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LONGING FOR AN IMPOSSIBLE PAST:
DIFFÉRANCE, DISTANCE, AND THE CORONAVIRUS AS THE
INAUGURATION OF AN AGE OF WRITING

As we witness the aftermath of the initial responses to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – the failures and successes of the various shelter-in-place orders and a global economy interrupted – it is difficult not to notice the fact that in the age of Coronavirus, our modes of interaction, social, political, and economic, have been, perhaps in some ways irrevocably, altered. This is true across the spectrum of our institutions, from a push to make mail-in voting ubiquitous to the advent of waiting in lines to enter grocery and department stores. Not the least among institutions affected is the university, which has resulted in considerable shifts in pedagogical practice in the name of social distancing practices. Consequently, a discussion of pedagogy in the age of Coronavirus from a perspective of Derrida's science of writing, must center heavily on what has become of the classroom in the wake of social distancing protocols. In other words, what had once felt like the full presence of face-to-face classroom learning, has now, in many cases, been replaced by the highly mediated substitute (supplement) represented by such platforms as Zoom or Google Hangouts, about which – based on Derrida's discussion of his attitude toward writing and representation – one could imagine Jean-Jacques Rousseau spinning in his grave. Likewise, Rousseau, were he alive today, would not be alone in lamenting such measures of social distancing. As with seemingly every other Coronavirus response measure, such pedagogical practices have not failed to evoke certain frustrations, and a desire to return to a previous norm. In this light, I will be analyzing, here, the Zoom meeting and its possibilities as exemplary of the inauguration of a particular age of writing over and against the nostalgia thus provoked, which is perhaps most dramatically illustrated by the assault-rifle-wielding protesters who took to the streets at the height of Coronavirus lockdown to demand that the economy reopen and that things go back to normal.

In the last chapter of *Of Grammatology* Jacques Derrida deals directly – after having dealt on a mediated basis through the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss – with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's thought on writing. Writing, which Rousseau describes as "only a mediated representation of thought" is characterized by Derrida as "total alienation" in that "alienation without reserve is thus representation without reserve."¹ This alienation or representation, in Rousseau's schemata, is set in relation to presence in such a way that it "supposes at once that representation follows a first presence and restores a final presence" and representation is criticized "as the loss of presence."² Thus, if speech represents full presence, then writing, as derivative of speech, represents a loss of presence. Writing, then, for Rousseau, is a supplement that does violence to

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 321-322

² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 322

the source in a way that reflects his thoughts on the state of nature. Derrida says that “according to Rousseau, the negativity of evil will always have the form of supplementarity. Evil is exterior to a nature, to what is by nature innocent and good.”³ The supplement to nature, in this case, is evil, in part because “presence, always natural … ought to be self-sufficient.” The supplement thus attempts to replace what cannot be replaced. As such, speech and presence, which in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic can be thought of as simply as that of the personal, face-to-face interactions which we have been asked to largely forgo, is posited as representing a kind of pure, natural originality to which writing, in its degrading, derivative supplementarity does harm.

Based on his analysis of Étienne Condillac’s proposed project of “the General History of Script,” Derrida notes that “it is at the moment that the social *distance*, which had led gesture to speech increases to the point of becoming *absence*, that writing becomes necessary” and that “when the field of society extends to the point of absence, of the invisible, the inaudible, and the immemorable, when the community is dislocated to the point where individuals no longer appear to one another, become subjects of being imperceptible, the age of writing begins.”⁴ Initially, this describes the ever expanding scope of a society in the process of becoming a global society. In the midst of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, however, the terms “social *distance*” and “the point of becoming *absence*” take on something of a new meaning. We might, thus, infer then that a new understanding of these terms might also suggest that a new kind of “writing becomes necessary.” For the world of higher education, as well as much of the corporate world—those whose work is not deemed essential (or those workers not deemed as expendable as fast food and grocery store workers), for whom new technologies make uninterrupted work nonetheless possible—this new kind of writing is exemplified by video conferencing tools like Zoom and Google Hangouts.

In many ways, the advent of these technologies seems to confirm the possibility of Rousseau’s belief that “the furthest in the time of lost presence is closest to the time of presence regained” and that “total alienation is the total reappropriation of self-presence.”⁵ If the ideal which has been lost (and lost again in the COVID-19 pandemic) is the presence of speech prior to representation, which Rousseau characterizes via his “public festival,” the above mentioned telecommunications technologies (for which from here on we will use the term “Zoom meeting” as a shorthand) represent a further step in “the progress of analytic rationality” along which phonetic writing already lies.⁶ By this token, it might be said, then, that the Zoom meeting represents a further step toward Rousseau’s teleology of the image, in that “the telos of the image is its own imperceptibility.”⁷ Indeed, compared to previous telecommunications technologies such as email, wherein no illusion of presence obtains in the face of graphic representation, and telephone, wherein the illusion of the presence of voice is disembodied and represented via technology, the Zoom meeting appears to take a step closer to the imperceptibility of the sign, in that

³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158

⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 306, 307

⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 321

⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 327

⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 324

representation supplements presence by way of an image and voice that simulates an embodied presence through an unseen writing of computer code.

Likewise, this writing (as well as that of telecommunications in general) seems to achieve a new level of freedom of the sign from any particular language. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida compares the level of universality of phonetic writing with the “natural universality of a sort in the most archaic degree of writing” saying that “painting, as much as the alphabet, is not tied to any determined language.” The difference between these two degrees of writing being that, for painting “its freedom with reference to languages is due not to the distance which separates [it] from its model but to the imitative proximity which binds them,” while “by contrast, the ideal universality of phonetic writing is due to its infinite distance with respect to the sound … and to the sense signified by the spoken word.”⁸ However, in the writing that is the Zoom meeting the universality comes from the fact that the infinite distance of the digital writing that makes Zoom possible from the spoken word becomes “the imitative proximity which binds them.” Thus one gets the sense in the Zoom meeting, as with painting, that “under a universal appearance, [it] would thus be perfectly empirical, multiple, and changeful like the sensory units that it represents outside of any code.”⁹

Thus, the writing that is the Zoom meeting, which ultimately is reducible to an unseen binary script, much like the *I Ching* hexagrams that prefigured its discovery, bears a certain relation to Leibniz’s search for a *Characteristica universalis*. Leibniz envisioned his *Characteristica universalis* as “an instrument for philosophical reasoning and communication as well as creation.”¹⁰ Of this kind of universal writing Derrida has this to say:

The universal writing of science would thus be absolute alienation. The autonomy of the representant becomes absurd: it has attained its limit and broken with all representeds, with all living origin, with all living present. In its supplementarity is accomplished, that is to say emptied. The supplement, which is neither simply the signifier nor simply the representant, does not take the place of a signified or a represented, as is prescribed by the concepts of signification and representation or by the syntax of the words “signifier” or “representant.”¹¹

However, Leibniz had a system of prerequisites by which he proposed to judge a given script in order to identify potential universal forms of writing: “universal validity, correlation between sign and idea, and analytical systematicity.”¹² Leibniz felt that he came closest to discovering his *Characteristica universalis* in his study of the *I Ching* hexagrams and Chinese sinographs.¹³ The combination of the two provided Leibniz with an interesting glimpse into aspects of his universal script, although each

⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 327

⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 327

¹⁰ Bachner, Andrea. “What Original? Origin Stories, Script Teratologies, and Leibniz’s Hexagrammatology.” *Comparative Literature* 65, no. 1 (19, 2013): 26–35. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-2019266>. 28

¹¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 330

¹² Bachner, 29

¹³ Bachner, 29

individually failed a different criteria of his prerequisites. The sinograph, for one, while perhaps universally valid and consisting of significant correlation between sign and idea, did not exhibit analytical systematicity. Consequently, the Zoom meeting as writing, through the binary connection that links it eventually with the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, falls short of Leibniz's *Characteristica universalis*, in that, as in the hexagram, there is no correlation between sign and idea.

This is simply a technical way of confirming the impression that many people have when participating in Zoom meetings. While the Zoom meeting constitutes an element of alienation, it fails to achieve the telos of the image, "its own imperceptibility." What has come to be known as Zoom fatigue, which is said to be caused by the extra attention that is required to pick up on the nonverbal cues that come so much more naturally in face-to-face interactions, could be seen then as a physiological manifestation of the same frustrations that caused—in many cases armed—protesters to take to the streets in opposition to social distancing protocols and shelter-in-place orders.¹⁴ Ultimately, these protests as well as the resistance to the mediated format of the Zoom meeting (especially among college students itching to return to their respective campuses) can be understood, apropos of Rousseau's festival, as a reaction against representation, a "desire to make *representation* disappear."¹⁵ The gun-toting open-the-economy-protesters especially can be seen to represent Rousseau's festival particularly in light of Derrida's statement that "the signifier is the death of the festival," particularly in a overly hopeful inversion, whereby the protesters/the festival might be the death of the signifier. The word "death" is used loosely here, in that, as Derrida points out, "this festival without object is also a festival without sacrifice, without expense and without play. Above all without masks ... That festival represses the relationship with death."¹⁶ Similarly, these earlier protests regarding COVID-19 responses, are predicated precisely on their repression of the relationship with death involved in the global pandemic at hand.

Furthermore, there is an element of nostalgia implicit in this desire. Like the armed protestors who stormed city capital buildings across the United States, there is a sense among certain students and faculty, that in the age of Coronavirus and social distancing, we have lost something like a *parousia*, an unmediated full presence, that had obtained at some point in the recent past. There is a general wish "to go back from the supplement to the source."¹⁷ This is described in terms of birth and rebirth or awakening and re-awakening: "birth is the birth (of) presence. Before it there is no presence; and from the moment that presence, holding or announcing itself to itself, fissures its plenitude and starts the chain of history, death's work has begun."¹⁸ From this rebirth, or re-awakening in the context of Rousseau's encounter with the great dane, there is therefore the means by which presence is supposed to be regained. Rousseau describes his experience of

¹⁴ Robert, Yola. "Here's Why You're Feeling Zoom Fatigue." Forbes. Forbes Magazine, May 1, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/yolarobert1/2020/04/30/heres-why-youre-feeling-zoom-fatigue/#400a69232ac6>.

¹⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 333

¹⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 334

¹⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 330

¹⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 337

being knockout by a large dog and the experience of re-awakening wherein, we are told, he says “I came to myself”:

“I was born in that instant to life, and it seemed to me that I filled with my light existence all the objects which I perceived. Entirely giving up to the present moment, I did not remember anything; I had no distinct notion of my individuality, not the least idea of what had happened to me; I did not know who I was nor where I was; I felt neither evil nor fear, not trouble.”¹⁹

The apparently typical ego dissolution experience which Rousseau describes, figures presence as in opposition to imagination—“Rousseau would like to separate the awakening to presence from the operation of imagination”—in that “this pleasure, which is the only pleasure, is at the same time properly *unimaginable*. Such is the paradox of the imagination; it alone arouses or irritates desire but also it alone, and for the same reason, in the same movement, overflows or divides presence.”²⁰ The operation of imagination then, in dividing presence and prohibiting a state with “no distinct notion of … individuality,” amounts to a state of self-reflection as representation—consider one’s own image reflected back among the grid of images of the mediated presences of the Zoom meeting. The idea that when this operation of the imagination “appears, signs … and letters emerge, and they are worse than death” reflects the conservative slogan for re-opening the economy which states that “the cure is worse than the disease.”

However, as with Rousseau and his state of re-awakening—the means by which one is supposed to make a return to presence, to the source—the open-the-economy protesters have their sights set on a source that is already a supplement as, indeed, when “one wishes to go back *from the supplement to the source*: one must recognize that there is *a supplement at the source*.”²¹ In other words, while what these protesters objected to, like Rousseau and his public festival, could be understood on a certain level as representation/supplement interrupting their access to an originary presence/source, they failed to realize that, by nature of this formulation, the source they wished to return to was already a supplement. This can be seen for instance in the way that during the height of pandemic response measures there was a prevalent fear of an impending totalitarian police state, while several weeks later, when protests against the killing of George Floyd erupted across the nation, many of the same conservative voices promptly abandoned any critique of policing in favor of their more typical law-and-order rhetoric. What this shows is that, by seeing the possibility of a police state as a supplementary interruption of the source, by failing to see that—insofar as the police state that is feared has always been the lived reality of Black Americans throughout U.S. history—there is a supplement at the source, “it follows—but it is a *liaison* that Rousseau [and conservative protesters] work[] very hard to elide—that the very essence of presence, if it must always be repeated within another presence, opens originally, in presence itself, the structure of representation.”²²

¹⁹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 337, 338

²⁰ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 338

²¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 330

²² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 339

That being the case, this type of nostalgia is indicative of what Lauren Berlant, in her book *Cruel Optimism*, refers to as cruel optimism, in that what the open-the-economy protesters (as well as students and faculty who spend their energy bemoaning socially distanced learning) “desire is actually an obstacle to [their] flourishing.”²³ In this case, what is desired can be seen as an obstacle to flourishing by virtue of the fact that resistance to social distancing measures can directly increase the death toll. However, on a less extreme level, as Berlant says, optimistic relations (in this case, opening the economy or resuming face-to-face learning) “become cruel … when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.”²⁴ Indeed, it is relatively apparent that this nostalgia which the public festival in the age of COVID-19 refers back to, which is seen as “a form analogous to the political meetings of a free and legiferant assembled people” is nothing other than the neoliberal order that has dominated global politics and economic policy for the last forty years—the utopian illusion of which, while short lived during the neoliberal heyday, seems to have made a ghostly reappearance in the disjointed time of global pandemic.

In her reading of an untitled poem by John Ashbery, Berlant describes what could be seen as the fundamental disconnect between the possibility of an originary presence and the neoliberal norm to which the open-the-economy protesters wish to return. While the presence of the public festival implies a proximity of presence, a lack of social distance, and consequently a certain intimate intersubjectivity, Berlant points out that “existentially and psychoanalytically speaking, intersubjectivity is impossible. It is a wish, a desire, and a demand for an enduring sense of being with and in x and is related to that big knot that marks the indeterminate relation between a feeling of recognition and misrecognition.”²⁵ We see from Ashbery’s poem (“We drove downtown to see our / neighbors. None of them were home. / We nestled in yards the municipality had / created”) that:

If anything, the explicit rhetoric of the neighbor shows it to be aware, after all, that the American dream does not allow a lot of time for curiosity about people it is not convenient or productive to have curiosity about. It is a space where the pleasure that one’s neighbors give is in their proximity, their light availability to contact: in the American dream we see neighbors when we want to, when we’re puttering outside or perhaps in a restaurant, and in any case the pleasure they provide is in their relative distance, their being parallel to, without being inside of, the narrator’s “municipally” zoned property, where he hoards and enjoys his leisured pleasure, as though in a vineyard in the country, and where intrusions by the nosy neighbor, or superego, would interrupt his projections of happiness from the empire of the backyard.²⁶

Thus, Berlant shows that the American dream, the proposed model of originary presence, itself consists of a divided presence that masquerades as presence. As such, we are “willing to have our memories rezoned by the

²³ Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, 2012. 1

²⁴ Berlant, 1

²⁵ Berlant, 26

²⁶ Berlant, 29, 30

constant tinkering required to maintain the machinery and appearance of dependable life.”²⁷

In conjunction with Berlant’s approach via affect theory, which focuses more on the impasse of an attachment to a system that does not serve the purposes and needs that it is supposed to serve, in *The Age of Disruption*, Bernard Stiegler has shown, in a far more Derridean approach, that the above mentioned norm, which is positioned within what Stiegler refers to as “*the epoch of the absence of epoch*,” far from being the site of originary presence, consists of such profound disruption that many of the younger generation believe that theirs “will be the last generation, or one of the last, before the end.”²⁸ More specifically, the disruption that is “the barbarism specific to the absence of epoch consists in always *outstripping and overtaking*” the “retentional and protentional systems [which] amounted to epochs,” “so that they seem always already futile.”²⁹ There is a through line of continuity here, which supports the knowledge that “there is a *supplement at the source*,” in that Stiegler’s analysis is little altered by the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic. Stiegler’s discussion of primary, secondary, and tertiary retentions are key to understanding this. While “primary and secondary retentions are psychic realities … Tertiary retentions are artificial retentions, not psychic but technical, such as archives, recordings and technical reproductions in general.”³⁰ It was the advent of broadcast forms of analogue tertiary retentions, i.e., radio and television, that inaugurated the absence of epoch by way of the fact that “it became possible to massify behaviour and to short-circuit the collective protentions constitutive of an epoch.”³¹ Furthermore, going beyond analogue tertiary retentions, Stiegler says of digital tertiary retentions, of which the Zoom meeting as a form of writing is a part, “hence it is that the data economy comes to replace the industry of cultural goods. This replacement … is a disruption of what was already disruptive.”³² This disruption is the lack of presence at the heart of the presence to which the open-the-economy protesters and face-mask-resisters desire to return.

Drawing upon Derrida’s discussion of *Hamlet* in his *Specters of Marx*, it is a time out of joint, but one which the open-the-economy protesters refuse to acknowledge. In this way, we can understand the true crisis as preceding the physical spread of the virus in much the way Derrida describes when he says that “there is tragedy, there is essence of the tragic only on the condition of this originarity, more precisely of this preoriginary and properly spectral anteriority of the crime.”³³ We can understand, then, a fundamental disconnect between these shelter-in-place protesters and the crisis by which the time is disjointed. As such, despite the fact that “it is in this desperate context that the absence of epoch seems condemned to rush headlong to its end, not as the beginning of a new epoch but as the ‘last generation’,” it is this disjunction of time that allows for the possibility of

²⁷ Berlant, 31

²⁸ Stiegler, Bernard. *Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*. Polity Press, 2019. 5, 9

²⁹ Stiegler, 21

³⁰ Stiegler, 22

³¹ Stiegler, 23

³² Stiegler, 25

³³ Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 24

any outcome, in the still to come, beyond "this 'worst' currently underway."³⁴ For, "to be 'out of joint' ... can do harm and do evil, it is no doubt the very possibility of evil. But without the opening of this possibility, there remains, perhaps, beyond good and evil, only the necessity of the worst."³⁵

As Stiegler says of tertiary retentions, which (consisting of such categories as "archives, recordings and technical reproductions") can also be understood as degrees of writing in general, "any tertiary retention ... is a *pharmakon*."³⁶ In his essay, "Plato's Pharmacy" Derrida says that "Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this 'medicine,' this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence."³⁷ The writing inaugurated by the age of Coronavirus, then, in every way, acts with the ambiguity thus described. First, it is a medicinal response to a global pandemic which attempts to reduce the body count of said pandemic. In relation to shelter-in-place protesters, it acts "through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws."³⁸ In much the same way that the written text had brought Socrates out of his proper place in the city, so Coronavirus response measures have induced behaviors in many middle class conservative Americans which they would normally abhor.

As such, the harm/benefit of writing in the age of COVID-19, i.e., Zoom meetings, social distancing protocols, and masks cannot so simply or finally be determined. As Stiegler says, despite the disruption of digital tertiary retentions, "the new *pharmakon* that arose with *digital* tertiary retention brought with it new opportunities."³⁹ Instead, it is "the prior medium in which differentiation in general is produced ... it is the difference of difference."⁴⁰ Thus, while the desire to reopen the economy, to resist the mask, or to prematurely return to face-to-face learning despite the threat of the ongoing pandemic seems to represent a resistance to the disjointure of time that seeks only to embrace the worst abuses of a neoliberal order in decay, and the writing/*pharmakon*/supplement which "the disappearance of that face is the movement of difference which violently opens writing or ... which opens itself to writing and which writing opens for itself" contains all the ambiguity of the harmful with the beneficent. It is deconstructive thinking that opens a path beyond the worst through the crisis of which the pandemic is only a part.⁴¹

Thus, the potential pitfalls and benefits of these forms of socially distant communication correspond to Derrida's question regarding justice: "is this day before us, to come, or more ancient than memory itself? If it is difficult, in truth impossible, *today*, to decide it is precisely because 'the time is out of

³⁴ Stiegler, 25

³⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 34

³⁶ Stiegler, 24

³⁷ Derrida, Jacques. "Plato's Pharmacy." In *Post-Structuralism, Deconstruction, and Post-Modernism*, 429–50, n.d. 429

³⁸ Derrida, Jacques. "Plato's Pharmacy." 429

³⁹ Stiegler, 24

⁴⁰ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 443

⁴¹ Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 446

joint.”⁴² Ultimately, however, this urge to reopen the economy and resume face-to-face learning, much like Rousseau’s dream “of the simple exteriority of death to life, evil to good, representation to presence, signifier to signified, representer to represented, mask to face, writing to speech,” points to an originary presence that never really was, to a source that was always already a supplement.⁴³ Thus, by longing for an impossible past, for a freedom in the proximity of speech in a neoliberal Eden that never truly obtained, over and against these new norms of writing, and instead of engaging with and “thinking writing beyond good and evil,” we foreclose the possibility for a best-case-scenario still to come.⁴⁴

⁴² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 25

⁴³ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 343

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 342