Kate H. Wells

Ancestral Irrepressible: Marshall McLuhan and the Future of the Archive in Derrida's *Archive Fever*

The keynote address of a recent Toronto conference opened with an acerbic tribute to Marshall McLuhan by York University Professor John Greyson. Referring to Canada's most famous media theorist as 'Daddy McMessage,' Greyson issued a double statement in that he paid tribute to McLuhan while also sharing a somewhat perplexed implication regarding his status as a patriarchal signifier through which Canadian media studies must flow. While McLuhan's role in the field of Canadian media studies has sometimes been a controversial and contended point, his contribution is crucial and his presence is, as Greyson alluded to, unavoidable. It is a common cliché to consider Marshall McLuhan more relevant now than he was in his lifetime, yet McLuhan's legacy is worth revisiting on a theoretical level. The McLuhan project taps into the current Western focus of re-thinking conceptions of space and time and broadens a popular consciousness about media's impact upon culture and society. McLuhan's fierce attitudes against academic rigidity, his pursuit and cultivation of interdisciplinary groups and his encouragement of graduate student participation alongside established professors resonates with the contemporary struggle to break staid disciplines. *Wired* Magazine has made him the publication's official mascot; the digital age, electronic communication and the encroaching global sphere (for better or for worse) resonate with his early aphorisms, so prevalent they need not be re-invoked here.

One is suddenly reminded of Derrida's (1995) deconstruction of Freud's monumental position as the patriarch of psychoanalysis in *Archive Fever*. McLuhan's spectral status as an ever-present tradition in both media studies as well as in Canadian cultural studies reflects the human phenomenon of keeping the past alive through the implementation of living ghosts. The persistence of the dead implied by Derrida's hauntology leads him to interrogate the power assigned to any original source. Such work sparks questions on the nature of memory, a subject that McLuhan's work often hinged upon. Both Derrida and McLuhan question the nature of representation, exteriority and how memory survives. Derrida writes that the archive, despite its association with capturing the past, in actuality only exists so that we may compensate for the loss of memory, and can "never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience (Derrida 1995: 11)." The archive too requires "consignation in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction (Derrida 1995: 11)." For Derrida, the survival and preservation of memory in the literal name of Freud bears all that the Freudian signature gathers together and authorizes, resulting in the irrepressible ancestry. The archive takes

place somewhere between Freud and his life's work, "at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory (Derrida 1995: 11)." We find ourselves in an intermediate space, between Freud the man and his legacy of psychoanalysis, and it is this middle area that Derrida diagnoses as crucial to the archive. The archive, as a type of medium, holds a complex tension between remembering and forgetting. And, in many ways, the difficulties entailed in separating Marshall McLuhan from his message are as large as the project of the archive itself.

Since the publication of *Archive Fever*, work on the archive often approaches the subject through the actual word, *archive*, engaging in a salutary way with Derrida's etymological deconstruction.[1] Derrida opens up the word archive, from the Greek arkhe, and reveals its double identity: commencement and commandment. Here, Derrida locates the two poles required for the revelation of the paradox. The implication of power and the nomological authority of the forward command precede the physical domicile of the archons, the topological principle. The archon, as guardian of documents, the sacred texts which come to be sheltered in the arkhe, wields the power of interpretation: they guard and guide those documents that "speak the law." The interpretive power of the nomological principle speaks to how a name like Freud or McLuhan can become so embedded into cultural memory that it seems physically inescapable; it appears omnipresent, its topography cannot be circumvented. While the first half of this essay will engage with the nomological inscription implicit in the archive and its typographical connotations, the second half will explore the topological possibilities of archival theory. Inspired by McLuhan's belief that our environmental situation acts as a medium of information, and using Foucault's methodology of archaeology as epistemology, I explore the archive less as a house of documents and more as a spatial concept of media.

The foundation of the archive, rooted in paradox, forms a forceful foliage of the twinned concepts nomos and topos, resulting in an ambiguous tension that allows Derrida to declare the archive not a concept, but rather a notion. This status as 'notion' allows the ineffable archive to be considered a space of contestation. Where there are two meanings, there may be more, and beginning from these etymological elements of law, place and power, the archive becomes a malleable theoretical area, a notion to conceptually expand upon. Terry Cook's (2003) work on the archive shows how the archival process does impact what it holds, contrary to many assumptions of the benign nature of archives. Though many scholars have come to depend on the archive as a "value-free site of document collection and historical inquiry," Cook's work has argued that archives are actually "active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed. By extension, memory is not something found or collected in archives, but something that is made, and

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[1] It would appear that Derrida's work has become that unavoidable entity on its own turf of archival theory.

continually re-made (Cook 2003: 8)." The archive mediates between the loss and preservation of real acts, and becomes a medium in its existence as something literally in the middle.

Cook pinpoints the postmodern archival turn as the catalyst for the theoretization of the potential of the archive, however comments that it remains very much in the realm of theory instead of actual archival practice. There remains a fundamental breakdown between the ways in which the postmodern archive, "anything but natural and objective," is posed theoretically and used academically (Cook 2003: 13). This is a phenomenon that is important not only for the potential of what an archive might become, but also how an archive manages to hold so tenaciously onto its first manifestation as an originary source. Derrida directly attributes this to the technology available to store, reproduce, and repeat, as "the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event (Derrida 1995: 17)." Because of these facts of technology, the archive today is not what it was in the past, and won't be the same in the future, due to its attachment to this phenomenon of exteriority and representation.

Derrida's textual approach to meaning engages with the same topics and questions that define McLuhan's oeuvre: how do our literary proclivities define and shape our consciousness? McLuhan's work on technologies of communication, conceived of as extensions of our physical senses, draws on the Platonic critique of writing as an artificial device that would lead to deteriorating human memory function. McLuhan implements the language-based concepts of figure and ground as the foundation of his media theory: "ground" is the abstract paradigm that cannot be understood without referencing a figure that stands in contrast to it. Ground is a 'style of awareness' impossible to study on its own terms. To demonstrate this concept, McLuhan returns to the world of 'logos' – the uttered word – as it was transformed by the invention of the consonant and phonetic language. The consonant became the abstract sign of representation for the idea of something that did not exist in nature, but only in thought. In this way, by "pursuing the analysis of the bare sounds of speech to the level of complete abstraction," phonetically written language became a process where through the visualization of the written sign, a figure is isolated within the larger field of sight, or ground (McLuhan 1988: 14). This process of abstraction suppresses ground to the point of flattening what was once a spherical, boundless perception of space, resulting in the linear Geometric model known as the 'Euclidean' that provided the template for Western consciousness throughout the last two millennia.

The evolution of processes of recording, or technologies of memory, accelerated the changing relationship between figure and ground. To remember, to capture historically, requires a dependence on a prosthetic device; the various takes on the mythological 'fall' of 'natural man' into

'technical man' that dominate anthropological approaches from Plato to Rousseau, (invoking the theme of historical accident: Prometheus, divine providence) can only be known because they are recorded somehow, placed outside of the human mind. Famously for the pre-literate Greeks it was the mimetic device in the oral structure of Homeric tradition that enabled poets to maintain historical records, a process that entailed a total submersion into the activity of recitation and performance, where the bard surrendered all objectivity (McLuhan 1988: 16). The abstract relationship between figure and ground under the visual (literate) regime of grammar and rhetoric had not yet formed; instead figure and ground are interactive and relational. The figure, as an idea to be focused upon and represented, "ceases to be an object of attention and becomes instead a ground for the knower to put on […] it is not simply a matter of representation but rather one of putting on a completely new mode of being (McLuhan 1988: 16)." In this sense, the idea of representation does not have to involve a split between the knower and known.

Theoretically, McLuhan's most passionate pursuit was a rebirth of the sense of acoustic space, described as aural, non-visual and post-Euclidean, a finite but boundless alternating complex tissue of figure and ground, brought on by the 20th century implementation of instantaneous electric communication technology (McLuhan 1988: 38).[2] Whereas visual space finds its basis in purely mental formations of abstract figure minus ground, acoustic space, "whether pre-or post-Euclidean, is formed as a discontinuous and resonant mosaic of dynamic figure/ground relationships (McLuhan 1988: 40)." McLuhan's examination of the revolution in language systems from orality to literacy, informed heavily by Eric Havelock, emphasizes the cultural overhaul that took place alongside the changes in communication. Removing the task of record-keeping from its traditional group function of poetic recitation, writing emphasizes the autonomous self, rather than the collective group; it is a fundamentally solipsistic function. Whereas oral cultures were familiar with a totalizing mentality, the literate style accentuated the concept of self, or "I." Adapting to a literate style meant rejecting the oral style, for "accepting the premise that there is a 'me,' a 'self,' a 'soul,' a consciousness which is self-governing and which discovers the reason for action itself rather than through poetic experience" is antithetical to oral culture (Havelock 1963: 200). The capacity for abstract thought, noted by McLuhan as a crucial and technological aspect to the development of literate cultures, enriched and enabled human society to move forward. The question that troubled McLuhan was what is lost when we move away from a balanced sensory existence and allowing the visual sense to dominate?

Such is the basis for McLuhan's most famous argument: that the impact of communication depends thoroughly on the medium through which it was transmitted. Derrida's gloss dips into

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[2] McLuhan notes that this is not unlike Heraclitus' fire or energy and its effect on humankind's ability to illuminate forms and project meaning

McLuhan's aphoristic connection between the medium and the message further, in stating that archival technology does not only determine the moment of capture of a memory or event, nor only the shape and form a printed object, but is responsible for the content's overall attachment to its origin. Importantly, it conditions the "printed content of the printing: the *pressure* of the *printing*, the *impression*, before the division between the printed and the printer (Derrida 1995: 18)." This impression bears the relationship between past and present, between what happened in the creation of the material and its place now, growing always farther apart in time but bound together under nomological authority. Derrida's typographical metaphor is deliberate, and creates an argument that ties the archive to textual form, makes clear the formulation of memory as an object, and confronts us with the seeming impossibility of ever moving completely away from the nomological inscription.

The typographic impression and issue of representation remains a paradox most specifically located in text, but in its more abstract form it exists in all human attempts to store, record and communicate that which is memory. The archive acts as the "objectivizable storage" for collected impressions yet also subsists as the anticipation of the future and as the actual event that shapes all that it comes to bear upon (Derrida 1995: 26). This triple sense of the word *impression*, as explained in Derrida's 'Preamble,' attests to the hypomnesic fullness of archival theory. In "one instant" (let's say, the Freud-event, or the McLuhan-event) the past and future are hinged together and it is made apparent that the archive is not only about recording the past, but also about the movement towards the future from this moment of nomological and topological assignment.

As electric technologies bring communities closer together, the detached, non-reflexive mentality of typographic, visual and perspectivist culture no longer exists as the sole method of understanding the relational aspects of societies. Derrida ponders the implications of email and that because it "is on its way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity" the consequences "of production, of printing, of conservation, and of destruction of the archive must be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations (Derrida 1995: 17)." Interdependence, understanding and co-ordination brought on by newer effects of instantaneous media communication must be considered for the way they will interact with older epistemological approaches. McLuhan's firm belief that the typographic mentality was losing environmental supremacy to acoustic imagination due to the discovery and implementation of electronic technologies inspired his writings on cultural hybridity.

In *Understanding Media* (1964) McLuhan examines the violence of cultural thresholds and the extreme potential energy within communication systems, writing that "of all the great hybrid unions that breed furious release of energy and change, there is none to surpass the meeting of oral and literate cultures (McLuhan 1964: 55)." Literate, typographic society brought a certain type of

control of language, which lead to the control of space and time, and the conquering, empire-making mentality that has characterized western man. Conversely, "the immediate prospect for literate, fragmented Western man encountering the electric implosion within his own culture is his steady and rapid transformation into a complex and depth-structured person emotionally aware of his total interdependence with the rest of human society (McLuhan 1964: 56)."

However, electronic technologies, positioned as paralleling the impact of the alphabet and writing upon the world, cannot be seen as a simple restoration of a pre-Euclidean sensibility of orality. To see McLuhan's message in this light is to miss one of his most major points, in that we are currently dealing with an age of mixed-media. McLuhan's *Counterblast* (1969), an experimental text of complex ideas condensed into thoughtful statements and short paragraphs, proclaimed the search for a new technological language based on the clash of two different systems of communication. The 1969 publication, which also appeared as periodic supplements to the 1953-1957 Toronto-based journal *Explorations*, put forth: "Nobody yet knows the language inherent in the new technological situation […] We begin again to restructure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3000 years of literacy divorced us (Carpenter and McLuhan 1957:21)." Among colleagues and students, McLuhan was known for his abrupt 'probes,' a style of posing questions without giving up the answer. His goal was to inspire others to think through the problems that he conjured up out of cultural observation, reflective of the spirit of ambiguity and paradox inherent in understanding media.

The note of anticipation in *Archive Fever* taps into this type of interrogation, and "to the rigor of a concept" Derrida proposes the archive as a notion, awaiting development. One of Derrida's stated theses in *Archive Fever* entails the idea of the archive in a developmental stage – it is "divided, disjointed between two forces." (Derrida 1995: 28) Derrida's project, as subtle and nuanced as his writing skills, crafts an implicit skepticism towards the typographic and textual while at the same time obliged to re-engage his originary source. Freud's death drive becomes the necessary structural device in contemplating the archive as that which constantly destroys itself and in that process, recreates itself. When he states that we cannot speak of Freud without being already *marked* by the Freudian impression, that if we think "that it is possible not to take this into account, forgetting it, effacing it, crossing it out, or objecting to it, one has already confirmed (thus archived) a 'repression' or a 'suppression (Derrida 1995: 31)'" he also is referring to the epistemological paradigm of typography.

It is indeed interesting to pause here and consider Derrida's discussion of circumcision as a typographic metaphor – it "maintains a reference to the *graphic* mark and to repetition" – rather than one which might enable a discussion that speaks to forms of knowing that do not involve writing (Derrida 1995: 20). Derrida's argument regarding Freud's domination of western thought

is also one of the domination of writing and linear systems. Yet what Derrida is interested in precisely is the idea of the original, which is what troubles him about archives. Discovery and legitimacy enshroud the documents contained in official archives and allow for a control of the past based on Derrida's ideas of inscription, filial circumcision, and the consignation of a community around what is deemed the original mark. Carolyn Steedman points out how Derrida "broods" over the type of historical work certain "archives of evil" have produced. She hints at "a shadow of suspicion here, then, that it is not archives at all that he has in his sights, but, rather, what gets written out of archives, formal, academic history (Steedman 2001: 8)." The problem is that the original subject remains at all.

Yerushalmi's interest in Freud's opinion, the patriarchal voice of psychoanalysis, indicates a faith in the depths of the archive, that as long as it can be found new questions can be answered with old information. And yet, in his wish to make specters and ghosts speak, he privileges the fathers, the archons, the archontic law. Derrida's scope includes a reflective critique to implicate the patriarch in the paradox of Yerushalmi's approach. Using the case of *The Rat Man*, Derrida equates Enlightenment rationality to Freud's inability to admit to possibility. That exacting and universalizing logic, which proclaimed the triumph of Freud's 'scientific' approach to the mind, connects Freud's psychoanalysis to the phallogocentric paradigm of rational thought over the sensibility and perception of something as subjective as a witness. By not allowing us to think in terms of a perhaps, or admitting to the failure of scientific method, Yerushalmi at first denies the future any interpretation that does not settle with the determined past. Such decidedness is contrary to the potential of the archive and the slippage of memory.

Yet when Yerushalami switches gears and employs the word 'perhaps,' and admits that perhaps Freud will not answer, everything changes. Suddenly the archive appears incomplete, the future is open to change, and the past may change, too, based on new information. It is here that Derrida locates the shift in the relationship of the archive to the virtual. In pondering the power of memory and its inscription of meaning in any solid, material form, the unknowable future presents an archive of promise, and with no sense of the one original. In an act of violence to these principles, establishing the archive as a future notion, Derrida is now prepared to proceed, once again on the need for new questions and new vocabulary. He waxes poetic: "Let us imagine in effect a new project of general archiviology, a word that does not exist but that could designate a general and interdisciplinary science of the archive (Derrida 1995: 34)." The 'perhaps' indicates that the past is now open to change. The archive as a future notion might be established with archiviology, as it confronts and destroys the patriarchal signifier's attachment to the nomological principle. Yet in this act, the archive is still reproducing itself by acknowledging the principle to destroy in the first place

Derrida's archiviolithic framework resembles McLuhan's sense of impending doom for textual and material information and anticipation of virtual communication. The nomos of the text-based archive, and the topos of the architectural arkhe, cannot alone provide the full story of how cultures engage in acts of memory, especially in this age of 'visual culture' and 'acoustic space.' Janine Marchessault's (2005) work has pointed out how McLuhan's writing conceptualizes culture as landscape, metaphorically capturing epistemological paradigms in spatial form, whether of galaxy and globe or figure and ground (Marchessault 2005: 28). McLuhan's method also engaged aesthetics and perception. McLuhan's work, "oriented around the archival, encyclopedic, and artifactual surfaces," focuses on how the modern landscape imputes its symptoms into living culture, in an active engagement with human choice (Marchessault 2005: xi). Space, both acoustic and environmental, is not given a determining role as much as one of a processor of information, a medium, and is used as a framework for understanding social and cultural changes that he attributed to media. In 1954, McLuhan claimed in *Counterblast* that "the city no longer exists, except as a cultural ghost for tourists […] The telegraph brought the world to the workingman's breakfast table (McLuhan 1958: Item 14)." The space of the city is conceived of as source of information, with flows extending within as well as outward to other spaces. From McLuhan's vantage point at mid-century, everything appeared connected, whether via main artery expressways, the whimsies of nighttime radio reception or telephone lines, destined to evolve into information superhighways.

In conjuring from the double etymology of 'archive' the idea of the forward command of the superior magistrate, one gets the sense of guarded access, the permission slips or the conspiratorial winks to guide us past barriers. This epistemological metaphor implies that the archive wields a power of a problematic sort: of stone, steel, paper, and law, which preserve a hegemonic narrative of progress in the name of the father, of the fatherland. The colonialism I might pull out of such a construction might well allow me an all out attack on western civilization and its privileging of certain forms of knowledge. Language and writing solidified the calculating reason that later peaked with the invention of the printing press and blossomed during the Enlightenment, the height of abstract reason and concrete science. The comparative ability to mark differences and make distinct the 'other' provided insulation from the wilderness of savage magic, but also created a discerning, imperialistic attitude towards space and issued in the age of exploration and empire. Communication becomes linked with the archival source, the commencement of the forward command. While McLuhan's point stresses that those cultures that do not choose to communicate (or do not know how) across long distances are doomed to be exploited by those that do, it is also the matter of the original inscription, as Derrida makes clear in his emphasis of the very act of impression and the power in the nomos.

This is an interpretation of the metaphorical potential in the idea of 'forward command.' In this interpretation I actually perform the essence of the secondary function of etymological double, where I pay respect to the root but maintain my independence in translation (Derrida 1995: 57). I also perform another deconstruction of the archive, this time interrogating its status as architecture, a fortress-like material construction, a monument akin to the outdated documents that Michel Foucault (1972) castigates in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault poses that the history of ideas cannot be studied as a document, because the subject matter, "that of imperfect, ill-based knowledge, which could never in the whole of its long, persistent life attain the form of scientificity (Foucault 1972: 136)" does not conform to the rules of the book and the document. For instance, a book contains a unity that Foucault targets as suspicious, because, as unities, books "are not as immediate and self-evident as they appeared (Foucault 1972: 135)." Foucault's methodology describes a 'new' way to do history, slowly and painstakingly removing what he deems 'anthro' from what must be located in the tradition of the 'arche.'

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault suggests that his goal was to work towards a theory of possibility, not perfection, and to replace history with a methodology of archaeology. This "archaeology, addressing itself to the general space of knowledge, to its configurations, and to the mode of being of the things that appear in it, defines systems of simultaneity, as well as the series of mutations necessary and sufficient to circumscribe the threshold of a new positivity." (Foucault 1970: xxii) Foucault's stance against an 'established' disciplinary framework that perpetuates the status of history as living and continuous challenges the nomologial principle of interpretive authority. According to Foucault, the past will always be re-written and transformed by the present state of knowledge. We may study the internal coherences, axioms and compatibilities of ideas through architectonic unities of these systems, all the while avoiding direct contact with what is eternal, descriptive, and interpretive; in other words, reinforcing origins and the current power structure.

Like McLuhan and Derrida, Foucault captures a sense of possibility in the liberation of meaning from textual abstraction. By restricting interpretation, mediation becomes the foreground for all information, and the weight of rhetoric is dismissed as the overwhelming content of meaning and interpretation, content that distracts from the development of new ideas. Foucault details the incremental breakdown of the unity of discourse and the rules of how it functions as a field, its basic logic. The relations between these elements becomes Foucault's object of analysis, and "the problem arises of knowing whether the unity of a discourse is based not so much on the permanence and uniqueness of an object as on the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed." (Foucault 1972: 32) In such a scenario, subjective agency is removed and replaced with a sense of interaction of place, space and memory. The closed system of the *Ancien* Regime (in McLuhan's terms, the typographic universe) is literally

broken open by the insistent pressure of a new type of cultural landscape and its demands to express itself.

In McLuhan's view, new forms of communication induced a type of narcosis to the older, 'literate' generation, but afflicted the new, 'electric' generation: the youth of the 1960s. McLuhan explained in his 1969 *Playboy* interview: "From Tokyo to Paris to Columbia, youth mindlessly acts out its identity quest in the theatre of the streets, searching not for goals but for roles, striving for an identity that eludes them (McLuhan 1995: 249)." The theatre is exemplary of the creative sprit of an age that still used its visual and auditory senses in relative equilibrium. Contemplating the mixed-media situation of the age of the printing press (or the dawn of Gutenberg Galaxy), McLuhan writes: "For the Elizabethans, the whole folk wisdom of oral culture, centuries of oral disputation, and a huge backlog of vocal music were cross-fertilized by the printed page (1969: 122)." These intersections provided a richer medium and conditioned a cultural mindset capable of more complex and elaborate modes of communication, leading McLuhan to compare the "agility and multiple mental focuses" of Elizabethan prose with technology of the modern movie camera (McLuhan 1953: 121). Performative sensibilities present a threat to the universalization or standardization of textual inscription. Any obsession or privileging of 'the original' in such scenarios would be impossible, as each performance contains its own original archontic principle. This sense of a performed and cultural archive, viewed in terms of Foucualt's non-subjective discourse and McLuhan's acoustic space, may be seen in the contemporary theoretical and aesthetic attempts to restore the blurry lines between subjective and objective experience.

The cultural archive, thought of as a spatial medium, orients itself towards an open future of multiple uses and multiple repetitions that do not bear allegiance to an original. It might entail following Derrida's account of the Freud "who wants to be an archivist who is more of an archaeologist than the archaeologist," conducting an archaeological exploration of the landscape, looking as Derrida suggests Freud did, for "an imprint that is singular each time, an impression that is almost no longer an archive but almost confuses itself with the pressure of the footstep that leaves its still-living mark on a substrate, a surface, a place of origin […] An archive without an archive […]." (Derrida 1995: 97-98) The destabilization of archival place by Derrida's deconstruction launches infinite speculations on new realms of possibility for what the archive might be, thus truly situating it away from present reality. The unattainable originality of Elizabethan performance that McLuhan touches on reappears today in an easy technological metaphor: as screens filled with simultaneous windows of information, as the dominance and ethereality of email, and as the preponderance of an ephemeral digital culture. Yet it goes beyond electronic communication and into the very nature of theoretical possibility, as well as theories of representation and theories of difference draw on this *archive* of knowledge.

By proceeding along these arguments put forth by McLuhan, enhanced by Derrida and Foucault, the archic function rears its head. Acoustic space, discourse, and the archive might each be practiced in an interdisciplinary methodology of epistemological archaeology; it is suddenly not only McLuhan's legacy one might be concerned with. Looking towards a past haunted with the inscripted impact of the thinkers who come before us inspires an anxiety of filial assignment; this malaise, hinted at by the moniker 'Daddy McMessage' defines the *mal d'archive*. In the archive of the future, an understanding of the way in which affective spaces process and create information allows us to move away from the traditional centering of the western subject, of interpretive teleology and, *perhaps*, of textual inscription. The specters of Freud and McLuhan, those irrepressible ancestors, must remain, but their names alone do not impart the consignment of meaning of commandment and commencement.

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