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BOOK PROFILE: *TRANSMITTING CULTURE*

A profile of Régis Debray, *Transmitting Culture*. Translated by Eric Rauth. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 155 pp. \$22.00 (paper). ISBN 0-231-11345-5.

DEGRAY OPENS HIS STUDY with a distinction between communication and transmission. Communication is a transport through space while transmission is transport through time. The diachronic movement of ideas is, however, not conditioned by mechanical or technical processes. Unlike communication which depends on communication machines—from the telephone to the World Wide Web—transmission has a more invisible mode. Ideas link bodies of people together into communities. Though transmission involves acts of communication, it is a degree higher than mere movements of messages. The corpus of knowledge is often transmitted as symbol or image. Mediology sets out to explore the ‘milieu or middle ground in the black box of meaning’s production’ (7). This does involve a study of the ‘corporatist’ component (service staff) and the material embodiment (technologies of memory). But transmission is more than just this committing to memory—it is the creation of a system of signs and symbols. Organized matter and materialized organizations interact to create the ‘medium’ of transmission.

Debray goes on to look at the historical modes of mechanical reproduction and communication—from the orthographic Athenian model to the creation of a public space of communication. Cultural transmission in America, argues Debray, focuses on performance rather than ideology—focusing on the basics of communicative devices and assuming the political neutrality of the medium of emission. Transmission can never be delinked from its technological and organic mediums. Debray then moves on to look at a ‘traditional’ medium of doctrine transmission: the invention of transmission modes in Christianity. Debray notes that angels functioned as messengers. The transmission of the very idea of the divine, demonstrates Debray, depends on the invention of the angel and the demon. Mediology is therefore an ‘angelology’.

With the Renaissance *technē* splits into technology and artistry. Debray’s

mediology locates the crisis of human identity in this break between the 'technologic crust of the human species ... and the underground mantle of cultures' (46). What is needed, urgently, is a mediology that accounts for both sides of the transmission spectrum. Debray thus rejects McLuhan's reduction of all transmission to the medium of communication and the sociologist's focus on identities and cultural formations. It is not possible, he proposes, to choose between technicism and culturalism since their interdependence in the transmission of culture is undeniable. Debray therefore favors Roger Chartier's mode of locating what he terms 'attitudinal gradualism' (50), where changes in behavior preceded and anticipated the technological change. Local and national structures and systems condition technological change. Technology is rooted in ethnicity and ethnic norms. A symbol, rooted in ethos, serves transmission as much as the technical device of memory.

A politically informed mediology will need to look at cultural validation of technology—the examples Debray uses include the spacing of the museum—and the *symbolic* operation of a technical product or image.

Debray's is a cautionary tale of neglecting technology in favor of culture and of glorifying technological efficiency over ethno-cultural contexts. His emphasis on image-making and symbolic operations ensures that the debate over mediology is always dual—crossing back and forth between technology and culture, machine and memory. The examples from history—the transmission of faith, for instance—are well directed, and Debray astutely unravels the philosophical underpinnings of mnemonic and archiving devices within Christian culture. His study of iconology is thus constantly aware of the slippage *between* significations—politico-ideological, technical and economic.

Mediology, in the manner Debray envisions it, seems to be a mixture of social constructionism, the history of ideas and the sociology of media. Debray admits, at the opening of chapter Three, that there is nothing novel about his project. This is proved conclusively throughout the book, since much of what Debray is saying has been said, with far greater degrees of reification (methodological and ideological) by several cultural critics from Raymond Williams through Stuart Hall to Eugene Thacker. Philosophers of science like Bruno Latour and scholars of scientific rhetoric (I am thinking here of a work like Dwight Atkinson's *Scientific Discourse in Sociohistorical Context*, 1999) have constantly underscored the intersecting cultural, ethnic, economic and iconographic 'bases' of the transmission of culture. Eugene Thacker's recent study of genetic science and media (*The Global Genome*, 2005) is as much about scientific image-making as the technology. Thus Debray does not either surprise or stimulate us with 'mediology', and *Transmitting Culture* falls

between commentary and critical analysis.

REFERENCES

- Atkinson, Dwight. *Scientific Discourse in Sociohistorical Context: The Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, 1675-1975*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999.
- Thacker, Eugene. *The Global Genome: Biotechnology, Politics, and Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005.

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