But, Who, Derrida?

Scott McQuire

Never have you been so obedient as at the moment when you believed you were taking yourself back in hand, and your autonomy. I saw you then, you believed you could stop everything, stop everyone (I am speaking of arrests), stop time itself, and make it sign a contract with itself, you burst into the saloon, armed to the teeth: no-one moves, everyone in his place, state your identities, one after another, not all at once. Above all you were afraid that some-one would change place or occupy several at once.

Jacques Derrida, 'Envois'.

Upon reading David Holmes' most exacting and magisterial article on Derrida and politics, I found myself responding with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was refreshing to find a substantial article printed in a Left journal written by someone who had actually bothered to read some of Derrida's work, rather than simply relying on the hasty dismissal which is the more fashionable response. On the other hand, the 'Derrida' exhibited in the article was one I scarcely recognized, which surprised and intrigued me given that I believed myself familiar with the texts under discussion. Holmes sought to indict Derrida's project not merely for 'asocial indifference' but on the grounds that it expressed an entire 'crypto-theory' of the subjectivity of the autonomous individual pertaining to this particular epoch of commodity capitalism. The hostility with which this critique was announced was perhaps as noteworthy as the critique itself.

I felt I was suffering prosopagnosia: the diabolical impulse to misrecognize familiar vistas and recognize the unfamiliar. It was somewhat akin to reading a book which a stranger has underlined.
emphasizing certain points and marking particular passages, but never the passages you notice or with the emphasis you would seek to give.

It puzzled me how I had managed to read, to understand, to interpret, Derrida so differently from David Holmes. My fascination with this scene grew into a desire to restage the encounter, this time with an eye precisely on this question of different readings and different interpretations. Was this really the 'same' Derrida we both read? Putting aside the most obvious rejoinders (I was 'wrong', his text was 'right', or vice versa) for reasons I will develop, it is towards this encounter with the enigma of the same that I want to write.

Writing and Re-iteration

My first impulse was to begin to re-read Derrida paying particular attention to passages Holmes had cited. Holmes' basic critique of Derrida's 'project' is argued along the lines that Derrida has a 'lack of commitment to social relations founded on presence and a commitment to social relations which dissolve them...'. (p. 81) For Holmes, social relations of 'mutual presence' are understood as being 'fundamentally "social" in an organic and genetic sense'. (p. 81) Derrida is seen, at best unwittingly, to give theoretical respectability to social processes such as the spread of media technologies 'which characteristically attenuate presence' (p. 108) and thus undermine the fundamental basis of sociality.

Holmes argues that this implied advocacy of such processes on Derrida's part serves to legitimize a radically new form of autonomous, transcendent subjectivity which parallels the subjectivity produced by the general spread of commodity relations into more areas of social life. Holmes feels authorized to fill in Derrida's theory of the subject because of the symbiotic connection he perceives between Derrida's concept of writing and the general attack on the value of 'mutual presence'. For example, we read: '. . . it will be evident that the subjectivity made possible by writing (in the new sense) is equivalent to the value of presence produced by technologies of extension generally'. (p. 112)

This brief sketch may serve to situate the argument that Holmes develops at length. What I am interested to examine here are the terms of this argument, especially the status Holmes attributes to Derrida's concept of writing. This assumes importance because of

1. David Holmes, 'Deconstruction: A Politics Without a Subject That Is', Arena 88, 1989. All future references to this article will be given in brackets in the text.
the manner in which Holmes seeks to construct an opposition between writing (in Derrida’s sense) and the value of ‘mutual presence’ he desires to give priority. Such an opposition extends strategically throughout Holmes’ text and is the basis from which he mounts his critique of Derrida (in terms of a lack of commitment to social relations of presence, etc.). Thus Holmes proceeds:

We have already heard how writing works by extension, how it can extend ‘the fields and powers of a locutionary or gestural communication’ to thereby ‘supplement presence’. ‘Written communication’ Derrida distinguishes from the mutual presence of ‘spoken communication’ by the fact that ‘it can give rise to an iteration both in the absence of and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject’. It is because the sign can be objectified in print, ‘can be cited, put between quotation marks: thereby it can break with every given context and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion’. (p. 109)

Such a passage seems reasonably straightforward. It locates in Derrida’s text a distinction between writing and speech. ‘Writing’ is determined as that which ‘supplements’ the presence of speech, interrupts its determinable contexts and so on. Elsewhere we read ‘Writing, in intervening, in removing the episteme, the homogeneous context, banishes from the subject the determinability of meaning, impelling a more abstract mode of communication...’ (p. 95) Hence, to the extent that Derrida is an advocate of ‘writing’ Holmes suggests he is for the attenuation of social relations of immediacy and presence. But can such an interpretation be sustained?

If one traces the citations, even a cursory reading of the passages in question (let alone the rest of the essay) raises problems for the interpretation given by Holmes. Let us take time to re-read. Where he writes, ‘We have already heard how writing works by extension, how it can extend “the fields and powers of a locutionary or gestural communication...”’, one should perhaps note that this citation is lifted from a question which Derrida posed in the following terms: ‘When we say that writing extends the fields or powers of a locutionary or gestural communication, are we not presupposing a kind of homogeneous space of communication?’ Which puts in question precisely the notion of extension Holmes seeks to attribute to writing.

As to how writing as this form of ‘extension’ functions to thereby “supplement presence”’, I am at a greater loss. Despite the citation, nowhere on the page in question do those words

actually appear as cited. At one point, where Derrida refers to Condillac, we read ‘Representation regularly supplements presence’. The italic, which has apparently been ignored, perhaps designates a need for caution here, marks that the term supplement bears a heavy burden at this point. Its weighting becomes clearer if one expands the citation.

The absence of which Condillac speaks is determined in the most classical fashion as a continuous modification, a progressive extenuation of presence. Representation regularly supplements presence. But this operation of supplement (‘To supplement’ is one of the most decisive and frequently employed operative concepts on Condillac’s *Essai*) is not exhibited as a break in presence, but rather as a reparation and a continuous, homogeneous modification of presence in representation. ³

Where Holmes has found writing determined as a supplement to presence, he has somehow contrived to overlook Derrida’s entire elaboration on the significance of this very gesture. It is precisely insofar as writing has been designated as a supplement that it has always been excluded from participation in presence and maintained in opposition to speech as that which is more present. Far from simply continuing this distinction, Derrida has argued that ‘Either writing was never a simple “supplement” or it is urgently necessary to construct a new logic of the “supplement”’. ⁴ Derrida’s critique of this opposition between speech as presence and writing as non-presence is so well known that it is difficult to imagine how it was contrived to ignore it here so thoroughly and thus put its conventional form back in his mouth.

But let us continue our reading. Holmes proceeds: ‘“Written communication” Derrida distinguishes from the mutual presence of “spoken communication” by the fact that “it can give rise to an iteration both in the absence of and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject”. (p. 109) Again, even a cursory glance at the passage in question raises some problems for this interpretation. I will content myself with citing the passage indicated.

In effect, what are the essential predicates in a minimal determination of the classical concept of writing?
1. A written sign, in the usual sense of the word, is therefore a mark which remains, which is not exhausted in the present of its inscription, and which can give rise to an iteration both in the absence of and beyond the presence of the empirically determined subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it. This is how, traditionally at least, ‘written communication’ is distinguished from ‘spoken communication’. ⁵ (emphasis added)

---

³. ‘Signature, Event, Context’, p. 313.
It seems Holmes attributes this traditional distinction between the ‘written’ and the ‘spoken’ to Derrida precisely where it is most put into question. Then almost immediately this distinction is confused with Derrida’s critique of it. Except that the critique is held to apply to written signs only (in the narrow sense), which completely transforms it.

Thus Holmes proceeds: ‘It is because the sign can be objectified in print, “can be cited, put between quotation marks: thereby it can break with every given context and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely non-saturable fashion”’ (p. 109) Let us compare this with what Derrida once wrote.

This is the possibility on which I wish to insist: the possibility of extraction and citational grafting which belongs to the structure of *every mark, spoken or written*, and which constitutes every mark as writing even before and outside of every horizon of semio-linguistic communication: as writing, that is, as a possibility of functioning cut-off, at a certain point, from its ‘original’ meaning and from its belonging to a saturable and constraining context.\(^6\) (emphasis added)

How is the reading given by Holmes to be sustained? Where is the distinction between ‘written communication’ and the mutual presence of ‘spoken communication’ he found? It is exactly the received form of this distinction which is problematized here. Derrida shows that the conventional distinction between writing and speech depends upon recourse to a privileged and almost entirely unquestioned value of presence. He even goes to great lengths to demonstrate that speech or *any* system of differentiable marks is capable of extension just as much as writing (in the traditional sense). Such a demonstration necessarily problematizes the simple value of ‘mutual presence’ Holmes seeks to oppose to writing. Because speech, as much as what we usually call writing, is capable of *repetition*, of functioning outside the horizons of its ‘original’ context, even the simplest mark or sound in any imaginable system of signification must always differ and defer in itself. Our words, whether written or spoken, can never appear in or grant their full presence, not even once. This innocent potential, which Derrida has occasionally termed iteration, is a possibility inherent in all systems of marks capable of signification, and has the effect of ensuring that context and meaning are always necessarily *open-ended*.

Any mark, whether inscribed or uttered, is capable of being repeated in a new context, cut off from its ‘original’ scene of production. It is difficult to imagine a clearer or more decisive

---

5. ‘Signature, Event, Context’, p. 317.
demonstration of this possibility than in tracing the 'original' context of Holmes' citations of Derrida. One could repeat this process profitably with respect to other areas of Holmes' article.\footnote{Footnote 77 on p. 96 springs to mind immediately; reading the beginning and end of the passage renders a substantial transformation to the effect of Holmes' citation. One could also examine the way in which Holmes manages to ascribe to Derrida the principle of 'anything goes' (p. 107) whilst also characterizing him as 'an intellectual from battle looking very much like the engineer'. (p. 98) Or one could look more closely at the free and 'autonomous' subjectivity Holmes attributes to the Derridean text on the one hand and the 'celebration of the triumph of chance and undecidability' (p. 96) he finds on the other. None of these examples should be consigned simply to the category of 'misreadings'.} I have concentrated on the distinction he seeks to establish between writing and presence because of the strategic position it assumes in his argument. To the extent that this distinction, which is vital for the entire structure of his argument, \textit{simply does not operate} in Derrida's text, one would have to suggest that Holmes' critique misses its professed target.

But such a demonstration remains trivial if it merely serves to oppose a 'wrong' citation or a 'wrong' Derrida to a putative proper usage. The matter is more complex in that it bears upon questions of reading and interpretation which assume decisive importance here. Citations inevitably transform meanings by producing the 'same' words in different contexts. To believe that Holmes could have \textit{faithfully} cited Derrida depends upon the assumption, at some point, that there is a singular meaning of the texts in question which can be isolated, reproduced and positioned as a court of ultimate appeal. But citation, like reading and interpretation, is a form of translation which is inevitably transformational. Rather than simply appealing to true or false 'Derridas', right or wrong citations, attention should perhaps be given to the specific transformation produced by a particular \textit{manner} of reading, its guiding assumptions, its trajectory and destination. As, on occasion, Derrida has given us to think.

One may wonder how and why what is so naively called a falsification was possible (one can't just falsify anything), how and why the 'same' words and the 'same' statements — if they are indeed the same — might several times be made to serve certain meanings and certain contexts that are said to be different, even incompatible.\footnote{C.V. McDonald ed., \textit{The ear of the other: Otobiography, Transference Translations} (trans. P. Kamuf and A. Ronell), New York, Schoken Books, 1985, p. 24.}

This is a theme to which we shall return.
The Voice of Truth

It is worth looking more closely now at the value of presence which Holmes places in opposition to Derrida’s concept of writing. ‘Presence’ serves as a fundamental point of reference for Holmes, naming the most unquestionably desirable state; we recall that relations of mutual presence are taken to be ‘fundamentally “social” in an organic and genetic sense’. (p. 81) Further, it is in the name of such relations of presence that technologies of extension such as the media are criticized, precisely as attenuations of presence.

Relations of ‘mutual presence’ or ‘social relations of immediacy’ are usually appealed to as self-evident states by Holmes. One reason for this underdevelopment of such a vital aspect of his argument may be the authority he gives to a number of other Arena articles which also use ‘presence’ as a grounding value. Curiously enough, a close reading of these foundational articles reveals that the value of ‘presence’ is also largely assumed rather than opened up and explored. Here I cannot hope to fully engage with the complexity of the perspectives enunciated in these texts. Nor do I want to dispute the value and importance Holmes, Hinkson and Sharp attribute to face-to-face interchange as a vital element in an imaginable or desirable human society. What I would like to question here is the extent to which the value attributed to ‘presence’ in those texts can still serve as a fundamental point of reference from which to understand the social and political transformations produced by the proliferation of information and media technologies.

Such an inquiry has at least two zones. It involves considering what Holmes, Hinkson and Sharp signify by ‘presence’ in their texts whilst probing the extent to which such a value breaks from or actually remains complicit with the media culture it seeks to analyse. A different approach is to examine the extent to which Derrida’s critique of presence exceeds the easily domesticable dimensions of a ‘reality intelligible only as alienation’ (p. 91) which Holmes is so eager to find, and in fact emerges as vital to a critical social theory in the age of media technologies.

In the Arena texts, ‘presence’ seems to be largely thought in terms of face-to-face situations in which people are physically present-at-hand to each other. For example, John Hinkson writes: ‘Information technology helps perfect human communications on

a level quite different from one of human interaction grounded in
gesture, the intuitive, the body. But by and large persons do not
know each other tangibly—in the flesh and blood—and the
experience of our sociality is reduced as the presence of the
tangible other diminishes'.

For Hinkson, mutual presence is characterized by the possibility
of touch, of the flesh and blood of the body, in opposition to
communication over the telephone for example. (Holmes uses
the same telephone example on p. 108.) In a similar way Hinkson
criticizes the cybernetics of Norbert Weiner for the development
of a perspective which equalizes all communications including
‘bodily or tangible communication, communication grounded in
presence and place’. Geoff Sharp also adopts this position when
he contrasts ‘direct human presence’ with its abstraction in the
extended exchange characteristic of print and electronic media,
and cites the importance of ‘the reconstitution of the face-to-face
community’ as a strategy of resistance to the ideology of
autonomy.

Holmes overlays the emphasis on the ‘face to face’ and the body
by determining mutual presence with respect to ‘phonic communi-
cation’ in opposition to ‘written’ communication. As we saw
earlier such a move is less revealing with regard to Derrida, who
continually works to problematize such an opposition, than with
regard to those who work within its limits. It is the limits of this
opposition between the written and the spoken, between the
present and the absent, between technology and nature, which
circumscribe Holmes’ text (and those texts it draws from) in its
attempts to develop a critique of media culture.

For Holmes, relations of ‘mutual presence’ are thought on the
basis of the unmediated presence of the voice between people who
are physically present-at-hand to each other. Accepting such
relations as ‘fundamentally “social” in an organic and genetic
sense’ may seem an attractive proposition, insofar as it seems to
oppose examples of ‘direct’ human contact to the alienating inter-
ference of technology, such as the telephone. But, despite the
initial warm glow such a determination gives, it is not at all clear
it provides an adequate basis from which one could begin to
understand the transformations communication and information
technologies have produced with regard to human relationships.

To privilege face-to-face conversations in the manner Holmes

12. ‘Constitutive Abstraction’, p. 79.
does (that is, by opposing speech to writing, direct speech to technological mediation, etc.) is to make certain assumptions about the voice—about the states of consciousness, intentionality and self-presence it involves. To assume that the face-to-face conversation is a relation of greater presence is to assume that the voice is that which is most present. It is to assume that the speaking voice is the purest and most unmediated expression of the self. Further, that the speaking voice unmediated by technology gives the purest expression of consciousness. And finally, that the speaking voice is that which most closely expresses the intentionality which animates it.

At least two major problems arise with regard to these assumptions.

The first concerns the complex temporality of human existence. The importance of memory and the entire problematic of the 'deferred effect' which Freud initiated would seem to necessarily complicate any thought of presence, what we think 'mutual presence' to others or self-presence involves. As in our earlier example of iteration, conversations, experiences and events are always capable of being transported outside their 'original' contexts by way of memory and recollection. 'Social relations of immedjacy' are no more exhausted in the present at hand than are telephone conversations simple attenuations of such putative full presence. Traces always remain; such traces have continuing effects, come to assume different meanings, even entirely new significances, when repeated, remembered or recited elsewhere. This lack of plenitude in the face-to-face meeting is not a novel situation introduced by writing in Derrida's sense or by 'postmodernism' as Holmes gives us to think. Rather, it is an irreducible effect of the structure of remainder or repetition which pervades all the acts we designate as 'communication'. (To be communicated, marks, oral or written, must be repeatable, must remain partly 'outside' themselves. If they are repeatable, they can be reproduced in an infinity of contexts, but can never appear in full plenitude. And so on.)

Derrida's suggestion that there is no simple, direct or otherwise full presence, even in face-to-face meetings, should not be equated too quickly with a condition of alienation. Rather, it is an attempt to give expression to the temporal dimension of subjectivity which precludes the possibility that a self extended over years could ever be fully present, to itself or others, at any one moment.

Determining presence on the basis of face-to-face meetings or direct speech as Holmes does, ignores the extent to which human consciousness contains the potential and ability to make others
present even when they are not present-at-hand, either spatially or temporally. Friends who are travelling or living elsewhere often become present in thought, recollection and anticipation. Those who have died may remain present in remembrance and mourning. Even those we have never known, who have never been physically present to us, may nevertheless occupy our present thoughts. (This is harder to evoke; I am thinking particularly of my mother's mother whom I never 'knew'.) These different modes of presence and presencing are often denied expression, especially in a certain mode of 'theoretical' discourse. It is to Derrida's credit that he is willing to explore forms of presencing which are characteristically repressed or forgotten in contemporary culture. These examples may serve to make us wary that, in extolling the face to face as the arena of presence, we do not accidentally efface intersubjective capacities to live in dimensions of presence other than the immediate or the present at hand; for example, in the presence of one's ancestors and descendants whose horizons are so often ignored today.

A further problem with regard to the assumed self-presence of the speaking voice is that opposing speech as a relation of greater presence to writing as an attenuation of presence involves a disregard for the necessary dependence of speech, as much as writing, on a system of signification. To assume that the spoken signifier grants greater presence of the self or is the medium of greatest 'mutual presence' is to ignore the extent to which any language (written and spoken) is not 'natural' or value free but is structured and delimited by a history of struggle and contestation concerning what can be said, by whom, in which contexts and so on. Insofar as we accept the responsibility for the history of our language (which for English speakers is so intimately connected to the history of imperialism, not least in Australia) we would be naive in the extreme to believe that language could ever be a neutral or unmediated form of expression. Yet the attempt to value presence on the basis of an opposition between speech and writing makes precisely this assumption. Derrida for one has been extremely critical of this belief in the possible effacement of the signifier which underlies the privileging of the voice as the medium of greatest presence.

The voice is heard (understood) — that undoubtedly is what is called conscience — closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier: pure auto affection that necessarily has the form of time and which does not borrow from outside of itself, in the world or in

---

‘reality’, any accessory signifier, any substance of expression foreign to its own spontaneity. It is the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously, from within the self, and nevertheless, as signified concept, in the element of ideality or universality... This experience of the effacement of the signifier in the voice is not merely one illusion among many — since it is the very condition of the idea of truth... (And so on.)

The very idea of truth depends upon the belief in a signified which is not answerable to a signifier; a moment of full presence in which a concept transcends its medium of expression. To equate direct speech with greater presence and writing with attenuation of presence, as Holmes seeks to do, partakes in the same systematic repression of the signifier, and adherence to an idealist notion of truth we might otherwise wish to question. It betrays commitment to the possibility of a neutral or value-free mode of expression which is reducible to a singular meaning without ambiguity. We shall explore further some of the consequences of such a commitment a little later.

Conflating speech with presence, as Holmes does, also ignores the extent to which language itself exceeds the boundaries (both spatial and temporal) with which we usually conceptualize the self. The voice does not exhaust the limits of the self. Like the telephone (but not the ‘same’) it both brings us close to and distances us from our ‘selves’. Language, in its spoken form as much as its written form, is precisely a mediation which has always been at the edge of our understandings of the relation between self and other, between nature and *techne*, between speech and writing, and so on. We might say that language is a technology of otherness which is most natural to the speaking self.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing again that here I am not seeking to prove that there is no difference between face-to-face meetings and other modes of interaction, say over the telephone. Nor am I particularly questioning the value Holmes and others attribute to face-to-face meetings. It is simply that I do not think any useful distinction between the different modes of presencing involved in these different forms of interchange can be made on the basis of a homogeneous and homogenizing concept of ‘presence’ which valorizes the immediate, the present at hand and the plenitude of the speaking subject whilst ignoring the differentiated temporal structure of consciousness and meaning conferral. Further, I would suggest that Holmes’ moves to ignore, repress or otherwise exclude the absence and alterity which inhabits the

14. *Of Grammatology*, p. 20. ‘Conscience’ should be read with the connotation of conscience/consciousness it carries in the French.
heart of all which should be most present (the self, intentionality, consciousness, etc.) are not peculiar to his text, but are complicit with a particular theoretical and institutional history characterized by the desire for full presence, full speech, saturated contexts, unquestionable meanings, etc. Such a desire has marked a certain relationship to technics, time and the other from Plato to the present, and is perhaps not without continuing effects with regard to the influence of media technologies in contemporary culture.

But here I will not insist too much. In this context it is enough to suggest that as soon as one relinquishes the notion and dream of an undifferentiated subject of pure self-presence and admits the possibility of subjects constituted at least partly in unconsciousness, affected even momentarily by memory and the temporal structure of delay and detour, as soon as one grants even a degree of determination to language as constitutive of subjectivity, one cannot remain satisfied with the undifferentiated value of presence which Holmes uses as a measuring stick for Derrida. And if, on the other hand, one follows Derrida in accepting the inherent discontinuity in continuity of even the simplest singularity (which shakes the received notion of ‘singularity’ as well as that of presence, etc.) one may begin to understand the spread of media technologies from a different perspective. Holmes clearly announces such a problematic: ‘... as if the phonic relation were the source of particular ideologies’ (p. 110) but remains curiously mute in the face of it.

'The time difference is in me, it is me...’

The significance of simply opposing the mutual presence of relations of immediacy to technologically mediated presence becomes more apparent if one considers further the temporal frame within which such an opposition is given and thought.

If mutual presence is determined wholly on the basis of immediacy, face-to-face situations and so on, one is also determining the vast range of different modes of presencing solely on the basis of a privilege granted to the present moment. The present moment becomes the moment of adequation, the mythical moment at which intentionality is full, meaning is established and context is saturated. Past or future transformations are thought only as the absence of this supposed ‘original’ presence, as its weakening, dissipation or attenuation. This fundamental symmetry, in which absence is determined precisely as the absence of presence, structures the entire logic with which Holmes works, in which presence is positioned as the value which is able to determine and regulate the entire field.
As Heidegger has argued at length, the valorization of the present moment and the present at hand amounts to thinking time on the basis of the now. It is immediacy, the now, which grants more ‘presence’. The now is that (moment of time) which is (most present). This privilege of the now has been the dominant form of thinking time in the West from Aristotle to Hegel and beyond. Today, the need to question this privilege is perhaps especially pressing following the intersection of positivism with the development of capitalism and the spread of the industrial city. As John Berger has pointed out, ‘of all that has been inherited from the nineteenth century only certain axioms about time have passed largely unquestioned’.

The new urban-industrial forms of ordering and regulating time have become one of the most important political questions of this century.

In this context, a major difficulty arises with the attempt by Holmes, Sharp, Hinkson and others to ‘save’ human presence from its technological attenuations. In thinking presence on the basis of the ‘now’, they remain firmly within the temporal paradigm of the media technologies they seek to criticize.

For ‘presence’ and the ‘now’ are precisely the points at which such technologies take hold. To take broadcast television as an example (which has already become more than an example) its popularity and its legitimation, its mantle as the most significant force in ‘communication’ belonging to this era, are intimately connected to its ability to transform human experience of time and space. It is no accident that such possibilities of transformation have been largely directed towards the accentuation of the ‘present’ and the ‘now’.

McLuhan thought television to be an extension of the human nervous system which obliterated time and space for the planet. At his most optimistic, he predicted this would bring about an end to the linear and fragmented culture of the book and spark

17. One would need to detail an entire lexicon of narrative and programming techniques, including the system of ‘direct address’ to the viewer; repetition and flow of segments within programme blocks; emphasis on viewer participation as both audience and protagonist; the relay of multi-camera perspectives; the formal reflexivity of the medium and its means of production, and so on. For some exploration of such a perspective see my ‘Television: Presenting the Memory Machine’, Arena 80, 1987.
a return to oral culture. Yet the return of such 'immediacy' today remains firmly linked to the value of 'presence', thought on the basis of the same opposition between speech and writing which governed the era of the book. This suggests that, in some ways, television is not so much a break with this epoch, but an intensification of it. In a sense which demands to be further explored, contemporary television has emerged as that which most fully grants the experience of 'presence'. In the process, it has necessarily transformed the 'presence' we experience in face-to-face situations.

If we want to take this effect of television seriously, that is, if we want to do more than simply appeal to our prejudices—and television is an easy villain for the Left—it is not enough to simply oppose relations of 'mutual presence' to television's 'attenuation' of presence. Such an opposition assumes that television works merely as a substitute for 'real' presence lacking elsewhere in a flawed culture. By treating television as an attenuation of 'real' presence, the extent to which television and media technologies constitute an entirely new frame of presencing and experiencing the present is ignored.

Television effectively produces the present, the moment, the there, the now, 25 frames a second, 24 hours a day. It attempts to cover up, to efface, to obliterate the dead time within the living present. It brings you an over-abundance, a supersaturation of presence. In comparison to television, the presence of the everyday present at hand may seem flat, undirected, lacking in excitement and intensity. If this seems an exaggeration, think of the experience of watching sport on television compared to watching it face-to-face. With its multiple camera angles, instant replays, friendly commentary and 'perfect eye' coverage, many people prefer the presence generated by the television manifestation. Unless you are satisfied with simply consigning such a preference (which could be elaborated with regard to many types of television programming, and even to the entire question of television's popularity) to categories of 'alienation' or 'false consciousness' as if such terms explained everything, you need to find a means adequate to conceptualizing and giving expression to the differences in these modes of presence and presencing.

This is to suggest that you need to be able to discuss the

manner in which ‘presence’, including ‘phonic self-presence’ depends upon and uses mediation (such as language), depends upon all that is usually opposed to it (absence, otherness, un-consciousness) as the very space of its appearance. Further, you need to address the manner in which technology (not least television) depends upon and uses ‘presence’ in ways which cannot be so serenely exhausted by terms like ‘attenuation’ or ‘dissolution’. You need to question the dominant mode of temporality within which the thought of a pure presence has paradoxically functioned to rivet technology to contemporary adequations of self-presence. It is no accident that in the epoch of media technologies the myth of ‘natural’ forms of representation such as language become more and more prominently exposed. Yet at the same time the entire trajectory of television in its colonization of the real has been towards the effacement of such a rupture. Today, isn’t it precisely the desire for the real, the live, the up to date, the moment, for being there now — in a word, the desire for more presence — which drives television and other technologies of extension? Is it not precisely our intersubjective capacities, ignored and excluded by a culture dreaming of pure presence which they draw upon and colonize in their very operations? It is in this respect that the homogeneous value of presence Holmes appeals to in order to judge Derrida appears most inadequate whilst, on the other hand, Derrida’s critique of the logocentrism invested in such judgement appears most necessary.

**Destiny and Determination**

In suggesting that Holmes’ manner of reading Derrida closes off possible critical interventions that Derrida’s work enables, the question of a politics of reading and interpretation is foregrounded. (This is not to suggest that there could be an unlimited or totally open reading; doubtless Holmes’ critique opens up areas I have ignored or closed off.) It would be banal here to respond by simply confronting Holmes’ reading with a ‘correct’ version as if such a master perspective capable of summing up all others could be produced with sufficient time, patience and tenacity. What is at stake goes beyond the *Arena* texts and rather extends to the entire hermeneutical framework which presumes that texts are ultimately reducible to singular meanings and that totalizing definitions, such as the ‘negative theology’ label Holmes attaches to Derrida, are the best (or only way) to engage in social critique.

‘Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought’,

---

so Heidegger gives us to think at the beginning of Being and Time. What is so noticeable in Holmes’ reading of Derrida is that what is sought is a textual figure reducible to a single, homogeneous horizon. Every item cited leads Holmes unerringly to the same zone and basis of conclusion (‘negative theology’, ‘humanism of play’, etc.). There is no consideration of even the possibility that there may be diverse elements in Derrida’s work which resist the trajectory of such questioning (‘I want to locate Derrida in relation to a socio-cultural form which is both articulated with and emergent from the social relations of early capitalism’ [p. 75]) or otherwise escape this gaze.

Instead, what Holmes seeks most of all is a key. A central point which will be able to order the entirety of the subject named ‘Derrida’. To this end certain key words are designated: ‘...with Baudrillard it is the code, ...with Lyotard the category of ‘information’, with Derrida it is the text’. (p. 75) If ‘Derrida’ evades this investigation and avoids roll-call, precisely by multiplying and substituting counterfeit keywords (différence, text, trace, dissemination, sheaf, come, post/postal, address, destination, frame, arche, hymen, gift, hinge, etc.), Holmes always brings him back to the point, finds that his ‘evasiveness is even more telling’ (p. 89), and finally locates the desired key. ‘“An infinite but infinitesimal distance”: this is the phrase through which Derrida’s entire project, its politics and its ethics, can be opened up to social critique.’ (p. 89)

That this key is found is not really surprising. Holmes searches for it, desires it, needs it, precisely as a reassurance against the menacing possibility that there may be no single key. That the order of the key, the order of totalizable structures and stable centres, the realm of mastery, has perhaps never existed. Or has only existed insofar as the law of singular meanings and homogeneous contexts was able to arrest the centre and hold it in place.

What Holmes desires, above all else, is finally decision itself. Matters must be consistent, determined, finalized. It is worth recalling his critique of the (implicit) ‘Derridean subject’: ‘It is individuated and dismembered in the sense of being denied (and constituted as denied) access to social or theological norms...’ (p. 97) This is to say, denied certainty, consistency, role models; in other words, the rule of law. That the norm, the law of normality, might itself engender a certain social violence is completely passed over.

The thought of anything which resists the destiny of law—the rupture of causality and structure Derrida has invoked under such names as dissemination and a-destination—is anathema.
Holmes continually refers to the *disturbance* posed by deconstruction and its ‘endless’, ‘incessant’, ‘restless’ questioning. What is deplored is that ‘nowhere can it be committed nor can it decide ...’ (p. 91) Or that ‘Meanings are dissolved before they reach any point of determinancy’. (p. 106) Such prescriptive statements seem content to project the characteristics a certain discourse has always sought to associate with women (changeable, unable to decide, restless, incessant) as terms of disapproval. But, putting aside this complex association, one may ask where has Derrida ever suggested that meaning could be entirely undetermined? Likewise decision; it is not the possibility of decision but of absolute decision which is put in question.

Holmes assumes that in questioning the possibility of theoretical totalization and the centred conceptual field which regulates such a possibility, Derrida necessarily disappears into a flux of pure transgression. But Derrida’s critique of totalization, which he elaborated most recently with regard to the possibility of distinguishing ‘fascist’ from ‘non-fascist’ discourse, does not easily conform to the simple ‘anything goes’ formula Holmes is content to find. (p. 103) I will risk a long citation:

Is there a systematic set of utterances, axioms, evaluations, hierarchies which, forming a closed and identifiable coherence of what we call totalitarianism, fascism, nazism, racism, antisemitism, never appear outside these formations and especially never on the opposite side? And is there a systematic coherence proper to each of them, since one must not confuse them too quickly with each other? Is there some property so closed and so pure that one may not find any element of these systems in the discourses that are commonly opposed to them? To say that I do not believe that there is, not absolutely, means at least two things. (1) Such a formalizing, saturating totalization seems to me to be precisely the essential character of this logic whose project, at least, and ethico-political consequence can be terrifying. One of my rules is never to accept this project and consequence, whatever they may cost. (2) For this very reason one must analyze as far as possible this process of formalization and its program so as to uncover the statements, the philosophical, ideological or political behaviours that derive from it and wherever they may be found. The task seems to me both urgent and interminable.20

It would seem difficult to reduce such a position to one of transgression without limits. It is even more difficult to imagine how Holmes can even begin to speak of the need for ‘reflexivity in critique’ (p. 116) without admitting the possibility of questioning any or all received limits of thought. Even a decision to

---

respect certain limits involves identifying them, posing the ques-
ion of their value, extent, and so on. How else is the limit (for
example, the limit of ‘the social and theological norms’ which is
advocated) constituted if not by the possibility of their own
transgression?

It seems to me not a strength but a significant shortcoming
that Holmes is content to find Derrida so consistent, to make up
his mind about him so easily, to totalize, package and consign
him to the rubbish bin so quickly. One might suggest he has
read somewhat hurriedly and impatiently with a particular agenda
in mind and his end in sight. He is too eager to get to the ‘real’
questions, to bring matters back to the real issues such as ‘the
real basis of class power’. (p. 115) This is not to suggest that
such concerns are unimportant; rather that they should not
constitute the sole ground from which or towards which all
questioning must proceed. The theoretical imperative to treat
diverse and specific struggles such as those concerning race,
ethnicity, sexuality and ecology as subsidiaries of a single, gener-
alized ‘real’ issue (such as class) has lessened in recent decades.
Doubtless some view such a change as a dilution of real politics.
But this is an important argument which surely demands an
openness towards the horizon of one’s own questioning position.

What Holmes (and the texts he draws on) continually refuse
to question is the limits of their own questioning framework.
There seems to be an inherent working presumption that their
theoretical frame is adequate to master all it would seek to sur-
vey. This belief in the totalizing potential of a single perspective
leaves no space to even begin to talk about a politics of inter-
pretation — ‘how and why the “same” words and the “same”
statements — if indeed they are the same — might several times
be made to serve certain meanings and certain contexts that are
said to be different, even incompatible’.12

Instead, one continually finds related gestures designed to
exclude the possibility of plurality and heterogeneity. This is not
to suggest that multiplicity should be valorized in or for itself;
simply that its consistent and rigorous exclusion is noteworthy.
The desire to comprehend Derrida as a unity, to force him
towards ‘a reduction of interpretation to a singular reading and
above all to decidability’ (p. 104) goes hand-in-hand with the
unquestioned privilege granted to a particular mode of critical
discourse. It is one in which the relation between world and text
is restored to something like its Lukasian self-confidence, where

Derrida and ‘deconstruction’ can be understood as ‘mirroring the nature of the commodity form’. (p. 105) What is privileged is a form of rational argument which constructs a hierarchical conceptual field regulated by a fixed centre. It is this order which enables the panoptic dream of a single totalizing perspec-
tive and engenders systematic effects of theoretical mastery.

Such a perspective depends upon the belief that one’s own mode of discourse and form of expression can be taken as more or less transparent and value free. It is the same repression of the signifier, the exclusion of the metaphoric, the denial of the medium of expression, which we earlier found at work in the conventional privileging of speech over writing, ‘direct’ presence over mediated presence, in the very idea of truth itself. This systematic denial, which extends beyond the Arena texts, produces serious problems, not all of which are simply ‘textual’. How can a text or a politics predicated upon its own certainty and singularity of meaning ever hope to engage with texts or politics constructed precisely in the tension of its representative form and discursive status?

To believe that one can simply exclude or pass over this uncertainty is to refuse to engage with one of Derrida’s most consistent problematicas. Yet the texts of Holmes, Sharp and Hinkson all proceed without questioning their own techniques of narration. Where any doubts arise they are quickly satisfied. For example, Sharp anchors his ‘Constitutive Abstraction’ essay by excluding the effects of language and claiming neutrality for his depth metaphors. (‘Right at the outset it is vitally important to note that no value connotation is intended in the use of such terms as “plane” or “level”.”)22 Similarly, Holmes criticizes Derrida on the grounds that his discourse privileges terms and relations such as transgression, impermanence and difference which parallel the movement of commodity abstraction. But he remains content to ignore the extent to which his own discourse is similarly dependent upon metaphor, including the values of wholeness, certainty, identity, the genuine and the real which have also been drawn into the sphere of commodity exchange. It is not enough to point to a theoretical complicity at such a generalized level — unless, of course, one believes there remains a position somehow outside of such complications.

It is this refusal to question the authority of one’s own position, including one’s means of expression, which remains significant.

22. ‘Constitutive Abstraction’, p. 54.
here. Even if one felt able to give the *Arena* texts a 'generous' reading and understood their valorization of face-to-face relations differently, the possibility of such different readings would still have to be taken into account. Yet, as they stand, this is the very possibility the *Arena* texts cannot consider. A decision to discount discursive and subjective plurality in favour of decision and determination is one mode of engaging in politics. But it would seem unnecessary to presume that only certainty, continuity and 'social and theological norms' can provide a basis for lived identity or political action. Treating ambiguity as an 'accident' produces an incommensurability with relation to Derrida, which amounts almost to an encounter between the Newtonian and post-Heisenburg universes.

If one is able to read Derrida with less haste, one may begin to discern the expression of mode-of-lived identity which depends less upon the assertion of the self than upon respecting the traces of the other in the self. Which bespeaks the need to accept responsibility for the most diverse elements which fortunately constitute any 'normal' self. Which further bespeaks the need to engage in politics with an awareness of the limits of one's own position and perspective, with as much emphasis upon listening as on speaking, with as much status given to reflexivity and questioning as on taking stands. The recognition of irreducible alterity in identity is not inherently 'liberating'. But leaving the zone of self-certainty and mastery to act towards ends one admits are unforeseeable is not to act without hope and imagination.

**BREAKTHROUGH**

I willingly serve technology since two recent inventions: a computer which estimates backbenchers' salaries for the year 2000 and a machine which measures the half-life of an election promise. I hear that scientists are working on a device to detect minute amounts of political scruple.

*Peter E. Lugg*
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
MCQUIRE, SCOTT

Title:
But, Who, Derrida?

Date:
1990

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34903

File Description:
But, Who, Derrida?

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.