

Utopia Deferred

Jean Baudrillard

Writings from *Utopie* (1967-1978)

Translated by Stuart Kendall

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Requiem for the Media

Introit

THERE IS NO revolutionary theory of the media. The "revolution of the media" has to date remained empirical and mystical, as much in Marshall McLuhan as among those who stand so willfully apart from him (the intelligentsia of the Left in particular). McLuhan himself has said, with his Texo-Canadian brutality, that with the appearance of the telegraph, Marx's theory, a contemporary of the steam engine and the railroad, was already obsolete during his lifetime.¹ In his candid fashion, he is saying that Marx, in his materialist analysis of production, has almost circumscribed a privileged domain of productive forces from which language, signs and communication have been excluded. To tell the truth, Marx does not even have a theory of the railroad as a "medium," as a mode of communication: it isn't considered. All technical evolution in general is only considered under the heading of production—primary, material, infrastructural—the sole determinant of social relationships. Dedicated to an intermediary ideality and a blind social practice, the "mode of communication" has been at leisure for a century to "make its revolution" without changing anything in the theory of production.

From here, and on the condition (which is already a revolution in relation to orthodox Marxism) that the exchange of signs is not

considered as a marginal, superstructural dimension among beings that the single true theory (materialist) defines irrevocably as "producers of their real life" (of goods destined to satisfy their needs), we can envision two perspectives:

1. We retain the general form of Marxist analysis (dialectical contradiction between forces of production and relations of production), but we admit that the "classical" definition of productive forces is a restricted definition, and we enlarge our analysis in terms of productive forces to the entire field thus far blind to signification and communication. This implies setting loose in all their originality the contradictions freed from this theoretical and practical extension of the field of political economy. This hypothesis is the point of departure for Enzensberger: "Monopoly capitalism develops the consciousness shaping industry more quickly and more extensively than other sectors of production; it must at the same time fetter it. A socialist media theory has to work at this contradiction."² But this hypothesis accomplishes little more (and, in this sense, it is also late) than to virtually extend the commodity form to every domain of social life. And in fact there already is a "classical" theory of communication, a "bourgeois" political economy of signs and their production, as there came to be one of *material* production since the 18th century. It is a class-bound theoretical discipline.³ Until now, no fundamental critique, no logical extension of Marx's critique, has responded to it. The critique of the political economy of the sign has been rendered impossible by the relegation of this entire domain to the superstructure. Thus, at best, Enzensberger's hypothesis could only make up for the tremendous delay in classical Marxist theory.

2. This hypothesis is only radical in the eyes of orthodox Marxism, which, completely immersed in the dominant models,

and for its own survival, forbids itself even this much. But the radical alternative is elsewhere. In place of reinterpreting the crucial problem posed to revolutionary theory by the production of meanings, messages, and signs in terms of classical productive forces—which is to say of generalizing a Marxist analysis considered to be definitive and sealed with the approval of the “spokesmen of the revolution”—the alternative is to disrupt these terms in light of the irruption of this problem in the theoretical field (which no Marxist who “respects himself” would do, even as a hypothesis).

In other words, maybe the Marxist theory of production is itself irremediably partial, and cannot be generalized. Again: the theory of production (the dialectical continuity of contradictions linked to the development of productive forces) is strictly homogeneous with its object, material production, and cannot be transferred, as a postulate or theoretical framework, to contents that it was never given.⁴ The dialectical form is adequate to certain contents, those of material production: it exhausts its meaning, but does not exceed, as an archetype, the definition of this object. The dialectic is in ashes because it offered itself as a system of interpretation for the *separated* order of material production.

This hypothesis is, all in all, logical. It attributes Marxist analysis with a global coherence, an internal homogeneity which forbids it from retaining such and such an element and from excluding such and such an other, according to a technique of *bricolage* of which the Althusserians are the most subtle pyrotechnicians. Conversely, we will give Marxist theory credit for a maximum of coherence, and it is for this same reason that we will say that this coherence should be broken, because it is a without response before a social process which far exceeds that of (material) production.⁵

Enzensberger: A “Socialist” Strategy

LACKING A THEORY and an offensive strategy, Enzensberger claims, the “left” remains disarmed. It contents itself with denouncing mass media culture as ideological manipulation. It dreams of taking control of the media, sometimes as a *means* of aiding the masses assumption of a revolutionary consciousness, sometimes as a *consequence* of a radical change in social structures. A contradictory impulse, which simply reflects the impossibility of integrating the media into a theory of infra- and superstructure. Lacking a conception of the media as new and gigantic, potentially productive forces (Enzensberger), the media (and one should add the entire domain of signs and of communication) remains a social mystery for the “Left”: it is split between fascination and panic before this wizardry, which it cannot escape, but which it morally and intellectually reproves (this of course is the “Leftist intellectual” speaking through Enzensberger’s self-criticism). This ambivalence reflects only the ambivalence of the media, without surpassing or reducing it. As a good Marxist sociologist, Enzensberger impures the “phobia” of the Leftist intellectuals and movements to their bourgeois or petit-bourgeois origins: they defend themselves instinctively against mass culture because it shatters their cultural privilege.⁶ True or false, maybe it would be better to ask what responsibility the intelligentsia of the Left have in this fascinated contempt, this tactical disarray, and this refusal of investment before the media. Precisely what responsibility Marxist prejudice, its nostalgic idealism of the infrastructure, its theoretical allegiance to everything that is not “material” production and “productive labor.” “Revolutionary” doctrine has never accounted for the exchange of signs other than in functional use: information, diffusion, propaganda. And the current, new look in

public relations material, the entire modernist subculture of Leftist parties is not made to break this tendency: it shows well enough how bourgeois ideology can pass elsewhere only through "social origin."

All this results, following Enzensberger, in the political schizophrenia of the Left. On one side, an entire revolutionary (subversive) faction launches itself in the apolitical exploration of the new media (subculture, underground). On another side, the "militant" political groups still live essentially with archaic modes of communication, refusing to "play the game," to exploit the gigantic virtualities of electronic media. They reproach the students of May '68 for having had recourse to traditional artist's means (Beaux-Arts) for the diffusion of their slogans, and for having occupied the Odéon, a cultural capital, rather than the ORTF.⁷

Enzensberger's thought attempts to be optimistic and offensive. The media are currently under the monopoly of the dominant classes, which turn them toward their profit. But their *structure* remains "fundamentally egalitarian" and it falls to revolutionary practice to release the virtuality inscribed in them but perverted by the capitalist order—saying the word: to liberate them, to return them to their social *vocation* of open communication and unlimited democratic exchange, to their true socialist destination.

It is clear that this is a question of the extension of the same schema forever allotted, from Marx to Marcuse, to productive forces and technology. They are the promise of human accomplishment, but capitalism blocks and confiscates them. They are liberators, but we must liberate them.⁸ The media, one sees, do not escape the fantastic logic of the fligreed inscription of the revolution in things. To hand the media over to the logic of productive forces is thus no longer a critical act: it more firmly encloses them in revolutionary metaphysics.

As usual, this position is lost in contradictions. On one side, though their own (capitalist) development even assures a more and more extended socialization—even though it should be technically thinkable, there is no closed circuit television for the happy few, "because this would go against the grain of the structure" of the medium.⁹ For the first time in history, the media make possible the participation of the masses in a collective process that is social and socialized, participation in which the practical means are in the hands of the masses themselves.¹⁰ But the "socialist movements must fight and will fight for their own wavelengths."¹¹ Why fight (in particular for wavelengths), if the media realize socialism on their own? If this is their structural vocation?

Enzensberger claims, following Brecht,¹² that the present order reduces the media to a simple "medium of distribution."¹³ We need to make the media a veritable medium of communication (the same dream always haunts the Marxist imagination: to tear objects from exchange value and return them to their use value), and this transformation, he adds, "is not technically a problem." But:

1. It is false that the media in the current order are "purely and simply a means of distribution." Here again, this makes them the relay of an ideology which would find its determination elsewhere (in the material mode of production). In other words, the media as marketing and merchandising of the dominant ideology—in which there is the assimilation of the employer-employee relationship with that of the producer-transmitter of the media—to irresponsible receptive masses. This is not as a vehicle of contents, it is in their form and their operation even that the media induce a social relationship, and this relationship is not exploitative, it is one of abstraction, of separation, of the abolition of exchange. The media are not coefficients but conductors of ideology. Not only are they

not revolutionary in destination, they are not even, elsewhere or virtually, neutral or non-ideological (the phantasms of their "technical" status or of their social "use value"). Reciprocally, ideology no longer exists somewhere else as a discourse of the dominant class before being invested in the media. It is the same in the sphere of commodities: nowhere do they possess some other status as reality (the "use value of the product") other than the form they assume in the operation of the system of exchange value. And ideology is no longer some imaginary floating in the wake of exchange value, it is itself the operation of exchange value. After the Requiem for the Dialectic, we should sound the Requiem for the Infra- and for the Superstructure.

2. It follows that when Brecht and Enzensberger affirm that the transformation of the media into a veritable medium of communication is not technically a problem ("it is" Brecht claims, "but the natural consequence of their development"), one must understand in effect (but conversely and without playing on words) that it is not exactly a technical problem, since the ideology of the media is on the level of form, of the separation that they institute, and which is a social division.

Speech without Response

THE MASS MEDIA are characterized by being intransitive, anti-mediators, manufacturing non-communication. If one accepts the definition of communication as an *exchange*, as the reciprocal space of speech and response, and therefore of a *responsibility*; not a psychological and moral responsibility, but a personal correlation from one to another in exchange. In other words, if one defines communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of information which could be reversed in feedback. The entirety of

contemporary media architecture is founded on this definition: *the media forbid response forever*; they make every process of exchange impossible (excepting in the form of the *simulation* of a response, itself integrated into the process of transmission, which doesn't change the unilaterality of the communication in any way). This is their true abstraction. And the system of social control and power is based on this abstraction.

To clearly understand the term *response*, one must understand it in the strong sense, and for this one must refer to its equivalent in "primitive" societies: power belongs to the one who can give and to *whom one cannot respond*. To give, and to do it in such a way that one cannot respond, is to disrupt the exchange to one's profit and to institute a monopoly. The social process becomes unbalanced. Response, on the contrary, disrupts this power relationship and institutes (or restores), on the basis of an antagonistic reciprocity, the circuit of symbolic exchange. The sphere of the media is the same: it speaks and *no response can be made*. This is why the only revolution in this domain—and everywhere besides, the revolution as such—is in the restitution of the possibility of response. This simple possibility presupposes the overturning of the current structure of the media in its entirety.

No other theory or strategy is possible. Every impulse to democratize its contents, to subvert it, to restore the "transparency of the code," to control the process of information, to manage a reversibility of the circuits, or to assume power over the media, is hopeless if the monopoly of speech is not broken; and this not to offer it individually to each of us but so that it can be exchanged, given and responded to,¹⁴ as one would a look and a smile now and then, and without ever being able to be stopped, clogged, stockpiled and redistributed to some place in the social process.¹⁵

For the moment, we live in non-response, in irresponsibility. "Minimal autonomous activity on the part of the spectator and voter," says Enzensberger. The first and most beautiful of the mass media is in effect the electoral system: its crowning achievement is the referendum, in which the response is implied in the question, as in polls. It is a speech which responds to itself through the simulated detour of a response, and there again, the absolutization of the speech beneath the formal mask of exchange is the definition of power. Roland Barthes points to the same non-reciprocity in literature: "Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and customer, between its author and reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, *serious*: instead of functioning, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*."¹⁶ Today, the status of *consumer* defines this relegation, and the general order of consumption is nothing other than that wherein it is no longer permitted to give, to respond or exchange, but only to take and to use (appropriation, individualized use value). In this sense, "consumer" goods are also a mass medium. They answer to the general form we have described. Their specific function is of little importance: the consumption of products and messages is the abstract social relation that they establish, the taboo cast on every form of response and reciprocity.

Thus it is not true, as Enzensberger affirms, that "for the first time in history, the media make possible a mass participation in a production social process," nor that "the practical means of this participation are in the hands of the masses themselves." As if owning

a television or a camera inaugurated a new possibility of relation and exchange! Strictly speaking, no more than owning a refrigerator or a roaster. There is no response to a functional object: its function is there, integrated speech to which it has already responded, and which leaves no place for play, for a reciprocal gesture (except for its destruction or for turning it away from its function).¹⁷ The functional object, like all messages made functional by the media, like the operation of the referendum, therefore controls rupture, the emergence of meaning, and censorship. At the limit, if the authorities are not also obsessed with contents and convinced by the media's force of ideological persuasion, and therefore of the necessity of controlling messages, they would offer each citizen a television without concern for its programs. It is effectively useless to fantasize about the police appropriating television for the authorities (Orwell 1984): Television is, in its mere presence, social contract at home. It is unnecessary to conceive of it as a spy-glass of the regime into our private lives, because it is better than that: it is *the certainty that the people will no longer speak*, that they are definitively isolated before a speech without response.

Such is the structure of television as a mass medium. And, in this sense, McLuhan, whom Enzensberger contemptuously characterizes as a ventriloquist, is much closer to a theory when he says that "the medium is the message" (except that, totally blind to the social form we are discussing, he exalts the media and their planetary message with a delirious tribal optimism). "The medium is the message" is not a critical proposition, but, in its paradoxical form, it has analytical value. Enzensberger's ingenuity on the "structural nature of the media" (!),¹⁸ such that "no power can permit the liberation of their potentiality," on the other hand and although it wants to be revolutionary, is only mysticism. The mystique of the socialist

predestination of the media, inverse but complementary to the Orwellian myth of their terroristic manipulation by the authorities. Even God would approve of socialism: the Christians say so.

Subversive Strategy and "Symbolic Action"

ONE MIGHT OBJECT that the mass media played a role in May '68 by spontaneously amplifying the revolutionary movement. At one moment at least during the action, they were (involuntarily) turned against the authorities. The subversive strategy of the American Yippies (Hoffman, Rubin) is based on this necessity and this possible redirection. In worldwide revolutionary movements, a theory of "symbolic action" has been elaborated from it. Redirect the media through their ability to chain react. Use their power to generalize information instantaneously. The assumption here is that the impact of the media is reversible, that it is a variable in the class struggle that one must know how to integrate to one's profit. This must be questioned, it might be only a large strategic illusion.

May '68 can serve as an example. Everything would lead us to believe in the subversive impact of the media during that period. Suburban radio stations and newspapers echoed the student actions everywhere. If the actions were the detonator, the media were the resonator. The authorities accused them directly of "playing the revolutionary game." But this evidence was based on an absence of analysis. I would say on the contrary that the media never played their role so well and that they were, in their function of *habitual* social control, on top of the events. This was because they maintained *their* form (amid the disruption of their contents) and that this form, no matter the context, makes them inexorably in solidarity with the power structure. By diffusing the event in the *abstract*

universality of public opinion, they imposed a sudden and inordinate development on it and, through this forced and anticipated extension, they deprived the original movement of its rhythm and its meaning—in a word: they short-circuited it.

In the traditional field of politics (Left and Right),¹⁹ where sanctified models of canonical speech are exchanged, the media transmit without altering the meaning. They are as homogeneous to this speech as they are to the circulation of commodities. But transgression and subversion don't pass over the waves while being subtly denied as such: transformed into *models*, neutralized as *signs*, they are emptied of their meaning.²⁰ There is no model, prototype, or series of transgression. It is therefore still the best way to reduce them. Fatal publicity is still the best way to lessen the impact of transgression. Earlier, this operation might have led us to believe in "spectacular" results. In fact, it is equal to dismantling the movement by removing its primary impulse. The act of rupture is changed into a distant bureaucratic model—and this is what the media does.²¹

All of this is readable in the derivation, the distortion of the term "symbolic." The action of March 22nd at Nanterre was symbolic and transgressive because, at that moment in that place, it invented a radical rupture or, returning to the analysis proposed above, invented a *response* there, where the administrative and pedagogical power of the institution held forth and kept others from speaking. The broadcast and contagion of the mass media did not make this action symbolic. Today however, it is more and more this last sense (the impact of exposure) which suffices to define symbolic action. At the limit, the subversive act is no longer produced *as a function of its reproducibility*.²² It is no longer created, it is produced directly as a model, like a gesture. The symbolic has slipped from the order of the production of meaning even (political

or otherwise) to the order of its reproduction, which is always that of power. The symbolic becomes *coefficient*, pure and simple; transgression becomes exchange value.

The entirety of rationalist critical thought (Benjamin, Brecht, Enzensberger) sees decisive progress in this. The media does nothing but actualize and reinforce the "demonstrative nature of any given political act" (Enzensberger). This evidently agrees with the *didactic* conception of the revolution, and, moreover, with the "dialectic of consciousness rising," etc. This rationalist thought has not renounced the bourgeois thought of the Enlightenment, it inherits all of its conceptions of the democratic virtue (here revolutionary) of the diffusion of knowledge. In its pedagogic illusion, this thought forgets that—the political act deliberately targeting the media and expecting power from it—the media itself is deliberately targeting the political act to depoliticize it. An interesting fact might be cited here as support: the contemporary eruption of news in the political sphere (which converges with Benjamin's idea of the passage of the work of art from the political stage through its reproducibility). A tidal wave in Pakistan, a black boxing match in the United States, a bistro owner shoots a youth, etc. These kinds of events, once minor and apolitical, find themselves invested with a power of diffusion which gives them social and "historic" scope. Undoubtedly the new sense that they assume, the confrontation of incidents that never before made the news, and in which the new forms of politics are crystallized, is to a large extent created by the media. These news items are unplanned "symbolic actions," which return through the same process of political signification. Doubtless, their reception can only be ambiguous, and if, thanks to the media, politics returns under the heading of minor news items, thanks to the same media, minor news items invade politics. Elsewhere the status of the news

has changed with the extension of the mass media: from parallel category (related to almanacs and popular histories) it has become a social system of mythological interpretation, a tight network of models of signification from which no event escapes. This is mass mediation. It is not a group of technologies for the diffusion of messages, it is the imposition of models. Here again is McLuhan's formula: "Medium is the message" performs a transfer of meaning in the medium itself as a technological structure. This is still technological idealism. In fact, the great *Medium* is the Model. That which is mediated is not that which passes through the press, the TV, the radio: it is that which is fulfilled by the form-sign, articulated in models, regulated by the code. Similarly, commodities are not produced industrially, they are mediated by the exchange value system of abstraction. One sees that at best what functions under the sign of the media is the formal surpassing of the categories of news and politics and of their traditional separation, so as to more easily assign them together to the same general code. It is strange that we never wanted to measure the strategic impact of this forced socialization as a system of social control. Once more, the electoral system is the first great historical example of this. And it has never lacked revolutionaries (once among the greatest, today the least significant) who believed themselves capable of "playing the game." The general strike itself, an insurrectional myth for so many generations, has become a reductive schema. That of May '68, to which the media contributed largely by exporting the strike to every corner of France, while apparently the culminating point of the crisis, was in fact the moment of its decompression, of its asphyxiation through extension, of its defeat. Of course, thousands of workers went on strike. But they didn't know what to do with this "mediatized" strike, transmitted and received as a model of action (by both the media or

the unions). Abstract in a sense, it neutralized local, transversal, and spontaneous forms of action (not entirely). The Grenelle accords didn't betray it.²² They sanctioned the passage to the generality of political action, which brought an end to the singularity of revolutionary action. Today, it has become (in the form of the calculated extension of the strike) the final weapon of the unions against wildcat strikes.

The electoral system and the general strike are thus also media of a certain kind. Playing with extensive, formal socialization, they are the subtlest and most assured institutions for filtration, disman- tling, and censorship. There is no exception nor miracle.

Walls and words, silk-screen posters, and hand-printed flyers were the true revolutionary media in May, the streets where speech started and was exchanged: everything that is an *immediate* inscription, given and returned, speech and response, moving in the same time and in the same place, reciprocal and antagonistic. The street in this sense is the alternative and subversive form of all the mass media because it is not, like them, an objectified support for messages without response, a distant transit network. It is the cleared space of the symbolic exchange of ephemeral and mortal speech, speech that is not reflected on the Platonian screen of the media. Institutionalized by reproduction, spectacularized by the media, it bursts.

It is therefore a strategic illusion to believe in a critical reversal [*détournement*] of the media. Today such speech passes through the *destruction* of the media such as they are, through their deconstruction as systems of non-communication. This does not imply liquidation any more than the radical critique of discourse implies the negation of language as signifying material. But this certainly implies the liquidation of their present functional and technical structure as a whole, of their operational form, if I can put it that way, which reflects their social form throughout. At the limit of

course even the concept of the medium disappears, and should disappear: exchanged speech, reciprocal and symbolic exchange denies the notion and the function of the medium, of the intermediary. It can imply a technical apparatus (sound, image, waves, energy, etc.) as well as a corporeal apparatus (gestures, language, sexuality), but this no longer acts as a medium, as an autonomous system regulated by a code. Reciprocity passes through the destruction of the medium as such. "People meet their neighbors for the first time while watching their apartment houses burn down."²³

The Theoretical Model of Communication

TO SUMMARIZE these diverse hypotheses:

1. McLuhan (remember): the media create, they are the revolution, independently from their contents, from their singular technological structure. After the phonetic alphabet and books, radio and cinema. After radio, television. Here and now we live in the era of instantaneous, global communication.

2. The media are controlled by power. We must tear them away from it, either by taking power ourselves, or by reversing them by raising the spectacular stakes through subversive content. Here the media are viewed only as a message. There is no question of their form (any more than there is, of course, in McLuhan, who views the medium only as a medium).

3. Enzensberger: the present form of the media induces a certain type of social relationship (assimilated into that of the capitalist mode of production). But through their structure and their development, the media possess the virtuality of a socialist and democratic mode of communication, of a rationality and a universality of information. Liberating their potential will suffice.

From the perspective of a revolutionary strategy, only Enzensberger's (Enlightened—Marxist) hypothesis and that of the radical American left (spectacular—Leftist) interests us (we are not talking about the practice of the official Left, Marxist or not, which is confused with that of the bourgeoisie). We have analyzed these positions as strategic illusions, the cause being that both of them share with the dominant ideology implicit reference to the same *theory of communication*, a theory admitted everywhere, on the strength of received evidence and a highly "scientific" formalization by a discipline, the semio-linguistics of communication, applied to structural linguistics on one side and informatics on the other, endorsed by the universities and mass culture (mass media professionals are its connoisseurs). The entire conceptual infrastructure of this theory is ideologically in solidarity with the dominant practice, as it was and still is to classical political economy. It is the equivalent of that bourgeois political economy in the field of communication. And I think that if revolutionary practices remain bound to the strategic illusion of the media, it is because they have never made anything more than a superficial critical analysis of it, without carrying out a radical critique of the ideological matrix of its theory of communication.

Formalized most specifically by Jakobson, its basic unity is provided by the sequence:

transmitter—message—receiver
(encoder—message—decoder)

The message itself being structured by the code and determined by the context. To each of these "concepts" corresponds a specific function: referential, poetic, phatic, etc. Each communicative process is thus vectorized in a single sense, from the transmitter to the receiver. The receiver can become a transmitter in turn, the same

schema repeats itself. Communication can always be reduced to this simple unity where the two polar terms are never exchanged. This structure is offered as objective and scientific, since it follows the rules of the method: it breaks its object down into parts. In fact, it contents itself with formalizing an empirical given, abstracting the evidence and lived reality. This is to say that the ideological categories through which a certain kind of social relationship speak, precisely that wherein one speaks and the other does not, wherein one chooses the code and the other has the sole freedom to submit or abstain. This structure is based on the same arbitrariness as signification: two terms are artificially isolated and artificially reunited by an objectified content called a message. There is no reciprocal relation nor presence of one to the other of these terms," since both are determined in isolation in their relationship to the message and the code, an "intermedium" which maintains both of them in a respective situation (the code holds both of them in "respect"), distanced from one another, a distance which comes to fulfill the full and automated "value" of the message (in fact: its exchange value). This "scientific" construction institutes a *model of simulation* of communication from which reciprocity, the antagonism of the partners, or the ambivalence of their exchange is immediately excluded. What effectively circulates is information, content in the supposedly readable and univocal sense. The authority of the code guarantees this univocality, and thereby even the respective positions of the encoder and the decoder. So far so good: the formula has a formal coherence which assures it is the only *possible* schema of communication. But if one suggests an ambivalent relation, it all falls apart. Because there is no code for ambivalence. Without a code, no encoder or decoder: the extras flee the stage. No message either, since the message is defined as "sent"

and "received." The entire formalization is only there to avoid this catastrophe. Therein lies its "scientificity." In fact, it establishes the terrorism of the code. In this directive schema, the code becomes the sole authority which speaks, which exchanges itself and reproduces itself through the dissociation of the two terms and the univocality (or the equivocality, or the multivocality, it hardly matters: through the non-ambivalence) of the message. (Similarly, in the economic process of exchange, people no longer exchange, the system of exchange value reproduces itself through people.) This formula at the basis of communication succeeds in offering, as a reduced model, a perfect shortcut for social exchange *as it is*, as in every case the abstraction of the code, forced rationalism, and the terrorism of separation regulate it. Such is the objectivity of science.

Separation and closure: it is already the same schema active at the level of the sign in linguistic theory. Each sign is divided into a signifier and a signified, assigned to one or the other, but in a "respective" position, and each sign on the basis of its arbitrary isolation "communicates" with all the others through a code called language. There too, the scientific taboo is cast on the terms' potentiality for symbolic exchange, beyond the signifier-signified distinction, in poetic language for example. In poetic language, as in symbolic exchange, the terms *respond* to one another beyond the code. We have indicated this response throughout this text as deconstructive to every code, every control, every power, which, inversely, is always based on the separation of terms and their abstract articulation.

Thus the theory of signification serves as a nuclear model for the theory of communication, and the arbitrariness of the sign (this theoretical schema for the repression of meaning) assumes all its political and ideological scope in the arbitrariness of the theoretical

schema of communication and information.²⁶ Which, as we have seen, echoes not only in the dominant social practice (characterized by the virtual monopoly of the pole of the transmitter and the irresponsibility of the pole of the receiver, the discrimination between the terms of the exchange and the *diktat* of the code) but also, unconsciously, through all the vicissitudes of a revolutionary media practice. It is clear, for example, that everyone who aims to subvert media contents can only reinforce, in its autonomy, the separated notion of the message and therefore the abstract bipolarity of the terms of communication.

The Cybernetic Illusion

SENSITIVE TO THE non-reciprocity of the current process, Enzensberger believes this can be helped by demanding that the same revolution intervene at the level of the media as that which disrupted the exact sciences and the subject/object relation of understanding, which has been engaged in a continual "dialectical" inter-reaction ever since. The media would have to take into account all the consequences of the inter-reaction, whose effect is to break the monopoly and to permit everyone's integration into an open process. "The programs of the consciousness industry must subsume into themselves their own results, the reactions and corrections that they call forth...they are therefore to be thought of not as means of consumption but as means of their own production."²⁷ This seductive perspective: 1. leaves the separated authority of the code and the message intact; 2. attempts, on the other hand, to break the discrimination of the two poles of communication, toward a more supple structure of the exchange of roles and feed-back ("reversibility of circuits"). "In its present form, equipment like

television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver: technically speaking it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system."²⁸ There again, we fail to surpass the categories of "transmitter" and "receiver," despite the effort to mobilize them through "switching." *Reversibility* has nothing to do with reciprocity. Undoubtedly, for this profound reason, today cybernetic systems understand very well how to put this complex regulation, this feed-back, to work without changing anything about the abstraction of the process as a whole, or allowing any real "responsibility" into the exchange. This is even the systems' best defense, since it thereby integrates in advance the possibility of such a response.

One can no longer effectively conceive, as Enzensberger shows in his critique of the Orwellian myth, a mega-system of centralized control (a control system for the current telephone system would have to surpass it *n* times in complexity, and is therefore excluded practically). But it is a little naïve to think that censorship should be eliminated though the extension of the media. Even long term, the impossibility of police mega-structures simply signifies that the current systems integrate within themselves, through feed-back and self-regulation, these henceforth useless mega-systems of control. They know how to introduce that which denies them *as a supplementary variable*. There is censorship in their operation itself; they don't need a mega-structure. They never cease from being totalitarian: they realize in some way the ideal of what we can call a decentralized totalitarianism.

At a more practical level, the media also know very well how to put in place a formal "reversibility" of circuits (letters from readers, listener call-ins, polls, etc.), without leaving room for any response, without changing the discrimination of the roles.²⁹ This is the social

and political form of feed-back. Enzensberger is therefore always, in his "dialecticalization" of communication so strangely proximate to cybernetic regulation, a victim, though in a more subtle way, of the ideological model we are discussing.

From the same perspective, breaking the unilaterality of communication, which translates itself at once into the monopoly of specialists and professionals and that of the class enemy over the media, Enzensberger proposes as a revolutionary solution that *each of us become a manipulator*, in the sense of an active operator, an editor, etc., in short, pass from the status of receiver to that of producer-transmitter. Therein is a kind of critical reversal [*détournement*] of the ideological concept of manipulation. But here again, because this "revolution" retains as its basis the category of "transmitter," it is content to generalize as separated, making each of us his or her own transmitter, it fails to check the mass media. If each of us possessed his or her own walkie-talkie or Kodak, and made his or her own films, we know what would result: personalized amateurism, the equivalent of Sunday *bricolage* on the periphery of the system.³⁰

This is evidently not what Enzensberger wants. He is thinking of a newspaper edited, distributed, created by its own readers (as *Underground* was in part), of video networks for the use of political groups, etc.

This would be the sole means to unfreeze a blocked situation: "In the socialist movements the dialectic of discipline and spontaneity, centralism and decentralization, authoritarian leadership and antiauthoritarian disintegration has long ago reached a deadlock. Network-like communications models built on the principle of reversibility of circuits might give new indications of how to overcome the situation."³¹ This is a question of restoring a dialectical

practice. But can the problem continue to be posed in dialectical terms? Is the dialectic itself dead at this point? The examples he gives are interesting in that they surpass a "dialectic" of transmitter and receiver. One finds in effect a process of immediate communication, not filtered by bureaucratic models, an original form of exchange, in fact, because there are *not transmitters and receivers*, but people who *respond*. The problem of spontaneity and of organization is not surpassed dialectically here, it's terms are *transgressed*.

That is the essential difference. The other hypotheses leave the separated categories to subsist. In the first case (the private de-multiplication of the media), transmitter and receiver are simply reunited in a single person: manipulation is in some way "internalized."³² In the other case (the "dialectic of circuits"), transmitter and receiver are simultaneously the two sides: manipulation becomes reciprocal (hermaphroditic combination). The system can act on its two tableaux at the same time as on the classical bureaucratic model, and in every possible combination of the two categories. What is essential is that these ideological categories should be saved, and with them the fundamental structure of the political economy of communication.

Once again, in the relationship of symbolic exchange, there is a simultaneous response, there is neither transmitter nor receiver for one part and another of a message, nor is there any longer a "message," a *corpus* of information to decipher in a univocal way under the auspices of the code. The symbolic consists precisely in breaking the univocality of the "message," or restoring the ambivalence of meaning, and eliminating in the same blow the authority of the code.

This can help us evaluate Umberto Eco's hypothesis. Briefly stated: changing the contents of the message changes nothing, one

must modify the reading codes, impose other reading codes. The receiver (who in fact is not one) intervenes here essentially, he opposes his own code on that of the transmitter, he invents a veritable response escaping the trap of directed communication. But in what way is this reader "subversive"? Is this still reading, in the sense of deciphering, the recovery of an univocal meaning? And what is the code that he opposes? Is it a singular mini-code (ideological, but without interest) or another schema directing reading? In which case it is only a question of textual variation. An example might illustrate Eco's perspective: the reversal [*détournement*] of advertising with graffiti after May '68. It's transgressive not because it substitutes another content, another discourse, but because it responds, there, in place, and breaks the fundamental rule of all media, non-response. Does it oppose a code with another code? I don't think so: it simply breaks the code. It does not offer itself as a text to be deciphered alongside the advertising discourse. It lets itself be seen as transgression. Hence the slogan, the transgressive reversal of discourse, does not act by means of another code, as a code, it acts by means of the instantaneous deconstruction of the dominant discursive code. It volatilizes the category of the code and that of the message.

Therein lies the key to the problem: wanting to conserve (even by "dialectically surpassing") *any of the separated instances of the structural communication grid*, one forbids oneself from changing anything fundamentally, and condemns oneself to fragile manipulatory practices, that it would be dangerous to mistake for a "revolutionary strategy." In this sense, only that which radically checks the dominant form is strategic.

Requiescant media in pace

4. Speaking rigorously, this principle has nothing to do with science or constituted techniques. One must separate "the" technic from its absolute use, so as to reveal its concrete efficacy, wherein it is always the technique for something: training and rational exercise.

8. Requiem for the Media

1. Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) 5.

2. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" *The Consciousness Industry* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974) 96–128. Originally published in the *New Left Review* (Autumn 1970).

3. This political economy of the sign is structural linguistics (along with semiology and all its derivatives, of which communication theory will be discussed below). We know that, in the general ideological framework, structural linguistics is today's master discipline, informing anthropology, the human sciences, etc., just as political economy did in its time; it's postulates profoundly informed all of psychology, sociology, and the "moral and political" sciences.

4. In this sense, the expression "consciousness industry" which Enzensberger uses to characterize the present media, is nothing but a dangerous metaphor. It supports his entire analytic hypothesis, which is to extend to the media the Marxist analysis of the capitalist mode of production, to the point of rediscovering a structural analogy in these relations:

dominant class	dominated class
producer-entrepreneur	consumer
transmitter	receiver

5. In fact, Marxist analysis can be questioned on two very different levels of radicality: insofar it is a system of interpretation for the separated order of material production and insofar as it is a system of interpretation for the separated order of production (in general).

In the first case, the hypothesis of the non-pertinence of the dialectic outside the field of its "origin" should logically be extended: if the "dialectical" contradictions between productive forces and relations of production largely efface themselves in the field of language, signs and ideology—*maybe they have never truly been at work in the field of material production either*, since a certain capitalist development of productive forces was able to absorb them, not every conflict of course, but the revolutionary antagonisms at the level of social relations. What is therefore the validity of these concepts, if not a purely conceptual coherence?

In the second case, it is at the root itself (and not in its diverse contents) that the concept of production should be questioned, with the separated form that it institutes, with the schema of representation and of rationalization that it imposes. It is undoubtedly there, at the extreme, that one must go.

6. One finds this type of reductive determinism in Bourdieu and in the phrasology of the Communist Party. It is without theoretical value. It makes of the *mechanism* of democratization a revolutionary *value* in itself. That the intellectuals repudiate mass culture does not suffice to make a revolutionary alternative. The aristocrats frown on bourgeois culture in the same way: this never sufficed to make the latter anything but a class culture.

7. [ORTF, French radio and television headquarters. *Trans.*]

8. Thus the institutions of power and of the state according to whether they are in the grip of capital or if the people have taken them over, empty themselves or are filled with revolutionary content, without their form ever being interrogated.

9. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 105, 108.

10. *Ibid.*, 97.

11. *Ibid.*, 107.

12. [See Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as an Apparatus of Communication" (1932) in John Willert, ed. *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 51–53. *Trans.*]

13. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 97–98.

14. This is not a question of "dialogue," which is never anything but the functional adjustment of two abstract speeches without response, wherein the two "interlocutors" are never present one to the other, but only their stylized speech.

15. We can see that taking the ORTF in May '68 would have changed nothing in itself, other than to scuttle the ORTF as such: the entire technical and functional structure of it reflects the monopolistic use of speech.

16. [Roland Barthes, *S/Z* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974) 4. *Trans.*]

17. Multifunctionality evidently changes nothing here. Multifunctionality, pluridisciplinarity, polyvalence in all its forms are the responses of the system to its

own obsession with centrality and uni-equivalence. They are reactions of the system to its own pathology, but they leave its logic untouched.

18. Enzensberger interprets it in this way: "Medium is the message" is a *bourgeois* proposition. It signifies that the bourgeoisie has nothing left to say. Having no further message to transmit, it plays the card of medium for medium's sake. If the bourgeoisie has nothing left to say, 'socialism' would do better to keep quiet."

19. This distinction has no meaning in relation to the media. We can give them credit for having largely contributed to its effacement. The distinction is linked with an order characterized by the *transcendence* of politics, and it has nothing to do with what is announced in many forms as the *transversality* of politics. But we should not be fooled: the media only contribute to the liquidation of the transcendence of politics so as to substitute their own transcendence, that abstraction of the form of the mass media that is definitively integrated and offers nothing more than the structure of conflict (Left/Right). Transcendence in the mass media is therefore a reduction of the traditional transcendence of politics, but it is still much more than the new transversality of politics.

20. This form of "exposure" or "propagation" is also to be found in the fields of science and art. Generalized reproducibility obliterates the process of work and of meaning so as to deliver contents as a model of itself (cf. *Diogenes* n° 68 (1969); Raoul Evgmann, *Le miroir en miroir*; Baudouin Jurdant, *La vulgarisation scientifique*).

21. We should note that this labor always doubles a work of selection and of reinterpretation at the level of group adherence (Lazarfeld's *two-step flow of communication*). Hence the highly relative pregnancy of the contents of the media and the multiple resistances that it provokes. (We should ask ourselves, however, if these resistances intend, even more than the contents, toward the abstraction of the media itself: in this sense, Lazarfeld's double articulation would, since the second articulation is a network of *personal* relations, opposed to the generality of the media's messages.) Significantly, this "second" reading, wherein group membership opposes its own code to that of the transmitters (cf. Umberto Eco's thesis, discussed below), not to neutralize it, to "reduce" its dominant ideological contents in the same way as critical or subversive *contents*. To the extent that the first (cultural models, systems of imposed values without alternative or response, bureaucratic contents) are homogeneous with the general mass mediated form (non-reciprocal, irresponsibility) and integrate themselves therein through redoubling, there is as an effect of over-determination and therefore a pregnancy greater than the dominant ideological contents. This "passes" better than the subversive contents. But it is not essential. It must be recognized that the *form* of transgression does not pass "more or less," it is radically denied by the form of the mass media.

22. For Walter Benjamin, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the reproduced work becomes increasingly "designed for reproduction." For Benjamin, therefore, the work passes from ritual to "politics." The "exhibition value" revolutionizes the work of art and its functions.

23. [An agreement reached by representatives of the CGT and Georges Pompidou in May 1968. *Trans.*]

24. Jerry Rubin, *Do It* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 234.

25. The two terms are so minimally present, one to the other that it is necessary to create the category of "contact" to theoretically reconstitute the group!

26. The developed form of this opens logically onto analysis in terms of classical political economy. In *La communication de masse* (S.G.P.P. 1971), Burgelin discusses mass communication as a "market of messages," repeating all the schemas of liberal economy: competition, offer and demand, equilibrium, needs and consumer "choice," etc. This is the *unchanged* extension of bourgeois political economy, just as Enzensberger extends *unchanged* the critique of that political economy.

27. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 119, 127.

28. *Ibid.*, 97.

29. Here again, Enzensberger, who analyzes and denounces this integration of control circuits, meanwhile connects with this incorrigible idealism: "Naturally (!) such tendencies go against the grain of the structure, and the new productive forces not only permit, but indeed demand (!) their reversal" (108). Feed-back and interaction are the *logic* of cybernetics, and there is the same illusion in underestimating the possibilities of the system for integrating these "revolutionary" innovations as in underestimating the capacity of capitalism to develop the forces of production.

30. Enzensberger draws his argument from the fact that Xerox retains its monopoly on photo-copying (the possibility of general "free press") and only rents at exorbitant rates. But having our own Xerox or short wave-length is inessential. The true monopoly is never that of technical means but that of speech.

31. Enzensberger, *op. cit.*, 110.

32. This is why the *individual* amateur cameraman remains in the separated abstraction of *mass* communication. Through this internal dissociation between the two authorities, the entire code and all of the dominant models engulf and seize his practice.

"L'Utopie a été renvoyée..." *Utopie* 4 (October 1971) 3-4; translated by Gary Genosko as "Utopia: The Smile of the Cheshire Cat" in *Uncollected Baudrillard op. cit.*, 59-60.

"Conte de grève 2" *Utopie* 4 (October 1971) 24-27.

"Requiem pour les media" *Utopie* 4 (October 1971) 35-51; reprinted in *Pour une Critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); translated by Charles Levin as "Requiem for the Media" in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1981) 164-84.

"L'ADN ou la métaphysique du code" *Utopie* 4 (October 1971) 57-61.

"Le miroir de la production" *Utopie* 5 (May 1972) 43-57; reprinted in *Le Miroir de la production ou l'illusion critique du matérialisme historique* (Paris: Casternan, 1973); translated by Mark Poster as "The Mirror of Production" in *The Mirror of Production* (St. Louis: Telos, 1975) 17-51.

"Le marxisme et le système de l'économie politique" *Utopie* 6 (February 1973) 5-44; reprinted in *Le Miroir de la production ou l'illusion critique du matérialisme historique op. cit.*; translated by Mark Poster as *The Mirror of Production, op. cit.*, 111-167.

"Conte de grève 3" *Utopie* 7 (August 1973) 26-43.

"La dramatisation de l'économie" *Utopie* 8 (February 1974) 6-17.

"La campagne BNP" *Utopie* 8 (February 1974) 45-48.

"Les animaux malades de la plus-value" *Utopie* 8 (February 1974) 14-17; "Les animaux malades de la plus-value 2" *Utopie* 9 (April-May 1974) 14-17; substantially rewritten as "The Animals: Territory and Metamorphosis" translated by Sheila Faria Glaser in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) 129-41.

"Trompe-la-mort" *Utopie* 9 (April-May 1974) 18-23.

"Sur l'échec de la prophétie..." ("Les élections '74") *Utopie* 10 (June-July 1974) 7-17.

"La prise d'orage" *Utopie* 13 (March-April 1976) 5-9.

"À mort les sauvages" ("Dies irae") *Utopie* 13 (March-April 1976) 34-37.

"Porno-stéréo" *Utopie* 13 (March-April 1976) 87-95; reprinted in *De la Séduction* (Paris: Galilée, 1979); translated by Brian Singer as "Porno Stereo" in *Seduction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, London: Macmillan: Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990) 28-36.

"Le cadavre en spirale" *Utopie* 14 (May-June 1976) 10-15; reprinted in *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981); translated by Sheila Faria Glaser as "The Spiraling Cadaver" in *Simulacra and Simulation op. cit.*, 149-154.

"Conte de travail 3" *Utopie* 14 (May-June 1976) 19-24.

"Le dernier tango de la valeur" *Utopie* 14 (May-June 1976); reprinted in *Simulacres et Simulation, op. cit.*; translated by Sheila Faria Glaser as "Value's Last Tango" in *Simulacra and Simulation, op. cit.*, 155-157.

"La lueur enchantée ou le flûte finale" *Utopie* 16 (April 1977) 6-9; reprinted in *Le PC ou les paradis artificiels du politique* (Cahiers d'Utopie, 5. Fontenay-sous-Bois: Cahiers d'Utopie/Quotidienne, 1978) 9-27; reprinted in *La Gauche Divine* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1985); translated as "The Enchanted Barle or the Final Flute" by Mark Lajoie in *Uncollected Baudrillard op. cit.*, 91-96.

"Castrée le veille de son mariage" *Utopie* 17 (December-January 1977-78) 2-10; reprinted in *Le PC ou les paradis artificiels du politique* (Cahiers d'Utopie, 5. Fontenay-sous-Bois: Cahiers d'Utopie/Quotidienne, 1978) 29-55; reprinted in *La Gauche Divine* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1985); translated as "Castrated on his Wedding Night" by Mark Lajoie in *Uncollected Baudrillard op. cit.*, 96-103.

"Notre théâtre de la cruauté (sur le terrorisme Mogadiscio)" *Utopie* 17 (December-January 1977-78) 17-24; reprinted in *À l'Ombre des majorités silencieuses ou la fin du social* (Fontenay-sous-Bois: Cahiers d'Utopie, 1978); translated by John Johnston as "Our Theater of Cruelty" Semiotext(e) (1982), 4(2): 108-115; reprinted in *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities, or The End of the Social and Other Essays* Foreign Agents Series. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).