

Of Tools and Angels

Régis Debray's Mediology

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Transmitting Culture

by Régis Debray, trans. Eric Rauth

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RÉGIS DEBRAY'S mediological work has so far failed to stir much Anglo-American enthusiasm. This failure is all the more remarkable given mediology's contiguity to currently flourishing fields of interdisciplinary research, namely the emergent cultural histories of technology, the work on material culture, and the re-orientation of numerous texts in the humanities and social sciences around the function of the new media in the production and circulation of knowledge. While Debray is an extraordinarily prolific writer, only a handful of his monographs have been translated in English to date, while his collaborative work and the journal *Les Cahiers de Médiologie*, which he has edited since 1996, remain virtually unknown in the United Kingdom. This is regrettable as Debray's work is instructive for current Anglo-American cultural studies insofar as it affirms that we cannot afford to study the history of technology without also studying the history of affect and sociality. At the same time, it demonstrates the difficulty of rendering an analytics of technoculture compatible with an analytics of the social imaginary or, in his words, of crossing the 'story of our tools' with that of 'our hopes and dreams' (p. 47).

Transmitting Culture forms part of Debray's mediological project, a project officially launched with *Cours de médiologie générale* in 1991 but arguably informing Debray's thinking since his 1979 *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France* (published by New Left Books as *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities* in 1981). Rather than advancing new work, *Transmitting Culture* constitutes a further re-statement of principles, this time foregrounding the study of

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cultural transmission, or, of the ways by which humans produce ‘a culture technologically’ (p. 79). Debray launches mediology as a cross-disciplinary analysis of the material supports – techniques, networks and forms of organization – that have constituted the coordinates of our cultural present. In the wake of McLuhan, mediologists have refuted the disciplinary segregation between histories of culture and histories of technology by shifting attention to the *instruments* and technical apparatuses that support the formation of cultural meanings. Here, in Debray’s brand of cultural materialism, culture is what technologies make possible, and technology constitutes ‘the intimate prosthetics of cultural life’ (p. 52). For example, Debray’s mediological perspective on the study of the Enlightenment does not involve primarily the texts of the Enlightenment philosophers as such, but rather a history of 18th-century publishing and of the postal networks and road systems which cut up 19th-century Europe into a new kind of spatiality. Similarly, mediologists would sidestep the study of photographic realism to focus on the uses of tripod-less cameras and of the first portable Leica.

The mediological perspective is thus preoccupied with the ways in which ‘a novel technological object dislodge[s] a traditional domain’ (p. 99) to produce new cultural materialities. While all this may be familiar enough for Anglo-American academics, the difference with Debray’s work is his insistence that mediology aims further than the study of media and technology to encompass what he calls cultural *mediation*. Debray intends this term to refer not only to the technological pathways through which cultural realities are constituted, but, in addition, to the forms of sociality which undergird such constitutions. Here Debray explicitly distinguishes his project from what he sees as the technological monism of McLuhan. In the pages of *Transmitting Culture* Debray repeatedly warns against McLuhan’s reduction of ‘our hopes and dreams to the story of our tools’ (p. 47) and cautions that technology must not be enthroned as the new foundation of cultural history. What is often missed in McLuhanesque ‘tool stories’, according to Debray, is a particular dimension of the cultural: there must be more to cultural processes than the transformation of tools, because tools do not in themselves produce allegiance and do not generate affectivity. Technology, then, is only one aspect of the process of mediation: it forms its material supports (as printing press, archive, video). These supports, however, cannot become effective without a human, social dimension – without institutions, groups, schools and their attendant hierarchies, their rules of belonging and ways of doing.

At the centre of *Transmitting Culture* is Debray’s polemical distinction between ‘transmission’ and ‘communication’: as he claims, the academic habit of studying culture primarily through practices of communication has generated a very skewed understanding of how our technological present is constituted. In Debray’s diagnosis, this state of affairs has come about because of the human sciences’ infatuation with semiology and, more recently, with its successor, cognitive science. The concept of communication bestowed by these two methodologies, Debray suggests, has

entailed a conceptual impoverishment in the ways scholars analyse cultural processes. Models of communication can read culture only as the circulation of messages and codes between various points in space (as the shuttling of information between senders and receivers). Because of this, they de-emphasize the material pathways that make communication possible. Furthermore, they cannot allow us to grasp those aspects of cultural transmission which involve a relationship between past and present, and in that relationship, the recognition of an absent other. Debray insists that the passing of a message is inevitably a passing down, an act of legacy-making. As such it involves a relationship to a place outside the present of a community, and this is a relationship which involves the organization of affect into forms of belief. It is this relationship to a place other than the present of communication which, for Debray, constitutes transmission as ‘duty and obligation, in a word, culture’ (p. 5).

In this foregrounding of belief, Debray’s text resonates with his earlier explorations of sociality developed in his *Critique of Political Reason* (1983). While Debray himself has insisted that *Critique* is not a mediological text, it is there that he articulates at length the theory of the social imaginary that provides the backbone for his more recent work. In brief, *Critique* sought to underline the centrality of belief in the production of communities. There Debray criticized those social theorists such as Marx and Lévi-Strauss who underestimated the material forces generated through belief and through affectivity more generally: for Debray, belief is a complex cultural phenomenon which is crucial for the processes of transmission. In short, what enables and lubricates transmission is the organization of affect into a social imaginary which materializes as institutions, places of worship and commemoration. The power of those institutions consists in their purporting to embody an other invisible and transcendent place (be it ‘God’, ‘Nation’ or ‘Party’) which – in turn – functions to guarantee a community’s boundaries and coherence.

Transmitting Culture reprises this preoccupation in an extended discussion of the place of angels in Christian faith, a discussion which takes up the middle part of this short book. Angels, for Debray, figure the process of transmission in the Christian religion and embody the very principles of mediation that have ensured Christianity’s long survival. This strict hierarchy of messengers allows for the transmission of the divine message while also safeguarding the pre-condition of belief: namely, that God himself will be forever unattainable. Angelic proliferations defer access to the ‘Father’ thus ensuring the latter’s divinity: the condition of belief is that God cannot appear as such, hence the need for angels to ensure transportation of the divine message. Indeed, Debray positions mediology as an amplified secular version of ‘angelology’, the latter being a branch of Roman Catholic theology preoccupied with the generation of a precise taxonomy of mediators.

Angels, however, in their capacity as mediators, also introduce a crucial problem in Debray’s book. If the angelic function is fundamental to

transmission, Debray's argument also suggests that this is the very function that is becoming obsolete in the current techno-cultural landscape. This is because, as Debray has put it elsewhere, current technologies privilege 'mimetic immediacy' over 'symbolic mediation' (1993: 37), thereby becoming inimical to the temporality of transmission. Towards the end of *Transmitting Culture*, Debray expands on this transformation through the rather unlikely example of pianist Glenn Gould's interpretation of Bach's music. This interpretation might have stood as:

... the triumph of the 'Gould utterance' over the 'Bach utterance', were it not that the highly sophisticated orchestrating of emotion produces in us, the listeners, the effect of quasi-ecstatic contact with an 'utterance' in its purest and most untamed state... The cumbersome question of method and interpretation yields to transparency, vibrancy, and translucency. In the end we see Gould no longer but hear Bach in person: a revelation, an encounter, a shock. (pp. 106–7)

Rather than invoking Bach, Gould's playing in fact supplants the master, insofar as the emotiveness of Gould's performance creates the effect of immediacy: the audience, mesmerized, believe themselves to be in the presence of Bach. The production of this immediacy is what makes Gould into a celebrity-performer. In this capacity Gould is no longer an angel-mediator: he becomes instead an illusionist, the one who produces the Bach-event. Gould's skill has the effect of replacing the transmission of Bach by a simulated contact with Bach. After Gould's rendition, the technology of the piano supplants that of the harpsichord, for which Bach had composed his music. The modulated sounds of the piano thus provide the technological infrastructure for that which audiences receive as 'emotiveness', an emotiveness which would have had no place in the original plucked-string renditions of those same pieces. What is shattered here is not only the materiality of mediation (the fact that it is the instrument itself rather than Gould's 'soul' which is responsible for what we call emotive playing) but, more radically, the function of Bach as the temporally distant origin, a function fundamental to the process of transmission and to the establishment of a legacy.

In Debray's rendition, Gould the illusionist stars as the demonic twin of an earlier modern hero, Walter Benjamin's translator. The latter – whom Debray would undoubtedly see as an ideal mediator – was a figure for whom the labour of translation consisted primarily in the acknowledgement of the elusiveness of the original: Benjamin's translator knew that a faithful translation was, so to speak, a failed one; in other words, that his task consisted first of all in maintaining the original at a distance. The good translator took care to preserve the original's non-coincidence with itself. The 'Gould effect', by contrast, consists in the celebrity-performer supplanting the elusiveness of the master-text with the 'immediacy' of his own technique. Gould's performance is experienced as an event because it dematerializes the difference between piano and harpsichord to replace it with Gould's

‘soul’. The celebrity-performer does not transmit Bach: his performance does not preserve the temporal distance or difference of Bach-as-legacy. Rather, Gould ‘communicates’ Bach, in Debray’s sense of aiming instead for the illusion of spatial coexistence between composer, performer and audience.

For Debray, the Gould effect is a prefiguring of a now widespread malaise, namely the eclipsing of transmission through current communication technologies. Here, communication becomes more than a faulty paradigm in the study of cultural forms; *Transmitting Culture* continues Debray’s claims that our current use of digital and audiovisual technologies favours the compression of transmission into communication and makes a virtue out of instantaneity and information saturation. In Debray’s Baudrillard-like refrain, the temporality of transmission, of ‘debt and obligation’, has all but evaporated in the globalized present – a predicament only partially counteracted through spasmodic reassertions of different kinds of cultural and ethnic identity.

Transmission then occupies a paradoxical space in Debray’s mediology: it is at once an aspect of cultural life which alters according to the shifts in the technological prostheses through which cultural life is constituted, *and* the very mediation of a transcendent ‘outside’ that current communication technologies, in their investment in actuality, are striving to eclipse. Insofar as *Transmitting Culture* engages this paradoxical space, it is a fascinating and timely book which seeks to complicate the analysis of techno-cultural forms. By the same token, this engagement makes some of its arguments vertiginous and unsustainable – for example, it is not clear whether the mediologist is studying the vicissitudes of cultural life or mourning the loss of ‘Culture’ as legacy-making. Nevertheless, Debray’s book constitutes a persuasive call for an interdisciplinary scholarship capable of mixing the seemingly incompatible materialities of ‘our tools’ with those of ‘our hopes and dreams’. While the co-analysis of these materialities is no mean task, it is also, arguably, a necessary one. Debray’s difficulties in speaking of tools and angels may alert us to a pressing need to understand our cultural present otherwise, while still insisting on a language that is attentive both to the materialities of transmission and to currents of affectivity. There should be paths beyond a technological monism other than those leading to the domains of angels.

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