

All Watched Over by Machines of Rhetorical Opportunity

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God only knows where I would be right now if the prosthetic technological infrastructure that undergirds our contemporary mediated existence suddenly went kaputt, whether due to something natural like a solar flare or sharks chewing through optic fiber, or because of a human-made cause like a belligerent electromagnetic pulse from the Russians or a different sort of devastating virus from China.

Most obviously, I would not be able to use my laptop (or my phone as a backup) to read my paper right now, nor would I have been able to write my paper (on the plane) using Google Docs, nor would my plane have been able to make it across the country from San Francisco without crashing, nor would I have been able to book a flight on that plane or a hotel room to crash tonight, nor would I have been able to submit a proposal or organize a panel for the conference, and so on and so on.

To paraphrase a point ventured already in 1968 by Marshall McLuhan, had COVID-19 affected our virtual viscera and computer systems rather than our organic corporeal systems, quote, “there would be no doubt how electric technology shapes, works over, alters—massages—every instant of our lives,” end quote.

For the deeply Catholic (and deeply Canadian) McLuhan, digital media by the late 1960s, when the Internet was only a twinkle in the cycloptic eye of HAL 9000, had already become pervasive for, part and parcel with, and omnipresent in modern society.

Likewise for McLuhan, the Great Torontonion Sage of the Technological Age, whatever human beings are able to put out into the world or accomplish, whatever meaning we are able to make for or of ourselves, is by dint of our media; and hence as the ubiquitous culmination and combination of all prior communication technology, digital media are moreover effectively omnipotent and increasingly autocratic within the realms of human activity.

This is the significance evangelized by McLuhan in his most famous maxim, which in its time had the character of a viral meme *avant la lettre*: To say *the medium is the message* (or *the massage*) is to say that meaning is grounded *not* in the content of what gets explicitly *enunciated* but in the material structure of the *enunciation* itself, in *how* something gets communicated rather than *what* gets communicated.

Drawing a line of “simultaneous happening” between McLuhan and another contemporaneous theorist of enunciation, Robert Pfaller has circuitously indicated that according to this general axiom, media function structurally in Lacanian terms as *points de capiton*, the point of which is to anchor signification and produce the necessary illusion of a fixed, stable interpretation.

In this sense, the container defines the content and establishes the foundational frame through which any given material or communiqué should be read, a site of punctuation that stabilizes from within the slippage of the signifying chain.

Whatever differences may separate *The Simpsons* and *The Sopranos*, they are first and foremost understood as TV shows; and whatever nonsense of partisan spectacle may ostensibly differentiate the posts of the 44th and 45th American Presidents, their initial impact and effect on political discourse is felt most strongly and widely as tweets *tout court*, drafters of memes more than policy.

More than mere message, in other words, the medium is the Master Signifier.

To seek, for instance, a deeper psychological insight or clandestinely encoded meaning behind “covfefe” is to miss the greater impact and ideological function of the tweet, which was to go viral, become a meme, and further infiltrate, transform, and shape the public discourse in and towards a manner completely empty of intelligibility—all this engendered by the nature of the medium itself, despite the text being utterly arbitrary and lacking intentionality or coherency.

(Note, furthermore, that according to the strict Lacanian denotation, in contrast to other words that require still other words for their meaning, a Master Signifier refers before all else to itself, a definitional tautology echoed in the McLuhanite apothegm: *The meaning of a medium is the medium*).

While for McLuhan the medium was the message always already, that truth is all the truer and more relevant today, as digital communication technologies have become all the more omnipresent, omnipotent, and even omniscient—tracking, touching, and transforming all areas of human practice.

(And if you are asking how a truth can be all the truer, we will return to that point in due time.)

By elevating this involuted understanding of the structural role played by media to the psychoanalytic realm of the Master Signifier, communication technologies join other rarefied *points de capiton* that have hegemonically functioned to anchor social signification and suture the body politic, such as Freedom, the Law, and (naturally) God.

Of course, the connection between divinity and media is nothing new:

We have always identified our Gods with the help of a medium, whether the Muses of Homeric oral poetry, the *deus ex machina* of Athenian tragedy, the *logos* of Christianity, *umm al-kitab* or the holy mother book of Islam, and now with McLuhan we have come to apotheosize modern media to the same sacred station in our secular age.

What *is* new, however, and what differentiates the profound social role played by contemporary digital communication technology from any other historic instance of a holy medium, is less that today media work as Master Signifiers than that those traditional *points de capiton*—whether Freedom, the Law, or

(especially) God—have seemingly vacated their conventional functions of suturing civic meaning and anchoring hegemonic values.

Slavoj Žižek (we all knew I would get around to him eventually) has described this shocking withdrawal as a “demise in Symbolic efficiency”—*Symbolic*, that is, with a rather symbolic capital *S*—a point (but not a *point de capiton*) echoed by Marxist rhetoricians and scholars of communication like Dana Cloud and Jodi Dean (in case you were wondering when I would get around to the unifying field of this conference).

Within a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, a demise in Symbolic efficiency refers not just merely to the general disappearance of common heroes, legends, and cultural exemplars—or in the words of Paula Cole, “where have all the cowboys gone?”—which at one time conferred a sense of social identity and knotted our civic fabric, but more acutely and completely, a deep skepticism towards and categorical rejection of public anchors and governing institutions whatsoever—that is to say, the cynical realization that there were never really any cowboys anyway, at least not in the sense once widely presumed (this is the idea that drives a film like Jane Campion’s *The Power of the Dog*, that last word a reversal, note, of *God*).

The consequence, among other effects, is both an ineluctable fragmentation of the Symbolic field and proliferation of new, individualized, decidedly antisocial symbols, an erosion of the fundamental capacity to communicate with and understand one another because there is no longer a shared language or mutual vocabulary.

Consider, for instance, in terms of the Symbolic economy, the sudden rise of (and financial fall of) cryptocurrencies, which outnumber to the tune of a thousand times official institutionally and communally backed fiat currencies (18k vs 180); or in terms of the social Symbolic, the rejection, by both the left and the right, of political legitimacy based on party affiliation, because the president is either an unduly elected Russian stooge or a deep state pretender to the throne; or in terms of the religious and educational Symbolic, the recent case at Wheaton College near Chicago where a professor was forced to step down after claiming that the signifiers “Allah” and “God,” in Islam and Christianity respectively, referred to the same signified.

Of course I could go on, but all of these examples—some of which you may take issue with or split hairs over if you have already bought in, financially or conceptually, to cryptocurrency or if you believe that the president really was or really is a puppet figurehead and empty emblem, a debate over examples which is precisely my point about lost *points de capiton*—in each instance they betoken what is often seen as a crisis of epistemic validity and our current post-truth condition (though even the truth of post-truth is up for argument).

It should be noted, however, that truth must be understood as an effect of a Master Signifier, rather than one itself outright: Something is true because God or Science or the Government tells us so, but

after a decline in Symbolic efficiency, when such anchors lose the weight of their traditional authority, truth in turn is forfeited, or at least undergoes a shift in value, so that we might say truth is no longer as true as it once was.

Even as the barren epistemic landscape has been met by academic monographs, special issues of scholarly journals, symposia, conference panels, social media discourse, TV talking heads, and the like, the erasure of truth and the untying of the Symbolic fabric have been in a joint process of unbecoming for quite some time, because truth always already was on shaky ground.

A Master Signifier may temporarily stabilize meaning and provide a floor for certitude, but the proper Žižekian claim to make here would be that, in point of fact, *points de capiton* have little to do with facts and are themselves in reality contingent and unstable, with no certain floor beneath them, either, so that in different times and different places with different people, different sites of anchorage emerge: Democracy was not always a Master Signifier, nor even was a monotheistic God.

Just as America in a post-truth era, as faith in seemingly all institutions collapses, has seen a rise in authoritarianism and demagogues rushing in where prior Symbols have vanished, discourse like nature also abhors a vacuum and inevitably requires other knots take the place where the old ones untied.

The reports about the untimely death of Symbolic efficiency, then, appear to be somewhat exaggerated, and though we might see how conventional Master Signifiers have perished—taking with them, in an epistemic murder-suicide, prior suppositions of truth—others always emerge, knots inevitably form, and with new Signifiers new modes of communing with our Masters, new Gods to fill the gap left in the wake of dead deities.

Recast in this light, the question is not, as *Time* magazine asked on its cover in August 1966, “is God dead?,” but rather, if we decide to take the Zarathustrian declaration of deicide seriously, *who has taken Their place?*—that is the question, by the bye, that John Lennon was in time assassinated for answering even before *Time* posed their rhetorical doubts, when he rightly highlighted in March of the same year that the Beatles had become “more popular than Jesus.”

The point is not that Rock Gods make up (and often in makeup) the new pantheon, though I would not be the first to intimate that there is something of the divine about their music and that the Fab Four may have been modern prophets, Tipper Gore be damned; that said, there is another line of John the Antibaptist’s that offers a clue to our contemporary theological crisis:

As he divined how to define the divine, quote “God is a concept by which we measure our pain” end quote—so what is it that we today “measure our pain” against, through which we understand our suffering and imagine our capacity for surviving it?

As I have intimated already, although Olympus has fallen and Heaven is seemingly further away than ever, there still exists an otherly world that serves the same function today, a world of collective

imagination and consensual hallucination through which we understand one another and identify ourselves: The medium is the Master Signifier such that today we worship at the algorithmic altar of a digital divinity, all the more powerful today for having so little competition, the last God standing. Signs of this newfound religiosity pervade contemporary culture, such as the wry commonplace that if you can't find it online—the social media profile of a person you go on a date with, the Yelp page for the place they take you to, the Wikipedia entry for the thing they talk about—it doesn't really or fully exist whatsoever; or how facts found online, no matter how obviously ludicrous, whether about something as massive as the shape of the earth or as microscopic as the efficacy of horse dewormer, assume a deeper hyperreal truth beyond epistemological concerns of veracity; or even how, in everyday parlance, we describe films that are 90% CGI as nonetheless live-action because their virtual fakery is really so believable.

While Samuel Morse, in the first message sent over his newly invented telegraph, may have asked “what hath God wrought?,” today with every tweet we ask the question, “what hath technology wrought?”—much the same point is reflected in the title of Alex Garland's 2014 film *Ex Machina*, which dropped the *deus* to elevate the machine.

Even earlier still, in *Time* too, in a time before all of culture was overclocked with halfcocked digital dreams of crypto profits (with an *F*) and Google gurus (decided not *Gs*), in the same 1966 issue, in the same article, on the same page that they heralded the death of God, the magazine editors appended a worshipful advertisement for one of the first electric typewriters, a forerunner to the modern word processor, the sort on which I wrote this paper.