



## EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

### “MEDIA TROPES”

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« Le caractère fondamentalement tautologique du spectacle découle du simple fait que ses moyens sont en même temps son but. Il est le soleil qui ne se couche jamais sur l’empire de la passivité moderne. Il recouvre toute la surface du monde et baigne indéfiniment dans sa propre gloire. »

“The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory.”

—Guy Debord ([1967] 1995, 15)

To say that Debord publicly distanced himself from Marshall McLuhan is something of an understatement. At one point he declares that McLuhan’s early formulation of the “global village” made him “the spectacle’s first apologist ... the most convinced imbecile of the century” (1990, 33). Such rhetoric notwithstanding, it is difficult to read Debord’s lines above without calling to mind McLuhan’s famous adage that “the medium is the message.” It is well known that for McLuhan the medium must not simply be understood as the means by which a message is conveyed or communicated. Instead, the medium transforms—rather than transports—the message according to the terms of the medium itself. That is, the medium persuades in relation to its own implicit ends. Modern technologies and media convergence in the global society of the spectacle only accelerate this process of transformation as Debord and McLuhan both attest.

At times Debord’s rhetoric verges on the apocalyptic; he laments that “all community and critical awareness have ceased to be” ([1967] 1995, 21). For him, society’s virtually total subjection to the “integrated spectacle” (1990, 8) in which media converge is none other than our subjection to global capital:

“The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image” ([1967] 1995, 24). More recently, Jodi Dean has theorized the convergence of culture and technology in a similar vein, but has updated the spectacle to reflect the realities of the digital age. She writes: “Technoculture is an ideological formation that uses democracy, creativity, access, and interconnection to produce subjectivities of communicative capitalism” (2002, 103). Here again, means become virtually indistinguishable from ends where communication, culture, and technology are deployed ideologically in the service of capital, or as the “*materialization* of ideology” ([1967] 1995, 150), to use Debord’s words. Community and critical awareness are increasingly attenuated as the spectacle of communicative capitalism rises up and demands to be treated not as a means but as an end-in-itself, an end that not only justifies but manufactures the means by which such justification is accomplished, tautologically.

We might say that an epochal shift has occurred. According to classical political liberalism of the eighteenth century, the worth—or dignity—of the “end-in-itself” was reserved for the human person, these claims forming the stuff of republican revolutions. Under neoliberalism, however, liberalism is redefined in global(izing) economic terms when the market is conceived according to principles of autonomy and agency, even inalienable rights, dignity, and sovereignty. Today, we commonly speak of “the market” in anthropomorphized terms: in hushed tones we wonder what the market will “do,” and how the market will “respond” or “react” while human beings and even governments are vassals, helplessly subjected to its whims. In the words of Michel Foucault, in effect we have:

extend[ed] the economic model of supply and demand and of investment–costs–profit so as to make it a model of social relations and of existence itself, a form of relationship of the individual to himself, time, those around him, the group, and the family. (2008, 242)

The market now has a soul even if it has no heart. This is the spectacular, if somewhat surreal, reality of daily life in the “global village.”

In the neoliberal worldview, then, the value of the individual person becomes measured as “human capital” and in accordance with the terminology of “human resources.” The individual is reconceived as “entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings” (Foucault, 2008, 226). Convergent networks proffer the terms and the means by which these relations are mediated in the ways individuals are assessed, screened, controlled, and regulated in what Gilles Deleuze dubbed the “society of control” (1990). The

means but also the ends—because convergent networks themselves produce the investments that must be protected, the security threats that must be thwarted, and the risks that must be managed. Means and ends converge, and the threat of subjugation is total when there is no way to bring down the machine from within, and no way to escape its global purchase, to act from without. Perhaps Debord’s claim about the “essentially tautological” character of the spectacle should be read as a rhetorical call to arms. If the threat is real, it is not (yet) total, and it does not (yet) completely foreclose upon criticism and resistance because spectacle is not the mere artefact of capital—it is also the potential site of conflict and change, manifestoes and media manipulations. I invoke Debord to introduce this issue of *MediaTropes* because I hope to impart an insurrectionary ethos to the critical essays that are gathered here. While, to my knowledge, none of the authors necessarily subscribe to Debord’s political philosophy, each in some manner enacts what Debord describes as a *détournement*, a critical resistance.

*Détournement* remains untranslated in the English text of *The Society of the Spectacle*. In French, the word has many valences: it can mean misappropriation or embezzlement of funds, abduction or corruption (e.g., of a minor), hijacking, diversion, and more generally, a twisting or turning away. Debord explains *détournement* as “the fluid language of anti-ideology,” oftentimes violent, which “mobilizes an action capable of disturbing or overthrowing any existing order” ([1967] 1995, 146). More subtly, its insurrectionary force is to be found in its style:

*Détournement* is the antithesis of quotation [*le contraire de la citation*], of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period [*son époque*] and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework [*à l’option précise qu’elle était à l’intérieur de cette référence, exactement reconnue ou erronée*].<sup>1</sup> ([1967] 1995, 145–146)

*Détournement* works against ideologies that have become ossified in quotable quotations and against the tropes or “turns” (from *dé-tourner*) that have come to circulate as common sense, a disconnected prattle that stands in for wisdom and

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase, *exactement reconnue ou erronée*, is not translated in the English text. Here Debord suggests that it does not matter whether the precise option linked to the frame of reference is “exactly recognized or erroneous.” The *détournement* intervenes, rather, at the level of production and effects.

truth. The trope is neither true nor false as such. *Détournement* entails the critical work of re-contextualizing, re-historicizing, of understanding the implicit social, cultural, political, and economic vectors of those valorized fragments in order to understand what makes them appear to be meaningful and true. For a culture saturated by convergent media and underwritten by the hegemonic “values” of a neoliberal political economy—where “value” has shifted from an ethical to an economic register—nothing could be more important. I should add that the economy provides, of course, just one set of tropes among countless I could mention; but today it is the talk we seem to hear most, except, perhaps, among those too poor to feel *disenfranchised*.

In a famous passage, the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche writes:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. ([1873] 1954, 46–47)

Nietzsche’s insight must be updated in one respect. Today, with information moving at the speed of light, “truths” can come to “seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people” almost instantaneously, rather than “after long use.” In our spectacularly interconnected technoculture, we are bombarded from all sides, with ever-increasingly efficiency, 24/7. Nietzsche’s claim is that “truth” is nothing more than a mobile army of tropes that constitute human relations in a particular way. The reader is exhorted, then, to decipher the ways these tropes have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished to persuade; to see how they are mobile, how they circulate, and to understand the force by which they inculcate. It is also an exhortation to examine critically our own subjectivity as an effect of these tropes, rather than presuming the “I” as an unadulterated origin, a point of departure. There is no Archimedean point from which to levy a critique, but this does not mean that critique is impossible. Significantly, Nietzsche himself deploys tropes, both military and economic, in these lines. He, therefore, demonstrates that a critical theory must itself mobilize an army of tropes, a counterforce, to lay bare our illusions and expose the masters we unwittingly serve. In other words, we must wage our critique from within. And a critical media theory will do much the same.

A few summers ago, when *MediaTropes* was in its conceptual stages upstairs, at McLuhan's crumbling historic coach house at the University of Toronto, simple Google searches for "mediatropes" and "media trope" yielded nothing. Today, if Google is to be believed, the term has entered our lexicon. A media trope (from the Greek *τρόπος*, meaning "turn") is described as a commonplace or convention—an idiom—particular to the medium in question. To offer one example, consider how American television newscasts reporting on the Iraq War quickly developed their own conventional visual, informational, and emotional apparatuses (enhancing, transposing, and embellishing)—from the placement of authoritative newscasters and "military experts" within the frame to the use of "interactive" maps and special effects. Fox News was especially spectacular in its use of effects, in March 2003 matching the Bush Administration's display of "shock and awe" with its own televisual extravaganza, including sound effects, a stars and stripes motif, flying captions, and live video feed of the carnage from Baghdad captured with night vision camera equipment. For the spectator, witnessing the techno-military supremacy of the United States becomes inseparable from the mediated experience of visual mastery—voyeurism from the comfort of one's own living room.<sup>2</sup> What was this spectacle? Recall Debord. Fragments, quotations (quite literally, words and images fed to the mainstream media by the Pentagon), abstractions everywhere in a frenzy of quick succession; authority invariably tainted, no framework amidst this orgy, no historical context, and no mention of political or economic "interests." This was an exercise in "nation building" on at least two fronts in the War on Terror where "security" was played as the trump card, the means and the ends hardly distinguishable. As Debord writes:

The story of terrorism is written by the state and it is therefore highly instructive. The spectators must certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to convince them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic. (1990, 24)

If we assume that the values of social justice and truth are not utterly moot, and we hope to understand the mediated social and cultural effects of propaganda, patriotism, and capital, the spectacle must be re-contextualized through critical theoretical tools and "media literacy" (see Gibson 2008). Media theory and criticism ought to be especially attentive to those places where means and ends threaten to merge in a spectacle of communicative capitalism. I believe that

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Stahl has produced an excellent nine-part documentary on war as entertainment, titled [Militainment, Inc.: Militarism and Pop Culture](#). Also see his forthcoming book, Stahl (2009).

Debord's activist conception of *détournement* has today a fresh vitality if we are to comprehend the persuasive force and power of media tropes and, in turn, to render them explicit. These strategies will inform, perhaps, one response to the protracted and manufactured crises of late modernity—economic crisis, political crisis, the crisis of identity, of security, of meaning, of belief...

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The issue's lead essay by Deborah Lynn Steinberg analyzes the PBS/NOVA televised documentary film, *The Sons of Abraham*. The film tracks a project to genetically adjudicate the claim of the South African Lemba tribe to Jewish identity. Through a semiotic and narrative reading of the film, Steinberg analyzes the ways that the scientific search for the "Jewish gene" is framed as a question of racial-ethnic identification and belonging. Under the spectre of eugenic science, what emerges is a claim about the historical intersection of race and genes. She argues that genetic science is underpinned by neoliberal specular economies that are dangerous, in part, because they are profoundly seductive. She suggests that Based on the confluence of science and spectacle, the affective and phantasmatic character of popular/scientific knowledges enables a troubling investment in "identity genetics." Attending to the ways that science and spectacle are mediated, she suggests, will help us to understand and to critically question our own affective investments in the tropes of science, race, and identity.

Janine Marchessault's essay is also a study of filmic representation. Marchessault draws on the work of film theorist, Siegfried Kracauer to consider filmic depictions of the commonplace and parochial—everyday public localities, such as the street, the town square, and other built environments—and to ask how these depictions intersect with the phenomenon of globalization. Through a close reading of Philip Hoffman's film, *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*, she suggests that what is "common" about the parochial is produced cinematically: "manifestations of global cultures, national and urban idioms, and technologies that the film stages as commonplace" (31). If the local has a global resonance, the film's representation of the local tangle of intimate human interconnectivities, material realities, and emotions has the power to transform—and, perhaps, redeem—the alienating effects of globalization. We are opened onto a new category, the "translocal," which is both the effect of new global media and a possible site of insurrection.

In his essay, Nicholas S. Anderson reflects on the social and familial relations that are increasingly informed by “domestic robotics.” Looking at the uncanny liveliness of such “intelligent” creatures as iRobot’s Roomba, Nintendo’s Chibi-Robo, and Cynthia Breazeal’s “sociable” robot Kismet, Anderson asks how these interactive, affective, and quasi-agential beings challenge the traditional distinction between humans and nonhumans, life and nonlife. Domestic robots, he claims, “reorganize the form-of-life, the *bios*, in the home: remapping the domains of labour, reorganizing the speeds and potentials of the day and of the domestic, adjusting the affective climate within its four walls, and modulating the productive potentials of the household and its occupants” (43). He suggests that as these media become more “alive,” we must begin to develop a biopolitical ethics that is not anthropocentric, one that would be commensurate with the kinds of social and cultural relations that these technologies define and enable. His essay suggests that emergent robotic media are sites of resistance to traditional conceptions of ethics and subjectivity; they are sites of mediation and *détournement*.

The contributions by James Martel and Jennifer Karyn Reid take an historical perspective on the rhetorical force of media. Martel argues that the Renaissance political philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli demonstrates a series of rhetorical strategies that allow him to foment public conspiracies even as he appears to be a quiescent subject of the prince. Through his treatises and plays—two distinct media outlets—Machiavelli employs the rhetorical figure of *adianoeta* to speak a language that informs the public of his plans even as it appears to be harmless speech to a prince. Machiavelli can do this, Martel contends, because he recognizes that in their multitudinousness, the public has a different form of knowledge than princes do. While the prince knows things as a person or via his advisors, the public knows things by dint of their sheer numbers. When properly unified (as his conspiracies allow), the public can benefit from its epistemological advantage in ways of which princes are not even aware. Here, then, is a nascent conception of the “multitude” made popular recently by Hardt and Negri (2004).

Reid’s essay looks at St. Patrick’s “Confession” and “Letter to Coroticus” to understand how he mediated between early pagan and Christian cultures in the fifth century. Reid argues that Patrick transforms and translates a message that makes the most of his audience’s belief in the mystical nature of writing. In this respect, she argues, Patrick’s writings demonstrate an Augustinian view of the power of language, linking language and the human body through the mystical body of Christ. “Patrick rhetorically fuses exterior and interior experiences, through the figures of the dream-state, the ‘inner man,’ and autobiography, as a way of expressing the simultaneous nature of physical

and metaphysical involvement in the body” (87). Martel’s and Reid’s historical approaches are important not just for their contribution to scholarship in their respective fields; they are also salient interdisciplinary and trans-cultural media studies of historical texts and environments. Their theoretical perspectives not only are resources for a better understanding of the development of Western politics and religion, but also suggest practical rhetorical strategies that could be adopted and adapted in our own media today. That is, these readings of Machiavelli and St. Patrick adumbrate for us modes of resistance, critique, and *détournement* relevant to an age of mass media, communicative capitalism, and religious conflict.

Finally, George Bragues and Cheré Harden Blair both address the influence of the Internet within an academic context. Bragues offers a detailed case study of Wikipedia entries on seven Western philosophers, comparing the scope and accuracy of Wikipedia to published authorities in the field. Much to the chagrin of many professors, his analysis suggests that Wikipedia is not inaccurate, but that its deficiencies with respect to philosophy lie mainly in the omission of some theoretical perspectives. Blair’s essay dovetails nicely with that of Bragues. She asks how new media, such as Wikipedia, have begun to undermine the authority of traditional authorship, and thus pose a formidable challenge for conventional conceptions of plagiarism and academic integrity. Blair’s interpretation of both theoretical and practical literature on plagiarism suggests that teachers and researchers must come to terms with a rapidly changing field—the intertextuality of remix culture, hyperlinking, filesharing, and the neoliberalization of academic institutions, including the “branding” of the university, the commodification of research, and the increasing trend for students to conceive of themselves as educational clients/consumers.

On behalf of the editors, I am proud to introduce this issue of *MediaTropes*. We shall continue to publish quality, peer-reviewed scholarship that examines the many dimensions of media and mediation. As the diversity of the essays in this issue attests, we are committed to critical interdisciplinary approaches that bring to light the social, political, and economic dimensions of culture and technology. The journal website allows readers to freely post comments on individual articles; we encourage you to take part in the discussion. We believe that the scholarly essays gathered here both offer and engage a critical media theory that is inherently—even rigorously—practical, social, and political.

To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle—for, on the basis here defined, the very constitution and communication of a theory of this kind cannot

be conceived independently of a *rigorous practice*—we may say with certainty that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the path of the practical movement that occurs at the level of society as a whole. (Debord, [1967] 1995, 143)

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