A Note about Context

This text was submitted as part of the viva or dissertation defense confirming the candidate's authority to direct research. It was presented at the Sorbonne (Paris I) on January 8, 1994, to a committee composed of Messrs. Daniel Bougnoux, Bernard Bourgeois (presiding), Roger Chartier, François Dagognet (minutes), Jacques Le Goff and Michel Serres.

"Mediology" may seem an ambiguous and even dubious term. Its meaning needs to be distilled. Before doing so I want briefly to retrace the steps that have led to this disciplinary project.

1. Reminder

They have taken some twists and turns, beginning with the contemporary mediator represented by the modern French intellectual (Teachers, Writers, Celebrities, 1979; The Scribe, 1980), ascending to mediation per se in its ageless logical necessity (Critique of Political Reason, 1983), only to arrive finally at the media or the contemporary procedures of influence (Courses in General Mediology, 1991; A History of the Western Eye, 1992; The Seducer State, 1993).*

At the outset, I was concerned with probing the too familiar term ideology. It had appeared to me, despite the Marxist legacy, that "ideology" would only become clearer when removed from the semantic field of the epistemè to that of praxis; the misleading notion of ideology as the antithesis of scientific knowledge leads to our understanding it as illusion or mere reflection, a

specular inversion of the real, lack of true recognition, false consciousness, etc. It is better to think of it as the means of a form of organization. Of an incorporation. Of a collective incarnation. Questions that were once said to be ideological we would today say are symbolic or cultural. They torment and beset the body politic, which is why they are neither trifling nor lazy questions, but weighty, serious and "organic." In this perspective and sticking with clichés, religion is no longer the opium of the people but the vitamin pills of the feeble.

It appeared clear to me following this that these practices of organization were, throughout history, grouped along a recurrent axis, which was fortunately variable in its forms but unfortunately stable in its principle: the axiom of incompleteness, where to my eyes the religious syntax of collective life is established/born.

I sum up this logical mechanism inspired by Gödel: no general totality of relations is relative to itself or it would not then be a totality. A system cannot close itself off by making sole use of the elements internal to it. The closing off of a field can thus only proceed contradictorily, by opening up to an element external to this same field. This element will turn out to be a founding hero, an originary myth, Holy Scripture, a Constitution or Testament—will always be what is sacred to a given group, what it lost in the beginning and what it must incessantly offer itself anew, symbolically, in order to reconstitute itself as a group.

If the structural invariant of stable societies is indeed like this, there will always be among us a near nothing, some ungraspable and inexhaustible je-ne-sais-quoi to transmit. Since no geographical territory can be completely closed off horizontally, the god-making machinery stops only where human communities are marked off and effectively exist, and mediation's work is endless. Even the smallest organized group will have need of a body of mediators or intellectuals [clerks] to periodically re-bestow coherence and vigor by opening it to a supereminent value.

Here I will mention that work of mine of religious anthropology (Critique of Political Reason). Even though [since it is more a work concerned with the political forms of the sacred] it does not belong to the mediological edifice, it ensures its foundations, at least to my way of thinking. The ever-renewed organs of the inter- are spurred on back upstream by the meta-function. It is the transcendence of the Origin, founded by logic, which brings it about that interpreters exist. Within a pure immanence no messengers are needed. Our religions have recourse to angels because God isn't there.

Once the why (why there is something symbolic in circulation) was elucidated, if I may be so bold, there remained the how (how an abstract symbol can produce concrete effects). This how was an avowed constant that went under the name of "symbolic efficacy." It called for a more specific conceptual apparatus which I called "mediology" in the first line of Teachers, Writers, Celebrities back in 1979.

There is then a thesis at stake here. What at bottom is its argument?

It comes down to replacing one word with another: "communication" with "mediation." Perhaps you will say that this is a rather paltry result of fifteen years' labor. But passing from a philosophy of communication to a philosophy of mediation is to change elements. "The Mediator supplants the messenger": isn't this the very formula of the Christian revolution? The rubble of Mercury's statue strewn before Christ on the cross. It was Michel Serres who led me to discover, in Raphael's Vatican Stanze, that fresco by Lauretti Tommaso christened The Triumph of Christianity. It was in that case truly a triumph over Hermes. The Word cannot transmit itself without becoming Flesh, and the Flesh cannot be all love and glory; it is blood, sweat and tears. Transmission is never seraphic because incarnate. Christ has no wings to fly away from the cross, and the bodies of those Word-messengers the Angels are too tenuous and fine-spun to suit the purpose. The act of communication is fluid; that of mediation, weighty. The messenger-angel traverses space by flying through and above it, the mediator is traversed by time and transfixed by the centurion's lance. Rational mediology too, taking the foundling Christian myth as paradigm, is tragic twice over: because it takes the trouble to say what suffering, misery and exclusion are inscribed in any effective transmission of a message, and because it works on the obstacle or perverse effect of the systems of delivery [messageries], namely that the good messenger is he who disappears behind his message like the angel of the Annunciation, vanishing as soon as it appears. But in historical
practice, it is the mediator who outpaces what he mediates, and the connecting conduit also blocks alternate routes (Saint Paul/Christ, Lenin/Marx, Lacan/Freud, etc.). The intermediary makes the law. Mediation determines the nature of the message, relation has primacy over being. To put it in other terms, it is bodies that think and not minds. The constraint of incorporation produces the corporations—those intermediate bodies and institutions of knowledge, normalized and normative, which we call schools, churches, parties, associations, societies of thinkers, etc.

2. Identity Check

If, in the course of some hypothetical spot-check, this rather suspicious-looking neologism of mediology were obliged to state its identity (the way a Parisian can be asked to present his papers in the metro), the question about its line of work could be answered, “I deal not so much with forms of mass media per se, despite the name I wear. My business is really signs.”

“Linguistics has been handling that one for quite some time,” the border policeman would retort. “To be sure, but I understand ‘sign’ in the wider sense, and not just as it has been endowed with traits recognized by linguists—the arbitrary, the differential, the linear, the discrete. I handle all the sensory traces of an intended meaning.” “But that is semiology’s bailiwick.”

“Others are indeed concerned with the meaning of signs. I’m interested in the power of signs—an altogether different problem.”

“Which the pragmatists of communication for the Palo Alto school at Stanford have undertaken to formulate.”

“Undoubtedly, yet the Palo Alto school and the specialists of language or speech acts concentrate on what is produced in verbal communication, between two or several interlocutors. I have in view, beyond-word relations and the warm tête-à-têtes of intersubjectivity, something like a pragmatics of thought over the long historical haul of societies. People are not influenced by words alone. Messages transmit themselves as well by gestures, by figures and pictures, the whole panoply of the sign’s archives.”

“‘To speak clearly, all in all you’re connected with the history of ideas, a proven discipline you would like to apparel after the present day’s tastes, after the fashion for ‘communication’...’”

“No, not really. The theme of communication is, strictly, foreign to my concerns. I am deliberately ignorant of what an ‘idea’ may be, and have taken to task the ineptitude of the very word ideology. It is only the material traces of meaning that have aggravated my attention. Something which turns the history of ideas topsy-turvy.” Worsening its case, these denials would increase the intruder’s chances of being promptly escorted to the borders, outside the university.

It is always a thankless and awkward task to introduce ideas using notions from which one intends to be set free. Such are the reference points acknowledged by everybody, and one surely needs after all to make oneself understood. These preliminaries, inevitably negative, oblige one to draw punctilious lines and make fastidious distinctions where until now there prevailed soothing surface continuities. An irritating business for all concerned parties. The study of the ways and means of symbolic efficacy, since such is our object, skirts either by chance or force some imposing disciplines which nourish it from many directions with information and suggestions. To deal for example with the functions of visual representations and artifacts [l’image], art history and the history of technology have been indispensable—but insufficient. Similarly, regarding the efficacy of social ideas, we have constantly found ourselves adjoining of course sociology, from Weber to Bourdieu; but also the history of mentalities, of Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff; or historical psychology, illustrated for Greek man by Jean-Pierre Vernant; or the history of symbolism of a Pierre Nora, centering on the collective effects of memory; or, besides those, the cultural history that Roger Chartier, Jean-Claude Schmitt, Paul Zumthor and so many others are in the process of renewing. I cite here the historical arsenals from where I have borrowed arms and projectiles: in order, however, if I may be so bold, to deploy them in a different research strategy. Well, in any case a subversive strategy, in relation to the former history of ideas, because it has to do with reversing its habitual course by substituting concern for its mouth or delta for concern over the sources of the flow. Not “what is this thought the product of?” but “what has it effectively produced?” Not “where does this information come
from and what does it mean?” but “what has this new information transformed in the mental space of this collective and its devices of authority?” Describing the development of a philosophy into a non-philosophy, of a moral science into a non-moral science, of a discourse into a non-discourse, leads to a coming to terms not with messages themselves in their literalness, not with the underlying epistemé of such and such a domain of utterances, but with the more obscure and trivial phenomena of processes of advance, diffusion, propagation. It is from this moment that the genesis, workmanship and content of “discourses” is effaced before their effects “below street level.” Because it no longer then is a matter of deciphering the world of signs but of understanding the “world-becoming” of signs, the Churchification of a prophet’s word, the scholarization of a series of seminars, the formation of a Party from a Manifesto, or Reform from a printed poster in a public place, the “becoming-Revolution” of enlightened ideas, the “becoming-national” panic of a radio broadcast of Orson Welles in the U.S.A., or the “becoming-delivered” rice sack of a humanitarian broadcast on French television. Let us say: the “becoming-material” forces of symbolic forms.

This is not to make a religion out of the classic opposition between the certum and the verum, certitudes (commonly known) and (uncommon) truths. But my incompetencies, as much as my life’s trajectory, have personally confined me to the study of the first intellectual district: that of the myths, beliefs and doctrines swallowed up for a century by the so fallacious term “ideology.” It is the universe of -isms, or of collective affiliations founded on a proper noun (Platonism, Christianity, Marxism, Lacanism, etc.), a universe in which the potency of symbols must pass through the specific forms of power, does not get developed in the same space-time, answers not to the same exigencies of validation as the universe of -ics (mathematics, physics, etc.). The technologies of belief and of social being clear a field that is wider but less readily controllable than the “technologies of intelligence” Pierre Lévy has scrutinized, or “the science in action” so deftly deconstructed by Bruno Latour and the researchers of sociology of innovation from the Ecole des mines, who bring to light the unwieldy mediations—political, rhetorical, industrial—of what people take to be true. As rigorous in its effects as it is evanescent in its causalities, belief is perhaps all the more imperceptible the more easy it is to access, veiled by its familiarity and the false transparency of the train of its ideas. This is doubtlessly behind the belatedness of our knowledge of the mechanisms governing influence and the ascendancy over knowledge of the production of experimental or falsifiable truths. Compared with an epistemology already well-assured of its object and methods, a “doxology” or learnedness about non-knowledge stutters. There is no Great Wall between the two realms of observation and adhesion, between the constructed and the spontaneous, but we are more familiar with the gears and networks of science than with those of the collective imaginary. As if, in spite or because of their airiness, convictions were to us more impenetrable than the tangible results of the work of proof. As if the closed doors of laboratories offered less resistance than the banging doors of painters’ studios, printshops or electronic imaging. Political hallucination remains a mystery; the physiology of vision is one no longer. We know better what we measure, and what measurement means, when we calculate the dynamic mass of a galaxy than when we quantify by polling a state of opinion. Likewise do we have more familiarity with the uses and effects of the computer, the standard tool of men and women of science today, than with those of television, daily tool and concern of today’s politicos. And there are only the rarest dialogues between these two categories of objects and subjects.

It is hardly necessary to recall how the human sciences have already so amply treated the thousand circumstantial levels of signs’ efficacy, affecting that symbolic mammal homo sapiens and loquens. Anthropology has shown us, exemplified by the shaman’s recitations before the tribal woman in labor, how “the passage to verbal expression releases the physiological process” (Lévi-Strauss). The psychoanalyst confirms through his/her clients the virtues of the talking-cure (Freud); the sociologist of culture submits as evidence the symbolic violence practiced by the higher-ups simply through ways of saying, doing, classifying, behaving, perceiving, eating—and whose arbitrariness the lower-
downs assimilate as natural (Bourdieu); the sociologist of politics
knows from experience that giving the orders means transmitting
and subjecting, inculcating, since domination ordinarily has no
recourse to physical violence (Weber). The poets who, for their
part, treated the question at the same time as the princes and
well before the human sciences, on numerous occasions have
exalted "the word, that force that goes" (Hugo), or further the
"powers of speech" (Edgar Allan Poe). But before they came
along, some nomads of the Near East had invented God in their
image, lending him right from the start—Act I, Scene I—that
mysterious and thus divine aptitude for transmuting an act of
saying into doing: fiat lux, "and there was light." Enunciation =
Creation. We have perhaps forgotten Genesis, but the sensus
communis at bottom is always taken for Yahve every time it
evokes not the trumpets felling the walls of Jericho but books
"which break with tradition," "spoken words that caused a
shock wave," "ideas that alter the face of things," etc. These co-
lerless metaphors conceal the performative mystery by banalizing
it, but one has to consciously resolve not to consider as self-
edent that the spoken word of Jesus of Nazareth was able at a
certain point in its course to transform the Roman Empire and
give birth to Christianity; or that Urban II's preaching at
Clermont, putting bands of pilgrims and entire armies into
motion, brought forth the first Crusade; that the posting at
Wittenberg, by a former Augustinian monk, of 95 theses in Latin
could have given rise to the Reformation; that the Communist
Manifesto originated a "Communist system." In short, the fact
that a representation of the world shall have modified the state of
the world, and not just its perception (a fact we hold to be some-
ting natural), is worth taking the trouble reconfiguring into a
real enigma. They say philosophy is the daughter of astonish-
ment. It is not enough just to be dumbfounded to become a
philosopher, but my different works all arise out of intellectual
wonder at the cliches that naturalize an even more mysterious
operation than signification, namely the transition of the sign to
the act. At the entry to the "black box" there are sonorities, let-
ters, faint traces; at the exit: new legislations, institutions, police
forces. To dismantle this "box" is to analyze what we shall call
a fact or deed of transmission, or to produce the rules of

transformation from one state into another (not the gaseous into
the liquid, but the chain that would follow sermonizing into an
army or magic book, and from that into a Party or State; or
"logic into epilepsy"). The structural stability of languages and
codes is one thing, the quaking of a stable structure by an event
of speech or word, or any other symbolic irruption, is another.

3. Primary Definitions

Your criticism of my propositions will perhaps be facilitated by
a few preface and summary definitions. I call therefore "medi-
o-logy" the discipline that treats of the higher social functions
in their relations with the technical structures of transmission. I
call "mediological method" the case-by-case determination of
correlations, verifiable if possible, between the symbolic activities
of a human group (religion, ideology, literature, art, etc.), its
forms of organization, and its mode of grasping and archiving
traces and putting them into circulation. I take for a working
hypothesis that this last level exerts a decisive influence on the
first two. The symbolic productions of a society at a given instant
t cannot be explained independently of the technologies of mem-
ory in use at the same instant. This is to say that a dynamics of
thought is not separable from a physics of traces.

The means of routing a message, the point of passage to which
it is bound, furnishes for analysis a major but limited element.
The medium in the McLuhanite sense of the word is but the
ground floor. One cannot thus rest there.

Objects and works count less, of course, than operations. Let
us guard against the substantialist trap by integrating the
medium as a device or system of representation [dispositif] into
mediation as the actual use or disposal of resources [dispo-
sition]. Or, further, by integrating such and such cultural
substantives—books, images—into the corresponding infinitive—to
read, to look at—and above all into the variations of
that act (the ways of reading and looking, their social frame-
works and styles). Herein lies the inversion of hierarchies: the
text as an ideal unity is less pertinent than the book as object,
and the object in its turn less so than its metamorphoses. Our
province is the intermediate or intercalative,* because we are much given to the intervals, intercessors and interfaces of transmission. But with the prefix inter-designating as it does an order of realities invariably secondary in relation to the terms it fits together, we have preferred instead the Latin suffix -ion, -io betokening action or process, here of technology-culture interactions. It is in reality the intermediate spaces and time, the betweenness of two things or periods, the trough of the wave [les entre-deux], that are decisive; but our language works the opposite way: it spontaneously subordinates the signs of relation to those of being, and doing to being.

The mediologist busies himself with the forms of media like Marcel Proust with his petites madeleines, or Sigmund Freud with his slips. No less but no more. Let us even say, relatively rarely. The word media, that false friend of the mediologist, denotes "any means of technical support making possible the massive diffusion of information (press, radio, television, cinema, advertising, etc.)" (Petit Robert). "The media" does not mean in our view an autonomous, coherent field liable to be constituted into its own specific discipline. This is not only because they are overdetermined, spanning a multiplicity of determinants at once economic, technical, political, cultural, ideological, etc.—as is the case with any process of transmission—but because they are but a more particular variant, inflated yet derived from a permanent question of global principle. What was offered by Aristotle's reflections on rhetoric, or Plato's on writing and the sophist, and, quite as much as those, by the case of that original Marathon runner, seen as author and victim of the West's first "scoop"—all these matters relate not to presently fashionable mass-mediology but do come directly under the headings of our field. Contemporary media are only encrypted over the long term, in temporal depth. To begin to approach television as a mediologist and not a sociologist of communication, one needs to take up an ancestral soul and observe it in perspective, against the light surrounding the Byzantine icon,

*In the sense of that which is introduced to a series of already existing elements, as in the cases of the additional day of February to bring the calendar in line with the natural solar year, or a newly acknowledged geological bed (for example, associated with a period of subsidence) between two other strata, or the modifying elements tacked on to words in the development of a language to make compound words (agglutination). [Trs.]

the traditional form of painting, photography, and cinema. The moment is understood through process, as is the past through the whole.

Shall we then take as our object the medium in the singular? Not that either, except that insofar as the interposing environments of transmitting symbols are structured by a dominant medium one cannot not envisage a role for this muddled term, on condition of granting its complexity (so much does its ordinary use often prove mystifying and simplistic). In the transmitting of a message, medium can be understood in four non-contradictory but exclusive senses. 1. As a general procedure of symbolizing (the word, writing, the analogical image, digital calculation). 2. As a social code of communication (the natural language in which a verbal message is pronounced—say, Latin, English, or Czech). 3. As a supporting material system or surface for receiving an inscription or archiving (clay, papyrus, parchment, paper, magnetic tape, screen). 4. As a recording device paired with a certain distribution network (via the manual labor of scribes, print workshop, photograph, television, information systems). Let us agree on the propriety of calling "medium" in the strong sense the system of apparatus-support-procedure, that which a mediological revolution would unsettle and disturb organically. The general technical method of "writing," bereft of any indication of the support system enabling and conserving its markings, or of the network through which they circulate, fails to specify concretely the nature of a medium. The "writing" sign displayed on the computer screen is to our eye another medium from the same sign on the paper's surface: it has passed from the graphosphere to the videosphere. Whence notably the inadequacy of the hasty antitheses written/oral—differences in the recording surfaces and networks of distribution having been abstracted.

A mediological revolution does not fundamentally affect the extant linguistic codes (printing with presses did not change the syntax or vocabulary of French), no more than it abolishes the other modes of transmission (they continued in the sixteenth century to produce sermons and manuscripts). The invention of printing did not all by itself manufacture a new material basis for receiving graphic imprints: rag paper already existed. Nor did it create an original formal structure for binding the reading
surface: the “codex” book was several centuries old at the time, and the forms of books remained for nearly a century after Gutenberg those of the manuscript, as Roger Chartier has reminded us. Nonetheless, beyond the inertia of status quo communicative activities and taking account of the periods of latency, Gutenberg’s technology would prove effective in profoundly overturning, if not the modalities of reading, at least the symbolic status and social reach of the written word through mass literacy. Moveable lead type required paper, but the latter would have vegetated, so to speak, without the former. The dynamic was that of the pair lead-paper, but the true operative agency—quantitative and qualitative—of a convulsive upheaval in the sign’s medieval ecology was, in the final instance, the invention of the letter-press: the motorized and matricial machine of a new anthropological structure characterized as “modernity.”

Every revolution of this genre is multifactored. And it would be reductionist, obviously, to promote the medium into a unique causal agent when it remains the necessary but not sufficient condition of a mediological revolution. The machinery, in Daniel Bougnoux’s words, holds in its control only half of the program; the other half is made by the milieu, and causality follows a circle. A medium is nurtured and grows through the environment, which may or may not make demands of it. And doubtless one could apply to the first hand-press and print impression the same type of assessment David Landes applies to the mechanical clock: “It is not the clock that provoked an interest for measuring time; it is the interest that led to the clock’s invention.”¹ Epidemiology and microbiology have illuminating ways of approaching environmental causality in this regard. Just as the variability of the virus is a function of the site into which it is introduced (the same virus that causes AIDS in humans is harmless in chimpanzees), the variability of a mediological effect is explained by the degree of resistance of the cultural and social milieu (each one having an immunological defense system *sui generis*). The same complex of machines can be revealed epidemic in one place and indifferent in another. The site of eleventh century China was unable to foster and fully adapt on a large scale fonts of moveable characters, which knew a resurgence and growth in the fifteenth century, at the other end of the world, in passing from wood (block) to lead (type).² Chinese xylography met a modest demand for printed texts, required no heavy investment, and maintained more easily a close tie with the calligrapher’s style. The Mycenaean milieu of the twelfth century B.C. had not allowed the linear phonetic notation of thought to “mature.” It confined the invention to the royal precinct, in the hands of a caste of scribes, for purposes of bureaucratic regulation. The Athenian habitat reaped its benefits, a few centuries later, and transformed the procedure of keeping secret records within the palace walls into a means of publicizing laws and civic equality in the agora.

Thus the causal tie between a technology and a culture is neither automatic nor unilateral. One cannot be sure about the types of behavior that linear writing is going to develop in a given setting. Still, one can be sure that a culture unaware of this particular procedure of memorization will not have such and such a behavioral pattern: it will have no cognizance of how to class things, list events, place items in columnar format, etc. (And thus will have no cognizance of the logic of non-contradiction, linear history, cumulative memory, etc.). But has not the science of ecology for a long time traded in the more straightforward mechanistic causalities for “systematic” models? It is well known that it does not rain in the Sahara because there is no vegetation, and no vegetation because it does not rain. Christianity helps along the victory of the *codex* (our own form of book) over the *volumen* (or scroll), unfit for liturgical reading because so little able to be easily handled, and the victory of the *codex* helps along that of Christianity over pagan practices. Both phenomena co-produce one another.

To the “small” system of the material base, or surface of inscription along with its apparatus for making and preserving


signs, responds the “large” medium-milieu, a socio-technological complex that is mediology’s historical object proper. “Milieu” is more than scenery or stage-effects, or than an exterior space of circulation: it conditions the semantics of traces slanted by a social organization. It sets the horizon of meaning of messages received across “the logic of custom or use” (Jacques Perriault) of which it is the porter (arranging for welcoming, withdrawing, hostility, standing-by, etc.). This “logic” is not some user code simply “in the air,” an autonomous mode of implementation spread equally among a population of virtual users. Its coordinates line up with a political map of recognized competencies—in solidarity as they are with a hierarchized distribution of positions and expertise, of an organized regulation of accesses to different communicative bases and systems. A historical milieu of transmission crystallizes concretely in, and through, the socialized operators of transmission. It is a space constructed by, and upon, networks of appropriators, official guarantors of reputations, regulators, go-betweens or middle-men, etc. This holds for printing, for example, with its editor-booksellers, retailers, educators, librarians, organizers of reading rooms, administrators of provincial academies, etc. “They select, make available and control the dynamism of information; they render it desirable and assimilable; they are the active agents of its appropriation and transformation.”2 But each novel medium modifies the operative capacity and thus political importance of each of the networks already functioning. In general the new denomes the old. Each mediological revolution gives rise to its own producers of friction, its own “switch points” along the tracks of its development, and the history of a cultural milieu can be read (and written) as that of the short-circuits and competitions between juxtaposed, or rather, superposed, devices of transmission (thus with today’s school networks, bookstores, presses, radio, television).

The error of futurologists and disappointment of futurists commonly arise from overestimating the medium’s effect by underestimating the milieu’s weighty plots. As a general rule, usage is more archaic than the tool. The explanation is self-evident: if the medium is “new,” the milieu is “old,” by definition. It is a stratification of memories and narrative associations, a palimpsest of gestures and legends continuously prone to reactivation, the repertoire we rapidly leaf through of representational structures and symbols from all preceding ages. I am papyrus, parchment, paper, computer screen. I am the Decalogue, François Villon, Lenin and Macintosh. I am pictogram and alphabet, text and hypertext, manuscript, printed page and radiating screen. It is the same with individuals as with mediaspheres. Each mediasphere concretely supposes heterogeneous mediospaces. France in the video sphere is “a hexagon any of whose sides are only an hour and a half away,” and whose images have the speed of light. But having Airbus and live TV coverage has not done away with the country’s departmental jurisdictions originally measured as portions of space that one can cross by horse in one day. The most recent layer of signs reaches us through the older ones, in a perpetual re-inscribing of the archives, such that the new takes effect in, by, and on the old. Hence the eternal lateness of effective customary use above and beyond the tool’s potentialities, of event overtaking expectations. Hence the tenacious viscosity of quotidian practices, the hijacking or misappropriation and longer by-passing of the available apparatuses, and at times the felicitous surprises issuing from the chronological bricolage to which any culture and individual is constrained vis-à-vis its/his material bases of representation.

Let us sum up. In the word “mediology,” “medio” says not media nor medium but mediations, namely the dynamic combination of intermediary procedures and bodies that interpose themselves between a producing of signs and a producing of events. These intermediates are allied with “hybrids” (Bruno Latour’s term), mediations at once technological, cultural and social. We are quite ill-prepared to deal with crossings and composites. The edifice of signs divides into the three levels of the physical (or technological), semantic, and political. But its study has been up to the present day partitioned into air-tight disciplines: the first level attributed to “the history of sciences and technologies”; the second, to the “sciences of culture”; the third, to the “sciences of society.” The same segmentation has applied in professionalized practices: to the technocrats and engineers belong cable and “cultural equipment,” that is the care of the conduits; to

intellectuals and artists go the messages and significations, i.e. the care of contents; to the princes and decision-makers, at last, the monitoring of customs and the control of profits, i.e. care of the trade-offs and fall-out effects. Yet “the transition from the pure to the married state” that constitutes a symbolic utterance’s entry into action does not respect those borders. Neither does mediology: it aspires to be trans-bordered, athwart establishments and nomenclatures. In order to think through what is otherwise inconceivable to it, has not each age of human reason had to confront incommensurables, find connections between whole continents? Everything takes place as if one had always unconsciously dissociated 1) the technological question—which machine is at work here? 2) the semantic question—which discourse are we given to understand? and 3) the political question—which power is exerted, how and on whom? Looking not for that which is behind, but for what takes place between, the mediologist beholds himself constrained to set up his footstool before three more dignified arm-chairs: those of the historian of technology, the semiotist and the sociologist. An uncomfortable position but inevitable. Philosophy, apart from a few exceptions, turns its back on technological modalities, and to history’s variations; history turns its on the anthropological invariants, and the concepts that describe them. Sociologists turn theirs on the world of objects and technical systems; students of technology, on subjects and mentalities; and semiotists, on both of these. This is why, and for lack of any alternative, crossing fields legitimized to our way of thinking a “staggered” approach, to attempt connecting the universe of subjects with systems of objects.

The neurosciences endeavor to surmount the brain/mind breach. The study of societies until just yesterday continued to separate the machine or the tool and, on the other side, spirituality or culture; here, the history of technologies and there the “moral sciences.” And rags do not mix well with napkins, under penalty of unleashing immediately the defensive attack: vulgar materialism, naive reductionism, obsolete determinism. The mixing of rubrics appears, however, indispensable for grasping the organizational logic of a political and intellectual history, but also the collective attitude of a given period, which was stigmatized in its time as “dominant ideology” where one would rather see today the “conjunctive tissue of the mind of societies” (Le Goff). The mediological manner or cast of mind consists in putting one’s finger on the intersections between intellectual, material and social life, and in making these too silent hinges grate audibly. That is, in looking for the mainspring, the excluded third term of our grand narratives, the one that bridges without pontificating by connecting software and hardware. For example, an analysis of the movement of ideas in France in the eighteenth century, of interest to mediology, will favor those informal intermediate spaces, those key sites, poles of social attraction and centers of intellectual elaboration that were clubs, salons, cénacles, theater boxes, reading rooms, literary societies, circles, not to speak of more regular academies and institutions. The bookseller will seem more worthy of attention than literature, meeting places than commonplaces, and journalistic or café culture than the culture of literary wits. Or sellers who spread news and make reputations than the authors. The Enlightenment seen from this angle is not a corpus of doctrines, a totality of discourses or principles that a textual analysis could comprehend and restore; it is a change in the system of manufacture/circulation/storage of signs. That is, in the first appearance of nodes and networks of sociability, interfaces bearing new rituals and exercises, proving worthy as means of producing opinion. These are, in sum, through their displacement of intermediary bodies, a reorganization of the structural articulations of public spirit. It is not the ideas or the themes of Enlightenment that determined the French Revolution, but rather that set of logistics (without which these ideas would never have take on corporeal forms).

Here is something that will sound to historians like a return to sender. What after all does the history of mentalities do, if not practice concretely, from live models, this type of approach? Was it not that which taught us to allow the interstices and residues of the events of history to begin to yield their fruits? To prefer the everyday, the automatic and the collective to the eponymous heroes and summits of social visibility? Jacques Le Goff, apropos the medieval sermon and painted or sculpted image: “Mass media are the privileged vehicles and matrices of mentalities.” Roger Chartier apropos the spread of the Enlightenment: “Receptions are always appropriations that transform, reformulate, exceed
what they receive.” Observing this to be the case, the apprentice mediologist, who could have given himself the flashier part to play facing the history of a century ago, just as the neurochemist today opposes the old psychology of faculties, convinces himself that he has still less to bring to the historian of mentalities than the sociologist to social history. Reconstructing theoretically the empirical cases elaborated by the workings of the new history, the mediologist can at the most propose macroscopic models of conceptualization, if not explanation. The mental (which comes from mens, mind) tends upward; the materialities of culture downward. By ascribing the equipment of societies’ mentalités to their technologies for domesticating space and time, we shall be able to join modestly with other “guilds” of social and human science to purposely lower the debate. This we can further do by extending to the mediological supports of those mentalités the allegedly reductive role imputed elsewhere to the biological bases of the psyche; as we can also do by translating “revision of values” by “displacement of vectors.” A socio-analysis of the homo academicus cannot help not readily imputing, therefore, an alleged “aristocratism” to those contemporary philosophies that would resort to the specialists’ “-ogy effect” (grammatology, marxology, archeology, semiology, etc.) “in order to borrow the methods and appearances of the scientificity of the social sciences without giving up the privileged statute of the philosopher.”3 Far from locking ourselves into a self-sufficient and self-referential notion about universals, we prefer nothing more than immersion in the contingency of historical accidents and things, while at the same time mindful to posit or set off from the magma of events some structures of necessity of a more general character. For, instead of making note of the documentable, like the historian, the mediologist dreams of conveying reasons for things, by showing the skeletal structure beneath the flesh, what one could call “the hard of the soft.” Truly, more than removing the partition between vectors and values, we would have needed to talk about strengthening crisscrossed lacings: an intertwined kind of understanding that would de-ideologize “ideologies,” desanctify sanctities, but also mentalize the material bases of systems of inscription, and


psychoanalyze not souls but tools. That is, in one and the same gesture, make our mnemo-technic equipment intelligible as mentality and our mental equipment intelligible as technology.

4. By Invariants and Variations

Writing about the power of intellectuals, the Scribe, the Word, the history of Looking, the State—should I dare say that as a philosopher I have never produced books of anything other than history, however heavily conceptualizing they may also be. The just estimation of meaning can be treated as synchrony, after the stable ground rules of a code; but not the just estimation of effective power, which supposes a diachrony (if only in the “horse-steam engine” sense of the term: a unit of work per unit of time). It had to do in each instance, indeed, with “substituting for the autarchical analysis of structures the transversal study of a logic” (Sylvie Merzeau). How? By making a column of invariant traits, on the left, correspond to a series of pertinent variations, on the right; whence those synoptic tables for a holistic view of such and such a trajectory (see appendices). The functions in a given framework of civilization are invariant: there is a relational function of the servants of the absolute, like scribes or intellectuals; a reconstitutive function of visual images, whether one refers to it after the fashion of “scopic impulsion” or of Pascal’s “image-producing faculty” (the one that “dispenses reputations and gives respect to persons”); or, the propaganda function of State power. What is variable are the regimes of the functioning. And it is the order of these fluctuations that this double-entry grid or template would want to produce.

We were not in pursuit of identities but passages and emergences (thus arose our interest in those watersheds, the sixteenth and twentieth centuries). Comparatism (not between cultures here, but phases) worked loose and brought to light the significant differences. This does not throw into relief a general anthropology, since the exercises of power and practice have priority over structures and the cross-sectioned trajectory. Nor does it clear the way to a positive (or positivist) history, because the pertinent variations are related back to invariants and we seek
not only to establish but to order them. The ideal project would have been to assay a techno-history of culture, to be brought one day under a historical anthropology here and there presently taking shape.

The “techno-” is upstream from or at the heart of the “socio-.” This is what immediately set off the approach taken here in relation to the sociologist. One encounters it clearly in the example of how a culture looks at art and symbols, and in the history of that looking. In “A Median Art, Essay on the Social Uses of Photography,” the sociological interest focuses on the behavioral codes and modes of appropriation of the medium. The sociologist demonstrates extremely well how the characteristics of the photograph as an objective imprint of things fulfill the expectations of popular naturalism. This innovative work that consists of “regaining an objectified sense produced from the objectification of subjectivity” takes for granted, however, what is singular to the recorded image which distinguishes it radically from the “icon” and “symbol” form. It subjects to no examination the invention’s disruptive effects on the previous or bordering practices of representation: print engraving and painting. And thereby leaves intact the whole genealogy of representative technologies in which one would observe the medium-photograph overthrowing by degrees the economy of visual messages. It goes without saying that no single angle of view on photography disqualifies another, the counter-field of mediology coming eventually to complete the sociological field, without claiming for itself, latecomer that it is, the same norms of knowledge.

More vulnerable to the unexpected than his distinguished neighbors, the mediologist continues on his way from one surprise to the next in the adventurous history of inventions. The technological object puts him out of countenance; each innovation would nearly force him to change theories. The sociologist, the semiotician or the psychoanalyst tend to great technological emergences indiscriminately, as these theoreticians are in the bosom of an already constructed system of a priors. They hasten to show that, be their object animal, mineral or vegetable, it confirms their set of preexistent rules—the war between the classes, the system of the code, or the topic of psychological instances. Have not these disciplines become much too sure of themselves to recall Apollinaire’s advice to the poet: “Mind a train does not come along and no longer surprise you”? They most often reduce the new artifact to the state of a metaphor of themselves. Far from exclaiming something to the effect of “that’s it exactly, see for yourself,” the mediologist of how artifacts have been looked at, when faced with an African idol, a museum painting, a photograph, the cinema, television, begins with a “that’s not ‘it’ at all, I no longer recognize myself in it.” “But it’s very simple!” says the already constituted systematic branch of knowledge to itself, knowing all in advance. “That gets more and more complicated,” muses the other.

To learn meant, in an earlier time, to simplify, by finding the simple intelligible invariant of complicated empirical variations. Peirce established in this way that the semiotic world, or “semiosphere,” is distinguished from the organic, or biosphere, by the mediation of an “interpretant.” It is this third term between the sign and the object which does not exist in the reflexive sequence of stimulus-response. Here is a tertiariness that betokens human freedom: let us see it in an anthropological invariant. I cannot make it such that my lower leg does not kick if one gives it a light tap above the knee, but I can run a red light, smile at someone who gives me a chilly welcome, or decline a gesture of friendship addressed to me. A “semiotic situation” leaves me free as to my responses, including not responding. But this space of freedom is not a space of indifference, a subjective indetermination independent of the nature of the “semaphores” at our disposal. One cannot, for example, fit modern “mass communications” into an historico-conceptual framework, a sort of state of nature of culture, and call the latter “the prevailing situation of semiosis” or semiosphere. It is one thing to understand our “mass culture” actuality in accordance with a model of intelligibility, as the token is to the type or the phenomenon to the structure. It is another to dissolve the one in the other. A simplification that no longer allows one to identify the historical differences—for example, between the “semiosic situations” of the archaic Greek
world, the Christian Middle Ages, or of our twenty-first century—ceases to be operative in order to become comfortable. Hence the necessity of a second level of time for the act of knowing: to introduce some discontinuousness within a continuity. To concretize the abstract universality “the semiotic situation” constitutes is to state it more specifically as a **mediasphere**, a concrete variation of the atemporal invariant **semiosphere**. Here the principle of intelligibility of the empire of signs is but the same thing as its periodization. Time is needed in order to understand, and above all to understand what one says, as I remember Althusser reminding us one day. There is neither a synoptic table nor a distinction made among mediaspheres in my *The Scribe and Teachers, Writers, Celebrities*; but it is indeed the difference in the shift from the French scholar-intellectual [clerc] to the monk that personally set me on the “mediological” path, by hindering me from choosing—in defining the “intellectual,” (a task become our national *pons asinorum*)—between the historical and structural approaches. Certainly in the France of today, what presents itself to view is but a milieu of sociability structured by three poles: university, publishing-editing, medias. And certainly these poles **co-exist** in any given one of them and at present, with all sorts of well-known connecting bridges between them. But each predominant, successively central space of attraction can be historically dated. 1880 to 1930 concentrated the university cycle; 1930 to 1968, the editorial cycle; 1968 to who knows when, the mediac cycle. Three cycles that also are good for “recyclings,” whereby what is recycled is a “clerical-intellectual” function that preceded the birth of the very word and of the secular intelligentsia (see Le Goff: *Les Intellectuels au Moyen Age*), and will outlive it should need for that prove to be the case. Here, the invariant function appears as soon as one passes from substantive definition of “the intellectual” as “the man of ideas and values” to his operative definition as “the man of the transmitting” (of ideas and values). It is the function that determines the status and not the reverse. To aim at the exact nature of functions practiced in reality, rather than at the official untitledness of print organs and so on, makes apparent a logic of the places occupied by these functions which does not correspond to the logic of signs and insignia. It involves a change of the angle of vision producing this slightly preposterous idea that the journalistic institution fulfills a social function not all that different from the secular clergy long ago: the mediative as the functional “ecclesiastical” of the moment. It is no longer the homily from the pulpit but the narration of the news on screen and paper that presently provides for the translation of event into symbol and of peripetia or mere incident into dramatic art. Each “menu,” each page layout, is a lay sermon (or moral instruction), with its hierarchy of titles, and thus of events and persons, with its providential logic of meaningful sequences or imputed chains of cause and effect, its allegorical use of photographs, etc. (The basic journalist, to continue the homiletic metaphor, is the parish priest of old; the editorial director, an archbishop; the newscaster or anchorperson, with all of France’s hexagon as jurisdiction, a primate of the Gallican church. Hence that moot question of mediology, let it be noted in passing: the debate over ordaining women in the catholic world, a debate already settled technologically while the Vatican’s back was turned.)

The question “why convey, why transmit meanings” [*pourquoi transmettre*] comes under the heading of an anthropology; the question of “what there is to transmit,” under that of an ethics; the question of “how does one transmit” under that of a historical mediology. At least let us say that while the function of symbolic mediation is orderable into categories, is transhistorical, anchored in the theorem of incompleteness as the transcendental condition of collective organization, the institutional organs of this function are precarious, singular, ever-changing. One must take them on as a historian and no longer as a philosopher. But this is only the initial exodus. To understand the structuring of the historical succession of institutional organs by the technological evolution of the material bases of representations and systems of inscription [*supports*], conventional historical accounts do not suffice. There is a need to make oneself a technologist—or put clearly, given the nature of the means in question, a mediologist. A second exodus, or the further exile within exile already from the concept. For a metaphysician there is little brilliance in what the historian does. And just as little, for
a simple historian, in what the historian of technology does, despite the exhortations of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch. This drop by two degrees in rank—if we hold to the venerable hierarchies knowing full well how outmoded they were—is included in the logic that reasoned: first, to understand the opus, look toward its operation; second, to understand the operation, look toward the equipment or apparatus; third, to understand these things, look toward the series in which they take their place. And this is how a study like my Teachers, Writers, Celebrities or even more A History of the Western Eye is sure to seem too anecdotal in the philosopher’s view, and too systematic in the historian’s. The latter distrusts totalizing concepts, experienced as he is in the complexities of practices. The former spurns the singularities of empirical history because to describe variations without giving their reason seems to him uninteresting. Sensitive to where these two oppositely posed objections have validity, the mediologist (and this is to be feared) will escape neither.

5. What is a Mediasphere?

In these small critical histories (that historians will doubtlessly determine to be “philosophical”), the chronological unifier can be called the mediasphere, or middle ground, setting or environment [milieu] of the transmission and carrying [transport] of messages and people. This milieu, structured by its foremost technique and practice of memory-formatting, structures in its turn a type of accrediting of the discourses in currency, a dominant temporality, and a mode of grouping together that are the three faces of a trihedron forming (what one could sum up as) the collective personality or psychological profile proper to a mediological period.

Historically, every mediasphere is specific to time and place, and our tables (see appendix) distinguish between three primary types: the logosphere, when writing functions as the central means of diffusion under the constraints and through the channels of orality; the graphosphere, when printed text imposes its rationality on the whole of the symbolic milieu; the videosphere, with its devitalization of the book via audiovisual media. This succession does not encompass, it will be noted, periods and societies without writing systems: it is properly speaking historical (post-Neolithic). This limitation pertains only to our object of study. One of the key references we have consulted, the ethnomethodologist Jack Goody, has thematized by working from surveys conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa the exit of cultures from what could be called the mnemosphere, or oral transmission founded exclusively on the arts of memory. The three main effects of the written notation of thought are known: accumulation, permanent setting down of traces [fixation] and their depersonalization. Writing inaugurated the transmission of the symbol at a distance, in space and time, and on this head can serve as our chronology’s far-end buffer zone. We have confined inquiry to the passage from hand-written and oral public communication (logosphere) to the mechanical reproduction of text (graphosphere) and, following that, to the analogical—and not long thereafter, computer- graphic—recording of sonorous and visual signs (videosphere).

The combination transmission/transportation makes periodization a problem because to the caesura of printing’s effects on memorization corresponds no equivalent caesura of effects on locomotion. The concordance of the tele-communicative and transportational, which is not only a chronological coincidence, begins with the technological and social use of electric energy (the social break coming between ten and thirty years behind the technological invention). The dates show it: to the electromagnetic telegraph corresponds the railroad, to the telephone the automobile, to radiotelephony the airplane (or to radio’s years aircrafts’ years), to television the intercontinental missile and space rocket launcher. But before this and for three thousand years, on the ground, the saddled horse aligned the speed of circulating messages with that of persons. Travel time for a long while remained stationary, if not unchanging. Simple horse-pulled wagon, passenger stagecoach, the deluxe covered carriage with suspended chassis [carrosse], the more elaborate public coach generally drawn by five horses [diligence], the sleeker hooded and windowed landau or berline, the barouche or calash [calèche] with folded black top, the lightweight one-horse, two- wheeled cabriolet or “convertible” with folding leather hood: lightening the vehicles and improving the roads shortened the
delays, but without changing the unity of time (in 1650 the Paris-Toulouse route was covered in 330 hours and by 1848 in 80 hours). Even if it took but three days (and nights) for news of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre to reach Madrid, Julius Caesar traveled at the same pace as the prince of Condé, and Chateaubriand’s Italian voyage hardly went much faster than Montaigne’s. And the growing difference between transporting on the backs of men and transportation by wheel, between carrying messages or packages and changing locations, was not yet culturally significant. Putting aside the rudimentary systems of signalization by sight or sound (lighthouses and floating beacons or buoys, towers and lights, church bells and horns), the uncoupling and estrangement between the respective range of activities of the message and the messenger becomes operative only with the Industrial Revolution. It begins at the end of the eighteenth century, at the same moment as the steam engine, with the optical telegraph; and seriously, radically, in the middle of the nineteenth century, with the electromagnetic telegraph. The instantaneity/ubiquity of messages proper to the videosphere goes back in fact to 1848.

To give back to a mentality’s milieu its indissoluble configuration in space and time, it may perhaps be necessary to acknowledge the properly mediative functions of territoriality. A mediashere is a mentality’s relation to physical space as well as time. One does not communicate with God just anywhere, for example, but through the joint mediation of certain privileged sites with a certain milieu receiving travellers (shrines and places of pilgrimage). The immobilized human body does not encounter the same symbolic needs as the body of the traveller on foot or on horseback. I was able in Cours de médiologie générale to point out only in passing the link that existed between the appearance of monotheism and itinerancy in a desert habitat, the great period of pastoral nomadism (pp. 245–250). Relations among the Hebrews to the Invisible were mediated by a space polarized between desert and ecumenicity [from Greek οἰκονομεῖον, Latin oeconomē, ‘the inhabited world’], mountain and plain, as by a certain type of migration. Religious space is never isotropic: polytheistic territorality—of a perimetric and ponderous type closed off to wondering—is not monotheistic space, which is at once hypercentralized in representation (O Jerusalem) and delocalized (no altar). Similarly the theological debate over idols, waged by iconoclasts and iconodules, cannot be detached from the debate about movable versus immovable property, portable objects versus those that must remain in one place, the lightweight versus heavy or inert. Not by accident is the desert theme common to both Protestantism and Judaism, with all its practices of salvation—ascent, return, retreat, refuge. In the same measure that forgetting the desert and a prolonged sedentariness exposed the faithful to a relapse into idolatry, deterritorialization induced a state or rather resumption of messianic consciousness. Space, in terms of the lived relation to a geography as much physical as moral, would thus be classed among our guiding embodiments of study. And this relation indeed depends as much on the means of transportation as of transmission. Their changes of speed modify attitudes of thought as well as regimes of authority: kinetics and symbolics are in league with each other. A mediashere’s space is not objective but trajective. It would therefore be necessary to hazard the term “mediospace,” the relation of a given surface area to a duration. The “ball of earth” as a mediopace of the graphosphere is not the same as that of the videosphere. The one has a circumference of three years (Magellan) and the other of twenty-four hours (Airbus).

Every subject/object dichotomy, every spirit/matter duality, would thus be fatal for a realistic perception of the mediashere, which is as much objective as subjective. A devised system and a systemic disposition, a behavior and a representation, a mindful machinery and a mechanical mentality, properly apprehending the—mediashere activates the connecting dash within the

---

5 I was pointing this out as a matter for conjecture, without even being cognizant of the allusions of Ernest Renan. The geographer Jean-Luc Piveteau has effectively consolidated the hypothesis in his “La territorialité des Hébreux, l’affaire d’un peuple il y a longtemps ou un cas d’école pour le IIIe millénaire,” L’Espace géographique, 1993, no. 1.
"techno-cultural." The calibration of social time is clearly supported here by a technological scanion, but a mediaphere is not only a technological environment. Its analysis, in the way of a psychosomatics of the social body, keeps to that borderland of collective psychologies where machines become culture and culture machinery. The proof of this is that a mediological revolution, stirring together concrete things and myths, crystallizes at the same time around an apparatus and a fetish. For the new, soon to be institutionalized, organ—promoted to its position at the center of symbolic transmissions, a sacred tool, the new mainstay of the logistics of influence, and a bearer of ambivalent affects—comes straightaway to speak in our ears an Aesopian tongue. So it was with the alphabet, the printing press, television, or the computer (soon to fuse into one single appliance). The "inert" instrument has a soul from the word go, one that confers on it the imaginary investment needed to make it a mediabolical organ, the ubiquitous centerpiece of our dreams of salvation and other wishes upon a star—demonic for some, for others wondrous. Each mediaphere has its frigths and castles in the air. It can be as onerous as it is mechanizing.

If technology's material base surrounds itself with a fabulous halo (which can even predate its effective public appearance, as we see with the computer in the post-World War II U.S.), it remains no less true that the mythology fades once the material product of its performance declines in significance. The myth of the Book as the Temple of God and Emancipator of humankind failed to withstand the marginalization of the printed book by the new bases of inscription. And the old mythic investiture was carried over to the micro-computer, which is variously held to promise world salvation, promote grass-roots democracy, ensure universal "cosmopedagogy" (or the permanent education of the human species). The mythical primacy is dislodged with the practical return on investment; social status rewards the utensil-value of the tool, and not the opposite. The fact that in the mediaphere objective should not be separated from subjective cannot therefore obscure the ultimate supremacy of base over symbol. Be it the slightest letter of the alphabet, the meanest lead-typeface character, or the minutest silicon chip, the lower-case will draw in the upper-cases, sooner or later. A culture or social tradition finally earns the fate of the devices of memory that back it up, and each new mediaphere short-circuits the class of hegemonic mediators issuing out of its predecessor. It is hence always good mediological method to come up with the little "whatsit" behind the lofty word that hides it from view (translating, for instance, yesterday's "glorious alliance of workers and intellectuals" by the hookup of the boiler machine to the typesetter's printing case). Not only to be cured of linguistic substantialism, in one's head, but to orient oneself correctly in life: the dynamics are on the side of the object. We have seen that a sublime religion's birth can be apprehended as a mythic sublimation of the setting of an original displacement. A fortiori, "ideology" could be defined as the play of ideas in the silence of technologies. Soul is the idea of the body, said Spinoza. Would not mentality be the idea of the mediaphere?

But hardly does one utter such a formulation before having a mind to retract it, as if the phantom of a kind of "organic totality" in the Hegelian style were paying us a visit. Let us conceive it rather as a space of dispersion, without reduction to the homogeneous. The temptation needs resisting to draw together all the planes of this techno-historical category around a unique center, as happens with the "spirit of the age" or "mind of a people"—the Zeitgeist and Volksgeist of the philosopher from Jena. Here the unitotality would be reflected not in a spiritual principle, but in an internal material principle. The risk would be, in sum, substituting for the Hegelian identity of meaning and life the identity of technology and mind as pure self-consciousness of the technological world. Such an inmanence of right into fact would be the bearer of a technodicy, a profane and profanatory theodicy telling us that, being what everything is, technology is always right. It would be Reason, with no external standpoint from which to judge it. The history of technological development would then become the world's tribunal. We would answer this by noting there is no conceptual or moral dramaturgy, no majestic tableau of humanity on the march to its glory, nor even any dialectical principle busy at work in the succession of mediapheres. It is impossible to make technological history enact the role of philosophical history, and to presuppose that "technology governs the world" as "Reason governs the world." For the Hegelian Reason knows where it is going, and cannot get lost. It
leads to its realization in Absolute Spirit, disconnected from any external tie, in the autonomous plenitude of a perfectly finished freedom. Does it need recalling that scientific-technological progress is not the progressive epiphany of Liberty? It is no more the bearer of something better than of something worse: of the order of a fact, it is foreign to the order of value.

We might, it is true, have drawn other items from other tool boxes; borrowed, for example, from sociology the notion of field, because “in the field there are struggles and thus history” (Bourdieu). What can be likened to a biosphere of mind or ideality could actually mask the interplay of conflicts and competitions, shrink the margins of initiative in which those who direct symbols, as well as their personal responsibility and the political coefficient of the operations, processing, and transactions. Why not opt for the word “system,” with all it implies of self-organizing and self-regulation? Or “structure,” which postulates as well the immanence of a self-developing process? Instead it would seem that, contrary to all that is implicit in a structure, a mediasphere has no transhistorical essence, evolving with and as the technological sequence. Differing equally from a system, it cannot be fully isolated from its predecessors: there is no (or less and less) pure mediasphere, only one interwoven with preceding ones. And unlike the field, it would be sympathetic but unrealistic, so we believe, to assume that “its structure is defined by the state of the relations of force between the players” (Bourdieu). Though there be some “play” or freedom of movement across neutral space in a mediasphere too, and thus, quite fortunately, fields of opposing forces, “sphere” and “fields” are not exclusive, but rather the first englobes the second. It suggests the interdependence of elements and dependence by inclusion. On the one hand we are subjugated to a mediasphere (and not to a field) by the fact alone of being within it, subjugated to a system of constraints existing “independently of consciousnesses and individual wills.” A sphere has a strong autonomy. On the other hand, we are bound by it to globalize our perception by re integrating a given assemblage of tools and machinery [appareillage] into a cohesive “landscape.” This coherence avoids the problem of having to atomize the techno-epistemic complex into loose units, by isolating them at once from their complements and their context of usage. Within the graphosphere at its zenith, the book is inseparable from public instruction, the latter from the public library, the public library from the daily press, etc.: these interdependencies speak to the new-found autonomy of the phenomenon of written materials (altogether different from isolated “graffiti” or the inscribed dedication). The “sphere” extends the visible system of the medium to the invisible macrosystem that gives it meaning. We see the microwave oven but not the immense grid of electric power it is plugged into. We see the automobile but not the highway system, gasoline storage facilities, refineries, petroleum tankers, no more than we see the factories and research installations upstream and all the maintenance and safety equipment downstream. The wide-bodied jet hides from view the planetary spider’s web of the international civil aviation organization, of which it is but one strictly tele guided element. To speak of the videosphere is to be reminded that the screen of the television receiving signals is the head of a pin buried in one home out of millions, or a homing device, part of a huge organization without real organizers—of a character at once social, economic, technological, scientific, political—much more, in any event, than a network of corporate controlled production and programming of electronic images.

Just as we cannot perceive—or perceive badly—that which makes perception possible, we hardly discern spontaneously the structure of bones from which depends an era’s symbolic flesh, hidden beneath the finish of its literary, aesthetic, or legal monuments.

When we read the missives of Voltaire, or of Madame de Sévigné, do we think about the services for delivering correspondence and messages they suppose? Namely: 1) a strong central power, capable of maintaining a network of roads, postal relay stations, an organization of paid permanent employees, and 2) horses to ride, thus stud farms to produce them, and thus, in the end, a military calvary. This bucolic, pacific and so widely scattered literature required armed forces and a centralized State.

When as literary critics we study the nineteenth century novel or feuilleton, how often do we think about the Stanhope press,
the penny newspaper, the national network of schooling, and the railroads that all supported the demand for this literary form? When as historians of ideas we examine the import of socialist doctrines, how often do we think about lead typography or about the typographical milieu where these doctrines saw the light of day? Do we put socialism and Linotype printing into relation—two phenomena, after all, the duration of whose lives coincided chronologically?

The notion of a “sphere” has some serious drawbacks, but also a certain virtue of demystification. We fetishize objects isolated against their background, visible to the naked eye; networks are less easily turned into myth. Competitions and shows are held to celebrate the elegance of the automobile, but the public does not break into spontaneous rejoicing over the Highway Department. Paeans are sung over Bugattis but not tarmac. Eight-cylinder engines have been the stuff of dreams; road-menders, never.

I am acutely conscious of having exaggerated the relative autonomy of mediaspheres (and, on a smaller, more provincial scale, those of the cycles of intellectual power in France). This has been in the interest of exposition. I am not unaware that whatever clarity proffered by these dichotomies (of the written/oral type) or by these tripartitions (as in our ternary tables in the appendix) can often prove illusory. Highlighting divisions yields increased meaning or interpretive force, but to the detriment of the nuances, shadings, and finer points: it is the well-known weakness of strong oppositions. I believe, however, in the pedagogical utility of provocative schematic tabulations aiming to visualize a differential logic synchronically, even if it turns out that this black/white thinking leads historians (those killjoys when it comes to deep conceptualizing) to remind systematic spirits that societies prefer gray. A chart of oral and written traditions opposing feminine to masculine values, rural to urban, etc., will justly elicit reproach from the competent historian that there exists from as early as the eighteenth century a feminine literature (private, aristocratic, written and circulated by hand) and that urban “public” writing did not prevent production of

the private, notarial, confiscated writing of the country provinces. These irrefutable objections do not annul, in our humble opinion, the interest of bringing to the fore the great polarities of our culture, holding true for types and archetypes; and we will simply have to learn to live with it if these diverse symmetries and classifications feed others’ reservations toward mediology as a grand délire of synthesizing, in the scientific mode of the nineteenth century (see appendices).

Still more grave would be the illusion fostered by the linear order of language—the illusion of a unique and linear time in which the before and the after would parade by in succession and without ever going back. This evolutionist legacy of the past century has not held up against concrete observation of societies. And the history of the sciences itself, showing signs of fluctuation and turbulence in the rivers of knowledge, confirms the idea that time flows backward as much as ever onward. These recursive curlings, these spiralings in reverse, are as much marvels as sources of dismay in our cultural history. Mediaspheres have not succeeded one another as substitutions, but rather as complications in a perpetual game of mutual reactivation. Let us think “succession” more in terms of the staggered stages of the ziggurat than the linear suite of doorways or enfilade of trees. There is, to be sure, no zero sum game between written and oral, there being several sorts of writing and orality—primitive or ritualistic, individual or collective, brought about or not by a reading out loud, etc. Distinctions have been drawn between oralities that are primary among peoples without writing, fundamental in Antiquity, mixed or secondary in the Middle Ages (after the advent of the Holy Book), tertiary with radio and television. And the computer terminal, like the fax machine, renews the practices and prerogatives of the written word (even while diminishing its symbolic stature). Because we have been unconscious victims of the cruel objectivity of mechanically recorded memories (since no traces of recorded sound were ever conserved prior to the beginning of the century), as well as of the overvaluation of written text and the

folkloric heroization of the oral (what has redundantly been called today's "verbal words"), we simply have not placed enough emphasis on the immense sub-base of the more spontaneous manifestations of living speech [la parole vive]. There is no meaning except by means of letters and figures. With his La Raison des gestes dans l'Occident médiéval, Jean-Claude Schmitt has composed a suggestive inventory of this originary dialectic between body and mind. On the ocean of signs, human beings have continued to navigate by the aural and gestural—in the margins or hollow spaces of alphabets, so to speak, or by passing over them. Yet perhaps this newly ancillary role of the written word, proper to the logosphere and which the graphosphere had virtually forgotten, will become familiar to us once again within our videosphere's formidable resurrection of gesture, voice, and teletransmitted physical presence. For we are surely rediscovering the values of the bodily that so amply feed our growing incapacity for impersonal life (and which print culture's delegation of meaning used to keep alive).

"Orality," notes Paul Zumthor in La Lettre et la voix, "is an abstraction; voice alone is concrete." Sign effects were first voice effects. Effects of the solar plexus, stomach, whole body, as the vocal gesture engages (more than the mouth and face) a certain poise of the upper body, stamping of the feet, movement of the arms. We should like to have evoked, along with the logosphere's historians who have done so, the primal vibration of the stentor. And evoke too, along with the ethnologists of African cultures, that first principle of life that puts in movement all the powers contained in man, in order to dispel the bad and call forth the good. Not words of intimacy, the babbling near the running fountain, the murmur of hearts in unison that a Rousseauist ear would long to hear back at their origins, before the disheartening misfortunes of separation, before reparation of the first divorce by the Social Contract. Nor the lulling and intoxicated words of folklore, the stammered out remains "let fall from obscure catastrophes." But instead words of authority, sacral, seminal, inaugural words, malediction or benediction, bewitchment or prayer, that canopy our talk fests and our chit-chat. Or the speech of God, the verbal primum mobile of Genesis, of Adam in Paradise giving existence to animals and things and a person by naming them. The word of the Father inseminating the immaculate Virgin's womb without further ado or paternity suit. Sacramental, liturgical, propitiatory or commemorative words, the very breath of truth and bearers of salvation. Words by whose virtues Buddha, Pythagoras, Jesus, or Socrates (and Saussure, let us add in passing) were forever exempted from writing—and we put forever in their debt through the fading echo of their voice. Words gathered humbly, haltingly, by the ink of holy books, which are not deciphered alone but listened to in groups, in prayer, because they are believed to carry over the spirit or afflatus, the breath, of origins. The words of Saint Francis of Assisi and God's jongleurs, those with which almost all the Latin thinkers of Christianity—orators, pastos, and advocates of their order—made do; those that even today are still chanted in psalmody at night during the Byzantine holy offices of Mount Athos. Words that, somewhere between charm and charisma, rang out in the incantation of the witch doctor or exorcist spellbinding or healing their listeners; that worked in rhythm with the repetitive motions of the artisan’s hands in the clay; that were pronounced by bard, aoidos, and skald, by blind itinerant Homer and a spiritualistic Hugo. Words of the master alchemists and great secrets; but also (if we go down a floor) the word of the judge who "says the law," of the magistrates who institute it, discuss it or divulge it by petition, deposition, and sentence. The vocal act of the king who ordains or promulgates the law, the herald who proclaims the edict, or Antigone who stands up and says no. Of whoever is called to hold out their hand today and swear, whoever swears by or appeals to their own private gods or their grandmother.

To these we can add the physical act of elocution that impels a taking down or taking away under its dictation and gives dictators sway over crowds subjugated by a pacing of delivery, a tone or timbre, a texture of voice. But also those words knitted into virtually the entire life of the spirit in the Middle Ages, by the university disputatio, by commentary and oral reading (when reading meant melodic mouthing of the words to oneself alone or in a group); as well as by those words of the liberal arts, grammar and rhetoric (with taking down notes, or reportatio, becoming part of the curriculum in the course of the thirteenth century, which was greeted with the strongest suspicion). Those historians
number 1, but the expression reverses direction from 3 back to 1
in changing to a “this revives that” (the decay of the great monu-
ments of writing reviving a taste for the great monumental systems
of writing, within that zero-sum game Hugo suggests of equating
edifice with book). So too does the philologist witness word pro-
cessing on the computer stepping back over the stable identity of
the text that emerged out of the modern book to rediscover the
“joyous excess” of medieval抄写者s. 3 is always closer to 1
than to 2. In urban space, at intersections or train stations, func-
tional written text is giving way to ideograms and even pictograms
of international readability. “Transalphabetical” visual forms
answer with a strange echo to the pre-literate thought of Aztec or
prehistoric mythograms, with their resplendent and multi-dimen-
sional space. A reorientation along the line of the Flesh given new
life by our modern illiteracy of all-image-and-sound shows a
return of the “cultures of childhood” and instinctual motivating
archaisms prior to the printed word. And so techno-economic
globalization gives rise to the planet’s politico-cultural balkaniza-
tion, driving entire continents back to a pre-national, quasi-feudal
fragmentation. It is as if the principle of constancy applied
whereby whatever was lost from one hand was won back from
the other. The fixation with the image-rich land and those cen-
tripetal values attached to it (identity- and origin-myths) come
back in the fullness of the aerial and centrifugal videosphere,
within and through it. Technological uprooting from the tradi-
tional pagus (pagus being both the page of written words and the
farmer’s field) has been furthered by the computer screen and the
electronic stock exchange, and is offset by a religious and political
reterritorialization of mentalities. Technological evolution, we
have said, has nothing of the eschatological odyssey about it; but
recalling that the logosphere imagined eternal beatitude as a con-
centration of auditory joys—angelic choirs, canticles, harps,
crystalline springs and songs of birds—we can appreciate how
much the graphosphere had distanced itself from paradise, and
how close we are moving toward it. Was not Eden an idea
brought from the Near East, the dream of a closed garden as only

7 Bernard Cerquiglini, Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie (Paris:
Le Seuil, 1989).
the desert could conceive? Well beyond the conventional pictures of God's kingdom, by making out of the Word its Supreme Being, the logosphere corresponded to an "orientalization" of the Western world. And the graphosphere (which hinged archive to letter) corresponded to a counter movement of Europeanization of the non-Latin periphery, where thinking's notation by images held sway. The videosphere could see, conversely, a Far Easternization of the European, linear and alphabetical worlds. The digitization of artificial memories indeed demolished the distinction made by Peirce between icon and sign. Binary coding records ideograms as fast and as well as letters because it treats the text as an image. It brings to an end the "reproductive handicap" of East Asian figuative notations, with their thousands of ideograms so severely penalized by the requirements of printing (and by the old-style typewriter). Gutenberg had bestowed on the poor Latin alphabet, with its twenty-four signs, a serious advantage for evolving and expanding. Standardizing written form by the pixel and instant optical recognition, turning all graphic signs into equivalent visual contrasts, serves Asia more than the West. Japan, which places a premium on digitization, has as well become the best if not only producer of cameras, photocopiers, and scanners. The switching places of the planet's center and peripheries, a cruel trick of the larger historical development of things, is vouched for by the humble history of reprography.

II

A New Turn?

The method sketched here in broad strokes has hardly been embraced by a generous criticism, with some rare exceptions. I alone am responsible for the inadvertence, as much through my writings' intemperance—uselessly polemical or lyrical—as through the shortcomings of my knowledge. Then again, our present disciplinary segregations and the somewhat raw realism of the analysis have contributed more than a little. Add to this backdrop a certain undeserved or inappropriate notoriety associated with the author, and it is inevitable that rumor shall have oversimplified things. "Conversation," said Alain, "is always brought down to the level of the least intelligent." It has seen fit to register these labors under the social rubric "Information and Communication," when it has not lumped them under a self-confident semiology of communication at peace with its presuppositions. The only inconvenience in this is that we are at opposite ends of the earth from semiology and far removed from "Infocom."

1. Vast Misunderstanding

If one looks at them closely, not one of the problems raised in this study is conceivable within the received categories of "communication." This cancerous term, whose metastases are as precipitate as they are ungovernable, errs in our view not only by its undue extension to everything and anything, in its use, but

Testament. The womb comes after the child, who shapes it in his own measure. The words of the prophet are put in his mouth posthumously, all this according to the law of the precursor, “the one of whom one knows afterward that he came before.”

Contrasting Derrida’s position with that of Marie Bonaparte toward Edgar Allan Poe’s “Purloined Letter,” Eco distinguishes between interpretation, which stands by the text as a given, and utilization, when we claim to draw out of the text inferences about its author’s person. The observation of historical facts shows that the social use or the actual career of reception of a text exceeds the alternative of persons and statements. It demonstrates first of all that its users are not reduced to readers, and still less to exegetes. From a plus side, Jack the Ripper, like Gregory VII or Torquemada, were as legitimate interpreters of the New Testament as Stalin or Pol Pot were of Das Kapital, because the mediologist is under no obligation to ask himself questions about legitimacy. He acknowledges that every strategy of interpretation is subordinate to a strategy of appropriation: it is a political operation, and thus an exclusion. Property in this case is theft: letters that are useful are always “stolen.” The problem is not that of interpreting properly or badly the parable of the Good Samaritan or the analysis of labor-value, it is knowing how to make use of it to keep one’s appointment in charge of department x or advising director y. One can in extreme cases use an author without knowing him, just as one undergoes the influence of a text without having read a line of it. That is even the most frequent case. How many of those who lived in the Communist world had read Karl Marx in his textual form? Or in the medieval world, Aristotle and Saint Thomas? Or from our politically liberal world, Adam Smith or Montesquieu? How many, even today, subjects of the Freudian empire have read the works of Freud? The projected cone of a collection of utterances passes beyond the immediate space of its “addressees,” whether followers or victims. It sows its seeds indirectly, off to the side, in a “pre-recorded” and re-broadcast sort of way, through a thousand roundabout pathways. And most often its memory precedes it. Those endowed with farsightedness it reaches mediated by rumor, indeed magnified by its opacity and its exegetical escorts, as if basking in the glow of these thousand silent signs, non-verbal and unwritten—in the manner of rituals, buildings, emblems honoring the (real or supposed) author of the primordial text. To acquire such a text, look at and thumb through it: this is to come back into the exaltedly fulfilling community of those who speak in its name. Whether religious or doctrinal, the most highly valued Books of the societies of the book have this status—that possessed by the Koran of today’s Islam. The meta-text—or that collection of indications of the relation which propriety demands one maintain toward it—envelops the text and causes it to exist socially.

And so we are dealing with a turning around of the usual signposts. The semiologist relates a given text to its past, the mediologist to its future. “Have I really understood?” asks the one. “Where is this going to end up?” asks the other. The interpreter is tormented by the “what-can-one-say-about-it?” The speaker-participant, by the “what-can-one-make-of-it?” There is a characteristic semiological personality—ironical, uninvolved, non-violent, skeptical, relativistic, or of sunny disposition—whose traits alone bespeak professional competence and habitus. Semiologists are not active in politics, even when and especially when having come out of a more scientific horizon they make themselves into hermeneuts of everyday life, like Eco the chronicler and Barthes the mythologist. The psychological profile of the mediologist is perhaps less contemplative, closer to collective action. But for a wild enthusiasm for grandeur, he is a strategist manqué or suppressed politico. At the least he loved once upon a time the battlefields. Mutatis mutandis, semiological flair is distinguished from mediological instinct, like the detective from the (disarmed) prophet. In the one case one’s eye is on Sherlock Holmes, in the other on Saint Paul. These two individuals can cross paths in the street, and chat for a spell, since it takes all sorts to make a world. But they do not have, the one and the other, the same obligations. One can see that in order to be complementary, semiology and mediology do not answer to the same vital interests.

7. “Medium is Message”: A Critique’s Critique

Was McLuhan’s name too often in the newspapers for him to be taken seriously by the academy? The proper name’s transfiguration into logo, trademark and cliche (a match in acoustic space to the
Marlboro man, Chaplin’s cane or Marilyn’s flared-out skirts) did nothing to facilitate the esteem; and most of us are familiar with the superior tone, somewhere between irritation and playfully mocking, that in the right circles is elicited by this impostor-prophet, this garish and muddled showman, whose buzzwords are every man-in-the-street’s common coin—Gutenberg galaxy, “hot” and “cold” media, message and massage, etc.—and whom no hard science type grants any seriousness or epistemological dignity. Truth to tell, this pyrotechnician laid no claim to such recognition anyway: “I explain nothing,” he writes. “I explore. And logic is a term devoid of meaning when applied to an explorer.” It is a weakly coherent theory internally, but the model for an “open” body of writings recording in the tracings of their very syntax—mosaic-like, non-linear, hopping from subject to subject like a channel changer—the novel electronic grammar it takes as its object. The cathode-ray picture tube has its reasons Reason knoweth not, and McLuhan manically defies reason to give a more truthful account of it. Unverifiable sooth-sayings, undemonstrable rantings, excessive generalizations—all function, in his own terminology, “as the means of probes.” The phonetic alphabet as the source of Euclidian geometry, papyrus “creating” the Roman Empire and Muslims “causing its demise,” “film [which] replaced the novel, the newspaper and the theater all at once,” and a hundred other pearls from the same bed, would suggest a historian or sociologist of otherwise normal constitution in a state of near inebriation. This literature professor and exegete of Joyce, Pound and Eliot was neither historian nor sociologist. Apart from their sense of subtlety, these high-flying foreshortenings evoke a kind of technologically minded Malraux who would apply to the world of material systems of representation and inscription, and of signs, the same genius for the unlikely that the author of *The Psychology of Art* applied to the world of forms. All the same, beneath the oracular crust one finds that momentous nugget which sums up in five words a hundred insights of venerable authors: “the medium is the message.” What we might call the “mass mediology” of the sixties, smashed to bits by Bourdieu and Passeron in a deservedly famous article, did not too precisely further refine McLuhan’s pronouncement. The list of objections could be

and has been lengthened indefinitely: confusing technology itself with its usage makes of the media an abstract, undifferentiated force and produces its mirror image in an imaginary “public” for mass consumption; the magical naivety of supposed causalities turns the media into a catch-all and contagious “mana”; apocalyptic millenarianism invents the figure of a *homo mass-mediaticus* without ties to historical and social context, and so on. But as there can be sterile subtleties so can there be, as Descartes said, “fecund nonsense”—the McLuhanesque formulation being among that company. Mediology, which did not invent the equation and for good reason, seeks merely to drive it into its proper corner by giving it a content at once reasonable and radical. To conceive things at their extremes by expounding arguments pushed to the limit, following the Machiavellian recommendation, does not always preclude exact thinking.

Let us admit straightforwardly that the memorable phrase is not impervious to analysis. Umberto Eco, who does not however detest baroque art, was at no great pains to show in his *Cogito interruptus* of 1967 how McLuhan mixes together under the same label of *medium* the *channel* or material vehicle of information, the *code* or internal structure of a language, and the *message* or content of a concrete act of communication. Clearly our Canadian professor was unfamiliar with Saussure (and no less with Seignobos). Though it may also be that Thomas Aquinas’ close reader Eco pays no heed to the complex materialities of the medium.9 Whereupon arises this unfortunate symmetry: against the *medium minus code and message* of the McLuhanites, the semioticians set up *codes minus medium and milieu*. This was the way the founder of modern linguistics had wanted it, seeing no meaningful difference between a written and oral transmission (though in his theory subordinating written to oral): “Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first.”10 “A pure social object that is indifferent to the matter or materiality of the signals

---


the long history of material operations and socio-technical systems, each of whose individual communicants is the end result (accounting for the point at which there is an “author,” and isolated “reader,” etc.). 2) It abstracts from the long history of cultural operations that determine and underlie acts assumed to be simple (the forms and modes of reading, looking, writing, gathering and retrieving, etc.). 3) It abstracts from the long history of political operations that have finally made possible the community of a code (through the fostering and management of a national language by means of a centralized power, promoting literacy, legislatively creating archives and other public stores, etc.).

The answer to the question “what is an author?” cannot afford to disdain the material form of the book (its size, binding, frontispiece, publisher’s and printer’s logo and colophon, etc.) and its legal fallout. So too with the “what is a text?” question: impossible to reckon as originary and natural the text’s homogeneity, its stability, its conformity—later properties of the form writing took, and which appeared and became standard with industrial modernity. The idea of the author supposes that of the work as a unity of reference, and this latter unity assumes the further identifiable unity of the book as object. These are two assumptions that are unknown in the logosphere: the thirteenth-century peciae recited medleys, often without any author’s name attached to them, and in the same collection they could alternate excerpts from diverse genres and authors, and sometimes in different languages. In France, we are told one must wait until the year 1400 to find, with the works of Guillaume de Machaut, a fully homogeneous text, one with clearly identified title and author.\textsuperscript{11} In short, “author” and “text” are results and not givens. There is no “author” in the lay sense without a certain material culture of the book. And no autonomy of the “text” without all the variations of types and sizes of printed copies, without the development of a method for biblical commentary and inter-glossing by exegetes, without that long process of the separation of meaning from the first systems of material inscription of signs. It is in fact a process of abstraction whose apotheosis has unquestionably been marked by literary semiotics.

A choice must be made to emphasize code or codex, the

language system or its material embodiment, perhaps one will say. But that's exactly what one had best avoid doing by carefully examining watersheds and precise turning points. What good is it to hock one fetishism for another—structure for material implementation? The requisite formalizing of the code into a "pure system of internal relations" led semiology to posit its autonomy in order to better standardize its application. Now, for one thing the existence of a code is not a condition necessary for an act of communication, as we see plainly with the example of painted or engraved pictures and all those non-verbal indices that can accompany a verbal communication itself (sign language and facial expressions, gestures, intonation, etc. make meanings): the code is thus not everything. And the sign's becoming act (its operativity) is, furthermore, conditioned by how it becomes a trace of memory, or its material methods of inscription: the code does not therefore hold a monopoly on meaning.

8. The Force of Forms

Some have managed to present the semiotic turn as a transition from the what to the how. We should not make of the mediological turn simply a return to the what as the material condition of the how. It would be to assume that the building obeys only the dictates of the stone, and that "lapidary" style ordinarily hides raw materials. This overtilting of the balance would be a bit naive. It is true that historians of the forms of writing scarcely separate any longer systems of notation from a physics of their material base. The clay "guides" cuneiform through the angle of the tracing tool used (it is difficult to impress curves with a chisel, punch or stylus bevelled into a burin). Papyrus documents, whose material base is vegetal, compensate for this by making possible the sharpened reed stylus, thereby favoring simplified and minimal systems of symbols and characters, notably non-capitalization. Without our rehearsing the transitions from stone to clay to papyrus to parchment to paper to screen, each reader can imagine for himself how a Latin maxim carved on the stone monument in a public place for collective reading in Rome will not call forth the same interpretation as the identical sentence in the course of a letter of Cicero's. Likewise, the meaning of a text is not to be found solely in its wording on the page. If "form is meaning" (in the bibliographer McKenzie's formulation), this means that the material is no matter of indifference. The simple choice of character, the size, the layout, the word-spacing, the paper quality, all have their own effective meanings, visual and tactile. And these forms of writing or printed pages preempt the social classification of what presents itself for reading (and thus how the reader will receive it). The contemporary researcher who calls up over great distances a "document" on-screen—dematerialized by its digitized transmission, disconnected from its first medium of manuscript and printed form, cut off from its original size and context—is extremely likely to decode it in an anachronistic way. We simply are not liable to apply the same exegesis to an article placed on page thirteen of the newspaper and the same article distributed over five columns on the front page; nor to a seventeenth-century text depending on its printing in a quarto or duodecimo edition. A poem will not resonate the same aesthetically when printed with or without its accompanying margins and blank spaces. The identical photograph printed on a quarter page of the tabloid and blown up into a four-by-three meter poster becomes two distinct pictures. Will the electronic libraries of the future invent a new breed of researcher, the immemorializing cyber-scholar, subtracted from the materialized memories of traditional archives?

These formal aspects of layout and design are constitutive of the message itself. There is in the rigor of semiological abstraction a propensity to shoulder the immemorial partition between the world of things and the world of spirit. In its estimation, the structures it brings to light come under the head of internal analysis; the surroundings and conditions of access it observes, of external analysis. It is the very validity of the check-point between physical exteriority and semantic interiority that has been thrown into doubt. Hasn't the time arrived to draw out all the epistemological consequences of discovering that the spirit of the age is as much in its objects as in its literary works, as much in our own hands as in our heads? There is a kind of spirit and intelligence in our vacuum cleaners, our automobiles, our telephones and our toothbrushes; and materiality in our symbolic goods. This fin de siècle's Zeitgeist thrives as ubiquitously in the design of washbasins as in the displays of our bookstore
shelves. It seems, say the designers, that our bathrooms changed their soul at the beginning of the seventies (ceasing to be the somber chamber in which one shuts oneself up to perform intimate ablutions). That is, at the cultural moment when the Freudian vulgate was entering the dailies, and certain analysts and analysands undertook to cast a curious eye on the basic functions covered by the national health organizations (why after all should that be shameful any longer?). Should we conclude that our furniture designers might also have been sitting in on Lacan’s seminars?

As surroundings can have genius, so can the media of texts and representation take on spirit. That they have it more and more is evident in an industrial and post-industrial age. Here we would have to take up the carefully argued praise of textures, alloys and plastics to be found in the writings of a “materiologist” like François Dagognet. He has shown how in plastic creation “the idea germinates out of the basis of the material itself instead of imposing itself thereon” (the sculptor César is hardly one to deny that). Visual artists (who have practiced intuitively and for a long while McLuhan’s adage) generally speaking are far ahead of the others on this score; we can have confidence in these silent Pythias of mediological messages. The celebration of raw materials by contemporary plastic artists, as by the industrial arts, are in their own way evidence that materials become in themselves intelligible forms in equal measure as the intellect takes on material form (or the reverse). In the past, the material bases for inscription of signs were inert, static like a sheet of paper. And already by the nineteenth century photosensitive film provided the know-how for conserving and storing a visual trace. An electromagnetic base medium accomplished the same for sound traces. Silicon and arsenic of gallium added to these known properties powers of initiative and self-activation. 12 And the computer screen is a dynamic medium of inscription—interactive, user-friendly—that through the “electronic book” will transform our practices of reading, writing, and invention. A silicon microchip can, all told, overturn “the order of discourse.”

What holds true for written text and philologists holds a fortiori for visual representation and its semiologists. The most intricate “syntagma” treatments of the narrative poetics of the film medium would err, I think, to spare themselves and us the trouble of studying beforehand the techniques for taking, projecting and distributing or broadcasting pictures. Ranging historically from frescoes to virtual reality graphics, visual representations do not indeed lend themselves to panoramic inclusion under a uniform discourse. Would that a brilliant visual semiotics not blot out too completely the more traditional craft-industrial study of the methods of manufacturing and numerous transformations of the magic lantern, or of the various recording media—tele-cinema (bringing films to the TV screen), kinescope (TV to movie screen), VCR, 16 mm synchronous sound, mobile car video, etc. For moving pictures in particular, one would do well not to proceed from the latter stage of significant forms but to go back from signification to the manufacture and production.

Once the technological moment of the process has been boiled off, vaporized literally, one is doubtless left with a medium whose load has been lightened, a flexible and obliging medium. A “channel” transformed in this way into a simple vector for codes and distributor of messages is no longer a true modus operandi, and its users will feel free to make pass through it whatever they want (and not what the “channel” tolerates), without any particular damage or distortions. This sometimes has the effect of making the semiologist a spirited spokesman for modernity’s delights. He is the herald of good news alone, especially for those of a more literary persuasion: “No need for

concern, things will turn out alright.”13 Those who profess an interest in our practices of mediation can expect from this the ideal conformist discourse (everyone in the same boat, nothing new under the semiological sun). The medium conceived (or forgotten) as an auxiliary organ confirms the glorious and received idea (around since the dawn of philosophy) that man is his own center, the master of nature as of his tools. Ancestral hierarchies turn out to be validated in subtle ways, in values just as they are in academic course programs. The secular distinction still holds between the liberal arts, having speech for their object, and the mechanical arts, which are concerned with the material world. It is duplicated by that between the normative disciplines, which establish order in the secret grammar of signs, and the descriptive disciplines, which focus on physical or morphological phenomena—paleography, epigraphy, source studies of texts, etc. Has not the low-profile and parallel (or subsidiary) role played recently by the School of Paleography and Archival Studies (the Ecole des chartes) at the Sorbonne predisposed us to accept this separation between (humble) research in the diachronic materialities of the documented word and (noble) research in the synchrony of Codes? Though the semiotologist insists that a language does not have an author, he grudgingly perpetuates the “satellitization” of meaning around a queenly consciousness. Language may de-center meaning, but speech re-centers it on the subject of the act of utterance, a conscious and undetermined subject. Faced with this, the mediologist will not even be able to resort to those newfound potentialities that result from every Copernican-style revolution, since he neither displaces nor reverses the center of gravity of the universe of symbols (from a point closer to home to another more distant). He is content to point out that there is a plurality of different machines (and not The Machine), and that they restrict us in identifiable ways (without being sovereign or supernatural). Says the semiotologist: “Confronted with the anonymous divinity of technological Communication, our answer might be, ‘May our will be done, not thine’” (Umberto Eco). Wavering somewhere between extremes, the mediologist vis-à-vis the medium sends forth a more pedestrian prayer: “Let us look for the least objectionable conciliation possible between thy requisites and our requests.” Codes can be playfully juggled with, but not machines. And pridefulness having first been lost when the Order of Language was instituted, the enthusiasts of the signifier rediscover it in the end in their jubilant linguistic point-scoring and game-playing. They might say we are no longer like gods because we do not invent the rules of the game—but demigods, yes, nonetheless, for these rules are transparent to us and we get the better of them. Constrained to greater modesty, the mediologist will even hesitate to sign up to the idea so skillfully developed by Michel de Certeau, that “custom carries communication.” He will find it hard to celebrate with quite the same verve as this author of the Arts de faire the creativity of independent local radio stations, the lived spontaneity of instances of bricolage, and the various ways in which local resistances maintain themselves by means of officials on the take. He will no doubt follow Certeau in drawing a distinction between a “popular culture” with its impregnable rainbow patchworks, and a homogenizing “mass culture.” But he will resist seeing in the first of these cultures an assured road to salvation, or a subversion of the One by the Many. Without exactly lowering his head in deference to the technological megasystem, he is sure that the believing, knowing and acting subject finds there a powerful opponent, and that hard tech can be mollified but not domesticated. For it is not enough to exert a legalistic control over the network in order to control the tenor of the messages. An amusing translation of this claim: if we could imagine a France in which the Revolutionary Communist League, on the day following a Great Victory, were to take over the national TV network T.F.I, the program director Mr Alain Krivine would very quickly come to resemble the father and son team of the Bouygues.

The bearer of news this dismal runs little risk of overdosing on accolades and hurrahs—no matter how demoralizing some of our optimisms or bracing our pessimisms.

wrong way in the course of their humble tasks propagandizing for
the organization who, from those sidelines, posed frontally the
dynamic questions of mediation: in philosophy someone like Sorel,
in politics Gramsci, or in cultural life, and through more round-
about means, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht.

3. On a Few Hidden Precursors

It is apparent, then, that we have found our golden threads in the
outlands and hard shoulders of the major doctrines, among the
common stock of the apostles, litterateurs, strategists—men of
expedients, henchmen, practitioners. Apostle is epistle: “apos-
tolēs,” “epistola” have the same etymology. The apostle is the
“letter” of the Holy Spirit, a proxy sender of the Almighty’s mes-
gages. The apostles are better versed than their Messiahs in the
“postal services and telecommunications” of the Truth because
they are better placed for knowing that a brief epistle read by
those it is addressed to will accomplish more for the Spirit than
a Treaty or Summa kept in an armoire. This common sense may
be the least commonly shared thing there is.8

Jesus functions as the sole Mediator of salvation but Saint
Paul is the best on-the-job mediologist of Christianity. As was
Lenin for Marxism. If one understands by ideologue the pro-
ducer of a system for interpreting the real, which determines the
objectives of collective action, and by strategist the organizer of
the forces available for pursuing this action, which ensures how
it is to be conducted in the field, the strategists have so to speak
mediology as part of their very take or hold on life—as an
instinct, not just a scientific competence.

8 Above all among professional writers. I have spent time with a good number who
considered the labor of the idea a fait accompli once they had put the finishing
touches on the explanatory opuscule, the author’s Society editorial project, or the
book-that-definitively-resolves-the-question, confident in the ommne bonum est dif-
fusion sui of tradition (they position themselves rather to the Left). One recognizes
others, on the opposing shore, who are so concerned with diffusion, editing, mailing,
and marketing, that the content of the message matters little to them. On my left,
good epistle-writers without any postal workers; on my right, trusty postmen carry-
ing empty envelopes: the bringing together in real space and time of a letter and
stamped envelope falls under the heading of a real exploit.
Instinctual mediology has existed in a practical form for centuries, in suspension with a thousand authors and actors of our own history. Those who govern are more savvy about it than those who are governed, for it applies to their very survival. As far as thoughtful reflection about it is concerned, that is, a locally reflected mediology in its raw state, one can say that its traces become abundant beginning with the eighteenth century. We have already seen why: up until that time epistemology was ruled by the metaphysics of Light. It is with the Enlightenment (Lumières in the plural), with the birth of a public opinion and civil society, that the means said to be of vulgarization or more open disclosure also become worthy of being given consideration. Human souls reeling from the changes of this era and their beliefs shaken to their foundation: periods of instability or historical destabilization like this are always more propitious for the deployment and thus closer examination of symbolic tools than periods of order or consolidation. The power of words is heightened in stormy times, and a pre-revolutionary and revolutionary milieu is distinguished by a mounting conductivity of ideas. Napoleon's remark that “Three newspapers on the side of the opposition are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets” was not thinkable coming from Louis XV. In France the mediological intuition dwelled within men of power well before men of learning began to be concerned with it. And even then, it cannot be explained in the case of thinkers but first in that of professional writers (historians, essayists, critics, novelists, poets). Here, direct observation from experience has had a lead of at least two centuries over speculation.

One would have little trouble culling indications of a mediological interest out of Michelet, when he sets the written culture of the Girondins against the oral culture of the Montagnards. Nor out of Tocqueville, from whom whole chapters might be taken, like the famous one titled “How towards the middle of the eighteenth century men of letters took the lead in politics and the consequences of this new development.” But it is the jolt of recognition I received reading Augustin Cochin’s Les Sociétés de pensée et la démocratie and above all La Révolution et la libre-pensée (1924) which convinced me that an approach we might call cynical, or pragmatic toward social ideas, could be fruitful, and that it would be interesting to systematize it well beyond the historical juncture of the Jacobin episode. By reducing revolutionary ideas to their instrumental function Cochin wants to see in them nothing more than simple support structures for groupings of individuals by their affinities, against nature and without precedent (clubs, societies, spheres of influence, etc.). Capturing thought or philosophy in the snares of its own means of transmission, he discovers that what seems to be the truth of doctrine is found in its method of socialization and not its utterances. Diachronic examination of the logistical succession of steps of transmitting the message replaces the synchronic investigation of the order of reasons (the system of notions belonging to Jacobin ideology). Beneath the reductive method of the counter-revolutionary polemicist, it seems to me that we can detect the outlines of an intellectual revolution capable of transforming one day “the history of ideologies” into an annex of the history of techniques of organization. Forty years before “the medium is the message,” someone claimed that “the method engenders the doctrine” and was not understood.

It is in the eighteenth century that there comes into being a breed of authors who are not yet journalists but are forced to busy themselves with what it means to make a book, to compose it, get it into print, sell it, live from it. There are men of letters who head toward (whether or not from a directly interested business angle) the literal manufacture of the letter—the papermaking industry, foundry casting and the print trade—who are concerned as professionals with the business of the book trade, with literary property and copyright infringement or the pirating of copies. There are writers for whom the written text as an objective thing is worthy of inquiry as both an object of curiosity and something at stake in relations of power. And there are professional publicists paid to know all too well that in matters of opinion just publishing is itself not the same as promulgating. This is why I cited Diderot in Teachers, Writers, Celebrities as mediology's great-uncle, and Balzac as its founding father. The genealogy exaggerates of course the literary aspect of mediations, but the two of them explored the three sides—political, technological,
and cultural—of the mediological triangle. The essential correlation of the three poles did not escape the notice of these honorable ancestors: powers of opinion over governments, networks of circulation of the sign, and the typology of the literary milieu.

But it was the poets who pushed furthest the incursion. With poets it is as if one were dealing with less of the arbitrary and more of the pertinent; as if, being more attentive to the manners and matters of the act of saying (be it in sonorous vocality or graphic form), they had known before all the others (and dispersed as they are from the prejudices of meaning) how to disclose, to themselves and to us, the sensoriness of signs and the variations of this sensoriness. Too bad for us if this ascendancy detracts from the scientific credit—and if it came about that a poetics degraded into a doctrine came in for denunciation. We might think of Victor Hugo, whose “This will Destroy That, the Book will Destroy the Building” is not of course a compendium of mediology but a kind of obligatory “introit” preceding the mass that virtually introduces the concepts later labeled milieu and medium. Or of Baudelaire, who is at once alarmed and fascinated by the eruption of Niepce’s invention in the midst of Gutenberg’s. Or of Apollinaire, who measures by instinct the breaks with the past brought on by radio and film. And Breton, along with the Dadaists before him, who pick up on photography and give it a new twist, taking the medium in all the best and worst directions. I would also readily include in this list a great prose poet, eccentric and inspired: McLuhan, with whom I would associate (as far as images are concerned) that other poet of visual thinking, Serge Daney.

McLuhan is no theoretician or even a reasoner. He is on the model of Blake, a specialist and perhaps heir of Joyce and John Donne, bursting with penetrating and incoherent intuitions, a popular vates badly served by his theoretical speculation but carried along nevertheless, mediating, speaking, by his publicitarian aggressiveness. From the poetic side he has the virtue of attending to ambient conditions and all the variants of popular culture that are ordinarily scorned by professors. He proceeds by means of collages, short-circuits, and abrupt changes of subject, using ideas badly assimilated (but his own strange writings were no less so to the author himself). His guiding idea that form is content and medium message—is this not a poet’s idea, or rather itself the form taken by the poetic work we can say he applied to the cultural forms of his time? Structuralism did not after all invent the notion of “structure”: McLuhan put it to the test only to extend much further its rigors. Mediology did not invent “medium is message,” to which it prefers, besides, the deeper less known aphorism of Cochin (“method engenders doctrine”). It prefers only to make these formulations exemplary of something that can be investigated systematically and align them with the more serious consistencies of a theory. Hence a certain ambivalence toward this illuminating visionary-crank, this improbable monomaniac in the same degree superficial and powerful. With McLuhan one must tirelessly peel away the husk of manic inspiration and carefully validate the kernel of truth.

Paul Valéry, that materialist of the abstract, was a kind of discrete and rigorous McLuhan. His subtlety and sense of the exact protected him from popularity. His operating definition of Mind as “power of transformation,” and the intuition (on which he meditated for countless hours) that machines modify the conditions and nature of thought, make of this poet-philosopher one of the principal pioneers. Even if the mediologic reputation he deserves is not something widely recognized, we owe as much if not more to this agnostic as to the famed Catholic of Toronto. Another name stands out by its imposing presence: that of Walter Benjamin, an omnipresent adoptive godfather of mediology, with his dual allegiance to mysticism and technology (yet refraining intelligently from taking one for the other). “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) is one of our classics. Just as is, on the philosophical plane, Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology, which offers a theoretical matrix for any applied mediology. As to the role played throughout the entire course of this crystallization by Michel Serres, the author of Hermes and La Légende des Anges, we concede that his presence on the examining committee does not facilitate here the exegesis.

The bricoleur, says Lévi-Strauss, works with signs and the engineer with concepts. The objection will be raised that one does not become an engineer by making do with and piecing together implements and equipment already to be found on board.
Collecting fragments from writings that prefigured mediological inquiry, the scattered materials of construction, is one thing; actually making a machine work according to plan is another. Mediology may still be a confederation of straggly residues, a precarious coalition of heterogeneous disciplines, and thus only an art of accommodating remainders or a meticulous bricolage to the second power. The threshold of a genuine task of engineering remains before it. At least, the few works I have just cited make possible, along with others, an opening toward the unity of the concept, above and beyond a simple note-taking survey of some singled-out experimentations. I well suspect that if the abstract concept aims at being perfectly transparent to the reality it designates, it will never have (because of its diaphanous character) “the thickness of humanity” and the warmth of lived experience proper to full-blown empiricism (and which gives in return to the labors of hommes de lettres an incomparably “truer” charm). By these lights a system of notions will always be outdone by the bric-à-brac of “things seen.”

4. One Path Like Any Other

“Every discourse on method,” said Bachelard, “is a discourse of circumstance.” Allow me then, honoring this truth, to recall what my own circumstances were like. For there was after all the simple order of an individual existence on the near side of these bookish discoveries made in such disorder. I was initiated into my studies of mediology unbeknownst to me, thrust into adulthood sometime during the sixties. The canonical question of the history of ideas—“do books make revolutions?”—is not only a question for the seminar room. For some people this was a question lived out over a long course—about ten years in my case. The majority of my fellow Normaliens (philosophers and militants) had summoned the wisdom to undertake head-on, but along distinct parallel tracks, revolutionary militancy and intellectual labor. I made the (philosophical) mistake of looking for ways to make the two converge, which led me toward leaving my country and philosophia perennis to try to make these opposites meet: saying and doing. The attempt was to bring about in Latin America a certain kind of collective doing, an anonymous one emerging from a certain kind of personal and authored saying (political articles and booklets). It was the work of “agitprop” in a sense. With the publicity given Revolution in the Revolution? which was a question-marked, portable and succinct manifesto that theorized in 1966 the Cuban Revolution and called upon Latin Americans to make other revolutions on the same model, I had reluctantly become the apostle of an ephemeral and localized -ism: focismo or the theory of the guerilla fire-pockets of rebellion. People have said that it was responsible for many deaths on Latin American soil. I am not sure about the causal link, but can vouch for occurrences of massacre as a direct and indirect witness. This opuscle was distributed outside the continent, and translated into many languages, enough to “act” or produce influence in Turkey, Palestine, and Thailand and elsewhere, as I discovered twenty years later while travelling in these countries and happening upon former political prisoners who would say to me “Hello, it was your book that landed me in prison.” Those who had to stay there would never have occasion to tell me this. It does present a moral problem of responsibility, and a problem concerning the nature of the justice system as well, since the codes that were in force prescribed prison without parole for the “intellectual authors” of “crimes.” It was at all events a problem that, once the first shocks and bumps in the road had been absorbed, I believed I could add, by way of a modest contribution or brief illustration, to the common store of studies led by the historian of long chronology and wide scope: studies with titles like The Origins of Contemporary France (Taine) or The Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution (Mornet). And what of the question of causal sequence from the Enlightenment to 1789? It is still being debated;

*Debray had espoused this strategy as a devotee of Ernesto (Che) Guevara (1928–1967), the Argentinian medical student who became the principal architect of domestic and foreign policy in revolutionary Cuba following the victory of Castro's Rebel Army in 1959. Guevara had developed a theory of revolution, based on the Cuban experience, whose revised Leninist tenets he exerted other Latin-American revolutionaries to follow by taking up arms and forming roving bands of rural guerillas. The theory was known as foquismo from the guerilla group, the foco. Debray's book was translated into English as Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America, tr. Bobbye Ortiz (New York: Grove Press, 1967; repr. Greenwood Press, 1980). [Trs.]
Roger Chartier has recently revived it with his *Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*. I do not know where the minute sequence of “scholarly opuscule to militant military school” can occupy in the unfolding of this vaster history. But conscience without science being the soul’s ruination, I at least told myself then, in consulting the glorious preceding events, that my minor misfortunes might be useful for something.

It was no real abandonment of the ground I was used to when, a few years later and in a French parliamentarian and legal context, I again took up the role of publicist, but still at the meeting point of the theoretical and practical spheres. Preaching in France for the political good cause, which was for me in the seventies something called the “Union of the Left”; composing a *Letter to French Communists*; apostatically getting involved in innumerable “interventions” both oral and written in order to bring about more quickly the conversions of peoples’ sympathies—this modest social-democratic proselytism was in the end no less that of a mediator of utopias, a courier of programs. In short, it was the standard practice of the very model or carbon copy of a French intellectual confronted with an ideological message in the process of becoming a material force (or a weakness, which is the same operation assessed from the other direction). Here again it was not professionally uninteresting to follow the course of a discourse, the ground it had covered from its beginning to its falling-off point; and whether the particular issue might have been left-wing or right-wing is not of importance to the protocol of experience. This was what might be concluded from my experiment of participating, for example, in drawing up a *Charter of Freedoms* in 1978 under the aegis of Robert Badinter, and three years after that, in turning it into a piece of legislation, or into something resembling action (it is hard to say). The mysterious transition from saying to doing can be subjected to a banal, tried-and-true, as well as trying, test applicable to those who craft messages of collective interest: the translation of the space of their private apartments into that of state-owned historic buildings, parallel with the internal transformation of the culture of opposition into a culture of government. Being an adviser to princes betrays perhaps the vocation of philosophy—something that has been disputed since Plato—but surely not the cause of mediology. To produce discourses in places where decisions are made, a workaholic or an acolyte’s job, is not the worst way to study the relations unifying the government of men with the administration of signs. Or perhaps what should have been said in this instance, the government of signs and administration of men.

What is generally called “being in power” is covered with opprobrium, though power is but a site of maximal powerlessness. This cannot hide from us the fact that it is also one among various trials for truth, the *experimentum crucis* of men of letters, the place where one is asked to pay in hard cash. It is also a site of strong news about the external world, which lowers (without canceling of course) the “ideological” coefficient of the contents. The pen pusher or scribe anxious to lessen the gap between what he can have learned about the state of the world and his own compatriots’ state of mind conducts a *second* mediological experiment: one measuring a milieu’s resistances of a quasi-physical nature vis-à-vis ideas that contradict his beliefs. Informed as I was at that time of strategic and diplomatic questions (by notes, telegrams, reports and travels), I was able to assess the relations of force between blocs, civilizations and countries and measure the full weight of symbolic panoplies, images, sounds, and myths—factors that are more and more decisive and always underestimated. I noted for example in 1984, having returned from Central Europe, that “there is more power in rock music, videos, blue jeans, fast food, information networks, and television satellites than in the whole Red Army.” However the things I was able to publish on these subjects (*La Puissance et les rêves, Les Empires contre l’Europe, Tous Azimuts*) had just about zero resonance. I sought to explain in 1985, making use of supporting facts and statistics and contrary to the prevailing opinion at that time that the free world was encircled and infiltrated by the totalitarian menace, “that the democracies are doing increasingly well while the Soviet Union and its empire are a power in decline” (fourth quotation on the cover jacket of *Les Empires contre l’Europe*). But I was able to notice that my “message was not getting across,” and that the most appreciated authors of the moment whom everyone was reading, quoting, and reviewing were those who were taking as their themes “the end of the democracies,” “the Finland syndrome,” “the immutable nature
of the U.S.S.R. or the petrification of the societies of the East into a “statocracy.” I could well extrapolate the same comparative game to other subjects connected with the international relations I was able to follow quite closely during a decade. It would confirm this hackneyed but instructive observation: the person who knows how to hang on to their reason cuts the figure of an oddball; the person who feeds collective delirium passes for being reasonable.

So the skepticism would be fooling itself that holds political judgments undecidable. There exists a simple and verifiable touchstone—aptitude for anticipating the event. Rereading magazines, newspapers and books ten years after their publication should be enough for deciding in these matters between the real and the unreal, for telling a certain historical clairvoyance from a simple ecological redundancy. It is especially in this sense that I became cognizant of the age-old dilemma of the reader or writer of public epistles to modern audiences: whenever his letters get the reality of things wrong by echoing all the ambient expectations, they have every likelihood of, in fact, reaching their addressees. When they get things right, that is to say, are displeasing, they will probably not even be read. Compare the social pulse-taking of Marx and August Comte—or the way the twentieth century has selected from between their two bodies of writings, identifying valid information in the one and rejecting the other as background noise. They offer another illustration of this curious phenomenon on the higher plane of great world visions. The mediologist with credentials for specialized study of qualitative phenomena may be a cynic, but not to the point of thinking that an idea, a system, a doctrine which does not “work” is on this account uninteresting or false (the sociologist Comte proved to have a prophetic pertinence, far superior to Marx). The proof would be a cutting edge in reverse: an idea that has impact on its environment over the short or medium run is quite probably a false idea. The antipathy of collectives to truth is no new discovery, but it does displace attention in a useful way from the message onto the milieu as a kind of “regional mail facility” of last resort. The term “influence” undoubtedly has the flaw of including within its figural texture what needs to be explained, but the man without influence is a mediological indicator of even more utility than the “man of influence.” And the flop says as much about conditions of reception as the blockbuster. Having experienced these two conditions in succession is an almost scientific privilege. Given that no society is demystifiable (an effect of the theorem of incompleteness), it is normal that the mystifier should come across as more credible than the demystifier. But ample proof having been produced to show that “society runs on ideology like the car on gas” (Althusser), the moment comes when one is persuaded that being satisfied to pump gas has its limits, and that it’s time to go about learning mechanics and opening up the hood to take a look at how the motor of belief really runs. The pump attendant is the engagé intellectual, the publicist always on the go, or the professional conference-frequenter and talker. The apprentice mechanic does not learn rational mechanical principles. To pass from activism to a possible pragmatics involves adopting a certain distance or disengagement. But the public speaking and other day-to-day interventions have fostered the long-term research on the phenomenon of intervening itself.

“Method,” said Marcel Granet, “is the road once one has already traveled down it.” May this felicitous formulation and avowal of modesty excuse the thesis defender for these few personal off-key notes—in an otherwise harmonious concert of objective reasons?
## Mediological Tables

**Excerpt from Cours de médiologie générale**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRATEGIC MILIEU (PROJECTED POWER)</th>
<th>WRITING (LOGOSPHERE)</th>
<th>PRINTED TEXT (GRAPHOSPHERE)</th>
<th>AUDIOVISUAL (VEIDESPHERE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE EARTH</td>
<td>THE ONE (City, Empire, Kingdom) absolutism</td>
<td>EVERYONE (Nation, People, State) nationalism, totalitarianism</td>
<td>EACH ONE (population, society, world) individualism and anomie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GROUP IDEAL (AND POLITICS)</td>
<td>CIRCLE (Eternal repetition) Archeocentric</td>
<td>LINNE (history, Progress) FUTUROCENTRIC</td>
<td>POINT (news, event) EGOCENTRIC: cult of the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHAPE OF TIME (AND ITS VECTOR)</td>
<td>THE ELDER</td>
<td>THE ADULT</td>
<td>THE YOUNG PERSON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANONICAL PHASE OF LIFE SPAN</td>
<td>MYTHOS (mysteries, dogmas, epics)</td>
<td>LOGOS (utopias, systems, programs)</td>
<td>IMAGO (emotions and fantasies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARADIGMATIC ATTRACTION</td>
<td>RELIGIONS (theology)</td>
<td>SYSTEMS (ideologies)</td>
<td>MODELS (iconology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYMBOLIC ORGANON</td>
<td>CHURCH (prophets, clerics) Sacrament: DOGMA</td>
<td>INTELLIGENTIA secular (professors, doctors) Sacrament: KNOWLEDGE</td>
<td>MEDIAS (broadcasters and producers) Sacrament: INFORMATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPIRITUAL CLASS (CONTROLS SOCIAL SACRED)</td>
<td>REFERENCE OF LEGITIMACY (we must, it is sacred)</td>
<td>THE IDEAL (we must, it is true)</td>
<td>THE PERFORMER (we must, for it works)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGULAR MEANS OF INFLUENCE</td>
<td>MOTIVATOR OF OBEDIENCE (fanaticism)</td>
<td>LAW (dogmatism)</td>
<td>OPINION (relativism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONTROL OF INFORMATION</td>
<td>PREACHING</td>
<td>PUBLICATION</td>
<td>VISIBILITY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATUS OF INDIVIDUAL</td>
<td>SUBJECT (to command)</td>
<td>CITIZEN (to convince)</td>
<td>CONSUMER (to seduce)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MYTH OF IDENTIFICATION</td>
<td>THE SAINT</td>
<td>THE HERO</td>
<td>THE STAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOTTTO OF PERSONAL AUTHORITY</td>
<td>“GOD TOLD IT TO ME” (true like words from the Gospel)</td>
<td>“I READ IT IN A BOOK” (true like a printed word)</td>
<td>“I SAW IT ON TV” (true like a live broadcast)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGIME OF SYMBOLIC AUTHORITY</td>
<td>THE INVISIBLE (Origin) or the unverifiable</td>
<td>THE READABLE (Foundation) or true logic</td>
<td>THE VISIBLE (Event) or the plausible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNIOT OF SOCIAL DIRECTION</td>
<td>THE SYMBOLIC ONE: the King (dyastic principle)</td>
<td>THE THEORECAL ONE: the Head (ideological principle)</td>
<td>THE ARITHMETICAL ONE: the Leader (statistical principle, poles, rating, audience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTER OF SUBJECTIVE GRAVITY</td>
<td>THE SOUL (Anima)</td>
<td>CONSCIOUSNESS (Animus)</td>
<td>THE BODY (Sensorium)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# MEDIOLOGICAL TABLES

## LOGOSPHERE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IDEAL TYPE</th>
<th>FEUDAL MONARCHY (PRE-RENAISSANCE)</th>
<th>ABSOLUTE MONARCHY (1650-1789)</th>
<th>REPUBLIC (1900)</th>
<th>DEMOCRACY (2000)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE SYMBOLOGICAL KING (Age of miracles)</td>
<td>MAGICIAN KING (Age of miracles)</td>
<td>STAGECRAFTING KING (Age of marvels)</td>
<td>MECHANICAL &quot;KING&quot; (Age of motors)</td>
<td>TECHNOLOGIC &quot;KING&quot; (Age of montage)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE SUBJECT (Metapolitics) assembly: the Kingdom</td>
<td>THE SUBJECT (Metapolitics) assembly: the Kingdom</td>
<td>THE CITIZEN (Politics) assembly: the Nation</td>
<td>UTOPIAN OR COMMEMORATIVE (Festival of Reason, July 14)</td>
<td>MEDIATIC OR RECREATIVE (Festival of music)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HERALDIC (Arms, emblems, motto) shield with fleur-de-lis</td>
<td>ICONOGRAPHIC (gallery of faces) the King's portrait</td>
<td>ALLEGORICAL (personification of ideas) Marianne</td>
<td>UTOPIAN OR COMMEMORATIVE (Festival of Reason, July 14)</td>
<td>MEDIATIC OR RECREATIVE (Festival of music)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACRITUDE (direct link with Christ: sacred king)</td>
<td>MAJESTY (indirect link with Reason and Progress)</td>
<td>GLORY (indirect link with Reason and Progress)</td>
<td>AURA (direct link with population)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## GRAPHSOPHERE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IDEAL SITE OF EXALTATION</th>
<th>ALTAR (Church)</th>
<th>THE SCENE (Theater)</th>
<th>LECTURER'S PLATFORM (School)</th>
<th>SCREEN (TV)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

## VIDEOSOPHERE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RITUAL OF PRESENTATION</th>
<th>LITURGY (on one's knees)</th>
<th>THE CEREMONIAL (to amaze)</th>
<th>DISCOURSE (to convince)</th>
<th>THE TV SHOW (to seduce)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RELIGIOUS (processions, canicles)</td>
<td>ARISTOCRATICAL OR MYTHOLOGICAL (court festival: opera, ball, concert)</td>
<td>UTOPIAN OR COMMEMORATIVE (Festival of Reason, July 14)</td>
<td>MEDIATIC OR RECREATIVE (Festival of music)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## EXCERPT FROM A HISTORY OF THE WESTERN EYE

| PRINCIPLE OF ITS EFFICACY (OR RELATION TO BEING) | PRESENCE (transcendent) | REPRESENTATION (illusory) | SIMULATION (numerical) | |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------| |
| MODE OF EXISTENCE | LIVING | PHYSICAL | VIRTUAL | |
| CRUCIAL REFERENT (SOURCE OF AUTHORITY) | THE SUPERNATURAL (God) | THE REAL (Nature) | THE PERFORMER (The Machine) | |
| SOURCE OF LIGHT | SPIRITUAL (from within) | SOLAR (from without) | ELECTRIC (from within) | |
| PURPOSE AND EXPECTATION | PROTECTION (& salvation) | DELETION (& prestige) | INFORMATION (& gameplay) | |
| HISTORICAL CONTEXT | FROM MAGICAL TO RELIGIOUS (Cyclical Time) | FROM THE RELIGIOUS TO THE HISTORICAL (Linear Time) | FROM THE HISTORICAL TO THE TECHNICAL (Punctual Time) | |
| DEONTOLOGY | EXTERNAL (theological & political organization) | INTERNAL (autonomous administration) | AMBIENT (Techno-economic management) | |
| IDEAL & NORM OF WORK | "I CELEBRATE" (a force) Modeled on Scripture (Canon) | "I CREATE" (a work) Modeled on antiquity (Model) | "I PRODUCE" (an event) Modeled on the Ego (Fashion) | |
| TEMPORAL HORIZON (& MEDIUM) | ETERNITY (repetition) Hardness (stone, wood) | IMMORTALITY (tradition) Softness (canvas) | THE PRESENT (innovation) Immateriality (screen) | |
| MODE OF ATTRIBUTION | COLLECTIVE & ANONYMOUS (from sorcerer to artisan) | INDIVIDUAL & SIGNATURE (from artist to genius) | SPECTACULAR & LABEL, LOGO BRAND NAME (from entrepreneur to enterprise) | |
| ORGANIZATION OF LABOR | FROM CLERGY TO GUILD | FROM ACADEMY TO SCHOOL | FROM NETWORK TO PROFESSION | |
| OBJECT OF WORSHIP | THE SAINT (I protect you) | BEAUTY (I am pleasing) | NOVELTY (I surprise you) | |
| GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE | 1) CURIAL = The Emperor 2) ECCLESIASTICAL = Monasteries & Cathedrals 3) SEIGNORIAL = The Palace | 1) MONARCHICAL = The Academy (1500-1750) 2) BOURGEOISÉ = Salon + Criticism + Gallery (to 1968) | MEDIA/MUSEUM/MARKET (for plastic arts) PUBLICITY (audiovisual) | |
| CONTINENT OF ORIGIN & CITY OF TRANSMISSION | ASIA-BYZANTIUM (between antiquity and Christianity) | EUROPE-FLORENCE (between Christianity and modernity) | AMERICA-NEW YORK (between modern and postmodern) | |
| MODE OF ACCUMULATION | PUBLIC: The treasury | INDIVIDUAL: The collection | PRIVATE/PUBLIC: Reproduction | |
| AURA | CHARISMATIC (animal) | PATHETIC (animus) | LUDIC (animation) | |
| PATHOLOGICAL TENDENCY | PARANOIA | OBSESSION | SCHizophrenIA | |
| AIM OF THE GAZE | ACROSS THE IMAGE | MORE THAN THE IMAGE | ONLY THE IMAGE | |
| MUTUAL RELATIONS | INTOLERANCE (Religious) | RIVALRY (Personal) | COMPETITION (Economic) | |
## Word vs. Letter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INSTITUTIONS AND POWERS OF THE WORD</th>
<th>INSTITUTIONS AND POWERS OF THE LETTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ORAL TRADITION</strong></td>
<td><strong>WRITTEN TRADITION</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELEVANCES OF AUTHORITY (sphere of belief)</td>
<td>RELEVANCES OF TRUTH (sphere of knowledge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STATEMENT OF FACT: values of affect</td>
<td>STATEMENT OF RIGHT: values of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOUGHT IN SITUATION (the voice connects)</td>
<td>DECONTEXTUALIZED THOUGHT (written text displaces)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVERPRESENCE OF THE PRESENT</td>
<td>OVERPRESENCE PAST/FUTURE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMPHATIC AND PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION (force of context)</td>
<td>ANALYTICAL AND CUMULATIVE COMMUNICATION (force of the “co-text”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADDITIVE LOGIC (juxtaposing)</td>
<td>SUBORDINATIVE LOGIC (make sequential)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGGREGATIVE SYNTHESIS (redundance)</td>
<td>DISCRIMINATIVE ANALYSIS (distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUGGESTIVE POWER OF HEARING (social immersion)</td>
<td>SEPARATING POWER OF THE EYE (critical distancing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRADITIONALIST FACILITY (difficult to criticize one’s public in real time)</td>
<td>DOGMATIC FACILITY (ease with which a public can be sadomasochized at a distance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VALUES OF COMPLICITY AND IMPATIENCE (phatic)</td>
<td>VALUES OF PATIENCE AND COHERENCE (optical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONALIZATION OF SOCIAL LINK</td>
<td>APITUDE FOR IMPERSONAL LIFE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLEMICAL HABITAUX ad hominem (but open mind)</td>
<td>LOGICAL HABITUS IN A UNIVERSAL MODE (but closed-mindedness)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNOWING IS THROUGH THE ACT: primacy of praxis</td>
<td>KNOWLEDGE IS STORED: primacy of the opus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTHORITY OF AUTHORS WITHOUT WORK</td>
<td>AUTHORITY OF WORKS WITHOUT AUTHOR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“LISTEN TO THE DIFFERENCE”</td>
<td>“SEE THE DIFFERENCE”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Glossary

On the one hand, care must be taken not to fall into the pretences of formalism: one does not create a useful concept just by coining a neologism. On the other, a commitment must be made to being precise: no refutability nor even discussion are possible without a definition of terms. The semantic confusion of numerous ongoing debates about “communication” leads to the conclusion that, of the two, a rudimentary lexicon will always prove a less grievous flaw than a charming rhetorical cloud. All things considered, the social sciences require this basic courtesy.

- **circuit, short**: drop in status of the class of mediators operating within a demoted earlier medium, whose efficiency of profit-making has been weakened by a new medium.
- **cultural crisis**: initial effect of overlapping two or several competing memory technologies.
- **effect, jogging**: renewal of the old by the new. Complement and correction of the ratchet effect (q.v., below) (motorists who walk less run more).
- **effect, ratchet (passim)**: irreversibility of technological progress. Firearm users do not turn back to the crossbow after the harquebus; nor do travellers revert to the stagecoach after the railroad.
- **effect, stagecoach** (Jacques Perriault's term): the new begins by imitating the old. The design of the first railroad cars looked like the horse-drawn coach. The first incunabula were made to