

THE GNOSIS OF MEDIA¹

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Much contemporary library thinking and planning hinges on the belief that the true telos (or mission) of libraries is to merge into the new electronic environment, usually referred to metonymically as “the Internet.” In this article, I argue that those who propagate the Internet as the coming information paradise, subsuming and superseding libraries, are mistaken and that the claims they advance are fundamentally flawed. Yet these flaws are interesting ones, with a tradition stretching back almost two thousand years. Indeed, belief in the Internet and the digital library as the information paradise of the future can be traced through such proponents and antecedents as Marshall McLuhan and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to the ideological tradition of Gnosticism. That this philosophical-theological pedigree has gone unnoticed to date results from the antihistoricism of the Internet dogma’s contemporary adherents—also a common property of all Gnostics. Only by exposing the Gnostic background of much modern media theory can the true role of libraries again become apparent, and that is to be what libraries have always been, namely, a body of memory.

The death of the spirit is the price of progress.
(ERIC VOEGELIN)

Over the past decade there has been so much writing about the effects of the new media and the Internet on the humanities, the sciences, and society in general, that almost everything seems to have been said and done. And as usual, when people are confronted with new developments, we have, on the one side, those frenetically welcoming the new, while on the other [S. 22] side, we have those reacting with distrust. Between these two parties, which have been fighting against each other ever since the advent of technology, we have some people who are trying to find a balance between utopian hope and Luddite rejection, claiming that progress always seems bigger than it is and that we are always sending the same letter—but in technologically different envelopes [1].

But what makes a careful analysis of the current media change more necessary than ever is the fact that this change is very different from earlier ones. First, this is the first time in media history that a new medium is claiming to absorb almost all older media. Second, the Internet as super-integrative medium takes one step further and claims to leave the physical

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ground of the older media, transforming them all into noncorporeal electronic data that can be stored and accessed beyond the constraints of space, thus making time the decisive criterion by which we should judge the new media age. And finally, the current media change is negating the individual as we know him or her—be it the author or the political individual rooted in a local community—claiming to transpose this person into a noncorporeal being and thereby ending 2,500 years of Western metaphysics. These are far-reaching claims that deserve careful analysis; this will be the topic of the first part of the article. In a second part, I will try to explain why, at the heart of these claims, there lies a Gnosticism. The third part is dedicated to the question of why this Gnosticism has been the blind spot of the humanities for such a long time. The answer to this question will provide us with a new insight, which we will then use to consider the problem of body, memory, and library in the fourth part of the article.

I. Dematerializing the Physis

According to the advocates of the Internet and hypertext, the new media have already moved “beyond the book” [2, p. 209] in four steps.³ First, they transcend the linearity of the printed book by connecting all digitally stored texts through “links,” thus building a nonlinear worldwide network of interconnected texts—the global hypertext [4]. Second, hypertext is an open text in the sense that it has no definite beginning or ending and in the sense that it redefines the borders of the text by blurring the distinction of the intra- and extratextual [4, pp. 57 ff.]. Third, by integrating pictures and sounds [4, pp. 49 ff.], hypertext is becoming a global multimedial medium that is “subverting the dominant model of prose” [5, p. 263] and making a strong “pictorial turn” that is said to be more apt at representing our [S.23] complex and nonlinear mental operations [6, pp. 12–13].⁴ Fourth, once everything that can be digitized is digitized, hypertext as a global multimedial medium will provide instant access to our recorded tradition, which, for the first time in human history, will not be the strange, opaque thing whose appropriation requires hard work but will be a translucent and omnipresent totality [8, p. 113], available simply by clicking on a computer mouse. At the end of this process, books and journals housed in real libraries will be replaced by “one metatext” [2, p. 227] stored in a virtual library.

These four steps “beyond the book” have strongly impressed the library, information, and media community and are often taken for granted. But there are just as strong counterarguments that are worthy of consideration.

³The following discussion is based on [3, pp. 139–59].

⁴See also [7, p. 73]: “Unter Hypertextbedingungen werden Schreiben und Lesen zu bildhaften Vollzügen. Der Schreibende entwickelt ein netzartiges Gefüge, ein rhizomatisches Bild seiner Gedanken. Dieses Bild ist vielgestaltig und komplex” [Under the conditions of hypertext, writing and reading are becoming pictorial actions. The writer develops a net-like structure, a rhizomatic picture of his thoughts. This picture is multiform and complex].

First, even hypertext—if written in a Western language—is read from left to right and therefore depends on the linearity enclosed in alphabetic writing. The advocates of hypertext, however, do not have in mind this obvious fact but, rather, the global network of electronic texts when they claim that printed books are blind monads whereas only hypertext is able to connect texts to a network. While it is certainly impossible to connect texts printed on paper through an electronic network, it is shortsighted to look at books as if they were blind monads. From the very first appearance of the book, we have a whole apparatus of textual features that serve to connect written and printed texts in readers' memories [9–13], thus forming a mnemonic network.

If this is true, then the second argument—that only hypertext is an open text—is a misleading contention that has forgotten that we are free to begin at the end of a book or in the middle, that we are free to ignore the footnotes or to follow their traces and switch from one book to another, and that we are free to read a book only in parts.

But books have not only been open texts from time immemorial, they also have been multimedia from the beginning: early Greek manuscripts dating back to the fifth century b.c. contain drawings, and the first scores can be found in manuscripts of the fourth century b.c. [9, 14, 15]. So the notion of a “pictorial turn”—the third argument against the book—is misleading too, ignoring the long history of texts and books that only in recent decades has led to a certain cleavage between more text-oriented books and other, more picture-oriented media. But the latest trend shows a return [S. 24] of the picture in books, and therefore we should be cautious of seeing in the “pictorial turn” a move “beyond the book.”

What makes this theory of a move “beyond the book” and toward the Internet so convincing is, therefore, not the hard facts of media history but the great expectations encapsulated in the fourth argument: that a complete digitalization of our printed records would lead to easier access to stored information and knowledge, making them in toto available for the first time in human history. But if we look a bit closer at these splendid expectations, we can easily discern their dark side.

First, it is highly uncertain that the costs for storing and accessing information in a digital format are significantly lower than the costs for storing books and journals in old-fashioned brick-wall libraries. Quite the reverse, the data available are showing that it is much costlier for libraries to change completely to an electronic data storage, provided that all costs

are taken into account.⁵

Second, even if we had an age during which cost would be no argument, it is still devastating that there is no chance that one could have easy and complete access to digitally stored information. The theory of probabilities clearly states that a search in an electronic database with two search terms can never reveal more than 6.25 percent of all the relevant documents, because of a collision of two semantics: the semantics of the searcher and the semantics of the database, both of which name the same facts but probably use different words to do so.⁶

[S. 25] To summarize, the alleged positive features of hypertext and the Internet are features that have already been implemented by older media, although in a nonelectronic way. And the ease of access to digitally stored information is a myth, ignoring both the economic and technological constraints of the plan. If the impact of the myth does not derive from hard facts, we must consider another motive to explain the growing attraction of the Internet. This motive is revealed by the most avant-garde theory of

⁵A digital library has to account for at least three different kinds of costs: (i) the initial costs of the transfer from print to a digital format, (ii) the “migration” costs evolving from the need constantly to adapt the digital format to the newest technological standards, and (iii) security costs evolving from (a) soft- and hardware problems (Y2K problem) or (b) external and internal “hacking.” To refer to the first point, in Germany, the costs for a complete digital transformation of only one of our leading scientific libraries has been estimated between \$150 million and \$300 million, and that would be roughly two-thirds of the costs for the new library buildings that would be necessary to give all German libraries the needed shelf space [16, p. 588]. Even if the phenomenon of “redundancy” would bring down the costs for a digitalization of the subsequent German libraries, the figures available are showing that the transfer from print to electronics is a tremendous financial effort. Second, in Baden-Württemberg alone, one of the German Länder, the government has spent \$20 million from 1995 to 2000 to “migrate” the computer systems of seven universities (that includes university libraries, university hospitals, university administrations, and network centers) [17]. Third, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* estimated that enterprises had to spend worldwide \$50–\$3,500 billion to cover the costs of the Y2K problem [18, p. 21]. Such figures make clear why at least some economists are doubting that there really is a rise of productivity thanks to computers [19].

⁶If we are searching with two search terms in a database, the probabilistic calculus will be the following [20, pp. 105–6]: let the probability that a searcher uses the appropriate search term 1 be 50 percent: $p(st_1) = 0.5$. Let the probability that a searcher uses the appropriate search term 2 be 50 percent: $p(st_2) = 0.5$. Let the probability that search term 1 is connected with the relevant document be 50 percent: $p(d_1) = 0.5$. Let the probability that search term 2 is connected with the relevant document be 50 percent: $p(d_2) = 0.5$. Then the probabilistic calculus is $p(st_1) \times p(st_2) \times p(d_1) \times p(d_2) = 0.5 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 = 0.0625$. And this is in plain English: using two search items, you will probably find 6.25 percent of the relevant documents—that is, about six documents out of 100. An unusual high probability of 70 percent for using the appropriate search terms would lead to the following result (same search as above): $0.7 \times 0.7 \times 0.7 \times 0.7 = 0.2401$. In this case we would be able to find 24 percent of the relevant documents. This is still less than one would guess, but it is absolutely compatible with Blair’s [19] empirical research in the field of information retrieval.

the Internet, which claims that the interactive global network is not mainly a storage device but, rather, a communication tool that aims to build a free intellectual and emotional virtual community [21]. To participate in this virtual community, it is necessary simply to negate the physical conditions of bodily human existence and to invent a virtual personality with an easily changeable identity [7, pp. 63 ff.].

The parallelism between the semiotics of hypertext and the communitarianism of the Internet is striking: electronic networking is considered to be an integrative activity that reaches its full potential by dematerializing the corporeal basis of texts and of human bodies, and by uniting noncorporeal information and noncorporeal individuals in the same electronic medium, thus creating a new world of virtual communication and community where everything and everybody—if “thing” and “body” even make sense in virtuality—are coextensive. It is this coextensiveness of virtual communication and virtual community that enables an endless and complete interchange between both, thus leading to an absolute translucidity within which everybody knows everything at every moment.

For theoretical purposes, I will call this kind of metaphysics of the Internet “Internetism” for short. Its main characteristic, dematerialization, is a complete transubstantiation, not of water into wine, but of *phúsis* into *téchnê*. If we were indiscreetly to translate the Greek *phúsis* into the Latin *natura*, which is the source for the equivalent words in our Western languages, we would be on the verge of missing the point with respect to the Greek word. The basic meaning of *phúsis* is organic “growing” [22], and Aristotle makes a clear distinction between things that are *phúsei* and things that are *téchnêj* (Metaphysics, D₄, and Physics, B₁).⁷ If something is *phúsei*, [S. 26] then it grows and changes because an inner principle is making it grow and change until it reaches its final form,⁸ whereas something that is *téchnêj* requires an outer force to give its matter a certain form. The dematerialization of the corporeal, as it is proclaimed by theorists of the Internet, intends to annihilate what is *phúsei*—what has its reason to exist (Seinsgrund) in itself and grows in itself to a final form—and to replace it by what is *téchnêj*, thus aiming for a world where everything is a thing in the sense that everything is made. The fundamental difference of our world—that there are things *phúsei* and things *téchnêj*—would be eliminated, and, at the same moment, and only then, the new noncorporeal world would come under our complete control because we know how we made it and how to reproduce it. In the end, we would act as a new Creator, playing with a virtual world of *téchnê* without the moral limitations of our world as it is, where play may suddenly become serious by ending in a destruction of *phúsis*.

At this point, the religious background of the Internet becomes obvious. But it is necessary, if we want to see its full scope, to analyze this background in more detail. Therefore, I will explain why the attempt to create a new and better world of absolute translucidity by way of completely replacing

⁷For an in-depth discussion of Physics B₁, see [23].

⁸Physics B₁, 15: “What is ‘growing’? Not that ‘from something’, but that ‘towards something’. The form is *phúsis*.”

phúsis with *téchnê* is part of a religious project known as Gnosticism.

II. Gnosticism

Gnosticism, as an important component of our Western world, has often been neglected. The reasons for this neglect are manifold, but the two most important ones must be mentioned here. First, from its beginning, Christianity struggled with Gnosticism as a heretic movement and, after its success in the Roman Empire, managed to suppress the latent Gnosticism in such a way that until today the lack of extant sources makes it almost impossible to determine the origin and development of the Gnostic phenomenon [24]. But Gnosticism could never be suppressed entirely, and it survived in different forms, awaiting its breakthrough in the last century within the political revolutions of National Socialism and communism [25, 26]. Second, the cultural break after the French Revolution drove religious phenomena out of the political and philosophical debate in such a way that, for the past two hundred years, modern man has been trying to find his identity at a distance from religion. As a result, the still-extant Gnosticism has become the blind spot in the eyes of Western man. In these circumstances, a little operation on our eyes might be helpful to give us full sight.

[S. 27] My operation begins with the remark that the Greek word *gnôsis* simply means “knowledge,” “understanding,” or “insight.” A Gnostic is someone who “knows”; all we have to do is find out what a Gnostic wants to know [24, 26, 27]. The answer is: the Gnostic is convinced that this world is bad and should be replaced by a better one. The knowledge he seeks is the knowledge that enables him to change the nature of man in order to save the world. The basic idea of Gnosticism is an immanentization of the Christian *eschaton* [26, pp. 119–21]. Unlike the Christian’s hope of a final transformation of world and man at the end of all times when God finally reveals himself in His glory, the Gnostic is willing to save the world and man in this world through his own appropriate action; that is, the Gnostic is going to erect heaven on earth and is unwilling to wait for a celestial salvation. Hence, the knowledge of a Gnostic is axiological and teleological knowledge: he knows what kind of world would be better and what to do to attain this better world.

This knowledge of a final change in history, the immanentization of the Christian *eschaton*, is expressed in four symbols that have become characteristics common to almost all modern political movements [26, pp. 111–17]. First, history is thought of as a sequence of three ages, “of which the third age is intelligibly the final Third Realm” [26, p. 111]. This Gnostic speculation survived in the periodization of history in ancient, medieval, and modern history; in Auguste Comte’s theory of a theological, metaphysical, and scientific phase of history; and in postmodern Internetism, which deals with a realm of pure electronic light and knowledge as the end of the sinful “wetware.” Second, there is the symbol of the great leader whose existence is revealed at the beginning of the new epoch and who

will lead us to the wonderful new realm. If we are willing and able to follow him without reservations, we will be transformed into a new type of man—a superman—living beyond the constraints of existing institutions, existing morality, and existing duties. The historic names of such leaders are too well-known to necessitate repetition here, but I cannot abstain from mentioning that in some of the recent publications on the Internet the reader can easily discover this phenomenon of the leader, some of them living in Redmond, Washington, others in Cupertino, California. Third, there is the prophet of the new age who knows the course of history. At present, these prophets are relabeled as intellectuals, working in universities on this or that Gnostic speculation on the end of history through ever newer media. Fourth, there is the brotherhood of autonomous persons, a new model of society that works without institutions because in the Third Realm the new gifts are spread among everybody, perfected to the same degree. This symbol has varied widely throughout history, and you will find it in the vision of a communist realm as well as in the recent proclamation of the virtual community on the Internet.

[S. 28] The beginning of a Gnostic movement not only depends on the realization of these four symbols but also on two powerful methods that aim to train the faithful according to the new creed. The first method is the “authentic formulation of truth that would make recourse to earlier literature unnecessary” [26, p. 139]. The political philosopher Eric Voegelin has coined the term “koran” for such a canonic closure of tradition that is, at the same time, the formulation of a new doctrine [26, p. 139]. Voegelin gives an interesting example for a koran: the *Encyclopédie française* “as the comprehensive presentation of all human knowledge worth preserving” [26, p. 139]. This point makes clear that the idea of a digitalization of all human knowledge—with the exclusion of what is often called “redundant material,” of course—is also simply a koranic idea in Voegelin’s sense. The second method for training the faithful is to prohibit theory as a means of critique—to effectively make theory taboo—and, as a result, to bring public debate to an end [26, pp. 140–41]. A wide range of measures for creating taboos is possible, from directly threatening the unfaithful to more civil ways of deriding those who do not share the new creed. You certainly discern this latter measure in the constantly repeated argument of Internetism, that those staying with the paper book and the brick-wall library will contribute to bring down this wonderful information tool to something like a museum: a dusty thing of an older time that is simply superfluous in the postmodern world of a global community and economy.

The point is that the taboo is the reverse side of propaganda. As we have seen in Section I, every argument in favor of Internetism cannot only be doubted but plainly refuted. Hence, the desire to put a taboo on the arguments: without this taboo, the uncertainty of the Internet’s promises would come into view, and, moreover, it would become obvious that the basis of these promises lies in a neglect of the facts. This neglect is the prerequisite for the “glimpse” into the better future of virtual communication and community, where we will find the typical Gnostic panorama of “a state of prosperity and abundance, a minimum of work, and the

abolition of governmental compulsion” [26, p. 147]. But, however charming this “glimpse” might be, the fact remains that the ground on which the Gnostic building of Internetism is erected is unsafe. This is because Internetism not only neglects the basic facts but also stems from the immanentization of the Christian *eschaton*, which leads to the idea that the future can be foreseen and planned. The world of the Gnostic Internetism of today is the “dream world” [26, p. 167] of Gnostic lore, where the structure of reality is disregarded, the facts are ignored, and the openness of history is replaced by a revolutionary step into the Third Realm.⁹ In short, instead of theories, we have korans and taboos, aimed for a Gnostic “change in the nature of man and the establishment of a transfigured society” [26, p. 152].

If this is true, then we have to ask why the Gnosticism of the new electronic media has been so widely ignored in the humanities. Should not the humanities provide the critical instruments for a thorough analysis of this phenomenon? The answer is simple enough: the Gnosticism of the new media is the blind spot in the eyes of those in the humanities because they themselves are, at least for the most part, partakers of the most up-to-date literary and media theories of Gnostic nature. We will see this in Section III.

III. Media Gnosticism

I begin my discussion of media Gnosticism, not with the most fashionable theories, but with the somewhat more remote evolutionary media theory of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, because he is the point of transition from a plainly Gnostic media concept to its modern or postmodern derivatives.

A. Evolutionary Media Gnosticism

It was the aim of a paleontologist and member of the Jesuit Order, Teilhard, to bring the theory of evolution and theology to a synthesis by showing that the evolution of life was nothing but the outer manifestation of an inner progress of cosmic consciousness: “In her deepest deep the living world consists of consciousness that is covered by flesh and bones” [29, p. 165].¹⁰

This inner progress of consciousness is guided by an orthogenesis, that

⁹The difference mentioned is the difference between a meaning in history and a meaning of history. While every human action depends on a teleology (we do what we do because we want to achieve something) and is therefore meaningful, we do not know the meaning of history as such. Hence, we can debate and examine the reasons for actions in history, but we never will know the meaning of history. Whenever we try to speculate on the meaning of history, we depend on a theology of history. See [28, pp. 1–19].

¹⁰There is a strong resemblance between Teilhard’s and Comte’s theories. This resemblance results from the fact that both Teilhard and Comte were readers of Blaise Pascal (and Teilhard was, of course, a reader of Comte as well), who is the founder of the theory of evolution. In the context of the present article, this aspect cannot be developed.

is, it leads to more complexity and more consciousness until finally, with man on earth, a “noosphere” is attained, a thinking layer covering the whole earth. This noosphere is a new quality of evolution since the blind fate of passing on genes changes to a self-reflection of the genesis—a point where the evolution comes to an “organic crisis” because the evolutionary elements, that is, human beings, can refuse to serve the world by interrupting the orthogenic progress [29, p. 255]. This crisis can only be solved [S.30] when we decide to continue the orthogenic progress toward more complexity and consciousness—when we decide to pass from the human to the superhuman, which is, for Teilhard, “a harmonic collective consciousness” that does not retain our individuality, but our personality [29, p. 279]. If we could reach this point of the evolution, we would be at “point Omega,” the last element in cosmic evolution and the first element beyond: at Omega we all will switch from bodily existence to pure spirit and find our place in the transcendence of God-Omega [29, p. 320].

Of course, this is Gnosticism at its best: Teilhard is in possession of the true knowledge that is necessary to build a new world, and even though this new world is a switch to a somehow transcendent “point Omega,” it is clear that this switch depends on our revolutionary action and can be attained in this world. But Gnosticism, as we have seen, does not merely possess the true knowledge to render the Christian eschaton into a phenomenon of immanence. It also needs the right instruments to enable this soteriological change in history. For Teilhard, these soteriological instruments can be found in modern technology because the “noosphere” is not only a result of the evolutionary advent of mankind on earth but depends on the “evolutionary event of the discovery of electromagnetic waves.” This leads to a simultaneous presence of all men on earth so that every human being is coextensive with the earth [29, p. 267]. It is, of course, crucial that the technical devices support the “auto-cerebralisation of mankind” [30, p. 159] by proceeding toward the “Mega-Synthesis” of the noosphere. The required devices are the aforementioned electromagnetic waves, that is, radio and television, but also writing—and computers [30, p. 159]. With their help, we should create a “geo-economy” beyond nations and races. This “geo-economy” should be assisted by “geo-politics,” a worldwide organization of the sciences that will help to reach the evolutionary point Omega. And the third element of a transformation of our world toward point Omega is a “geo-demography,” that is, a humane kind of eugenics [29, p. 314]. Even though Teilhard denies that the transformation of mankind at point Omega is a revolutionary act, he knows that this transformation can be properly done within a combination of reason and mysticism, bringing, as Teilhard writes, “the spirit of the earth” to his “ecstasy” [29, pp. 320–23] by following the universal trace of love that is, for Teilhard, the inner element of orthogenesis [29, pp. 293 ff.].

The price that Teilhard must pay for his immanentization of the Christian eschaton is the eradication of the individual, which is the mark of crisis in the process of cosmic evolution.¹¹ Only when the individual is extinguished as a “heresy” [29, p. 273] will it give way to the true humanity of

¹¹For critical discussions of Teilhard, see [31, 32].

the harmonic, collective consciousness that we all will attain in God-Omega. [S. 31] To eradicate the heresy, Teilhard relies on the forces of a technical totalization. He relies on writing, electromagnetic waves, and computers, which will trigger and reinforce the critical and final move toward Omega. And that means that it is not a loving Logos that brings us to the point of unification with God-Omega; rather, it is technology that will be used as a soteriological means for a rational organization of the earth in the context of a geo-economy, of geo-politics, and of geo-demography.

The eradication of the individual as “heresy” is easy because the individual is, for Teilhard, nothing but an “illusion” [30, pp. 139 ff.]. But if the individual is an illusion, then the crisis that is connected with the appearance of the individual is an illusion as well, and there is nothing that we, as individuals, could decide. To be more precise: all our individual decisions are illusions, and, from the beginning to the end, all that really exists is a cosmic spirit that comes to its self-consciousness through our flesh and bones and, finally, wants to dispense with our bodies. No real death, no resurrection, and no judgment day—it is all settled and done from Alpha to Omega, and all we have to do is turn on the computer and watch our switching. Then the end of the world will come, and the spirit will be removed from the body to rest finally on God-Omega [29, p. 320, n. 38].

Here again we see clearly the Gnosticism of Teilhard’s theory: our world is a wrong world not only because it is a bad world but also because it is a corporeal illusion. Only if we radically eradicate this corporeal illusion will we be able to attain the real world of a cosmic spirit. The development of a machine that liberates the spirit in conjunction with automation—that is, the development of the computer—is therefore the radical political act of the “Mega-Synthesis” [29, pp. 270–72], which leads to a totalitarian cosmic spirit by negating the body. That this is all done by a loving God-Omega, as Teilhard claims, is something we all must believe.

It is this other side of Teilhard’s, the radical revolutionary change by means of technical devices, that makes his theory compatible with a political media Gnosticism that easily dispenses God-Omega as the motor of history to arrive instead at a transformation of society through human actions.

B. Political Media Gnosticism

There are three trends to be discerned in political media Gnosticism. The first is Marshall McLuhan’s work, which is clearly influenced by Teilhard’s example [33, pp. 46, 174, 197]. Like Teilhard, he constructed an eschatological philosophy of history, leading from the initial synesthetic unity of tribal society to the fall of the alphabet and to a final return to unity in the “electronic age” [33, p. 8].

The second was described by Walter Benjamin in his famous treatise *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Benjamin claimed that the technical means of production would destroy the singular work of art in such a way that art would lose not only its aura but also its former

traditional context (*Traditionszusammenhang*), which was the context of the religious ritual, transposed by the bourgeoisie to a secular ritual of the work of art. The new technical means of reproduction would totally dispense with all auratic ritual and place the work of art in a new social context. This new context would no longer be a contemplative context but, rather, a political one: there would no longer be a difference between author and public since the new mass media, with their need for text, would enable everybody to write articles. Thus, labor itself would come to words since there would be no need for a writer to abstain from working in a factory: “The literary authority would no longer be rooted in a specialized training, but in a polytechnic one, and so it would become common property” [34, p. 493].

The third trend of the political media Gnosticism is neostructuralism, with its widening of Benjamin’s suspicion of the “auratic” author or auratic work of art. Since Roland Barthes, entire generations of literary critics have been trained in detecting nothing behind the literary work of art except a texture of citations whose unity does not originate in an author. Thus, there is no totality of an artful text but, rather, a plurality of citations without an authorial origin, and we finally can “break the text” [35, p. 74]. If we do so, we would and should drive out the “natural” of the text, that is, the “natural (syntactic, rhetoric, anecdotic) units” of the text [36, pp. 21 ff.] that are normally considered to be results of the author’s planned work. And as a result of that break, we do not read literary works but “lexias,” that is, voluntarily chosen units of text [36, pp. 20–21].

And here we return to hypertext. The Internet, with its “new economy of writing” [37, p. 37], is nothing but a realization of Benjamin’s and Barthes’s ideas of revolutionary societal changes. Some 150 years ago, this change depended on the establishment of a new socialist economy, and today, after the linguistic turn, this economic revolution is diminished to a revolution of writing [38]. But the old Gnostic progressivism is still alive, claiming that we will be able to fulfill our hopes in this world. All we have to do is sit in our global village where we use the newest media to weave an endless web of citations that brings us back to the worldly paradise of the Global Tribe (McLuhan), the Communist Society (Benjamin), or the age of Semiotic Bricolage (Barthes).

The reverse side of this media Gnosticism is the negation of what Barthes called “the natural”: it is the inherited body of authorial texts, as well as the inherited human body, that we all need if we want to live in this world. If we “break” the “natural,” we may imagine ourselves to be in a better world, but this better world is one of lexias without authors and one without bodies. In short, it is a world of death where only machines—perhaps writing machines producing lexias and computers as various kinds of writing machines—will survive.¹² It is a world of pure *téchnê* without *phúsis*.

¹²This world of machines is, of course, a world of labor, as Benjamin’s treatise makes clear. We only should add that the world of labor is a world of inhumane labor in the sense that humans are no longer necessary.

C. Philosophical Media Gnosticism

That this advent of writing machines is not merely a danger, but quite possibly a blessing, is the conviction of the most fashionable media Gnosticism as it was first developed by Martin Heidegger and then adopted by Jacques Derrida. The starting point of Heidegger's philosophy is the diagnosis that Western philosophy cannot properly think what Being (*Sein*), as such, is because since Plato, Being has fallen into oblivion. To think that Being properly would be the advent of salvation (*Aufgang des Rettenden*) would bring us back to an initial truth that would change the fate of the world—or better, the fate of Being itself [39, p. 36]. In short, by thinking Being properly, the eschatology of Being would be revealed, because Being, as such, is eschatological.¹³

Heidegger means the following: Being and man depend on each other because Being needs man to reveal itself. Technology is an integral constituent of this Being revealed; thus, in our world, with its artifacts and technical devices, Being has always been present. If we become aware of the presence of Being, the eschatological dimension of Being would be open to us, and we could see the hitherto veiled *Geschick* of Being. *Geschick* is both “fate” and “transmission.” To become aware of the presence of Being means to become aware that we are fatefully dependent on Being, which has always been transmitted, and that the history of these transmissions is our historical epochs. With this theory, Heidegger takes the Christian *eschaton* back into history: the *eschaton* is no longer the far end of history, the Once that would come at the end of time, but the appearance of epochs in which Being is unveiling itself. This unveiling is the real *Ereignis* (event) of our history: the ever-unveiling presence of Being, transmitting itself into historical epochs.

The *Ereignis* is certainly conceived against the historical event of Christianity that awaits the *eschaton* at the end of time when the epiphany of God will end all history and show what and why history has been. But Heidegger's immanentization of the *eschaton* makes of history a history of [S. 34] Being in the way that the ever-unveiling but ever-veiled Being lets us continuously wait for the *parousia* (appearance) of Being—a *parousia* that, of course, will never come because history, as history of Being, is the veiled unveiling of Being. In other words, while the Christian *eschaton* is the real end of our time and world—the point of convergence of God and human history—the unveiling of the history of Being is conceived as the unveiling of an initial veiling—and is, therefore, a permanent deferral of the *eschaton*, a deferral that is, at the same time, the *conditio sine qua non* of Heidegger's history of Being. In short, Heidegger's philosophy is marked by the dialectics of anticipating and deferring the *parousia*—not of God, but of Being,

¹³“Das Sein selbst ist als geschickliches in sich eschatologisch.” See *ibid*: “Das Einst der Frühe des Geschickes käme dann als das Einst zur Letzte (eschaton), d. h. zum Abschied des bislang verhüllten Geschickes des Seins” [40, p. 323 (301)] [The Once/Then of an early fate [Geschick] would come as the Once/Then of the Last [eschaton], i.e., it would be the farewell of the hitherto veiled fate [Geschick] of being].

thus propelling history ever further on an eschatological wave that sentences this world as it is and brings us, at once, nearer to the decisive point of danger and salvation—without ever bringing history to a final end, of course.¹⁴ What remains is the gesture of a tremendous historical decision that awaits us at every moment but is, at the same time, a transmission of Being itself taken away from us so that we can but piously ask what Being and time, man and technology, are, preparing by questions the *parousia* of Being.

This is, of course, Gnosticism in its outermost camouflage [41, pp. 87–89]: Heidegger is surely in possession of the highest knowledge necessary to change the world. We are told that this soteriological change depends on our relation to technology, which is both the symbol of the highest danger (*die höchste Gefahr*) and the sign of an initial truth (*anfänglichere Wahrheit*) that is always present among us [39, pp. 31–36]. But this merely distances the utopian branch of Gnosticism often connected with new technologies as the instruments of change and replaces these instruments with the koran of Heidegger's works and its demand of “piously asking” as the real soteriological instrument—a modern form of prayer that will lead the faithful to salvation within this historical world.

But is it not mysterious that Being proper has always needed devices to be unveiled—and that one of those devices is technology? And does that not mean that the History of Being is simply the history of technology—with Being proper as a kind of unreachable transcendence and technology as the worldly side of this transcendence? If this is true, then Heidegger's History of Being, with all of its mysteries, can be reduced to a history of technology. This is exactly what Derrida did when he replaced Being with *archi-écriture* (ur-writing, original writing, *Ur-Schrift*), situated from the beginning in the context of a media technology that simply declares that [S. 35] Heidegger's History of Being is an enormous postal deceit.¹⁵ Instead of Being as a fateful sender of every (trans-)mission, there are only postal services where you can find, in one long-forgotten mailbag, a lost postcard, telling the History of Being.¹⁶ To hope there could be an Advent of Being someday as the arrival of the letter of all letters—the final transmission of Being as such—is for Derrida nothing but a childish eschatological and apocalyptic desire to weep for the end of our correspondence, as if for

¹⁴See [39, p. 40]: “Je mehr wir uns der Gefahr nähern, um so heller beginnen die Wege ins Rettende zu leuchten, um so fragender werden wir. Denn das Fragen ist die Frömmigkeit des Denkens” [The closer we come to danger, the more shining are the ways of the salvation, and the more we do ask. Because asking is the piousness of thinking].

¹⁵“Car ordonner les différentes époques, haltes, déterminations, bref toute l'histoire de l'être, à une destination de l'être, c'est peut-être là le leurre postal le plus inouï” [42, pp. 73–74].

¹⁶“Une telle, histoire des postes' ne serait qu'un minuscule envoi dans le réseau qu'elle prétendrait analyser (pas de métapostale), seulement une carte perdue dans un sac” [42, p. 74].

the sense of an initial correspondence with Being.¹⁷

But Derrida's *archi-écriture* is far from being noneschatological. The intended reversal of the logocentric degradation of writing leads Derrida to a postal history of writing where writing is proceeding as a Becoming of the Sign [43, p. 406], not referring anymore to a Logos (or Being), but proceeding programmatically from our world of absolute danger to an unstoppable coming world.¹⁸ But since writing as a manifestation of *différance* (difference, differentiation, differing, deferring), a game of signs,¹⁹ can never end in a presence of meaning because every sign is related to and differing from all other signs, all of them forming an Outside without the Inside of a Logos, the coming world of a nondegraded writing can never come. Thus, Derrida's attempt to explain what a nondegraded writing could be is bound to fail, and all he can say about ur-writing or *différance* depends on a Logos that knows what he says [44]. In short, Derrida's postal history of writing is a Gnosticism à la Heidegger, pointing to a new world of undegraded writing that should be reached but never can be. This construction mingles the advent of the new world with the necessary deferral of an Absolute Presence. As a result, Derrida's theory—like Heidegger's—is full of a rhetoric of announcement, permanently announcing a necessary absence and a nonappearance of whatever.²⁰

[S. 36] But behind Derrida's back, we can see clearly what he really announces: it is the computer that has—"today"—the chance to uncover the "surface of the text" [43, p. 31]. The eternal deferral of the Absolute Presence is therefore nothing else but the electronic writing machine, an Outside of signs that needs no human being to proceed, making clear at first glance that the postal history has come to an end. There is nothing but a *programmé* (program, letter, inscription), which announces that there is nothing but a *pro-programmé*. This is the *eschaton* as *katastrophé* (turning back): in the end we do not learn what it is all about and why, but we learn that history took an electronic turn so that we are no more needed—and that this is for the benefit of writing itself.

To summarize: if we follow the media Gnosticism, we are led either to a utopian concept where a radical crisis needs a radical revolutionary change or to a concept that dispenses with the utopian branch and tells

¹⁷"Le désir (eschatologique, apocalyptique) de cette histoire des postes mondiales n'est peut-être qu'une façon, très enfantine, de pleurer la fin prochaine de notre 'correspondance'—et de t'envoyer encore une larme" [42, p. 74].

¹⁸"Pour ce monde à venir et pour ce qui en lui aura fait trembler les valeurs de signe, de parole et de l'écriture, pour ce qui conduit ici notre futur antérieur, il n'est pas encore d'exergue" [43, p. 14].

¹⁹"L'avènement de l'écriture est l'avènement du jeu" [43, p. 16] and "il faudra ici penser que l'écriture est le jeu dans le langage" [43, p. 73].

²⁰To give an example: "L'avènement de l'écriture est l'avènement du jeu; le jeu aujourd'hui se rend à lui même" [The advent of writing is the advent of the game; today, the game is becoming aware of itself] [43, p. 16]. This announcement is soon cancelled: "Cela signifierait peut-être qu'on ne sort pas de l'époque dont on peut dessiner la clôture" [Perhaps this could mean that we do not step out of the epoch whose end/close (*clôture*) can be seen in outline] [43, p. 24].

us that Being (Heidegger) or Writing (Derrida), as such, will bring us salvation—with little or no human interference. But both concepts converge in the idea of the computer as the turning point of our history, leading us to a New Realm where we will discern that our present human identity is nothing but an illusionary stance in history. Hence the desire to annihilate the body: it is the body that marks our connection to the world as it is, with all its faults and stigmata. To bid farewell to Gnosticism, therefore, means to bring back the body in all its aspects. In the context of a media Gnosticism, it means to bring back the body of writing and, consequently, the body of the library.

IV. The Body of Memory

To bring back the body of writing, we should first glance briefly at the everyday situation of talk [45]. If two or more people are talking with each other, they are usually bodily present in the same situation, that is, they are copresent in space and time, and their copresence constitutes a common field of perception. But their talk is marked by fleetingness: the sounds of the words are fading away, and all that remains is what persists in the memory of the talking individuals. This fleetingness is a problem when the subject of talk is not gossip, but knowledge that ought to be preserved. In such a case, we need a means to dissolve the content of speech among copresent talkers and listeners and to preserve it through space and time. This problem of transferring a message to different places was solved very [S. 37] early on by sending messengers who were not only good walkers but also in possession of excellent memories. But a messenger is certainly of no use to bridge the diachronic gap. The solution of this problem was to develop a set of rituals that enabled a culture to transfer, in a stable way, a basic set of knowledge to those born later. But this practice still relied on memory, not of messengers but of specialists for a chronological transfer of tradition: priests, bards, or shamans.

The next step in dissolving the content of speech among copresent talkers and listeners was to use writing instead of memory as a means of a chronological transfer of tradition.²¹ In this case, the chain of talking messengers or priests is broken, and the acoustic transfer is replaced by visual signs. Hence, the importance of writing lies not in replacing the personal contact, but in replacing the fleetingness of sound by the materiality of visible signs. In other words, the materiality of texts is bound to the complete dissolution of the copresence of talkers and listeners; from then on, the quality of tradition depends on the material medium of writing.

It follows from this that writing is *not* a medium of connection, but a

²¹This happened first in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The reason for this change was an economic problem: the Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies were complex enough to develop economies where taxes and payments had to be registered. Writing was therefore an economic instrument, and the earliest texts were simply economic transactions. For details, see [46].

medium of distance. Unlike talkers and listeners, writers and readers are not copresent in a common field of perception; on the contrary, they are separated in space and time. It is this distance in space and time that leads to a corporeal incarnation of texts. And in this corporeal incarnation, the content of a tradition becomes visual and spatial. Ever since the advent of this corporeal incarnation of tradition, we have had a relation to our tradition that has become, through its materiality, something objective and real, and something we can either accept or reject.

The first level of this visual and spatial written tradition is, of course, the book. That a book is more than a container of a text can be attested by the fact that from the time of the Alexandrian library, we find critical marks in the margins of texts used to indicate dubious passages [47, pp. 141–47]. This is the beginning of the tradition of so-called *notae*, that is, textual marks to indicate passages worthy of notice and memorization. In the Middle Ages, to these *notae* were added footnotes, registers, indexes, headers, titles, and many other features, all of which were meant to facilitate the mnemonic appropriation of the text. This appropriation is bound to an individual memory spatially structured and often compared with a “palace” or “theater” in which one could move from one mnemonic *locus* [S. 38] (place) to another to rediscover what one had hitherto placed at these loci [II, 48]. In short, the corporeal features of a manuscript, codex, or book were (and are) basic for the mnemonic appropriation of the text, an appropriation that integrates the memorized text in a corpus of previously memorized texts by grouping them in a spatially structured mnemonic “theater” or “palace,” thus giving every text its relevance.

And this brings us to the second level of the visual and spatial written tradition: the library. The library is the outward materialization of the inward mnemonic theater or palace; hence, the spatial and systematic arrangement of books on the shelves and the systematic catalog. But unlike the book, with its textual memory features that are subject to individual appropriation, the library is the symbol of the collective mnemonic appropriation of the body of tradition: the systematic order of the library expresses the significance of the collected works by giving them a distinct place on the shelves—here, in front of you, you will find the most interesting works, but at the back there is nothing but rubbish—tiring work that is done by librarians for the community to which they belong.

If we keep in mind this inconspicuous effect—that the book as medium of distance is leading to a bodily incarnation of tradition and is turning the library into an interface between interior (somatic) and exterior (extrasomatic) memory—we can easily discern the differences between corporeal libraries and noncorporeal databases or the Internet. The first difference is that only a corporeal library provides scholars and students with a mnemonic grid that is able to indicate the significance of a text by indicating its “place” in the stream of tradition, whereas electronic databases, which do not and cannot have a spatial memory grid, are blurring the significance of texts. One may find “everything” in a database, but what kind of thing it is, why it is significant, or why it is simply nonsense are questions that cannot be answered by the database. In short, databases are

not memory methods but are meant for forgetting. The “everything” you can find there is the “everything” you can forget.

The second difference between corporeal libraries and noncorporeal databases is bound to the fact that a library as a body of tradition is linked to a community that is participating in this tradition because it is the community’s own tradition. In contrast, noncorporeal electronic databases and the Internet are distributed worldwide, and this is claimed to be done in favor of the memory of a global society. But as the French historian Maurice Halbwachs has described, a universal or global memory is impossible since the collective memory always relies on a group with boundaries in space and time.²² Regardless of what someone might find in a [S. 39] worldwide database or on the Internet, his findings are dissolved from his daily life in a corporeal world where he is always a member of a spatially and chronologically distinct group and community with a distinct memory. And to maintain this group or community at the place where it is located, we have no need of electronic devices that play in an *u-topos*, a nonplace, but we do need memory devices like books and libraries.

This brings us back to the corporeal library and its necessity. Whoever opts for a real life in this world, and not for a utopian transformation of our world into a noncorporeal and electronically shining and translucent cosmic spirit, has to opt for real books and libraries. Their bodily existence is so deeply intermingled with our own bodily human existence that it is impossible to deny the one part of this twofold body. Whoever tries to do so lures his fellow citizens into the trap of a Gnosticism where we all may have a universal knowledge but certainly will lose our lives. Avoiding this kind of Gnosticism will bring us back to where we are and have always been—back into our world where knowledge does not depend on information machines, but on dialogue and memory, and on corporeal books and corporeal libraries as memory tools. The kind of knowledge we achieve through dialogue and memory is certainly a *gnosis* too, but it does not lead to a magic Beyond where everything will be better. On the contrary, since it started with Socrates, Plato, and Sophocles, this kind of *gnosis* aims at our human condition. It is a *gnosis* that begins and ends with what the oracle at Delphi recommended a long time ago: *gnôthi sautón*.

²²“Aber es gibt kein universales Gedächtnis. Jedes kollektive Gedächtnis hat eine zeitlich und räumlich begrenzte Gruppe zum Träger” [There is no universal memory. Every collective memory is based on a groupe limited by space and time] [49, p. 73].

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