of this possibility of restoring wholeness – or aura – to films, as is made clear by his discussion of how films and film theorists often attempt to restore an artistic, ‘ritual value’ to cinema (pp. 226–8). Yet, Benjamin’s primary focus in this essay was not on individual films or filmmaking practices; rather, he was concerned, in an almost Heideggerean way, with the ‘essence’ of films, and, indeed, with the ‘essence’ of modern mass culture.

This essence lies precisely in the dispersive effects of technical reproducibility, which replaces the ‘unique occurrence’ of the artwork with one that Benjamin describes as ‘massive’ or ‘mass-like’ [*massenwiese*] and which he explicitly links to ‘contemporary mass movements’.4 This notion of ‘mass’ or of ‘the masses’ implies, first of all, that distraction, unlike the experience of the aura, is not an individual phenomenon but a collective one. Benjamin in fact speaks of ‘a collectivity in a state of distraction’ while, on the other hand, his descriptions of the experience of aura always refer to an individualized reception. This collectivity is not, however, a mass in the sense of a ‘bloc’ or even a unified movement, but rather an amalgam of impulses, of *movements*. Thus, for example, Samuel Weber (1996) can argue that for Benjamin:

> Mass movements are the result, or rather, the corollary, of that movement of detachment, *ablösen*, that marks the decline of the aura. For aura relates to mass not just as uniqueness does to multiplicity but also in spatial terms, as a fixed location does to one that is caught up in an incessant and complex movement. (p. 85)
Inasmuch as this incessant mass movement involves not only a ‘movement of detachment’ but a ‘shattering of tradition’, it is also very much a movement of dispersion, a scattering. In Benjamin’s terms, this dispersion is the ‘polar opposite’ of the concentration demanded by the work of art.

Benjamin aligns this dispersive mass movement with what he calls the ‘exhibition value’ of the work of art, in contrast to its ‘cult value’. To understand this linkage, we must remember that Benjamin’s notion of ‘exhibition value’ implies not simply that the artwork be exhibited to the public, but that it be seen in many places. In other words, the very notion of exhibition value implies that the artwork is capable of being moved or, rather, dispersed. As Benjamin (1969) notes, ‘It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple’ (p. 225). Thus, exhibition value is not only a matter of physical dispersion; it is also a dispersion or displacement of the (cult) value that is concentrated in the experience of the aura.

For Benjamin, this dispersion of the aura’s cult or ritual value ‘is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art’ (p. 221). What it is a symptom of, I would argue, is precisely the distracted, dispersive processes of mass culture, which are based on the reproducibility and dispersion made possible by photography and cinema. These processes are continued by the electronic and digital copying that have come to define contemporary information media and cultures. It is this sense of distraction, not as simply a lack of attention or concentration, but as a dispersive movement of both information and its reception, that is exemplified – and, indeed, thematized – in Pop Up Video.

Theory of the pop up

This diffusion or dispersion of information is particularly evident in the textual pop ups that define Pop Up Video and distinguish it from other music video shows. In mimicking the dialogue boxes and pop-up screens of computer and hypertext programs, these pop ups are ostensibly designed to provide additional information and commentary on the music videos to which they are attached. They therefore present themselves as a linking of textual and audio-visual information, much like the linking of information that forms the basis for hypermedia and the web. On the web, of course, the concept of a ‘link’ is explicitly figured as involving a movement from place to place or, rather, from site to site. Thus, for example, Steven Johnson (1997) describes the experience of clicking on web links precisely in terms of a thrilling rush of movement:

... the eureka moment for most of us came when we first clicked on a link, and found ourselves jettisoned across the planet. The freedom and immediacy of that movement – shuttling from site to site across the infosphere, following trails of thought wherever they led us – was genuinely unlike anything before it. (p. 110)

Similarly, computer games and hypermedia CD-ROMs almost invariably present links as a means of moving from one virtual space to another, transporting or
‘teleporting’ users to other ‘levels’, ‘rooms’, or even to other ‘worlds’. Even the most mundane examples of hypertext define links in terms of movement among various texts and images, often jumping from ‘page to page’ or ‘screen to screen’.

Of course, the pop ups of Pop Up Video are not ‘active’ links in the same sense as web or hypertext links, since they do not allow viewers to choose what links they will follow, what information will ‘pop up’. Yet, these pop ups do involve a kind of movement, as the very idea of ‘popping up’ suggests.

It is worth recalling here that the term ‘pop up’ did not originate with videos or even computers, but in reference to illustrated books, particularly children’s books. Intended less to educate than to delight, pop-up books include folded illustrations that, when opened, automatically spring from the page into three-dimensional form. To ‘pop up’ therefore implies a movement upward or outward, away from the text that the pop up is designed to illustrate. Although this movement ‘comes from’ the text, it is also self-sufficient, since it provides pleasure in its own right, apart from any illustrative capacity. This movement occurs suddenly, which is why ‘popping up’ has something in common with leaping, springing, and jumping. Yet, popping up also implies a kind of revelation, in which something not previously evident appears. In popping up, then, something quite literally takes place, jumps into existence, both spatially and temporally. Thus, popping up always involves an element of surprise, of unpredictability, which is part of its pleasure. Perhaps because of this sense of unpredictability, the movement of popping up seems to take place ‘automatically’ – indeed, almost magically – without human guidance or control. Indeed, popping up inevitably seems to refer to the movements of inanimate objects or forces. People do not generally ‘pop up’, although dead bodies sometimes do.

As in pop-up books, the pop ups of Pop Up Video appear suddenly, moving away from the video behind them and toward the viewer. Here, too, this movement appears to take place autonomously; these pop ups do not require the intervention of characters to convey their information, but seem to address the viewer directly. To be sure, these appearances do not simply occur of their own accord, but are carefully calculated, just as they are in pop-up books. Yet, they do serve as figurations of a movement that might be said to be autonomous, or at least relatively autonomous: the dispersive movements of information, and of culture itself.

This dispersion of information is illustrated, for example, in the metaphors that underlie Pop Up Video’s presentation of its pop ups. These pop ups appear accompanied by a fluid ‘bloop’ sound that suggests the ‘popping’ of bubbles as they spring from beneath the water. This impression is reinforced by the program’s animated title graphics, where the show’s credits appear – also accompanied by blooping sounds – within bubbles that seem to rise to the surface of the television screen. Here, not only is the medium (of television, but also of information) presented as intrinsically fluid, but the pop-up ‘bubbles’ are themselves figured as if they were being spontaneously discharged from the music videos themselves: pockets of text, bits of information, that, having escaped their previous context, emerge at random upon our screens. In this sense, the pop ups of Pop Up Video may be seen as illustrations of what has sometimes been called the ‘leakiness’ of
information – its ability to escape enclosure or restriction, to spread, to disseminate itself.

This dissemination of information is not, however, simply metaphoric. If, in Pop Up Video, it becomes a basic element of the show’s attempt to mimic computer interfaces and hypermedia, it also seems to apply to the very idea of popping up. Pop-up books, for example, may arguably be seen as an early form of hypermedia, combining textual information, images, and even 3-D effects. Pop-up books also predate hypermedia inasmuch as they are largely nonlinear texts, in which narrative linearity or continuity becomes secondary to the excitement of eye-popping images, which literally leap off the page. One does not generally ‘read’ a pop-up book for its story, which often is little more than a framing device designed to present a series of images. Rather, one ‘views’ a pop-up book by moving from image to image. Thus, although these images are necessarily presented in a linear order within the confines of the book, one can easily view them – as children often do with picture books – in an entirely different order, flipping or jumping from one favorite image to another. As with the links of hypermedia and web pages, this nonlinear or ‘distracted’ jumping among images becomes the mode through which these images are not only viewed, but consumed.

Whether in books or in Pop Up Video, then, pop ups seem to involve two distinct, but related, types of movement: the sudden, surprising ‘popping’ of the pop ups themselves and the distracted, equally surprising movements of viewers as they jump, skip, or bounce from point to point, or pop to pop. Both of these movements are dispersive, nonlinear, indirect; they do not lead to a particular end, but instead spread outward, moving away from their ostensible point of origin. The movement involved in viewing or consuming pop ups parallels Benjamin’s notion of ‘reception in a state of distraction’, while the movement of popping up shares a number of similarities with his view of the sudden, disjunctive effects of film – and of modern life. Indeed, pop ups can be seen as involving a ‘pop-up’ effect similar to the ‘shock effect’ that Benjamin associates with film. Of course, this pop-up effect is generally designed to limit or cushion our experience of shocks. Pop ups are supposed to be merely surprising, allowing us to maintain a sense that we are in control of our visual consumption, skipping here and there as fancy strikes us. Yet, as ever more texts and media forms become linked or popped, as meta-information proliferates, we often feel ourselves overwhelmed by the information that continually pops up around us, caught up in its unpredictable movements.

If popping up involves a dissemination that moves (us) away from the ‘original text’, it is important to examine how this movement takes place – or, rather, ‘takes off’. In Pop Up Video, for example, pop ups are supposed to simply augment the music videos to which they are affixed. Indeed, music videos were themselves based on a similar idea: adding images to popular songs. In many music videos, of course, these images provide all-too-literal narrative interpretations of the song’s lyrics. Similarly, the majority of pop ups in Pop Up Video tend to be directly related to their source material, providing fairly straightforward information about the location where the video was shot, details of the shoot, or about the performers. Yet, just as not all music videos employ images as literal illustrations of a song, not all of these pop ups follow directly from their source. Often, in fact, they rely on jokes,
puns, and wordplay that are only peripherally, or incidentally, connected to the content of the videos. Thus, for example, the popped version of REM’s tribute to Andy Kaufman, ‘Man on the Moon’, moves from telling us that Neil Armstrong became the first man on the moon in 1969 to noting that Michael Jackson first did the moonwalk in 1983 to informing us that REM’s lead singer Michael Stipe ‘mooned’ Bob Dole at an airport in 1996. A bit later in the video, the pop ups return to this thread, noting that ‘10% of Americans believe the moon landings were a hoax.’ From this, the text slides to an even more marginally related point, noting that ‘39 Heaven’s Gate cult members believed they would be taken to heaven by a UFO’, followed by the statistic that ‘72% of Americans believe in heaven.’ It ends by noting that ‘7% believe that Elvis is still alive’, playing on earlier information about Andy Kaufman’s Elvis impersonation. This kind of slippage suggests that, although the ostensible function of the pop-up texts is to add information to their ‘source’, pop ups have a tendency to drift, to move away from their ‘original’ and establish their own trajectory and momentum.

This logic of the pop up is, then, very similar to what Jacques Derrida (1974) has referred to as the logic of the supplement. As Derrida notes:

... the concept of the supplement ... harbors within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus ... But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself in-the-place-of. (pp. 144–5, original emphasis)

Like the supplement, then, the pop-up is supposed to be merely an entertaining addition to the music video, just as video was supposed to be to the song. Yet, in both cases, the addition comes increasingly to take the place of the ‘original’. As in pop-up books, the pop ups become the main focus of Pop Up Video. Indeed, we might say that, no longer constrained to following the direction of their source, they take on a movement of its own, an autonomous or ‘automatic’ movement. This was, of course, exactly Benjamin’s point concerning technical reproducibility: the copy, no longer anchored in space and time by the presence of the original, moves off on its own, in a process of diffusion or dispersion.

This dispersive, supplemental movement need not be viewed simply as a lack of direction – just as distraction should not be seen merely as a lack of attention. There is, after all, an important difference between indirection and the lack of all direction. Given that the movement of these pop ups is frequently based on jokes and puns, they may be said to simulate the movements of the unconscious, which itself proceeds by a certain diffusion and displacement, by indirection, by moving among seemingly disparate elements. Indeed, one might well argue that not only Pop Up Video, but the unconscious itself, is based on the logic of the pop up. For doesn’t the unconscious appear to us in a similar manner, by popping up in the most scattered, unpredictable way, in the midst of other thoughts and images?

Of course, my point here is less the resemblance of Pop Up Video to the logic of the individual unconscious than to a mass-cultural unconscious. For the movements of popped videos and other pop ups are scattered not only across our video and computer screens, but across that vast and far-flung space that we call popular or...
mass culture. *Pop Up Video* is therefore ‘pop’ in a double sense, referring not only to the movements involved in popping up, but to popular culture itself. And if this connection seems like mere wordplay, well, that is precisely the point. For popular culture is a kind of cultural unconscious that functions *through* a process of incidental moves and links, of puns and wordplay, of popping up here and there. In other words, what makes popular culture ‘pop’ is precisely the fact of its dispersion, its dissemination.

**Consumption and dispersion**

As Benjamin was well aware, this kind of cultural dispersion and distraction often evokes profound anxiety. As cultural products, and cultures themselves, come increasingly to be seen in terms of information – as ‘software’ – this anxiety becomes ever more clearly linked to the proliferation and dispersion of information. *Pop Up Video*, like all popular culture, involves both a product of this dispersion and an attempt to maintain control over it. Here, we can see how the logic of the supplement applies to information as well, for every effort to control the dispersion of information, to restrict information to the status of a mere adjunct to an original nature or reality, is doomed to substitute itself for that original, and to add to the proliferation and dispersion, which only intensifies the efforts to control it once again.

This situation – or perhaps, this inability to situate ourselves – has a good deal in common with the sense of diffusion and homelessness that was felt in Benjamin’s time. As is well known, Benjamin warned that this dispersed state of affairs was vulnerable to a fascist use of the media, which would offer the masses a unifying means of self-expression in the image of the State and the Leader. Thus, the masses, as Samuel Weber (1996) notes, were able to ‘find a face and a voice that it might call its own, or if not its own, that it could at least recognize and use to secure its own position’ (p. 101).

Today, although expressions of national unity and security remain a common reaction to the threat of dispersion, this self-expression is figured less in terms of a State or a Leader than through the media itself. For it is precisely through the images of popular media and information culture that we recognize and define ourselves, our own image. In media and information culture, the proliferation and dispersion of images and information are presented as a matter of self-expression, of personal choice. In this mediated, digitized world, self-expression has become increasingly customized. Which is also to say, it has become a matter of those distracted, dispersive movements that we call *consumption*.

Consumption obviously refers here not only to the consumption of products, but also of information. It is increasingly through consumption that we attempt to define ourselves, whether by the clothes that we buy and wear, or by the books or films or websites that we choose to look at. Indeed, it often seems that the more dispersed or distracted we feel our experience of the world to have become, the more desperately we attempt to re-define ourselves through consumption. Consumption, in other words, becomes the means through which we seek to
maintain a sense of ourselves as active, autonomous subjects amidst the proliferation and dissemination inherent in media or information culture. The rise of meta-information – and of data processing more generally – responds to this desire to remain in control of information by consuming it. Meta-information implies a kind of meta-consumption, which allows us to feel that we have chosen what and how we consume. It is precisely this effort to present the dissemination of information as a matter of consumer choice, as under (our) control, that is the motivating logic of Pop Up Video, as it is of new media, old media, and popular culture in general.

It is no longer the case that, as Stewart Brand (1987) once put it, ‘information wants to be free’: rather, information wants to be consumed. On the one hand, as many commentators have observed, information has increasingly come to be constituted as a commodity, its dispersion restricted to controllable channels of distribution and governed by rules of intellectual property and exchange. On the other hand, information is dependent upon being consumed. Without consumption, information would be static and inaccessible, much like the traditional work of art. Indeed, it would not be information at all, but a ritualized, eternal knowledge or truth: logos. One might say, in fact, that information stands in the same relation to logos that film does to the aura of the artwork. In a similar way, the consumption of information mirrors the distracted reception of film.

In a world of media and information, the distracted, dispersed reception that Benjamin saw in film – and in mass culture generally – has increasingly become a matter of consumption. Yet, this is also to say that the idea of consumption has itself changed. Unlike material commodities such as food or fuel, information does not simply disappear once it is consumed. Indeed, it is consumption that allows information to thrive and proliferate. In being consumed, information flows from one person or place to another. We see this process of dissemination everyday on the internet, where the consumption of, for example, MP3 and other software files takes place through a process of copying that allows information to be moved to different locations. Consumption, in other words, becomes the means by which information spreads. With the rise of technological reproducibility, as Benjamin so clearly saw, cultural consumption itself becomes ‘distracted’, dispersed.

It is important to recall, however, that Benjamin does not consider reception in a state of distraction in terms of individual consumption. Nor, for that matter, does he seem interested in the use of technological reproduction by individual consumers, although the popularization of photography had already made reproduction available to consumers. In this regard, Benjamin’s thought stands in sharp contrast to current debates about digital copying, which continually pose reproducibility in terms of the ‘individual rights’ of consumers (to access information) or of producers (to copyright).7 Benjamin does not see the copying and reception/consumption of technologically reproduced forms as a matter of individual choice or control, but as an ongoing, ‘automatic’ process, which he continually figures in terms of the ‘unconscious’ (‘the camera introduces us to unconscious optics’) and the ‘habitual’. Thus, Benjamin implies that the process of dispersion applies not simply to the artwork, but to the consciousness of the human subject as well. The supposed autonomy and coherence of the subject itself comes to be scattered amidst the
It is precisely this dispersive quality that Benjamin figures in terms of the complex, disjunctive, and incidental movements of the masses – and of mass culture generally.

The consumption of information is essentially a matter of movement, of dissemination. This dissemination of information, as Mark Poster (2001) has argued of the internet, provokes anxiety about the stability of national, ethnic, and personal identities (pp. 101–28). Immersed in this flux, we often feel ourselves increasingly adrift, without the security of an essential identity that pre-exists our role as consumers. Identity becomes diffused, dispersed amidst the movements of media, of information, of cultural consumption. In consuming, we find ourselves caught up in these movements, carried along by the flows of information, images, and sounds, bouncing from product to product, text to text, pop to pop.

In these movements, however, the primacy of the individual subject has obviously not faded away. Indeed, it reasserts itself in the figure of the consumer itself. Even in 19th-century modern culture, as Anne Friedberg (1993) – herself drawing from Benjamin – has observed, consumption was often represented in terms of a ‘mobilized, virtual gaze’ that constructed the consumer-viewer as a kind of flâneur (pp. 29–40). In this way, the unsettling dispersion of modern urban life was translated into the personal mobility and freedom of the consuming subject. The idea of the consumer, in other words, came to serve as a way of insulating the subject from the dispersive ‘shocks’ of modern mass culture – and, more recently, from the fast-moving, disjunctive images and data of contemporary information and media culture. Here, consumption becomes the price that we pay – often quite literally – in order to maintain a sense of individual identity, direction, and choice amidst this scattered profusion of information and goods.

Yet, ironically, the more that we consume in order to define or ‘express’ ourselves, the more our sense of identity seems to slip away, to diffuse. If consumption always seems to promise personal fulfillment, to make us feel more ‘complete’, or ‘free’, or ‘in control’, it only allows us to achieve these goals momentarily. We therefore find ourselves in the position of consumption-addicts, requiring an ever-increasing dose of consumption – whether of goods or of information – simply to feel that we are active, autonomous subjects. Here, the ‘objects’ of our consumption are truly fetishized, taking on a ritual value similar to that of the artwork, which allows them to reflect the self’s desired sense of coherence and autonomy. Here, again, Benjamin (1969) was prescient: he notes that film responds to the ‘shriveling of the aura’ by fetishizing the movie star (much as fascism fetishized the Leader). In this way, ‘the phony spell of a commodity’ takes the place of the artistic aura (p. 231). The fetishism of commodities (including informational and cultural commodities) comes to serve as a personal fetish, the means by which we ‘express’ – and thereby secure – ourselves in a world that seems to threaten us with not only dispersion, but dissolution.

Thus, just as distraction was, for Benjamin, an ambivalent process, so too is consumption. But this is also to say that consumption, like distraction, is not inherently bad. Global media and information conglomerates such as Viacom, which owns and controls Pop Up Video, may attempt to restrict and regulate the flows of cultural consumption, but the processes of consumption are not always predictable or entirely controllable. If corporations have a vested interest in
presenting their products as expressions of individual consumer choices, it is also the case that consumption often moves, or pops up, in nonlinear and at times unsettling ways, much like the movements of the unconscious. As the dispersive movements of *Pop Up Video* suggest, then, cultural consumption can, at least, offer the possibility of an interaction that does not simply express or mirror the self’s sense of coherence and mastery – even as the chaotic ‘popping up’ of information provokes ever more frenetic efforts to maintain the fantasy of ourselves as autonomous consuming subjects. Following this possibility will require a theory – and a politics – of cultural consumption that remains open to the scattered, incidental movements through which information and culture spread. Such a theory, I would submit, must not only speak to how images and information continually pop up in unexpected ways and places, but also to how we ourselves are moved, dispersed, distracted, popped, by the information that consumes us every bit as much as we consume it.

**Notes**

1. See, for example, Sarah Vowell’s (1997) connection of *Pop Up Video* to *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *Mystery Science Theater*.

2. This meta-textual approach is hardly limited to television programs. It seems, in fact, to have become an important strategy across a wide range of cultural phenomena, from Marcel Duchamp’s found objects to Andy Warhol’s re-presentations of pop-culture icons to Cindy Sherman’s Movie Stills series, from the often ironic referentiality of contemporary popular music (and music videos) to the winking celebrations of popular culture in ‘hip’ magazines such as *Bomb*, *Raygun*, and *Giant Robot*. On the web, of course, meta-textuality has become a standard procedure, with sites routinely including links to – and often commentary on – topically related sites. But then, top-ten lists and lists-of-lists have become increasingly common throughout popular culture.

3. Peter Wollen (1993) provides a succinct and useful summary of Benjamin’s view of this filmic shock effect: ‘Film provides a series of shocks, sudden shifts in camera position, discontinuities in time and space, close-ups and bird’s-eye views, changes in the tempo of editing and the scale of objects’ (p. 50).


5. I would suggest that pop-up books bear an interesting relation here to Benjamin’s work on the arcades, which he often describes as being similar to the way children view the world. Indeed, noting the way in which children viewing the multicolored illustrations of an encyclopedia find strange affinities between ‘the ichthyosaurs and bison, the mammoths and the woodlands’, Benjamin (1999) sees ‘the same strange rapport and primordial relatedness in the landscape of the arcade’ (Paris Arcades I: 827). If, as Benjamin argues, the arcades are the ‘primordial landscape of consumption’, perhaps pop-up books are the primordial scene of media and information culture.

6. The example par excellence here is perhaps Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), where the film’s humor is based precisely on the continual ‘popping up’ of Harry’s dead body.

7. Obviously, copyrights are generally defended by corporations rather than individuals, but corporations are legally considered to be individuals, and the rhetoric of copyright protection is invariably based on defending the ‘individual rights’ of producers.

8. Indeed, in discussing the ‘shock effect’ of film, Benjamin (1969) cites Georges Duhamel’s statement that in the cinema, ‘I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images’ (p. 238).
References


R.L. Rutsky is the author of High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and editor of the forthcoming Strategies for Theory: From Marx to Madonna (SUNY Press, 2002). He has also published work on new technologies, film and media, and cultural studies in many journals, including Discourse, Film Quarterly, New German Critique, Style, and Strategies.

Address: [email: rlrutsky@hotmail.com]