

ECHOGRAPHIES OF
TELEVISION

JACQUES DERRIDA AND
BERNARD STIEGLER

With the exception of a few very slight modifications (changes in the length or punctuation of a sentence, the addition of a brief note clarifying a context, the division into chapters, each bearing a title), this text corresponds to the full and literal transcription of an improvised interview shot by Jean-Christophe Rosé under the auspices of the INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel), on Wednesday, December 22, 1993.

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RIGHT OF INSPECTION

BERNARD STIEGLER *When I first came to you with the idea for this recording, you asked that the conditions of its use be clearly defined. You wished, in particular, to exercise your right of inspection [droit de regard] over the use that might be made of the images we are recording at this very moment. Could you explain your reasons for making this request? Much more generally, what would a “right of inspection” be in the era of television and of what you recently dubbed “teletechnologies”?*

JACQUES DERRIDA *If I made such a request, if I voiced it in principle and in general, it was, first of all, without any great illusion. Without any illusion as to the effectiveness of such a “right of inspection.” But in order to recall, precisely, its principle. We know it is impossible to control these things. It is already impossible in the domain of publication, where “intellectuals” and writers would be “more at home,” as it were, under cover of the written. Control of written publication is already difficult; it is a fortiori when we are talking about cameras, film, and television. And so, if I wished to have this right of inspection, it was without any illusion, but also without any protectionist or inquisitorial anxiety. It was simply to reaffirm a principle, that is to say, to have the opportunity to state this principle, to propose it. Like many others, I think that one of the problems experienced, really by anyone who expresses himself in front of a camera, but particularly by intellectuals, teachers or writers, who are concerned to prepare or watch what they say or to proceed with caution, one of these problems which can turn into a political drama, is that*



they feel enjoined by a contradictory injunction: they must not refuse to bear witness or cut themselves off from the public sphere, which is dominated, today, by television in general, but at the same time, they are less than they are elsewhere in a position – I won't say to appropriate – but in any case to adapt the conditions of production, of recording, of what we're in the process of doing here and now, in such artificial conditions, to their own requirements. And I'm not even talking about broadcast or distribution yet.

Already, I have the impression that our control is very limited. I am *at home* [chez moi],¹ but with all these machines and all these prostheses watching, surrounding, seducing us, the quote “natural” conditions of expression, discussion, reflection, deliberation are to a large extent breached, falsified, warped. One's first impulse would therefore be to at least try to reconstitute the conditions in which one would be able to say what one wants to say at the rhythm at which and in the conditions in which one wants to say it. And has the right to say it. And in the ways that

would be least inappropriate. This is always difficult. It is *never* purely and simply possible, but it is *particularly* difficult in front of the camera. What is more, the “home” [*le “chez-soi”*] to which I just alluded in passing (the *casa* hidden in the *etymon* of this little word “*chez*”) is no doubt what is most violently affected by the intrusion, in truth by the breaking and entering [*l’effraction*] of the telepowers we’re getting ready to talk about here – as violently injured, moreover, as the historical distinction (it is old, but not natural and not timeless) between public and private space.

What I would have liked to convey by this illusionless request is the paradox of a task or a watchword: perhaps it is necessary to fight, today, *not against* teletechnologies, television, radio, e-mail or the Internet but, on the contrary, so that the development of these media will make more room for the norms that a number of citizens would be well within their rights to propose, affirm, and lay claim to – particularly those “intellectuals,” artists, writers, philosophers, analysts, scientists, certain journalists and media professionals, too, who would like to say something about the media or analyze them at the same rhythm at which we are trying to do this together, here and now. That’s all I wanted to suggest.

The expression you used at the end of your question, “right of inspection,” is obviously a very ambiguous one. It may refer to abusive authority, authority which has been usurped, violently appropriated or imposed in a situation where we don’t “naturally” have any rights. The law of inspection is furthermore in itself an authority against which one might revolt. Who has right of inspection over whom? Right, every right, in a certain sense, is right of inspection, every right gives the right of inspection. Right equals “right of inspection.” Kant reminded us of this, that there is no right without the ability to exercise the force that will ensure it is respected. Thus there is no right that does not consist in conferring upon a power a right to control and surveillance and, therefore, a right of inspection, in a situation where nothing guarantees it “naturally.”

But in the context in which you raised it, you wanted to know, in a general way, what links the juridical, or the juridico-political, to seeing, to vision, but also to the capture of images, to their use. It remains a question as to who, in the end, is authorized to appear

[*se montrer*] but above all authorized to show [*montrer*], edit, store, interpret, and exploit images. It is a timeless question, but it is taking on original dimensions today. One would have to approach this specificity via the very general question of the right of inspection, which exceeds both our time and our culture. We are not going to go into this vast question, which would take us back to the Bible, to Plato or even to the question of the gaze [*le regard*] in other cultures. But even if we confine ourselves to framing this question exclusively in terms of our time and in terms of the technology of images, there is much to do. There is much to say, whether about the right to *penetrate* a “public” or “private” space, the right to “introduce” the eye and all these optical prostheses (movie cameras, still cameras, etc.) into the “home” of the other, or whether about the right to know who owns, who is able to appropriate, who is able to select, who is able to show images, directly political or not. I had used this expression, “right of inspection,” in reference to photography, to a mute photographic work,² the narrative matrices of which I had multiplied, but it goes far beyond the question of art – or of photography as art. It concerns everything that, in public space today, is regulated by the production and circulation of images, real or virtual, and thus of gazes, eyes, optical prostheses, etc.

It is also an institutional question and a question of the right of access to archival images.

Yes.

I'm thinking, in this instance, of a text that was published in Le Monde last October, which you signed, concerning the enforcement of a law passed by Parliament in 1992, instituting the “dépôt légal”³ of film and television programming, that is to say, film and television archives, and opening these archives to researchers. This access had previously been barred by economic as well as by juridical law: there was no obligation to make these image and sound recordings available to researchers. Now there is a law, which ought to be in force but isn't yet.⁴

As soon as this law exists (the question of its enforcement, serious as it may be, being for the moment secondary), it acknowledges

that society, a state or a nation, has the right or duty to “store” [*stocker*], to preserve [*mettre en réserve*] the quasi-totality of what is produced and broadcast on national stations. Once this has been preserved, accumulated, ordered, classed, the law should grant access to it, as to all patrimony, as to all national property. And it should extend this access to *every* citizen who wants to consult this archive. (*At least* to every citizen, for this enormous question of right cannot necessarily be limited to the citizen and to the right or law of a nation-state as such. Everything that is affecting, and this is not nothing, the juridical concept of the state’s sovereignty today has a relation – an essential relation – to the media and is at times conditioned by the telepowers and teleknowledges we’re talking about. What is more, all states do not have the same history and the same politics of the national archive. They all have a different concept of the access that should be extended to noncitizens.)

I imagine that if there was some hesitation or a period of latency before this law could even be produced and, after that, enforced, this is because, in the end, this new type of archive creates original problems. The norms that had already been adopted for other types of repositories [*mémoires*] or archives, for example, the written archive, the *dépôt légal* of books, wound up getting displaced by the enormous production of the radiophonic or televisual archive. It seems that no limit should be placed on the access of citizens to this archive – nor, for that matter, I just alluded to it, on that of foreigners. It’s actually a matter of something that is already public, that has already been put out there, already been shown. There is no secret here, no reason of state can be invoked. Consequently, it is completely normal for the state to guarantee, without delay, to anyone who wants to study these public documents – one thinks first of researchers and of research that ought to be developed in the audiovisual domain – not only the formal right, but the technical conditions of access to this archive. If the enforcement of this law has been delayed, this is unacceptable. That’s why a certain number of us protested what was due, perhaps, as the government has claimed, to techno-empirical reasons, perhaps to less “neutral” reasons, let’s leave this question aside for the moment. In any case, the delay in this domain is a violation of the right of anyone who wants to consult a public archive.

All the more so as this is becoming a particularly urgent area of research, obviously for theoretical, philosophical, scientific, and historical reasons – the task of the historian intersects, here, all the others – but for political reasons too. For we now know the effect that the production and, subsequently, the broadcast or distribution of discourse or of images can have on public space. It is all too clear today, the political arena is to a large extent marked and, often, determined, well beyond the usual places, well beyond the statutory organs of political debate and decision-making (Parliament, the government, etc.), by what is being aired on the radio or shown on television. The fact of having access to these archives, of being able to analyze their content and the modalities of selection, interpretation, manipulation that superintended their production and circulation, all these things are therefore a citizen's right. Again, I say "citizen" in a way that's a bit vague for the moment. No doubt we'll have a chance to come back to this. I think this right should be the right, not only of the citizen of a state, but also of "foreigners." A new ethics and a new law or right, in truth, a new concept of "hospitality" are at stake. What the accelerated development of teletechnologies, of cyberspace, of the new topology of "the virtual" is producing is a practical *deconstruction* of the traditional and dominant concepts of the state and citizen (and thus of "the political") as they are linked to the actuality of a territory. I say "deconstruction" because, ultimately, what I name and try to think under this word is, at bottom, nothing other than this very process, its "taking-place" in such a way that its happening affects the very experience of place, and the recording (symptomatic, scientific, or philosophical) of this "thing," the trace that traces (inscribes, preserves, carries, refers, or defers) the *différance* of this event which happens to place [*qui arrive au lieu*] – which happens to take place, and to taking-place [*qui arrive à (l')avoir-lieu*] . . .

Television belongs to the contemporary apparatus of teletechnologies, which is obviously much more complex than television alone. It is possible to read you and to understand that writing – any form of writing – is already a kind of teletechnology. The power to address a letter is a sending away from oneself which already breaks the circle of any proximity, of any immediacy,

and you have indeed shown that there is in fact never any immediate proximity, that there is always already something like a writing and therefore like a teletechnology. What, then, would be the specificity of what you have recently given this name “teletechnology”? A moment ago, you said that you have no illusions as to the control we might hope to have over the operation in which we are now engaged, for example, or over its destination. And you reminded us that you had already said, about writing, that there is no possible mastery of its “meaning” [“vouloir-dire”]. How do contemporary teletechnologies, and especially television, bring up the problem of this nonmastery in a singular way?

As always, the choice is not *between* mastery and nonmastery, any more than it is *between* writing and nonwriting in the everyday sense. The way in which I had tried to define writing implied that it was already, as you noted, a teletechnology, with all that this entails of an original expropriation. The choice does not choose between control and noncontrol, mastery and nonmastery, property or expropriation. What is at stake here, and it obeys another “logic,” is rather a “choice” between multiple configurations of mastery without mastery (what I have proposed to call “*exappropriation*”). But it also takes the phenomenal form of a war, a conflictual tension between multiple forces of appropriation, between multiple strategies of control. Even if no one can ever control everything, it is a question of knowing whom you want to restrict, by what and by whom you don’t want what you say or what you do to be immediately and totally reappropriated. I’m not under any illusion about the possibility of my controlling or appropriating what I do, what I say or what I am, but I do want – this is the point of every struggle, of every drive in this domain – I would at least like the things I say and do not to be immediately and clearly used toward ends I feel I must oppose. I don’t want to reappropriate my product, but for the same reason, I don’t want others doing this toward ends I feel I must fight. It’s a struggle, really, between multiple movements of appropriation, or of exappropriation, an illusionless struggle precisely because it gets displaced between two equally inaccessible poles.

That said, what, in terms of the general history of teletechnology or of teletechnological writing, is the specificity of our

moment, with devices like those that surround us here? This is an enormous and difficult question. The specificity of this moment has forms and folds that we can't describe or analyze now in the way that would be required if we had the time: if we weren't in the present situation of televised recording. We must consequently try both to mark the fact that we aren't able to speak here in the way that we are used to speaking and writing about these subjects, we must try not to efface this constraint, and at the same time, to respect the specificity of this situation in order to address these questions, in the moment, with another rhythm and in another style.

So perhaps we should begin by saying the following, which is still very general: this specificity, whatever it may be, does not all of a sudden substitute the prosthesis, teletechnology, etc., for immediate or natural speech. These machines have always been there, they are always there, even when we wrote by hand, even during so-called live conversation. And yet, the greatest compatibility, the greatest coordination, the most vivid of possible affinities seems to be asserting itself, *today*, between what appears to be most alive, most *live* [in English in the original],⁵ and the *différance* or delay, the time it takes to exploit, broadcast, or distribute it. When a scribe or an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century writer wrote, the moment of inscription was not kept alive. The material support, the forms of inscription were preserved, but no "living" or supposedly living trace of the writer, of his face, his voice, his hand, etc. At the opposite extreme, now, at this very instant, we are living a very singular, unrepeatable moment, which you and I will remember as a contingent moment, which took place only once, of something that was live, that is live, that we think is simply live, but that will be reproduced *as live*, with a reference to this present and this moment anywhere and anytime, weeks or years from now, reinscribed in other frames or "contexts." A maximum of "tele," that is to say, of distance, lag, or delay, will convey what will continue to stay alive, or rather, the immediate image, the living image of the living: the timbre of our voices, our appearance, our gaze, the movement of our hands. It is a simple and poignant thing that, until the end of the nineteenth century, not one singer's voice could be recorded. No one's voice could be recorded in its "own movement"! Not even the voices of people

whose archives we felt obliged to keep public (singers but also writers, storytellers, orators, politicians, etc.).

Well, precisely because we know now, under the lights, in front of the camera, listening to the echo of our own voices, that this *live* [in English] moment will be able to be – that it is already – captured by machines that will transport and perhaps show it God knows when and God knows where, we already know that death is here. The INA is a machine, and this machine works like a kind of undertaker, recording things and archiving moments about which we know a priori that, no matter how soon after their recording we die, and even if we were to die while recording, *voilà*, this will be and will remain “live,” a simulacrum of life. A maximum of life (the most life [*le plus de vie*]), but of life that already yields to death (“no more life” [*plus de vie*]), this is what becomes exportable for the longest possible time and across the greatest possible distance – but in a finite way. It is not inscribed for eternity, for it is finite, and not just because the subjects are finite, but because the archive we’re talking about, too, can be destroyed. The greatest intensity of “live” life is captured from as close as possible in order to be borne as far as possible away. If there is a specificity, it stems from the measure of this distance, it stems from this polarity which holds together the closest and the farthest away. This polarity already existed, with the quote most “archaic” or most “primitive” writing, but today it is taking on a dimension out of all proportion with what it was before. Of course, we should not define a specificity by a quantitative difference. And so we would have to find structural differences – and I think there are some, for example, this restitution as “living present” of what is dead – within this acceleration or amplification, which seem incommensurable, incomparable with all that preceded them for millions of years.

Isn't the possibility of live transmission, for example – we might very well imagine that the image being captured by the camera at this very moment was being broadcast immediately – something which marks an absolute specificity as compared to writing?

One might be tempted to think so. There is certainly what is called live transmission, the transport, by “reportage,” of political

events, for example, or of a war. There have been many recent examples of this. Although this supposed “live” does in fact introduce a considerable structural innovation into the space we’re talking about, we should never forget that this “live” is not an absolute “live,” but only a live effect [*un effet de direct*], an allegation of “live.” Whatever the apparent immediacy of the transmission or broadcast, it negotiates with choices, with framing, with selectivity. In a fraction of a second, CNN, for example, intervenes to select, censor, frame, filter the so-called “live” [in English] or “direct” image. To say nothing of programming decisions, whether with regard to what is “shown” or who “shows” or manipulates it. What is “transmitted” “live” on a television channel is *produced before being transmitted*. The “image” is not a faithful and integral reproduction of what it is thought to reproduce. Still less of everything that remains “reproducible.” This would hold equally for the modest experiment that we are conducting here. Suppose that what we are in the process of recording were to be viewed somewhere else, at this very moment, for example in another country, where all our allusions to the “French scene” today would most likely be unintelligible. Everything would be subject to a distortion, consequently introducing delays and supplementary interpretations. Nor is it even necessary to invoke a foreign country for this. When it is a question of more politically charged events – a battle, a parliamentary debate, a military or humanitarian intervention, the live retransmission, no matter how direct it “technically” appears, is immediately caught in a web of all kinds of interventions. It is framed, cut, it begins here, is interrupted there. We might describe ad infinitum all these modes of intervention which ensure that the “live,” the “direct,” is never intact. That this technical possibility exists, however limited, impure, “fictional” it may be, is enough, to be sure, to change our understanding of the entire field. As soon as we know, “believe we know,” or quite simply *believe* that the alleged “live” or “direct” is possible, and that voices and images can be transmitted from one side of the globe to the other, the field of perception and of experience in general is profoundly transformed.