THE MEDIA OF THE SPECTRAL:
DERRIDA AND BAUCHARLARD

There is no doubt that in the face of the apparently monoligible nature of much contemporary media, there is a very strong temptation to throw up one’s hands and refuse to engage. Similarly, where party and parliamentary politics become increasingly a self-regulating machine, moving with a perpetual motion with no apparent engagement beyond their mechanical orbit, the appeal and temptation of Baudrillard for some readers becomes perhaps understandable. Indeed, much as he is regularly treated with scorn, we might say that the slang of dismissal and withdrawal from the public sphere is perhaps the most characteristic political gesture in the contemporary West.

Yet against such sentiments Derrida insists that responsibility calls us to engage no matter how minimal our potential contribution and marginal our position, not to do so is to risk closing off the possibility of an event of alterity, to renounce the possibility of a different future. In this paper I will follow, firstly, how Derrida’s Husserlian analyses lead him to argue that the media at once open the possibility of an engagement of alterity while also potentially closing it off. We will see how the media can be the medium of the spectral. I will outline how Derrida argues we can keep open such a possibility at the same time as elaborating concrete analyses of media institutions and practices.

We have seen for Derrida the media is not a dramatically new problem. The ultimate result of his Husserlian analyses, as I have argued elsewhere, was to question whether any firm distinction between ‘ordinary perception’ and mediated perception is possible. In his work on Husserl, Derrida goes no further than the apparently simple technology of writing. Yet writing, as Derrida shows us, (and we must remember that everything that can be said about writing is also implied in the spoken word and all other linguistic acts) does not give us access to the thing itself. Language mediates our access to the world; we might say mediates in the sense that it both enables and prohibits this access. If there is no immediate proximity, there is always something like a writing at work. There is no structural difference between Derrida’s approach to the simplest utterance and to the productions of the most technically complex media: “these machines have always been there, they are always there, even when we wrote by hand, even during so-called face conversation”. Consequently, as he says in Of Grammatology: ‘immediacy is derived’. Of course, we must struggle to come to terms with the specificity of teletechnologies—Derrida is the last person who would let us gloss over them—but neither does that mean we can be allowed to forget that they remain on a continuum with ‘ordinary’ perception.

Derrida’s raising of the questions of perception and conceptuality leads to a deconstruction of the distinction between real and virtual that drives Baudrillard’s thesis on simulation and the media (although these remarks are not presented as an explicit reflection on Baudrillard’s work). Indeed, although Elographies (a series of interviews which is Derrida’s most sustained engagement with the question of the media) does not engage in a close reading of Baudrillard, Derrida’s coinage of the neologisms ‘artifactuality’ and ‘notivirtuality’, there could be used as the starting point for such a deconstruction. Both of these terms
introduce questions as to when exactly technology and the media emerge. Drawing on his readings of Husserl he sees something that could be termed 'technical' at work in the habitual operation of language in perception. Language enlightens and culminates at the same time, makes public but also holds back; it contains an indecipherable 'secret' that means communication can never be fully transparent. We don't need to pick up a pen and write for our language to be marked with something technological. The teletechnological inventions of modernity are complications of this structure, immense ones, singular ones, but we must not lose sight of what they have in common with the supposedly mediated. It is this inseparability that Derrida tries to highlight with his neologisms. For Derrida there is no 'the media', there are always media, right from the moment we begin to think, and before, indeed, Derrida goes so far as to suggest that media as the plural of medium is the very channel of the revent: 'I like the word 'medium' here. It speaks to me of specters of ghosts and phantoms'. Here Derrida does not signal a sudden hirudine interest in the occult but refers to a quasi-concept developed in his late work: to speak of the specter is to speak of the escape of the thing itself. It denotes—if it is possible to denote such a thing—something that is neither alive nor dead, neither present nor absent. In Heideggerian terms the spectral points us towards the necessity, when talking of the present, of examining how that present presents, and presences, itself. When he talks of specters, his insistence is: 'I want very much not to give up either on the present or on thinking the presence of the present—or on the experience of that which, even as it gives itself to us, conceals them'. We might say that while Baudrillard would try and hold his 'Requiem for the Media' (the title of a section of his early Toward a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign) Derrida would insist that the corpse might not be so securely entombed as Baudrillard thinks and that rather, through mourning and the inevitability of specters, the media may well be the medium of the other.

The use of the term 'artifactuality' no longer simply opposes reality and virtuality but draws attention to the ways in which what is conventionally regarded as virtual is a necessary part of the creation of what we call 'reality'. Derrida argues that: 'actuality is made: it is important to know what it is made of, but it is just as important to know that it is made'. With regard to the media Derrida again repeats: 'actuality is, precisely, made ... not given but actively produced, sifted, invested, performatively interpreted by numerous apparatuses which are factitious or artificial, hierarchizing and selective, always in the service of forces and interests to which 'subjects' and agents ... are never sensitive enough.'

And this, he might have added, happens in 'ordinary' perception too. In particular, we must note that Derrida is explicit in warning against an Baudrillardian reading of artifactuality: the requisite deconstruction of this artifactuality should not be used as an alibi. It should not give way to an inflation [une surmarche] of the simulacrum and neutralize every threat in what might be called the delusion of the delusion, the denial of the event: "Everything," people would then think, "even violence, suffering, war, and death, everything is constructed, fictionalized, constituted by and for the media apparatus. Nothing ever really happens. There is nothing but simulacrum and delusion." While taking the deconstruction of artifactuality as far as possible, we must therefore do everything in our power to guard against this critical neo-idealism and remember, not only that a consistent deconstruction is a thinking of singularity, and therefore of the event, of what it ultimately preserves of the irreducible, but also that "information" is a contradictory and heterogeneous process. It can and must be transformed, it can and it must serve, as it has often done, knowledge, truth, and the cause of democracy to come, and all the questions they necessarily entail. We can't help but hope that artifactuality, as artificial and manipulative as it may be, will surrender or yield to the coming of what comes, to the event that bears it and toward which it is borne. And to which it will bear witness, even if only despite itself.

We might note that he does not name Baudrillard here and, perhaps, we might see in this a recognition of places of proximity in the work of the two and a desire not to appear dismissive of his work. But we must stress how Derrida insists, on 'information' as a contradictory and heterogeneous process, not as code or even simulation (as Baudrillard does), and on the possibility of transformation and of an event. In these regards we could contrast the two theorists on the question of 'real time' TV. In Gulf War, Baudrillard speaks of real time TV as 'the spectacle of the degradation of the event': the way
in which the compounding of commentary upon commentary, gloss upon gloss simply underlines the "unreality of the war". Real time TV is said to be a simulacrum, there is no critical position that can be taken against it, and we cannot find a position outside it from which to criticize it: "the closer we supposedly approach the real or the truth, the further we draw away from them both, since neither one nor the other exists. The closer we approach the real time of the event, the more we fall into the illusion of the virtual". Baudrillard thus cedes all to the system he seeks to escape, making his only recourse a prayer for apocalypse: "all that we can hope for is ... that some event or other should overwhelm the information instead of the information inventing the event and commenting artificially upon it ... the only real information revolution would be this one". I would argue that it is such words we find precisely that "inflation of the simulacrum" and that failure to see information as a contradictory and heterogeneous process that Derrida warns against.

Derrida's own position is quite different although he is equally critical of those who would imply that 'real time' TV is somehow less mediated, less problematic than any other form of TV: "live" is not an absolute "live" but only a live effect (un effet de dire), an allegation of "live". He suggests that a widespread awareness that the issue is problematic can be seen in the very fact that we use the term 'real time' at all. Again, rather than seeing the problem of mediated perception as unique to contemporary teleotechnologies he generalizes it: "there is never an absolutely real time. What we call real time, and it is easy to understand how it can be opposed to deferred time in everyday language, is in fact never pure". He stresses that "the 'live' and 'real time' are never pure, that they do not give us intuition or transparency". But they are not unique in this. Here Derrida recalls the conclusions of his early work on Husserl: "The condition of possibility of the living, absolutely present is already memory, anticipation, in other words, a play of traces". The complexity of his analysis in no way prevents him from also engaging in a basic critique: "What is 'transmitted' live on a television channel is produced before being transmitted. The "image" is not a faithful and integral reproduction of what it is thought to reproduce. Still less of everything that remains 'reproducible". Again, Derrida conceptually sketches a topography that insists beyond the apparent and the perceived lies an alterity that exceeds and challenges conceptuality: the (im) possibility of an event. This is very different from total alienation in the code or escape into immannence, the heads or tails, either/or logic of simulation as Baudrillard presents it.

While Baudrillard's analysis can only lead him to hope for the implosion of the media, Derrida's opens the possibility of a multilevelled critique. Indeed, the consequence of the complication of this boundary between real and virtual returns us with an urgency toward the question of the structures and process of the media. When Derrida complains of the media that "they pretend they are showing us the thing itself, for example, the attacks during the Gulf War", he does not stop paralyzed like Baudrillard, who can (apparently) only offer either the total fiction of the code-programmed simulation or the complete immediacy of the simulacrum-enabled symbolic, but follows to an insistence on the need to examine the vast complex of processes that lie between the TV reports of the Gulf War and the events in the Middle East. In contrast to Baudrillard's non-engagement and withdrawal, Derrida can argue that, "one can find in the techno-politics of telecommunications something inescapably at stake, at stake for philosophy, very new in certain of its forms, its operations, its evaluation, its market, and technology". After 9/11, again in contrast to Baudrillard, Derrida can both mourn the singular lives lost and engage in a practical analysis of the operation of the media, noting how it," does not count the dead in the same way from one corner of the globe to the other." He further argues that 9/11, "calls for just as many questions and analyses as that which it seems simply to 'represent through a straightforward and neutral informational process'. He makes this point of the need to understand the processes of news making repeatedly: "Hegel was right to remind the philosophers of his time to read the newspapers every day. Today, the same responsibility also requires us to find out how the newspapers are made, and who makes them". Again, in an interview with The Australian newspaper in 1999 Derrida said, "The media is the main political problem facing the world today"; a statement he confirmed in a subsequent interview, qualified as "not the most original thing I have said" but as something, nevertheless, that needs to be constantly repeated. Derrida argues that we must
If media technologies can open up new forms of democratic organization, Derrida also explores how they can be the conduit for the most deadening repetition, in particular, criticizing the way in which “the national… overdetermines all the other hierarchies [and] relegates to a secondary position a whole host of events.” Indeed, he argues “in the news ‘naturalness’ is spontaneously ethnocentric,” a point we have already seen him make in relation to the reporting of 9/11. Indeed, he describes as a ‘tragedy,’ that “the apparent internationalization of the sources of information is often based on an appropriation and concentration of information and broadcast capital.” The way in which a process which offers a new diffusion, the opening of a novel space, is ironically the same of an unprecedented homogenization that leads Derrida to make a call “to resist the concentration of the international corporations which more and more control this power.” In recent interviews and writings he often discusses the ways in which media institutions could be made more open to democratic possibility, subscribing to the conventional liberal and leftist position regarding the necessity to “fight against accumulation, concentration and monopoly” as forces that potentially lead to censorship, yet pragmatically acknowledging that one cannot simply argue for “plurality, dispersion, or fractioning,” not least because of the potential the latter offers for antidemocratic possibilities. He argues we must try to avoid a monopolistic, monopolistic media but still need defined centers where public opinion can materialize, that hegemonic forces cannot be challenged by simple dissemination. Derrida is clear that the task is “to introduce some heterogeneity without disseminating or impertling the media’s universal reach or scope.” The difference from Baudrillard’s work could not be starker.

When outlining the strategies for overcoming ethnocentrism in the media Derrida acknowledges “some journalists make laudable efforts to escape this law, but, by definition, it can’t be done enough, and in the final analysis is not up to the professional journalists.” He argues “it is our duty as citizens of the world, as citizens of the nation and citizens of the world, to cooperate with the people in the media who are ready to do critical work.” Yet, ultimately Derrida does not place his main hopes for the expansion of the democratic potential of the media on journalists or on regulation: “If this struggle is not waged from
the side of what are still called— provisionally—
the ‘buyers’ or ‘consumers’, it is lost from the
start”.35 Indeed, Derrida’s own experiences with
media misrepresentation made him increasingly
skeptical about those whose profession is the
media. He said in one of his last works, a propo-
sition of the questions put to Heidegger by Der Spiegel
in 1966: “Like most journalists, they are first of all
interested, or perhaps only interested, in what they
take to be politics and the political. Like all
journalists, they insist on clear, univocal, easily
understandable answers on a particular subject”.36
In order to escape this what Derrida sees as most
important is the raising of the question of the
addressee: “What is possible and, in my opinion,
desirable are not legislative decisions concerning
the production and distribution of whatever it is,
but open programs of education and training in the
use of this technology, these technical means”.37
Here Derrida’s position has similarities with the
neo-Brechtian one criticized by Baudrillard in
“Requiem for the Media”. However, for Derrida, it
is not merely a question of concrete, individual
addressers becoming more involved in
production, but rather it is “the concept of the
addressee that would have to be transformed”.38
Derrida is not just suggesting addressers are
nearly available technology to turn themselves
into producers but, more importantly, he desires
“those who were previously in the position of
consumer-spectators can intervene in the
market!”.39 His suggestion is “The addressee has
never simply been a passive receiver” and he says
that his desire is “for addressers to be able to
transform, in their turn, what reads them, the
‘message’, or to understand how it is produced, in
order to restart the contract on different terms”.40
When Derrida talks of the way that the message
reads the addressee, he is speaking of something
more fundamental than the neo-Brechtian
programme. I would suggest when he argues that
‘an original expropriation’ is necessary in the
media and that “the choice is not between mastery
and non-mastery”, in order to understand this we
need look at how Derrida translates and transforms
Heidegger’s Begriff into ‘the event’.41 Derrida’s point
would be that how the media is structured and how addressers are educated to
generate in a democratic sphere are important
because, much as it is an unprecedented leap,
preparation is necessary for the possibility of an
event of alterity. He argues: “Ethical responsibility
(which is to say judicial and political
responsibility) ... is exposed not only in what is
called life or existence, but in the task of
deciphering, reading, and writing”.42 When
Derrida speaks of a gift or an event, there is an
acceptance of language as both potentially
instrumental and excessive, a medium for the
incomprehension of alterity, the eruption of an unthought
of future. He would argue that we must take
responsibility for our use of language—and the
media in which it is manifested—to engage
actively with it, to develop new strategies of
reading, to heighten our awareness. Yet this
task does not and will not lead to a control or
mastery, not should we want it to. Baudrillard condemns
signification as the code or sees alterity as evading
simulation but Derrida would argue that alterity is
inscribed within language, within the media, from
the start.

Notes
1 Jacques Derrida, Echographies: Of Television (Polity
Press, 2002), 38.
2 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology (John
3 See Jacques Derrida, A Taste for the Secret
4 Jacques Derrida, Right of Inspection
(Monacelli Press, 1999), 6.
5 As Simon Critchley argues the spectre is
precisely that which refuses phenomenologization,
that retreats before the gaze that tries to see it. Ethics—Politics
—Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas
and Contemporary French Thought (Verso,
1999), 151.
6 Derrida, Echographies, 4.
7 Mourning is another quasi-concept
developed in late work. Complicating what
Faulkner says concerning mourning and
melancholia, and developing the work of
Abraham and Torok, Derrida argues
‘mourning must be impossible ... where ...'
Ecographies, 3.
8 Jacques Derrida, Negotiations: Interviews
and Interventions 1971-2001 (Stanford
University Press, 2002), 86.
9 Ibid, 5-6.
10 Ibid, 49.
11 Jean Baudrillard, Gulf War Did Not Take
Place (Indiana University Press, 1995), 48.
12 Ibid, 49.
13 Ibid, 48.
14 Ecographies, 40.
Ibid, 129.
16 Ibid, 5.
17 Ibid, 129.
18 Ibid, 40.
23 Derrida, Echographies, 4.
24 Derrida, Deconstruction Engaged, 45.
25 Ibid.
27 Derrida, Echographies, 36.
28 Ibid, 57.
29 Derrida, Negotiations, 251.
30 Derrida, Deconstruction Engaged, 46.
31 Derrida, Echographies, 4.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, 5.
34 Derrida, Deconstruction Engaged, 45.
36 Derrida, Deconstruction Engaged, 45.
37 Derrida, Echographies, 4.
38 Derrida, Deconstruction Engaged, 46.
39 Derrida, Echographies, 44-5.
40 Derrida, Rogues, 111.
41 Derrida, Echographies, 45.
42 Ibid, 55.
43 Ibid, 54.
44 Derrida, Echographies, 46, 48.