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Frédéric Vandenberghe

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RÉGIS DEBRAY AND MEDIATION STUDIES, OR HOW DOES AN IDEA BECOME A MATERIAL FORCE?

Frédéric Vandenberghe

ABSTRACT   This article presents an outline of Régis Debray's mediology. Situated at the crossroads of philosophy, theology, anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, political sciences, semiotics, media and cultural studies, mediology is a relatively autonomous discipline that analyses the totality of the processes of mediation that intervene between culture and agency, and transform ideas into a material force. Mediology or mediation studies broadens the notion of media so as to include all material and institutional vectors of communication and defines mediation as the totality of interactions between culture and technology that make the diffusion (through space) and the transmission (over time) of ideas possible.

KEYWORDS   Régis Debray • André Leroi-Gourhan • Marxism • media studies • mediology • Michel Serres

RÉGIS DEBRAY: ALWAYS RADICAL, NEVER CONSEQUENT

It is not enough to invent a new word to found a new discipline. One also needs a charismatic personality, seminal ideas, good contacts and contracts, a strong publication record, support of powerful institutions, and a solid network of faithful followers who want to spread the word through the academic world. Following the footsteps of Lamarck (who invented the word biology in 1802), Comte (who made up the word sociology in 1837) and Haeckel (who invented ecology in 1867), Régis Debray, the French polymath, essayist and former comrade in arms of Che Guevara, coined the neologism 'mediology' in 1979 in a book on the structural transformations of the French

intellectual field since the Reformation (Debray, 1979/1981) In a series of influential lectures, published in 1991 under the Saussurean title *Cours de médiologie générale* (Debray, 1991), Debray founded mediation studies as a new interdiscipline that analyses the socio-logistics of the transmission of culture.[1] Although he is a controversial and contested figure who thrives on polemics, he has nevertheless succeeded in gathering some of the most innovative philosophers and sociologists of media and technology in France (Bernhard Stiegler, Pierre Lévy, François Dagognet, Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, Antoine Hennion) around his project and its journal, the *Cahiers de médiologie.*[2]

Radical activist, presidential adviser, social scientist, political philosopher, art critique, novelist, poet and writer, this former student of Althusser is a man of contradictions. Always radical, never consequent, his agile mind is always on the move – physically, between continents, psychologically, between moods, stylistically, between treatise and prose, intellectually, between disciplines, and politically, between Castro and Charles de Gaulle. Wary of all intellectual fashions, he willingly adopts the posture of the archeo-modernist who flirts with Marxism, nationalism and religion when others court semiotics, cosmopolitanism and *laïcité*. He may defend unfashionable positions, but at least, unlike some of the former Maoists, he has not sold out to liberalism. Leaving aside the rumours, the myths and the anecdotes concerning his personal, political and intellectual life, which he has willingly exposed in his autobiographical trilogy *Les temps d'apprendre à vivre* (Debray, 1987, 1996, 1998a), his development can best be described in terms of a four-phasic approach of the theory-praxis link: from theoretician of the revolution and practitioner of the guerrilla alongside 'Che' in Latin America, ending up in a Bolivian jail at the end of the 1960s; through a critique of intellectual power of French intellectual life, Third World adviser to President Mitterrand and member of the Conseil d'Etat in the 1970s and the 1980s; to a megatheory of mediations and a staunch defence of Republican law and order in the 1990s; ending with an exploration of the religious roots of community and violence in the new millennium.

Régis Debray is the author of more than 10 philosophical books, as many political pamphlets and even more novels. Over a period of 40 years, Debray has worked on three main topics: Marxism and revolution (1967); religion and nationalism (1981/1983, 2003); and intellectuals and media (1979/1981, 1991, 1994/1996). In this article, I will only deal with his socio-philosophical writings on mediation and will neglect his political philosophy, his philosophy of religion and his provocative interventions in the public sphere (his ill-fated defence of the Serbian nationalists against the NATO-coalition, his interventions against multiculturalism and in favour of non-confessional schools, and more recently, following the invasion of Iraq, his proposal to relocate the UN headquarters in Jerusalem).

Mediology or mediation studies offer a systematic framework for the interdisciplinary analysis of culture and technology that aims to integrate the

social sciences and overcome their limitations. Sociology studies how collectivities are formed and societies are made, but tends to neglect the role of culture and technology; semiotics studies culture, but omits the material conditions of its diffusion; media studies focus on newspapers, colour TVs and the internet, but leaves out other media of communication and transmission; while the history of technology ignores how collective subjectivities are formed and how societies are transformed by techniques and social organizations. What was lacking was a unified approach for the socio-technical study of the history and political efficacy of the means of diffusion and transmission of culture over time and through space. Focusing on the material and institutional conditions of cultural transmission and dealing, literally, with the ways, the canals, the mobiles, the stations, the ports, the portals and other sorts of material and institutional vectors by means of, and thanks to which, ideas and ideologies are transmitted from generation to generation, mediation studies offers a loosely integrated perspective that reconnects 'socio-logy' to 'techno-logy'.

WHAT IS MEDIATION STUDIES?

Mediology offers a specific dialectical mode of presentation (*Darstellung*) that mediates empirical research (*Forschung*) on messages, mediums and media environments by replacing the media and communication mantra of the late Shannon ('Who says what to whom and by which channel') by a more Leninist one: 'What to do, how, via which vectors and under what constraints' (Debray, 1998b: 8). The theory of mediation does no more pretend to be a theory of the media than psychoanalysis is a science of the slips of the tongue, but in the same way as the latter includes slips of the tongue, the former encompasses the media.

Mediation studies is born from the double frustration of a Marxist who couldn't fall back on Marxism to understand the world-historical efficacy of Marxism in a Marxist way, and of a French intellectual who, in spite of Bourdieu, deplores the absence of a sociology of intellectuals in the country that invented the intellectual and where every social scientific theory eventually empties itself in the political issues of the day. 'The Germans have had Mannheim, Weber, Schumpeter, Michels. The Americans S. M. Lipset, Wright Mills. The Italians Gramsci and his followers. France has had the Dreyfus affair and has since then rested on its laurels' (1979/1981: 38).

Situated at the crossroads of anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, political sciences, aesthetics, semiotics, media and cultural studies, ecology, philosophy and theology – which makes it rather hard to predict on which shelves the books will be placed – mediology is a relatively autonomous discipline which, in line with Saussure's famous dictum that the point of view creates the object, 'cuts out' (like a cookie-cutter) of the empirical manifold the heterogeneous domain of the 'middle realm' of the social

and the technological, and constructs it as an object of comparative research in order to analyse its role in the transmission of culture and the (re)production of society.

Following Michel Serres (1980/1983, 1992/1995), one of his mentors, Debray conceives of this 'middle realm' of techno-social mediations in which the social and the technical meet and mingle as a 'transactional reality' (Winnicott) in which, thanks to the communication of information and the transmission of culture, the spirit gets materialized into technology at the same time as the social gets organized into society and reproduced through history. 'The *medio* in mediology does not refer to media or medium but to mediations, that is to the dynamic totality of procedures and intermediary institutions that intervene between the production of signs and the production of events' (Debray, 1994/1996: 29).

Those intermediaries are hybrids. They are both and at the same time social, cultural and technological. Like Bruno Latour (1991), Debray thinks that the socio-cultural and the technological are inseparable, but unlike Latour, who attends the Sunday Mass but gives only scant attention to the symbolical realm of the Spirit (Vandenberghe, 2006: 197–242), he conceives of culture as the middle and middling instance that connects people and things, and analyses mediation as a process that, by structuring *praxis*, makes the spatial production of society through the communication of information possible and that, by storing memory, contributes to its temporal reproduction through the transmission of culture from generation to generation.

> To communicate is to transport information through space; to transmit is to transform information through time. . . . In the first case, by relating a here with an elsewhere, we will make connections (and thus society); in the other case, by relating a now and a then, we will make continuity (and thus culture). (Debray, 2000: 3).

In so far as the transmission of culture already presupposes the communication of information, mediation studies can be initially defined as the study of the material and social conditions of the transmission of culture and, thus, of the production and reproduction of society.

This may all sound rather familiar to Althusserian and neo-Gramscian comrades, but instead of accepting that ideas have an impact and that ideologies work either because they are true, as is allegedly the case with Marxism itself, or because they are false, as is the case with all the other ideologies, Debray innovates by moving from the message to the media, and by conceiving of the latter as techno-typical and ethno-cultural vectors of transmission that make the efficacy of the symbolic possible in the first place.

'How does an idea become a material force?' (Marx), 'What are the material conditions of force that an idea has to satisfy to become itself a material force?' (Althusser), or, more generally, 'What are the material and institutional conditions of the symbolic transmission of culture and the reproduction of society?' – this is the central question of mediation studies.[3]

Formulated in such general terms, it is obvious that the central question of mediation studies coincides with the central problem of sociology: How is society possible? How does one get from a disorganized *pan* to an organized *holon* (Aristotle)? What transforms a bunch of atomized individuals into a stable society? How is a stable society produced, reproduced and transformed? Although mediation studies focuses mainly on the material and the technical conditions of the symbolic transmission of culture, it does not neglect the institutional and social conditions of the reproduction of society.

Looking at Debray's socio-philosophical production of the last 20 years, we can in fact distinguish a double project in his early work that will later be fused into the single project of mediation studies. The first project, developed in *Critique de la raison politique ou l'inconscient religieux* (1981/ 1983), is 'metapolitical'. Noting the transhistorical presence of religion (which unites) and the permanence of the nation (which divides), Debray tries to give a rational explanation of the necessity of the irrational in any organized society.[4] For Debray, religions and nations are simply an integral part of the 'political unconscious' that underlies and determines the 'ideological pre-conscious' which, in turn, as in Freud's metapsychology, underlies and determines the strategies and the tactics of activists and politicians who mobilize the masses. Moving from Freud to Kant, Debray analyses the political unconscious reflexively as the condition of possibility (= *Critique*) of the knowledge of the laws (= *Reason*) of the formation and functioning of large social groups (= *Political*).

To adequately understand religions (Judaism, Catholicism, Hinduism, etc.) and other 'isms' as material forces, one has, however, to see that they offer not only mental representations of reality, but that, in so far as people are 'hailed', emotionally gripped and constituted as 'subjects' by them, they actively structure and organize their practices in a similar way as Kant's schematism does. As promises of a better world, ideologies may be as false and illusory as religions. Yet, if they move people, keep them together or drive them apart, make them form churches, chapels and schools, or join parties, cells and armies, it is not in spite but rather because of their falsity and illusory promises. Marx did not see it that way, of course, and yet if we want to understand Marxism and its relation to 'really existing socialism', if we want to understand the symbolic efficacy and the performative force of Marxism as an anti-religious ideology that has itself become a religion with its own pontiffs and churches, cults and rituals, organs and newspapers, we would better seek guidance in the writings of Comte, Durkheim and Mauss than in the ones of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

The second project, already announced in the opening pages of *Le pouvoir intellectuel en France* (1979/1981), but only fully developed two decades later in *Cours de médiologie générale* (1991), extends the social psychology of ideologies and group formation with an analysis of the techno-social modes of the transmission of beliefs, ideologies and ideas. Religions and ideologies may grip the masses, but it is only if the prophet and the

ideologue can rely on an effective social organization (the Church, the Party, the School) and a powerful system for the diffusion and the transmission of their ideas (books, pamphlets and flyers, but also transportation systems and other technological vectors of ideas), that they can intervene as a force in history. To successfully transmit an ideology and turn the idea into a material force, one has to 'collectivise and materialise' (Debray, 1997/2000: 27), organize the socius into a collective organization, and manage the logistics of diffusion. As an investigation into the material bases of the symbolic universe, mediology analyses the 'materialities of culture' and, countering the ideocentrism and idealism of the history of ideas, convincingly shows that ideas have no force of persuasion in themselves, but need the intervention of technological and institutional vectors to intervene in society and transform it. In the same way as there is no foot and mouth disease without sheep and cattle, there's no socialism without Marxist religion, a communist party and party press. Or, less metaphorically:

> The capacity of an idea to put a mass in movement, to modify the balance of a field of power or to induce this or that behaviour is not dependent on its truth-value. It is rather a function of the (historically and socially determined) mode of transmission on the one hand and the type of investment of adhesion to it on the other hand. Although the two factors interact and can only be separated through abstraction, we will leave the study of the former to mediology and concentrate our efforts here on the mechanisms, the nature and the implications of collective adhesion. (Debray, 1981/1983: 116–17)

In his first major statement on mediology, Debray fuses the two projects into one and formulates the 'central hypothesis' of mediation studies, broadly defined, in a single phrase: 'The logic of transmission and the logic of organisation cannot be separated' (Debray, 1991: 10). In other words, the social and the technical do not form two classes of reality, but one single realm in which subjects and objects, humans and non-humans, intermingle and co-determine each other. Following the basic insight of Actor Network Theory, mediation studies aims to redistribute action by scattering it over a plurality of elements, human as well as non-human ones, that are spread across the environment and linked together in a heterogeneous network, each element of which translates and prolongs the action of the anonymous collective. Reminding us of Latour's metaphysical mingling of humans and non-humans and the operational distinction he establishes between the 'sociogram' and the 'technogram' (Latour, 1987: 138), the first one showing us the changing string of people tied to a single piece of technology, the second one, the changing shape of technology a bunch of people are working on, Debray defines the medium as the heterogeneous interface between the spiritual and the material world, and specifies it by distinguishing between its material and its institutional side, its logistical and its strategic side.

To understand 'how one can do things with words' (Austin), one has to open the black box of the medium and analyse the inner workings that almost magically 'transform opinions into bayonets', to paraphrase Napoleon's definition of the revolution. Inside of the box, one will find two smaller boxes. The first one is labelled 'organized material' (OM) and refers to the technical vectors of transmission (subdivided in turn into the physical carrier (OM1), the mode of expression (OM2) and the dispositif of circulation (OM3)); the second one is labelled 'materialized organization' (MO) and refers to the institutional vectors of transmission (subdivided in turn into the linguistic code (MO1), the framework of the organization (MO2) and the matrixes of communication (MO3)).[5] 'Alphabetical writing, for instance, is a (technical) operation. Its social transmission presupposes, on the one hand, papers, tracers and books (inert transmitters) and, on the other hand, schools, publishers and teachers (animated transmitters)' (Debray, 2000: 125).

Opening those boxes means moving from the *opus* to the *modus operandi*, and analysing the transmitters no longer as vectors but as a *praxis* and process of transmission:

> On the one hand, there's the work to organise the inorganic material: Depositing of signals onto certain materials (tracing of characters on a sheet of paper or engraving of digital information on to an aluminium disk), following certain specific procedures. . . . On the other hand, there's the work to organise one's fellows: The constitution of an apparatus – institution, organisation or corporation – ensues into something like a non-biological organism (the community which is created to that end). (Debray, 2000: 126)

Mediation studies not only enjoins the analyst to investigate the medium of transmission as a practical process of transmission, but also to consider its objects of analysis in relational terms. The medium is not a thing, but a dynamic, dialectical *praxis* and process that interrelates and integrates objects, peoples and texts.

> One is acting as a mediologist each time one brings to light the relations that unify a symbolic corpus (a religion, a doctrine, an artistic genre, a discipline, etc.), a form of collective organisation (a church, a party, a school, an academy, etc.), and a technical system of communication (recording, storage and circulation of traces).[6]

From this relational perspective, the central and somewhat speculative question of mediation studies – 'How can an idea become a material force?' – can be reformulated and answered in empirical terms: (Founding) texts, ideas and ideologies of (famous) people like Jesus, Marx or Hitler have an institutional impact on (ordinary) people, generate their collective practices and function as the active principle of their collective cohesion, thanks to the intervention of concrete material objects like monuments and documents, bodies and bikes, vocal chords, radios and computer screens that make the

production of ideas, their diffusion through space and their transmission through time, possible.

Although the epistemological vector seems to go from texts and symbolic corpuses (myths, religions, ideologies) to people and socio-political bodies (associations, institutions and organizations) and from there to material objects (media of communication, vectors of transmission), mediation studies inverses the order of causation and adopts as a heuristic principle that it is, in fact, the changes in the material conditions that first condition the technical aspects of the transmission of ideas (e.g. the invention of printing and the advent of the first books). As a consequence of the changes in the forces of intellectual production, the institutional conditions change in turn (e.g. the Counter-Reformation and the formation of the Protestant Churches). Finally, as a result of the material and the institutional changes, the texts are canonized (e.g. Luther's bible) and performatively transformed into the apparent causes of the intellectual and social change of which they are the consequence.

Linking this dialectical inversion of causes and consequences back to the distinction between the double process of the 'organization of the material' (OM) and the 'materialization of the organization' (MO), we can finally see and understand how mediation studies is able to empirically 're-specify' the dialectical interplay between agency and structure in a never-ending morphogenetic sequence whereby a change in the material forces of diffusion can trigger a symbolic revolution, which grips the masses and makes them move and change society. Taking the invention of writing and the printing press as a pseudo-concrete historical example of Debray's mediological rewriting of historical materialism, we can see that the universe of the mediologist is not a mechanical but a dialectical and systemic universe with feed-back loops of causal co-determination between the material and spiritual factors:

> The invention of writing has produced texts (OM1); the printing press (OM2), a new system of reproduction of texts, will produce a large quantity of objects-books (OM3) that are inseparable from a technical and human environment that produces and diffuses texts (the atelier and the bookshop). In turn, this stimulates the expansion and the official promotion of national languages by the State (MO1), diverse institutions of the Republic of Letters (academies, royal libraries, scholarly periodicals, cabinets of reading, etc.) (MO2) that carry in their turn discursive matrices and precise forms of sociability (the notion of the copyright, the form of correspondence, the discourse of reception, the conversation of the salon, the communication within learned societies, etc.). (Debray, 2000: 131)

Note that in this spiralling sequence of increasing complexity the causality is material and formal (in Aristotle's sense) and that there's no place for simple causality and linear determinism: 'A does not cause B, but without A, there is no B'. The invention of writing did no more produce the Counter-Reformation or the Enlightenment than the invention of the bike produced the suffragettes and feminism, and yet without printing press and without bikes feminism would not have existed.

PHILOSOPHICAL INTERLUDE

Actor Network Theory and mediation studies belong to the same Franco-French intellectual tradition (cf. Stiegler, 1994). They each extend it in their own way. Whereas both continental and analytical philosophy seem to have offered nothing else in the last millennium but an ongoing meditative footnote (to Plato) on how to properly conceptualize the ontological, epistemological and ethico-political relations between the subject and the object, rationalism and empiricism, the mind and the body, the sacred and the profane, a philosophy of technology has flourished in France in the last half of the 20th century which, unlike the Germans, does not try to dialectically overcome the age-old oppositions – usually ending up on one side of the spectrum anyway (see Marx vs. Hegel, etc.) – but pretends to get out of the impasse by simply ignoring them. *Tertium datur*, it triumphantly claims, and laughing out loud, it proposes a certain empirical philosophy of technology as the *tertium gaudens*.

Instead of exorcising technology away with Martin Heidegger (technology as *Gestell*) and Jacques Ellul (technology as technocracy), or accepting it lock-stock-and-barrel as a Cartesian sign of irresistible progress on the road to high modernity, this philosophy of technology does not judge technology as good or bad in the first place. Adopting the no-nonsense approach and the love of facts endemic to British empiricists, it does not deem that art, technique and technology are too trivial or banal for philosophical research either, but taking a sincere interest in material culture and the fact of technology, it tries to understand technology and to study it empirically.

Following the seminal work of Michel Serres, Actor Network Theory and mediation studies overcome the ontological dualism between the subject and the object or culture and nature by inserting an ontologically mixed sphere made up of humans and non-humans to mediate between the ideal and the material world. Conceived as a vector of transmission, the medium has, like Jesus and the King of France, a 'double body' (Kantorowicz, 1957).[7] As materialization of the spirit, it belongs to the material world; as a spiritualization of the material, it partakes of the spiritual world. Conceived as a process, mediation is the *praxis*, which, like Jesus' life, links both worlds and allows the Father and the Holy Spirit to intervene in this world by interconnecting people and objects. This reference to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit indicates that mediation studies is not dualist but trinitarian, not only dialectical but also 'trialectical'. In the same way as God needs the Son to become what He is, words need a series of mediations (or 'translations' and 'articulations') to be heard in this world. Nothing is immediate; everything is mediated. 'The world does not come out of a pistol in one shot', as Hegel would say. One always needs processes of negations and to go through the adventures of the concept to become what one is.

Although Debray mixes humans and non-humans in his notion of the medium and introduces mediation as a heuristic process to investigate the

performative transformation of words into deeds, he does not share the radical constructivism of Latour's anthropology of science and the cultural-ization of nature that it implies. Like Roy Bhaskar (1989), he refuses to collapse the ontological into the epistemological. It is not because objects can only be known 'to us' under certain descriptions that one is allowed to conclude that the descriptions actually construct the objects themselves.

> It does not follow from the fact that the objective world is inseparable from the practical representations that a society has of it that a society can construct all its objective references. That a map contributes to the formation of a territory does not mean that the territory is the invention of the cartographer. (Debray, 1998c: 267)

Having refused the radical constructivism of Woolgar and Co., Debray is not inclined to 'deconstruct' the progress of science and technology either. Our relation to things is always mediated by humans and our relation to other humans is always mediated by things, but if one should mix humans and non-humans, things and people, to understand the efficacy and perfor-mativity of words, one should, nevertheless, clearly distinguish between two modes of existence and not confuse the history of things, which is linear and cumulative, with the history of humans, which is non-cumulative and cyclical.

The myth of Prometheus is there to remind us that the Gods may be but we, mortals, are not in possession of the truth of human affairs (Debray, 1981/1983: 52–3). Prometheus wanted to steal the secret of 'political art', but given that this secret was too well protected by Zeus' guards, he ended up in the atelier of Hephaistos and Athena where, undiscovered, he stole the fire. We are still asking ourselves the same questions as Plato, Aristotle and Kant, but we no longer use fire, pigeons and runners to communicate between people or horses, stage-coaches or steamships to travel through space. Tech-niques evolve and form a progressive, irreversible system that follows the laws of 'techno-logy' (Leroi-Gourhan). There are scientific and technical truths that we all accept as truths (for the time being) – they belong to the realm of *epistémè*. But we don't agree on philosophical, moral, political or social issues – they belong to the realm of *doxa*. The intersubjective universe is directed by unverifiable beliefs, the objective universe by refutable knowl-edge.

> Travelling at the speed of 1000 km an hour instead of 5 or 20, the replacement of the foot by the horse and the horse by the plane have not brought more justice or diminished the constraints in social life. Our vision of things has been changed by it, but not the 'meaning of our life'. (Debray, 1981/1983: 55)

There may be some lingering nostalgia and a good deal of anti-(American) modernism in Debray's work but he's no more of a technophobe or a technophile than Latour is. Although he resists the current anti-categorical imperative to disperse and multiply and does not hesitate to use

capital letters to talk about Religion, History or the State, he acknowledges that word technology, invented only in 1777, has always to be declined in plural. He does not paraphrase Thatcher and say that 'there's no such thing as technology, there are only civilisations, nations and tribes', but he comes quite close to it when, in his radical refusal of the American economic and technological hegemony, he writes in shorthand: 'globalisation of objects = tribalisation of subjects' (Debray, 1991: 468). In any case, even if technologies are far from innocent, one should avoid all the Heideggerian shortcuts of the Frankfurt School and not blame hammers and bulldozers for the building of concentration camps. Technologies are neither good nor bad inherently but rather they are both. What they eventually become depends on us, at least in part, as the recent history of the internet shows, for example. It's people who make technologies, of course, and that's why technologies have their own history, but we might as well reverse the order of things and say with Leroi-Gourhan (1964) that it is the technologies that make people.[8]

André Leroi-Gourhan, the analyst of the 'mythogrammes' of Lascaux and counterpart of Lévi-Strauss, is a pre-historian and paleo-anthropologist. Although his work may not be that well known outside or even inside of France, it is nevertheless foundational and may well be the unacknowledged background of contemporary post-humanism (Vandenberghe, 2006). The starting point of Leroi-Gourhan's anthropology is vaguely similar to the one of Arnold Gehlen (1986: 20): Man is a *Mängelwesen*, or a deficient being. Humans are 'prematurely' brought into the world as an accident of their evolution towards an upright posture. This upward posture may have led to the loss of the automatic or organic adaptation to the environment that characterizes the animal kingdom; it has also led to the development of language and technology, both of which are typically human. What distinguishes the human kingdom from the animal one and explains civilization, according to Leroi-Gourhan, is the upright posture of *homo sapiens*: 'Humanisation begins with the feet' (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964, I: 211).

Indeed, the vertical locomotion of man has liberated the hand, which is a precondition for the development of tools, and the liberation of the hand has in turn liberated the mouth and made speech possible. Once the double capacity of the fabrication of tools and symbolic expression are functionally acquired – which happened four or five million years ago – the process of humanization and civilization can begin and be understood as a process of progressive exteriorization of the operational programmes that allow man to adapt to his environment. Following Marcel Mauss (1950: 363–86), who has shown in his famous article on the techniques of the body that even our seemingly most natural ways of behaving such as walking or swimming presuppose learning of corporal technique, Leroi-Gourhan conceives of the anthropogenesis as a technogenesis. Humanity constructs itself through technology – it is the non-human that makes us human; the object that makes the subject is the 'transcendental objective' (Serres) of humanity. Paraphrasing

de Beauvoir's famous statement about women, we could summarize the wilful blurring of humans and non-humans, culture and nature, sociology and technology, by saying one is not born a human, but becomes one, thanks to technology.

The central notion of Leroi-Gourhan's socio-physical anthropology is the 'exteriorization of organs'. Although this notion sounds similar to Hegel and Marx's notions of *Entaüsserung* (exteriorization or alienation), Leroi-Gourhan does not mean to suggest that there's something 'inside' of humans that they exteriorize through their praxis and that this praxis is precisely what distinguishes them from animals. Four or five million years ago, humans started to exteriorize themselves in their tools, and thanks to those silexes and other prostheses, humans became human. Projecting themselves into the world through technologies, technologies necessarily act back on human subjects and modify them, by modifying their objects. Reversing classic humanism, Leroi-Gourhan not only affirms that it is the objects that make humans (as when we say that it is 'the suit that makes the man'), but he also insists that technologies follow their own laws and have a mind of their own, that they have unintended and unexpected consequences, both happy and perverse, that no one, no individual, no society and no politics can control. Where humanists cry wolf and see a sign of dehumanization, alienation and reification, post-humanists see only a normal, 'human, all too human' process of humanization through exteriorization, reification and alienation.[9] Stripping the old, venerable and critical concepts of the humanists of their normative overtones, the post-humanists willingly provoke the humanists, but without really telling them why they do so. Once we understand the intellectual background, however, we can easily see that the post-humanist is not necessarily an anti-humanist. The provocative value of their statements thus falls away and, *à la limite*, even convinced humanists can appreciate the intelligence of an absurd statement such as the following without being shocked: 'For a humanist, the best friend of man is man himself. For a non-humanist, it is his gun, his car or his mobile phone' (Tisseron, 1998: 273). Having said this, I still think that post-humanists in general and Debray in particular, overemphasize the logic of materiality and underestimate the potentiality of the logos. In more Hegelian language, I would say that the mediation needs to be mediated in its turn so that the stress on the materialities of the symbolic becomes subservient to the symbolization of the material and the materialization of the symbolic.

OLD MEDIA, NEW MEDIA

Mediology not only offers a general theory of social order and social change but also, as suits a dialectical theory, distinguishes different epochs in the history of mankind, each of which is triggered by a technological

revolution in the media of transmission and dominated by a hegemonic medium which determines, or, as Althusser would have said, 'overdetermines', all the social, cultural and ideological phenomena of that epoch. Inspired by Comte's developmental law of three stages ('*loi des trois états*'), according to which mankind has moved from the theological, via the metaphysical, to the scientific or positive stage, Debray distinguishes three stages in the history of mankind, each of which is configured by the dominant medium of the epoch: the logo-, the grapho-, and the videospheres (Debray, 1991: chs 10–12; Debray, 1992: ch. 8).[10]

Driven by the techno-logic of the dominant medium, the material and cultural vectors of transmission form together a complex ecological system: the 'mediasphere'. It reforms and performs its surroundings (and vice versa). The *logosphere* refers to the period following the invention of writing in the 'axial age' and is dominated by oral culture. The written word is of central importance but the teachings they contain are mainly diffused by oral means and images. In Greece, the logosphere makes possible the epochal transition from *mythos* to *logos*. With the invention of the printing press, the logosphere comes to its end, or better, is 'sublated' (*Aufgehoben*) in the 15th century by the *graphosphere*. With the advent of the graphosphere, printing imposes its rationality on the totality of culture. Newspapers and books are distributed en masse. Although they are read in private, they are discussed in the public sphere, where the only force permitted is 'the force of the better argument', at least according to Habermas, who follows Kant on this point. The Age of Enlightenment may have started with Gutenberg, but according to Debray, it finished on the barricades of May 1968. Debray, who was in the Bolivian prison of Camiri at the time, studying the classics of theology, considers the May events as a typical revolt by the petit bourgeois that can easily be explained by their impending risk of downwards mobility. This is no doubt contestable, but 1968 is the date he chooses to mark the transition from the grapho- to the *videosphere*.

In the last quarter of a century, the importance of the book has indeed waned. It is now overtaken by the audio-visual media, the television in particular, which has dethroned the written word and given an increased importance to sound-bytes and emotions over analysis and cold reason. Paradoxically, the 'hotting up of the medium' is linked to a return to orality: 'The third age gives the supremacy to the ear and transforms vision into a modality of listening' (Debray, 1992: 383). This explains the emotionality of the medium and its emphasis on communication, personalization and directness. At the end of the day, the audience wants everything to be close, warm, simple, lived, experienced, sympathetic and authentic. Incidentally, the demise of Marxism, the most bookish of all political philosophies, is linked to the waning of the graphosphere: 'Scientific socialism has not survived the passage from electromechanical transmission (press, telegraph, etc.) to electronic diffusion' (Debray, 1991: 291).

Generalizing the message of the 'Toronto School', summarized in McLuhan's famous slogan, 'the medium is the message', Debray conceives of the media not so much as material causes but as formal causes, in the Aristotelian sense of the word. The media are not neutral vectors of cultural transmission – they impose a certain worldview and help configure a certain way of thinking. In so far as the spoken, the written and the audio-visual media privilege respectively the indexical, the iconic or the symbolic dimensions of reality (Peirce), they can be conceived as genuine 'symbolic forms' (Cassirer) that structure the same things differently by 'performing' different worlds.

In Debray's encyclopaedic scheme of world-history, the notion of mediasphere plays quite an important role. The technical milieu of an epoch conditions not only the 'ways of worldmaking' (Goodman) but also, and especially, the structure of the relations that link the symbolic order to the mode of political domination. This may seem a bit speculative, but insofar as the media allow one to produce or modify the public consciousness, it is not that difficult to understand that the dominant medium of an epoch is also at stake in the political struggles between the dominant classes. In France, for instance, the shift from the logo- to the videosphere cannot be separated from a change in the hegemonic structure of power (Debray, 1979/1981). To understand French politics, and to be able to intervene in it, one has to know who dominates intellectual life and how one can best influence public opinion. Over the last two centuries, the hegemony of the Church and its priests (1880–1930) has shifted to the State and the literati (1930–68), and from there, to the market and the journalists (1968–present). Since 1968, for the first time in history, the sphere of diffusion is able to control the sphere of production, as can be gathered by a simple trip to the FNAC in France, Waterstones in England or Barnes & Noble in the USA. The market reigns, and through its influence on journalists and TV producers (like Bernard Pivot in France or Peter Sloterdijk in Germany), it determines not only what is going to sell, but also what is not going to sell. If a book is not mentioned and promoted by the newspapers, the radio or TV, because it's too academic, for instance, or because the PR work has not been properly done, it won't become a bestseller – that much is certain. It is no longer priests, academics and writers who steer public opinion, but now journalists and TV producers set the agenda and address themselves to the masses – to sell them to the advertisement industry – one could say that the hegemony is in the hands of a new 'mediocracy' (Debray, 1979/1981: 14).[11]

If one wants to be heard, one nowadays has to appear on television. This is not only true for aspiring intellectuals, such as the ex-'nouveaux philosophes' (Bernhard-Henri Lévi and his friends from Café Twickenham) who made a furore in France in the 1980s, but also for politicians, Presidents and Prime Ministers included, who no longer represent and incorporate the power of the state, but instead have to present and market themselves as if

they were stars – appearing sympathetic and dynamic, avoiding long phrases and complex phraseology, using affective language, etc. (Debray, 1993). Indeed, the passage from the logosphere to the audiosphere implies a shift of predominance from the power of words to the power of images (or from the symbolic and the iconic to the indexical, to borrow the classical semiotic classification of signs by C. S. Peirce). What cannot be seen or shown does not exist. With the disappearance of 'grand narratives', the State, the Republic, the General Interest, Progress, the Law, Justice and other true abstractions lose their attraction and credibility. Nostalgic for the times when the word ruled the world and politics was not run and done as a business, Debray spells out (and deplores) what one could call an epochal detranscendental-ization of culture, leading to indexical nominalism:

> The shift from symbolic mediation to mimetic immediacy implies and explains the change of emphasis from the abstract to the concrete, from law to jurispru-dence, from morality to ethics, from the prosopopeia to the anecdote, from the universal to the singular, from the species to the individual, from the emblem to the face. (Debray, 1993: 37)

If all this seems rather techno-deterministic, one should remember that technology is not a cause but a condition, and that one can only analytically distinguish between technology, culture and society. In reality, they form a 'seamless web'. Influenced on this point by Leroi-Gourhan's technological functionalism, Debray does, however, believe in technological progress. Technology scans the arrow of time and renders it irreversible through the invention of ratchets. From this quasi-Darwinian perspective, new media are able to overtake old media in the same way as the car was able to overtake the horse and carriage, simply because they are more efficient, cheaper, and more effective:

> The dominant medium is the one that has a larger reach, that is faster, that is cheaper for the sender and requires less effort from the receiver (and is thus synonymous with greater comfort). In this sense, television dominates the radio, which dominates the newspaper, which dominates the brochure, which dominates the book, which dominates the manuscript, etc. (Debray, 1991: 301)

If new media generally tend to overtake older ones, it is because they offer better techno-political value for less money and time. This does not mean, however, that new media simply displace and replace old media. The theory of functional substitution is simply wrong. Printing has not replaced writing and writing has not replaced talking. What is true for the advent of mediaspheres is also true for the invention of new media. Photography has no more replaced painting than the cinema has replaced the theatre or the phone face-to-face communication. The internet has not killed the book; in fact, books are one of the most popular commodities sold online.

New media do not drive out or abolish old media, but they initially model themselves on the older ones – superpose themselves on them and

start mingling with them before they overtake them and start to transform, remould or translate the older media in their own image. Photography was first conceived on the model of painting, the cinema on the model of photography, the television on the model of the radio and the computer on the model of the television, but after the revolution, the sequence is inverted, which explains why we tend to conceive painting on the model of photography, and the theatre on the model of the cinema. We are now slowly but surely on our way to thinking of painting, photography and television on the model of computerized multi-media.

With the advent of a new medium, nothing changes, yet everything is transformed. This is true for the digital revolution as well. In passing, Debray mentions that the internet may signify that we are entering a new age, the age of the 'hypersphere' (Debray, 1992: 386–96; 2000: 45). He notes that the digitalization of information does not only pertain to texts, but also to images and sounds. Apart from a couple of pompous and high-sounding passages on simulation, simulacra, and the virtualization of the world, which supposedly abolishes the distinction between the world and the image, he has not much to say about the passage from analogical to binary technologies – which may be due to the fact that he doesn't use the computer and still writes his books by hand (Debray, 1998a: 121).[12]

CONCLUSION: FROM MEDIA TO MEDIATION STUDIES

Régis Debray is a controversial figure. From different quarters, his mediology has come under attack as a 'scientific imposture' (Bourdieu–Bricmont–Bouversesse).[13] It is true that his style is not scientific. His concepts are rather loose, his approach a bit cavalier, and the whole enterprise is too encyclopedic to be fully convincing. Moreover, his polemics against media studies, semiotics, hermeneutics and cultural studies are unnecessary. In spite of all that, I have, however, been seduced by Debray and his mediology. The man has not only talent, a style and a sense of formulation, but also erudition and a mission. His attempt to merge media studies and social studies of science has given rise to an original remake of historical materialism that emphasizes the materiality of culture and enlarges the focus of media studies beyond newspapers, colour televisions and the internet. By stressing the technological preconditions of praxis – 'no *praxis* [action of man on man] without *technè* [action of man on things]' (Debray, 2000: 146) – mediation studies offers a materialist version of cultural studies in the tradition of the Toronto School. It may overemphasize the logistics of cultural transmission and underemphasize its logics, but at a time when everything, technology included, is reduced to text and deconstructed, it offers a welcome correction to the textualism of cultural studies.

Frédéric Vandenberghe is Professor at the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Visiting Fellow of the Ethics, Politics and Economics program at Yale University. He is the author of a two-volume book on theories of alienation and reification, *Une histoire critique de la sociologie allemande* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997–98; translation forthcoming in the Critical Realism Series, Routledge); a booklet on Georg Simmel, *La sociologie de Georg Simmel* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), and a book on biotechnologies, *Complexités du posthumanisme. Trois essais dialectiques sur la sociologie de Bruno Latour* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006). [email: Frederic@iuperj.br]

Acknowledgement

Notes
1. For an introduction to the man and his ideas, see Reid (1992) and Reader (1995); for an assessment of his work, see the symposium in *Le Débat* (1995, no. 85) and the collection of essays in Dagognet et al. (1999). *Cours de médiologie générale* (Debray, 1991) is the main reference, but *Transmettre* (Debray, 1997/ 2000), *Introduction à la médiologie* (Debray, 2000) and *Cahiers de médiologie* 6 (1998b and 1998c) also offer excellent introductions to the main concepts and assumptions of mediology. At present, only three of his books (Debray, 1979/1981, 1994/1996, 1997/2000) in the domain of mediology are available in English.
2. The *Cahiers de médiologie* (available online at www.mediologie.org) publishes thematic issues and is illustrated with stunning pictures and an original layout. Most issues deal with specific topics that are treated in a mediological perspective – such as nationalism (no. 3), war (no. 8), terrorism (no. 13), missions (no. 17) – or propose historical studies of the vectors of transmission – such as roads (no. 2), bicycles (no. 5), cars (no. 12), but also documents (no. 4) and monuments (no. 7). Since the *Cahiers de médiologie* were discontinued in 2004, Debray has launched the new journal *Médium* 'to struggle against the ruptures of times and generations . . . and to reconnect our cultures and our technics.'
3. In his PhD (Debray, 1992) and his thesis on habilitation (Debray, 1994/1996: Part 2), Debray has expanded the mediological framework to incorporate the role of images and art in history. Moving from an analysis of the symbolic efficacy of ideas to the iconic efficacy of images, he thus reformulates the central question of mediation studies: 'How does an image become a material force in history?'
4. In the final chapter of his book on God (2001/2004) and in his essay on the religious function (2003), Debray rehearses his rendering of Gödel's theorem of incompleteness and confirms that there is no immanence without transcendence and that every society finds its ultimate foundation in something that transcends it. In the last part of *Critique de la raison politique*, he also makes a move from political theology to polemology, showing that the unity of the in-group is only possible through its closure and dissociation of the out-groups. It is at this point that the link between his mediology and his defence of the nation-state against universalism and neo-liberalism becomes visible.

5. The distinction between MO and OM is now part of the standard repertoire of mediation studies (see Debray, 1997/2000: ch.1, 1998b, 2000: ch. 2, as well as Debray, 2001/2004: 17–18 for an ironic self-critique – 'It's not that simple').
6. Quoted from the webpage 'mediology' available from http://www.mediologie. org.
7. On the duality of the medium, see Debray (1997/2000: ch. 1, 2000: ch. 4, and 1992: ch. 4). On Jesus, angels, the mystery of incarnation and other Christianological stuff, see Debray (1991: chs 4 and 5; 1999: ch 1), as well as his book on God (Debray, 2001/2004).
8. For an extensive discussion of Leroi-Gourhan's anthropology of technology, which is also a tribute to him, see Debray (1992: 176 ff.; 1994/1996: 145 ff.; 1997/2000: 111 ff.; 2000: 22 ff).
9. Leroi-Gourhan does not get totally rid, however, of the humanist emphasis. In the final chapter of his main work, *Le geste et la parole*, he wonders whether man is going to survive as *homo sapiens* or whether they're bound to regress to the state of ants. In a series of interviews, he makes it clear that he's concerned about the future of humankind and that he fears the worst since civilization got out of joint around the 18th century: 'Humans may have been around for 2 million years, but if we are not careful and do not keep our technology in check, we may have only a couple of thousand years left, if not a couple of centuries' (Leroi-Gourhan, 1982: 242).
10. Debray packs so much into his distinction of the different mediaspheres – from symbolic world making and styles of leadership to deontology and geopolitics – that it would take him (and us) too much time to discuss it at length. Instead of a discussion, we get a table in which the main features of the different mediaspheres are compared, contrasted and summarized. See the Annexes to Debray (1994/1996) for a reproduction of the main mediological *tableaux*.
11. Along similar lines, one could perhaps invent the word of the 'ideovisual'.
12. For an analysis of the hypersphere, I recommend the work of Pierre Lévy (1994/1997, 1995), another fellow traveler of mediation studies who is influenced by Deleuze and Buddhism.
13. In his early years, Debray was quite close to Bourdieu, but they had a falling out. In his booklet on television, Bourdieu (1996: 58) attacked the 'self-designed holders of a science that does not exist, mediology, to propose, before any inquiry, their peremptory conclusions on the state of the world of the media.' In the same spirit, Jacques Bouveresse (1999), Bourdieu's friend and colleague at the Collège de France, who introduced Wittgenstein to a French audience, added injury to injustice by viciously attacking Debray for his pseudo-scientific reinterpretation of Gödel's theorem. In the so-called (Sokalized?) 'science wars,' Bricmont, another Bourdieusian, debunked mediation studies as a pseudo-science (Sokal and Bricmont, 1997).

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