

THE MEDIA OF THE SPECTRAL: DERRIDA AND BAUDRILLARD

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There is no doubt that in the face of the apparently monolithic nature of much contemporary media, there is a very strong temptation to throw up one's hands and refuse to engage. Similarly, where party and parliamentary politics become increasingly a self-regulating machine, moving with a perpetual motion with no apparent engagement beyond their mechanical orbit, the appeal and temptation of Baudrillard for some readers becomes perhaps understandable. Indeed, much as he is regularly treated with scorn, we might say that the shrug of dismissal and withdrawal from the public sphere is perhaps the most characteristic political gesture in the contemporary West.

Yet against such sentiments Derrida insists that responsibility calls us to engage no matter how minimal our potential contribution and marginal our position, not to do so is to risk closing off the possibility of an event of alterity, to renounce the possibility of a different future. In this paper I will follow, firstly, how Derrida's Husserlian analyses lead him to argue that the media at once opens the possibility of an engagement of alterity while also potentially closing it off. We will see how the media can be the medium of the spectral. I will outline how Derrida argues we can keep open such a possibility at the same time as elaborating concrete analyses of media institutions and practices.

We have seen for Derrida the media is not a dramatically new problem. The ultimate result of his Husserlian analyses, as I have argued elsewhere, was to question whether any firm distinction between 'ordinary perception' and mediated perception is possible. In his work on Husserl, Derrida goes no further than the apparently simple technology of writing. Yet writing, as Derrida shows us, (and we must remember that everything that can be said about writing is also implied in the spoken word and all other linguistic acts) does not give us access to the thing itself. Language mediates our access to the world; we might say mediates in the sense that it both enables and prohibits this access. If there is no immediate proximity, there is always something like a writing at work. There is no structural difference between Derrida's approach to the simplest utterance and to the productions of the most technically complex media: "these machines have always been there, they are always there, even when we wrote by hand, even during so-called live conversation".¹ Consequently, as he says in *Of Grammatology*: 'immediacy is derived'.² Of course, we must struggle to come to terms with the specificity of teletechnologies—Derrida is the last person who would let us gloss over them—but neither does that mean we can be allowed to forget that they remain on a continuum with 'ordinary' perception.

Derrida's raising of the questions of perception and conceptuality leads to a deconstruction of the distinction between real and virtual that drives Baudrillard's theses on simulation and the media (although these remarks are not presented as an explicit reflection on Baudrillard's work). Indeed, although *Echographies* (a series of interviews which is Derrida's most sustained engagement with the question of the media) does not engage in a close reading of Baudrillard, Derrida's coinage of the neologisms 'artifactuality' and 'actuvirtuality', there could be used as the starting point for such a deconstruction. Both of these terms

introduce questions as to when exactly technology and the media emerge. Drawing on his readings of Husserl he sees something that could be termed 'technical' at work in the habitual operation of language in perception. Language enlightens and occludes at the same time, it makes public but also holds back; it contains an indecipherable 'secret' that means communication can never be fully transparent.³ We don't need to pick up a pen and write for our language to be marked with something technological. The teletechnological inventions of modernity are complications of this structure, immense ones, singular ones, but we must not lose sight of what they have in common with the supposedly unmediated. It is this inescapability that Derrida tries to highlight with his neologisms. For Derrida there is no 'the media', there are *always* media, right from the moment we begin to think, and before. Indeed, Derrida goes so far as to suggest that *media* as the plural of *medium* is the very channel of the revenant: "I like the word 'medium' here. It speaks to me of specters of ghosts and phantoms".⁴ Here Derrida does not signal a sudden bizarre interest in the occult but refers to a quasi-concept developed in his late work: to speak of the specter is to speak of the escape of the thing itself.⁵ It denotes—if it is possible to denote such a thing—something that is neither alive nor dead, neither present nor absent. In Heideggerian terms the spectral points us towards the necessity, when talking of the present, of examining how that present presents, and presences, itself. When he talks of spectres, his insistence is: "I want very much not to give up either on the present or on thinking the presence of the present—nor on the experience of that which, even as it gives them to us, conceals them".⁶ We might say that while Baudrillard would try and hold his 'Requiem for the Media' (the title of a section of his early *Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*) Derrida would suggest that the corpse might not be so securely entombed as Baudrillard thinks and that rather, through 'mourning' and the inevitability of specters, the media may well be the *medium* of the other.⁷

The use of the term 'artificiality' no longer simply opposes reality and virtuality but draws attention to the ways in which what is conventionally regarded as 'virtual' is a necessary part of the creation of what we call 'reality'. Derrida argues that: 'actuality is *made*: it is important to know what it is made of, but it is just as important to know that it is made'.⁸ With regard

to the media Derrida again repeats:

actuality is, precisely, made ... not given but actively produced, sifted, invested, performatively interpreted by numerous apparatuses which are factitious or artificial, hierarchizing and selective, always in the service of forces and interests to which "subjects" and agents ... are never sensitive enough.⁹

And this, he might have added, happens in 'ordinary' perception too. In particular, we must note that Derrida is explicit in warning against a Baudrillardian reading of artificiality:

the requisite deconstruction of this artificiality should not be used as an alibi. It should not give way to an inflation [*une surenchère*] of the simulacrum and neutralize every threat in what might be called the delusion of the delusion, the denial of the event: "Everything," people would then think, "even violence, suffering, war, and death, everything is constructed, fictionalized, constituted by and for the media apparatus. Nothing ever really happens. There is nothing but simulacrum and delusion." While taking the deconstruction of artificiality as far as possible, we must therefore do everything in our power to guard against this critical neo-idealism and remember, not only that a consistent deconstruction is a thinking of singularity, and therefore of the event, of what it ultimately preserves of the irreducible, but also that "information" is a contradictory and heterogeneous process. It can and must be transformed, it can and it must serve, as it has often done, knowledge, truth, and the cause of democracy to come, and all the questions they necessarily entail. We can't help but hope that artificiality, as artificial and manipulative as it may be, will surrender or yield to the coming of what comes, to the event that bears it and toward which it is borne. And to which it will bear witness, even if only despite itself.¹⁰

We might note that he does not name Baudrillard here and, perhaps, we might see in this a recognition of places of proximity in the work of the two and a desire not to appear dismissive of his work. But we must stress how Derrida insists, on 'information' as a contradictory and heterogeneous process, not as code or even simulation (as Baudrillard does), and on the possibility of transformation and of an event. In these regards we could contrast the two theorists on the question of 'real time' TV. In *Gulf War*, Baudrillard speaks of real time TV as 'the spectacle of the degradation of the event': the way

in which the compounding of commentary upon commentary, gloss upon gloss simply underlines the "unreality of the war".¹¹ Real time TV is said to be a simulacrum, there is no critical position that can be taken against it, and we cannot find a position outside it from which to criticize it: "the closer we supposedly approach the real or the truth, the further we draw away from them both, since neither one nor the other exists. The closer we approach the real time of the event, the more we fall into the illusion of the virtual".¹² Baudrillard thus cedes all to the system he seeks to escape, making his only recourse a prayer for apocalypse: "all that we can hope for is ... that some event or other should overwhelm the information instead of the information inventing the event and commenting artificially upon it ... the only real information revolution would be this one".¹³ I would argue that it is such words we find precisely that 'inflation of the simulacrum' and that failure to see information as a contradictory and heterogeneous process that Derrida warns against.

Derrida's own position is quite different although he is equally critical of those who would imply that 'real time' TV is somehow less mediated, less problematic than any other form of TV: "live" is not an absolute "live" but only a live effect [*un effet de direct*], an allegation of "live".¹⁴ He suggests that a widespread awareness that the issue is problematic can be seen in the very fact that we use the term 'real time' at all. Again, rather than seeing the problem of mediated perception as unique to contemporary teletechnologies he generalizes it: "there is never an absolutely real time. What we call real time, and it is easy to understand how it can be opposed to deferred time in everyday language, is in fact never pure".¹⁵ He stresses that "the 'live' and 'real time' are never pure, that they do not give us intuition or transparency".¹⁶ But they are not unique in this. Here Derrida recalls the conclusions of his early work on Husserl: "The condition of possibility of the living, absolutely real present is already memory, anticipation, in other words, a play of traces".¹⁷ The complexity of his analysis in no way prevents him from also engaging in a basic critique: "What is 'transmitted' 'live' on a television channel is produced before being transmitted. The "image" is not a faithful and integral reproduction of what it is thought to reproduce. Still less of everything that remains 'reproducible'".¹⁸ Again, Derrida conceptually sketches a topography that insists

beyond the apparent and the perceived lies an alterity that exceeds and challenges conceptuality: the (im) possibility of an event. This is very different from total alienation in the code or escape into immanence, the heads or tails, either/or logic of simulation as Baudrillard presents it.

While Baudrillard's analysis can only lead him to hope for the implosion of the media, Derrida's opens the possibility of a multilevelled critique. Indeed, the consequence of the complication of this boundary between real and virtual returns us with an urgency toward the question of the structures and process of the media. When Derrida complains of the media that "they pretend they are showing us the thing itself, for example, the attacks during the Gulf War", he does not stop paralyzed like Baudrillard, who can (apparently) only offer either the total fiction of the code-programmed simulation or the complete immediacy of the simulation-enabled symbolic, but follows to an insistence on the need to examine the vast complex of processes that lie between the TV reports of the Gulf War and the events in the Middle East.¹⁹ In contrast to Baudrillard's non-engagement and withdrawal, Derrida can argue that, "one can find in the techno-politics of telecommunications something inescapably at stake, at stake for philosophy, very new in certain of its forms, its operations, its evaluation, its market, and technology".²⁰ After 9/11, again in contrast to Baudrillard, Derrida can both mourn the singular lives lost and engage in a practical analysis of the operation of the media, noting how it, "does not count the dead in the same way from one corner of the globe to the other".²¹ He further argues that 9/11, "calls for just as many questions and analyses as that which it seems simply to 'represent through a straightforward and neutral informational process'".²² He makes this point of the need to understand the processes of news making repeatedly: "Hegel was right to remind the philosophers of his time to read the newspapers every day. Today, the same responsibility also requires us to find out how the newspapers are made, and who makes them".²³ Again, in an interview with *The Australian* newspaper in 1999 Derrida said, "The media is the main political problem facing the world today"; a statement he confirmed in a subsequent interview, qualified as "not the most original thing I have said" but as something, nevertheless, that needs to be constantly repeated.²⁴ Derrida argues that we must

break with the framing in which television and newspapers would present us the world, see from the side of the teleprompter or the press agency, and remind ourselves that the politician who looks us in the eye as he speaks, speaks from a script prepared by others, that all that can seem most 'natural' is a product of processes that must make us question what 'natural' could be. Yet what we must particularly underline is that in addition to making commonly presented criticisms of the media, Derrida argues for a 'critical culture of the spectrality of the media', a matter I will come back to in concluding.²⁵

On numerous occasions, Derrida argues that the new teletechnologies at once open up novel possibilities at the same time threatening a certain homogenization. He says of the "new role of the media in the public space" that there are "many reasons for a democrat to rejoice in it. But its effect is terribly ambiguous"²⁶. Yet, for Derrida, they open the possibility of a new place and an event of alterity. Indeed, he argues that one of the most important effects of the new media technologies is the creation of a "new topology of 'the virtual' ... producing a practical *deconstruction* of the traditional and dominant concepts of the state and citizen"²⁷. His suggestion is that it is "a technology that *displaces places*", and that consequently "the question of democracy ... may no longer be tied to that of citizenship"²⁸. The new media technologies in Derrida's eyes have the potential to open up new form of democratic association and participation. Similar to Habermas, for Derrida the globalization they bring is a chance as much as a threat and he argues: "Since no locality remains, democracy must be thought *globally* today"²⁹. Indeed, his suggestion is, "we should work together as people who are more than citizens, because I would advocate something that would go beyond citizenship, beyond belonging to a nation state"³⁰. In insisting that we need to be more than citizens we come to what Derrida says concerning hospitality (a theme he develops partly out of and against Kant) and the need for a responsibility that exceeds all established claims to rights and residence. Indeed, it is precisely the globalization of new technologies which opens the possibility of such hospitality. With the globalization of the media, for Derrida, while there might be at times fierce critique, there is no mourning for a lost sphere of immanence but rather a welcoming of the possibility that new media can be the medium for an unprecedented incoming of the other.

If media technologies can open up new forms of democratic organization, Derrida also deplures how they can be the conduit for the most deadening repetition, in particular, criticizing the way in which "the national ... overdetermines all the other hierarchies [and] relegates to a secondary position a whole host of events"³¹. Indeed, he argues "in the news 'actuality' is spontaneously ethnocentric", a point we have already seen him make in relation to the reporting of 9/11.³² Indeed, he describes as a 'tragedy', that "the apparent internationalization of the sources of information is often based on an appropriation and concentration of information and broadcast capital"³³. The way in which a process which offers a new diffusion, the opening of a novel space, is ironically the scene of an unprecedented homogenization that leads Derrida to make a call "to resist the concentration of the international corporations which more and more control this power"³⁴. In recent interviews and writings he often discusses the ways in which media institutions could be made more open to democratic possibility, subscribing to the conventional liberal and leftist position regarding the necessity to "fight against accumulation, concentration and monopoly" as forces that potentially lead to censorship, yet pragmatically acknowledging that one cannot simply argue for "plurality, dispersion, or fractioning", not least because of the potential the latter offers for anti-democratic possibilities.³⁵ He argues we must try to avoid a monopolistic, monolithic media but still need defined centers where public opinion can materialize, that hegemonic forces cannot be challenged by simple dissemination. Derrida is clear that the task is "to introduce some heterogeneity without disseminating or imperiling the media's universal reach or scope"³⁶. The difference from Baudrillard's work could not be starker.

When outlining the strategies for overcoming ethnocentrism in the media Derrida acknowledges "some journalists make laudable efforts to escape this law, but, by definition, it can't be done enough, and in the final analysis is not up to the professional journalists"³⁷. He argues "it is our duty as citizens of the world, as citizens of the nation and citizens of the world, to cooperate with the people in the media who are ready to do critical work"³⁸. Yet, ultimately Derrida does not place his main hopes for the expansion of the democratic potential of the media on journalists or on regulation: "If this struggle is not waged from

the side of what are still called—provisionally—the ‘buyers’ or ‘consumers’, it is lost from the start”.³⁹ Indeed, Derrida’s own experiences with media misrepresentation made him increasingly skeptical about those whose profession is the media. He said in one of his last works, a propos of the questions put to Heidegger by *Der Spiegel* in 1966: “Like most journalists, they are first of all interested, or perhaps only interested, in what they take to be politics and the political. Like all journalists, they insist on clear, univocal, easily understandable answers on a particular subject”.⁴⁰ In order to escape this what Derrida sees as most important is the raising of the question of the addressee: “What is possible and, in my opinion, desirable are not legislative decisions concerning the production and distribution of whatever it is, but open programs of education and training in the use of this technology, these technical means”.⁴¹ Here Derrida’s position has similarities with the neo-Brechtian one criticized by Baudrillard in “Requiem for the Media”. However, for Derrida, it is not merely a question of concrete, individual addressees becoming more involved in production, but rather it is “the concept of the addressee that would have to be transformed”.⁴² Derrida is not just suggesting addressees use newly available technology to turn themselves into producers but, more importantly, he desires “those who were previously in the position of consumer-spectators can intervene in the market”.⁴³ His suggestion is “The addressee has never simply been a passive receiver” and he says that his desire is “for addressees to be able to transform, in their turn, what reads them, the ‘message’, or to understand how it is produced, in order to restart the contract on different terms”.⁴⁴ When Derrida talks of the way that the message reads the addressee, he is speaking of something more fundamental than the neo-Brechtian programme. I would suggest when he argues that ‘an original expropriation’ is necessary in the media and that “the choice is not between mastery and non-mastery”, in order to understand this we need look at how Derrida translates and transforms Heidegger’s *Ereignis* into ‘the event’.⁴⁵ Derrida’s point would be that how the media is structured and how addressees are educated to engage in a democratic sphere are important because, much as it is an unprecedented leap, preparation is necessary for the possibility of an event of alterity. He argues: “Ethical responsibility (which is to say judicial and political responsibility) ... is exposed not only in what is

called life or existence, but in the task of deciphering, reading, and writing”.⁴⁶ When Derrida speaks of a gift or the event, there is an acceptance of language as both potentially instrumental and excessive, a medium for the incoming of alterity, the eruption of an unthought of future. He would argue that we must take responsibility for our use of language—and the media in which it is manifested—to engage actively with it, to develop new strategies of reading, to heighten our awareness. Yet this task does not and will not lead to a control or mastery, not should we want it to. Baudrillard condemns signification as the code or sees alterity as evading simulation but Derrida would argue that alterity is inscribed within language, within the media, from the start.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *Echographies: of Television* (Polity Press, 2002), 38.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (John Hopkins University Press: 2nd ed, 1998), 157.
- 3 See Jacques Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret* (Polity Press, 2001), especially pp58-9.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, *Right of Inspection* (Monacelli Press, 1999), 6.
- 5 As Simon Critchley argues ‘the spectre is precisely that which refuses phenomenologization, that retreats before the gaze that tries to see it’. *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (Verso, 1999), 151.
- 6 Derrida, *Echographies*, 4.
- 7 Mourning is another quasi-concept developed in late work. Complicating what Freud says concerning mourning and melancholia, and developing the work of Abraham and Torok, Derrida argues ‘mourning must be impossible ... where ... mourning succeed[s], mourning annuls the other’ *For What Tomorrow A Dialogue* (Stanford University Press, 2004), 159-60.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interviews and Interventions 1971-2001* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 86.
- 9 *Echographies*, 3.
- 10 *Ibid*, 5-6.
- 11 Jean Baudrillard, *Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Indiana University Press, 1995), 48.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 14 *Echographies*, 40.

- 15 Ibid, 129.
- 16 Ibid, 5.
- 17 Ibid, 129.
- 18 Ibid, 40.
- 19 Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars* (University of Illinois Press, 2001), 45.
- 20 Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 144.
- 21 Jacques Derrida, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jurgen Habermas* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 92.
- 22 Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford University Press, 2005), 155.
- 23 Derrida, *Echographies*, 4.
- 24 Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged*, 45.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Jacques Derrida, *Points: Interviews 1874-94* (Stanford University Press, 1995), 426.
- 27 Derrida, *Echographies*, 36.
- 28 Ibid, 57.
- 29 Derrida, *Negotiations*, 251.
- 30 Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged*, 46.
- 31 Derrida, *Echographies*, 4.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid, 5.
- 34 Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged*, 45.
- 35 Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: essays of Today's Europe* (University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 99-100.
- 36 Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged*, 45.
- 37 Derrida, *Echographies*, 4.
- 38 Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged*, 46.
- 39 Derrida, *Echographies*, 44-5.
- 40 Derrida, *Rogues*, 111.
- 41 Derrida, *Echographies*, 45.
- 42 Ibid, 55.
- 43 Ibid, 54.
- 44 Derrida, *Echographies*, 46, 48.
- 45 Ibid, 37.
- 46 Derrida, 'Justices' *Critical Inquiry* 31:3 (2005), 715.