Chapter 2

Behind the Mirror:
General Theories of the “Mass Media”
It may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the persistence of this semblance of persistence provides it with continuity.

—Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*
In the many mediated worlds that we inhabit, the nature of information we receive as “news” has an important bearing on our individual senses. “News” when generated by the “mass media” is repetitive, spectacular, and in most cases isomorphic with the structures and patterns of information that the state and other important wielders of power find comfortable and decide to share about the contemporary, the past, and the future worlds. Divorced in most cases from the contexts that generated them and their physical groundedness, the information packed as “news” are often considered as actually existing; these somewhat resembling the pure lines of Euclidean geometry or the simple forms of physics one learnt back at school, that is, with “other things remaining constant”. From apoplectic stimulus-response triggers to delayed cogitative resonances, “news” circulated through the “mass media” informs, but importantly, naturalizes people, institutions, societies, and events as one often tends to hypostasize the existence of the “real” from the information processed. This hypostatization is not always without fissures and break-off points: the processes of everyday newsmaking which swears on the telling of truths “for all, on behalf of all”, a myth in itself, is not forever in congruence with the insouciance or the intense involvement that individuals have with life and reality at large, whatever be the nature of their sources and informants. But even when there is an increasing suspicion that the “mass media” cannot always be trusted as sources, this realization often becomes inconsequential. This is partly because knowledge acquired through the information machines of the “mass media” merges together as if of its own accord into a self-reinforcing and standardizing frame of universal background reference
presupposing certainty, and when this standardizing frame is further strengthened and naturalized by the continuous flow of (mostly) establishmentarian “news” that shapes the future and the present and reshapes the past every day. The Marx-inspired way of proceeding through “doubt(ing) everything” offers little solace here. The doubting of anything becomes impossible unless one takes refuge in recognizable tropes (once again mediated) which then become the starting point for our doubt.¹

Therefore, it follows, even if all knowledge formed out of the circulation of “news” by the mass media systems were to carry a statutory warning as in cigarette packs that they were open to possibilities of doubt (and perhaps cancer), some of that still would have to be used as a foundation, a referral, and a starting point for empirical searches, and even for critical ontological and philosophical reflections on the mass media.² Even with that, the contents (and effects) would have easily been contemplated, and/or made subjects of broader and divergent theoretical, historical or sociological reflections, however partial, distorted, or incomplete they may be. These mostly would have taken the form of critical content analyses—either questioning the entropic generation of reality by the “mass media” (but always a reality not subject to consensus), or reading brainwashing, subversion or empowerment in media audiences in their everyday acts of consumption.

Mostly, it is the analysis of generated content that clouds an understanding of the media. In many situations, the so-called mirroring of “reality” by the “mass media” that is in fact a hypostatization also becomes a recognition granted to the “mass media” at the cost of reality, and even when serious charges of distortion are brought against them.3

But what lies, so to speak, behind the “mirror”? This chapter tries to understand that by looking at the “theories” and observations of a few thinkers of the twentieth century who have critically engaged with the “mass media”, and who have thought with proper focus on the materialities of mediation itself. The purpose is not to exhaustively review the literature on this subject, nor to outline a coherent corpus of works or a linear trajectory of thought. Rather, it is to find what historical hindsight allows us to consider relevant in past intellectual attempts to understand “mass media”, beyond an analysis of their mediated content, and how, in turn, they can help us better understand media spaces in the context of media technologies, especially when we try to approach newspaper production in complex social spaces such as India.

As they engaged with the powerful and privileged “mass media” and their often exclusivist activities of cultural production, distribution and audience formation,

3 Consider, for example, the title of one of the most powerful critiques of the Indian print media industry in the seventies: India’s Monopoly Press: A Mirror of Distortion by Sumanta Banerjee (New Delhi: Indian Federation of Working Journalists, 1973). The reference to the press as a “mirror of distortion” also contains an assumption on the possibility of the “mirror” as being accurate in its signalling of reality, if only through variations in the orientation of the mirror. In other words, the “mirror” derives function from the certainty read in its use: either as something repressive or emancipatory. But this certainty is in itself problematic, as we have seen above.
each of the thinkers discussed in this chapter (and not only because they all belong to the North) have been identified and read both as populists and elitists—Harold Innis (and Marshall McLuhan) from North America, and Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Ellul from western Europe; in different ways, most of them have criticized (or, in modest terms, subject to doubt) for being what their readers from the times and spaces they occupied thought them to be. Their lives and thoughts, too, have been etherized and dissected manifold times under different coloured skies and on different tables, in different contextual readings their supposed cadaveric secrets long since laid bare; and more recently, they are open to further and intense inspection in the published works of the new media theorist whose critical act, in most cases, consists of reading subversion and/ or empowerment (and in rare instances, distortion) in each mass-produced consumable produced by the global culture industry.

Although considered of less import in the context of the “new media”, most of these thinkers are rarely left undisturbed in their real or imagined graves. They continue to make their appearances in contemporary media discourse as the eccentric, faulted, and “old” prophets of the Old Testament prefiguring the coming of “new” and angry Christ-like figures who would chase invisible Pharisees at the temples and supermarkets, meditate on the “existence” of deserts and wars, and declare all older views as irrelevant. Since the exposition of the mystery (or the magic) of the “mass media” for the present is of less concern to our
context, I have consciously tried to stay away from these contemporary discussions, with a certain degree of scepticism in mind.

This chapter also foreshadows concerns that will reappear in the later chapters; hopefully, with a willingness to connect the dots over a broad range of observations that see media spaces intrinsically connected with the materialities of production.

In the present day mediatized environment that we live in, or, after what in media studies circles is popularly lauded as the arrival of a new network society (courtesy Manuel Castells) of which “informationalism” is the new watch-word,⁴ reference to older critiques of the “mass media” is considered symptomatic of a researcher’s bipolar disorder: old ideas must be done away since the new age requires newer critical contemplations with no reference to the old. I differ.

I believe that there are major and important insights to be had, and that theories are long standing ideas that do not fade away that easily. The titular word “general” is, therefore, deceptive.

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⁴ The technological paradigm of “informationalism” which inaugurates a new social structure called the “network society”, according to Castells, qualitatively “sets it apart from historical experience” in terms of its processing capacity, apart from other factors. This is because Castells feels that the new technologies shaped by the “revolutions in microelectronics, software, and genetic engineering” have the capacity to “self-expand their processing power because of their recurrent, communicative ability” [See Manuel Castells, “Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: A Theoretical Blueprint,” in The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective, edited by Manuel Castells (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2004), 3-45]. However, Castell’s attribution of sui generis self-expansion (and uniqueness outside history) to technologies is not altogether new, at least in the history of human thought on technology; something that I intend to discuss in detail later.
1. Harold Innis and the notion of “Bias”

Harold Innis (1894-1952), historian, philosopher, a sociologist of the media with particular interest in the economic history of knowledge, was a Canadian thinker who tried to approach media spaces with a focus on the materiality of the medium used in communication. For Innis, this was necessarily historical, and closely linked to an understanding of the embedded nature of what he characterized as the “bias” of civilizations and cultures in the medium/ media they used for communications.

In this section, I will first try to outline Innis’s notion of “bias”, and then move on to glean insights from his specific observations on the newspaper as a medium. We can note a difference in the usage of the word “bias”. “Bias” when used in connection to the media usually ends up referring to the slant of some news to suit certain political and socio-economic ends, some particular points of view unduly emphasized at the cost of the rest, or prejudices and favoritisms of media houses towards certain individuals and concerns, always propelled by motives of some kind that are not considered proper in most societies. All these ultimately tend to refer to the content carried as “news”, and/or the digressions, distortions and deviations supposedly suffered by it. Innis’s usage of the term is markedly different, he stays away from all analyses of communicated content, and tries to look beyond, to understand the “bias” of the age that its media communicate. On the surface it might appear that Innis’s usage of the expression “bias of communication” is a less ostentatious precursor to McLuhan’s expression
“the medium is the message”.\textsuperscript{5} But as I will try to highlight, Innis’s approach is deeper and more introspective.

As an economic historian, Innis made an extensive study of certain “staples” that shaped the course of the economic history of Canada under the British Empire, as he explored the routes, passages, flows, and circulations that characterized economic trade in history.\textsuperscript{6} Innis was not affable to the economics of his time and the changes economics and the social sciences tried to inculcate in themselves in the first half of the twentieth century, mostly by trying to approximate the natural sciences, which he felt led to a predilection for project-driven short-term empirical research.\textsuperscript{7} If by imitating the natural sciences, his contemporary economists concentrated more on mathematical expressions of the price system, Innis found that they did so by neglecting the social and technological conditions under which prices and conceptions of prices operated. And by the time he had moved on to research histories of communications, Innis had already developed a conscious aversion to “the penchant for mathematics and for other scientific tools which have warped the humanities”.\textsuperscript{8} By then, he had also rejected Marxism, Canadian socialism, statism and market theory,\textsuperscript{9} and felt that social investigations could

\textsuperscript{6} As James Carey observes, Innis chose this over the popular tendency of his times that made his contemporaries exclusively focus on the immediate industrial production of the factories and how to improve them. James W. Carey, introduction to \textit{Changing Concepts of Time}, Harold Innis (1952; Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), viii.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{9} As Vincent di Norcia observes: “Perhaps the problem is that Innis’ social reach implied a radically original thesis that economic factors alone cannot explain what needs explaining—the socially penetrative powers of the price system in geography and history.” Vincent di Norcia,
escape the dangers of an “obsession with the immediate” only by emphasizing a long-range approach to social phenomena.

The need was for a historical approach which looked for consistent patterns over longer periods of history. Of lesser concern was to approximate the precision of formulaic diagnoses and prescriptions of the natural sciences that he considered as impossible in social enquiry.10 This desire for a long-term approach, which grew up in sharp opposition to the measurement-management and mathematical approach to social phenomena, even more evident by the end of the twentieth century, perhaps, 11 informs the broad historical strokes Innis makes in his observations on the media—often the staple fodder for Innis’s critics.12 For Innis, who was sceptical of the sharp empirical bend of social-sciences’ enquiry, was apprehensive that the limited intellectual lifespans of the intellectual in the twentieth century was inadequate to properly utilize the vast repositories of knowledge and formulate definitive social judgements. (To him, as he says it was


10 The argument for the grounding of economic theory in history is obviously not unique to Innis. Many a critical economist has later raised questions from within the discipline on economics’ taking for granted the problems of historical contingency; c.f. Geoffrey Martin Hodgson, How Economics Forgot History: The Problem of Historical Specificity in Social Science (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).


12 For example, see John Nerone’s criticism of Innis (and McLuhan) for dealing with world-historical shifts in communication systems, and the “insistence on telling really big stories”. Nerone feels this kind of grand-narrative or speculative history follows the legacy of the West-European Enlightenment and positivist histories of cultural development that got an impetus with the rise of literacy. John Nerone, “Approaches to Media History,” in Companion to Media Studies, edited by Valdivia, 97-8.
for Graham Wallas, “the idol of the pulpit and the idol of the laboratory were hindrances to effective social judgement, arising, as they do, from the traditions of organized Christianity and the metaphysical assumptions of professional scientists.” ¹³) His almost impossible attempt to map a history of human communication is to be understood in the context of this rejection—sense could be made out only if one rejected topical speculations, and tried to understand society with a long-term historical approach, and without the “bias” that hinders objective rational enquiry about one’s own society. ¹⁴ Innis’s gradual exploration of the “bias” of civilizations and cultures in the media they have used can be read from here: from a conscious effort to look for a more humanistically-inclined perspective, one that looks for a better subject position by stepping back into the historical from the contemporary in order to have a better, critical, and historical (but not historicist) insight into the latter.

Mediation of knowledge and the “bias” of communication

The label of technological determinism is consistently applied to Innis in most communication studies literature in the sense that he supposedly considers communication technology as the sole engine of history. ¹⁵ Even when he does not

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¹⁴ As his essay, ‘The Bias of Communication’, tells us: “The bias of modern civilization incidental to the newspaper and the radio will presume a perspective in consideration of civilizations dominated by other media. We can do little more than urge that we must be continually alert to the implications of this bias and perhaps hope that considerations of the implication of other media to various civilizations may enable us to see more clearly the bias of our own.” Harold Innis, “The Bias of Communication,” in Innis, Bias of Communication, 34.

¹⁵ This is in fact more a McLuhan-inspired reading of Innis, than a reading of Innis’s own contentions, as I will later try to show.
actually do so, Innis is offered an uneasy position in the history of communication studies. As Megan Mullen observes, communication scholars and especially North American media scholars more generally look to Innis as something of a middle ground: located somewhere between David Hume-inspired behaviourist studies of the media that aspire towards the scientific, and the (sometimes) unfathomable concepts associated with European cultural studies and theories of the “postmodern”. It is to be remembered here that Innis’s discussion of the “bias” of communication starts with an important assumption, rather than an assertion.

What Innis does is to start from a simple proposition that assumes that the uses of a medium of communication over a long period of time will “to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated”, and that communications as technology have a “possible significance” in the rise and decline of cultural traits. As our knowledge of civilizations that had used less durable media (for example, societies that had used papyrus) is less formed than of civilizations that used more durable ones (cultures that had used clay tablets and stone)—considering the durability of the substances used as communication media, and also the conditions of their preservation—Innis posits that our knowledge of other civilizations (as well as that of our own) in the historical sense, is largely dependent on the character of the medium put to use by each civilization, and the way it has survived down time, or has failed to reach posterity.

Why is it, then, necessary to study the “bias” of a medium of communication considered as a medium? Innis's answer to the question runs like this: as we can historically identify that each medium is unique in terms of its material form, it follows that an assessment of a civilization based on a medium of communication necessarily “demands recognition of the significance of the peculiarities of the medium”. Historical evaluations which tend to neglect the characteristics of a medium of communication of an age—for example, that the material of papyrus was not suited to preservation over three generations while parchment made from animal hide lasted much longer, resulting in the possibilities of preservation of parchment but the disappearance of papyrus—miss the woods for the trees, or at least concentrate more on the foliage. They end up over-emphasizing historical periods and zones where durable media (as material) were used, while neglecting others which used less-durable or unknown media.¹⁸ For Innis, the notion of “bias” offers a theoretical (and at once historically-grounded) guideline for the fixing of a proper perspective without being deterministic, that is, in the absolute insistence on the medium, or in the search for a methodology proper without the rigid search for historical validation.

There is a second reason as important as the former. Innis contends that a medium is always peculiar in terms of its bias towards time and space. The formation of new ideas in a society and socio-economic changes are largely influenced by the processes of contestation between media biased towards the

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¹⁸ Harold Innis, Empire and Communications (1950; Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1986), 117.
conservation of knowledge and information over time and other media biased towards transmission and diffusion over space. Therefore, the simple identification of a medium that is the dominant form of communication in a social milieu is not enough. It is the identification of the bias in the orientation of that medium considered along with its peculiarities and its particular preoccupation with either time or space, and its relation to other media, which helps us understand society and its culture/s. At this point, Innis’s use of the term “medium of communication” perhaps merits attention. Innis uses the term to include the raw materials that constitute the medium (for example, papyrus, stone, or parchment), considered along with the instruments that were used on it to inscribe codes (for example, reed pen, quill, or iron pen) as well the form of communication embodied in that medium (for example, hieroglyphics, cuneiforms, or alphabets): “It is therefore both the medium per se, coupled with the form of communication, that predisposes the society in question to frame its knowledge of the world in particular ways.” (However, Innis does pay less attention to the scripts, codes, and hermeneutical sealings than he does to the material of the medium of communication. If scripts developed, Innis feels that they did so in relation to the material put to use for the coding.)

19 As Innis observes: “A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting.” Innis, “Bias of Communication,” 33.
20 Heyer, Harold Innis, 63.
21 For example, he locates the historical development of the Aramaic script as related to the use of parchment and the demands of an extensive land trade, and the development of the Phoenician script as moved by the demands of an extensive maritime trade for an alphabet to be used in relation to the use of papyrus. Innis, “Bias of Communication,” 33.
As each medium of communication arrives with its intrinsic emphasis on time and space, it is necessary, according to Innis, to understand the characteristics of a medium in order to know its bias towards space or time, since it sheds more light on the nature of the culture in which it is embedded, and how information passing through this medium transform into systems of knowledge not at all at odds with the power structures of that society but mutually reinforcing. Innis observes that civilizations that used media with bias towards time—those that are heavy, durable and less easy to transport (for example, stone and clay tablets)—were centralized in terms of administration and more tradition-bound, hierarchical, and communitarian. In contrast, civilizations using media with bias towards space—those that are light, less resilient to time and can be easily transported (for example, papyrus, the parchment-codex, paper)—are characterized by a decentralized administration that spreads across great distances, complex forms of authority, secular institutions, abstract and technical forms of coded knowledge, and less communitarian. Thus, in the “theory” of media that Innis proposes, the bias of media towards time or space first corresponds to the form of society in which it occurs: it is not that a medium with its bias towards time or space creates its own corresponding civilization, as it is commonly inferred.

A medium with the peculiarities of its material form suits the needs of a civilization which looks for means to express itself and only then the civilization ends up adapting the new characteristics of the medium to suit its ends, and takes steps so that the material is readily available as before to suit the increasing need
for communication. In the case of older media with a distinctive bias towards time, Innis notes, the nature of the medium was instrumental in the association of the sacred with the medium, and importantly the preoccupation with control over non-linear time through rituals, seasonal cycles, and ritualized usage of the (magical) medium, and the creation of centralized empires and civilizations with ruling groups of élites who had exclusive access to the sanctioning, making and dissemination of knowledge and the language used for the medium. With the coming of media biased towards space, observes Innis, there are corresponding changes; perhaps the most decisive change is that the preoccupation with non-linear time is replaced by an obsession with conquests of geographical space and the notion of progression through a linear time, and all the cultural accoutrements that come with it. Accordingly, a civilization is stable if it reconciles a proper balance between the concepts of space (in the territorial sense) and time (in the durational sense); it collapses if this balance gets disturbed.

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22 A “soft” kind of media determinism: only if we really have to resort to the two categories of media determinism outlined by Paul Levinson. According to Levinson, the “hard” kind of media determinism insists on communication technologies as having “an inevitable, irresistible social (or other) effect” on societal formation; the “soft” kind only hints at the possibilities of influence: “they make events possible—events whose shape and impact are the result of factors other than the information technology at hand.” Paul Levinson, The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution (1995; London and New York: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 1-10.

23 This is not to suggest that this also expands and contributes to the philosophy of language upon which the discursive turn rests by virtue of the focus on the materiality of communication media rather than the manifest content of language, as Ian Angus also argues. Ian Angus, “The Materiality of Expression: Harold Innis’ Communication Theory and the Discursive Turn in the Human Sciences,” Canadian Journal of Communication 23, no. 1 (1998), http://cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1020/926 (February 2, 2010).

24 Though Innis never shows a clear awareness of Walter Benjamin’s writings, it is at this point he comes close to Benjamin’s reflections on the decline of the “aura”.

Intertwined with the concept of space and time “bias” in a medium, and adding force to it, is Innis’s appraisal of the formation of “monopolies of knowledge” that are influenced and shaped by the use of a particular medium. An understanding of it is a bit difficult since Innis consciously stays away from attempting a formal definition (or theory, so to speak) of what constitutes “monopolies of knowledge”. Instead, he concentrates more on how they develop or decline in history, quickly sweeping across one historical period to another to outline the development of “monopolies of knowledge”. However, if we choose to ignore this (indeed problematic) grand historical sweep for the moment, and also care to ignore the need for rigid definitions, we can perhaps gain some insight here.

We can see that Innis identifies an important ground that marks the appearance and aspirations of a new media technology. Because “monopolies of knowledge” are always formed in relation to a medium of communications, the historical appearance of a new medium especially when it intersects and overlaps on the communicative spaces of the old is always connected to the fusion it tries to achieve with previous communicative practices than attempt a distinction.

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25 The following paragraph from his book *Empire and Communications* might serve as an example of Innis’s characteristic historical sweep: “Monopolies of knowledge had developed and declined partly in relation to the medium of communication on which they were built, and tended to alternate as they emphasized religion, decentralization, and time; or force, centralization, and space. Sumerian culture based on the medium of clay was fused with Semitic culture based on the medium of stone to produce the Babylonian empires. Egyptian civilization, based on a fusion of dependence on stone and dependence on papyrus, produced an unstable empire which eventually succumbed to religion. The Assyrian and Persian empires attempted to combine Egyptian and Babylonian civilization, and the latter succeeded with its appeal to toleration. Hebrew civilization emphasized the sacred character of writing in opposition to political organizations that emphasized the graven image. Greek civilization based on the oral tradition produced the powerful leaven that destroyed political empires. Rome assumed control over the medium on which Egyptian civilization had been based, and built up an extensive bureaucracy, but the latter survived in a fusion in the Byzantine Empire with Christianity based on the parchment codex.” Innis, *Empire and Communications*, 166.
Historical evidence, too, suggests that—parchment as a medium at first tried to approximate the papyrus, the early printed books of the incunabula and beyond tried to approximate the manuscript codices of the medieval scribes, the keyboard of computerized word processors tried to approximate the keyboard of the mechanical and electronic typewriters, and so on. “Revolutionary” is a word often used to describe these arrivals, though a view beyond the metaphor shows that it is more of a symbolic attribution by posterity.

The important point here is that new media technologies never appear out of the vacuum; historically they never have had started with the intentionalist idea to revolutionize communication, that is, try to “turn the world upside down”. New media technologies always start from an approximation of the old, and the desire to approximate has a connection to profit, either material or symbolic. Objectionable though this may seem to puritanical pursuers of knowledge, the coming of print to Western Europe was fanned by the desire to make accurate and effective copies of the manuscript books—a desire less shaped by a (simulated or otherwise) noble intention to make “revolutions” than to copy better than the expert copyists of the guilds, for profits were dependent on making exact but cheap reproductions of expensive manuscripts. This is not to suggest changes or transformations do not take place, and that all new media technologies are merely extensions of the old, or even the oldest communicative medium, the body—an idea championed at one point by another Canadian thinker on communications media, Marshal McLuhan. For Innis, though, the distinction that appears in the
subsequent cultural usage of a new medium is shaped more by the nature of the medium of communication, whereas its historical intention at its inception as technology has always been to approximate, improve on, and amplify what had been the characteristic of the old. If power élites of the old medium monopolized on the processes by which knowledge was communicated—the appearance of new media on the fringe zones of its control challenges this monopolization over knowledge; not as a challenge per se, but a challenge nevertheless. Innis observes that this gradually morphs into a contest in the social arena which has important implications for the future character of knowledge.26

If printing in Europe had started with the desire to make accurate copies of manuscript books, at the same time, the condition of what McLuhan later called the inauguration of “lineality” by print technology later took shape in the Reformation, particularly with Martin Luther's popularization of the sensus literalis of the printed text (in his case, the Scriptures) that upset older interpretations shaped by manuscript culture, orality, traditions, power, and transcribed forms of knowledge monopolized by the Roman Catholic church. But

26 Again this is more of an observation than the outlining of a “method”. In an postmodernist evaluation of Innis as a Canadian media theorist, Arthur Kroker draws on the contemporary to devise an Innisian “method” for the studying of the technological habitat: “(l)ts ontology is the problem of technology and culture as radically dualistic; its epistemology is focussed on the hermeneutical problem of running outside and alongside cultural discourses which are not our own; its aesthetic lay in the recovery of a creative tension between the bi-polar tendencies to “time” and “space” in modern communications; its politics were directed against the formation of “monopolies of knowledge” and on behalf of the pluralistic universe of civil discourse; and its social ecology was focussed on the study of the multiple “adaptive strategies” by which the capitalism of the Old World was imposed on the new continent” (Kroker’s emphases). Arthur Kroker, Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant (Montreal: Ctheory Books and New World Perspectives, 2001) 109-10. Kroker’s formulations try to systematize Innis’s observations into a rigid “theory”: a systematization Innis himself was very much against.
in another historical epoch, it is also observable that Enlightenment rationality put
to use print as a vehicle to challenge this very dogma of the literal text and literal
reading championed by Luther; the “lineality” of print was challenged much
earlier than McLuhan had suspected—that is, a century and a half before humans
dreamt of androids and electronic sheep, communication, and electronic
communion—and that through print itself. As Innis contends, it is in the course
of this contest that a new medium make an effort to assert its newness, something
that is once again stimulated by its characteristics as a material medium with its
bias towards propagation in space or time, and which in turn, influences the
balance of the “culture” in which the new medium arrives. This contest is often
dialectical (though Innis never uses the word); but not necessarily always following
a progressivist pattern.27

What does Innis contribute to media research?

Primarily, Innis’s theoretical contribution is the conception of “bias” inherent in
the material media that helps us in identifying our own historical prejudices in the
search for objectivity.28 For Innis, there is a fundamental instability implicit in the

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27 It also deserves noting that Innis’s choosings here are decidedly humanist: he admits that his
sympathies are with the oral cultures of the ancient Greeks, than with the “inevitability” of
civilizational forms that followed in human history, and precisely the ones that allow these sympathies
only limited values in historical curiosity.

28 I borrow the term “prejudice” from Gadamer’s explorations of the object of knowledge in
hermeneutic theory where Gadamer contends that sensitivity to the object of inquiry must, from the
start, be a questioning of things. According to Gadamer, this sensitivity should be such that it
recognizes no content as neutral, and at the same time, remains conscious to the fact the inquiring self
in setting the terms of inquiry appropriates, validates or negates one’s own fore-meanings and
prejudices which are mostly shaped by the location of the “flickering” individual self in a tradition; the
tradition itself shaped by history, social conditioning, and the state. “The important thing is to be
aware of one’s own bias,” says Gadamer; where one’s “prejudice” rests in the provisional judgement of
the inquiring self “before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined.”
development of high-speed communicative media in the modern world that is used to build a space-oriented and consumption-driven society. His engagement with “bias” of the history of communications is only to identify traits than to formulate laws; his intention is to “trace the implications of the media of communication for the character of knowledge and to suggest that a monopoly or an oligopoly of knowledge is built up to the point that equilibrium is disturbed”. 29

Again, this is a suggested point of view rather than an assertion. As discussed earlier, Innis engages with history more to identify traits rather than to formulate principles; it is an engagement with history only to have an historical (but not historicist) approach informing the understanding of the present, still influenced at large by the newspaper. Thus, a grasp of the notion of “bias” and the formation of “monopolies of knowledge” that accompanies each media as technology have important implications for intellectual attempts to understand media spaces, and questioning assumptions that creep in once the nature of the media of an age appear invisible to its present.

The second contribution of Innis follows directly from his identification of the space-time bias of media and the formation of “monopolies of knowledge”: he restores to media criticism the often forgotten idea that media are material conveyances that convey information through time and space and that the understanding of media history is almost impossible without an adequate

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29 Innis, “Bias of Communication,” 34.
historical understanding of the role of the materials that constitute the physical media. Here we can briefly consider the insights that Innis offers on the newspaper as a historical medium. For Innis, the present was a period in the early twentieth century which was dominated by the newspaper as the principal medium of communication of the age which had started facing competition from a new rival: the radio. Innis sees the newspaper as instrumental in shaping the “bias” of modern societies, but refrains from detailing its historical characteristics on the ground that “(w)e are perhaps too much a part of the civilization which followed the spread of the printing industry to be able to detect its characteristics”. However, if he did consciously choose not to judge the newspaper as a historical medium, he made some important observations on the roles it played and continues to play in modern societies.

According to his criterion of evaluation, Innis identifies the newspaper as a medium biased towards propagation in space rather than in time. Historically, cultures and societies corresponding to space-biased media have shown a tendency to make expansive attempts in the geographical sense, and in the course of these expansions, they have attempted to spatially reconstitute the sense of historical time by dismantling it into uniform, measurable lumps of time that are at the same time discrete, and can be accorded functional value, if not recoverable, then beneficial if conveniently treated under the laws of profit. If not in absolutely

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30 Innis did not live to see the ubiquity of television-mediated knowledge; it was a month after his death from cancer that television made a full-fledged appearance in Canada in December 1952. Heyer, *Harold Innis*, 67.

similar terms, the newspaper as a space-biased media too derives its existence from its ability to separate portions of time it earmarks as yesterday's and those that it decides or identifies as belonging to today: the profitability depending on conditions of the “freshness” of yesterday's or today's news. From the second half of the nineteenth century, Innis locates, the strategy of the newspaper to promulgate its space-bias has been to press into service “every conceivable device to increase circulation”—the exploitation of cheap newsprint, cheap composition through mechanical devices following the linotype, the symbiotic relation of newspapers with the extension of railroads, telegraph posts, and post offices, the trans-Atlantic and other cable networks, express systems, literacy, and even aviation lines and the radio. And he identifies: “Speed in the collection, production and dissemination of information has been the essence of newspaper development.”

In contest with other space-biased media such as the radio and the television, it is this ability to create nearness in space in terms of sizeable and accessible portions of events and issues yesterday's or today's time that the newspaper's space-bias is challenged by the newer media. It is this contest which had once created conditions of hostility between the newspapers and the radio when the newspapers had tried to monopolize their control over spatial dissemination of information by trying to influence the state to stop the radio from breaking the “news”. This does not follow as a mere topical observation. As outlined earlier, we find that Innis in his historical explorations of the

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development of print from 1500 to 1950, discerns a pattern of increasing mechanization and also an increasing monopolization, in the respective fields of the newspaper’s component technologies: ink, moveable type, the press and paper; the latter particularly becoming cheaper and cheaper with the passage of time.33

Four contentions emerge from here. The first of these points to a complex relation between the newspaper and the state. Disproving the popular romantic myth of the origins of the newspaper as a rebel on the side of social change, Innis shows that historically the newspaper grew in a restrictive space defined, licensed, and nurtured by the church and the crown, and later solely by the state. If in England the reporting of domestic news in print was allowed only after the civil war (when printing was subsidized by the demands of political factions for domestic news), in the colonies, newspapers from the beginning grew in close support from the post office and the government’s needs for printing communiqués. Within their boundaries defined, newspapers sometimes did press for change of those in control of the government. But this pressing for change, in most cases, was propelled by the need to have better facilities as commercial enterprises, than to argue for emancipation for all. In Innis’s reading, what the newspapers’ search of prospects for change historically point at is the accentuation of “the bitterness of journalism between those in control of government subsidies and those who hoped to control them”.34 An understanding of the newspaper business is

therefore incomplete without understanding the relationship of the newspaper to the policies of the state which taxes and controls it, but also grants it its legitimacy.

The second contention follows from the first: there is the need to view newspapers historically as commercial enterprises which agree to profit above everything else, and the greater need to understand advertising in the press in the context of the historical participation by the press in the advertising business.

The third contention is that the technological aspects of news-making demand no less attention than the content carried as “news”, for they affect the character of the organizations that are supposed to be making that content. The historical differentiation of roles within the newspaper business can be identified only in respect to the technological differentiation of roles that takes place with all major changes in printing, papermaking, news collection, and distribution of newspapers, with respect to the historically discernible pattern of mechanization. Only then can we understand why the printer in control of the press till the first half of the eighteenth century loses out in the latter half of the same century to the publisher and the journalist whose names began to appear on the newspaper’s pages, and who in some cases, went on to become editors.

The fourth contention is an extension of the third. It points out that the results of printing press technology cannot be easily separated from those of paper technology, and it follows that while investigating newspapers, an absence of
issues addressing the question of newsprint, of other things, leads to explorations of the newspaper business being rendered partial and incomplete. If the question of the role of “public opinion” crops up in most media-related queries, Innis makes us aware that this role was “determined in part by the availability of paper and the cost of printing”. In his historical outlining of the appearance of the modern newspaper, Innis deals at length to show how the introduction of woodpulp in the making of newsprint shaped not just the nature of newspapers and politics in America and Canada, but excited a host of characteristics (like the increased number of pages, appearance of the featured articles and pages in the need to fill up print space, and so on) that characterize the content and impact of the modern newspaper.

**Innis, McLuhan, and “Medium Theory”**

It is at this point we may stop to consider how Innis significantly differs from Marshall McLuhan as a thinker on the “mass media”. For most of his critics (and admirers), these dissimilarities are precisely not a problem, for both Innis and McLuhan are more or less tillers (with different sensibilities, no doubt) on the same field of “medium theory”. For them, Innis’s formulations only find further confirmation in McLuhan’s famous assertion:

> All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched,

unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without knowledge of the way media work as environments.  

However, I believe that this resemblance also becomes a starting point for the recognition of their differences. I find that the almost exclusivist insistence of the perspective of the “Medium is the Message” for both Innis and McLuhan is both problematic and reductive for an understanding of what Innis tries to insist on about the media of communications. This exclusionist perspective is in part due to McLuhan’s reading of Innis: most of the posthumous intellectual appreciation of Harold Innis as a theorist of the media is without doubt influenced by the glamour (in the fairy-tale sense) of Marshall McLuhan, but also deeply coloured by the ways McLuhan interpreted and reintroduced Innis’s works to the world—mostly as anticipatory suboptimal formulations of what he considered his more coherent corpus (albeit presented as humble but optimal glosses). Another reason for the grouping together of Innis with McLuhan is

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36 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967; Corte Madera, California: Gingko Press, 2001), 26. This is not to suggest that I am dismissive of the similarity of Innis and McLuhan here, or the importance McLuhan attaches to the understanding of the way in which the media work as environments.

37 For representative scholarly treatment of this bundling together of Innis and McLuhan as the “first generation” of medium-theorists, see Shaun Moores, *Media/Theory: Thinking about Media and Communications* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 42-6. Even in more sympathetic treatments, the place afforded to Innis is a middle position between McLuhan and Meyerowitz as a “mediationist” in a discussion on the broadcast media, and yet again, a precursor to McLuhan’s problematization of the media as medium; see David Holmes, *Communication Theory: Media, Technology, Society* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 38-41.

38 For example, see McLuhan describing his book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of a Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962) as a footnote to the observations of Innis regarding “the psychic and social consequences, first of writing and then of printing” [Marshall McLuhan, “Media and Cultural Change,” in *Essential McLuhan*, edited by Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (New York and London: Taylor & Francis and Routledge, 2005), 83]. Innis, as we have seen, remained wary of social-consequential approaches to social phenomenon; he had a similar if not more
influenced by the pressing need felt by late twentieth century scholars of the media to identify an intellectual grouping (if not a tradition) hinging on the materiality of communication, and their carrying forward of this proud awareness to analyses of electronic texts, and in times when linguistic deliberations on the philosophic plane concerning the coded content of communication momentarily seemed to overwhelm all other considerations. This can be observed most distinctively in the perspective offered on Innis and McLuhan by Joshua Meyerowitz in his exposition of “Medium Theory”. What is forgotten is that in Meyerowitz’s references to McLuhan and Innis, his own concern is immediate rather than historical: his is an effort to “understand the new impact of electronic communication on social behaviour”. In his attempt to construct a bridge between “medium theory’ and sociological investigations of the everyday, that is, in ‘situations’,“ Meyerowitz finds no harm in highlighting the works of two almost contemporary theorists whom he finds stressing the need to approach communication, not from the hermeneutic play of eternally deferred signifiers emerging from the content of communication, but in an insistence on the medium (as form) put to use for communication.39 But “medium theory”, at least if we go by Meyerowitz’s definition—“the historical and cross-cultural study of the different cultural environments created by different media of communication”40— is too wide-ranging an approach to be considered a unificatory “theory” (the title

distrust of interpretation bordering on psychological themes, and which were perhaps his grounds for not participating in the Toronto School of Communications.


40 Ibid., 16.
of this chapter notwithstanding) to reconcile two thinker whose concerns, if they appear similar, also differ significantly.

In McLuhan’s evaluation, Innis was a “genius” but who was “technologically blind” at times. And it is a matter of surprise to McLuhan that, with regard to modern communications like the radio and electric technology, Innis fails to “make a structural analysis of the modalities of the visual and the audible” but views them “as extensions of the patterns of mechanical technology”: “(i)t had not occurred to Innis that electricity is in effect an extension of the nervous system as a kind of global membrane.”\textsuperscript{41} This also forms part of one of McLuhan’s central tenets on the media: the notion of media as extensions of “man”. Meyerowitz observes that McLuhan adds this notion of “sensory balance” to Innis’s concepts of information monopolies and media biases. True, McLuhan’s approach does expand on Innis’s observation that the “discovery of printing in the middle of the fifteenth century implied the beginning of a return to a type of civilization dominated by the eye rather than the ear”.\textsuperscript{42} But while Innis is cautious in approaching the impact of communication technologies on society, and views that only in terms of the influences these technologies as processes exert on different societal organizations and cultures, McLuhan sees them in terms of the effects they generate by impacting on the human sensorium and thought.\textsuperscript{43} For McLuhan, these effects are unidirectional—their purpose is to trigger and automate

\textsuperscript{41} McLuhan, “Media and Cultural Change”, 87.
\textsuperscript{42} Innis, "Industrialism and Cultural Values,” 138.
tendencies of prosthetic numbness (narcosis) in individuals “with the same servo-
mechanistic fidelity” with which the mythical Narcissus fell in love with his shadow.\textsuperscript{44} If wheels, canoes, and typography were technological artefacts that were extensions of the body, McLuhan argues that the pinnacle is reached where the identification of the technological media as externalities becomes impossible with the coming of electric circuitry, which becomes the extension of the body’s central nervous system, and therefore of human impulses and thought.\textsuperscript{45} And at once he feels this is a closure where the system of assimilation and (bodily) externalization followed by older media is replaced by the integration effected by the new media dependent on circuitous flow: a becoming that is at once a being, ahistorical, mythical, but always contemporary, and having no goals outside itself. The prosthetic numbness becomes unidentifiable, except in the natural manifestation of some of its effects to a contemplative thinker who, to borrow words from our contemporary world, somehow manages to unplug his mind from his body like an external hardware memory-stick and boots it without recourse to any kind of central processing unit.

In contrast, the qualification and categorization of effects is of secondary concern to Innis if it does not further relate to the understanding of communication as processes. In other words, the shifts in human cognizance—observable through

\textsuperscript{44} Marshall McLuhan, \textit{Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man} (1964; Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 41-47.

\textsuperscript{45} The obvious connection intended by McLuhan in this comparison of electric circuitry to the central nervous system is to the formation of conscious knowledge. We might observe in passing that in a different century the lack of anatomical (and neurological) knowledge made Descartes to restrict himself on contemplations about the human pineal gland.
the changing conceptions of time and space that in turn reflect the “bias” of a society to its media of communication—are best viewed, according to Innis, when mounted on a historical rather than a psychological frame. He feels that everything is absorbed through the technologies of the media, but he makes an important clarification: technologies of the media are better understood as affective. Changes in communications technology affect three kinds of changes: they “alter the structure of our interests” (the things thought about), “the character of our symbols” (the things thought with), and the nature of the community (the field of action in which thoughts germinate).”46 Therefore, what is affected is not simply the cognitive faculty in individuals using new media, their prejudices, questions and/or interests, or the becoming of the media as curious means that have lost their function in a seemingly ahistorical present.

Historically observed, media technologies affect the historical characteristics of preservation of knowledge (and the nature of knowledge) that characterizes a cultural milieu whose meaning is not fixed, and whose varied contents can be understood only on the basis of an understanding of the historical context in which its particular media as technologies of communication takes shape. As we have identified earlier, Innis always remains careful against intentionalist interpretations of his observations, and takes pain to clarify that he is in no way suggesting a monocausal approach to the media of communications. But it is what McLuhan as a theoretician of modern communications precisely attributes to

Innis: “Once Innis had ascertained the dominant technology of a culture he could be sure that this was the cause and shaping force of the entire structure.” 47

Following this reading of Innis, McLuhan becomes more interested in exploring the changes that they usher in by outweighing older media, and how they are pivotal as singular causes in changing the societies that they appeared in. 48 In this respect, at least, McLuhan on the goose quill is quite similar to Marx on the handmill. 49

Though more familiar with the Fordist system of industrial manufacture as an economic historian, Innis refrains from borrowing its terms of reference to describe communication technologies. McLuhan does that: at the risk of historical simplification, he traces the social implications of print technology as “the assembly line of movable types” (that generated “the first uniformly repeatable ‘commodity’”) only to outline the conditions of its “obsolescence” with the advent of electric automation and electronic means of communication. 50 As Paul Heyer contrasts Innis’s observations with McLuhan’s formulation of “lineality”:

47 McLuhan, “Media and Cultural Change”, in McLuhan, Essential McLuhan, 86.
49 McLuhan writes: “The goose quill put an end to talk. It abolished mystery; it gave architecture and towns; it brought roads and armies, bureaucracy. It was the basic metaphor with which the cycle of civilization began, the step from the dark into the light of the mind. The hand that filled the parchment page built a city.” McLuhan, Medium is the Massage, 48. Contrast this with Marx’s famous explanation in Poverty of Philosophy: “The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist.” Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, 1847, Marxists Internet Archive, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/poverty-philosophy/ch02.htm (February 10, 2010).
50 McLuhan, Gutenberg Galaxy, 125.
Unlike McLuhan, whose landmark study *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* argues that beginning in the fifteenth century print brings into being almost everything we associate with modernity—nationalism, individualism, the scientific method, and a visual orientation in our cultural logic—Innis sees print as extending these elements that had already been asserting themselves a century earlier.51

What is also important here is that McLuhan does not share Innis’s concern for a consistently historical approach, and that being a very cautious and anxious one, almost despondent in Innis’s individual awareness of the connection of the mass media to world wars, hysterical propaganda, and the industrial and technological logic of domination and subjugation of older worlds and cultures. As Menahem Blondheim argues in this context, historicity perhaps remains one of Innis’s most useful and inspiring messages in the study of media and communication.52 And as noted earlier, history is important to Innis precisely because it contains the lost keys to unlock knowledge in environments where, as James Carey observes, we have to remain constantly wary of the “rhetoric of the technological sublime”.53

Because of his excessive eagerness to explain his present, most of McLuhan’s discussion of older media skirts around history, and wherever he talks history, he talks it to share his elation for the present that has made history irrelevant. In Elizabeth Eisentein’s words, McLuhan seems to “take mischievous pleasure in the

loss of familiar historical perspectives”, and he ends up offering symptoms of a cultural crisis in the guise of diagnosis.54

Another difference perhaps needs mentioning. Innis’s view of technologies of communication is materialist: new media technologies are important, but historical social change is not singularly reducible to these technologies.55 In contrast, McLuhan is markedly different.

The kind of contemplative insistence by McLuhan on the medium—even if he focuses on the material transmission of information and knowledge through the media—leads to an overarching insistence on media effects visible only in terms of the totalizing tendency of the medium as message, and independent of other causes.56 It is, in other words, technological determinism in the sense that it views the “medium” as the only pertinent realm: an all-embracing and all-explaining Idea, or a “theory of everything (communicated)”.

56 Raymond Williams offers a powerful rebuttal to Marshall McLuhan in this context. According to him, McLuhan sees technology as “an arbitrarily assigned psychic function” that desocializes all media operations to the extent that they are “distinguishable only by their variable sense-ratios”, diverting attention from the intentions of the communication institutions [Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974; London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 130-131]. Williams argues for a social-historical approach to media technologies to map the middle ground between what he calls “technological determinism” (a view that sees the invention, research and development of media technologies operative in an unsocial void, and then, in interaction with society, creating new conditions of being) and the determination of a view “symptomatic technology” (a view of technology as a “self-acting force which provides materials for new ways of life”) [ibid., 6-7].
Finally, McLuhan’s desire for formulating the laws of the media, or what he calls the "phenomenology of the media"\textsuperscript{57} does not make him share the scepticism of Innis concerning “revolutions” in communications, or the “bias” of his age. It goes without saying that unlike Innis, McLuhan was deeply immersed in the communication technologies of his age. For McLuhan, “(t)wo thousand years of manuscript culture were abruptly dissolved by the printing press”(my emphasis), and now everyone should be concerned about the media of communications because all have failed to realize that the appearance of electronic televsual media has engineered a brusque closure to a “four-century span of book culture”.\textsuperscript{58}

In a way, McLuhan tries to draw attention upon the embedded nature of a communication medium with regards to Innis’s notion of its inherent “bias” towards time or space (for example, in his treatment of print) only to insist that it holds no longer true with the arrival of electronic media:

Ours is a brand-new world of allatoncenes. “Time” has ceased, “space” has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening. We are back in acoustic space. We have begun again to

\textsuperscript{57} Marshall McLuhan, Kathryn Hutchon and Eric McLuhan, “Multi-Media: The Laws of the Media,” \textit{The English Journal} 67, no. 8 (1978): 92-94. Here McLuhan provides a brief outline of his conception of the tetrad: “This approach to the media is a right hemisphere study which is analogical rather than logical, simultaneous rather than consecutive. In each technology the question is asked, ‘What does it enhance?’ and, second, ‘What does it obsolesce?’ and third, ‘What does it retrieve that had been eliminated much earlier?’ and finally, ‘What does it flip into when pushed to its maximum potential?’” (ibid., 94). For Innis, the asking of these questions, at least for contemporary media, is problematic since the “bias” of the age clouds, distorts, and often renders imperceptible the answers that may emerge.

\textsuperscript{58} Marshall McLuhan, “Joyce, Mallarmé, and the Press,” in McLuhan, \textit{Essential McLuhan}, 53. It is perhaps not inconsequential to note that in this essay, McLuhan approaches the structure of James Joyce’s novel \textit{Ulysses} as a newspaper landscape where Joyce extends the technique of newspapers to report “the coexistence of events in China and Peru from global space to the dimension of time.”
structure the primordial feeling, the tribal emotions from which a few centuries of literacy divorced us.\textsuperscript{59}

If this is a metaphor—as Paul Levinson suggests of McLuhan’s reference to the photocopier machine, now puerile by historical hindsight\textsuperscript{60}—many contemplators on the metaphor (if not the man) have often taken this for the literal. (Levinson, who indulges in a critical but also deeply sympathetic treatment of McLuhan’s major contentions in his book, tries to reformulate McLuhan’s formulations in the context of the “digital age” along this line. He offers a social-Darwinist view of media evolution where human beings act as inventors of media technologies as well as selectors of their own media environments. McLuhan’s influence is at its strongest when Levinson suggests that the choice of media environments depends on two criteria: the desire by human beings to extend their communications beyond the biological boundaries of bodily sight and sound, and the desire to “recapture elements of that biological communication which early artificial

\textsuperscript{59} McLuhan, \textit{Medium is the Massage}, 16.

\textsuperscript{60} In a passage where he discusses how internet technologies have affected publishing, writing and online reading, Paul Levinson insists that McLuhan should not be always taken literally, and refers to McLuhan’s remark on the photocopier as publisher as more metaphor than reality, and like many of his other observations, a prescient metaphor. [Paul Levinson, \textit{Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium} (London and New York: Taylor & Francis and Routledge, 2004), 120.] But McLuhan’s own words contain more a hint of the literal than the metaphorical: “Xerography—every man’s brain-picker—heralds the times of instant publishing. Anybody can now become both author and publisher. Take any books on any subject and custom-make your own book by simply xeroxing a chapter from this one, a chapter from that one—instant steal!” [McLuhan, \textit{Medium is the Massage}, 123] We can note that McLuhan’s anticipation is strikingly similar in this case to a commercial run on American television by Xerox, the company that monopolized on the photocopier business. In this commercial an old professor, who dismissively tells his students that they do not have the slightest chance to become published authors, is interrupted by a young student who stands up and rebukes him. With the coming of this electronic photocopying technology, the student says, everyone will get to publish one day [Cited in Jeff Gomez, \textit{Print is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age} (London, New York, and Melbourne: Macmillan, 2008), 183].
extensions may have lost”. But in the absence of “time”, “space”, and therefore “history” in McLuhan, it follows that there remains “no sense of place” as Meyerowitz suggests, and thus adds force to apprehensions and laments of disruption, and also supplements the hermeneutically inspired contemporary observations from the other end of the spectrum that we can no longer step outside of the global communications flows to find a solid fulcrum for critique.

This excessive attachment to the ephemerality, and/or uniqueness, of the bits of information processed through newer technologies of communication, as I have already noted in the introduction to this chapter while referring to a similar position adopted by Manuel Castells, albeit from a communication perspective, leads to an apprehension centuries old than Marshall McLuhan—the fear that technology will, in a totalitarian fashion, overwhelm the human mind’s capability to discern the “facts” from the “world”. However, it can be argued that even when

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61 Levinson, Digital McLuhan, 52. Apart from being historicist in its approach, Levinson’s explanation fails to account for why in the contemporary world, for example, social-networking sites formed on the internet by few individual entrepreneurs also try to shape the desires and aspirations of many first-time internet users who look for free music or pornography—a problem that goes beyond the scope of our present discussion.

62 With the coming of the internet, there has been a deluge of such apprehensions, laments and tears that predicted the death of the book, and therefore reading, discursive contemplation, and print literacy. For a representative example, see Sven Birkerts, The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994). But that deluge too has now been reduced to a trickle in a decade after the initial apprehensions concerning the disappearance of print have been proven wrong—the belief that the fluidity, contingency, indeterminacy, plurality, discontinuity attributed to the hypertext will quickly become organizing principles of human thought “in the same way that relativity not so long ago displaced the falling apple” [Robert Coover, “The End of Books,” The New York Times Book Review, June 21, 1992, in The New Media Reader, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2003), 709]. As a consequence, the old-as-new concern for “Print is Dead” [c.f. Gomez, Print is Dead, 2008] finds less enthusiastic takers in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

63 For a representative example, see Scott Lash, Critique of Information (London: Sage Publications, 2002). As Lash puts it: “the cultural paradigm, through which the mass media work, is one of not narrative, nor discourse, nor representation but instead information” which renders critical judgement impossible [ibid., 65-66].
these ephemeral bits of informational data get compressed for immediate reception at a point of here-and-now, the “point” has a social context for its generation, reception, reconfiguration, and one where it is understood.64

To an Innisian perspective, therefore, assertions, (metaphorical or otherwise) explorations, and apprehensions of the above kind serve as further elaborations of the “bias” of the age. As we have witnessed earlier, Innis’s view of the media of communications is not a Hegelian progression through history where the future appears bright and clear in the intentions of the technologists using the new medium of communication, and more evident in the abrupt dialectical returns of the synthesized old (as new) that negates the earlier basis of its negation (as old); all possibilities of the flight of Minerva’s owl, in Innis’s vision, are linked to conditions of its blindness—its inability to discern light during the seemingly unbiased day that forms the historical present. And it is a confused flight that takes place towards a previously unknown (and inconceivable) space only when the time is close to dusk.

2. Siegfried Kracauer and the “Mass Ornament”

If Harold Innis can be credited for drawing our attention to the importance of the medium of communication to the shaping of society and knowledge, this section highlights the equally relevant observations of a thinker on the media, Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966), philosopher of culture, film theorist, one of the foremost

64 I return to this view of totalitarian technology in the section where I discuss Jacques Ellul.
critics of the politics and society of Weimar Germany and a distant and knotty relative to the “Frankfurt School”. Kracauer makes us aware that almost all the assumptions, constants, and forethoughts we have about society at large, are influenced by the technological media.

In Kracauer’s view, not only do the technological media influence the processes of modern societalization and culture, but through a set of augmentative practices (mostly brought along by the changes of media technologies in the first half of the twentieth century), they shape, nurture, and include the entire range of spatial images that constitute a society’s collective vision of itself, and that by creating and containing a “mass culture” where there is decreasing space for individual free-thinking as in the earlier centuries. This notion is forcefully reiterated, with variations no doubt, by the two thinkers discussed in the rest of this chapter: Walter Benjamin and Jacques Ellul. In Kracauer, we find the identification of surface-symptoms of this “mass culture” becomes very important when we try to understand media technologies as environments where the technological masquerading as culture predominates by and at large. Unlike the rest of the thinkers discussed in this chapter, only Kracauer had been a consistent newspaperman for more than a decade: one who knew the intricacies of the craft, one who worked “below the line” as a cultural feuilleton for eleven years for a primarily business newspaper, and intuitive enough to know as how liberal newspapers usually react when someone causes the Reichstag to burn.
The use of the word “mass” in relation to culture, media, and importantly production, deserves some attention in Kracauer. Etymologically, the word has its possible origins in the Hebrew word *mazza* (or unleavened bread or bread dough), and which entered the Greek and Latin languages when Christianity had complex and often confusing debates on transubstantiation, and the material nature of the bread used for the ritual. In theological terms, “massa” was double-entendre: it referred both to the unformed and the formed. A sense of redemption (through divine intentions) was woven around “massa” till the nineteenth century secularized the usage of the word, and the transferred nature of this epithet, and focussed more on the possibility of it being formed, than its being as unformed.

The “mass” had stopped listening to the pulpit in the nineteenth century; but the idea of its malleability to ideas—eulogized in some cases, as in the favour of sans-culotte radicalism in utopian socialist thought, or condemned in most cases, because of its hostility to public order or individuality in terms of its deplorability as the “rabble”—was something that was further open to exploration by thinkers of diverse persuasions. In Kracauer, the “mass” retains that secularized nineteenth-century sense of the malleable, but is also something that further lacks the sense of a collective. It is a group that is rendered incapable of definitive identities, except in terms of the disfigurement caused by a complex of technological formations which Kracauer, a journalist with a fascination for powerful images, calls the “mass ornament”.

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66 Ibid.
If the journalistic origins of Kracauer’s writings is often referred to alongside his enunciations on culture and society, less attention is attached to the fact that the majority of his writings have their roots in feuilleton columns—the ruled-off extinct portions at the foot of early newspapers, devoted to fiction, criticism, light literature, reviews, personalized reflections of wanderers under arcades and to soup kitchens for the dispossessed in urban city spaces, and reviews that roughly correspond in terms of content to the rapidly disappearing arts and culture review sections of a modern newspaper, that is, if those can be now visualized as spreading across the entire page at the bottom in the absence of a front-page advertisement, and occurring in every page like the anchor piece in terms of its placement. The feuilleton in which Kracauer wrote appeared on the lower third of the cover and subsequent pages in every issue of *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*—a daily newspaper in Weimar Germany where Kracauer took up work as a salaried writer in 1924 after failing to find consistent work as an architect after the First World War.67 It was here, below the single line impressed on paper by the groaning

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67 Kracauer took up work with *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*, at the age of thirty-three, after some unsuccessful attempts to live as an architect. He became the editor of the newspaper’s arts section in 1921, an engagement that was to last for eleven years. *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*, founded in 1856 by a Jewish banker and politician Leopold Sonnemann, was read more for its coverage of business and economic news in Weimar Germany. Most of the newspapers in Weimar Germany having major circulation were published from Berlin; *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* was an exception that it was published from Frankfurt, but it had its own visibility inside and outside Weimar Germany—it printed four editions each day (three local and one national), and numerous special supplements. In political terms, *Die Frankfurter Zeitung* was a liberal bourgeois publication that supported the liberal Deutsche Demokratische Partei, and sometimes, the Social Democrats; it supported the the signing of the Versailles Treaty, championed the constitutional democracy of the Weimar Republic, and campaigned for the nationalization of the major branches of industries. Its liberal bias allowed the criticism of “capitalism”, unless references got too specific. After the economic crisis of 1929, the paper was rescued from insolvency by the German chemical conglomerate, I. G. Farben. This was followed by an aggressive pro-industry orientation of the newspaper, and the sacking of left-wing staff. Kracauer survived this restructuring, and anticipated some other consequences: one of the reasons he moved on to Paris. After the infamous fire at the Reichstag in 1933, Kracauer got summarily dismissed from his
linotype machine that separated the typescript of the feuilleton from the pro-
business news, politics and economic reports that filled the pages of the
Frankfurter Zeitung, that the majority of Kracauer’s critical essays were published
consecutively in a space of eleven years, from his freelance contributions in 1921
to his writings as a cultural editor for the paper’s Berlin pages from 1930 till
February 1933 when he fled to France from Nazi Germany after Hitler’s seizure
of power.

The nature and forms in which these writings were initially published—though
we refer to some of the same that were later revised and compiled by the author in
the book-form after the Second World War 68—make us aware, at the risk of
being tautological, of three things.

One, most of Kracauer’s writings were in fact journalistic, that is, propelled by the
immediacy of circumstances, and written with a sense of urgency that goes into
journalistic writings of the everyday, and importantly, shares some of the
characteristic silences that goes alongside the business of newspaper writing,
especially when one is writing for a living with a commercial newspaper. Thus,
while we have Kracauer’s explicit observations on what causes a book to succeed as
a commodity, or how the will to profit creates films sensitive to the tastes of an

job—when the liberal facade of the newspaper finally fell over in its direct capitulation to Fascism.


68 Of the 24 articles reprinted in Mass Ornament, for example, 21 are journalistic articles that first
appeared in Die Frankfurter Zeitung in the 1920s. Most of his books, too, have their direct origins in
the close study that Kracauer made of Weimar Germany in his capacity as a journalist (ibid., 4).
audience, his observation on the newspaper as a business are negligible. It only occurs when, as we will see, he talks of the “illustrated newspapers”.

Two, in the use of the feuilleton for this liberal-bourgeois commercial newspaper, instead of a left-wing journal where he could (perhaps) expand a bit more on his critique of society, Kracauer was acting according to a certain kind of political belief scoffed at by Marxist intellectuals of his time: the belief in the liberating power of the press and the power of the freethinking journalist to raise serious questions about culture in society—a view he later abandons in his life. This belief of vindicating culture in a commercial newspaper in Weimar Germany acquires a particular sense of potency if we remember the troubled times in which Kracauer was writing.

In the 1920s, the rising wave of National Socialism brought with it the belief in the inevitability of technological progress, and cultural critics insisting on the dehumanization of technology were losing fast ground to the engineers, new professionals and their ideologues in Weimar Germany who championed the civilizational benefits of the technological dream as a “cornerstone of culture” in the *Kulturnation*. In the years roughly corresponding to the publication of Kracauer’s critical essays in the Frankfurt newspaper, the Berlin newspapers were awash, as was his own newspaper, with news celebrating engineers’ attempts to make “technology the foundation and essential supporter of all culture”, and,
“progress”—attempts that anticipated and culminated in the Nazis’ championing of Zweckwissenschaft (practical or purposive science). The logic of technological triumphalism permeated the Weimar Republic, and especially in the 1920s, when Kracauer was criticising in his columns the mediated logic of cultural systematization that went along with the formation of the “mass ornament” (a concept that we explore below). Anti-intellectualism and progressivist frenzy had heightened in Germany after the Nazis captured the government in the 1930s, and most German thinkers who rejected Enlightenment reason adopted a truncated version of it, while they dreamed as eager participants the dream of the technological presenting itself as culture. Unlike the tradition of German Romanticism which was rapidly dying out, Marxism and Social Democracy could offer little alternatives: ensconced, as they were, in their own teleological dreams of liberation that would come of the advances and final collapse of industrial capitalism. To them, both inside and outside Weimar Germany, say for Brecht, Georg Lukács, or, for a Marxism-influenced theorist of faraway lands,

69 The cultural dilemma of German engineers during the rise of Nazism worked around the question: “How could technology be integrated into a national culture that lacked strong liberal traditions and that fostered intense romantic and antiindustrial sentiments?” [Jeffrey Herf, Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 155]. As Jeffrey Herf notes, it necessitated “the legitimization of technology in culture without having recourse to (or succumbing to) Enlightenment rationality” (ibid.).

70 A typical example of the ambitious attempts made in this period is an attempt to develop a philosophy of technology in terms of Kantian categories. Konrad H. Jarausch gives us the example of a Catholic doctrinaire and theorist, Friedrich Dessauer, who thought of the engineer as attempting to create a “fourth realm” of technological solutions in a “categorical imperative of technology”. Konrad H. Jarausch, The Unfree Professions: German Lawyers, Teachers, And Engineers, 1900-1950 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 64.

71 The Faust legend is in a way a philosophical musing on the demonic inherent in technological knowledge: the seeker in pursuing the ends to knowledge, and without the questioning of the means, succumbs to the technological urge which the German Romantics had little difficulty in identifying as the devil.
M. N. Roy,\textsuperscript{72} fascism was simply a manifestation of irrationalism borrowed out of Nietzsche, “medieval Prussianism”, and still older traditions, and applied by the National Socialists to modern times. And in was in these times that the ideology of Nazism took shape in Weimar Germany in the strange crucible of “reactionary modernism”: where anti-modernist and irrationalist (and romantic) ideas resuscitated through German idealism went on to combine with the most palpable expression of means-ends rationality, that is, modern technology, and which claimed “Germany could be \textit{both} technologically advanced \textit{and} true to its soul”.\textsuperscript{73}

The third idea which Kracauer’s writing as a feuilleton provokes follows from the above. The legitimating of technology in the name of culture arises in an environment where technology (and technologies of mediation) seems the most legitimate, and where rational discussion on this legitimation is not allowed to take place. The serious nature of the writing carried in the feuilleton of the \textit{Frankfurter Zeitung}, especially when investigating new social formations in the realms of the social shaped by technological media and the legitimization of these formations—also shows that Kracauer was pursuing an agenda, albeit a philosophical one.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} In a polemic against Fascism published in 1938, M. N. Roy, one of the earliest Indian communists who later fell from favour in the Third International, observes: “The ‘National Socialism’ of Hitler is the gruesome ghost of medieval Prussianism, and Prussianism represented in what is still glorified in India as the laudable \textit{Kshatrya} virtue... The philosophy of Fascism is essentially identical with Indian spiritualism.” M.N. Roy, \textit{Fascism: Its Philosophy, Professions, and Practice} (Calcutta: Jijnasa, D.M. Library Best Books, 1938), 42-43.

\textsuperscript{73} Herf, \textit{Reactionary Modernism}, 3.

\textsuperscript{74} It was here that the feuilleton column of the Frankfurter newspaper crossed the boundaries between journalism, literature, philosophy and other disciplines, and, as Inka Mülder-Bach observes, it became “the production site of a fragmentary theory of modernity”. Inka Mülder-Bach, introduction to \textit{The
(“Those who want to change things must be informed about what needs to be changed,” wrote Kracauer in the conclusion to his feuilleton article on the book trade: “The use value of the articles we published in our series lies in their ability to facilitate intervention into social reality.”75)

The intervention into the social reality of Weimar Germany, and modernity at large in the 1920s, Kracauer believed, was to happen in aesthetic terms through true rational thought as bequeathed by the Enlightenment—wielded by the real rational individual, “who has not capitulated to being a tool of mechanized industry, resists being dissolved into space and time,” and who “certainly exists in this space here, yet is not utterly dispersed in it or overwhelmed by it”.76

Even after Adorno and Horkheimer’s raising of (self)doubts about the Enlightenment—the famous assertion at the beginning of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity,”77 or the seemingly invincible bestiality of peoples and nations that preceded it, made further vicious and cruel by different ideologies that contended for power during the Second World War—Kracauer’s faith in true reason had considerably weakened. But some of it remained, nevertheless.

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Photography, the “illustrated newspaper”,
and technology as culture

Kracauer’s observations on the newspaper as a medium is negligible; in his early writings he concentrates more on the medium of photography, while in his later writings he increasingly concentrates on film. What is important here is that the time of his writing in the Frankfurter Zeitung also corresponds to some changes in newspaper technology.

Although the modern newspaper is inconceivable without the photographic images that are lodged alongside the printed words, Kracauer’s writings are from a time when this juxtaposition was still considered as “new”; something we can have as a historical reference point when witnessing the changes in orientation of the late twentieth-century newspaper that increasingly incorporates elements from television and internet technology. So it is perhaps significant to observe that in the 1920s, the feuilleton was dying out, and one of the reasons why it was dying out was that newspapers were heavily adapting to the uses of the printed image in newspaper form, learning to approximate, cope, and ultimately expand upon the scopes offered by the then-established medium of photography and the growing popularity of the German weekly newsreel. Kracauer was conceivably the first to point out—before the word “tabloid” acquired its modern meaning in the course of the century—that newspapers that depended heavily on the printed image, compromised by doing away the close contemplation that usually goes along with print.
We can note that for Kracauer, who does not often use the word “newspaper” unless without a qualifier, the “illustrated newspaper” is always a pejorative term that he repetitively puts to use in his feuilleton articles to describe what he considers a misalliance between print with photography, especially in the context of “mass culture”. It is in his discussion on photography with respect to this concurrence; we can get strong hints of what could be considered Kracauer’s opinions on the technological media.

It is also worth observing that as a journalist who attaches close attention to the creative use of the printed word in a feuilleton column, Kracauer is not uncomfortable with the simple juxtaposition of illustrations, images and words in a newspaper, and the diminishing power of the word. His disquiet lies elsewhere. What gets missed here in most discussion on Kracauer is the fact that Kracauer is writing in response to a specific kind of technological usage of the photograph in Weimar Germany.78 After all, drawings and engravings (as pictures) had been used in newspapers and magazines for as long as the technology had allowed it, long before the invention of the daguerreotype (1839),79 and the invention of lithography in the nineteenth century had already made the mass circulation of

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78 For example, see D. N. Rodowick, Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001). In a Deleuze-inspired reading of Kracauer, Rodowick argues that since the new media have emerged with a new logic of sense- the figural—which cannot be understood through older linguistic of aesthetic philosophies, they can be approached as a historical image or social hieroglyph in which “the spatial and temporal parameters of contemporary collective life can be read as they are reorganized by the new images and new communications technologies”, thus unlocking the specific forms of historical knowledge that they communicate. However, we may observe, Rodowick does not outline the specific historical nature of the technological media Kracauer was dealing with.

79 The fixing of images to paper and the reproduction of prints was considered possible from 1840, after William Fox Talbot in England developed the calotype.
printed images possible.\footnote{According to Walter Benjamin, it was the invention of lithography in the nineteenth century that “first made it possible for graphic art to market its products not only in large numbers, as previously, but in daily changing variations”. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”, in Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media}, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Belknap Press, 2008), 20.} Half-tone reproductions of pictures and photographs (the mechanical rendering of continuous tone photographs into larger and smaller dots of ink on the printed page) had been possible since the 1880s—magazines and newspapers in Europe were regularly using them in their editorial pages even before the First World War. So the use of images and photographs in newspapers were not quite “new” to provoke such intense reactions such as we witness in Kracauer. We may observe that historically it was till the 1920s, hand engravings (drawn from photographs) and sketch art existed side by side with the photograph. The shifting bias towards photography came after. There was a different reason for this simultaneous occurrence of the hand-drawn image and the photograph drawn with light, with print favouring the former due to some reasons relating to production. Photographs did not and could not appear regularly on the papers because of the deadline problem: they had to be taken locally, or transported to the newspapers’ offices, in most cases shipped, and/or sometimes sent through the post office. The regular and diurnal recurrence of the photograph in newspapers and magazines was technologically possible, but impossible in terms of regular supplies.

The situation changed in the 1920s with the coming of the wirephoto process—a variation of facsimile technology invented by the telephone carrier AT&T in
1924, and there was change in the press situation of the northern world. Now, photographs could be transmitted anywhere through the telephone network, provided a bulky wirephoto machine, still expensive by those day’s standards, was available for scanning and translating a photograph into electrical impulses was available for use at both ends. And even though Kracauer finds this “evil” as originating from American illustrated magazines, historically it were the European picture magazines—the Illustrated London News, the Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung, and Vu in France—that lead the way in the 1920s. The newspapers followed suit. In 1935, when Kracauer was in exile from Nazi Germany, the use of photographs in newspapers received further impetus from the Associated Press’s setting up of the AP Wirephoto which started sending quality pictures to its member networks. This lead to the introduction of fully illustrated magazines, and rotogravure sections (higher quality intaglio printing devoted solely to pictures) in Sunday newspapers up until the introduction of the Sunday supplement magazines, mostly in colour, that still make their appearances in these early decades of the twenty-first century. Thus, it is the increasing use of the

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82 The best example of the displacement of the hand-drawn illustrations and engravings by the printed photograph in print magazines is to be found in the rise of the American weekly magazine Life which was released in November 1936, using bold photographs on its covers and insides as its signature-style. The magazine succumbed to the television in 1972 after severely losing on advertising revenues (Encyclopedia of Journalism, edited by Christopher H. Sterling (Thousand Oaks, California, London, New Delhi and Singapore: Sage Publications, 2009), s.v. “Photo Agencies,” 1052]. In its initial days, Life extensively put to use images by the Black Star, one of the earliest stock photography archives, formed in 1935 by three refugees from Nazi Germany one of whom, Otto Bettman, had brought along two trunks containing 25,000 photographs, prints and negatives from his Berlin photo agency. In the twenty-first century, with nearly 17 million images, it forms a part of the flagship historical archive of Bill Gates’s Corbis Corporation. Paul Frosh, The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), 36-37.
photograph through (half-tone) process engraving in the new breed of picture magazines and newspapers that Kracauer reacts against; and against the historical possibility, which he undoubtedly was aware of, of the further extension of this trend with the proliferation of the wirephoto process. (The same topicality pervades Walter Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay as well.)

Although Kracauer’s argument expands to engage with the photograph in more general terms, it is always better discussed with respect to this specific disfigurement of the textual orientation of the printed news medium that was taking place in Weimar Germany in the 1920s. (“Never before has an age been so informed about itself, if being informed means having an image of objects that resembles them in a photographic sense,” writes Kracauer. “Never before has a period known so little about itself. In the hands of the ruling society, the invention of illustrated magazines is one of the most powerful means of organizing a strike against understanding”83—an observation we might or then may not dismiss as hyperbolic and historically irrelevant.) To recognize this is to do justice to the close attention Kracauer attaches to historical specifics: to the juxtaposition of words and images in what he calls the “illustrated newspaper”, and to specific kinds of use of images that turned the nature of newspapers on their head.

In 1927—a year preceding the introduction of the twin-lens reflex camera called the Rolleiflex in Germany (a portable camera which was extensively for war-photography, apart from other purposes some of which are now recorded in some

dusty war archives), and incidentally, the same year in which the sound film makes its first appearance, and the television appears technologically possible in Vladimir Zworikin’s invention of the iconoscope—Kracauer deals at length on the function of photography as a technological medium in his feuilleton article ‘Photography’. He makes us aware that the success of a newer technological medium is most evident when older media try to blindly emulate and inculcate it in their older ways of representation: “The most striking proof or photography’s extraordinary validity today is the increase in the number of illustrated newspapers” (Kracauer’s emphases).

With the appropriation of the premises of the new medium, the older one wants to use and try them out, within the limits permitted by its technological form. But this use leads to important changes: in orientation, and in purposes of the old medium. The logic of the new medium in most cases ends up dominating the old. As Kracauer points out, the aim of the illustrated newspapers in Weimar Germany thus becomes “the complete reproduction of the world accessible to the photographic apparatus” and their method corresponds to that of the Deutsche Wochenschau, the German weekly newsreel (where a collection of photographs are strung together as real and viewed as an end in itself); they proceed to record spatial impressions and images of everything in a medium that earlier used the textual format for similar purposes. When the late twentieth-century newspaper increasingly starts resembling the television, or even later, as it suspiciously acts as

85 Kracauer, ‘Photography,’ 57.
an informant on the social-networking sites of the internet, we may note that Kracauer’s observations on the use of the photograph in the Weimar newspapers does help us in some ways in understanding why in the face of new media, newspapers respond in the same way they responded in the past.

While historicism attempts to create a temporal continuum, Kracauer insists, the photograph presents only a spatial continuum of the insignificant: “Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory images are at odds with photographic representation.” 86 Photography does not simultaneously translate the fragments existing atemporally in the memory, that is, in the context of meanings and associations that springs up in the mind when we, as human beings, remember—an antiquated photograph of someone’s grandmother, taken at one point of time in the nineteenth century, only conjures up a “disintegrated unity” of a spatial configuration that exists for a moment, with some hints of the ephemeral. 87 Unlike print, which supplements “memory images” in the process of informing (images that have definitive location in historical time, apart from their beginnings, concatenations to events and persons, and memory associations that have their distinct identities and closure in forgetting, selective remembrances, and death in human memory), Kracauer

86 Ibid., 50.
87 An observation that Roland Barthes later expands on in his musings on photography in the differentiation of the studium (the mnemonic and historical associations that spring from a photograph’s general environment, which might or might not still exist) and the punctum (the conditional, particular, and ephemeral details existing in a photograph—for example, the crinoline showing in the picture of an nineteenth-century lady, the faint smile on the face of a man who was hanged soon after the photograph was taken—that step out of the limits of the studium’s more general content). See Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography (New York: Hill & Wang, 1981).
argues that photographs put to use in illustrated newspapers, by their sheer accumulation, attempt to create a photographable present with an artificial memory. This calls for a reconsideration of the photographic image, since it goes without the “memory images” (contextual memory associations) embedded in a reality that has long since disappeared. And it leads to the creation of a false sense of the eternal where the contiguity of images systematically excludes their contextual framework available to consciousness; where “(t)he ‘image-idea’ drives away the idea”. Even when emboldened by mass reproduction and proliferation, a photographic image “gathers fragments around a nothing”, precisely because the seemingly limitless reproducibility of it through technical means prevents it to be felt and understood as human experience.

Thus, information (and memory, and therefore, history) conveyed through the printed word is replaced in the illustrated newspaper by an uninformed topicality of ahistorical images reproduced mechanically everyday that are increasingly taken for granted as reality. The end result is an acute problematization of the word

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88 The sheer accumulation of “artificial” images in Weimar newspapers has also got to do with the fact that most of the images sold to the newspapers by the Weimar news-photo agencies were shot with multiple sales in mind. Overt political imagery was discouraged in photographs “since a neutral picture had more potential to be sold to both liberal and conservative publications” [J. Abbott Miller, “Pictures for Rent: From Stereoscope to Stereotype,” in Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design, ed. E. Lupton and J. Miller (London: Phaidon, 1999), quoted in Frosh, Image Factory, 37]. Also, this fitted in with the aspirations of the Weimar newspapers most of which tried to convincingly portray themselves as parteilos (non-partisan)—according to a German press statistic of 1925, only 150 of the listed 3,168 dailies identified themselves as Social-Democratic, and the rest described their political stance as not giving any political tendency; something that stayed on till 1933 [Bernhard Fulda, Press and Politics in the Weimar Republic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 117].

89 Kracauer, “Photography,” 58.

90 Ibid., 56.
“informed”, and a technological vision of culture that society offers to itself, deprived of the function of human thought, whether collective or individual, and occurring invariably where mediated images appear limitless and “the flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory”.

**Kracauer and the “culture industry” thesis**

If media technologies cause the proliferation of mediated images over contemplation, the origins of these visions also lie, observes Kracauer, in the masses’ desire for distraction. In his more specific study of the salaried middle classes of Weimar Germany, Kracauer observes: “The mass of salaried employees differ from the worker proletariat in that they are spiritually homeless;” nothing is more characteristic of its existence than its search for distraction in a life lacking real concentration, “glamour”, and serious conversation that looks beyond the goals the individuals filling up this “mass” aspire to; the purposes of distraction being fulfilled, from time to time, by the culture industry acting as a “distraction

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91 Paul A. Taylor and Jan Ll. Harris, *Critical Theories of Mass Media: Then and Now* (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2008), 44. In their discussion of Kracauer, Taylor and Harris contend that Kracauer prefigures and anticipates Debord’s analysis of the *society of the spectacle* in the outlining of a new urban atmosphere where widespread commoditization blends with the increasingly powerful social role played by the “spectacle” (ibid.).

92 Kracauer, “Photography,” 58.

93 Kracauer, *Salaried Masses*, 88. This spiritual homelessness, of course, is inspired by the “transcendental homelessness” that Georg Lukács identifies in his *Theory of the Novel* (1920) as one of the important traits of modernity where, in real life or literary tragedy, “crime and madness are objectifications of transcendental homelessness—the homeless-ness of an action in the human order of social relations, the homelessness of a soul in the ideal order of a supra-personal system of values” [Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, (1920; London: Merlin Press, 1988), 61-62]. But as Thomas Levin observes, while Lukacs in his treatment of this “homelessness” privileges the realms of the aesthetic; Kracauer ascribes it more to marginal, quotidian phenomena [Levin, introduction to *Mass Ornament*, 15].
factory”. 94 As an example of this, he refers to the disembodied and precise
ornamental pattern formed by the dance performances of a group of militarily-
trained chorus girls—the Tiller girls; a performance where the dancers, and the
masses watching them, both disappear as individuals or people inside the group
identity of a formation which takes shape as a brutal, dehumanized social
grouping that that has no purposes beyond its own abstraction. Its dissolving of
the individuating influences of all the human beings who cease being players,
performers, and watchers is an act of exclusion of reality; the individuals inside
this group (the ‘we’ of those who have dispossessed themselves of themselves” in
the isolation of anonymous atoms95) participate in the circuits of a self-enclosed
rationality that encompasses society and culture in an ornamental world which
appears totally unmediated—the structure and the participants together forming
what Kracauer calls the mass ornament. It signifies the triumph of the mechanical
over the aesthetic, the ambiguous over the rational, and the ornamental (in the
sense of superfluous) over the human.96

94 Kracauer was the first person, as Karsten Witte notes, to detect the coming of the “distraction
factory” (a metaphor for the places where the salaried middle class spends its leisure time) [Karsten
Witte, “Introduction to Siegfried Kracauer’s ‘The Mass Ornament’,” New German Critique, no. 5
(1975): 64]. Kracauer identifies that the appropriation and monopolization of leisure time is carried
out through culture, which becomes a commodity for the precise purposes of distraction—a trend
later explored by Horkheimer and Adorno in their “culture industry” thesis.
96 It is not inconsequential that, according to Kracauer, the proclivity for ornamental patterns in mass-
produced films of Weimar Germany also finds reflection in the Nazi vision appearing in the future:
“Whenever Hitler harangued the people, he surveyed not so much hundreds of thousands of listeners
as an enormous ornament consisting of hundreds of thousands of particles.” Siegfried Kracauer, From
Caligari To Hitler: A Psychological History Of The German Film (1947; Princeton, New Jersey and
Here we arrive at a peculiar problem that is crucial to our understanding of Kracauer, and which also crops with respect to discussion on Horkheimer and Adorno’s “culture industry” thesis. Does the culture industry simply reflect the aspirations of the “spiritually homeless” masses, unbound to religion, family, kinship, and all older forms of community? Or does it create aspirations on its own in the name of the masses?

In answer, Kracauer does not put the blame squarely on the culture industry, though he notes the possibilities of formation of a “homogeneous cosmopolitan audience in which everyone has the same responses, from the bank director to the sales clerk, from the diva to the stenographer”. Unlike the significance later attached by Herbert Marcuse on the consumption of cultural consumables in an “advanced industrial society” which leads to the creation of a “one-dimensional” and homogenous social fabric, and Guy Debord’s explorations of the “society of the spectacle” where the eye meets only things and their prices—Kracauer is more concerned with the inclusive nature of what provokes the processes of their generation in the first place. For example, one of his articles, ‘The Little Shopgirls

98 As Marcuse emphasizes: “The more the rulers are capable of delivering the goods of consumption, the more firmly will the underlying population be tied to the various ruling bureaucracies.” Herbert Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society (1964; London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 46.
99 To be accurate, the author of the expression (“In the décor of the spectacle, the eye meets only things and their prices”) is more likely an unknown student protestor in the May 1968 French student rebellion who drew inspiration from Debord’s identification of the “spectacle”. In Debord’s view though, the “spectacle” cannot only be considered as an extension of commodity fetishism; it is inseparable from a new kind of enforcement for the viewer-participant-spectator-player: the enforcement of perceptual consumption as a conditional effect and expression of the spectacle. Hence, the enhanced need for détournement—which takes the ubiquitous media image as a societal constant, and attempts to subvert it. See Guy Debord, The Society of Spectacle (1967; Canberra: Hobgoblin Press, 2002), Situationist International Online, http://www.situationist.cjb.net/ (March 25, 2010).
Go to the Movies’ (1927), that dwells on the aspirations nurtured by commercial cinema, starts with the following exposition:

Films... are financed by corporations, which must pinpoint the tastes of the audience at all costs in order to make a profit. Since this audience is composed largely of workers and ordinary people who gripe about the conditions in the upper circles, business considerations require the producer to satisfy the need for social critique among the consumers. A producer, however, will never allow himself to be driven to present material that in any way attacks the foundations of society, for to do so would destroy his own existence as a capitalist entrepreneur. Indeed, the films made for the lower classes are even more bourgeois than those aimed at the finer audiences, precisely because they hint at subversive points of view without exploring them. Instead, they smuggle in a respectable way of thinking (my emphases). 100

Again, in another newspaper article discussing the book trade in 1931, Kracauer indicates:

The success of a book as a commodity ultimately depends upon the book’s ability to satisfy the demands of a broad social stratum of consumers. These demands are much too general and constant for their direction to be determined by private inclinations or mere suggestion. They must be based on the social conditions of the consumers (Kracauer’s emphases). 101

These references suggest a similarity that Kracauer has with Adorno and Horkheimer’s “culture industry” thesis—the culture industry, at least in the initial moments of its generation of new cultural consumables, starts with the approximation of what it considers to be “public taste”. But, there is also a point

of difference. For Kracauer, it is not just the will to profit and the casual insouciance of the culture industry that provokes it to intentionally integrate its consumers from above, as Adorno suggests.\textsuperscript{102}

While the “mass ornament” remains an end in itself, and it is the masses who give rise to this ornament, according to Kracauer, “they are not involved in thinking it through”.\textsuperscript{103} Cultural \textit{mass production} has as its counterpart a \textit{public} that it tries to understand and fit in to its conveyor belts,\textsuperscript{104} and which it considers formed as a uniform \textit{mass} as it constantly scouts, reconnoitres, and scours the information gathered off society from its below as what constitutes its “public taste”, only if to suit the purposes of the bait. (“The manipulator depends upon the inherent qualities of his material,” he writes, “even the official Nazi war films, pure propaganda products as they were, mirrored certain national characteristics which could not be fabricated.”\textsuperscript{105}) As Kracauer seems to suggest, it is the primacy of mediation over contemplation in the masses’ search for distraction when the inclusive nature of technology (as culture) overwhelms the masses’ verification of the technological nature of mediation and the products of the culture industry, that together constitute the “mass ornament”. Thus, what Adorno calls the “general uncritical consensus” on products of the cultural industry—“advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture

\begin{footnotes}
\item[105] Kracauer, introduction to \textit{From Caligari To Hitler}, 6. Contrast this with Horkheimer and Adorno’s assertion: “In a more modern, less ceremonious style, the \textit{Fuhrer} directly orders both the holocaust and the supply of trash” [Horkheimer and Adorno, \textit{Dialectic of Enlightenment}, 129].
\end{footnotes}
industry becomes its own advertisement”—is achieved not only because of the culture industry’s self-aggrandizement; rather, it points to a deeper malady in societal spaces to which the culture industry in its selfish self-interest responds to: namely, the domination of the technological camouflaged as culture.

Another difference that Kracauer has with the proponents of the “culture industry” thesis springs from here. To both Adorno and Horkheimer, the ubiquity of consumables produced by the culture industry are manifestations of the self-destructive capabilities of rational thought bequeathed by the Enlightenment, and provides no further proof than the “mass deception” practised by the rationality of the capitalist system. Kracauer, however, provocatively asserts that capitalism’s main defect is that “it rationalizes not too much but rather too little.” He prefers to distinguish between what he calls the ratio and true reason. What Kracauer seems to suggest is that ratio (the Latin word for “reason” meaning “measure”) which once an important component of West-European rational thought which made it take pride in its own capability of measuring everything and of accepting no boundaries—for example, in the mathematician Gauss’s desire to measure

107 For example, see Adorno deploring the “pseudo-rationality” of realpolitik in a content-analysis of an astrology column of the Los Angeles Times in 1952–3, arguing that the column promotes psychological dependency and social conformism in much the same way as fascist propaganda: “Irrationality is not necessarily a force operating outside the range of rationality: it may result from the processes of rational self preservation ‘run amuck’.” Theodor W. Adorno, “The Stars Down To Earth: The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column,” in The Stars Down To Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture, edited by Stephen Crook (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 34. Also see Adorno’s essay “Culture Industry Reconsidered”, Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment, and especially Horkheimer’s observation in Eclipse of Reason that in modern times, “reason has displayed a tendency to dissolve its own objective content”. Max Horkheimer, Eclipse of Reason (1947; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3-39.
time, in Marx’s desire to measure the transforming power of labour, or in Alexander von Humboldt’s desire to calculate the height of the highest mountain that early nineteenth century could think of—now finds expression in a distortion of rationality itself where measurability, and identification in terms of this measurability, becomes more important than the search for meaning that prompted it in the first place. Ratio then becomes a “murky reason” that is in historical terms something intrinsically capitalistic and of twentieth century origin. It is sponsored by those in power like a curious gladiatorial game of death; it lacks the resuscitating powers of true reason\textsuperscript{109} that exist despite the negativity it is forced to adopt in the face of technological reality:

The \textit{Ratio} that gives rise to the ornament is strong enough to invoke the mass and to expunge all life from the figures constituting it. It is too weak to find the human beings within the mass and to render the figures in the ornament transparent to knowledge... It can no longer transform itself into powerful symbolic forms as it could among primitive peoples and in the era of religious cults. This power of a language of signs has withdrawn from the mass ornament... It is the \textit{rational and empty form} of the cult, devoid of any explicit meaning, that appears in the mass ornament (Kracauer’s emphases).\textsuperscript{110}

The ubiquity of cultural consumables that is part of the complex of the “mass ornament”, therefore, becomes for Kracauer a site of redemption through true reason. If the sleep of reason begets monsters, as in Goya’s famous vision, Kracauer calls for a cautious awakening from it. If the false reality of the \textit{Ratio

\textsuperscript{109} That is, true reason that has the capability to analyse the “inconspicuous surface-level expressions” of an epoch hinting at the position the epoch itself occupies in the historical process [ibid., 75].

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 84.
assumes the form of a Medusa’s head, Kracauer points out that Perseus holds the ability to kill the Gorgon, as in the myth, only if he has the courage to look at her mediated image in his shield. It is in the ragpicker’s careful and continual acts of exploration of this detritus of images, sights, sounds, and objects, and their expression in the mostly unconscious, quotidian, and popular expressions of “culture” in societies—where “(t)he fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally”—that Kracauer hopes that the true reason will vindicate itself.

To sum up, what we learn from Kracauer that the sheer mass of historical images readily made available through media technologies are often not the true images of realities. Rather, as Kracauer emphasizes, it is this increasing accumulation of historical images (as information) that often hinders, instead of facilitating, the possibility of knowing and perceiving the real world. It increasingly threatens the link between memory and experience in the same way Plato’s cave dwellers ended up believing in the reality of that fantastic cave of shadows. We also learn from Kracauer that if technologies and forms of their mediation affect culture in ways that they appear invisible, then, their processes of mediation, and the forms in which they appear, need to be studied from the surface-level symptoms that they offer; for they may contain hints of some deeper reality.


In other words, if the surface symptoms evident in the everyday are properly decoded, Kracauer believes, they may lead to historical visions of an unmediated reality than grand attempts to create universal histories out of major events. This belief is concurrent with Kracauer’s insistence that “(w)e must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is the major events which have the most decisive influence on us”; as he observes: “We are much more deeply and continuously influenced by the tiny catastrophes that make up daily life.”

3. Walter Benjamin and technological replicability

In Victor Hugo’s novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) occurs the famous passage where in conversation with the disguised king of France, the sinister archdeacon and alchemist Claude Frollo indicates with his right hand a printed book lying open on his table, and with his left points to the gigantic medieval cathedral of Notre-Dame. He looks sadly from the book to the church and enigmatically exclaims: “This will kill that.” This powerful evocation of the printed book is followed by a polemical tract in the following chapter of the novel where Hugo further explores on two aspects of this exclamation. One, he tell us that the archdeacon’s exclamation implies that the rationality brought along by print will batter and finally topple the gates of the church and all (irrational religiosities).

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114 This exposition was not there in the first edition but incorporated in the eighth definitive edition of 1832 where Hugo scoffed at the imagination of contemporary architects in a new prefatory note and incorporated three additional chapters in the novel that included the chapter “This will kill that”. Michael Camille, *The Gargoyles of Notre-Dame: Medievalism and the Monsters of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 83.

115 That is, not excluding the possibility of rationally-founded religiosities and evangelical impulses.
Two, it also hints at the literal dethroning of architectural art—“the principal register of mankind” until the fifteenth century—by the art of print.\textsuperscript{116} For Hugo, both the architectural form of the medieval cathedral (“the book of stone”) and the material form of the printed book (“the book of paper”) are not only sites for inscription, they are the conduits that carry humanity’s messages for its kind; or, in other words, they are the old and the new media competing to communicate traces of humanity’s ideas for the present and for posterity.\textsuperscript{117}

The dethroning of the old revolves around the question of durability of the medium: the manuscript book could not replace the medieval cathedral because it easily fell to the torch of its haters as against the monstrous book of stone that survived social and terrestrial revolutions of the centuries. But the rise of the printed book, according to Hugo, is something that, for the first time, causes all questions concerning the durability of the medium fade into irrelevance:

In its printed form, thought is more imperishable than ever; it is volatile, elusive, indestructible. It mingles with the air... Before, it was solid, now

\textsuperscript{117} This is not to suggest that this idea originated from Hugo. In the seventh century CE, we have the instance of a benevolent bibliophile and classical Arab scholar from Basra, Abu Uthman Amr ibn Bahr al-Kinani al-Fuqaimi al-Basri (commonly referred to as Al-Jahiz), admiring this effectiveness of books over buildings in recording human memory and accomplishments of the passing ages and centuries, praising in particular the ancient Greeks for considering the book as the most precious of legacies, and commending his contemporary Manicheans for taking good care of their books. In the introductory chapter (titled ‘In Praise of Books’) to his book \textit{Kitab al-Hayawan} (Book of Animals)—an encyclopedia of seven volumes that is one of the earliest zoological studies suggesting on the possibilities of evolution—Al-Jahiz talks of the different methods used by peoples to preserve permanent records of bygone civilizations: the Arabs used poetry (in the oral sense), the Persians buildings, but books are the best. Why? Because, Al-Jahiz tells us, those who come after, often demolish the buildings, and their traces disappear; but books, handed down from one generation to another, and from nation to nation, remain ever renewed. Al-Jahiz, “In Praise of Books,” in Charles Pellat, \textit{The Life and Works of Jahiz} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 130-132.
it is alive. It has passed from duration to immortality. You can demolish a great building, but how do you root out ubiquity? Come a flood and the mountain will long ago have vanished beneath the waters while the birds are still flying; let a single ark be floating on the surface of the cataclysm and they will alight on it, will survive on it, and, like it, will be present at the receding of waters; and as it awakes, the new world which emerges from the chaos will see the ideas of the drowned world soaring above it, winged and full of life.118

This is no doubt a powerful and eager expression of a historical optimism, and a vigorous hope placed in the redemptive functions of the printed book that the twentieth century has considerably learnt to go without. But what is important for our study is that Hugo assigns the prime reason for the medieval cathedral’s obsolescence as a medium in the quick and easy replicability that makes the printed book live on, and, it is precisely the endless possibilities of this power of replication that does away with the question of durability of the medium once and for all. The exclusive and therefore confusing association of early human communication as architectural patterns traced on stone has obvious references to the interest Victor Hugo had in freemasonry. But we pay little attention to that here; and also to problems of a historical juxtaposition of the book and the cathedral as rival systems of communication.119 What is notable here is that Hugo attaches great importance to the book’s ability to quickly replicate itself through print—the hypothetical possibility of print as existing everywhere—as the only

118 Hugo, Notre-Dame de Paris, 196.
119 This is not a simple competition between two rival systems, as we have already learnt from Harold Innis. And as also noted earlier, the historical intention of the printed book during its inception as a new technological medium has been to approximate, improve on, and amplify what had been the characteristic of manuscript culture. The same can be said of the printed book and the cathedral, if such an incongruous comparison is attempted.
condition attached to its “immortality”. Hugo hopes that it is the conditions of this unprecedented replicability that the printed book will create a future where the ubiquity of print will triumph in the empowerment of humanity through its knowing of ideas bequeathed from the past, and further the possibilities of humanity’s mental emancipation from dogma through typographical fixity.120

For the moment though, we can go back over this hope that is triggered by the possibilities of endless replication of the printed word on paper. In the early years of the twenty-first century, at least, the hope placed in print on paper (if it does not lead to over-pessimistic arguments bemoaning the “death” of print) is suggestive of a quieter contemplation over the enthusiasm and exuberance characterized by Hugo.121 But the hope remains; nevertheless.122 It creates from its own wreck a vision of continuity that once again finds historical importance and faith in technology's ability to replicate and reproduce accurate visions and texts of its civilizational past—though something we have by now learned not to view as uncomplicated. And as we have earlier seen in our discussion of Siegfried

120 My use of the term “typographical fixity” has less to do with McLuhan than with Elizabeth Eisenstein’s identification of this term. For Eisenstein, it is the standardization and fixity of print through typography that separated print culture from scribal culture in terms of the increased output and the altered intake of transmitted texts, and therefore having important implications for humanity’s transmission of its past to future generations. See Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, “Defining the Initial Shift; Some Features of Print Culture,” in Eisenstein, Printing Press as an Agent of Change, 43–159.

121 For a random and nuanced example, we might look at an observation made by Peter Shillingsburg in his elucidations of the problems and potentials for electronic representations of literary texts. Shillingsburg reflects, and not without concern: “(T)he age of print has seen its peak and heyday, and will soon be surpassed, though not replaced, by electronic texts”. Shillingsburg, From Gutenberg to Google, 2.

122 In this case, I prefer to follow Ted Striphas in his belief that the “late age of print” points more to the “tense interplay of persistence and change endemic to today’s everyday book culture without necessarily presuming a full-blown crisis exists”. Ted Striphas, The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 3.
Kracauer, the enhanced visibility of images in print made possible through
technical reproduction does not always and necessarily imply an understanding of
the conditions of their rootings in real life and history. Often the ubiquity of
mediated images (and words) lead to their fading into a reality that is not real in
the sense that life is real. Moreover, technical replicability begets an ahistorical
forgetfulness—the forgetting of the “bias” of our age, as Innis has observed—and
concurrently, the forgetting of the processes of mediation (a point also stressed on
by Kracauer, and as we will see, by Benjamin).

The hope that Victor Hugo ascribes to the printed book in the nineteenth century
is in historical terms a difficult hope; made more difficult in the twentieth century
by the very processes of technical replicability. But it is the same hope in an
unprecedented technical replicability of sounds, images, and words that provokes
Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on the technological media of the twentieth century,
though not the same optimism.

*Technical replicability and the decline of the “aura”*

Most media criticism usually refer to Benjamin’s thoughts on the technological
media by solely focussing on his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its
Technological Reproducibility” (1935-6). It is difficult to do without; the essay
has important insights on technological media. However, it is to be remembered
that this essay forms part of Benjamin’s larger attempts to identify general
principles of art theory in the general climate of fascistic Germany, and to his
increasing preoccupation with the problems of historical understanding. Also
Important is the fact that Benjamin’s observations on the technologies of the media in this essay is permeated by his reaction against contemporary Fascism’s increasing insistence on creativity, genius, mystery, eternal value and timelessness in artistic productions, and its interests in an “aestheticizing of political life”.\textsuperscript{123} The point I am trying to stress here is that the communistic argument for “politicizing art” with which Benjamin’s ‘Work of Art’ essay concludes is deeply topical, and is not at all consistent with the patterns the rest of Benjamin’s oeuvre traces for us. Furthermore, the viewing of technically replicated “mass culture”, more specifically the products of the film and the camera, as intrinsically revolutionary is no doubt a historical overestimation; something that we can always retrospectively locate in the topical enthusiasm that invariably follows the introduction of new media technologies. In the ‘Work of Art’ essay this is further conditioned by notions of historical progress of the Marxist kind; something that does not tantamount to a permanence of conviction in Benjamin.\textsuperscript{124}

When working on his doctoral thesis, Benjamin records in a letter to Florens Christian Rang a preoccupation that relates to our context: "the question of the relation of works of art to historical life."\textsuperscript{125} What can be identified as “works of

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\textsuperscript{123} Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in Benjamin, \textit{The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media} (see note 81), 41.

\textsuperscript{124} It is in this context that Richard Wolin provocatively argues that Benjamin’s relevance is less to be found in those of his writings most avowedly Marxist; that is, in essays such as ‘Work of Art’ and ‘The Author as Producer’ where Benjamin displays, in comparison to his other works, a highly uncharacteristic trust in the course of historical progress. See Richard Wolin, “Benjamin’s Materialist Theory of Experience,” \textit{Theory and Society} 11, no. 1 (1982): 17-42.

art”? Benjamin offers two identifiers. He defines works of art as those "models of a nature that does not await the day" (that is, a day of revelation) and thus does not await judgmental closure either: "models of a nature that is neither the staging ground of history nor a human domicile." 126 Human life is invisible if viewed outside the matrices of historical time, that is, if the complex interweaving of its processes of development, maturity and death does not relate to the position it occupies in historical time. In contrast, a work of art appears ahistorical. If not on the surface, Benjamin argues it appears so, in terms of its essence; "there is no question of there being a history of the work of art as such." 127 Similar in this respect to philosophical systems, works of art tend to lapse into a “dogmatic sense of timelessness”, which is more ritualistic than historical. Technical replicability threatens this timelessness of the work of art (as expanded on in the “provisional formulation” 128 of his ‘Work of Art’ essay), but it does not reinstate it in terms of history and historical life.

“In principle,” Benjamin writes, “the work of art has been always reproducible.” 129 The emphasis is on the fact that the ever-increasing intensity of the technologies of replication in the twentieth century, centuries after the invention of the woodcut (the technological reproduction of graphic art) and the movable type (“the technological reproduction of writing”), have caused a qualitative shift in the seeing, appreciation, and understanding of works of art, and the processes of

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126 Ibid., 224.
127 Ibid.
their mediation. What Benjamin calls “technological reproducibility” perhaps deserves some attention from this point. The important thing to be aware of is that “technological reproduction” is not cognate with “mechanical reproduction”.\textsuperscript{130} Whereas the “mechanical” restricts itself to the machinery and applicatory purposes of the sciences, for Benjamin, the “technical” also involves history, and the generation of historicity outside the empirical realities of the “mechanical”, so that it also includes references to social relations, and, constitutes a category of human experience.\textsuperscript{131} What is historically new in the technologies of replication is “a structural shift in the significance of replication itself”\textsuperscript{132} that is evident in the decline of the “aura”. It is not only influences the structure of the work of art, but has wider implications in the political, social, cultural, and historical contexts, and with other things, leads to the formation of a “mass existence”.

We may also pause to consider at this point that Benjamin’s identification of the formation of this “mass existence” is not exactly similar to the formation of the

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conditioned masses in Horkheimer and Adorno’s “culture industry” thesis. While the later see the culture industry as forming homogenous masses conditioned to respond to their cultural consumables indulging in predictable responses, Benjamin agrees to the extent that technological reproducibility of cultural artefacts by means of reproduction, “extracts sameness even from what is unique”\textsuperscript{133}—which is an important shift from the “cult value” inspired by the ritually-inscribed work of art to the “exhibition value” necessitated by technological replicability\textsuperscript{134}—and that “(m)ass reproduction is especially favoured by the reproduction of the masses”\textsuperscript{135}.

But no further. Benjamin’s focus is not only on the symptomatic implication of ideology being reconstituted as in analogy with the technological device of the camera obscura—darkening, inverting, and systematically distorting reality, and itself constituting an upside-down vision of the relationship of human beings to their actual being in history\textsuperscript{136}—as in Marx or in his adherents down to

\textsuperscript{133} Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 24.

\textsuperscript{134} It is in this context that Joost Van Loon argues that Benjamin’s relevance lies in his concern for the role of “value” as the logical principle underlying the particular forms of usage of the work of art and its transformation—the generation of the value of a work of art thus becoming an effect of its consumption, and further constituting a market. Joost Van Loon, \textit{Media Technology: Critical Perspectives} (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 54-55. Loon reads this as leading to a blurring between production and consumption, and he moves forward fifty years to connect this with Baudrillard’s “hyper-reality”, the implosion of reality following the massive expansion of technologies of signification—a connection I find too far-fetched.

\textsuperscript{135} Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 54 n. 36. This observation occurs in the context of his discussion of the German weekly newsreel. Benjamin observes that the newsreel’s portrayal of the great ceremonial processions of the Fascist regime, the giant rallies and mass sporting events, and war itself, leads to the creation of a situation where “the masses come face to face with themselves”, as a mass. The technological replicability of the masses serves the Fascist propaganda function, according to Benjamin, where the masses start believing in themselves as \textit{the} mass, and all this is closely bound up with the development of technical reproduction made possible by the camera as never before.

\textsuperscript{136} Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, \textit{The German Ideology} (1845-1846; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 42.
Althusser\textsuperscript{137} or Žižek\textsuperscript{138}. That is, Benjamin does not read this reproduction of the masses as solely conditioned by ideology (and irrespective of the technological).

\textsuperscript{137} According to Althusser, an ideology is characterized by “the fact that its own problematic is not conscious of itself”—a system of representations which is “an organic part of every social totality” [Louis Althusser, \textit{For Marx} (1965; London: Penguin Books, 1969), 69, 231-232]. It has a “duplicate mirror-structure”: ideology “interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion”, in a reality they take as their own, and at the same time, it functions as a centre of inclusion for the “practical consciousness” so that there is not (and \textit{cannot} be) any outside to this system of representations [Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Louis Althusser, \textit{Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays} (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 180, 127- 193]. How does, then, one penetrate into the nature of the “ideological”? For Althusser, it starts with the absolute conceptual recognition of Marx’s theory of class struggle. The “ideological” is visible only when one takes up the (scientific) “proletarian class positions” and adopts “the only viewpoint which makes \textit{visible} the reality of the exploitation of wage labour power, which constitutes the whole of capitalism” [Althusser, “Preface to \textit{Capital Volume One},” in Althusser, \textit{Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays}, 100]. What if the argument for taking up a theoretical position based on “Marxism-Leninism” is itself ideological, in the sense that Marx is understood \textit{correctly} only by adherents of Marxism, Freud by Freudians, Foucault by Foucauldians, and so on? Althusser’s argument gets caught up in the very objections he raises against Pascal’s “proof” of the existence of the divine: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” [Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in Althusser, \textit{Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays}, 168]. What we need to note is that, for Althusser, as well as with Marx, technology exists only in the context of class struggle, and the “use of the category ‘Man’ depicted either as the victim of technology or as its beneficiary remains an obfuscation” [Robert Paul Resch, \textit{Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory} (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 75].

\textsuperscript{138} Žižek, for example, refuses to simply designate “ideology” simply as a “false consciousness”, an illusory representation of reality. However, the “ideological” is for him, as with Althusser, indicative of a concrete representational system, a social reality “whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence”[Slavoj Žižek, \textit{The Sublime Object of Ideology} (1989; London and New York: Verso, 2008), 3-55]. Worded differently, but with the same implications as in Althusser, “ideology” is for Žižek the constitution of a symbolic system that has by definition the character of totality: existing in an unmediated Universal that “represses” the “vanishing mediator” and exists irrespective of the processes of mediation in a world-as-system where the human subject cannot penetrate the reality of this world without a (proletarian) consciousness that is itself existing unproblematically (as in Lenin’s vision) in a without [Slavoj Žižek, \textit{For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As A Political Factor} (199; London and New York: Verso, 2008), 179-228]. What I want to indicate here is that for Žižek, questions on the nature of modern technological change that do not relate to his vision of the Marxist tradition, falls more directly under the realm of the “ideological”. In a way, this is what Louis Althusser had emphasised and championed as a true “science”: the use of Marxian ideology-critique as the conceptual key to all unanswerable political, social, and philosophical questions. Positive or negative mental approximations that concentrate on aspects of technology (as we witness in the case of Heidegger, McLuhan, or for that matter, Benjamin), those that try to follow human societies witnessing massive change in the processes of technological replicability as part of modernity, however powerful their critiques may be, are of less of importance to Žižek. For him, the key question directly hinges around “two excesses”: the ‘economic’ excess/surplus which is integrated into the capitalist machine as the force which drives it into permanent self-revolutionizing; the ‘political’ excess of power inherent to its exercise (the constitutive excess of representation over the represented)” [Slavoj Žižek, \textit{The Parallax View} (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2006), 298]. Walter Benjamin, then, has little to offer under this scheme of things.
Rather, he complicates it by introducing technological operation into the problem—one of Adorno’s many objections with Benjamin.

Three other major differences with Marxism crop up later as Benjamin proceeds to rethink his position on the necessity of technological change in The Arcades Project—which is part of Benjamin’s mature attempts to “demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress”, and of other things, to compare Herodotus with the morning newspaper.

One, if Marxism disallows the subjective in the thinking of this technological “necessity”, and the identifying of "defunct" older and alienated objects as immemorial and eternal, Benjamin holds it is difficult to separate subjective intentions in the first place from the disappearing meaning of alienated objects, and more so in the present for, apart from the generation of newer commodities as

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140 In a letter that discusses drafts of the Arcades Project, Adorno warns “Mr. Benjamin” against what he feels is the temptation of technologism: “The overestimation of machine technology and the machine as such has always been characteristic of bourgeois, retrospective theories: the conditions of production are thus veiled by an abstract reference to the means of production” [Theodore W. Adorno, “Letter to Walter Benjamin” (August 2, 1935), in Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 500]. For a detailed overview of the debate between Adorno and Benjamin on this issue and on other counts, see Richard Wolin, “The Adorno-Benjamin Dispute,” in Richard Wolin, Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), 163-212.


142 Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century: Exposé of 1939," in Benjamin, Arcades Project, 14. This reference follows Benjamin’s growing preoccupation with the notion of “eternal recurrence” and his reading of Remy de Gourmont: “‘If one takes from history only the most general facts, those which lend themselves to parallels and to theories, then it suffices, as Schopenhauer said, to read only the morning paper and Herodotus. All the rest intervening—the evident and fatal repetition of the most distant and the most recent facts—become tedious and useless’ [Remy de Gourmont, 1924, quoted in Benjamin, "Painting, Jugendstil, Novelty," in Benjamin, Arcades Project, 545]. Benjamin notes: “precisely in the minutiae of the ‘intervening’ the eternally selfsame is manifest” (ibid.).
objects and images, "technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation."143 Because it is more than difficult to see purely into the past without the retrospective search which prompts the present to look back at the past, "(t)he 'purity' of the gaze is not just difficult but impossible to attain."144 And in terms similar to Innis, Benjamin contends that the social-scientism called in to contingently understand only the “objective” nature of “social forces” from the vantage of the present is a flawed one: “truth is not—as Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike”145—what he calls the “dialectical image”.146

Two, Benjamin does not consistently accept with ease the severance with the past and traditions as in the ‘Work of Art’ essay. The parting with the past and traditions, according to Marx, is inevitable and triggered by historical mechanisms, at its best a reconciliation, which at the final moments of this loss is a comedy, or a farce.147 Benjamin differs here: if it does appear inevitable, the

144 Ibid., 470.
145 Ibid., 463.
146 “Every present day is determined,” Benjamin observes, “by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability” where the truth holds the strongest for that moment. Since history is always an involved act of reading, the understanding of the “dialectical image” is a growing out of the notion of history that tries to show things “as they really were”, what Benjamin identifies as the strongest narcotic of the nineteenth century; ever, a palliative for critical judgement. In the time-bound historical act of reading whose founding concept is actualization rather than historical progress, the “dialectical image” for Benjamin is the image that is read “in the now of its recognizability,” precisely because it “bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilious critical moment on which all reading is founded”. Ibid., 462-3.
parting with the past is not the cheerful historical destiny that Marx reads in the comic death of Greek gods in Lucian's prose. Rather, it is the long-drawn, melancholic contemplation of the angel of history who dwells on the past surrounding him as debris, clouding him in a sensuous, poetic, and mournful longing, and a loss that is irreconcilable to the extent that no redemption is possible in terms of their meaning except the powerful contemplation and disenchantment with the technological which fulfils the subjective side of the angel's glance.

Three, Benjamin observes that one of the impulses moving technological forms is that they, and also those that emerge from them, try to establish themselves as natural forms. And in terms similar to Marx and Engels, he ascribes to technology the impulse “to bring about objectives strange to nature, along with means that are alien and inimical to nature—measures that emancipate themselves from nature and master it”.148 But he also observes there is something strange in Engels's formulations that once the nature of “the social forces” is understood, they are transformed “from master demons to willing servants” by producers working together; he finds it particularly strange that this is no less utopian than the other creed of socialisms that Engels criticizes in his argument, which, also rests on a faith in the future redemption of technology. 149 For Benjamin, at least in

148 Walter Benjamin, “Dream City and Dream House, Dreams of the Future, Anthropological Nihilism, Jung,” in Benjamin, Arcades Project, 396. Unlike Benjamin, Marx’s view on technology is marked by a profound optimism in the liberating power of technology as a tool of communicative and political action. I return to discuss his views on technology in the next section of this chapter where I discuss Jacques Ellul’s thoughts on the technological media.
Arcades Project, technology is more demonic than servile—“it impinges on human beings, it constantly makes for variations in their most primordial passions, fears, and images of longing”\(^{150}\)—and contains within a stronger logic of its own than the thinking human subject of the nineteenth century who hoped to make himself its master.\(^{151}\)

**The hope of Walter Benjamin in the age of technological reproduction**

We return to consider the ‘Work of Art’ essay once more, but without the penchant for “progress” or the privileging of politics over art, and with more attention to mediation and the reformulation of the “auratic”. According to Benjamin, while technical replication has always threatened the “here and now” of a work of art, its uniqueness in terms of its historical situatedness; what the new technologies of replication and mediation appearing in early twentieth century have particularly jeopardized for a work of art is not just its historicity, but the sense of timelessness it inspires outside history, what he calls its “aura” (“A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be”\(^{152}\)). Earlier, the “aura” had existed in the inapproachability and the figurative distance that existed between a work of art existing materially and an observer.

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\(^{151}\) An argument built up more forcefully from here by Jacques Ellul, as we will later see.

\(^{152}\) Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 23. As John McCole observes, the contemplative immersion that goes with the recognition of the aura does simultaneously requires distance, and an identification with the temporal, that is, an understanding of the "elusive weave of space and time". And he also points to the influence of Bergsonian thought for Benjamin who found both tradition and experience were rooted in memory, and, “for him memory too was an auratic phenomenon.” John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 4-7.
contemplating it from within the bounds of the traditional and the ritual (and therefore, compelled by authority to view it as authentic); now, it is technical replicability that corrodes the “aura” and frees the work of art from the authority and tradition of viewing it, and introduces it into the fields of politics and “mass existence”.

What Benjamin identifies as specifically new, as we have already noted, is that artistic expression which earlier till the 1800s habitually assimilated technological modes of operation can no longer do so in the present. The logic of technical replicability overtakes in a breath-taking tempo the making of works of art, and ends up dominating it. But if technical replicability is corrosive to traditions and customs, Benjamin feels it also has liberating powers: it “emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual” —which is also a freeing of meaning inherent in the work of art from the specific sense perceptions shaped by ritual and tradition that once implied the absence of mediation. That is, it enhances the “auratic”, making the work the “original” of the reproduction in a way it did not exist earlier. Technical replicability, then, once again brings the question of mediation to the fore; that is, mediation that can be now considered apart from the contemplation of the work of art as a mediated object of ideology or politics.

Accordingly, technological replication holds emancipatory powers for the society and its individuals, who live a “mass existence”, but not for all of whom are

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uniformly organized as a “mass”. It does away with the dogmatic imposition of the visions of the religious cult and dictates of the ritualistic to replace it with a secular supposition of the real made possible through technical reproduction where the “decline of the aura” does not mean its complete disappearance.\footnote{155} If earlier, an object of human creation was embedded both in the ritually transmitted history and in the physical form of the artefact—together they were inalienable and inseparable in the fixed, ahistorical and seemingly unmediated visions that the object inspired. Now, after the coming of technical reproducibility, the ritualistic history, too, “is jeopardized by reproduction, in which the physical duration plays no part”\footnote{156} and the older “traditional” distinction between production and reproduction appears to break down.\footnote{157} But unlike the diffuse and subtle deliberations on the infinitely repeatable play of signifiers that would follow from similar observations roughly fifty years onwards in human history, Benjamin


\footnote{156} Benjamin, “Work of Art,” 22. It may be relevant here to make note of an analogy used by George Bornstein in his discussion of modern editorial theory where he stresses the importance of material textuality in the location of “meaning” in a literary text. Stressing that the meaning of a text is transmitted both from linguistic codes embodied in the text and the non-linguistic bibliographic codes that subsequently locate (and recreate) it “as an aesthetic rather than historicized object”, Bornstein points out that the bibliographic code for a particular “work” corresponds to what Benjamin calls the “aura”: it signifies a “presence in time and space” that is not identifiable in terms of the linguistic code alone. George Bornstein, \textit{Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6-7.

specifically draws our attention to the actualization made possible in each act of replication by the technological media:

(T)he technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced. 158

Benjamin indicates here that with the separation of the object from its singular and unique existence in the sphere of tradition, technological replicability also makes possible, precisely because of its generative powers, an infinite number of unique actualizations in which “mass existence” takes shape. These actualizations do not imply plurality, that is, an infinite series of the same individual occurrences; rather, they are the manifestations of the diverse nature of the “mass existence” in the age of technological reproduction, and are closely tied to the structure and operations of the reproductive technique itself. 159 In other words, if the “aura” declines through technical replication, the processes of technological replication can make possible, at least it can be assumed hypothetically, 160 the conditions for a reincarnation of the auratic (if not the actual, which in any case, was a hypothesization) in each act of the recipients’ reconsideration of a cultural

160 This assumption is moved by an apprehensive “either-or” speculation. As Rolf Wiggershaus puts it, Benjamin worries, “(E)ither technology would become, in the hands of the masses, a sober instrument of euphoric cosmic experience, or even more horrific catastrophes than the First World War would follow… Either technology would become the means of salvation, or there would be no salvation. Either it could be made to serve in the liquidation of the forces of magic, or there would be no liberation from those forces.” Rolf Wiggershaus, The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), 201.
artefact—where “(d)reams vary according to where you are, what area and what street, but above all according to the time of year and the weather”. 161 This is the point where the ‘Work of Art’ essay connects with the larger part of Benjamin’s vision of technological replicability: a hope in the reincarnation of the “auratic” once we learnt not to take technological replicability as given.

The hope in the reincarnation of the “auratic” also permeates Benjamin’s observations on the newspaper where he sees the conventional distinction between the author, the newspaper writer, the journalist, and the reading public “disappearing in a socially desirable way” in the enhanced technological reproducibility of the newspaper. On the one hand, capital wrests the newspaper as a “serviceable instrument of production” from the writer.162 On the other, in its attempts (founded as they are on the felix culpa of technical reproducibility) to become socially visible as never before the newspaper tries to assimilate concerns and aspirations of social groups who were previously excluded from their “news”; “the indiscriminate assimilation of facts goes the equally indiscriminate assimilation of readers, who are instantly elevated to collaborators” in the newspaper’s newer columns, letters’ sections, and supplements which try to cater to the readers’ opinions, queries, protests, and ward off charges of tendentiousness.163 It is in this constant act of approximation of “popular culture”

163 Like Kracauer, Benjamin holds as erroneous the view of the media producers as simple imposers of opinion from above, or as simple mediators. For example, in his study of the German publishing industry, Benjamin refuses to see the publisher as only acting as an intermediary (a “broker”) between...
by the newspaper—in the “literalization of the conditions of living” where the reader becomes a prescriber—where technological reproducibility carries out its “limitless debasement of the word”, and likewise celebrates the irreverent “public” over the exalted author-as-producer, that Benjamin hopes the newspaper will find its salvation.\footnote{Walter Benjamin, “The Newspaper,” in Benjamin, \textit{Work of Art}, 359-360. It may be relevant to note here that Benjamin’s hope concerning the modern newspaper, and McLuhan’s apprehensions concerning the electronic media, share a common ground—the blurring of the traditional roles and functions of creator and audience in participatory media. The “disappearance” of the distinction between media producers and their public is in both instances linked to their identification of the unprecedented replicability and dissemination made possible by technological media. As we have identified earlier in our discussion on McLuhan, these hopes and apprehensions are pointers to what Innis calls the “bias” of the age, and therefore, we pay less attention to these anticipatory visions which histories of the contemporary media have already disproved, and without calling into complex questions concerning “participation” with which our contemporary world tackles newer media.}

Approaching this from another angle, and minus the emancipatory hope in the power of the reader as prescriber, we find that Benjamin also inveighs against an important element of technological reproducibility—its inability to do without kitsch.

The garish tastelessness and sentimentality of kitsch produced by and large by the technological media, Benjamin feels, is not only because of their malabsorption of “public taste”.\footnote{As Richard Wolin points out: “For Benjamin, journalism represents the deliberate sabotage of experience, its reduction to a minimum number of superficial facts and statistics a process of distortion that aims at destroying the public’s capacity for independent judgment. The press attempts to manufacture an artificial consensus, ‘public opinion,’ by appending insipid ‘psychological’ explanations to each story in order to suggest how the average man on the street should interpret events.” Wolin, “Benjamin’s Materialist Theory of Experience,” 24.} In a section in \textit{The Arcades Project} where he muses on the political significance of film, Benjamin points out that the rise of kitsch invariably accompanies the arrival of a new media technology. He recognizes that it goes

\begin{itemize}
\item Individual manuscripts and “the” reading public. This is erroneous, he says, precisely because “the publisher is not in a position to form an opinion in a vacuum about either the ideal value or the commercial value of a book” [Walter Benjamin, “A Critique of the Publishing Industry,” in Benjamin, \textit{Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility}, 356-357].
\end{itemize}
beyond utopianism to suppose that anyone will win the masses over to a higher art—“they can be won over only to one nearer to them.” Here lies the origin of kitsch. Kitsch approximates the mass’s desire for “something that is warming” and replaces it with what it is: “nothing more art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption.”

Why do the technological media promote kitsch? For Benjamin the answer lies less in ideology than in their urgent need to establish themselves as technologies—“they take ‘kitsch’ dialectically up into themselves, and hence bring themselves near to the masses while yet surmounting the kitsch.” In the case of the newspaper, kitsch fills up the “empty phrase” that must be inserted aplenty between the columns of the pages, precisely because the newspaper, like the commercial factory, has to work on a product whose processing through journalistic and non-journalistic means is bound to its time-bound completion and physical shape of the newspaper, inviolable in terms of the logic of technological reproduction itself.

Inside the newshouse, Benjamin observes, the feuilletonist, the reporter and the photographer constitute a work order—“a gradation in which waiting around, the ‘Get ready’ succeeded by the ‘Shoot’ becomes ever more important vis-à-vis other

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167 Ibid.
168 Ibid.
169 Benjamin makes these observations in his essay on the Austrian writer and journalist Karl Kraus (1874-1936) who deplored proprietorial newspapers that survived on state and private advertisements and their claim to “culture”. See Walter Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” in Benjamin, *Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 361-390.
activities”—involving a specific form of work-preparedness which he calls idleness.\textsuperscript{170} The “news” that emerges is not representation of reality but a form of communication corresponding to this specific kind of labour process (with the technological media not just standing like priestly intercessors in between the “real” and the received): it is a machine-made reality which is distinct from the older artisanal way of storytelling in that it makes an \textit{a priori} claim to truth, and dismisses all other.

It is important to note here Benjamin does not mind that this “news” is a manufacturing (in other words, a fabrication) of reality. For him, the glorified storyteller of old is a fabricator of reality as much as the technological media are: for the storyteller fabricates (re-tells) the story in every act of his telling.\textsuperscript{171} (As Philippe Simay observes, for Benjamin it is transmission that infuses tradition into objects and events, and the crucial thing for him to reflect on is the process of transmission, not the product in its isolation as an object.\textsuperscript{172}) Nor is the disintegration of tradition important in this context, as we have already seen in our discussion on his ‘Work of Art’ essay.

Benjamin’s objection, as is Karl Kraus’s, is more with the \textit{a priori} truth-claim of the newspaper and the calling of it as “real”. He disapproves that specific kind of information which gets generated in the form of a sensation called “news”, and

\textsuperscript{170} Walter Benjamin, “Idleness,” in Benjamin, \textit{Arcades Project}, 802.

\textsuperscript{171} It is not incidental to observe in this connection that journalists and editors working across the desks of newspapers still use the term "story" to denote a particular item of "news" that needs to be processed.

“(w)ith the sensation, whatever still resembles wisdom, oral tradition, or the epic side of truth is razed to the ground.”\textsuperscript{173} This “news” appears to be transparent, unique and singular: it has an immediate utilitarian function as opposed to storytelling which communicates experiences and understandings from the past in varying degrees of opacity. While the story potentially depends more on its narrative function to the sudden opening up meanings across sheer narrative space and time, “news” appearing in the newspaper functions more as a commodity as it relentlessly asserts its utility and value in the here and now.

With the assertion of its utility as a commodity, “news” makes a claim to singularity, and at the same time, this claim to uniqueness leads it to project itself as intrinsically valuable.\textsuperscript{174} This insistence on value makes it alter the past, unmake what really has happened, and make real of what never really happened, and that as part of the assertive omnipresence insisted on by the bureaucratic side of editorial judgement: \textsuperscript{175} a judgement that chooses this “news” as “news”.

For Benjamin, this too is inexorably and materially bound to the processes of technological replicability that moves the press: Victor Hugo’s “sacred locomotive of progress”.\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{173} Benjamin, “Idleness,” 804.
\textsuperscript{175} Benjamin, “Journalism,” in \textit{Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility}, 353.
\textsuperscript{176} Victor Hugo, speech at a banquet organised by the publisher of \textit{Les Misérables} in Brussels on September 16, 1862, quoted in Benjamin, \textit{Arcades Project}, 679.
Where does then the hope remain? Mere optimism, as we may observe, remains blind to an extent to extremely negative visions; hope looks forward to transcend the tyranny and inclusiveness of these negativities by looking more closely at them, recognizing them, and yet persisting to look for an intelligible way out from what appears to be a perpetual flux of propagation and (homogenized) change.

For Victor Hugo, the technological replicability of the printed book signalled the ultimate triumph of the human: the unproblematic preservation, continuation, and propagation of “culture”. As we have seen, Benjamin too started from here and tried to locate optimism in the disintegration and transmission of the “aura” through technological replicability. But when the enhanced applicability of the very processes of technological replication in the hands of the fascists seemed to overwhelm his world and make the conditions of being human superfluous, Benjamin knew there was going to be no innocent faith in technological replication after that: technological replication has become a phantasmagoria, a play of dark unreal shadows, and a propagator of its own myths.

If a lesson can be drawn out of its past, as Benjamin tells us after reading the final agonized contemplations of the incarcerated Auguste Blanqui—“humanity will be prey to a mythic anguish so long as phantasmagoria occupies a place in it.”177 While the war continued to dismantle and disgorge peoples and nations, and seemed to obliterate traces of “culture” to the end of his life, Benjamin continued to find hope in the individualized and aesthetic attempts of the lone humanistic

collector to grasp history “as an afterlife of that which is understood” in *The Arcades Project.* This transcended the limits of his earlier optimism—the kind that still finds uncritical confidence in the progressive potential of new technologies of replication to affect the structures of power in society. He bravely attempted to look beyond the pallor and ghastliness of technological replication that appeared not in pictures but in old photographs, and tried to penetrate into “the alluring and threatening face of primal history” that reappears in technology and distorts human dreams of the future.

Therefore, if the “wish images” of what was once called collective humanity have disintegrated before diverse (and often suicidal) technological dreams, Benjamin warns us of the gloom of an impending technological encircling and integration. At the same time, he also hints that we can powerfully hope to transcend this technological encompassment by restoring to our individual visions the “auratic” that can illuminate our human selves and societies once we critically try to think our way through the very processes of technological replicability.

I believe, it is perhaps too early, in terms of history, to observe the obsequies of this hope. But then, as Harold Innis has observed in a not-too-different context: “Every civilization has its own method of suicide.”

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180 Innis, “Industrialism and Cultural Values” (see note 32), 141.
4. Jacque Ellul and technology as an environment

We conclude this chapter by revisiting the thought of Jacques Ellul (1912–94), legal scholar, propaganda theorist, philosopher of technology, earlier a French Resistance fighter and a disillusioned Marxist who turned to lay Christian theology and Anarchism, who makes us aware of the media as operating as technologies, and within the operative systemic logic of technology as an environmental system which no longer rests on tradition but has become autonomous with respect to it as an ensemble of self-justificatory means.

Ellul was one of the many important thinkers who emerged after the Second World War to ponder about the human condition in the face of an increasing advocacy of technological solutions in the North (and the South) to what were earlier considered human problems. He is also the one most neglected. In cases where his presence is granted, Ellul is acknowledged for making “the baldest statement of technological determinism”, and treated as an extreme and naive kind of technological determinist “for whom technology is technique and

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181 Ellul’s name is not often heard in historical treatments of the French intellectual scene of the fifties and the sixties. Even when these studies locate popular French intellectuals as busily critiquing the abstract nature of “Man” or “instrumental Reason”, and also pondering about the wonders that Heidegger’s thoughts on the metaphysics of subjectivity held for their individual critiques, Ellul does not find a cursory mention. For a representative example of this, we can refer to Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

182 Bruce Bimber, "Three Faces of Technological Determinism," in Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism, edited by Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1998), 82. Bimber finds that Ellul offers a normative account of technological determinism through his insistence on the domination of social, political, and economic life by the adopted goals of technological logic and efficiency. Conversely, the broader part of Bimber’s essay concerns itself with proving that Karl Marx was not a technological determinist on nomological counts.
everything is technique and therefore all human actions are technological”. In rare sympathetic treatments, Ellul is located in “a grand tradition of romantic protest against mechanization”, starting from the German Romantics and leading on to Heidegger, which is suspicious of the affective nature of everything technological.

My purpose here is less to defend to Ellul against charges of technological determinism than to understand his thoughts on the media in terms of his understanding of the inclusionary practices of the media acting as environments within the broader framework of a technology-mediated environment. But I also feel an awareness of some of his thoughts on what he calls the “technological system” precedes this understanding. Therefore, what follows is a brief outline of Ellul’s thoughts on technology as a systemic imperative, with occasional (and sketchy) comparisons to the thoughts of other thinkers on technology, indulged in only for purposes of better comprehension, and followed by Ellul’s thoughts on media technology.

**Technical autonomy and technical intention**

Early in the twentieth century, in the face of an unprecedented rise in technological innovations, applications, and anticipatory technological desires in the Northern societies, thinkers like Thorstein Veblen had referred to a

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“technological system of tangible performance” and to the “stubborn logic of technology” operating in the minds of scientists and technicians, and staff of the mechanical industries who excluded as unreal anything that could not be “stated in terms of tangible performance”, and thus reducing the economic sphere, structured under credit and financial obligations (those that developed from certain principles of legal formality in the eighteenth century) to “a tissue of make-believe”.¹⁸⁵ For others like Lewis Mumford, the twentieth century’s excessive and often obsessive preoccupation with technology was the accentuation of a timelessly recurrent and transhistorical conflict between personal autonomy and institutional regulation that is “deeply embedded in technology itself”.¹⁸⁶ And then, there was Martin Heidegger who found the (again, transhistorical) “essence” of modern technology in the dominion of “Enframing” (“as a destining of revealing”) where technology itself ceases to be a factor for consideration apart from its “essence”.¹⁸⁷ This “essence” exceeds both the instrumental and the technical to carry out an ordering: the formation of a “culture of universal control”

¹⁸⁵ Thorstein Veblen, The Engineers and the Price System (1921; Kitchener, Ontario: Batoche Books, 2001), 47. What characterises the formation, according to Veblen, is the increasing dependency on the growth of technical knowledge and the use of tools. For Veblen, this is also a cultural transition, observable in historical terms, from a peaceable to a “predatory culture”. Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 19.

¹⁸⁶ Lewis Mumford, “Authoritarian and Democratic Technics,” Technology and Culture 5, no. 1 (1964): 2. “My thesis, to put it bluntly,” observes Mumford, “is that from late neolithic times in the Near East, right down to our own day, two technologies have recurrently existed side by side: one authoritarian, the other democratic, the first system-centered, immensely powerful, but inherently unstable, the other man-centered, relatively weak, but resourceful and durable”.

where “(n)othing escapes it, not even its human makers”, and where nothing is perhaps possible except a contemplation of Dasein. During and after the Second World War, a selective appropriation of Heidegger's thoughts followed in the works of many “Left Heideggerian” thinkers, the most notable of them being Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse, who tried to reconcile Heidegger's normative questioning of technology with a Marxist critique of what Adorno and Horkheimer termed as “instrumental rationality”. In Hannah Arendt’s view, the historical arrival of technological automation shatters “the very purposefulness of the world, the fact that objects are the ends for which tools and implements are

188 In Andrew Feenburg’s reading, both Ellul and Heidegger indulge in a “substantive” critique of technology as they assign a “more than instrumental, a substantive, content to technical mediation” in the sense that technology is not neutral but embodies specific values, and that technology exceeds mere instrumentality to form this “culture of universal control” [Feenberg, Questioning Technology, 2-3]. While Feenburg is right to an extent in identifying the similarity of both Ellul and Heidegger in their questioning of the “neutrality” of technology, for Heidegger it is not simply technology but its “essence” that lays claim to this universal control. “Enframing,” through which this “essence” reveals itself, according to Heidegger, “is nothing technological—nothing on the order of a machine. It is the way in which the real reveals itself as standing-reserve” [Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology,” 23]. If for Heidegger the “essence” of technology can be ascertained on the realm of contemplation, according to Ellul, the “technological system” (“a real universe, which constitutes itself as a symbolic system”) is open to empirical and intersubjective verifications [Jacques Ellul, The Technological System (New York: Continuum, 1980), 177]. As we will see later, Ellul takes a more nuanced stand against the question of “universal control”.

189 As Richard Rojcewicz observes: “Insofar as the question concerns technology, insofar as technology itself is the theme, the question has been answered. The essence of modern technology has been brought to light as composing, as an all-encompassing imposition...The question does not concern technology; it concerns the questioner, Dasein. To answer the question is then not simply to bring the essence of modern technology into the light but, rather, to resolve thereby some issue of pressing interest to Dasein” [Richard Rojcewicz, The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006),127-128]. But there is also another less mundane problem at hand. Despite the series of postmodern dissociations of the man’s thought from the life he lived, there is no easy doing away with the fact that Heidegger’s philosophical formulation of the Dasein historically developed, as Richard Wolin points out, in disturbing proximity to the worldview of National Socialism in a “central European cultural imaginary” where the terms “technology”, “America”, and “Jews” were considered almost interchangeable, and where the invocation of one of these terms in the German social arena tended to conjure up the other two [Richard Wolin, The Seduction of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance with Fascism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004), 301]. Heidegger’s use of the term Dasein, unless we are speaking in terms of an ahistorical and self-encompassing realm of contemplation, cannot be freed of these uneasy historical associations.
designed;”\(^{190}\) in other words, modern technology destroys what has earlier existed as the very “purpose” of *homo faber*. Further, if modern technology has changed “the very worldliness of the human artifice”, technology also contains the potential to transform “the household of nature as we have known it since the beginning of our world to the same extent or even more” in the future.\(^{191}\) If technology contains incidental hints of future totalitarianism inherent in its purpose, Arendt feels it is also the means which can be put to the right use mainly through politics, to which it is always subservient.\(^{192}\) In Herbert Marcuse’s careful engagement with the more historically concrete expression of “technological rationality”, technology always has two aspects. On the one hand, technology is a manifestation of instrumentality—“as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize the machine age;” on the other hand, it simultaneously exists as an instrument (or a conglomeration of instruments) as “a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination”.\(^{193}\) However, what all these diverse views of technology

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\(^{191}\) Ibid.

\(^{192}\) It is not incidental, therefore, that Arendt’s historical identification of the “devices” for political reorganization and colonial domination (in race as a “principle of the body politic” and bureaucracy as a “principle of foreign domination”) and her detailed discussion of the rise of totalitarianism in the modern world by and large overlooks the role technology has played in the advent of these “devices”. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948; New York and London: Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 1994).

\(^{193}\) Herbert Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” 1941, in *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol.1, edited by Douglas Kellner (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 41. Unlike Heidegger’s insistence on inclusiveness, Marcuse’s emphasis is more on the spreading out of the “mechanics of conformity” from the technological into the realms of the social and the psychological through the social imperatives of a “culture of technology” which
have in common, in the most general of terms, is that they take critical positions against modern technology which they find containing hints of a totalitarian, artificial (as against the “natural”), and closed machinistic universe devoid of the diversity of human reflection, choices, and conscious human deliberations, and they also try to contain an outlining of the possibilities of emancipation from within the universal schema of the “unnatural” universe constituted by technology. Jacques Ellul’s outlining of the “technological system” differs on three counts.

Primarily, Ellul sees technology as constituting an environment order (where technology is operational inside a social setting with human participants to its working) rather than a totalitarian and closed system devoid of human participation. From this perspective, he considers the comparison of the “technological system” to the machine as both erroneous and reductive, that is, considered either in terms of an instrument (the symptomatic viewing of technology as tools), or the conditions of its instrumentality (the viewing of technology as the enframing of some means-end pattern). For Ellul, technology refers to an incessant search for “the one best way” to achieve any designated objective; it consists of a ensemble of practices: “the totality of methods rationally appears autonomous, but is not. It is rather through the “blending” of the technical and the social that technical principles become historically active and are embodied in concrete technical disciplines where, as Andrew Feenberg observes, this “blending” is defining for the nature of technology [Feenberg, Questioning Technology, 162]. Ellul, as we will see reaches similar conclusions, but he finds that the “weakness” of Marcuse’s analysis also lies here, in his failure to acknowledge the autonomy of technology. Though Marcuse’s formulation grants an autonomous character to technology, Ellul observes, Marcuse remains extra careful not to completely do away with the Marxist notion of technology as means [Ellul, Technological System, 51 n. 5].

arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity” (Ellul’s emphases). If technology appears decisive—playing a pivotal role in modern societies like spirituality in the European “Middle Ages” or the idea of the individual in the nineteenth century—it cannot be simplistically and exclusively represented by the machine, which remains an external object for the human (as in “man and the machine”), and at the same time, the (unattainable) ideal aspired by technology.

The conflation of the society with the machine, argues Ellul, has got more to do with people’s utopian (and dystopian, for someone’s utopia is always someone else’s nightmare) visions concerning society than with the reality of the technological condition. For the same reason, Ellul is dismissive of McLuhan’s apocalyptic vision of the televised “global village” where a certain form of media technology seems to transforms society itself to a perfunctory mechanical system, a mega-machine. It is impossible, says Ellul, precisely because society is full of “short circuits, jammings, chaos, and also huge nontechnicized voids”, and at the same time, the human subject “has not really been mechanized to the point of being just a gear”. Neither is technology interested in nor is it capable of manufacturing human robots; instead, it is rather keen in encouraging diversity,

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197 Ibid., 18-19. As Ellul observes: “We must remember that all utopians of the past, without a single exception, have presented society exactly as a megamachine. Each utopia has been an exact repetition of an ideal organization, a perfect conjunction between the various parts of the social body. Utopia presents a flawless totalitarian society, which finally assures man of equality, the future, and so on... What characterized all these descriptions was that the utopia could not come true.”
198 Ibid., 17-18.
altruism, and nonconformity in a human being, but only to integrate him into the “technological system” like the Nazi soldier, the Bolshevik commissar, or the managerial trainee who is trained for individual resourcefulness and non-servility towards superiors, but whose freedom exists only within the regimentation he operates. What Ellul also tries to emphasize here is that the “technological system” intrudes into the complex of social formations, rather than ensconcing them inside a closed, mechanical, and homogenized world:

*It does not turn society into a machine.* It fashions society in terms of its necessities; it uses society as an underpinning; it transforms certain of society’s structures. But there is always something unpredictable, incoherent, and irreducible in the social body (Ellul’s emphases).199

In other words, Ellul’s attempt is to contextualize the machine,200 without the fears of machinistic homogenization, and locate it within a broader understanding of technology as a set of socially-embedded intentionalities with varying emphases on rationality, efficiency and procedure in different social contexts.201 Unlike Lewis Mumford, or for that matter Heidegger, for whom the history of technology extends from ancient human history to the present as a slow unfolding

199 Ibid., 18.
201 Modern critics of Ellul have quite often overlooked this point. For example, we can look at Bruno Latour, the theorist who grants non-human creatures and non-living objects the status of *actors* in the creation of short-lived interactions or new associations that replace the social [See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 63-86]. Latour feels that Ellul’s “protectionism” springs from his fear of the machine. And he easily dismisses Ellul as absurd for his failure to understand, if not the role of machines as “cultural objects”, then the concerns of the human beings who live off the machines: “Protecting human beings from the domination of machines and technocrats is a laudable enterprise, but if the machines are full of human beings who find their salvation there, such a protection is merely absurd” [Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 124]. As we will later see, Ellul is on the contrary very much conscious of the status of these participants.
of collisions and integrative attempts of technology, Ellul attaches greater weight to the historical occurrence of the Industrial Revolution as the defining moment in humanity’s relationship with technology, from where the power of technology as an ensemble of means starts overtaking the productive utility of the machine.\(^{202}\) (The question concerning the neutrality of technology becomes relevant here, for Ellul points out that all theories concerning the neutrality of technology too have a distinct historical origin: they originated after industrialization had taken concrete shape in the Northern societies.\(^{203}\) Even if the machine is deeply symptomatic of technology—and historically its first palpable, substantial, and imposing example—it forms a part rather than being representative of the entire “technological system” which, Ellul contends, appears, develops, exists, and propagates “only to the extent that it integrates into a social body existing apart from it”.\(^{204}\) Therefore, the “technological system” is not a closed system, but something inevitably open, and non-repetitive:

“(I)t is a system in that each technological factor (a certain machine, for instance), is first linked to, connected with, dependent on, the ensemble of other technological factors before it relates to nontechnological elements. Or rather, to the extent that technology has become an

\(^{202}\) As Paul A. Taylor and Jan Ll. Harris observe in this context, in the case of Heidegger’s exposition, there remains the difficulty of “determining exactly at what point techne or authentic production ceased and technology as enframing emerged”; in contrast, with Ellul it is clear that the Industrial Revolution can be identified as the historical juncture where “technological innovation breaks with earlier culturally bound forms of technology, i.e. mechanization.” Paul A. Taylor and Jan L. Harris, *Digital Matters: Theory and Culture of the Matrix* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 64.


\(^{204}\) Ibid., 80-81.
environment, each technological factor is situated in that environment and constitutes it by subsisting on it.\textsuperscript{205}

It is also clear from the above that Ellul differs sharply from the standard Marxist analyses of technology. Technology in Marxism falls under the broader category of the means (or instruments) of production (including tools, machines, land, and raw material) that are held in possession as private property in the alienated mode of production known as capitalism. Seen in isolation, the machine appears in liberal thought as an instrument that reduces the burden of the workers and produces more things in a short time. For Marx, however, the arrival of the machine historically represents the highest stage of antagonism between labour and the instrument of production, where the machine threatens the workers like a ghastly presence—causing unforeseen accidents and deaths, and at the same time, squeezing unlimited labour from the “use value perspective” to extract profit instead of from the perspective of value, and material wealth, used with a “natural” viewpoint.\textsuperscript{206} Thus, the machine becomes the final ‘metaphysical object’ of the Marxist account of alienation, as Amy E. Wendling points out, it takes up “the same structural position as God in Feuerbach or the absolutist state in Rousseau”—where it exists as a fetishized subject non-optimally put to use in a totalizing mode of capitalistic production as the means to extract profit, and, its self-same materiality bears the characteristic birth-marks of the political

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 80.

\textsuperscript{206} Ranganayakamma, \textit{An Introduction to Marx’s 'Capital'}, vol. 2 (Hyderabad: Sweet Home Publications, 1999), 80.
conditions of the ownership of the mode of production that brought it into being.\textsuperscript{207}

Revert the conditions of ownership, Marx believed, the ghosts will flee the machine and the fetters attached to it at the time of its birth will fall off, and technology in a more general sense will cease to function in that frighteningly totalizing mode. In other words, if Marx's social hypothesis does not see technology as "neutral", it does insist on seeing technology as a functional ideology—science being an ideology, and therefore biased (and exorcized) in serving and reflecting the ideas of the ruling classes, utilizing the alienated instrument of production to extend ruling class domination.

This brings us to the benchmark Marxist argument that technology (as a system of objects) appears as a functional ideology in societies only because it is subject to the profit motive of a certain system of production that turns technology away from its "true ends". According to Ellul, this is merely a structural analysis of objects in the environment: an analysis which holds that the perfecting of objects is the imaginary solution to all kinds of conflicts: a general conclusion based on a partial analysis.\textsuperscript{208}


\textsuperscript{208} Ellul, \textit{Technological System}, 22 n. 10. And of course this is linked with the closed utopianism of a totalitarian vision.
Ellul refrains from referring to the “technological system” in terms of machine fetishism, the alienated means of production in the Marxist sense. Rather, he points out that unlike the machine industry of the mid-nineteenth century (the subject of Marx’s analysis) where the economic totality was based on the surplus value produced by the exploited labour of the workers, the connection between technology and machine industry widens to a considerable extent in the “technological system” where “(t)he value factor is no longer human work but scientific invention and technological innovation” which is not incidentally (and always uncritically) accepted in both “communist” and “free-market” discourses.

Moreover, the quest for profit does not entirely determine the technological impetus either; it is the “motion of technostructure” which grants primacy to the discovery and application of all possible technologies apparently unrelated by any acts of imagination, existing in complex relations or in disparate technological

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209 To be more accurate, Ellul does not disagree with the standard Marxist analysis that deplores the tendency to attribute to machines the powers over humanity which arise more from social relations. What he objects to is that the “technological system” cannot be conceptualised only in terms of machine fetishism. For Marxist thinkers on technology like Harry Braverman though this is an undisguised exoneration of capitalism, too characteristic of Ellul’s bourgeois ideology, that refuses to see the “‘master,’ standing behind the machine, who dominates, pumps dry, the living labor power” [Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century (1974: New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 158]. For Ellul, Marx’s account of the transformation of the worker into proletariat does not fix the blame on capitalists wanting to extract maximum profits. Rather, Marx’s account shows that mechanization and the division of labour (the two major technological advances which have served as foundation for the rest) accounted for the change, where capitalists historically acted more as intermediaries than sorcerers in setting in motion the forces of production. Ellul holds that this analysis has provided further proof in the twentieth century: “The technicization in the USSR demanded the creation of a proletariat at least as unhappy as that of England in 1850. The same is taking place in Third World countries that are taking the path to industrialization and technicization.” Jacques Ellul, The Technological Bluff (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 49.

210 Ellul, Technological System, 3-4.

211 If there is a link between these two, Ellul points out that both chose to remain unaware that “technological progress” raises more and greater problems than it solves.
sectors, and with different sets of priorities, disparities, growth, multiplicity of applications, and approaches that have some connection to machine fetishism but cannot be reduced to that. (It is in this context that Ellul dismisses claims of causal progression of technology and the vague claim made by technicians of “making the dreams of mankind come true”. He notes that the justifications for all technological projects are added a posteriori where finalities are found adventitious to them, and where objectives are fixed by specialists and technicians—who “are neither philosophers nor moralists”—working in their speciality, mostly without prioritizing the need for lofty ideas and human wants. This motion is indicative, according to Ellul, of technology’s triumph over humanity where the “primacy of technology is decided without debate, discussion, assembly, or vote” across societies and nations, and further points to the autonomy that the technology achieves as a systemic imperative, independent

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212 As Raymond William also notes: “The basic assumption of technological determinism is that a new technology—a printing press or a communication satellite—‘emerges’ from technical study and experiment. It then changes the society or the sector into which it has ‘emerged’. ‘We’ adopt it, because it is the new modern way.” Williams, *Television*, 120.

213 According to Ellul, these claims are outright delirious: “It is downright absurd to believe that the technicians who worked on airplanes did it because they wanted to realize the myth of Icarus! True, there has, occasionally, been a vague sentiment (crossing the oceans, flying, going to the moon); but can we claim that some dream was at the origin of radio, printing, gun powder? This rationale is a poetic addendum, taken on by technicians with a literary background” (Ellul’s emphasis). Ellul, *Technological System*, 257.

214 Hannah Arendt draws similar conclusions as she observes that the historical origins of modern technology have little to do with the facilitation of human labour in the perfecting of tools than an exclusive and “an altogether non-practical search for useless knowledge” [Arendt, *Human Condition*, 41]. Arendt’s example is that of the watch: one of the first modern instruments which, apart from its practical use, upset humanity’s thinking of time and interpretive perceptions about the universe, and also continues as a metaphor to excite diverse philosophical speculations on creation and evolution to this day. Arendt points out that the watch was not invented for purposes of practical life in the first place, but exclusively to conduct highly “theoretical” experiments with nature. Once its practical use became evident, the watch “changed the whole rhythm and the very physiognomy of human life; but from the standpoint of the inventors, this was a mere incident” (ibid.).


216 Ibid., 236.
of any system of human control—whether physical, spiritual, or political—and justified through propaganda that bases itself on the latest and most efficient of the technologies available.217

However, the autonomy218 of the “technological system” does not result in the blurring the boundaries of states and nations in an enhanced Orwellian nightmare of “universal control”.219 What he seems to emphasize more is that the demand for enhanced technology is less dependent on political ideologies of the state than on the technological imperative by which the state, by choice or compulsion, gives it a preferential and essentially obligatory character.220

It is the emergence of “an intertechnological relationship, the emergence of an ensemble of mediations” through multiple technical subsystems that constitutes technology into a system,221 and it functions “only to the extent that each of these subsystems functions and their interrelations is correct”.222 When these interrelations malfunction, “technology nourishes itself with its own failures”223: the useful (effective) answers to all dilemmas, problems, and dangers caused by any technological intervention are found only in further technological responses,

218 Apart from being autonomous, the “technological system” is also characterized by its unity, universality, and totalization. But these conditions affirm the capacity of the “technological system” to be open-ended in the sense of being all inclusive. Lovekin, Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness, 159.
219 We have already seen that Ellul is dismissive of these totalitarian visions.
220 Ellul, Technological System, 136-37. As he bluntly puts it: “Ideological imperialism is nonsense. Only the technological weight gives true superiority.” Ibid., 137.
221 Ibid., 92.
222 Ibid., 108.
223 Ibid., 224.
and always at an operational level. Self-augmentation becomes an important characteristic of the “technological system” where technology starts resembling a religion and becomes an incontestable object of faith, an end-in-itself.

It is here that the question of technical intention also becomes relevant. Earlier, we have seen that Ellul refuses to view technology as an ahistorical unmoved mover as in Heidegger, or for that matter, agree to a metaphysical omnipresence of the “desiring machine” traceable through psychoanalytic methods, as in Deleuze and Guattari, that keeps reminding us of Heidegger. Moreover, as Karim H. Karim observes, it draws further strength from the mystical devotion to “the power of the fact” that is characteristic of post-Enlightenment empiricism. Karim H. Karim, “Jacques Ellul,” in Key Thinkers for the Information Society, edited by Christopher May (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 73.

This in fact dispels another point of criticism leveled against Ellul by Bruno Latour in his book Aramis, or The Love of Technology. The book tells the story of an automated train system called Aramis that did not materialise, along with Latour’s intention “to offer humanists a detailed analysis of a technology sufficiently magnificent and spiritual to convince them that the machines by which they are surrounded are cultural objects worthy of their attention and respect” [Bruno Latour, Aramis, or the Love of Technology (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 1996), viii]. In a section of this semi-fictional narrative composed of many voices (where even the train system speaks in a human voice), Latour asks: If an advanced technological project like Aramis involves an increasing number of expensive and complicated failures—if “(n)inety-eight percent of projects disappear in this game of roulette” — how can there be talk of about the autonomy of technology, that is except in jest? (Ibid., 127). In my reading, however, Latour’s book offers further proof on Ellul’s observation that technology is autonomous regarding questions of application, for even during a project roll-back the importance of application springs, as Latour himself testifies, not so much from human needs or sociological imperatives than from the technological context in which this ever-expanding project has chances of being integrated.

As for example, the introductory exposition to Anti-Oedipus, their celebrated psychonanalytical critique of capitalism: “Everywhere it is machines-real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections... we are all handymen: each with his little machines” [Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1]. According to Deleuze and Guattari’s treatment of the term, the machine is defined as “as a system of interruptions or breaks (coupures). These breaks should in no way be considered as a separation from reality; rather, they operate along lines that vary according to whatever aspect of them we are considering. Every machine, in the first place, is related to a continual material flow (hylè) that it cuts into” (ibid., 36). However, this definition is precisely a separation from the material reality it acknowledges. For it takes as given, if not an unequivocal (and unmediated) truth of Being as in Heidegger, but a equally unequivocal manifestation of the plurality of a multitude of ontological beings as machines against a background of incorporeal universes that are in no ways material. Félix
David Menninger points out, the “technological system” in Ellul does not result from the activities of a non-human mechanical force acting autonomously on history, but more from “the ironic creation of exuberant human intentions evolving into uncompromising social necessities”, if not involving fatalism, but then containing a certain sense of the tragic in the unconditional submission of all traditional human ends to the technological imperative. This exuberance and the absence of the tragic is part of the technical intention involved in the making of the “technological system”; it feeds on the human penchant for power—“power which has as its object only power, in the widest sense of the word.”

The most difficult practical task, the human question in demythologizing technology, calls for a consideration of the relations “between the technicians and those who try to pose the technical problem”, and a penetration into technical intention. Ellul shows that any technological project that provides proof of “technological progress” necessarily involves the pre-existence of technical intention, and a “technico-military-statist complex” —“an enormous organization, of an active administrative type, which authorizes this progress and


If the “military-industrial complex” narrowly applies only to a certain kind of capitalist organization, Ellul’s use of the term “technico-military-statist complex” points out that the power of the industry is sanctioned by the power of the state, and the blame is to be fixed more on the “technological system”, along with the state, which continues to be an important champion of technology, apart from its control over the military. This complex, according to Ellul, prevents an awareness of the the great number of unforeseen effects, the negative effects, and dangers of technological transformation. Ellul, Technological Bluff, 75.
integrates it, unruffled, in the overall structure.”

And “technological progress” necessarily becomes a manifestation of human power: a dark mirror where the human creature in its quest for power, and devoid of history or tradition, admires itself in self-conscious arrogance, and with increased comfort as an accidental by-product.

The second important difference Ellul has with the different critiques of technology mentioned above is that he does not limit himself to aesthetic or ethical judgements on technology. That is, if modern technology seems to create an artificial universe, its artificiality is not a point of sustained criticism for Ellul. Nor does he assign a eminent and normative value to the “natural”.

Rather, he indicates that the autonomy of the “technological system” raises five important concerns with regard to values and morals. One, technology contains nothing moral, spiritual, or human and does not proceed in terms of a moral ideal: it considers itself as a progressive procedure that always moves forward and has no meaning because it has no end, apart from its capacities for self-augmentation. Two, technology does not tolerate any ethical or moral judgement—that is, it cannot allow morality or the question of ethics into consequences it has already

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231 Ellul, *Technological System*, 64.
232 Ibid., 69.
233 Many modern thinkers on technology often miss this point as well. For example, in Joseph D. Pitt’s reading, Ellul extends on an observation from the premise of ethics (that tools and or a system of technologies can cause a change in values by influencing the decision-making process) to visualize the system of technologies as an independent player. For Pitt, this is an exaggeration beyond doubt. Joseph C. Pitt, *Thinking about Technology: Foundations of the Philosophy of Technology* (New York and London: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), 87.
235 Ellul, *Technological System*, 47.
rejected in principle. (On the same count, it cannot be guided by economic or political activity, precisely because both economics and politics have to take moral values into account while defining their objectives.)

The third follows from the second: technology cannot be halted from a moral or an ethical reason or standpoint. The fourth relates to legitimacy: anything technological is legitimate where technology itself becomes the power that legitimizes it. The fifth concern follows from the fourth: technology is accepted as a universal moral value—whatever supports it is good, whatever opposes it is condemnable, and therefore ignored into irrelevance or violently rendered as obsolete.236

The third important difference that Ellul has with the other critiques of technology concerns the question of emancipation, that is, whether human emancipation from the technological paradigm, is possible from within the “technological system”. Unlike others, Ellul answers more on the negative. He refuses to provide a theoretical solution to all the problems he identifies in the “technological system”.237 He feels that any such attempt will try to close itself to the totality of solutions it proposes, which can then only lead to another form of...

236 Ibid., 145-153.
237 For then his theoretical solution has to take into account three criteria to explain any historical complexity: the social determinants that can explain blanks, points of rupture, and return, the possibility of these determinants to influence and combine with other determinants, and also “an imponderable element that intervenes to bring something to view”. For Ellul, this “imponderable element” is not social, political, or ideological, and neither is it the divine. It only serves as a pointer to the fact rigorous causality also faces the practical impossibility of defining everything, and providing a solution that privileges “one social relation or one phenomenon a guiding thread or a single dominant and determinative factor in human history” over all the real complexities that characterise human life and history. Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (London: Marshall Morgan and Scott Publications Ltd, 1989), 89-92.
socio-political systematization. However, if the effects of the “technological system” appear irreversible, the situation is not absolutely irremediable. But it requires us, as human beings, to “become aware of this independence of the technological system, which is opposed by the reassuring conviction of technological neutrality,” and make strenuous efforts to be aware of technical intention. According to Ellul, there can be concrete intervention at two levels. Either, one has to be a technician and at the same time a critic of technology who “can try to act upon the components making up the next technological advance”, or, one “must try to invent nontechnological yet applicable means for living and surviving in this technological environment”. Though Ellul dismisses the first as an absurd possibility, he allows some hope concerning the second.

*The technological media and the technological environment*

Where do the “mass media” figure in Ellul’s conceptualization of the “technological system”? As we have seen earlier, Ellul does not agree with McLuhan’s identification of the “mass media” as the sole explanation for everything happening in society. If there is an “image explosion” that carries out a “humiliation of the word”, the images proliferate only because certain equipment produce them: Ellul feels that it serves a pointer to the “technological system” that

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238 Ellul, *Technological System*, 203. As Ellul observes in this context: “I am making a dialectical ensemble that is open and not closed and I am making sure not to present solutions of the ensemble, responses to problems, theoretical outlets for the future. If I did do these things, I too would be contributing to the technological totalization. But my not doing them leaves the reader dissatisfied and makes it seem that by refusing, I must therefore be hostile to technology” (ibid., 204 n. 1).

239 Ibid., 155.

240 Ibid., 282.
works on the specific logic of applying and explaining anything that appears even remotely as a technological possibility.\textsuperscript{241} For Ellul, then, the “mass media” are primarily technological media—“(t)hey are produced by technological progress, they accompany it, they are closely tied to it, and they derive from each technological modification.”\textsuperscript{242} They serve the purposes of integrating human beings to the “technological system”, and as Karim H. Karim observes in this context, they act as “integration propagandists” to dress up “reality” within the myths of technological civilization, which also forms the basis of modern states.\textsuperscript{243}

What is however more important for Ellul is that the symbolic support that earlier existed for human communication is increasingly replaced by a technological support, creating an environment of “autonomous mediation” where the relation between the technology and the human appears nonmediated:

The social or individual consciousness today is formed directly by the presence of technology, by man’s immersion in that environment, without the mediation of thought, for which technology would only be an object, without the mediation of culture.\textsuperscript{244}

In other words, the relation to technology becomes immediate, where the human being’s environment increasingly adapts to and tries to becomes a function of


\textsuperscript{242} Ellul, \textit{Technological System}, 9.

\textsuperscript{243} Karim H Karim, “Constructions of the Islamic Peril in English-Language Canadian Print Media: Discourses on Power and Violence” (PhD diss., Graduate Program in Communication, McGill University, Montreal, 1996), 33.

\textsuperscript{244} Ellul, \textit{Technological System}, 38.
technology through technological mediation. It does not imply that human consciousness simply reflects the technological environment, as in McLuhan’s problematic: “The Medium is the Message”. Rather, technology as an environment (which “permeates the totality of experience and social practice”) invades and dominates other environments that were naturally existing and previously shaped by complex symbols, rituals, customs and traditions now destructured beyond reach, for technology “neutralizes and designifies anything it does not keep”.

Contrary to popularly-held assumptions that sharply distinguish between media technologies and the uses to which they are put, the “mass media” never belonged to these earlier environments: they do not, and never did provide a symbolic context for tradition or practical knowledge. So all talk of deterioration and decline of “ethics” and “news-value” in newspapers (the television has yet to catch up with that) becomes less important. The “mass media”, as constitutive technologies that are part of the technological ensemble, provide abstract information that supplants tradition or common experience with privileged, decontextualized, and meaningless technical knowledge on the one hand, and ascribes value—the value granted by the “technological system”—to the abstract nature of this knowledge. The result is a “flattening out” of all information that

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246 Ibid.
247 As we have seen earlier, both Kracauer and Benjamin have pondered over this question, and looked for solutions.
248 Ellul, Technological System, 46.
raises serious questions concerning the possibility of knowing what is real because there exists the incompatibility of criteria in the first place.249

(The above does not merely point to the importance the “mass media” attach to what costumes “celebrities” wear for their dinners, or why they privilege the “sensational” and the “emotional” over regular “news” presupposing “objectivity”.250 Despite the extreme diversity of the world of “news”, the thoroughgoing agreement of all “news” as “immediate data of consciousness”251 to all intents and purposes carried by the “mass media” lies in the unity of the technological processes that necessarily forces them to assign, contain and privilege a particular vision of the world on a page and within the viewing limits of a box-shaped electronic receptacle. If the idea of “information is power”, an idea existing much prior to the famous meditation by Francis Bacon, holds that knowledge and power are reciprocal, Ellul points out that it is not an exact coincidence, for the acquiring and withholding of information equally confer power.252 In the case of the “mass media” where there exists “an aristocracy of transmitters and a plebeian mass of receivers, audiences, and spectators”,253 the

249 Ellul, Technological Bluff, 88.
250 As Richard Stivers points out, the decline of shared meaning in this sway of abstract knowledge also heightens the need for emotional knowledge that develops “as an end in itself rather than as epiphenomenon of shared knowledge”. Richard Stivers, Shades of Loneliness: Pathologies of a Technological Society (Lanham, Maryland and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 22.
253 Ibid., 106.
denial, withholding, and the non-use of knowledge from their consuming “public”, also does impart power to them.)

Thus, we arrive at a problem similar to the one with which we began this chapter. How can we separate “information” propagated by the “mass media” from their processes of making and transmission? Especially after we know that it is not just “information” shared as knowledge, but something that is the methods of its making, and also its processes of transmission, which are not neutral and all subject to serious doubt? As Ellul asks, “where exactly is the boundary between propaganda, a massive affirmation of simplified facts, and information made up of general formulas, elementary themes, over which the reader has not the slightest control or power?”

There are no easy answers to this problem. But then again, our concern is less to penetrate into the mysteries of the “mass media” for final solutions. If we are not to search indefinitely for the “purity” of information in different media systems, Ellul tells us that the first step to comprehension is an awareness of the “mass media” as self-referential technologies propelled by human intent, yet characterized by the very absence of human dialogue in their technological separation of the informer and the informed, where the “mass media” can only refer to themselves.

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Conclusion

A clarification should be perhaps made here concerning the use of the term “theory”. Unlike older theories of the natural sciences which as conceptual devices tolerate no gradual transitions, residual inequalities and intersubjective speculations, and which in most cases can still be demonstrated externally (albeit in strict laboratory conditions, and the rigid assumption of constants), older theories of the social—like the ones we have dealt with, and those which cannot be reduced to simplistic manifestoes of praxis that think in terms of advances, regressions, and applicabilities—derive their relevance more from the contemplative and speculative thought they inspire on society rather than those continuous and systematic attempts to explain and replace it with radically new, improved and technologized ones. “Theory” is not a touchpad screen of applications or a fabulous device for prescriptive use in social spaces: it is something that inspires us to speculate and to think, and has an important element of contemplative justice which might not (and perhaps should not) be realizable in the real world.

Categorization is as (if not more) dangerous as the processes of selective naturalization. In the discussion that has followed, I’ve tried to remain conscious of the subsequent naturalizations of these individual theorists, and also tried to read them without relying more on the honorific or emasculating glosses that posterity has thrust upon them. To suit the purpose of this dissertation, I have paid more attention to what can be considered relevant in the context of the print
media. It follows that the purpose of this exploration was not to eulogize, but to locate the way on a moonless night with selective new light from dead stars who have died while obstinately refusing to come down to earth. The categories that include each of them here are by no means inclusive; often they overlap, intersect and reiterate overwhelming theoretical concerns that have found relatively few takers in the last century. If a common thread can be found in them, it is that in terms of a critical approach all are concerned with the inclusionary practices of media technologies acting as environments, and they all seem to hint that the change of valency within “information” that we find off the “mass media” comes less from within contemplations on the nature of the “information” itself, than the technological which privileges, shapes, and mediates that “information”. It is once again important to note in this context that we are not talking about a mystery that would be solved once it is made known. Rather, as the broader part of the different arguments collated in this chapter has shown, the problem is understood slightly better if we try to understand the “mass media” in terms of what they are: profit-driven information machines that are at the same time mediating environments that impose severe limits on the society’s vision of what constitutes reality. In the next chapter, in the light of this insight and further exploring questions and contemplations on the “mass media” and news-making processes, I attempt to understand how the newsmaking processes takes place within print media establishments. It is followed by the argument that there remains the need for a closer consideration of the materiality of “news”-manufacture that looks beyond the analysis of mediated content while approaching print media spaces.