

# Derrida, Jacques

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Born in 1930 in Algeria, trained in philosophy and literature in Paris and at Harvard University, Jacques Derrida taught first at the Sorbonne and then at the École Normale Supérieure, as well as at the University of California, Irvine, until his death (he died of cancer, in 2004). He was awarded honorary doctorates by the University of Cambridge, Columbia University, the New School for Social Research, the University of Essex, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, and several others around the world.

Derrida had serious doubts about the very concept of communication: “Is it certain that there corresponds to the word communication a unique, univocal concept, a concept that can be rigorously grasped and transmitted: a communicable concept?” (Derrida, 1982, p. 309). He expressly rejected the classical notion that communication is the transmission of meaning from subject to subject. His analysis of *logo-phonocentrism* (the assumption that speech is more primary than writing, and that thought is more primary than its expression) is pivotal to his critique of the metaphysics of presence, whereby he shows, in close readings of canonical works by Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, and others, how such a bias erects hierarchies that deconstruction would seek to invert. It was Derrida’s (1976) declared intention “to make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words ‘proximity,’ ‘immediacy,’ ‘presence’ (the proximate, the own, and the pre- of presence)” (p. 70). A related Derridean intervention is to point out that repetition and repeatability have powerful effects on supposed presence: Plato’s description of the written speech as communication that functions in the absence of the speaker leads Derrida to emphasize that communication is predicated on absence as much as on presence and on iteration as much as on live performance. Because iterability is a communicative precondition, the notion that somehow there is an “ordinary” form of communication that could escape this precondition would need to assert that this “ordinary” communication is somehow “special.” As Derrida sees clearly, the concept of communication affects its own conditions of possibility:

the value of displacement, of transport, etc., is constitutive of the very concept of metaphor by means of which one allegedly understands the semantic displacement which is operated from communication as a nonsemiolinguistic phenomenon to communication as a semiolinguistic phenomenon. (Derrida, 1982b, p. 310)

Suspended between a desire for an encyclopedic grasp of “Derrida” and the surmise that such a project must appear to go diametrically against the claims of deconstruction, we nevertheless encounter in Derrida’s work a strong concern with issues and research questions that are core to communication, enough so that it should be possible

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to sketch out a number of trajectories through his thought that circumscribe the stakes. Yet there are too few succinct accounts of Derrida on communication. Simon Morgan Wortham's (2010) *Derrida Dictionary* goes directly from "circumfession" to "community," without addressing communication—and never mind the proper names of philosophers, writers, and artists of interest to Derrida, since Derrida (1976) warned: "it would be frivolous to think that Descartes, Leibniz, Rousseau, Hegel, etc. are names of authors"—rather each is first of all "the name of a problem" (p. 99). Niall Lucy's (2004) eponymous compilation offers no more to the student of communication: His *Derrida Dictionary* likewise does not include a lemma on communication. However, this certainly does not mean that Wortham or Lucy were unaware of Derrida's strong interest in communication networks and media technologies. In an extended interview with Bernard Stiegler on television, Derrida explained what he called artifactuality: "Hegel was right to remind the philosopher of his time to read the papers daily. Today, the same responsibility obliges him to learn how the dailies, the weeklies, the television news programs are made, and by whom" (Derrida & Stiegler, 2002, p. 4). But Derrida's take on the historical transformation of communication by technology is ambivalent. On the one hand, he worried that "an entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications" (Derrida, 1987, p. 197). On the other hand, he declared, a decade before the invention of the World Wide Web, that he was one of those who wanted to write and first to reassemble an enormous library on the courier, the postal institutions, the techniques and mores of telecommunication, the networks and epochs of telecommunication throughout history. Yet the library and its history are relays of what he calls the great telematic network, as he asks: What would our correspondence be, and its secret, the indecipherable, in this terrifying archive? (pp. 27, 105).

Throughout his writing, Derrida made much of contemporary "techno-tele-media apparatuses and ... new rhythms of information and communication" (Derrida, 1994, p. 79). Above all, he admonished his readers time and again of the constant teletechnological deferral of information or communication. Both Derrida and Marshall McLuhan juxtaposed sequential and discontinuous modes of communication, but Derrida did not go along with the troubling equation of a "primitive past" with the electronic present. As he argued, "communication, if one insists upon maintaining the word, is not the means of transport of sense, the exchange of intentions and meanings, the discourse and communication of consciousnesses" (Derrida, 1982b, p. 329). Accordingly, we are not witnessing an end of writing—which, to follow McLuhan's ideological representation, would restore a transparency or immediacy of social relations; instead, Derrida argued, we are seeing a more powerful historical unfolding of a general writing—of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, and truth would be only an effect, to be analyzed in light of what Derrida calls *logocentrism*. Along the lines of his sustained critique of *phonocentrism* and *logocentrism*, Derrida rejected what he saw as hype in McLuhan. In an interview, he argued that

there is an ideology in McLuhan's discourse that I don't agree with, because he's an optimist as to the possibility of restoring an oral community which would get rid of the writing machines and so on. I think that's a very traditional myth which goes back to ... let's say Plato, Rousseau. (Brennan, 1983, p. 42)

Thus, instead of thinking that we are living at the end of writing, Derrida argued that the new media are an extension of writing, in the new sense of those writing machines that we are using now.

While Derrida objected to McLuhan's vaunted return to orality (with Eric Havelock and Walter Ong), elsewhere he also associated McLuhan with privileging touch as the sense of the electronic age. The relationship between theory and textuality, and particularly between Derridean thought (often but not always bottled and sold as deconstruction) and text under the conditions of computers and networks, remains contentious—although there have been numerous arguments that deconstruction might theorize hypertext or that hypertext might instantiate deconstruction. The term *hypertext* was coined by Theodor Nelson, who argued against unnecessary verbiage at the outset of *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* (Nelson, 1974); on the other hand, Nelson's creative neologisms have a lot to do with the reputation that his text soon acquired. Coincidentally, another influential subversion of textuality was published in the same year as the first edition of *Computer Lib/Dream Machines*: Derrida's *Glas* (Derrida, 1974). The two books look astonishingly similar and argue parallel points. Both are the product of radical textual montage, using elaborate cut-and-paste strategies that caused problems in getting them into print; both were reissued in the 1980s and hailed as influential for an entire generation. Nelson and Derrida were vigorously misrepresented by acolytes and detractors, and unfairly associated with exclusively text-based approaches to contemporary media. Nelson's penchant for neologisms such as *structangle*, *docuverse*, *teachotechnics*, and *showmanshipnogy* illustrates this attitude. By contrast, Derrida argued in favor of keeping the old name, despite radical displacement and grafting of its connotations. Given the impossibility of transparent immediacy, Derrida advocated the historical expansion of writing:

To leave to this new concept the old name of writing is tantamount to maintaining the structure of the graft, the transition and indispensable adherence to an effective intervention in the constituted historical field. It is to give everything at stake in the operations of deconstruction the chance and the force, the power of communication. (Derrida, 1988, p. 21)

This structure that Derrida envisioned was at times misunderstood, or misrepresented, as coming into its own on the Internet. Thus George Landow declared that Derrida's radical book *Glas* should be understood as "digitalized, hypertextual Derrida," and Modern Language Association president J. H. Miller associated it with "the new multi-linear multimedia hypertext that is rapidly becoming the characteristic mode of expression both in culture and in the study of cultural forms" (Landow, 1992, p. 2; Miller, 1991, p. 12). Whereas Mark Taylor argued that "deconstruction theorizes writerly practices that anticipate hypertexts" (Taylor, 1994, p. 3), Geoffrey Bennington advised that, if writing had a privileged empirical form for Derrida, it would be the computer—yet on the other hand hypertexts can just as well be presented as a fulfillment of a metaphysical view of writing (Bennington, 1994). Gregory Ulmer argued that Derrida's writings "already reflect an internalization of the electronic media" (Ulmer, 1985, p. 303), and Mark Poster held that "computer writing instantiates the play that deconstruction raises only as a corrective" (Poster, 1990, p. 128). Under the weight of such claims, both *Glas* and *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* came to be considered either

illegible or always already read, yet the inscription of textuality into a worldwide net of computer-mediated communication will not simply “always already” have taken place; it remains unforeseeable, its technicality must be interrogated without reducing such an interrogation to a participation in the same order. Hypertext is not the sublation of a system of traces and marks into fully manifest context, but rather an extension of the same structure. As Derrida has it: communication, if we retain that word, is not simply a transference of meaning but an inscription or grafting, and its effect is a dissemination that is irreducible to the mere polysemy that hypertext supposedly embodies.

Thus one may distill this thumbnail sketch of Derrida on communication to a constitutive belief in an originary and irreducible quasi-transcendental “dehiscence” constitutive of anything like meaning—such that any speech act at all is caught up in something that looks like performative contradiction when seen from a metaphysical vantage point. If one looks at it this way, the more one approaches the regulative idea of communication, the further away one gets from communication. Therefore deconstruction holds, against Habermas, that

the more perfect, the more performative a system of communication becomes, the more open it is, by the very fact of its increasing perfection, to contamination and breakdown, and the more of its resources have to be devoted to protecting itself from the necessary possibility of infiltration and infection. (Bennington, 2008, p. 52)

SEE ALSO: Hypertext, Hypermedia; McLuhan, Marshall; Medium; Orality; Poststructuralism; Signs

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