The Medium is the Archive

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Abstract

There has been much discussion about how digital technologies have changed the media. In this paper I will propose a reflection on how digital technologies can also deeply modify our conception of the media. In particular, I will show how digital technologies challenge a number of conceptual distinctions that underlie, almost as dogmas, most current discussions on media. I will analyse and criticise the following dogmatic distinctions: communication / recording; medium / archive; vehicle / store; act / object; content / form.

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1 Communication / Recording

Media theory has emerged as a theory of communication, with oral language and conversation as paradigms. In this theoretical framework, recording has generally been treated as a secondary moment, as a secondary function with respect to communication.

This priority of communication characterises the two theories of communication that are perhaps the most influential of the twentieth century: Austin's and Searle's linguistic pragmatics on the Anglo-Saxon analytical side; Saussure's, Barthes' and Metz's semiotics on the francophone continental side (but one could also mention, in German culture, Gadamer's hermeneutics or Habermas's theory of communicative action). In these theories, communication is fundamentally conceived as a transfer of thoughts from one mind to another by means of a language, which functions as a perfect mediator:

reliable and transparent.

Film, with its dependence on a technological device and with its ontological vocation to record reality, at first was an exception to this rule, but semiotic and pragmatic approaches have contributed to include the domain of communication. For film, understood in general as the medium of motion pictures, lies at the very boundary between communication and recording, I will treat it as our main example in this paper.

In his critique of semiotics (in the essay 'Le *puits* et la *pyramide*. Introduction à la sémiologie de Hegel') and pragmatics (in the essay 'Signature, événement, contexte'), Jacques Derrida (1972) has criticised the perfect transparency and autonomy of the linguistic medium, showing that these are nothing but an illusory effect produced by the transient and evanescent substance of the human voice. Indeed, as Derrida (1967b) himself argues, language, just like thought, cannot do without some material support, because language and thought require memory, which requires matter. In Aristotelian terms, one might say that, although language and thought may appear as pure actuality, they rely on memory, which is instead pure potentiality, and potentiality means matter.

Thus, against a conception of communication as a linear transfer of thoughts, Derrida (1967a, 1967b, 1972, and 1995) emphasises the mediating role of the material object, which may be the sound of the voice or writing or another transcription technique. In this way, the recording is no longer a mere appendix of communication, but becomes an active part of its process.

As pointed out by Maurizio Ferraris (2009), Derrida's intuition has been vividly confirmed by the diffusion of the digital medium, whose structural features contradict the illusory transparency of the oral language (as well as that of television as a medium), making it much more similar to writing and film. The digital revolution upsets the distinction between recording and communication, and unifies the two domains. That is to say, while we communicate, we record; and while we record, we communicate. For example, sending an SMS

or an e-mail is communicating and at the same time recording what has been communicated; symmetrically, uploading files on a network amounts to recording and at the same time communicates what has been recorded. Likewise, Facebook is a communication space that records everything that is communicated, while YouTube is a recording space that communicates everything that is recorded.

Digital technologies thus reveal that communication and recording are not two different processes, but rather two different ways of describing the same process. Assuming that communication is an act by which a thought is transferred from one mind to another (we shall see later how much this statement is questionable), this act requires the production of an object, which implies a recording (in the case of writing) or at least the possibility of recording (in the case of the voice). In the process of communication, such an object is as crucial as the act.

2 Medium / Archive

On the one hand, the medium is generally conceived of as a system of techniques and practices by which information passes from the sender to the recipient. On the other hand, the archive is defined as a system of techniques and practices by which information is stored. The notion of archive is traditionally subordinated to that of medium, in the same way that recording is subordinated to communication. The medium is considered the place of living communication, while the archive is considered the place of recording, that is to say of 'dead' or 'frozen' communication. According to this traditional approach, the archive contains everything that has already been communicated.

But we have seen that the digital medium reveals an archive structure, and this leads us to a circle: the medium is the condition of communication, since we communicate through the medium; communication is the condition of registration, since we record what has been communicated; recording is the condition of the archive, since what we put in the archive are recordings; the archive is the condition of the medium, since the digital medium is constituted by databases, that is to say archives. So the medium is the condition of the archive

and, at the same time, the archive is the condition of the medium.

To get out of this circle, we must recognise that the medium and the archive are not two different systems, but rather two different ways of describing the same system. The medium is the surface of the archive, the archive is the depth of the medium.

So the medium is not only a communication space, but also a recording space, and the archive is not only a recording space, but also a communication space. It is nevertheless useful to use the two terms in order to distinguish the prevalence of the communicative function (in the case of the medium) or the prevalence of the recording function (in the case of the archive). But we must never forget that even the most transparent medium (such as language) is always based on physical mediation (voice, memory), and symmetrically even the most impenetrable archive keeps the possibility of a communication. The medium is an archive that records for a limited time, the archive is a medium that communicates over a long period.

3 Vehicle / Store

The distinction between medium and archive relies on a metaphor: meaning is a commodity that is transported. This main metaphor entails a series of secondary metaphors: the medium is the vehicle of meaning and communicating is conveying meaning through the vehicle (for a recipient who will extract it from the vehicle); the archive is the store of meaning and to record is to deposit the meaning in the store (for a user who will extract it from the store).

But the metaphor that meaning is a commodity that is transported raises a big problem: goods can be transported because they are in the physical world, but the meaning is in the mind and cannot exist regardless of it. The most we can do is to act and produce things – including words, sounds, images – in order to generate meaning in the minds of others. The metaphor of the transport of meaning is unsatisfactory, especially for audiovisual objects, which can create meaning far beyond the intentions of the communicator. Making a film, for instance, does not consist of putting a message in a bottle, that

is, in conveying meaning from the mind of the director to the minds of the spectators. Rather, making a film consists in building a tool that can produce different affects and meanings for different people.

Even in its metaphorical foundation, the distinction between the medium and the archive is therefore untenable, because it is above all the metaphor of meaning as a commodity to be transported that is untenable. As linguist Michael J. Reddy (1979) points out in his essay *The Conduit Metaphor*, this model of communication reifies meaning in a deceptive and dehumanising way leading us to treat thoughts as if they had the same kind of external and intersubjective reality as lamps and tables.

The medium does not directly transmit thoughts. Instead, it allows us to produce objects that are capable, under the appropriate conditions, of generating thoughts in the minds of the recipients. Likewise, the archive does not directly store thoughts. Instead, it store objects that are capable, under under the appropriate conditions, of generating thoughts in the minds of the recipients. Therefore, we should turn our attention to these objects and these conditions.

4 Act / Object

The act of communication is traditionally conceived of as the transport of meaning through the vehicle, and as well as the recording object as the box that makes it possible to deposit meaning in the store. Yet, deconstructing the distinction between the medium and the archive involves that a work cannot be reduced either to the transport of meaning or the storage of meaning. Let us consider a film. This cannot be reduced either to the act of communication or to the recording object. The film is both an act and an object: an act that is iterated by objects, and is inseparable act from the objects it has produced. The film is an act that produces effects as long as its objects persist, just as the emission of light propagates as long as its rays persist. The film as an object is the propagation of the film as an act. What we call both medium and archive is the space of this propagation.

On the side of the medium, one tends to privilege the act and to

remove the mediation of the object (in particular, as we saw, in the paradigmatic case of the language). Symmetrically, on the side of the archive, one tends to focus on the object as if it was separated from the act that generated it. In both cases, one underestimates something essential: from the medium's perspective, one underestimates the relevance of the material determinations in relation to the communicative intention; from the archive's perspective, one underestimates the circumstances of production and reception in comparison to the existence of the object.

To consider the film as an act rather than an object may seem odd, but what is really odd is to consider the film exclusively as a recording object (on the archive side) or to treat it exclusively as an act of communication (on the side of the medium). New ontologies of art like those proposed by Gregory Currie (1989), Jerrold Levinson (1990) and David Davies (2004) highlight that works that have always been treated as objects should also be treated as acts. In fact, in appreciating a work, we also appreciate what an agent has done.

Therefore, in the archive, there is more than a merely material object; there is an object that iterates an act and is capable of eliciting thoughts precisely because of this. Likewise, in the medium, we do not find a simple act of transfer of meaning, but also an object to which the act entrusts the task of eliciting thoughts.

Too rigid conceptions of the medium and the archive break the essential link between the act of communication and the material object, but this link is essential to understand what a work really is. Consider what happens when we watch a film. On the one hand, we are directly confronted with images and sounds instead of pure thoughts and intentions. On the other hand, we do not consider these images and sounds simply for what they are or what they represent; we also treat them as the outcomes of a communicative act.

5 Content / Form

We have considered the distinction between the medium and the archive, just as the metaphor that meaning is a commodity that has been transported, which is at its root. Among the implications of these, there is the distinction between the content and the form (or the content and mode, or content and style, or the signified and the signifier: too often attempts have been made to solve conceptual problems by appealing to lexical shifts).

Meaning, as a transported commodity, must be contained in a container (called from time to time: form, mode of representation, style or signifier). But if we deconstruct the metaphor of meaning as a commodity, we also deconstruct the distinction between content and form. Works like films are not boxes, so they have no content, and no form either.

A film is rather an act that produces an object that is capable of eliciting effects. To study a film is to study at the same time the act, the object and the effects. A film's screenplay, its staging, its cinematography and its music, its framing and its editing, are all components of the act that creates the object and produces the effects. We should not think that something transports and something else is transported: the different components of the film all have the same ontological dignity. So, in a film, there is no content to be formatted, transported and stored. A film is just an act embodied in an object.

Usually, the form / content distinction is applied to works like films in two different ways. Firstly, one can call 'content' the entities to which the film refers (roughly the narrative information that in fiction films corresponds to the screenplay), while calling 'form' the representation of this content through images and sounds. In practice, this is just the distinction between screenwriting and film-making. Yet, on closer inspection, these is not content to be transported and a form that contains it; these are just two stages of a production process. Secondly, one can call 'content' the intention of communication of the author and 'form' the work that expresses it (by means of both screenwriting and film-making). Yet, this leads us back to the metaphor of the transport

of meaning with all its problems. Thus, the distinction between form and content boils down to a misleading way of expressing the plain truth that a work like a film is both an intentional act and a material object.

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