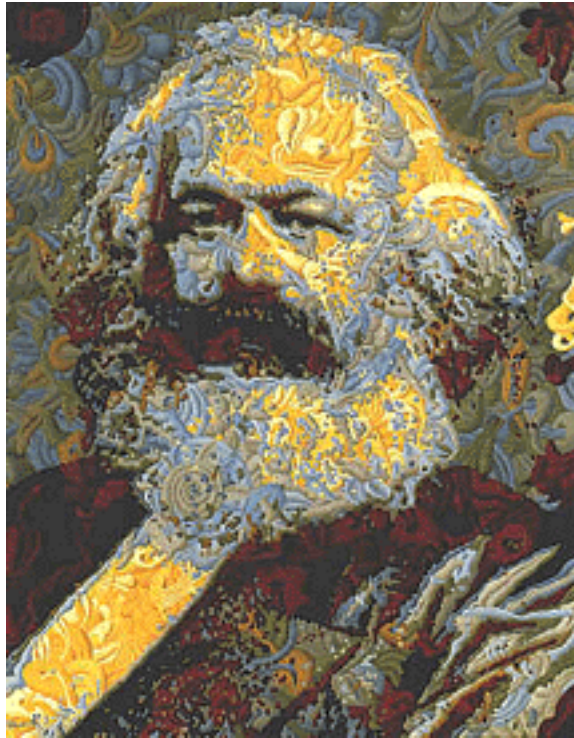


Review

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Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos: On the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms*.
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Hasn't the time arrived to draw out all of the epistemological consequences of discovering that the spirit of the age is as much in its objects as in its literary works, as much in our own hands as in our heads? There is a kind of spirit and intelligence in our vacuum cleaners, our automobiles, our telephones and our toothbrushes; and materiality in our symbolic goods.

-- Régis Debray, *Media Manifestos*

Mediation is . . . in the object itself, not something between the object and that to which it is brought.

-- Theodor Adorno, "Theses on the Sociology of Art"

**The Gears of the Collective Imaginary:
Regis Debray's *Media Manifestos***

It seems that every form of criticism relies, perhaps at times too greatly, on a set of tropes that can be easily and rapidly deployed against all competitors. These tropes function both as a kind of critical shorthand and as a means by which particular critical discourses establish the distinct characteristics that set them off from other forms of criticism. In Marxism, for example, one way of quickly discarding the claims made by other critical discourses (the current favorite seems to be cultural studies) is to take them to task for their lack of attention to the economic and to history--to criticize them, that is, for their failure to be materialist. This is to repeat, after all, the founding philosophical gesture of Marxism itself: the rejection of the idealism of philosophy (and Hegel in particular) in favor of a properly materialist philosophy. Perhaps because of the corresponding need to forever after defend themselves against charges of being materialist in a vulgar or mechanical sense, the initial paradox of producing a materialist *philosophy* has long been suppressed. In any case, to assert the philosophical and critical primacy of the material, while not without its problems, is also not entirely problematic--not, that is, unless the material that is insisted upon as a necessary component of all critical thought becomes itself reified, turned into something dead and outside of history, something whose main function is to bludgeon idealists into submission.

When it becomes merely an element of the rhetoric of the discourse called "Marxism" to assert that the material is everywhere absent except in its own practices, it seems to me that the material has become reified in just this way. To put this another way, while I myself have no doubt about the primacy of the material, it is nevertheless possible to miss a great deal when this becomes the main axis along which Marxist and Marxist-inspired critics approach the claims of other discourses. For Marxism itself has never been as materialist as some might want to claim, nor is the material wholly absent in other forms of discourse: to suggest otherwise is to falsely reduce complex issues to simple ones. As just one example of what I have in mind here, Michael Sprinker's generally excellent criticism of the ahistorical character of cultural studies is perhaps justified, but only to a certain degree. For while a certain stereotypical sense of what cultural studies is up to might suggest that all its time is spent considering the possible modes of resistance available in (the use made of) the objects of the culture industry--without, that is, ever imagining that these objects are that product of a certain specific moment of capitalist production that limits the very idea of what counts as culture--more careful attention to work of thinkers such as Lawrence Grossberg, Stuart Hall, Jim McGuigan, Meaghan Morris, and others, shows that this is simply *not* the case. To claim that cultural studies is far too fascinated with the "cultural" and not enough with what produces culture may perhaps be true as a generalization of its overall theoretical tone or tendency. But it is also somewhat of a cheap critique, and one, it seems to me, that doesn't get us very far in understanding the present conjunction of politics, economics and culture. At worst, such criticisms do little more than reinforce binaries that a dialectical criticism should always attempt to undo, and energies get misdirected into ultimately unhelpful debates over the divorce between criticism that is "merely cultural" (in the words of Judith Butler) and

criticism that is concerned, in the fashion of Todd Gitlin and Richard Rorty, with issues of "real" politics.

It seems to me that it is in the broad context I have just outlined that Régis Debray's most recently translated book, *Media Manifestos*, needs to be assessed. For while I find much that is useful and suggestive in this book, I also think that it is in some respects too one-sided. In the manner of any good manifesto, there is a breathless quality to this text--a headlong plunge into ideas, the assertion of a bitter enemy to be fought, the presentation of a whole new way of thinking about history and theory that claims to change our view of things entirely. Debray presents himself as charting virgin territory that has been hitherto unexplored. Nothing could be further from the truth. Fundamentally, *Media Manifestos* suggests that in exploring signification and communication--which he is right to suggest has been the dominant philosophical and theoretical undertaking of this century--it is important to attend to their fundamental materiality. The disciplines that have held a monopoly over these areas--"semiology" and communications studies respectively--have proceeded to study these phenomena in a disembodied manner, failing to take account of the specific historical processes and practices that make each possible, and possible in an historically determinant manner. It is not that this isn't an important project; as I hope to suggest, there is much that can come of it. It is simply that Debray overstates the limits of these fields, as well as the unique quality of the practice that he refers to as "mediology," which he seems to see as the first to ever undertake questions of signification and communication from a materialist (though not Marxist) perspective. If this is truly the case, how then are we to take Raymond Williams' forceful claim (perhaps too forceful, as Nicholas Garnham has pointed out) in *Marxism and Literature* that the elements of the superstructure must themselves be thought as material in the strongest way possible? And what about Voloshinov? The urgent revolutionary rhetoric that propels Debray's elaboration of "mediology" does not discount the substance of much of what he proposes here. But what it unfortunately disguises are the very deep connections between mediology and other similar forms of critique, as well as the fact that there is perhaps a more complicated, ambiguous story to be told about the ways in which a materialist account of signification might make use of the insights of both semiology and communication studies. Pierre Bourdieu's off-handed dismissal of mediology in *On Television* is perhaps not entirely without merit (50); one has the sense, especially of a practice eagerly reported on in *Wired*,¹ of a kind of strategic re-packing of concepts to be sold with the aid of a shiny new moniker--as if to suggest that Debray has finally succumbed to the logic of the intellectual marketplace that he decried earlier in his *Teacher, Writers, Celebrities* (1981).

Nevertheless, since the newness of a concept is certainly not everything, I want to give Debray his due here. After all, there is only so much one can expect from a work that self-consciously identifies itself as a manifesto, a form that consists of necessity more of exhortation than explanation. To begin with, the title is apt to mislead. *Media Manifestos* is a book that is fundamentally about materialism rather than the media. The media plays an important role here, but only once it has been characterized as simply the latest mode of *mediation*, the specific form of an invariant feature of human society: the transmission of symbols at a distance. There is always mediation, even though its particular forms

undergo historical change. For example, Debray suggests that "it is no longer the homily from the pulpit but the narration of the news on the screen and paper that presently provides for the translation of event into symbol and of peripeteia or mere incident into dramatic art" (25). The priesthood and the press perform a similar function, though of course it is to the significance of their differences to which Debray will attend. It is in the original title of the book and the subtitle appended to it in English that we get a better sense of Debray's overall aims: these are *Manifestes médiologiques*, manifestos for "mediology," a practice that explores "the Technological Transmission of Cultural Forms"--the "how" of symbolic transmission in each historical epoch that effects what can be transmitted, as well as the ultimate social significance of this transmission.

It is also important to note at the outset that this manifesto for mediation is part of a larger project. For Debray, *Media Manifestos* constitutes an attempt to reconstruct what, retrospectively, he now sees as occupying his attention since *Teachers*--the concept of mediation, which he has examined more or less directly in all of his work of the 1980s and 90s: *Le Scribe: Génèse du politique* (1980; *The Scribe*); *Critique de la raison politique ou l'inconscient religieux* (1983; translated as *Critique of Political Reason*); *Cours de médiologie générale* (1991; *Courses in General Mediology*); *Vie et mort de l'image: une histoire du regard en Occident* (1992; forthcoming as *A History of the Western Eye*); *L'État séducteur: les révolutions médiologiques du pouvoir* (1993; *The Seducer State*); and *L'Oeil naïf* (1994; *The Naive Eye*). *Media Manifestos* thus constitutes an overview of the considerations behind all of these books; it is, in a sense, a handbook or a guide to the practice of mediology in general. It is perhaps for this reason that what is in many respects the real insight produced by mediology is confined to a set of "mediological tables" (excerpted from earlier studies) which are relegated to the appendices. In the style of Jean-Joseph Goux's *Symbolic Economies* (though along different axes) or the charts sometimes favored by Lyotard, these appendices offer a broad ranging reconstitution of Western history into three epochs defined by the character of their particular "mediasphere." The table taken from *A History of the Western Eye* reads in part as follows:

	In the Logosphere (after writing)	In the Graphosphere (after printing)	In the Videosphere (after the audiovisual)
Attributes of the Image	Regime of the Idol	Regime of Art	Regime of the Visual
Principle of Its Efficacy	Presence: The Image Sees	Representation: The Image Is Seen	Simulation: The Image Is Viewed
Mode of Accumulation	Public: The Treasury	Individual: The Collection	Private/Public: Reproduction
Pathological Tendency	Paranoia	Obsession	Schizophrenia
Mutual Relations	Intolerance (Religious)	Rivalry (Personal)	Competition (Economic)

This chart indicates the conditions in numerous fields (psychic, social, economic, etc.) that correspond to each of the dominant "mediaspheres," or general systems of symbolic transmission, into which Debray divides history. It also points to the changes that occur as one mediasphere gives way--always incompletely, not "as substitutions, but rather as complications in a perpetual game of mutual reaction" (35)--to another. For Debray, the task of the mediologist is to identify the mediating, material "pathways" (technological and institutional processes and bodies) which constitute the "how" of symbolic transmission at a particular point in history, and which in turn produce (and are produced by) these other fields or spheres. It is in terms of its attention to the "power" of signs rather than to their "meaning," and with the "processes of advance, diffusion, propagation" by which signs become material, that mediology can be distinguished from semiology and communication studies. If mediology is concerned more with the "Churchification of the prophet's word" (8) rather than its meaning, it is because

The intermediary makes the law. Mediation determines the nature of the message, relation has primacy over being. To put it in other terms, it is bodies that think and not minds. The constraint of incorporation produces corporations--those intermediary bodies and institutions of knowledge, normatized and normative, which we call schools, churches, parties, associations, societies of thinkers, etc. (6).

A focus on the instruments and material forces by which signs are mediated produces a different understanding of history and of the significance of signification. For example, Debray suggests that for the mediologist, the Enlightenment is "not a corpus of doctrines, a totality of discourses or principles that a textual analysis could comprehend and restore; it is a change in the system of manufacture/circulation/storage of signs" (19). It is in this sense that Debray distinguishes mediology from its twin competitors of semiology and communication studies, both of which he sees as premised on an idealist assumption that makes it difficult to discern "the structure of bones from which depends an era's symbolic flesh, hidden beneath the finish of its literary, aesthetic, or legal monuments" (33). He is critical of the interpersonal sender/receiver model on which much of communication studies is premised, because it misses the fact that "transmission is a *collective* process. Not only are there lots of people on the 'line,' between the points, but in place of two individuals speaking and listening are personified social organizations, historically structured, in short, collective individuals are not isolated diodes . . . the true subject of transmission is not the source of it" (44-5). As for semiology, Debray criticizes the way in which it turns all cultural phenomena into a system of signs that can be deciphered like a text. Not only is this an example of the "structural adequation of the object to the tool" (58), a theory of texts that conveniently turns everything into something it can study, it also represents a collapse of language in upon itself. As a consequence of its excessive textualism, semiology ends up denying the existence of those forces outside of language that produce the signs that interest the semiologist. The explanatory gaps of semiology are thus considerable. As Debray points out:

When we read the missives of Voltaire, or of Madame de Sévigné, do we think about the services for delivering correspondence and messages they

suppose? Namely: 1) a strong central power, capable of maintaining a network of roads, postal relay stations, an organization of paid permanent employees, and 2) horses to ride, thus stud farms to produce them, and thus, in the end, a military calvary. This bucolic, pacific and so widely scattered literature required armed forces and a centralized State. (33)

Mediologists are thus less concerned with decoding the letters of Madame de Sévigné than with "the study of the postal relays between Grignan and Paris, of the goose quill pens used by this letter-writer and the mills where her stationery was manufactured" (65); less concerned with the meaning of signs than with understanding what makes this meaning possible.

Through its materialist re-conceptualization of the processes of symbolic transmission, mediology produces two effects. First, as Debray outlines in the final section of the book, "Toward an Ecology of Culture," a mediological approach produces a further de-centering of the subject. The subject must now be construed as an effect of the dominant mediasphere: "mediological man does not cohabitate with his technological surroundings, he is inhabited by his habitat; constructed by the niche he has constructed" (111). The second theoretical effect of mediology is perhaps more profound. By attending carefully to the conditions of possibility of specific modes of symbolic transmission, mediology puts into question what is an often unspoken element of many forms of critical thought. This is the uncritical and too infrequently thematized concept of "influence." The ways in which texts have a purchase on the world outside of them, producing actions and systems that extend beyond the limits of texts themselves, is in too many instances explained (or rather, not explained) by recourse to this mysterious mode of transmission or production. It is clear how this sense of "influence"--which Debray describes as having "the flaw of including within its figural texture what needs to be explained" (106)--operates within intellectual history, philosophy, and much of the public discourse that attends to a description of trends, periods, and so on (i.e., most of what passes for "news" these days). Debray believes that this sense of influence has also had to do a great deal of explanatory work within Marxism as well, a discourse that one would have thought to have been constructed to explain precisely what "influence" cannot.

Debray's relationship to Marxism remains a conflicted one.² While there is no doubt that he has been moving farther and farther away from the interests that animated *Revolution in the Revolution?* (1966), in the concept of mediology he has nevertheless retained a commitment to an historical materialism that shares many features with Marxism. And while Debray's direct attention to Marxism is limited in this book to less than ten pages, it is useful to consider what he has to say, not only because Marxism provides a theoretical inspiration for mediology (along with the unlikely bedfellows of Peirce and McLuhan), but also because it is a chief example of the kind of phenomena that mediology seeks to explain. Debray suggests that one of the fundamental projects of mediology is to account for the "real enigma" (10) of how a representation of the world can change the world. To what he describes as "the canonical question of the history of ideas--'do books make revolutions?'"--mediology therefore answers an emphatic "yes." History provides numerous examples of the condensation (or more correctly, the "reverse

sublimation") of gaseous texts into the solidity of institutions, programs, and ways of life. Debray writes that

the social use or actual career of reception of a text exceeds the alternative of persons and statements . . . its users are not reduced to readers, and still less to exegetes . . . One can in extreme cases use an author without knowing him, just as one undergoes the influence of a text without having read one line of it. That is even the most frequent case. How many of those who lived in the Communist world had read Karl Marx in his textual form? Or in the medieval world, Aristotle and Saint Thomas? Or from our politically liberal world, Adam Smith or Montesquieu? How many, even today, subjects of the Freudian empire have read the works of Freud? (68)

The challenge that mediology undertakes is to describe this passage from text to world from a materialist perspective, a perspective that Debray believes has eluded Marxism as fully as the semiology or communication studies. Indeed, Debray suggests that it is in its inability to explain its own transformation from texts to the practices and institutions of Communism that Marxism reveals its greatest inadequacy as a materialist philosophy of history.

How can this be? While Marx's critique of the Young Hegelians in *The German Ideology* opens up the possibility of a mediology, Debray suggests that Marxism failed to adequately theorize what should have been of utmost importance to a theory that wanted to change the world: a theory of "symbolic efficacy," of the means by which ideas might produce revolutions. In place of such a theory there is in Marxism only what Debray describes as various forms of "idealist predestination" which manifest themselves in "an infinity of materialist tautologies: 'Marxist-Leninist philosophy *represents* the proletarian class struggle in theory, and the theory and the proletarian class struggle *represent* philosophy within theory.' Or even more, this: 'According to principle, true ideas always serve the people; false ideas always serve the people's enemies'--which are words not from Saint Thomas nor Saint Theresa, but from Althusser" (88-9). In Marxism, Debray claims that the connections between text and world, between doctrine and organization, are asserted rather than examined; this is what gives Marxism both its powerful sense of predestination and also its particular vulnerability to changes in the mediasphere.

For if Marxism is presently undergoing a crisis, Debray suggests that it is due less to the end of state socialism than to the fact that it has never adequately understood its own material conditions of possibility--both what made it possible and what it could hope to make possible (the question of "symbolic efficacy" posed above.) In the few pages that he spends directly addressing the materialism of historical materialism, Debray argues convincingly that Marxism has never come to grips with its specific relationship to the modes of symbolic transmission historically available to it. He berates Marxism for not taking the necessary materialist step of "placing in relation the birth of the First International (1864) and the invention of rotary presses (1860). Or beyond that, by relation, in France, the Teaching League (1866), the surge in circulation of the *Petit Journal*, furthered by the rotary press of Marinoni (from 50,000 copies in 1859 to

600,000 in 1869), and the laying of the transatlantic cable (1866)" (92-3). The world of the newspaper and the printing press acts as a seemingly "natural" meeting place for the political avant-garde of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century; however, Debray argues that subsequent technological developments (photography, phonography, film, radio, tv, etc.) "'decommunitarize' knowledge and science even as they atomize and delocalize the collectives of knowledge . . . the library's crossover/expansion into a media center marks a change of 'element' Marxist culture has been no more able to survive than the 'industrial proletariat' has survived the shift from steel to polymers" (93-4).³ To link up the various aspects of Marxist theory with the contingencies and exigencies of its particular mediasphere produces a very different vision of the basis of Marx's historical materialism. "Like the Aristotelian who Beneveniste tells us confused certain categories of language for categories of thought," Debray writes,

the Marxist was unaware that he sublimated the blast furnace into a Proletariat; sublimated into a "vanguard element of the working class" the reader of a daily or the subscriber to the monthly review *Les Cahiers du Communisme*; into the "coming into consciousness about exploitation" a certain competence for deciphering a bookish common knowledge; and into the "union of theory and practice" certain channels of contact within an organization that rested on the dominance of print culture of an inscription system based in paper (including the popular university, the commonly consulted handbook, the communist cell library, the discussion in party congresses of theses and printed platforms, the Marxist Week of the Book, the newspaper advancing the interests of a certain class as "collective organizer," etc.) (92)

This is an interesting and potentially useful way of raising objections about the "materialist idealism" of Marxism. At the same time, it is also certainly an overstatement to suggest that insofar as Marxism failed to consider mediation by institutions and technologies, it is "a theory of history without history" (96). And it is here that it is possible to see both the limits and possibilities of mediology in general in Debray's specific examination of Marxism. By paying attention to the ways in which the symbolic transmission of Marxism was located in institutions and organizations, mediology can potentially open up a new vantage-point on Marxism as a whole. In the mediological account for Marxism, for example, Lenin emerges as the Marxist Saint Paul, the figure who understood "that a process of thought possesses the *objective materiality of an organizational process*" (95). On the other hand, Debray positions mediology as a practice that does not simply open up new avenues of inquiry, but which reveals the very mechanism of history itself, the gears of the collective imaginary that have for too long been obscured from view. It is in Debray's rhetorical urge to anoint it as a kind of critical super-science that mediology becomes most suspect and open to question. And it is here that it becomes necessary to raise the epistemological question that always troubles and destabilizes such claims: what are the material conditions of possibility that make mediology itself possible? Why can mediology itself tell us about why the secret logic of history emerges only now?

Debray appears to be aware that such criticisms might be raised towards mediology. He anticipates them by spending a great deal of time discussing the mode in which mediological inquiry is undertaken. Mediology, he emphasizes, is not a practice characterized by brilliant rhetorical flourishes, the flash of insight that characterizes philosophy's intersection and interrogation of one discourse with another. In a manner that is reminiscent of Foucault's description of genealogy (which is described as "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary" [139]), Debray claims that the proper site of mediological investigation is the archive. Mediology proceeds by means of dull and boring work, and it is only through his patience that the mediologist is rewarded with insight. Indeed, by comparison to other fields of inquiry (and here again, we can refer to the semiological transformation of all of culture into a text), it seems to be this "very dull grayness" (62) that guarantees the "truth" of mediology. On the evidence of *Media Manifestos*, the question needs to be asked: is this self-description of mediological practice accurate, or is this simply an example of the kind of critical rhetoric that I described at the beginning of this review? Does mediology really "do without geniuses" (62), or is this claim merely a way of obscuring Debray's own desires for this project? A manifesto is not a good site on which to evaluate the grayness and patience that Debray claims for mediology. Nevertheless, what we see in this manifesto is confirmed in what Yvette Biro finds in *Vie et Mort de l'Image*, a more fully worked out example of mediology. In this book, Biro suggests that what passes for a long stay in the archive is a hodge-podge collection of references and theoretical juxtapositions and strategies; perhaps this simply mirrors Debray's description of mediology as "a confederation of straggly residues, a precarious coalition of heterogeneous disciplines, and thus only an art of accommodating remainders" (102). Yet this non-systematic, fragmentary collection of facts and documents extracted from the archives seems to have produced the most startling insight. For unlike the genealogist, what the mediologist learns in the archive is not the necessity of attending to "the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality" (Foucault 139). Standing up to his knees (or maybe up to his head) in the vast, irreducible heterogeneity of history, the mediologist violently appropriates a few scattered archival fragments to produce a full-blown material history of the world--the truth of a world long hidden from us. As much as we might be able to learn from mediology, it is probably a good idea to suspect a practice that hides behind two rhetorics, one which masks its own procedures, the other which claims to pull back the curtain to allow us to gaze at long last upon the secret motor of history.

Notes

¹ Debray's obvious willingness to have his ideas discussed in sound-bite fashion in the pages of *Wired* is troubling, especially given the obvious subtext of Andrew Joscelyne's article. The title, "Revolution in the Revolution," makes direct reference to Debray's work on *focismo* in his 1966 book of almost the same name (the book's title is followed by a question mark.) The article's subtitle reads: "In the 60s, Régis Debray fought beside Che Guevara in Bolivia. Today, his obsession isn't ideology--it's 'mediology.'" In the context

of *Wired*, Debray's past involvement with Che Guevara and his imprisonment in Bolivia become merely signs of an appropriately hip revolutionary attitude (much as has happened with the image of Che in North America more generally), which an older Debray can now put to use in the exploration of the "revolution" of the present--the computer/media revolution for which *Wired* is the chief propaganda organ. As Keith White has written, " *Wired*'s distinctive maimed typography and its fluorescent hues may be interesting, but the magazine's truly marvelous feature is its corporate-culture mission. *Wired* is technology's hip face, an aggressive apologist for the new information capitalism that speaks to the world in the postmodern executive's favored tones of chaotic cool and pseudo-revolution" (47). Which raises the question: is this an accurate description of "mediology" as well? See Andrew Joscelyne, "Revolution in the Revolution (Interview with Régis Debray)." *Wired* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1995); and Keith White, "The Killer App: *Wired* Magazine, Voice of the Corporate Revolution." *Commodify Your Dissent*. Ed. Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997: 46-56.

[2](#) He writes here that "a Marxist indeed I was, although no marxologist, right up to around 1968, when 'the question of the nation' to which this tradition of thought brings only the most perfunctory answers, hit me, as well as my comrades, tragically, with blinding obviousness" (96). Debray's problems with the treatment of the nation in Marxism emerge fully, however, only a decade later in the essay "Marxism and the National Question." In her review of *Vie et Mort de l'Image*, Yvette Biro continues to detect "traces of a strong, vulgar Marxist school of thought" (72).

[3](#) By emphasizing its materialism and attention (or lack of) to mediation, Debray comes to a vastly different conclusion about Marxism's current prospects than Jacques Derrida does in *Specters of Marx*. Whereas for Debray, the videosphere means an end to a Marxism that developed almost organically within the graphosphere, Derrida comes to the conclusion that it is only now, at a certain moment of "tele-technology," that Marxism ("or a certain spirit of it") has reached the point of being able to finally actualize all of its latent possibilities.

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