Régis Debray, *What is Mediology?*
Translated by Martin Irvine
From: Régis Debray, "Qu'est-ce que la médiologie?"
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We all know that it's not enough to found a discipline by inventing a term. "Mediology" is a neologism, appearing in 1979 in *The Power of the Intellectual in France* (1). Under this label, over the years, an intersection of original research was constituted where philosophers, historians of technologies, historians of the book, theorists of aesthetics, and researchers in "infocom" crossed paths. Many misunderstandings, more or less disturbing, still surround this field of investigation.

In spite of its suffix, mediology does not claim the status of a science, and even less something "new" (because it is not in itself a discovery). Despite its root, mediology is not a sociology of media systems under another name. Mediology would like to bring to light the function of *medium* in all its forms, over a long time span (since the birth of writing), and without becoming obsessed by today's media.

It is a question, in the first approximation, of analyzing the "higher social functions" (religion, ideology, art, politics) in their relationship with the means and mediums/environments [*milieux*] of transmission and transport. The significant point, and the center of gravity of reflection, is the interval [*l'entre-deux*: the space (in)between]. It is still the fuzzy zone of interactions between technology and culture, or the interferences between our technologies of memorizing, transmission, and displacement, on the one hand, and our modes of belief, thought, and organization, on the other.

We recognize the place Walter Benjamin occupies among the predecessors of mediology. He did not wonder if photography is an art, but what the photograph had changed in our conception of art. Or, further still, the intuitions of Victor Hugo, with his always provocative "This will kill that" (2). The verb "will kill" matters less here, though it's eminently debatable, than making the connection between two things apparently far removed--the book and architecture, printing and Protestantism. The mediologists are interested in the effects of the cultural structuring of a technical innovation (writing, printing, digital technology, but also the telegraph, the bicycle, or photography), or, in the opposite direction, in the technical bases of a social or cultural development (science, religion, or movement of ideas).

Our interest, then, does not concern an object nor an area of the real (e.g., the media), but the relationship between these objects or these areas. Between an ideality and a materiality, a thought and a machine, a plan and a device. It comes from the taste for two dimensions (this and that). The study of the bicycle in itself does not have anything mediological about it, except when the existing relationship between the bicycle as an event and the advent of feminism is

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examined, or of the kinetic in art, or of democratic individualism, etc. The study of the idea of a nation becomes "mediological" when its connection to its networks is excavated--roads, railways, postal routes, telegraph lines, electricity. A study of the desire for immortality would be welcome in itself, but it would become mediological only if one endeavors to show how this intimate aspiration changed under the effect of painting, the photograph, cinema, television, in short, with the apparatuses of the collective imaginary.

The field of functional correlations is broad and various. One can stick to the interaction within a system *[intrasystème]*. For example, for the book, the printed mode of reproduction (technical aspect) and the internal organization of texts (cultural aspect). For the fixed image, digitalization and the art photograph (what the computer did to film). Or again, for the cinema, how the video tape recorder upset the cinéphile. The pleasures of discovery will increase when we move to the interaction between systems [*intersystème*]. For example, what the appearance of photography modified in painting; what electricity changed in architecture (lifting gear and skyscraper); or the direct televising of the Tour de France, produced, at the beginning of the century, in the printed newspaper. One finally can approach, with risks and dangers, the interactions across systems [*transsystèmes*]. For example, relations of dependence linking the itinerary in a desert milieu and the monotheist breakthrough, typographical culture and the socialist invention, cinematographic projection and the construction of imaginary nations.

Taking into account the effect-return is not only a concern of today. Ethnologists and sociologists taught us what man made with his tools. Technologists and epistemologists taught us (and rather well) what tools do to man. Material technologies and symbolic forms do not constitute separate continents (except in idealistic gigantomachies such as "man against machines"). Beyond a renewed place of honor for "intellectual technologies" (Pierre Lévy) and the means of transport, which return us to work of Goody, Postman, Latour, Havelock, and others, the mediological approach could lead one day to a new way of describing the world and of telling stories, far from the inherited dualism. We can proceed by abandoning the ancestral oppositions which direct what we write like a remote-control: original/copy, potential/actual, internal/ external, underlying substance/phenomenon, spiritual/material. These antiquated tandems reproduce themselves over and over again in other more techno forms: real/virtual; support/code; signal/message.

It is not because God is dead. Indeed, what died is the instinctive and unconscious theology which pushes us to place at the beginning of any history an origin and then a process; a Creator, then creatures; an Essence, then its phenomena; an ideal End, then subordinate means. The mediological style of inquiry rushes over this common direction by showing that the origin is what arises at the end; that the external medium/environment [*milieu*] is internal with the message, and that the periphery is in the center of the core; that transport [of

a message] transforms; that, say, the material of inscription dictates the form of writing; and that, in general, our finalities follow our external form.

Let us, then, summarize in short form the principal theses which guide us.

1. The influence of an ideology cannot be analyzed in ideological terms. The hidden dynamic of "the action of ideas in history" is to seek their material forms [*supports*] and sequences of transmission.

2. The transmission, or the transport of information in time, is to be distinguished radically from that of communication, or the transport of information in space, even if they combine in reality.

3. If man is the animal which has a history, then the nonbiological, artificial transmission of acquired features is another name for human culture. The animals communicate; they do not transmit. (They know the message by the signal, not the cumulative heritage of traces).

4. The means of transmission, or the mediating vehicles of a symbolic system, have a double nature: the technical devices (surfaces of inscription of signs, procedures of coding, apparatuses of diffusion) are added to the organic devices (institutions, languages, ritual). It is the presence of a hierarchical institution (or materialized organization) in addition to an equipment (or organized matter) which distinguishes an act of transmission from a simple act of communication. To schematize to the extreme, "American" empiricism tends to privilege the technical side of communications, and "European" sociology the political side (according to the Frankfurt school, political realism and technical angelism; the McLuhan school, technical realism and political angelism). The mediologist seeks to reconnect *praxis* [practice, material history] and *techné* [systematic knowledge].

5. The object of transmission does not preexist the mechanism of its transmission. The downstream constitutes the upstream. For example, as Maurice Sachot has shown, it is not the figure and words of Christ (the originating core message) which were transmitted to posterity by the Church of the apostles and the Fathers (3). The figure of Christ was elaborate in three centuries (starting from a probable Jesus of Nazareth) by the Christian organization, through a succession of structuring cultural matrices (Jewish, Greek, and Roman). The historicist illusion consists in attributing an "origin" (Jesus, Marx, Buddha, Freud, etc.) to the later forms of belief.

6. The modes of transmission for symbolic systems in the modern era are not separable from the modes of physical transport, whose conjunction configures a technically determined "mediasphere" (namely, a certain configuration in space and time). The mediological view endeavors to embrace locomotive machines and symbolic machines. For example, the coupling of telegraph and railroad after 1840, and now, telephone-car, radio-plane, television-satellites, etc.

7. The medium or vehicular device is not given immediately in the perceptible experience. It must be constructed by an operation of intellectual analysis. One realizes, then, that the concept of *medium* returns inevitably to that of the *milieu* (while pointing towards a cultural ecology), and that of *milieu* to that of technical *mediation*(as emerges from the phenomenon of human evolution always in progress).

A new grid for reading emerges whenever a wall falls down between two established disciplines and a border disappears. The birth of ecology cut down the wall between the living and the inert by showing that there were complex systems of bonds between the vegetable and animal species on one side, and, on the another, the grounds, the territories, and the environments [*milieux*]. In the same way, sociology overturned the wall that separated individual phenomena (the domain moral philosophers) from collective phenomena (the domain of historians). It would be a question here of cutting down the wall which separates the noble from the trivial, the forms considered higher (religion, art, politics) from the domains considered lower (materials, signal carriers, transmission channels).

Our goal: to destroy the wall that separates technology, until now experienced in Western tradition as anticulture, and culture, experienced as antitechnology. Each of these domains is thought as against the other. Perhaps it is time to think them systematically one by the other, one with the other.

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1. Book by Regis Debray, Editions Ramsay et Folio-Gallimard, Paris.
2. Translator's note: Quotation from Victor Hugo's *Hunchback of Notre Dame.* From a famous scene where a priest compares a printed book to the architecture and stained glass windows of the cathedral (as communication medium). The book, promoted by Protestants, is seen as "killing" the cathedral as information medium.
3. Author of *L'Invention du Christ: genèse d'une religion* (Collection "Le champ médiologique") Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998.