Derrida's machines: traces of a deconstructive concept of media [a]

As máquinas de Derrida: traços de um conceito desconstrutivo de mídia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between Jacques Derrida's work and Media Theory, based on his assertion that deconstruction would not be possible without the computer. Our hypothesis is that there is a spectral thesis on the mediatic within Derrida's thought, reconstructed in this text from traces scattered throughout his books. We propose to reconstruct this thesis through the presence of four communication media in his work: writing, the typewriter, television, and the computer. We conclude with the existence of a deconstructive concept of media, which understands the technical inscription device not as a mere intermediary of transmission but as a supplementary archive that influences the encoding of messages.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, deconstruction, Media Theory, archive.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora a relação entre a obra de Jacques Derrida e a Teoria das Mídias, a partir de sua declaração de que a desconstrução não seria possível sem o computador. Nossa hipótese é a de que há uma tese espectral sobre o midiático no pensamento de Derrida, reconstruída neste texto a partir de vestígios dispersos por seus livros. Propomos a reconstrução dessa tese a partir da presença de quatro meios de comunicação em sua obra: escrita, máquina de escrever, televisão e computador. Concluímos pela existência de um conceito desconstrutivo de mídia, que entende o dispositivo técnico de inscrição não como intermediário de transmissão, mas enquanto arquivo suplementar que influencia a codificação das mensagens.

Palavras-chave: Jacques Derrida, desconstrução, Teoria das Mídias, arquivo.

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Derrida's machines: traces of a deconstructive concept of media

INTRODUCTION: SPECTERS OF AN UNWRITTEN TEXT

"Ghost are always at the other end of the line"
—Kittler, 1992

WHAT CAN BE said when, on the other end of the line, we hear a murmur—something less than a voice, something unnamed, a signal we cannot comprehend? To presume a haunting, of course. Yet we might also understand, by thinking about the very idea of noise, that the specter *may well be the line itself*: that is, the hypothesis that the ghostly is not transmitted through the cables but rather provoked by them, an inevitable part of their operation.

We can begin to better grasp the nuances of this provocation by tracing the origins of the citation that set it in motion. The spectral provocation emerges in an interview given by media theorist Friedrich Kittler to *Artforum* magazine in 1992. Midway through the conversation, amidst reflections on the media genealogy outlined by the German scholar, the interviewer invites him to discuss the influence of deconstruction on his project—an unspoken, spectral allusion to Jacques Derrida's theory, an acknowledged reference in *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* (Kittler, 1990).

Kittler picks up on the cue and does not shy away from invoking the intercessor; more than that, he responds to the question by appropriating Derrida's own words. He recalls having hosted the French philosopher at an event at the University of Siegen in Germany, a cradle of German media studies. There, Derrida purportedly made the following confession: "If there had been no computer, deconstruction could never have happened" (Kittler, 1992, para. 24).

How might we understand this statement, beyond the mordancy of Kittler's response, which inverts the interviewer's presumptions? Or rather: how might we situate this phrase within Derrida's body of work, comprehending the haunting it introduces into the critical and philosophical project of deconstruction by attributing its very existence to computational processes?

These are questions that Kittler himself grapples with. Continuing his response, he laments that Derrida did not elaborate on this spontaneous reflection in a text, nor document these relations in a full-fledged essay. With such a text in hand, all those who deploy deconstruction as a somnambulistic act (as the German scholar puts it, citing Americans as the chief culprits) might better attend to the *materiality* of the phenomena they investigate. Motivated by similar questions, and within the context of a series of studies aimed at mapping the possible intersections between Derrida's philosophy and Communication

Theories (Abreu & Silva, 2022; Abreu et al., 2020), we follow Kittler's traces in this essay. Our goal is to demonstrate that Derrida did, in fact, write this text on the collateral influences between the computer and deconstruction—though not in a monographic form.

Our hypothesis is that the philosopher's manifesto for a computational understanding of the deconstructionist project is dispersed throughout his work, readable from the proposition of *Grammatology* in 1967 (Derrida, 1998) to the final interviews given in the early 2000s (Derrida, 2005). *Like a ghost*, then, the computer haunts all of Derrida's texts. Our task here is to reconstruct this spectral text by gathering its fragments and understanding how they reveal a different image of both Derrida's philosophy and the prospects they open for Media Theories.

This is thus both a horizontal and a vertical investigation. From the very inception of the grammatological project, Derrida acknowledged his inspirations in André Leroi-Gourhan's anthropology of technique and Norbert Wiener's developments in cybernetics—dialogues that have already inspired a series of recent investigations tracing the impact of cybernetic and informational thought on what has come to be known as post-structuralism or the philosophy of difference (Geoghegan, 2020, 2022; Lafontaine, 2007).

But beyond these references to a specific intellectual context of technological reflection, there is another path to reconstructing this lost text: the traces left by Derrida's recurring, though always elusive, references to specific media and communication objects. From the tools wielded by the hands of Paleolithic hominins and their "mytographies" (Derrida, 1998, p. 86) to the affectionate metalinguistic comments on "the little portable Macintosh on which I have begun to write" (Derrida, 1996, p. 25), Derrida reveals a fascination with inscription machines and how their actions are decisive in constructing the regime of meaning in which we are immersed. A regime which deconstruction ultimately seeks to expose, question, invert, and destabilize:

> The break with this structure of belonging can be announced only through a *certain* organization, a certain *strategic* arrangement which, within the field of metaphysical opposition, uses the strengths of the field to tum its own stratagems against it, producing a force of dislocation that spreads itself throughout the entire system, fissuring it in every direction and thoroughly *delimiting it*. (Derrida, 1978, p. 20)

Deconstruction as a strategy, therefore, is a *perspectival instrument*—and it is this very strategy that we will employ in the development of this article, adopting as a methodological principle its tendency to gather traces and reconstruct the

textual fabric. In our pursuit of the reconstruction of Derrida's computational essay, we will subject his own work to a deconstructive gaze. In doing so, we aim to test the hypothesis that between the two genealogies—of the media and of deconstruction—there exists a specular, parallel evolution, one that we intend to discern precisely at their points of contact.

This text, therefore, is organized around Derrida's mentions of media, opting to divide and categorize these references according to the specificity of each communication technology alluded to—a strategy aligned with the propositions of Media Theories and of Kittler (1999), insofar as it allows us to understand the materiality of each medium and how, in their singularity, they each illuminate a different aspect of Derrida's critical project. These will be: writing, the typewriter, television, and the computer. Ghosts of past, present, and future media; messengers of a thought that is never the same once it passes *through these machines*.

WRITING: EXTERIORIZATION AND SUPPLEMENTARITY IN THE ARCHE-MEDIA

First and foremost, the primary medium: first in the chronology of Derrida's media interests but also the first communication technology, as proposed by the philosopher in the wake of the archaeological anthropology of technology (Derrida, 1998).

All of his philosophy rests on the rehabilitation of the positive sense of writing, which had been downgraded and repressed in the Western philosophical tradition as an a mere technicality devoid of substance, a representation of representations, a poison to "true" cognition (Derrida, 1998). To affirm its positivity, Derrida postulates writing as any and all devices for inscription and the recording of information on material supports—a clearing of the conceptual ground and a historical reappropriation that challenges the Eurocentric history of writing, echoing the findings of French archaeology in the mid-1950s (Pinto-Neto, 2017). The most significant of these, in the interpretation proposed here, is the discussion introduced by André Leroi-Gourhan regarding the *liberation of the hands* of the first bipedal hominins. This idea, elaborated in his paleontological research and reflected in *Gesture and speech* (Leroi-Gourhan, 1993), is a cornerstone for Derridean writing.

Leroi-Gourhan identifies this moment of motor development and the acquisition of hand self-awareness as a decisive stage in human technological development. It is the possibility of manipulating tools that opens the way to an entire chain of inventions—a kind of archaeological update of the Promethean

myth[1]. But what are these tools? Above all, Leroi-Gourhan speculates, and Derrida emphasizes, they are *inscription technologies*: the means of engraving on walls and soil, the inaugural devices of artificial memory storage. This process gradually leads to an expansion of cognition, producing in these pre-linguistic (and even pre-vocal) humans a demand for a symbolic system to signify the ideas they expressed graphically. Leroi-Gourhan (1993, p. 31) notes the physiological alterations wrought by the manipulation of inscription tools, observing that the very possibility of speech arises from this transformation. Thus, he coins the radical statement: "We possess no direct means of studying language before writing" (Leroi-Gourhan, 1993, p. 111).

Closely following this interpretation, captivated by this inversion of the classical archaeology of the logocentric relation (according to which speech precedes and governs writing, understood merely as a phonetic representation), Derrida aligns himself with the view that writing constitutes the gesture that invents the very possibility of communication—a revolutionary invention, from which all others derive: "A writing that breaks with the *phoné* radically is perhaps the most rational and effective of scientific machines" (Derrida, 1998, p. 312)—or, as we should already call it, the most *paradigmatic* of *media*.

An *arche-media*, therefore. We read this in Derrida's reflections, where he establishes a regime of affiliation between those stones used to carve figures and the computing systems emerging in the 1960s, grounded in their operation of language through mediation:

> If the expression ventured by Leroi-Gourhan is accepted, one could speak of a "liberation of memory," of an exteriorization always already begun but always larger than the trace which, beginning from the elementary programs of so-called "instinctive" behavior up to the constitution of electronic card-indexes and reading machines, enlarges différance and the possibility of putting in reserve: it at once and in the same movement constitutes and effaces so-called conscious subjectivity, its logos, and its theological attributes. (Derrida, 1998, p. 84)

The question of "putting into reserve"[2] and the dynamic between creation and erasure enables Derrida to identify two distinctive features of writing that remain fundamental to all later media. First is the already mentioned issue of *exteriorization*: every medium of communication will mediate a relationship between cognition and its *outside*, operating as a passageway (hence the strong sense of "medium") from consciousness to the world. Yet this passage is not merely transmissive, as Derrida repeatedly cautions throughout his work. In

[1] The echo is not lost on other readers, such as Bernard Stiegler, a continuator of Derrida's grammatological project and author of a philosophical history of technics grounded in the dialogue between Leroi-Gourhan's reflections and a deconstruction of the Prometheus myth (Stiegler, 1998). We have already presented direct connections between the place of technology in the philosophies of Derrida and Stiegler in a previous essay (Abreu & Silva, 2022).

[2] The original expression, *mise en réserve*, has in French a common usage within economic language, referring to the withholding or safeguarding of part of a company's revenue—a meaning perhaps better rendered as *accumulation*, a word that also evokes the Marxist resonances of grammatology to which Derrida himself would allude. In the context of the cited passage, and within our argument as well, writing, as archi-medium, inaugurates the possibility of archiving meaning, rendering it no longer immediately accessible, and giving rise to ever more distant and deferred interpretations. There would always be a "value" in the communicative act that cannot be fully retrieved; hence Derrida's emphasis on the communicative value of the very act of accumulation/archiving.

this citation, we see how storage also acts as erasure, a cognitive reorganization mediated by the possibilities of mediation itself.

This issue relates to the second media characteristic we understand Derrida as outlining: the *prosthetic nature* of every medium of communication. After all, what is a prosthesis if not a technical, fictive body added from outside the "natural" body to fulfill a need or achieve an objective through this exteriorization? This concept arises in the grammatological project motivated by writing; it emerges in Derrida's reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his denunciation of writing as a *dangerous supplement* (Derrida, 1998, p. 141)—that which is necessary for memory and knowledge but also contaminates them. Every prosthesis is both exterior and interior; it is presence, but presence contingent upon absence. This understanding distinguishes the prosthetic notion of media from the concept of media as "extensions of man" prevalent in a certain tradition of media theory (McLuhan, 2005), taking this idea to its extreme: prostheticity is defined by generating the very lack it seeks to compensate[3]. Once the possibility of that fictive action is glimpsed, not only does the natural gesture cease to be so, but it also becomes clear it never was. "But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace." (Derrida, 1998, p. 145).

Rousseau cannot think without being able to write—this is his dilemma, and ours as well, mediated by the very possibility of mediation. Thus, it follows that "If supplementarity is a necessarily indefinite process, writing is the supplement par excellence [...]" (Derrida, 1998, p. 281).

It is from these two characteristics that mediality takes shape, as Derrida (1988, p. 3) succinctly concludes: "*If we take the notion of writing in its currently accepted sense-one which should not-and that is essential-be considered innocent, primitive, or natural, it can only be seen as a means of communication*" Furthermore, it is through this interplay between exterior and interior, between nature and prosthesis, that writing, positioned as the originary technology, is also constitutive of thought itself—and, in this way, also a condition for its deconstruction.

Thus, Derrida will treat writing as a way to overturn the instrumental conceptualizations of media inherited from the Western philosophical tradition: those that rigidly distinguish between *techné* and *epistémé*, subordinating the former to the latter. As he succinctly writes in *Memories for Paul de Man* (1989), a mature work in which we glimpse echoes of the media-deconstructive proposition observed by Kittler:

> There is no deconstruction which does not begin by tackling this problematic or by preparing itself to tackle this problematic, and which does not begin by again

[3] McLuhan's theory still bears a theological residue, evident in its insistence on the metaphysical and revelatory nature of media—whereby the coupling of media with subjects becomes a means of granting access to a kind of cognitive essence. Derrida offers only a brief, yet incisive, remark on McLuhan in "Signature, Event, Context" (1988), where he critiques the "ideological" dimension of McLuhan's theory as a longing for transparency and immediacy in human relations (as exemplified by the notion of the Global Village). A more extensive critique of this theological tendency in McLuhan, drawing on Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, can be found in De Marchi (2023).

> calling into question the dissociation between thought and technology, especially when it has a hierarchical vocation, however secret, subtle, sublime, or denied it may be. (Derrida, 1989, p. 108)

THE TYPEWRITER: THE ARCHIVE AND THE RECODING OF COGNITION

The direct clash with this hierarchy sets the tone for Derrida's deconstructionist approach to media, most notably in his discussions on another communication technology: the typewriter. Like primary writing, this medium plays a prominent and transversal role in his texts, traceable back to the 1967 essay *Freud and the scene of writing* (Derrida, 1978), in which he revisits the archaic mystic writing pad (*Wunderblock*), a child's toy for inscriptions on waxed paper. This toy serves as a model for psychoanalysis' theory of writing and, by extension, for deconstruction's metonymic opening to the question of machinic codification in inscription.

This framework leads Derrida, for instance, to fondly recall the portable Olivetti machines he carried worldwide between the 1950s and 1980s, marveling at their repetitive and rationalizing character—intensifications, rather than negations, of the "theater of prosthesis" inaugurated by manual writing (Derrida, 2005, p. 20). Contrary to the common perception of mechanization as a move toward greater intelligibility or clarity, Derrida sees it as merely a new "*organology*" (Derrida, 2005, p. 21): a simultaneous and collateral extension of both body and medium.

We can read this in two of Derrida's engagements with thinkers skeptical of the typewriter. The first involves playwright Jean Genet, who resisted the machine, claiming it inflicted violence upon the body of language and disrupted the natural flow of ideas. Derrida, recounting their conversation in an interview (Derrida, 2010) and as revisited by Katie Chenowet (2019), counters that "[...] all writing involves a negotiation between a body and an instrument, that there is always a 'cut' of some kind" (Chenowet, 2019, p. 48).

A similar argument emerges in Derrida's dialogue with Martin Heidegger, who denounced the alienation of the human essence through the loss of manual activities, with handwriting symbolizing this decline. Heidegger's critique reflects the Aristotelian distinction between thought and technique—a dichotomy ripe for deconstruction. Derrida's provocatively titled essay Heidegger's Hand (Derrida, 1987) dismantles this critique, reading it as phonocentric nostalgia rooted in a need to attribute an original purity to meaning. Heidegger's essentialization of the hand blinds him to the manuality inherent in typing—a discretized,

technological manuality that is all the more "manual" for being technological (Derrida, 1987, p. 169).

This deconstructive provocation reveals that the typewriter does not sever the hand but transforms it, unveiling its originary technicity: "Now, when one writes 'by hand,' one is not on the brink of technique. There is already instrumentalization, regular reproduction, mechanical iterability," Derrida writes—on a typewriter (Derrida, 2005, p. 20). The composition of hand and machine is not merely cooperative, but retroactively critical: the machine reveals previously invisible configurations of the hand. As both medium and deconstructive device, the typewriter also functions as a dispositif of visibility for earlier technical processes, which, upon being exposed, are altered. Hence, the call to compose, with typewriters, "*another history of the hand*" (Derrida, 2005, p. 21).

Through this discretization of writing operations by the typewriter, it becomes clear that a medium does not merely externalize; every medium also internalizes what it externalizes through thought. A striking instance of this process appears in Derridean echoes within Kittler's work (1999), as he recounts Friedrich Nietzsche's fascination with his typewriter, the archaic Malling-Hansen model acquired in 1882 to facilitate writing as his blindness advanced. Nietzsche's struggle with the device's weight and awkward ergonomics led him to compose shorter sentences: what Kittler (1999, p. 203) calls a "telegraphic style," philosophically enshrined as aphoristic writing, now a hallmark of Nietzschean thought. "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts," Nietzsche himself remarked (Kittler, 1999, p. 200).

Working: mediating and deconstructing simultaneously—this is our hypothesis for interpreting these phenomena in light of Derrida's technical archaeology of writing. The consideration of these processes of collateral supplementation between hand and machine reveals that every act of inscription is a medium of communication, and every medium of communication is an *act of archiving* (Derrida, 2005, p. 31).

In Derrida's view (1996), archiving is not merely synonymous with "recording" or "memory." His notion of the archive is suffused with deconstructive critique, demonstrating that every record is inventive, producing the possibility for what is archived to be comprehensible while simultaneously creating a reserve of meaning that renders this comprehensibility legible only within the archive's context. Archiving "conditions not only the form or the structure that prints, but the printed content of the printing" (Derrida, 1996, p. 18). Every archive is both inventive and conservative, a process we can describe in media terms as the codification of information by the medium's technical infrastructure.

This codification encompasses not just information but the entire communicational circuit, including the sender: as Nietzsche's typewriter recoded his way of doing philosophy. A compelling explanation of this process emerges in the following passage:

> This is another way of saying that the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content ofthe past whichwould exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of thearchiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable-content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. *This is also our political experience of the so-called news media.* (Derrida, 1996, p. 16-17, emphasis added)

THE TELEVISION: ARTIFACTUALITY AS POLITICAL FICTION

The resonance between medium and inscription—a resonance not rooted in determinism but in the recognition of the codifying nature of medial externalization—takes on a distinctly political dimension in Derrida's discussions on television. This medium, initially peripheral to the philosopher's interests, begins to infiltrate his work in the 1980s, eventually becoming the focus of an entire book: *Echographies of Television*, a record of a conversation between Derrida and Bernard Stiegler (1996), his disciple and a key figure who bridges deconstruction and the critique of new media[4].

The dialogue begins by establishing a connection between the television medium and Derrida's understanding that every act of meaning-making is a *tele--technology* (Derrida & Stiegler, 1996, p. 37): a form of communication projected across distance and time through the technical imprint of its trace, independent of context. For Derrida, what distinguishes television as a medium is the paroxysmal acceleration of this characteristic. Satellites and network broadcasting amplify the reach of its inscriptions to an extreme degree while simultaneously concealing the distance it traverses, rendering it deceptively transparent. Hence, the philosophers' discussion centers on the issue of *live transmission*, identified by Derrida as the decisive media shift within the archaeology of these technologies.

In "traditional" media, the moment of inscription of messages was obscured within the very body of the message itself: when reading a book, we access the materiality of its pages and content, but we do not encounter the presence of the author or their hand typing those words. In live television broadcasts, however, what is transmitted is *the act of inscription itself* (Derrida & Stiegler, 1996, p. 40).

[4] A few contextual remarks on the role of Stiegler in media-oriented readings of deconstruction: his philosophical work is driven by the proposal to conceive a philosophical anthropology in which the "being" of the human lies precisely in its lack of essence—a lack that is compensated for through the use of technics (Stiegler, 1998). This reading unfolds primarily through Stiegler's engagement with the ideas of Leroi-Gourhan, Gilbert Simondon, and Derrida. An important synthesis of Stiegler's media theory can be found in De Marchi (2023).

This new possibility of aligning the moment of inscription with that of diffusion compresses time, but also alters the cognition of the archiving process. When we watch television, we have the impression of witnessing an event—indeed, The Event, given its aspect of irruption and unrepeatability (Derrida, 1996)—even though, on the other hand, we know that "[...] it is being produced by the most powerful, the most sophisticated machines of repetition[5]" (Derrida & Stiegler, 1996, p. 102). This falsification is what Derrida and Stiegler term *artifactuality* (*artefactualité* in the original French), a portmanteau that combines the presumed "factuality" of communicational transmission (that is, the conveyance of objective information meant to be faithfully decoded to restore its proper meaning) with the "artifact" nature of every media product: produced supplementarily, and inherently both codified and codifying. Also containing within itself the word "actuality," the concept draws attention to the performative status of the real (a performance executed by the technical-media gesture, as previously explored in Derrida's reflections on the archive).

[5] In the original: "[...] *c'est produit, nous le savons aussi, d'autre part, par les machines à répétition les plus puissantes, les plus sophistiquées*."

Thus, the critique of television emerges as a call for vigilance, since this medium risks reintroducing an idea of presence—suggesting that the medium evolves towards restoring those lost hands, recalling Genet and Heidegger's rejection of the typewriter. Does the "live broadcast" reintroduce the subject? With *artifactuality*, Derrida and Stiegler argue otherwise: in truth, we have never been farther from it. Its simultaneous capture and transmission merely drive its *spectral* condition to an extreme.

The only thing less faithful than an image, Derrida and Stiegler (1996, p. 40) provocatively claim, is the image that believes itself to be a reproduction. Echoing the warning of painter René Magritte—who in his painting *La trahison des images* revealed that not every pipe is a pipe—, the philosophers invite us to consider that not everything a satellite transmits corresponds to what it captures—especially when it so convincingly appears to be. To think about *artifactuality* is to consider the inherent contradiction of all communication media: technologies can never produce a pure testimony, a genuine declaration, or an unmediated discourse—yet every testimony requires a technique of production as well as a technique of dissemination. This is a "contradiction or aporetic tension[6]" (Derrida & Stiegler, 1996, p. 108) at the core of all media, whose very operation attempts to reckon with this *technical fictionalization* intrinsic to communication.

[6] In the original: "[...] *contradiction ou dans cette tension aporétique* […]".

Not every pipe is a pipe, and not every airplane is an airplane: as early as *Ecographies of television*, Derrida and Stiegler discuss the live, chain transmission of the Gulf War in 1990, the first major historical event to unfold almost entirely in real time on television screens. However, some years later, amidst the escalating

entanglements of mediatization and globalization, another paradigmatic event of artifactuality as political experience occurred: the broadcast of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. Derrida (2003a, p. 108) reflects on this event in an essay on media and terror, asking, "What would "September 11" have been without television?" Terrorism, he argues, draws attention to the pragmatic aspect of communication, as it does not merely "transmit" through images but is, to a significant extent, created by them. This phenomenon is not modern (Derrida, 2003a, p. 108) or new; it underscores the powerful fictionalizing function of television communication, resisting any relativist conclusions or claims of a purely nihilistic deconstruction, as often misattributed to Derrida. Both the democratic advances of recent decades and the generalized precarization of everyday life owe much to television—not simply as a witness to what has occurred but as an oracle foretelling what might come to pass (Derrida, 2003a, p. 123).

In summary, television, as a metonymy for media deconstruction, reveals that all communication differentiates itself across distance and time, even when these dimensions seem to vanish. By artifactualizing its contents, television operates in close alignment with Derrida's own notion of language, understood as an operation of traces that refer to no external origin (Derrida, 1998). In this movement, television also serves as an analogy for deconstruction itself: it demonstrates how a text or content (such as the images of September 11) is nothing other than the play of its signifiers, without "hidden secrets" lurking behind the weave. The desire for instantaneity in television transmission parallels the performative ideal of the sign in deconstructive reading. And through its clear political ramifications, enabled by satellite diffusion and the medium's infinite and relentless *world-making* capacity, television prompts deconstruction to confront its own dangerous potential. The "*right of inspection*" that Derrida advocates within the televisual communication ecosystem is also aimed toward his own philosophical project. This self-reflection partly accounts for the explicitly political turn in deconstruction during the 1990s, as seen in works such as *Specters of Marx* (1993) and *Rogues* (2003b).

THE COMPUTER: MACHINES OF DIFFERENTIATION

In this partial history of communication machines reconstructed alongside Derrida (with evident echoes of the media-archaeological efforts of authors like Friedrich Kittler), one observes the tendency of technologies to translate one another: each medium reinvents the technique that preceded it, calculating and discretizing its operations. This non-teleological understanding of media

"development" (if that term still holds any relevance here...) is also the impulse behind that curious declaration recalled by the German theorist. The temporal confusion involved in attributing deconstruction to computation is, beyond or beneath the considerations made thus far, a playful necessity to disrupt chronological linearity—an essential gesture for grasping both Derrida's philosophical stance and his communicational position.

The philosopher had already played with this kind of temporal-technological disjunction in *Archive fever* (1996), speculating on what Freudian psychoanalysis might have been like had Freud had access not only to notebooks and mystic writing pads but also to voice recorders, CD-ROMs, emails... Here, Derrida is not interested in speculative science fiction but rather in drawing attention to the fact that, from the moment these recording and transmission technologies are created, it is as if psychoanalysis had always anticipated them in its project of exploring the writing of the unconscious. Not through any clairvoyance in the past, but through the retroactive reworking of its foundations by contemporary thought: "Does it change anything that Freud did not know about the computer?" (Derrida, 1996, p. 26). From the moment computing exists, psychoanalysis is no longer the same, renewed with metaphors and models to understand the workings of the psyche; and if it is capable of accommodating these technological images and logics, is it not as though it had always awaited them??

Thus, in the same text, Derrida (1996, p. 25) feels the need to confess again: "I have spoken to you of my computer, of the little portable Macintosh on which I have begun to write" It is as if he were doing to himself what he sought to do with Freud. What might his own work have become if it had always been composed on computers? We can answer this with greater specificity, as not only did Derrida use such machines, but his use of them has been documented. In a brief yet powerful essay, Alexander Galloway (2021) presents a series of studies conducted on the personal computers left by Derrida after his death, also connecting them to interviews in which the philosopher reflected on his relationship with these new tools for composing his thought.

We see, for instance, the philosopher's amusing account of his experiences using MacWrite, the word processor of his Macintosh. The program's paper-machine interface is, at once, the most transparent writing support—where thought seamlessly becomes text in a continuous act, with an automatism of inscription that radicalizes the real-time immediacy of television—and also the most constraining of media. As he writes in his characteristic style, Derrida finds himself repeatedly interrupted by a pop-up message from the software warning: "This command will make your paragraph too long[7]" (Bennington & Derrida, 1993, p. 35). The philosopher is amused by this alert: rather than seeing it as a sign of

[7] In the original: "*Cette comande va crer um paragrafe trop long*".

a constraint of the human imposed by technology, he embraces this coupling to reflect on a shared foundation between the two—a foundation that is, precisely, *without foundation*. Writing is the construction of a necessarily fictional recipient, and of a sender who exists only insofar as they write, as the very act of inscription itself. The software-as-censor, the manager of this new writing regime, epitomizes the gradual process of the artifactulization of writing (and, consequently, of thought), making mediation increasingly transparent even as it grows more complex. I know well how a pen works, and I have a reasonable understanding of the typewriter. But as for the computer, I remain ignorant of "*how* the internal demon of the apparatus operates." (Derrida, 2005, p. 23).

Faced with this "secret with no mystery," a frequent mark of "our dependence in relation to many instruments of modern technology" (Derrida, 2005, p. 23), what is to be done? Opening the black box would only break it; perhaps all we can do is play with its operation. And to play—beyond any concern for 'utility' or 'efficiency'—might that not be *deconstruction itself*?

A similar conclusion emerges from Galloway's (2021) recovery of the genetic criticism studies conducted on Derrida's Macs, particularly the digital archaeology undertaken by Aurèle Crasson (2019). In the philosopher's memory files (a term that, in itself, would have invited his scrutiny), an apparently anarchic arrangement of text documents was found, organized into folders whose naming strategy was provocatively systematic. Notes for a seminar on the concept of secrecy were dispersed across eleven different folders, labeled progressively: "S," "SE," "SEC," "SECR," "SECRE," "Secret," "SECRETA," "secrétar," "Secrétari," "Secrétaria," and "Secrétariat." This management of the archive as a kind of concrete poem opens new possibilities for reading the texts, generating meaning beyond them. It places "secret" at the center while also linking "SEC"—the acronym for *Signature, événement, contexte* ("Signature, event, context")[8] (Derrida, 1988)—to variations on *secrétaire, secrétariat*, and *bureau*[9] , evoking both secrecy and the administrative apparatus of inscription. As Crasson provocatively suggests, this may signal a reversal: the transformation of computational clarity into the enigma of inscription, where meaning is generated less by transmission than by deciphering:

> But what are secrets to a computer? Can it truly keep them? Nothing is less certain. In that impenetrable space for the technologically uninitiated—who believes that emptying a trash bin erases regrets and mysteries forever—we discover its transformation into a zone of potential revelations for detectives[10]. (Crasson, 2019, Section "*Le lemme, le mot…*")

[8] Not incidentally, this is the essay in which Derrida directly confronts the concept of "communication", opposing all transmissive meanings of the term.

[9] A spectral echo to Kittler's (1999) theory and his reflection on recording machines as technological updates of secretaries and human assistants (along with the power dynamics and gender rules embedded in that relationship).

[10] In the original: "*Mais que sont les secrets pour un ordinateur ? Sait-il les garder ? Rien n'est moins sûr. Dans cet espace impénétrable pour le non-informaticien—qui pense qu'en vidant une corbeille on efface à jamais ses repentirs et ses mystères—, on apprend qu'il constitue une zone de révélations probables pour les investigateurs de criminalistique*".

Not only that: studies on Derrida's computers reveal that, as a habit, he did not compose his essays and lecture notes in a single document but instead took advantage of the seemingly infinite economy of digital space to fragment his reflections (Galloway, 2021; Crasson, 2019). We can understand this as the philosopher fully liberating himself from any book logic, from the teleological codex format that was the primary target of the deconstructive project (Derrida, 1998). For Derrida, the Book represents the era of theological closure: whether in its formal containment of a beginning, middle, and end, or in its embodiment of metaphysical logic ("this material object exists only as means of access to the singular, unequivocal *truth*")—a notion encapsulated in the metaphor of the "Book of Nature," present in Western thought from Galileo to Descartes (Derrida, 2005, p. 15). The computer, by contrast, neither possesses nor induces singularity, nor does it induce any sense of finality: its content, organized into infinitely duplicable and mobile directories, breaks the physical closure of the Book, while the symbolic closure is eroded by the logic of computer networks and the impossibility of referring to a single node in this web..

Diagnosing "the end of the Book", contrasted with "the beginning of writing" as a system of trace inscription, was the initial philosophical objective of the deconstructive project—hence the title of the first chapter of *Grammatology*. But whereas Derrida once pursued this through critical-philosophical revision, by the 2000s he was doing so by playfully opening new folders on his personal computer. Moreover, these playful gestures reveal that "digital objects" (Hui, 2016)—text documents, organizational folders, electronic programs, and their configurations—are no less material than the walls of prehistoric cave paintings or the keys of a typewriter. Perhaps they are even more material, given their tactility, their nature as a "construction set" that not only permits but actively encourages assembly and reconfiguration. The hard drive is the realization of what Derrida (1994) called the *subjectile* as a synonym for support: a tablet for the experimentation of semantic dispersion, one that makes explicit the peculiar codifications of the very surface of communication. "Neither object or subject, neither screen or projectile, the subjectile can become all that, stabilizing itself in a certain form or moving about in another" (Derrida, 1994, p. 169)—like the screen of the word processor with which Derrida wrestled and upon which he is now inscribed as we compose this very article, marked by Word's suggestions for corrections to the philosopher's citations.

The least docile of supports, of media that no longer "mediate" anything—at least not innocently (despite their apparent transparency)—the computer gathers all previous medialities within itself through its character as a deconstructive *subjectile*. It brings forth, within the materiality of media, the process of a virtual

and virtually infinite construction of writing within the play of its inscription. In a program like MacWrite (or today's Word and Google Docs), text appears at the very moment of inscription, yet also elsewhere, detached from manual materiality, already offered up to fragmentation. The computer delineates media as that upon which something is inscribed, yet always under the condition of language; it encodes writing from within this spacing, which in the philosophy of deconstruction is named *différance* (Derrida, 1982). The concept designates the space of the in-between: between object and representation, between thought and writing, between sign and meaning. (And what is the *in-between* if not the medium—or media itself?).

Both physical and temporal, *différance* extends the instability of meaning: it allows only for play, for inventive modes—that which Derrida (1982) calls dissemination. It is within this space that both communication technologies and deconstruction operate, relying on their particularly disseminative properties: their constitutive supplementarity, which critiques an individualist conception of cognition; their archival recodification of mediation processes; their artifactual fictionalization of events; their material malleability and their invitation to play and to reconfigure meaning. All these characteristics contribute to inhabiting the space of *différance*, expanding it, and transforming it into a space of communication.

FROM A DECONSTRUCTIVE CONCEPT OF MEDIA TO A MEDIA CONCEPT OF DECONSTRUCTION

Derrida was always reluctant to offer a single or definitive explanation of deconstruction—an attitude that, after all, would be antithetical to deconstructive work itself, an operation that expands meaning rather than enclosing it within a single, fixed interpretation. He always favored traces, impressions, and speech acts that resist enclosing the term within rigid boundaries around the term: more than a concept, deconstruction would be a *strategic disposition* (Derrida, 1978; 1981), a gaze turned toward the most diverse phenomena and inscriptions. Hence, the surprise at the emphasis Derrida placed during his confession to German students: "If there had been no computer, deconstruction could never have happened" (Kittler, 1992, para. 24).

Not that clarity or transparency is to be expected here (after all, we have spent the last fifteen pages attempting to pursue the meaning of this statement...), but such a declaration seems to place an unexpected emphasis on the very reluctance to explain that was so characteristic of Derrida. The understanding of the deconstructive project would be inseparable from an understanding of the

workings of computation, specifically, and of medial operations more broadly. This leads us, then, to the only possible synthesis within a thought grounded in fragmentation: to divide our conclusion into two parts, each one pointing toward the ties that bind these two universes together.

The first involves the task of investigating and interrogating communication technologies—opening their operations—via a *deconstructive concept of media*. This perspective is anti-teleological, understanding the expansion and diffusion of media as a cumulative, translational process: each new communication and information technology incorporates the previous ones, dismantling them even as it pushes to the limit that which once characterized them as singular devices. This opens powerful avenues for a renewed reflection within the field of Communication, as it establishes resonances with key contemporary perspectives, such as the notion of media ecology developed from McLuhan; the hypothesis of remediation advanced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000); and the debates on mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). All these theories are concerned with understanding the technological ubiquity of the contemporary moment in its diversity, seeking to observe the collateral interactions among the various machines at our disposal. Moreover, the deconstructive notion of media recoverable from Derrida's work insists on the performative aspect of communication—its artifactality. What matters far more than the content being transmitted is the act of transmission itself, capable of formations and deformations that become inseparable from the very "content" of communication.

The history of media thus unfolds as a history of hauntings: each new machine is simultaneously haunted by its predecessors and itself haunts the reality into which it is introduced. A medium is a *frequency of visibility*—precisely the definition that Derrida (1993) gives to the specter, which, not coincidentally, resonates with the projection of light from a cinematograph. The relationship between Derrida and cinema is a fertile one, as another machine powerfully imprints itself upon his thought. From the 1990s onward—precisely the period in which he confesses before Kittler and his students—Derrida also allows himself to be filmed in abundance, becoming the subject of numerous films and documentaries. In one of them, *Derrida* (Dick & Kofman, 2002), when asked directly, "Could you speak a little more about the origins of the idea of deconstruction?" the philosopher responds without hesitation:

> Before responding to this question, I want to make a preliminary remark on the completely artificial character of this situation. I don't know who is going to be watching this. But I want to underline rather than efface the surrounding technical conditions and not feign a "naturality" which does not exist. (Dick & Kofman, 2002, 0:14)

What may seem like evasion is, in fact, one of the most incisive responses. To understand deconstruction, one must understand the media apparatus that interrogates it; to allow oneself to be filmed is, in a way, already to engage in deconstruction, insofar as it is an operation that challenges the natural, the linear, the transparent. It is not only about pointing out constructions and impostures but, without denying them, playing with them—seeking to make them produce something other than the discourse of logos and order. It means to underline distortions rather than effacing or concealing them. In this statement, as in the one given to Kittler's students, Derrida suggests that information and communication technologies constantly put the deconstructive project to the test, deconstructing it in turn, forcing it to the point of paroxysm. And so, we arrive at our second conclusion: from the deconstructive concept of media, we move toward the possibility of a *media concept of deconstruction.*

With its capacity to illuminate the material and codifying condition of inscription supports—its insistence on the need to dismantle and discretize information—media allow us to contest some of the principal critiques leveled against deconstruction: that it is relativistic and abstract[11]. Yet, sitting before the notebook in which we compose this text, copying and pasting citations from other tabs to the point that we sometimes cannot tell whether what we write is paraphrase or personal insight—resorting to Google to recall our own originality—, none of this feels ethereal. Nor did it for Derrida: with his Macintosh, he realized that he was already writing as someone who duplicates folders, or as someone who converses with the MacWrite assistant, even when he was using only pen and paper. Media deconstruct deconstruction from within and, in doing so, offer a new concept of themselves. This allows us to better understand Derrida's seemingly prophetic confession: without the computer, deconstruction would not have been possible. Marked by mediality from the outset, deconstruction emerges as a way of thinking attuned to the process of signification within our communicative techniques. For information and transmission technologies—inscription techniques—are not merely the privileged object of grammatology but also its very vehicle of reflection.

This awareness alters the entire project—not simply updating its foundations but making the update inseparable from the project itself. The concrete experience of our communicative practices is itself deconstruction, which is, quite simply, that *which happens* (*c'est ce qu'il arrive*)—yet another non-definitive attempt at explanation offered by Derrida (2001). It is not a human action or a conscious act but something that is always already occurring within discourse, inscription, and meaning: because nothing exists without being communicated, and, to be communicated, it must have been processed by some medium—disassembled,

[11] A brief history of the main critiques of deconstruction can be found in *Deconstruction in a nutshell* (Caputo, 1996).

coded, rendered as an artifact, and made available for further processing. It is along these lines that Derrida's critical-philosophical project (and, by extension, that of Kittler and Stiegler), by continually differing from itself, updates itself—like a computer program. Updated, it now presents itself—through the lines of code reconstructed here—as an object of engagement for contemporary Media and Communication Theories. M

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