The Archaic Sacred Illusion of Channels Communication

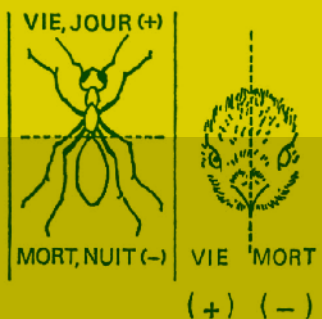RAIE   PAPILLON   FOURMI   GÊLINOTTE   ÉCUREUIL

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ERICH HÖRL

WITH A PREFACE BY **JEAN-LUC NANCY**

Sacred Channels

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The Archaic Illusion of Communication

Erich Hörl

With a preface by Jean-Luc Nancy

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For Ksymena and Helen

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From Aristotle to Hörl[1]

Jean-Luc Nancy

1

There can be no doubt that Erich Hörl's thinking proceeds from a very steady and conscientious meditation—rumination, even, absorption and digestion—of Aristotle's famous foundational formula: the human being is the animal to whom nature has given the *logos*, that is to say, language.[2] Language differs from voice (*phonē*), which other animals also have and which signals affects. The *logos* does not signal affects but signifies concepts that are subject to debate. Accordingly, voice announces joy or pain, speech names good and evil, just and unjust, sensations or sensibilities (*aisthesis*) that, by themselves, establish the associations (or communities) constituted by family members and citizens.

Elsewhere, Aristotle shows that the *logos* is what allows for exercising *technai*, for producing things that nature does not provide. A *technē*—what later, following the Latin, was translated as "art"—is the production of a work based on a reflected knowledge and with an end in sight. Situated beside the domain of action, where virtue (*aretē*), that is, ultimately, the quality of the agent, is at stake, the domain of production puts the quality of products, their effectiveness, at stake. This effectiveness can have contrasting properties: the art of medicine, for example, can produce a recovery or its contrary because the *logos* allows for knowing a thing *and* its negation or privation.

The human being, then, is the animal whom nature provides with the possibility of knowledge with a view to effecting works that are prescribed neither by nature itself nor by virtuous disposition—which (abbreviating somewhat outrageously albeit admissibly in this context) allows us to discern what is just.

This possibility is given by nature, by *physis*. That is the topic of Hörl's meditation. *Physis* endows humans with a capacity that exceeds the mere exercise of what belongs to *physis*. In other words, the nature of the human being implies an excess over nature. Should we say "nature *of* the human being" or "nature *in* the human being"? Everything leads us to think that the two should remain united. Even without dwelling here on the Heideggerian motif of the distinction between *physis* and "nature," we can say that if by "nature" we do *not* mean that which is supposed to be external to the human

and placed before the human like an object but, rather, the ensemble of what unfolds (*se déploie*), of which the human is (however insignificant) a part, we must stop and consider for a moment the fact that with the human being, nature unfolds or allows for the unfolding of what we call technics (*la technique*).

Technics must not be opposed to nature. It cannot even manifest itself as denaturing or as destructive of nature, or only to the extent that its natural origin is taken into account. While Aristotle, of course, does not take this path, he stresses that the "logical" character of human beings is conferred on them by nature. He does so by distinguishing between voice and discourse, and that is also to say between the expression of affects and the production of concepts. This difference is not a simple distinction between properties: it appears as a kind of dehiscence, that is, as an internal detachment in the same line or surface (the way a flower's stamina open).

This line symbolically crosses the throat and mouth when *Homo sapiens* becomes *Homo sapiens sapiens* (at least in the old classification that distinguished *Homo sapiens* from *Homo neanderthalensis*) or when a genetic transformation allows the hyoid bone to acquire a morphology apt for elocution. This symbolic crossing is at the same time the crossing *of* the symbolic, the crossing of the symbolic element understood as the order of relations (*rapports*) independent of sensibility (whatever role sensibility might play): associations, sequences, oppositions, comparisons based on values that do not derive from sensorial information but are formed according to their own order of distinctions, referrals, and combinations. That is what we call "language" (*le langage*), which also includes what we name "calculation" and what we designate as "thinking."

It is not a matter of indifference that the dehiscence takes place along the conduit of sonorous emissions of this bipedal mammal. Sensibility to sound features two distinct pathways for emission and reception; the other sensibilities possess specific receptors but their emitters are spread across the entire body. It is as if the sonorous must respond to a material structure of division and referral, opening and return: sound resonates, and the speaking body is, first of all, a resonant body. Yet dehiscence consists precisely in separating a strictly sonorous (phonic) aspect and a signifying (logical) aspect, the second being constituted, as just noted, by its internal relations alone. The phonic and the logical detach themselves as two sides of resonance—and as two sides, moreover, that refer to one another when they separate out to form the specific animality of the human animal.

These two sides can also be designated signal and sign. The signal (in Aristotle, the *sēmainein* of *phonē*) alerts, warns, holds back, or attracts; it

is turned only to the outside. The sign, while signifying something, also designates itself in its autonomy as a sign; the referent is not the signified, and the signified—or sense itself—is as such only in being referred to the order that specifically belongs to language.

2

The dehiscence of the symbolic order and the sensorial (or, if you prefer, perceptive, intuitive, affective) order is certainly not a dissociation. Very early on, it introduces extremely complex exchanges between the two sides of what has divided itself. But it is nonetheless a dehiscence, a detachment of two aspects—those aspects we distinguish, at least since Aristotle, as "nature" and "technics," as "given" or "innate" and "produced" or "acquired." This distinction became so pronounced that after a while we fell into the habit of opposing the two aspects.

We have thought technics as separate from nature and thought this separation itself as the fact of a heterogeneity according to which nature ends up becoming a relatively inferior register, subordinate to technics in that nature provides the material for technics. It seemed that human activity produced a second nature whose final achievement was to have been a universe, represented in the image of a "human nature" come fully into its own ("total man" or even "over-man"). Yet things got to a point where nature increasingly turned out to be integrated into the operations and logics of technics to such a degree that nature was no longer just the material but rather a part of a whole so integrally "technical" as to make it impossible to project any finality that would somehow be "supernatural"—that is to say, *metaphysical* in the sense stigmatized by Nietzsche and Heidegger, in the sense, that is, of an imaginary invention of "backworlds" or of the representation of an over-nature allegedly providing nature with its principles and ends.

Understood this way, metaphysics supposes a foundational incompleteness of nature and seeks to endow the *logos* with the status of a superior authority that furnishes and includes the human capacity for logic. With logic—language, thinking, calculation—all of technics finds itself in a strange and precarious situation, relegated to the margins of thinking. On the one hand, it does indeed testify to the incompleteness of everything that is not brought to completion in the divine over-nature whose model is a nature's "self-accomplishment." On the other hand, however, it proceeds from an imitation or a delegation of the operational force of the divine logos,

and its expansion in nature and over nature participates, in a way, in an economy whose goal is over-natural.

This schema of thought is no longer Aristotelian. For Aristotle, technics was inherently limited: "the instruments of any art are never unlimited, either in number or capacity."[3] Undoubtedly, that is the reason why he does not dwell on the singular character of technics issued from nature: for him, all technics still lie within the purview of the whole of nature (and here it would be appropriate to speak of *physis* again). The modern age, however, is the age of the infinite *logos* (whether it is conceived of as indefinite or as actual infinite, as the logos of the infinite or as the infinite of the *logos*)—and for that reason, it is the age of infinite technics or what we may call "techno-logy," taking up the sense or semantic constellation to which the word has led in English.[4]

Technical infinity or indefiniteness does not only consist in a quantitative and qualitative increase ("number and capacity") but in an intensification, tending toward an absolutization, of a referral to itself. Cybernetics, all servo-technics, and so-called interactivity form a kind of expansion of the sign: the relation to an external reality is indissociable from a relationship internal to the system.

The relation of technics to a supposedly external nature can no longer be dissociated from the techno-logical ensemble. Technical infinity thus means a tendency toward effacing the distinction between nature and technics. At the same time it means something with which it is contemporary: the destitution of metaphysics in the sense of a speculative elaboration of an over-nature. The "death of God" is essentially the birth of "technology" in a sense that might lead it to occupy the place of "metaphysics."

For this affirmation to become coherent at all—even if it may only be approximate—we have to acknowledge the need to dwell on a point that Aristotle could not have seen: technics is nature itself. And that means that nature, as the accomplishment of itself by itself, escapes by itself, it leaves its own image—over-nature or human nature—and compels us to confront head on an as yet unknown order of questions.

3

The reflection on "technics" cannot be a reflection on the uses and abuses of techniques, as if we had a horizon of reference allowing us to determine "good" and "bad" ones. That is not to say that there aren't good or bad techniques; what it does mean above all, however, is that our perspective must not be that of transcendental sense.

Not that sense were not always and by itself a transcendence—an excess over the merely available. Yet it does not transcend toward a beyond: it transcends into what unfolds as an order (or even a disorder...) opened up by the dehiscence of voice and language. This order is one for which there is neither a pure "physics" (*physis*, the autotelia of the always-already given) nor a pure "metaphysics" (sovereign of the world, allotelia of the never-yet attained). What else could we call this neither/nor but a double insufficiency (because after God and after a certain kind of "man," it is indeed in terms of a twofold lack, a twofold weakness that our age most often conceives of itself)?

From the outset, Erich Hörl's affirmation sets itself off from this neither/nor and the sense of lack or loss it harbors—the sense of a loss of sacralities that supposedly, before they were lost (after Aristotle, for example...), ensured the sensible consistency of both a "physis" and a "metaphysis." His affirmation states that technics—emphatically understood as the anthropological and physiological regime of what we might call an "ecotechnics [*écotechnie*]"—exposes the reality of sense to be the reality of communication and participation, of referral, relation, distribution, whose "metaphysical" driving force is the physical dehiscence of the logos (provided we choose to maintain the term "metaphysics" to speak of the thinking of the principles and ends deprived of their sacralities). Communication and participation in no way resemble those substitutes of sacrality that are the sentimental representations of an immediacy and immanence of contagions, of always more or less pious diffuse propagations, which are so obviously refuted by the ravages that traverse our world, a world fully engaged in transformation. With all his energy, Erich Hörl thinks the intensity of a communicating (rather than communicated) sense in terms of the nonimmediacy, the heterogeneity of senses, their "subjects," and their "channels."

In doing so, he is perhaps more Aristotelian than it may at first appear. For while he tackles the paradox of the naturalness of technics or the technicity of nature head-on, he necessarily also arrives at the proximity between techniques and virtues Aristotle had emphasized. The virtues are active dispositions toward both intellectual and moral excellence, toward knowing how to do and knowing how to judge. Yet nature does not provide us with virtues in potency, the way it furnishes us with the sensible faculties: virtues must be acquired in experience.[5]

In a regime of limited techniques, a reasonable regulation of virtues may be possible. In an unlimited regime—which includes an indeterminate expansion of what can be said to be "natural"—it is likely that such a regulation must confront very different conditions of being-with that are no longer circumscribed by either an *oikos* or a *polis* or any other kind of

koinōnia, of being-with or being-in-common that is not from the beginning also a being with technical objects and even technical subjects as much as with all other kinds of supposedly natural beings. This is the edge to which this book takes us.

4

Technological being-with is being "with" itself, we might say. Technical objects and subjects—if it weren't so cumbersome a term, we might call them "techjects," neither objects nor subjects—are aspects, segments, figures, and agents of our interhuman and intercosmic relations. It is quite obvious that techniques have always—and especially since the moment they began intervening with machines, even the simplest (wheel, lever, etc.)—been strictly linked to a diversity of relations in their inventions, fabrication, and use. One might well insist on how individualistic the use of automobiles is today, the fact remains that the conception, construction, and utilization of these vehicles has a number of very complex collective implications. There certainly is a correlation between social interaction and technical development. The phenomena of urbanity are by themselves a striking illustration of this point since the city itself is simultaneously a "techject" and the site of the intensification and complexification of indefinitely multiplied techniques.

There is thus a "with"—a *mit* and a *Mitsein*—that turns out to be intrinsically technical. This has a correlate in a technical displacement of ontology: what I mean to say is that the *thing in itself* (or "being itself," if you like) becomes indissociable from technics. The thing in itself never consisted of anything other than the effective *positing* of something. We must not think—as happens frequently—that for Kant the thing itself exists as a reality (however much it remains doubtful or mysterious) independent of phenomena (representations of the subject). Instead, in a completely different way, the thing in itself is nothing but the effective existence of something, whatever it is. This thing—all things—we can represent to ourselves. We can do so in a number of ways (logical, analogical, paralogical, etc.). Yet the existence of this thing is or owes itself to the fact that within the real there are some things in general (ourselves included) that are at the heart of, that are as it were the effectiveness of the real (the *omnitudo realitatis*, as Kant calls it).

Reality is no longer (if ever it was) an "object" posited before a "subject" (be it human or divine). Rather, it realizes itself—lexical proximity tempts us to say, *reifies* itself. It is the incessantly active connection of things—it tends

toward the connection of all things—among themselves in an extraordinar-
ily complex action–reaction of what we used to call "nature" and "culture"
or "given" and "constructed," etc.

The real is as technical as technics is real. Yet it is precisely technical
effectiveness that, ever since complex machines, energetic sequences and
interdependencies, and, finally, self-governing systems entered the scene, has
been perceived as a hypertrophy—a dangerous hypertrophy of what we still
call, most of the time, "nonnatural" or "artificial" (the way we oppose "screens"
and the "virtual" to supposedly good and solid supports of very real presences…).

Is this a cancerous hypertrophy of the artificial or of the very unfolding of
things themselves? A naive question when we think of the intense complexi-
fication we have long been familiar with of oppositions between nature and
culture, authentic and derivative, thetic and prosthetic, proper and improper,
science and fiction, consciousness and unconsciousness, etc. Thus, to name
but one example, Derrida's affirmation that there is "no outside-text"—so
often interpreted as a fantasmatic reduction of the real to language—would
seek to indicate that in the absence of any first and final referent, of any sense
complete in itself, all we have to work with is the entanglement of mutual
referrals between all beings and between all instances of existence ("nature,"
"technics," "animal," "symbolic," "effective," "mythical," etc.).

In other words, the *thing in itself* or the *thing itself* owes its Kantian
implication of "simple positing" to the following consideration: there is
only what there is, there is no other real than the real, nor is there a first or
final reason of this real. This "there is" is fortuitous, aleatory, contingent,
to use concepts that as it were lean on their classic opposites (necessity,
program, finality). It would undoubtedly be more correct to say that there
is simply this—*that there is* (*qu'il est simplement ceci—qu'il y a*). In this way
of putting it, the "*il a*" (lit., it has) proceeds from a substitution of "*il est*" (lit.,
it is) while the "*y*" (there) is an adverb of place equivalent to the preposition
"*à*" (to, at, in, etc.): "*il y a*" thus signifies "it is to or toward or …" In sum, being
is said or says itself [*se dit*] as a sending off (*envoi*) or referral (*renvoi*) to …
nothing or to its very sending. Ontology here vanishes—or turns itself into
a vanishing ontology—as much as the destination does.

5

Is this not what technology, according to which ontology vanishes, exposes
to us and exposes us to? There is what there is, there is no prior and no final
given, there is only the indefinite proliferation of things that transform,

combine, supplement, and link up with one another in a never-ending referral from ends to means and means to ends.

In the end, we may see in this indefinite reticulation—energies, speeds, efficiencies, information, transmissions, circulations, metamorphoses, expansions, contractions, and so on—the most implacable truth of nihilism: nothing leads to anything anymore, everything revels in an inane whirlwind of very high qualifications, precisions, and correlations.

But we may also discern in it the possibility of a new sense of sense: the very sense of existence as a simple disposition of what happens to it. Technics would then be the lesson of the dehiscence of being between its "*il a*" and its "*y*": the withdrawal of any initial donation and of any first referent, the fortuitous and fleeting existing for which its own ephemeral brightness is destined in the proliferation of its renewed appearances/disappearances.

In the words of Pessoa:

> *A espantosa realidade das coisas*
> *É a minha descoberta de todos os dias.*
> *Cada coisa é o que é,*
> *E é difícil explicar a alguém quanto isso me alegra,*
> *E quanto isso me basta.*

> The astonishing reality of things
> Is my discovery every day.
> Everything is what it is,
> And it's difficult to explain to anyone how much this gladdens me
> And how much this suffices me.[6]

The fact remains, however, that the most visible manifestation of this interconnection of existences dedicated to themselves and to their multiplied expansions is an intertwinement of violences such as the world, it seems, has never known before. It is as if technics, the more the perspective of a substantial end ("total man," "second nature," etc.) fades, cannot manifest anything but the power of destroying everything that had passed for being given, reserved, valid on its own, whether it was called "nature" or "over-nature." The overthrow of regimes of reference (principles, ends, essences, completenesses) comes not only with an exponential increase of capacities for transforming, converting, diffracting, and dislocating forces but above all with an ultimately unlimited disaggregation and/or liberation of the possibility of aiming for whatever end, of turning any means into an end, of setting up any and all "art" or "know-how" (*tekhnē*) as autonomous "values."

This is what drives the ultraliberal economy as much as the military or biological technologies best suited for ensuring all the power calculations one could ask for. In a sense, the world of technics serves itself as nature, as natural and supernatural order...

The only possibility of escape lies in a thinking—a culture, a civilization, a sociality—that trusts itself to a sense delivered from reasons and ends, that exits nihilism through its most intimate recesses, and travels or retraces in entirely new ways the old "channels" for communicating an allegedly "sacred" sense.

Notes

1. Rather than try and introduce a book that, like all good books, is quite capable of introducing itself and of developing of its own accord, I have chosen here to trace a path toward it, up to its threshold, the way I feel myself guided toward it.
2. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a10: 1988.
3. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1256b9: 1994 [modified]. This phrase comes in to support the claim that there can be no unlimited wealth. (I have chosen to translate *megisthē* as "capacity.")
4. This semantic replacement is remarkable: we have moved from "technology" in the sense of "study or knowledge of a technique or of the technic" to "technology" in the sense of "the technic or technical," period, as if there was no difference between the practitioner's study, practical appropriation, and mastery, and the technical operation. Moreover, it seems as if Jacob Bigelow, who initiated the generalized use of the term, had in mind a convergence of technique(s) and the sciences.
5. Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a25–1103b2: 1743.
6. Pessoa, "A espantosa realidade das coisas."

Preface to the German Edition

This is a book about the pathos of an age, about its epistemic and technological conditions and the imaginary that emerged in their shadow. As I was writing of this book, it increasingly became clear to me that history had shifted a little further, as if it had gotten over what I narrate in these pages. In the last years of the twentieth century, the pathos of the symbolist revolution against the dominance of intuitive thinking and the deep confusion into which, since about the middle of the nineteenth century, intuitive minds had been thrown by knowledge of the symbolic and the completely unintuitive facts of communication seemed to have come to a close. If we still believed that the owl of Minerva waits until dusk to spread her wings, of course, all the conditions for writing a history of the fascination symbolism has exercised would be met. In such moments, and if only for such a moment, everyone is still in good conscience a Hegelian. Symptomatic of our new situation, in any event, is the fact that under the heading "iconic turn" (Mitchell, Boehm), the partisans of intuition, which in the symbolic age was a great but more or less subterranean current of thought, are the object of renewed attention. Now that images have become symbolic (since they can be generated digitally) and overwhelm us, the question of the originary constitution of iconicity has rightly become a central element of the effort to diagnose how our present conceives of itself. And if we do not want to succumb to the mobilization of the imaginary now employing symbolic means, there may be good reasons to oppose the symbolic imperative, to reexamine the pros and cons of intuition, and to develop intuitive skills anew. At one time, the task was to demolish the sovereignty of intuition over symbolic thought and revise epistemological and ontological foundations under the auspices of the symbolic; now, evidently, the tables have been turned. The very hegemony of digitalness gives rise to resistance because it has begun to subject intuition completely and totalize itself. But why should we, now, especially if we are interested in diagnosing the present situation, why should we be looking at the symbolist pathos and its beauty, at the crisis of intuition since 1850 and its effects on the imaginary rather than work at comprehending the current crisis of intuition?

In fact, against all appearances, we still find ourselves in the same basic position (in the sense of Heidegger's *Grundstellung*), which is characterized by the difference between the intuitive and the symbolic. What has changed is only the situation within this position. The balance of power has shifted, the frontlines have moved. That does not absolve us from studying that

epistemic transition period, for we are still its children. An archeology of the present has to begin with spelling out that transition. Such an examination may protect us from a naive antisymbolist affect of the kind we are well familiar with from the confrontations of the day, and it may recall the epistemological and ontological stakes of the question in their entirety, which form the basis of our contemporary self-conception and yet run the danger of being lost from view. In addition to what has already been put to paper, this book seeks to contribute to this effort. It is a report on the archaic illusion of communication, a report embedded in a description of this illusion's general historical-epistemological constellation.

very patiently went over the entire text again and rekindled my faith in this book, which, once it had been written, quickly receded into the distance. I thank her for it. From 1998 to 2001, my work benefited from the support of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, via the DFG Research Training Group "Codifications of Violence in Medial Transformation" at the Humboldt University of Berlin.

Zurich, August 2004

Preface to the English Translation

Since the writing of this book in the summer and fall of 2002, the historical movement it undertakes to unearth with a view to the history of media, culture, and knowledge—the transition from intuitive to symbolic thinking that had been taking place since the various waves of formalization in the nineteenth century and culminated in the information theory and cybernetics of the 1950s and 1960s—has continued to advance. The technical-medial condition of the present, which only barely announced itself ten years ago but whose having-become cannot be grasped without this sea change, has been clarified dramatically by the becoming-environmental of computation. Thus, even though no more than thirteen years have passed since it was first published in German, this book enters into a transformed situation, which calls for a certain recontextualization, given that, despite all its immersion in history, it is also always and perhaps above all concerned with understanding our own genealogy. Only now has it become fully clear—and this, precisely, is what I have since sought to establish in the diagnostic work on the technological condition, the genesis of a new techno-ecological culture of sense, and the definition of the new power formation that is environmentality[1]—not only that information theory and cybernetics represented the high point and the end of the symbolist revolution, in which a certain epochal pathos of the purely symbolic came into its own and forced a redefinition of the matter of thinking, but also that a process of cyberneticization begun in the early nineteenth century took shape in a concrete theory and agenda for the first time here. The implementation dynamic of this process was yet to go far beyond its original institutional conception and reaches all the way to us, indeed reaches its high point only today: as the total cyberneticization of all modes of existence. The cybernetic problem has now proven to be the problem of our age.

This brings out the historical power/knowledge dimension of the great transformation of cyberneticization that not only implements the transition from the intuitive to the symbolic but finally forces the switch to a different situation in the history of sense, a situation this difference, which will have been central to its appearance, can nonetheless no longer suffice to describe. What is characteristic of this new situation in the history of sense is not the end of all sense, an end pursued by the pure, mathematical-logistical-technical use of symbols that precisely pays no heed to sense and meaning. What shows itself instead is the rise of a new formation, the techno-ecological formation, that takes place in the shadow of this alleged end of sense. It

ushers in a different sense of sense, no longer vouched for alphabetistically by a transcendental reading writing subject, that we can now describe with more precision. Even if reveries about the end of all sense have produced an entire formation of theory in media and cultural studies, it has now become questionable to what extent the concepts and conceptual strategies of this formation can still be used to work through the techno-ecological formation and to what extent this latter task requires entirely different ontological-political sets of tools that stem from a new, neither intuitive nor symbolic but, precisely, ecological-environmental image of thinking. This is what many people are working on in the most varied of ways and where one of the great challenges of thinking in our time is to be situated.

Undoubtedly, there is throughout this book—and this, too, Anglophone readers should be aware of—a certain demythologizing optimism that propels its labor on the history of fascination of the symbolic. The book describes the extent to which the scientific-technical transition from an alphabetically mobilized to a postalphabetic culture unfolding since the nineteenth century also took place in the imaginary and how, in the process, it liberated wild speculations about prealphabetic states of cognition and being, how an entire discourse about the Sacred and the Primitive, a discourse very close to electromagnetic field theories and fascinated with preindividual relations of force and processes of transmission in which the episteme was steeped, testified above all to the way a culture fundamentally disoriented by its entry into postalphabetic conditions of communication struggled for a reconception, and, in so doing, offensively operated a short-circuiting of the pre- with the postalphabetic. All of this unfolded up until the genesis of the new discourse network of cybernetics and information theory, characterized by a purely mathematical knowledge about information and communication, will, as a result of the symbolic purification of thinking this genesis entailed, have put an end to this hocus-pocus, clarified the foundations, drained the postalphabetic imaginary, and rung in the end of the archaic illusion of communication. Yet it is just this peculiar demythologizing optimism that have I since come see as historical, too, as a part of the symbolist fascination that, behind my back, inscribed itself in the book. Whereas Friedrich A. Kittler—in the foundational operation of German media theory, as it were—sought to trace the entire pathos of the symbolic to its machinic foundations and, in shortcircuiting the symbolic with the real, to cast out the last remnant of the imaginary and thus also all remainders of intuitive representational thinking (before later, he, too, in a strange echo of Heidegger's archaic illusion, went to seek the rise of the symbolic in pre-Socratic Greece),[2] the present book perhaps attempts

nothing so much as to capture the historicity of this powerfully consequential foundational operation, to show that it is not merely idiosyncratic but practically concentrates an entire epistemic constitution.

At the same time, this foundational operation intersects with a different history of fascination that I was not yet considering at the time, a history that renders this operation highly problematic, at least on the level of the politics of theory: the fascination exercised by nonmodernity.[3] This fascination features eminently geopolitical characteristics. It belongs, to put it in more polemic terms, to an offensive anti- and countermodernism seeking to enter into a nihilistic alliance with technics, which in getting rid of intuition and of what Heidegger called representational thinking sought to get rid of modernity as such.[4] Even in an anthropocene age that undoubtedly demands that we give up modernity's basic ontoepistemic attitudes, we should nonetheless be wary of adopting the philosophical politics of anti- and countermodernism.

For a more precise understanding of the fascination with nonmodernity, which includes much more than reactionary anti- and countermodernisms in the West, one would also have to look at contemporary ethnological and social-anthropological discourses after Lévi-Strauss. The present study, however, ends with Lévi-Strauss's dismissal of the archaic illusion in the light of cybernetics and information theory. Such newer discourses— paradigmatically proffered by authors such as Marilyn Strathern, Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Tim Ingold, and, in a wider sense, Bruno Latour, and aptly summarized in anthropology by the keyword "ontological turn"[5]—would deserve an additional chapter. It would describe the formation of a nonmodern decolonial counterthinking beyond the archaic illusion. At the same time, it would emphasize the peculiar resonance of such a thinking with problematic situations of the techno-ecological culture of sense under the conditions of the anthropocene that modernism can no longer come to grips with: from the emergence of nonhuman agencies, the explosion of environmental agencies and the most radical ever exposition of environmentality it operates, via radical relationality and the redefinition of subjectivity, to the end of naturalist cosmology. This is where we encounter one of the significant scenes of writing today, a scene that gives the discourse-archeological constellation described in these pages a new turn.

One voice is completely absent from this study: the voice of Gilbert Simondon. The book was written before I had read a number of his texts. Already back then, I should have been impressed by the untimeliness and originality of his contribution, which, at crosscurrents with the symbolist–intuitionist difference between structuralism and phenomenology, searched first for

a universal symbolism and then strove for a fundamental rethinking of the symbolic function beyond the difference between intuition and the symbolic. Simondon suggested a wholly autonomous philosophical path toward a speculative metaphysics of becoming-environmental. On the basis of the relationships between organism and milieu, he reflected on a general-ecological reconceptualization of the symbolic and a techno-ecology of sense, which makes him our contemporary.[6]

Simondon also managed to avoid the pitfalls of anti- and counter-modernism and demonstrated that it is possible to articulate a radically nonmodern(ist) agenda without simply dismissing the Enlightenment. Quite to the contrary, he recognized the historical dynamic, not to say the dialectic of the problem of the Enlightenment and its intrinsic link to the question of technology, which led him to a surprisingly contemporary renewal of the Enlightenment project in the first place.

In principle, "every manifestation" of what he called "the encyclopedic spirit" appeared "as a fundamental movement expressing the need for attaining a state of freedom and adulthood, since the current regime or customs of thought retain individuals within a state of tutelage and artificial minority."[7] Now, following the two manifestations of the encyclopedic mind that were the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, a "third stage of encyclopedic thinking" was imminent: universal cybernetics.[8] Its agenda presents itself as a liberation by means of a radical disclosure of mediation. Since the argument is as precise as it is unusual, it is well worth quoting at length. The "new magic"—and here there remained, even in Simondon, something of the archaic illusion—was to discover

> the rationalization of forces that situate man by giving him meaning within a human and natural ensemble. The very fact that teleology is treated as a knowable mechanism that is not definitively mysterious is indicative of the attempt not to accept a situation as one simply lives it and is subjected to it. Rather than seeking the procedure for the fabrication of objects without making a pact with matter, man frees himself from his situation of being enslaved by the finality of the whole, by learning how to create finality, by learning how to organize a finalized whole that he judges and appreciates, so as not to have to be passively subjected to a *de facto* integration. Cybernetics, being a theory of information and as a consequence also a theory of finalized structures and dynamisms, frees man from the constraining closure of organization by enabling him to judge this organization, rather than being subjected to it while venerating and respecting it because he is not capable of thinking or constituting it.[9]

This conveys once more just how immense the hope inspired by cybernetics was, which has since been dashed by the total cyberneticization and the political-economic occupation of organizing it operates, in the course of which the Enlightenment has turned into its opposite.

   This English edition features an appendix not included in the original edition that addresses another far-reaching philosophical positioning of cybernetics: "Heidegger and Cybernetics."[10] This text, which I wrote immediately after concluding the book manuscript, situates Heidegger's central project of redefining the matter and task of thinking in the historical-epistemic-technical process of cyberneticization, thanks to which it is largely decipherable and without which it is simply unthinkable. The book merely hinted at this aspect. Because this aspect is essential for understanding the constellation as a whole, however, including the essay in this volume seemed advisable. At the time I wrote it, however, some sources central for this kind of situating Heidegger's thinking had not yet been published, the so-called *Black Notebooks* in particular. For that reason, it largely neglects the political question.[11] That would no longer be possible today: Heidegger's rejection of "calculative thought" and his entire mobilization against modern representational and production thinking, which he saw perfected and completed in "fabrication [*Machenschaft*]" and later in the *Gestell* of technics, and, even more generally, his great construction of the history of Being, which culminated in this constellation and in talk of another beginning promoted by cybernetics, simply cannot be had without the essential anti-Semitic inscriptions revealed in the *Black Notebooks*. Heidegger's correctly so-called "metaphysical anti-Semitism"[12] goes back a long way and is originally linked with the emergence of the question of technology in Heidegger and in the fundamental role it plays in his work. The Jewish people is turned into an agent of absolute "bottomlessness" and of the "rootlessness" of Being, and Heidegger's notes leave no doubt that this rootlessness is above all the rootlessness of technics.[13] This essential anti-Semitic contamination of the narrative of the history of Being and the key position the question concerning technology plays in this history does not, in principle, shift their historical-epistemic place such as I situate it in "Heidegger and Cybernetics." But it is of decisive importance for assessing the philosophical politics Heidegger was pursuing with the question of technics. The question of technics absolutely compressed and concentrated this politics, which also entered into the way he positioned cybernetics in the history of Being and was ultimately to be picked up directly by a significant current of later German media studies (Friedrich Kittler's project, that is).[14] I will have to take up this difficult set of questions elsewhere. The as yet

unpublished *Black Notebooks* of the late 1950s and the 1960s will provide further material on the problematic field of Heidegger and cybernetics.[15]

It is an honor and a joy that this book has the privilege of an English translation by Nils F. Schott and a far-reaching preface by Jean-Luc Nancy. I sincerely thank both of them. I am also grateful to the series editors, Jussi Parikka, Anna Tuschling, and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, for taking the initiative in making *Sacred Channels* accessible to Anglophone readers, and to the staff of Amsterdam University Press for their careful implementation of this enterprise. I would like to thank the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) for funding this translation. I have refrained from including research published since the original edition first appeared and from systematically updating the bibliography. Not only would this work have immense, it would also have modified the shape of the book, which is something I—still persuaded of its original élan—wanted to avoid at all cost. Minor errors in the bibliographic references brought to light in the translation process have been silently corrected.

Berlin, September 2017

Notes

1.   See especially, "Die technologische Bedingung" (a shortened English version has been published under the title "The Technological Condition"); "Introduction to General Ecology"; and "A Thousand Ecologies."
2.   Kittler provides a paradigmatic presentation of this foundational operation in "The World of the Symbolic—A World of the Machine." On Greece as "origin of the history of being," see, for example, the last set of essays (chapters 18–23) in *The Truth of the Technological World*, 249–306, as well as *Musik und Mathematik*, vol. 1, pt. 1.
3.   The history of fascination is interested in epochal tensions, in that which keeps the thinking of an age running and alert, in the epochal repetition compulsions, and also in the reveries that propel its core projects. The fascination with nonmodernity is co-constitutive of our age. The term "history of fascination" was first coined by the scholar of religion, Klaus Heinrich. "Fascinating is what simultaneously attracts us and repels us, what has not been dealt with. Where there is something repressed that yet seeks to be dealt with. Where we perceive things of which we say, scared, that we will never be able to enter into a relationship free of ambivalence with them, this ambivalence will always remain. That is the history of fascination"

(Heinrich, "Über unseren Ausstieg aus den Höhlen," 76–77). And what could be more ambivalent than modernity, than the attempt to delineate oneself from it as well? Heinrich uses the term with an Enlightener's intention to designate the history of the species. I give the concept a turn to employ it in the history of discourse, media, and culture.

4.   In *Zerrissene Moderne*, Sidonie Kellerer has shown the extent to which the invention of Descartes as key protagonist of modernity inaugurated the history of fascination with nonmodernity.

5.   Compare Kohn, "Anthropology of Ontologies."

6.   On the "new universal symbolism" "common to the machine and to man" that thereby makes their synergy possible, see Simondon, *Technical Objects*, 117. Later, in the lecture course *Imagination et Invention*, Simondon develops a general-ecological theory of the symbolic that goes back to the emergence of the symbolic function from the relationship between organisms and from their mixed milieus made up of nature, other organisms, and symbols that derive from the subsequent sedimentations of these relationships. In so doing, he also inaugurates a new concept of sense. Andrea Bardin has studied Simondon's rethinking of the symbolic and of sense under the heading "techno-symbolic function" (Bardin, *Epistemology and Political Philosophy in Gilbert Simondon*, 145–63). He writes: "'Sense' is neither produced by organisms nor by *homo sapiens* but emerges from the relations of communication through which groups of organisms and the organism itself, at different levels and through different milieus, are structured" (146). For some first reflections on Simondon's ecology, see my essay, "'Technisches Leben': Simondons Denken des Lebendigen und die allgemeine Ökologie."

7.   Simondon, *Technical Objects*, 112.

8.   Simondon, *Technical Objects*, 115.

9.   Simondon, *Technical Objects*, 119.

10. The text was first published in 2004 as "Parmenideische Variationen: Heidegger und die Kybernetik."

11. The *Black Notebooks* published so far in volumes 94–97 of the Heidegger *Gesamtausgabe* comprise the years 1931–48. Of these, the notebooks from the years 1931–41 are available in English translation under the title *Ponderings*. Other relevant sources published later also include Heidegger's *Leitgedanken zur Entstehung der Metaphysik, der neuzeitlichen Wissenschaft und der modernen Technik.*

12. See Di Cesare, *Heidegger, die Juden, die Shoah*, a milestone in this debate.

13. On the question of "groundlessness" and "rootlessness," see Nancy, *The Banality of Heidegger.*

14. See, for example, Kittler, "Medien- und Technikgeschichte."

15. As the editor of the *Black Notebooks*, Peter Trawny, has told me in personal conversation.

All we have left is symbolic construction; and that is quite sufficient.

—Hermann Weyl[1]

Introduction

"Humans," Niklas Luhmann writes, "cannot communicate; not even their brains can communicate; not even conscious minds can communicate. Only communication can communicate."[2] This book is about the fact that Luhmann had to make this statement, and about why he had to make it, even nearly half a century after the formulation of an exact, that is, a technological-mathematical, concept of communication.

Our question concerns the incubation period of an epochal proposition: *There is communication*. The history of how it appeared indicates how difficult it was for an entire age to understand its foundations and thus to interpret itself epistemologically and ontologically. The task, to put it in the terms of Heidegger's archeology, is to answer the question: "Where and how did" this proposition "sleep for so long and presciently dream what is unthought in it?"[3]

To accomplish this task, we must elaborate the historical epistemology of the archaic illusion of communication that began to spread in the late nineteenth century and immediately preceded the emergence of the principle, *There is communication*. At its core, what today may seem mere reveries about a primitive world of transmitting sacred forces was a wild genealogy of the as yet uncomprehended facts of communication and of the revolution in the way of thinking that coincided with it. Despite all the obstacles to knowledge this illusion threw up, it did at the same time prepare the insight into the new basic position of an age. By projecting a primitive formation of world and experience, which could only be comprehended as deviating from the traditional categories and schemata of representational thought, the illusion marked the rejection of the cognitive primacy of intuition and representation, a rejection that was just then taking place in mathematics and physical field theory and thanks to technological media. Where a purely symbolic thinking clearly began to take shape in the sciences, the illusion demonstrated the arduous formation and childhood of all use of symbols. In explaining the becoming of elaborate symbolisms, insight into "the embryonic stage of the high-grade character"[4] also promised to explain the enigmatic epistemic power with which symbolisms were upending the order of things. Speculations about the prealphabetic thinking of the

"primitive," about their peculiar logical distinctions and mental constitution provided an age transitioning to postalphabetic conditions with images of thought for its still-problematic foundations. Finally, the mode of being of the "primitive" sketched in the archaic illusion bore witness to what Being could mean under the conditions of communication. Total communities of communication appeared on the margins of history or as initial survivals in the midst of modernity, at the point where the new facts of communication themselves were still foci of an electromagnetic-energetic imaginary and starting points for the pictorial world of a savage realism of transmission. All of the ontological helplessness and worries of an age faced with the fact that it did communicate rather than not communicate concentrated on the site of a primitive, completely noisified Being exposed to hopelessly open channels. "Primitiveness" was the name of the other scene of an age, a scene onto which were shifted the ontological enigmas the pure *There is communication* posed for contemporaries. It was there that the channels were hallowed as long as they remained the unthought and the unthinkable of an alphabetic culture and society horrified by it.

It is not by chance that the first thinker to pronounce the proposition was still enveloped in the slumber of the history of fascination with communication when he meditated across the boundaries of the Cartesian order of thought and knowledge: Georges Bataille. What for its part named both the upheaval of the conditions of possible experience as such and the ontological ground of this upheaval, he at first saw as the cipher of an inner experience. Yet many dreams—dreamed by anthropologists and social anthropologists, sociologists, historians of religion, and psychoanalysts, poets and philosophers—anticipated the proposition. For some, no doubt, it was a nightmare.

It took the wakeup call of information theory and cybernetics, it seems, to bring an entire age back from the land of dreams into a waking state. When logarithms demystified the enigma of communication, the sources of the imaginary of the age began to dry up. The alliance of cybernetics and anthropology made primitive communications and sacred channels of transmission disappear. Since then, the human being has been understood as the effect of different modalities of a great communicative function even in domains where the archaic illusion had previously been constructed. All of a sudden, the sacred channels were a thing of the past and merely an expression of the mythology of an epoch. This event, too, has a name: Claude Lévi-Strauss.

The father of sociological systems theory, to return to Luhmann, could not but designate the heart of his discourse with a variant of the principle that guided the age. The compulsive repetition of the proposition derived from

the historical-epistemological foundation on which systems theory rests. The proposition needed continually to be rearticulated because it was not possible simply to ignore the fantasms concerning communication that had sedimented in the matter of communication during the time it had taken to grasp the proposition. Luhmann's observation accords with the history of his discipline. It is a late echo of the years in which the discipline began to differentiate, an echo of Durkheim, the great "catalyst," as Luhmann once called him. Sociology, concerned with positioning itself in the space of knowledge, and Durkheim especially were among the protagonists of the archaic illusion. Precisely because knowledge of the social was immersed in the age's reveries about primitive communities of communication and sacred hells of telecommunication, its cyberneticization by systems theory also led sociology to a necessary act of conceptual auto-purification and auto-analysis.

To shed light on the question how an age, going through a history of fascination, came to think of its guiding principle, we will have to explore discursive fields that may appear far off and at great distances the ones from the others and to make connections that will seem surprising only as long as they have not been thought. One might, for example, wonder what, for heaven's sake, the work of the Irish mathematician, George Boole, who set out to develop an algebra of logic as a system of notation of the basic operations of the mind and thus played a major part in opening the path to the world of the symbolic, has to do with the genealogy of the Aristotelian categories developed by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, which penetrated the totemistic underground of thought and the rationality of "primitive" systems of classifications. Or what in the world might connect Michael Faraday's experiments and James Clerk Maxwell's electromagnetic field theory with Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's explorations of primitive mentality or with the debate about the function of *mana* in elementary forms of religious life. The task here is to inspect the manifold epistemic facts and reveries of an age in order to gain insight into the shared knowledge at their basis. The thought constraints, to use Ludwik Fleck's term, that impose their standards on entire epochs dominate them the way moods do. They draw on by the most varied sources and do not keep to the great watersheds that structure mental geographies and the order of knowledge. And once the clouds of the epochal imaginary are filled to bursting, once the atmosphere of the age's specific imagination is tense, the great thundershower rains down indiscriminately on all epistemic regions.

The concept "reverie" drives this endeavor to outline the incubation period of an epochal principle and to allow insight into the formation that arose from the erstwhile unthinkability of this principle. The concept originates

with Gaston Bachelard. It is probably no coincidence that it was thought up at the end of and with regard to the period at issue here. Bachelard coined it to account for the fundamental fact that the birth of the new scientific spirit was accompanied by a strange insistence of prescientific experience. "Reverie" captured the fact that evidently there were problems "that no one has managed to approach objectively," problems "in which the initial charm of the object is so strong that it still has the power to warp the minds of the clearest thinkers and to keep bringing them back to the poetic fold in which dreams replace thought and poems conceal theorems."[5] In the domain of objective knowledge, there were cognitive obstacles to be overcome by a "psychoanalysis of reason;"[6] Bachelard believed this ought to be supplemented by a "special psychoanalysis that we believe would form a useful basis for all objective studies."[7] The task of such a special psychoanalysis would be to comb through the archives of reveries, as "reverie takes up the same primitive themes as it would in primitive minds, and this in spite of the successes of systematic thought and even in face of the findings of scientific experiments."[8] Bachelard himself came across sets of problems that over the course of time had served as vessels for dreams and time and again brought humanity back from hard thinking to poetry: the complex of fire, for example, or that of water, the complex of air, of the earth, or of salt, that of wine, of blood, of space. Despite ever-present historical refractions, reveries in Bachelard's sense always reveal archetypal traits.

Yet even this traditional concept of reverie belongs to the history of the fascination with the "primitive" to be investigated here. Although "for a psychoanalysis of objective knowledge there are other instances of *primitiveness* which seem to us to be ultimately more pertinent" than those the inquiry into "prehistoric man" via "still existing primitive people" brought to light, Bachelard, constrained by the thought of his time, insisted on a "psychology of *primitiveness*" that was to guide the endeavor of opening up the realm of reveries:

> Indeed, we need only consider a *new* phenomenon to verify the difficulty of adopting a truly adequate objective attitude. It seems that the *unknown* aspect of the phenomenon is actively and positively opposed to its objectivation. To the *unknown* aspect it is not so much ignorance which corresponds as error, and error that is most heavily overladen with subjective defects. In order to construct a psychology of *primitiveness* it is sufficient, then, to consider an essentially new piece of scientific knowledge and to follow the reactions of non-scientific, ill-educated minds that are ignorant of the methods of effective scientific discovery.[9]

The impulse for this new psychoanalysis of knowledge came from the "discovery of the primitive mind" fully underway at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Its object, however, was a primitiveness that was both more general and more specific, a primitiveness that an age, faced with its central unknown, grasped in waves from out of its innermost core. In the encounter with the unknown, objective experience abruptly turned into inner experience, and even knowledge acquired an "affective nature."[10] Whoever knew how to decipher this affectiveness at the heart of objectivity knew something about the imaginary ground of an epochality. For Bachelard, the "indispensable mine"[11] for research on imaginary inscriptions of knowledge, in which what was specifically uneducated and primitive about an age was washed to the surface, was the epistemic history of electricity.

Even if the concept of reverie, down to its very foundations, is marked by the epistemic situation I seek to explain here, I consider it to be an appropriate means for reading this situation. Provided we set aside everything that is archetypal about it, everything that is complicitous with the archaic illusion, which in Bachelard still instituted, more or less latently, the continuity of a poetics of knowledge, the concept allows us to describe how a knowledge just emerging, forming itself, generates images of itself that are partly an expression of the difficult separation from what came before, partly a signature of the uncertainty its arrival necessarily entails. It is precisely a *not* understanding that governs such phases. There is no need to assume a history of the human species and its dreams to understand the genesis of reveries. Dream images are condensations of the ontological worries and epistemological needs of an age that has not yet come to grips with itself. As dreams of fear or dreams of desire, they keep epistemic threshold epochs in check. They presciently dream what it will one day, when a comprehensive overview returns, be possible to say clearly. To be sure, reveries might insist infinitely. An age never conceives of itself in its totality, and crystal clarity is an illusion. But there are approximations that take the pressure off an age to produce dreams; for only a moment, of course, until the next set, but a different set, of reveries comes in. The concept of reverie allows us to conceive of the formation of knowledge as a process that also always passes through the imaginary of an age.

To say it again, this book is about the ascent of the proposition, *There is communication*—about the ways in which it was dreamed and anticipated until there was no more need for dreaming to process its arrival, until reveries had done their duty. The dream sequences faded when the proposition could be said and its enunciation could become a truism, a mere imitation of what was already clear.

An exposition of the great reverie about the sacred and the primitive that began to preoccupy contemporaries in the second half of the nineteenth century demands, first of all, a description of the more general epistemic constellation in which this dreaming began. In the first third of this book, this constellation is conceived of in terms of a transition from intuitive to symbolic thinking, in which thinking itself entered a crisis, a transition in which an age lost its epistemological and ontological certainties. Two sites on which the dramatic nature of the crisis that forced contemporaries back into historicality in order to shed light on their own situation is apparent are to be explored here: pure mathematics and symbolic logic on the one hand and physical field theory on the other. What took place in these two domains was the elaboration of pure symbolisms whose task was, on the one hand, to address the basic modes of operation of the mind and, on the other, to provide systems of notation for the essential unrepresentabilities of electromagnetic communications. They were the key sites of a revision of foundations. Where science had once worked, as Nietzsche writes, "inexorably on the great columbarium of concepts" by burying intuition, it was now no longer concepts but symbolisms that constructed the "burial place of intuition."[12]

The rise of the axiomatic age needs to be described—and this is the main objective of the present text—in order to then understand how, given the devaluation of traditional systems of categories thus promoted, reveries of primitive and sacred thinking grounds set in. The birth of the human being as *animal symbolicum* had to be witnessed in order to experience the shock of one's own birthing from an appropriate historical distance. And when representational thinking was smashed to pieces in confronting the fundamentally nonintuitive facts of communication, when the lack of clarity of the phenomenal world generated by these facts could no longer be explained by representational images and intuition got lost in what cannot be intuited, one experienced the "torment of perception [*Anschauungsqual*]" felt by "primitive man." This torment, Wilhelm Worringer writes, once had had to be "overcome … in order to gain fixed conceptual images instead of accidental perceptual ones" and thereby to obtain the "enjoyment of perception [*Genuss der Anschauung*]."[13] It is this enjoyment, precisely, that Worringer's contemporaries had just lost again.

In the course of the communication age's first wave of demythologization, which unfolded under the auspices of an exact knowledge of information, Lévi-Strauss lucidly diagnosed the existence of an "archaic illusion" that even in his day continued to associate the modes of thinking of children, the "primitive," and psychopaths. When I speak of the archaic illusion of

communication, I thus also aim to trace Lévi-Strauss's diagnosis and even the emergence of structural anthropology back to its wider basis in the history of media and epistemology. Structural anthropology is thus to be considered the extreme stage of a history of fascination with primitiveness. It emerged where perhaps only one other reverie began, that of cybernetics, which displaced the reverie of the sacred and the primitive.

This books seeks to acknowledge something that, at least as a premonition, already permeates Marshall McLuhan's work. Because he himself was still writing under the lasting impression of the archaic illusion of communication, McLuhan was unable to recognize this illusion as such and to turn it into his main site of analysis. But in giving the greatest expression to it, he led it all the way up to the moment when it could be recognized. In the same year that Lévi-Strauss declared the savage thinker to be the information theorist of the first hour, celebrated his perfected symbolism, and thereby put an end to the contemporary myth of message mysticism and the mode of thought of the "primitive," *The Gutenberg Galaxy* contained propositions that laid bare the origin and the condition of possibility of structural anthropology's demythologization discourse: "Modern man, since the electromagnetic discoveries of more than a century ago, is investing himself with all the dimensions of archaic man *plus.* The art and scholarship of the past century and more have become a monotonous crescendo of archaic primitivism."[14] According to McLuhan, "we must learn today that our electric technology has consequences for our most ordinary perceptions and habits of action which are quickly recreating in us the mental processes of the most primitive men."[15] Thanks to the entry into the world of electricity, an entire epoch had been made "'connatural,' as it were, with non-literate cultures."[16] McLuhan's sense for the archaic style of the age was acute enough to note that "it must often have puzzled the scholars and physicists of our time that just in the degree to which we penetrate the lowest layers of non-literate awareness we encounter the most advanced and sophisticated ideas of twentieth-century art and science."[17] His most important watchword, that of the "global village," testifies to just how much he was obsessed with the idea of a return of tribal society. He abandoned himself to the reverie of a renewal of the "Africa within"[18] to be brought about by the communication age and thought that the defining achievement of radio lay in "reviving the ancient experience of kinship webs of deep tribal involvement."[19] In these and similar lines, the primitive appears, for the first time and despite all archaistic fascination, as a conceptual persona and the offspring of a fundamental caesura in the history of media and thought.

The exodus from the self-evident and thus unquestioned fundamental ground of cultural technique called alphabetic writing short-circuited an entire

culture with its own becoming. The postalphabetic cultures that according to McLuhan induced the crisis of the epistemic-cultural hegemony of the alphabet and laid their hands on the alphabetic consciousness shared with prealphabetic layers an analphabetic rationality. At its end, the long duration of alphabetic mentality seemed to return to a time before its beginnings. McLuhan saw this peculiar repetition at work everywhere. It was the main generator of his media archeology with an anthropological intent. This turned something that had more or less unrestrictedly governed the process of working through the immense decay of certainty into a figure that instituted a new discourse, the discourse of media history. And what previously had generated savage speculations from out of the deep layers of discourse and shed light on the contemporary situation by imagining primitive states of being and the world now acquired a clear structure. In certain respects, then, the discourse of media history is itself the child of the archaic illusion of communication, a child, however, that was soon to begin disavowing its descent by exorcising the anthropologisms with which it had been endowed. The study of the illusion, in this regard, is also a contribution to the archeology of media history itself.

The talk of magical channels we find in McLuhan's emphasis on the magical aspect of media[20] originates directly in the archives of the great transformation this book delves into. It merely condensed what had been collected for about a century under the headings of the "sacred" and the "primitive" and had turned matters of religion into a matter of media processes. Everywhere in William Robertson Smith, who inaugurated the modern discourse of the sacred and, not by mere coincidence, also published, in 1870, a mathematical treatise *On the Flow of Electricity in Conducting Surfaces*, there is talk of transmission and communication of the sacred, notions that were elaborated in the course of several decades to follow.[21] When, in 1913, Nathan Söderblom provided an overview of current scientific findings on the question of the sacred for Hastings's *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics*, he chose "communication of holiness" as his leitmotif.[22] And James George Frazer, to name another famous proponent, writes in his definition of "Contagious Magic": "its physical basis, if we may speak of such a thing, like the physical basis of Homeopathic Magic, is a material medium of some sort which, like the ether of modern physics, is assumed to unite distant objects and to convey impressions from one to the other."[23] Around 1900, the core discourse about primitive worlds of transmission, which had been sparked by discussions of concepts like *mana*, brought about an immense spelling out of a wondrous world of the immaterial and the invisible beyond the reach of the senses, a world in which there was constant communication.[24]

All that is left for us to do, after McLuhan, is to reexamine this caesura, which it seemed had unexpectedly transported an entire epoch back into primitiveness, both historically and epistemologically. In that endeavor we must separate out what in McLuhan is simply called electricity into two main currents of the history of knowledge: the formation of a purely symbolic thinking on the one hand and the discovery of the nonintuitive facts of communication on the other. Only then, only on the basis of this blueprint for the overthrow of the space of knowledge, is it possible to trace the genealogy of the two concepts that, to cite Foucault, were "hot" around 1900,[25] the "sacred" and the "primitive," and to explain what function they served in the entry into the age of the symbolic and of communication. Hence the structure of this book.

Proceeding this way allows us to decipher discursive sediments deposited by an age in the process of sacralizing its channels and searching for a new conception of itself. There are rereadings of some better-known texts to show how much the spirit of the crisis coalesced in them. Other texts that have practically been forgotten or at most count as curious documents from a time strangely enthused by the primitive come to occupy a historically and epistemologically central position. The return of the concept of the sacred, which has been underway for some time now, is rendered strange by the realization of just how much this concept was the spawn of a lack of understanding of the new facts of communication. It originated in a fantasy of transmitting impersonal powers and forces, a fantasy that was able to shape discourse only as long as the question of communication could not be thought symbolically and without being led astray by intuition. The concept of the sacred, the ambivalence it contained, and the difference between the sacred and the profane were the effects of the imaginary of an epoch. Those who gasp for breath when they read diagnoses of contemporary culture whose fascination with the "sacred" and the "primitive" is unbroken are being strangled merely by the phantom hand of a long gone but by far not overcome positivism of a history of fascination. Today, now that the discourse of the sacred and with it that of the "primitive" has, thanks to cybernetics and information theory, long been dispensed with, these discourses' afterlife comes into view only occasionally, on the epistemic margins. The knowledge that communication is a purely symbolic and systemic matter that has no need of human beings, or consciousnesses, or brains for it to function has made the archaic illusion of communication itself a matter of history. Modes of thinking and questions of transmission can no longer be mapped onto each other the way it used to be possible in the hermeneutics of primitiveness.

Whether the incubation period of the proposition, *There is communication*, has come to an end or not I dare not say. I tend to doubt it. The proposition continues to give us plenty to think about. Its various versions continue to presciently dream much that is unthought. And we still have to speak up against the archaisms that emerged at the time of its arrival. These archaisms have become sedimented at the basis of discourse and constitute one of those basic strata of our own epoch that have not yet been cleared away and have not yet been understood.

Notes

1.   Weyl, "Wissenschaft als symbolische Konstruktion des Menschen," 313.
2.   Luhmann, "How Can the Mind Participate in Communication?" 371.
3.   Heidegger, *Principle of Reason*, 4.
4.   Whitehead, *Symbolism*, 6.
5.   Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 2.
6.   Bachelard, *Formation of the Scientific Mind*, 29.
7.   Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 5.
8.   Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 4.
9.   Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 25.
10.   Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 6.
11.   Bachelard, *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, 25.
12.   Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," 261.
13.   Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, 38–39. Another art historian who participated in the archaic illusion to an even greater extent than Worringer was Aby Warburg. It is particularly thanks to Ulrich Raulff's *Wilde Energien*, esp. the discussion on pages 117–50 of Warburg's thinking in terms of its adherence to the energetic imperative, that his historical theory of symbols might find a place in the history of fascination with primitive communication.
14.   McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 78.
15.   McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 35.
16.   McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 52.
17.   McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 30–31.
18.   Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," 111. Cf. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, e.g., 52 and 36.
19.   McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 301.
20.   I am referring to *Die magischen Kanäle*, the title of Meinrad Amann's 1968 German translation of *Understanding Media*, to which the German title of the present book, *Die heiligen Kanäle*, alludes as well. *Sacred Channels* also constitutes a wide-ranging historical localization and critique of McLuhan's enterprise.

21. Cf. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 152–56.
22. Söderblom, "Holiness (General and Primitive)."
23. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 37.
24. Cf., for example, Marett, "The Conception of Mana."
25. Foucault, "Sexualité et vérité," 137.