



## MCLUHAN AND THE CULTURAL THEORY OF MEDIA

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Media are surely central to Western societies of the past several centuries and to the emerging global societies of the contemporary era and the future. There is a thickening, an intensification, and an increasing complexity to the use of information machines—technologies that are necessary in the production, reproduction, storing, and distribution of texts, images and sounds, the constituent elements of culture. The phenomenon has been termed a “media ecology” (Fuller, 2005), adding a new layer to the ecologies of animal, vegetable, and mineral. It behoves anyone engaged in critical discourse to take a serious account of media. I argue that they offer a key to understanding the process of globalization in relation to a new configuration of interaction between humans and machines.

Media are not easy to define and one’s approach to them affects considerably the character and limits of one’s discourse. All too often media are generalized and made transcendent—the characteristic gesture of Western theory in which humans are tool-making animals, enjoying the benefits of their devices “for the relief of man’s estate,” as Francis Bacon put it a half millennium ago (Bacon, 1893, Book 1, Chapter 5, Paragraph 11). In the seventeenth century, Descartes provided the metaphysics to Bacon’s utopian imaginings: humans are spirit, subjects for whom the material working, including the human body, is little more than inert matter to be shaped and fashioned for human betterment. This ontology oscillates between praising the freedom of the human mind and cringing with anxiety at the possibility of its diminution should those external objects rise up and threaten it. The name for this threat is “technological determinism,” so poignantly portrayed by Charlie Chaplin in the film, *Modern Times* (1936).

It is urgent to rid critical discourse of this framework and seek openings to the comprehension of the relation of humans to information machines, openings that promise alternatives to the freedom/determinism binary. Such frameworks would need to acknowledge the logics of both the human and the machine, as well as the logics of their various and multiple interactions. It would account for the interface between the two as well as the extension of the interactions across the planet, violating political and cultural boundaries and

forming new domains of politics and culture. These are the weighty issues raised by the simple term “media.”

The work of Marshall McLuhan is one key to the cultural study of media. Complex and contradictory as his thought often is, he nonetheless theorized media for the first time, pointing to the “message” or the effects of media as such. Yet cultural theorists of the 1970s and 1980s, figures to whom I for one have been deeply indebted, paid little attention to his work and were therefore, in my view, not able productively to theorize media, rendering those attempting to theorize media studies, such as myself, a bit frustrated and disappointed. A good index of the lack of attention to the question of media among cultural theorists is their almost complete neglect of the work of Marshall McLuhan. One searches far and wide for the rare references to McLuhan in the writings of such thinkers as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Jürgen Habermas, Louis Althusser, Jean-François Lyotard, Ernesto Laclau, Homi Bhabha, and Judith Butler—the list could be extended considerably to major theorists from the 1970s onward who either paid no attention at all to the vast changes in media culture taking place under their noses or who commented on media only as a tool that amplified other institutions like capitalism or representative democracy. Habermas, for instance, deeply concerned with communication theory since his earliest book on the public sphere and the role of print in coffee houses (Habermas, 1989), attends not at all to the mediation of print in the formation of critical consciousness in early modern Europe.

There are certainly some notable exceptions: Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Félix Guattari, and of course Jean Baudrillard<sup>1</sup> come immediately to mind. But Benjamin’s essay on the work of art considers mechanical or technical reproduction only and focuses on media of photography and film in particular, not on media in general (Benjamin, 1969). Elsewhere, Benjamin does point to language in general as a medium, without however raising the issue of its materiality and specific technological configuration (Benjamin, 1978, p. 316).<sup>2</sup> Brecht’s contribution was limited to a short piece on radio (Brecht, 1979–1980). Enzensberger enthused about the socialist possibilities of media only as bi-directional forms of communication (Enzensberger, 1982). And Guattari provided a fascinating critique of

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<sup>1</sup> I cannot discuss Baudrillard’s relation to McLuhan in this essay. Suffice it to say that it was productive for the theorist of the hyperreal. See especially his essay, “The Ecstasy of Communication” (Baudrillard, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Christopher Wild for pointing me to this essay.

Heidegger's views of technology but did not distinguish enough mechanical machines from information machines (Guattari, 1993). I resist discussing the complex relation of Baudrillard to McLuhan, wishing to focus instead on the absences of the latter and the consequences of that absence in other major figures. One might, however, indicate that Baudrillard's reputation may well have suffered in the eyes of those figures in part because of his debts to McLuhan, his willingness to explore media in the context of popular culture, a move from which Derrida and Deleuze among others shied away.

One might also object to the omission of Theodor Adorno from the list of media theorists. Of course Adorno made no mention of McLuhan but he did write at length and with perception about television, the phonograph, and mass culture. The important chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on "The Culture Industry" is after all a staple of media criticism (Adorno, 1972). Yet this work does not mention media and heeds primarily the capitalist form in which mass culture is produced and distributed. At times Adorno and Horkheimer notice the technical ability of contemporary media to send the same image, sound, or text to all of society, complaining that this monologue is a form of tyranny (Adorno, 1972, p. 159). Adorno comes closer to discerning the message of the medium in short pieces on musical reproduction (Adorno, 1990a; Adorno, 1990b; Adorno, 1990c). But these interesting observations do not lead a general concern with media as culturally informing devices and practices. Adorno's late reconsideration of the culture industry does not rectify the theoretical situation (Adorno, 1991).

If one considers that McLuhan's work is essential to the concept of media, that he is the first, perhaps after his Canadian colleague, Harold Innis, to problematize media, the absence of his name in the cultural theory of the 1970s and 1980s looms large in the most important theoretical works of the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

Take the case of Derrida. The philosopher of deconstruction prided himself on his attention to writing and other media. In *Archive Fever* (1998), for instance, he speculates as a sort of science fiction experiment on the impact of email on the psychoanalytic movement, concluding that its importance could not be overestimated. Derrida himself never used email, limiting his use of the computer to word processing, but that did not deter him from pronouncing on its significance, with quite interesting observations. The collection of his essays

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<sup>3</sup> For a critical review of McLuhan's relation to critical theory see Grosswiler, 1998. Stuart Hall's brief comments on McLuhan are illustrative of the general disdain in which the latter has been held by critical theorists (Hall, 1986, pp. 131–132).

published as *Paper Machine* (2005b) suggests an even deeper interrogation of the question of media, but the reader is disappointed in this hope. Not only is McLuhan's name missing from the volume but Derrida off-handedly sets aside the question of media in general as nothing more than neutral tools with no force of their own for cultural theory. He writes of paper that "its economy has always been more than that of a medium (of a straightforward means of communication, the supposed neutrality of a support)..." (Derrida, 2005b, p. 42). It boggles the mind to consider that the theorist of writing, so enamoured of its technicity, and so careful to draw out the implications of "the support" of the trace for the entirety of the Western philosophical tradition, would so easily overlook McLuhan's proposition that the medium is the message. I shall look further into the case of Derrida and the media below.

Michel Foucault provides an interesting additional example of the problem in Derrida's work. Foucault's work of the 1970s is densely sprinkled with metaphors of media. *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1978) centrally rely upon such figures as "technology of power" and "networks" in which individuals are understood as "nodes." His understanding of the individual or subject as constituted by and in networks in everyday life is highly suggestive for an understanding of the role of media. And his depiction of the confessional as the peculiar space of speech in early modern France moves very close to an analysis of one form of language in relation to subject positions. Even more, his enigmatic depiction of a world beyond the author function suggests exchange on the Internet before the phenomenon existed:

All discourses ... would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur. We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (Foucault, 1984, pp. 119–120)

Here Foucault seems to anticipate the world of chat rooms, email, blogs, and web pages where authorship is always in question. He seems to depict and even

to desire a space of communication where identity may be in doubt and may be subordinated to the flow of text, to the impulses of creativity. And yet the word “media” is absent from the vocabulary of the critic of authorship. In the end, however, aside from passing comments on the importance of writing in the care of self, Foucault does not theorize media as a significant domain of what he calls “subjectivation.”

Then there is Jacques Lacan, whose work has stimulated the important writings of Slavoj Žižek but whose own work on media provides perhaps the most egregious examples of the problem I am addressing. In his widely read (and viewed) television interview purportedly *about* television and published in transcript form as *Television* (1990), Lacan demonstrates quite clearly that he has, I am sorry to report, not a whiff of understanding about media. Complaining that the rebellious students of Paris, May ’68 were acting without a shred of guilt or shame, Lacan argues in *Seminar XVII* (2007) that the young people have symbolically slain their parents because they fail to recognize the authority of the gaze of the Other. Thus they cannot come under the Law, or become subjects of desire through the good graces of the master signifier, and so on and so forth. The important point in this stunning application of psychoanalysis to media is that Lacan attributes this moral transgression to television. Why? Because with television there is a voice but no individual (Lacan, 1990, p. 27). The obvious question is: How is television different from radio, film, and the Internet, all of which also emit voices without the speaker’s presence? Indeed books, newspapers—all forms of print—might be included in the list, although in these cases “voice” is not accompanied by sound. Why then limit the complaint to television? Clearly media studies will not be well informed by psychoanalysis if Lacan is any guide.<sup>4</sup>

Gilles Deleuze provides another variation of the absence of media in twentieth century theory. The seminal, even magisterial works he composed with Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (1983) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), explore critically the social and cultural space of modernity without mention of media. Their absence threatens to undermine what is otherwise a compelling rethinking of Western reality. The same may be said of Deleuze’s two volumes on film (Deleuze, 1986; Deleuze, 1989). The one exception within Deleuze’s considerable and weighty corpus is the short essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control” (1990/1992a), whose title suggests its marginal position in his

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<sup>4</sup> Freud also manifests a deep unconcern for media. In his famous example of the telephone he quips that it provides no more satisfaction than sticking one’s leg out from under the covers on a cold winter night just to be able to return it to comfort and warmth afterwards (Freud, 1961, p. 39). For a very different view of the value of Lacan’s insights on television see Morris, 2007.

thought. In the English-speaking discursive community, thinkers have so yearned for a discussion of media that this slight piece has gained attention and praise far exceeding its modest standing. Because of its celebrity, if for no other reason, it is worthy of attention.

In this brief piece from 1990, Deleuze emphasizes the absence of confining spatial arrangements in the exercise of domination afforded by the use of computer technology. “What has changed,” in the formulation of Deleuze’s argument by Hardt and Negri, “is that, along with the collapse of the institutions, the disciplinary *dispositifs* have become less limited and bounded spatially in the social field. Carceral discipline, school discipline, factory discipline, and so forth interweave in a hybrid production of subjectivity” (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 330). Beyond the negative trait of the absence of “major organizing sites of confinement” (Deleuze, 1995), control societies are, in this text, maddeningly undefined. Deleuze discusses the control society again in “Having an Idea in Cinema” (Deleuze, 1998), but once more, it is both brief and vague, adding only to his previous discussion that, since “information is precisely the system of control” (p. 17), “counter-information” becomes a form of resistance (p. 18). All of which suggests to me that Deleuze’s understanding of networked digital information humachines remains rudimentary. It is hard to imagine what “counter-information” might be, for example. Does he mean that critical content is resistance? Or does the form of the critical content constitute resistance?

It might seem logical to conclude from the opposition between “societies of discipline” and “societies of control” that Deleuze places himself against Foucault, or at least that he is going beyond Foucault by discerning forms of domination unthought by the historian of the Panopticon. Yet this is not at all the case. Instead, Deleuze proclaims his agreement with Foucault, citing William Burroughs as the fulcrum of the matter. Deleuze writes, “Foucault agrees with Burroughs who claims that our future will be controlled rather than disciplined” (Deleuze, 1992b). But Deleuze gives no evidence that Foucault anticipated a transformation to societies of control, relegating discipline to the garbage can of history. It would appear that Deleuze was unwilling to position himself as the thinker who went beyond Foucault even as, in the same paragraph cited above, Deleuze compellingly characterizes the break between the two orders of domination. In the following passage Deleuze insists that Foucault adopts the notion of societies of control: “the disciplines which Foucault describes are the history of what we gradually cease to be, and our present-day reality takes on the form of dispositions of overt and continuous *control* in a way which is very different from recent closed disciplines” (ibid.).

Deleuze's stadal theory, moving from discipline to control, is also far too linear in character. Elements of "control" existed in Europe in the early modern period as the state hired spies to keep track of suspected miscreants. Equally, forms of "discipline" proliferate in the twenty-first century as the United States, for example, erects more and more prisons under the so-called "get tough" policies of recent and current administrations. The shift from discipline to control is also Eurocentric, overlooking the very different disposition of these state strategies in the southern hemisphere. François Vergès points out, for example, that

In postcolonial Reunion, these two strategies have concurrently occurred. New types of sanction, education, and care have constructed a web of control around the Creoles, and along with the creation of a vast social network of control, there has been a multiplication of prisons, a criminalization and psychologization of politics. (Vergès, 1999, p. 219)

Deleuze's model of control as the next stage after discipline thus contains problems at numerous levels.

In an essay from 1998, Michael Hardt attempts to explicate the concept of societies of control beyond what Deleuze has given us. He asserts that, as the chief new form of power, "The metaphorical space of the societies of control is perhaps best characterized by the shifting desert sands, where positions are continually swept away; or better, the smooth surfaces of cyberspace, with its infinitely programmable flows of codes and information" (Hardt, 1998). Smooth surfaces are opposed to striated planes, categories one recalls from *A Thousand Plateaus* that designate respectively homogeneous and heterogeneous spaces (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). But Hardt overlooks the side of cyberspace which resists the power formation of the control society, all kinds of spaces in which copyright law, fixed identities, censorship, and so forth are continuously evaded and challenged. Cyberspace is hardly Hardt's smooth surface of transparency and control; it is instead a highly differentiated field of resistance, conflict, and uncertainty.

For Hardt, control societies are "smooth" because civil society has collapsed, rendering the social lacking in mediations (Hardt, 1998). Hardt analyzes the dialectic of civil society from Hegel to Foucault, concluding that "What has come to an end, or more accurately declined in importance in post-civil society, then, are precisely these functions of mediation or education and the institutions that gave them form" (p. 36). Foucault's disciplinary institutions have lost their ability to position and give identity to individuals. Replacing the spaces of confinement, according to Hardt, are the media. But again one must

object: the media are also mediating, albeit in a different form from the older establishments like education and the family. What is lacking in Hardt's understanding of the move from discipline to control is precisely an analysis of the media as technologies of power. Surely media are different from prisons, education, and so forth, but one must understand the specificity of the media as structuring system. As well, one must pay attention to the difference of one medium from another. Television, print, and the Internet are each disciplinary institutions in this sense, different from each other but also similar to prisons in that they construct subjects, define identities, position individuals, and configure cultural objects. True enough, media do not require spatial arrangements in the manner of workshops and prisons, but humans remain fixed in space and time, at the computer, in front of the television set, walking or bicycling through city streets or on a subway with headphones and an mp3 player or a cell phone. I refer to this configuration of the construction of the subject as a "superpanopticon" to indicate its difference from modern institutions (Poster, 1990). The term "control society" bears the disadvantage of losing an ability to capture the new technologies of power: the media.

At a more general level, what stands in the way of an approach to media theory for Deleuze is his understanding of film as art. From *Difference and Repetition* (1968/1994) to the cinema books of the 1980s, Deleuze frames cinema only as art. When he recognizes the altered sphere of everyday life as steeped in audio and visual technologies, he finds in art a liberatory escape from the quotidian: "The more our daily life appears standardized, stereotyped and subject to an accelerated reproduction of objects of consumption, the art must be injected into it in..." (p. 293). One cannot come near the problem of media with a view of the everyday as degraded, debased and baleful.

In sharp contrast to these cultural theorists, Vilém Flusser is an outstanding exception. The Czech cultural theorist can be compared to Marshall McLuhan and to Jean Baudrillard. With McLuhan, Flusser takes media seriously and, with Baudrillard, he discerns the impact of media on culture. Like both McLuhan and Baudrillard, Flusser theorized media culture well before many other cultural theorists thought seriously about it. Against the general avoidance of the concept of media in cultural theory, Flusser stands out, with only a handful of others, as one who presciently and insightfully deciphered the codes of materiality disseminated under the apparatuses of the media.

One area of Flusser's media theory that deserves special attention is the connection he drew between writing and history and the implications of this analysis for the concept of temporality. In his discussions of the media and

history, Flusser, one might say without exaggeration, denaturalizes temporality with a systematicity not seen since perhaps Giambattista Vico (1984). Flusser first argues that history is not possible without writing:

With the invention of writing, history begins, not because writing keeps a firm hold on processes, but because it transforms scenes into processes: it generates historical consciousness. (Flusser, 2002)

Already in the relation Flusser draws between writing and history, media practice plays a central role in culture, in this case as the awareness of time as linear movement. But already for him “writing” performs the function of changing “scenes into processes.” Flusser thereby contrasts culture based on writing with culture based on images. In contradistinction to Derrida, Flusser associates the institution of writing not so much with a change in the form of memory (as *différance*) as with a resistance to images: “Greek philosophy and Jewish prophecy are battle cries against images on behalf of texts” (ibid.). While for Derrida the ancient Greeks at least focus on the danger of writing in comparison to speech, Flusser’s binary of writing and images yields a different conclusion regarding the Greek valuation of writing.

What becomes most salient for Flusser’s theory of media is the consequence of writing for temporality. Flusser makes a great deal of the fact that writing is linear, that in this medium one thing inexorably comes after another. One cannot easily skip around in a written text, at least, that is until hypertext emerges with the digitization of writing. Try as they might, theorists such as Roland Barthes and writers from Laurence Sterne to Raymond Quéneau and the Oulipo group have at best great difficulty in constructing texts that allow or encourage readers to find their own way through the page.<sup>5</sup> Flusser’s insistence on the linearity of writing, despite these exceptions and demurrals, is convincing. He writes:

Linear codes demand a synchronization of their diachronicity. They demand progressive reception. And the result is a new experience of time, that is, linear time, a stream of unstoppable progress, of dramatic unrepeatability, of framing, in short, history. (Ibid.)

It might be noted that historians for the most part have traditionally sided with Flusser on the question of the relation of history to writing but not usually for the same reasons. Historians claim that without writing there is no material,

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<sup>5</sup> For another view of the matter see Hayles, 2002.

objective basis for memory about the past, or as Flusser says, writing as keeping “a firm hold on the past.” Put differently, Flusser distinguishes himself from the historians regarding the relation of writing to history as follows:

The difference between prehistory and history is not that we have written documents..., but that during history there are literate men who experience, understand, and evaluate the world as a “becoming”.... (p. 63)

Societies without writing are thereby societies without history. Historians’ penchant for the fullness of the written text, the face value of truth contained therein, is, of course, not Flusser’s claim. Not perhaps until the second half of the twentieth century, with studies of the Holocaust (LaCapra, 2001) and of other traumatic experiences more generally, have historians reconsidered the unique value of writing for its discipline, opening up the possibility that historical research might find evidentiary truth in oral reports and by conducting interviews. Also, influenced by anthropological and archaeological methods, some historians consider material artefacts, objects without writing, at least as a supplementary source for their archives.

But Flusser’s argument on the relation of writing to temporality has not been a major focus of historians. Flusser stresses as prominent aspects of this medium the one-directional flow as well as its “unrepeatability,” aspects of writing that militate if not determine a cultural inscription of time as progressive. Practices of writing and reading, for him, induce a linear sense of time and give prominence to diachronicity in general as compared with synchronicity. For Flusser, modern society’s break with the general human sense of time as cyclical, an obvious extrapolation from nature’s rhythms, owes a deep debt to the increasing salience of writing in the past several centuries. The full extension of time as linear progression emerged not with the simple discovery of writing but with a number of social and cultural changes commensurate with modern society: the printing press that made writing widely reproducible, the spread of compulsory education in modern democracies, the rise of urban commercial cultures with their heavy reliance on written documents, the emergence of the modern state with its bureaucratic form, and so forth.

There is another facet to Flusser’s theory of writing and temporality that deserves mention. For Flusser, writing as a medium encourages a specific form of temporality. The medium and the character of time are particular. This suggests that each medium might have an associated special form of temporality. Flusser’s media theory thereby accounts for the specificity of each information technology. His view contrasts sharply with that of Derrida in the

sense that the latter understands the temporal logic of writing as paradigmatic for all media, indeed for all technology. As a result, deconstruction has difficulty distinguishing between media cultures, such as between writing cultures and image cultures. Bernard Stiegler finds fault with Derrida on precisely this ground (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002), with the consequence that the relation of media technology to time is very different in Derrida and Flusser.

If history for Flusser is a linear mode of consciousness related to writing, today it must be considered in crisis. The reason for the crisis is simply that writing is being supplanted by images, a new medium is being added to the old and taking priority over it in the culture. Flusser understands this change in media in several ways. From a historical point of view (and there is some degree of irony in Flusser's reliance on history for periodizing media changes), image culture begins with the photograph (Flusser, 1984). As technically produced images, photographs encourage a non-linear form of composition and reading. They "are dams placed in the way of the stream of history, jamming historical happenings" (p. 127). The temporality of reading photographs is an all-at-onceness, not a linear progression. Written texts are decoded in a linear fashion, in a sequence of steps that are narrative in nature, moving from start to finish. According to Flusser, the process of interpreting images is different: "in pictures we may get the message first, and then try to decompose it.... This difference is one of temporality, and involved the present, the past and the future" (p. 23). The "historical time" of the written text induces a directional sense in the reader, a feeling of "going somewhere," while images are read with no sense of movement, of going nowhere.

In their composition as well, Flusser regards photographs as different from writing because they rely upon a "calculating, formal" type of thinking (p. 128). Yet for him photographs are not a throwback to prehistoric times. There is no identity between photographs and cave paintings, for instance. The latter are mimetic whereas photographs "are computed possibilities (models, projections onto the environment)" (p. 129).

Flusser is perhaps least convincing in his insistence on the difference of prehistoric images and photographs. Even if photographs have the formal property of "models," one might say the same about cave paintings (Guldin, 2007). And even if cave paintings are in the first instance mimetic, one might easily argue that photographs, at least until the advent of digital technology, have a mimetic quality as well. Certainly in nineteenth-century culture at large, photographs were in good part regarded as indexical. To make Flusser's argument more convincing one might analyze the difference between the

technology of prehistoric images and photography. The difference in the composition process between the two forms of image production is certainly stark.

In his analysis of the different temporalities of writing and images, Flusser develops a theory of the visual. Writing and images are as different as lines and surfaces. In the limited space I have available I shall leave the question of lines and surfaces and briefly outline a problematic concerning the concept of time in relation to information machines or media. But the analysis thus far has been enough to indicate Flusser's engagement with media theory and his effort to delineate the broad lines of such an analysis.

The cultural study of media is hampered by a philosophical tradition based on the episteme of the transcendental, unconditional, contextless "I think." From Kant (time as a synthetic *a priori* of reason) to Husserl (time as a feature of consciousness as it appears to thought) and even to Bergson (time as duration), the nature of time is deduced from logic. A change comes with Derrida and the association of time with the technology of writing, but here again writing becomes a form (*différance*) inhering in all media and thereby divorced from technological specificity and social practice. For example, in a rare mention of McLuhan in an obscure interview from 1983, Derrida says the following:

I think that there is an ideology in McLuhan's discourse that I don't agree with, because he's an optimist as to the possibility of restoring an oral community which would get rid of the writing machines and so on. I think that's a very traditional myth which goes back to ... let's say Plato, Rousseau.... And instead of thinking that we are living at the end of writing, I think that in another sense we are living in the extension—the overwhelming extension—of writing. At least in the new sense ... I don't mean the alphabetic writing down, but in the new sense of those writing machines that we're using now (e.g. the tape recorder). And this is writing too. (In Brennan, 1983, p. 42)<sup>6</sup>

First, Derrida mistakenly attributes a return to orality in McLuhan when one could as easily find in him, as many have, a new sensibility of touch (Cavell, 2002). Indeed, in his later work concerning the writings of Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida, apparently without recalling his earlier remark, reverses himself and finds that McLuhan regarded touch as "the sense of the electronic age"

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Peter Krapp for informing me about this interview.

(Derrida, 2005a, p. 354). Still, in the 1983 interview, Derrida, insisting on the turn to *écriture*, finds only a generalization of this media form, equating “tape recording” and presumably computer word processing with writing. Derrida, in one gesture, eliminates media specificity, and indeed one might say the problematic of media itself. The same move is evident in “Signature, Event, Context,” where Derrida finds in McLuhan not the idea of the medium itself as message, perhaps the main contribution of the latter to media theory, but, in a discursive act of serious miscomprehension, “a transparency” of “social relations”:

As writing, communication, if one insists upon maintaining the word, is not the means of transport of sense, the exchange of intentions and meanings, the discourse and “communication of consciousnesses.” We are not witnessing an end of writing which, to follow McLuhan’s ideological representation, would restore a transparency or immediacy of social relations; but indeed a more and more powerful historical unfolding of a general writing of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would only be an effect, to be analyzed as such. It is this questioned effect that I have elsewhere called *logocentrism*. (Derrida, 1982, p. 329)

Stiegler, in his three volume work *Technics and Time* (1994–2001), attempts to correct for Derrida’s misreading of media theory and to break from Derrida’s reduction of media to writing by inserting technology more firmly within the conceptual formation of time. In his essay, “Derrida and Technology,” as well as in his televised debate/conversation with Derrida published as a transcribed book, *Echographies* (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002), Stiegler complains that when Derrida theorizes writing as “arche-writing” he places technology in a register of temporality that loses the specificity of different media. All media for Derrida, he writes, “are figures ... of origin that arche-writing constitutes” (p. 239). Time is only possible for Stiegler (as for Flusser) through the technical inscription of cultural objects. Wrestling with the question of the transcendental nature of media temporality, Stiegler concludes on a middle ground of what he calls “a-transcendentality” (Stiegler, 1993).

Mark Hansen points out in his review of volume 1 of *Technics and Time* (2004) that that Stiegler’s discovery of the discreteness of the digital image leads him to posit media as constituting subjects in different forms of the awareness of time. Photography, film, and networked computing thus construct distinctly different forms of temporality in the subject. Yet Stiegler, rigorous and systematic in his thinking, still maintains a kind of original disposition of

media as material forms of memory, as prostheses. The question that remains open in his work, and that provides a fruitful intersection with Flusser's media theory, is the degree of determination one would give to this primary or initial prosthetic figure. I would argue that one must theorize time and media in such a way that the relation is not entirely dependent on the human as ground but instead opens a more complex possibility of multiple assemblages of the human and the machine, not as prostheses *for* the human but as mixtures of human/machine in which the outcome or specific forms of the relation are not pre-figured in the initial conceptualization of the relation. Contingency of the relation must be kept open. In that way, the different cultural forms of media and time would each have their own validity, and the critical issue of how to institute the newer relation in networked computing would remain an open political question.

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