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Book Review: Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication

J. Wesley Baker

Cedarville University, bakerw@cedarville.edu

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Ellul claims the unique value of language lies in truth which is created by the word and is not limited by public opinion. For this reason, the word has iconoclastic and paradoxical power while the image becomes idolatrous as it conforms to opinion. There is no mystery in the image and the Wholly Other no longer exists. Ultimately, there is a struggle between “religions of sight” and the “proclamations of the Word”, a struggle which favors the former in a culture controlled by technology.

With this struggle, Ellul returns to the important distinction he makes in his work between “created reality” (the Word) and “constructed reality” (the image.) It is a struggle between the artificiality of man’s work expressed in culture and the transcendent quality found in God’s work expressed in dialogue. And it is in the paradoxical quality of language that the Word “is true to itself when it refers to Truth instead of Reality.”

It is as “the Creator, founder, and producer of truth” that the word finds its most important expression and provides the speaker with a “call to freedom.” This freedom is possible because the second most important characteristic of the word is that it is paradoxical; it always falls outside of accepted opinion and calls that opinion into question. It is this paradoxical quality which produces the final characteristic of the word; the fact that it is mystery whenever it transcends the assumptions about God or the person and we hear an “echo, knowing that there is something more.”

Ellul reminds us that the struggle between image and word is not new; for centuries, the Church has allowed sculpture and glass to arouse religious imagination. But the intended mystery has been replaced by efficacy as images replaced the word in piety and theology. Paradoxically, the Church, as an institution, stimulated the humiliation of the word and the negation of Christian faith. With an emphasis on visible reality, “the illusion of images becomes our ultimate reference point for living.”

This illusion has become so dominant in our culture that “the image-oriented person” now relies on an intellectual process that depends more on emotion than reason. Facts are grasped because of intuition, not logic. Consequently, reality is defined in terms of the image so that “whatever is not transmitted audiovisually does not matter.”

Ellul is characteristically hopeful despite the pessimism he brings to the problem of modern communication. The image and word may be reconciled but not with any reliance on technology. Rather, there must be an iconoclastic spirit which separates the image from any claims to truth. Further, language must remain open; “it must remain susceptible of being newly filled with unexpected content.” In this way, language “permits a continual adventure.” And it is in this adventure that Ellul finds the hope that will move us to a genuinely religious dialogue of man with God.

In Review

Perspectives on Culture, Technology and Communication: The Media Ecology Tradition

edited by Casey Man Kong Lum

(Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2006).

Reviewed by J. Wesley Baker

Professor of Communication Arts,
Cedarville University, Cedarville, Ohio

The thought of Jacques Ellul is most often ignored in the fields of communication and media studies. The few references to him in that literature tend to be dismissive, writing him off as a pessimistic technological determinist based upon a reading of the most familiar of his sociological analyses. It is refreshing, then, to find a group of communication and media scholars who consider Ellul to be “one of their own” and who have a good grasp of the whole of his work—sociological and religious. In this collection of essays, edited by Professor Casey Man Kong Lum of William Paterson University, Ellul is embraced as one of the seminal thinkers whose writings contributed to the development of media ecology as a way of understanding media. This embrace is not

surprising when one considers that the eclecticism in sources and unorthodoxy in methodology which leave Ellul at the fringes of media scholarship mirror media ecology’s “pulling together like-minded ideas and theories from disparate academic disciplines under one roof” (pp. 22-23) in a conscious “revolt against . . . the dominant paradigm in communication” (p. 25).

Lum is among a small group of scholars uniquely positioned to write and edit a volume on media ecology because of his work as a graduate student at New York University with Neil Postman (to whom he credits the naming of the approach) and his close involvement in the development of media ecology as a branch of communication studies in its own right (he was one of the five founders of the Media Ecology Association). His introductory chapter, “Notes Toward an Intellectual History of Media Ecology,” provides both an introduction to the approach and a history of its development. Since this “intellectual tradition” largely developed through the Media Ecology program at NYU under Postman, it may be unfamiliar to those who are unfamiliar with that program. Lum’s essay thus provides an important contribution in chronicling the emergence of media ecology. “This book was conceived,” Lum explains, “to give the readers a general historiographic framework for understanding some of the issues, theories, or themes, as well as some of the major thinkers behind them that define the paradigm content of media ecology as a theory group and an intellectual tradition” (pp. 38-39).

Lum’s introduction is followed by twelve chapters that “focus on a short list of media ecology’s foundational thinkers and

some of the key theoretical issues they share” (p. 39). Postman’s important contribution is recognized in a chapter that publishes remarks he originally delivered as a keynote address to the first convention of the Media Ecology Association. The next set of chapters tend to follow the same structure: provide a “brief intellectual biography” of one of the theorists, then explain the “themes or theories” of that writer and how they contribute to the media ecology tradition (p. 40). Mumford, Ellul (covered in two chapters), Innis, McLuhan, Postman, Carey, and Worf and Langer each receive this treatment. The next two chapters are more integrative as the organizing principle changes from intellectual biographies to communication epochs—Orality & Literacy and Typography. In a short final chapter, Lum describes the current state of the media ecology tradition and suggests future directions for it as a theory group.

The rationale for two chapters on Ellul illustrates the degree to which the media ecologists (unlike most other media scholars) understand Ellul’s dialectic approach. Randy Kluver of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore focuses on Ellul’s sociological works while Ellul Forum Editor Clifford Christians examines how those sociological works relate to his theological writings.

Although Kluver concentrates on the sociological works, he does not present the kind of limited reading of Ellul that comes from those who have read only those works. His explication of la technique and propaganda are informed by a solid understanding of Ellul’s theology and his citations include the less read works in which Ellul more explicitly describes what he is about and how his works are in interplay. While Kluver’s review will go over familiar ground for most readers of *The Ellul Forum*, it is refreshing to find such a well-informed and balanced approach to Ellul finding circulation to a wider audience. His section “Criticisms of Ellul and His Work” clearly lays out four common criticisms of Ellul and thoughtfully counters each. He points out the adverse effect the clash in methodology and orientation between the “social scientific bent” of the field and Ellul’s “humanistic, critical approach” has on an understanding of Ellul (p. 111). Kluver also rejects the characterization of Ellul as a pessimist and a technological determinist by drawing from the religious works in which Ellul argues that a “realistic” view from outside the technological system provides an opportunity for hope. Kluver is weakest in dealing with the criticism that Ellul’s negative treatments of la technique “don’t correspond with our positive responses to technology” (p. 111). Here he tries to extrapolate a position from his assumption that “Ellul, undoubtedly, made use of the best medical technology he could when he was ill” and that he “used the modern media system to disseminate his own writings” (p. 111). Kluver’s argument would be bolstered by some statements from Ellul that suggest a tentatively positive view of the potential of “micro-computers” and the networked communication they provide for local groups of citizens. If networked personal computers could be used for decentralized decision-making, Ellul suggested, they could be “a tool which will allow the society to transform itself.” (Interestingly enough, Ellul makes this assessment in an interview published in *Etc.*, *A Review of General Semantics*, in 1983—when Postman was serving as editor.) Kluver’s “Suggestions for Further Exploration” provide suggestions that resonate with the Forum’s purpose of “carry[ing] forward both [Ellul’s] sociological and theological analyses in new directions.”

While Kluver provides an overview of Ellul’s thought, Christians plumbs the depths of the personal and intellectual roots that inform that thought. His essay and Kluver’s, he notes, enable “readers of this anthology to evaluate Ellul in the terms he himself has specified” (p. 119). Christians chronicles how Ellul’s conversion first to Marxism and shortly thereafter to Christianity set up the sociological and theological poles for his dialectic to be

dealt with in counterpoint and never reconciled. He then develops Ellul’s “theology of confrontation” in *The Meaning of the City* (which served as a counterpoint to *The Technological Society*) (p. 120). From there Christians moves to the impact of Karl Barth’s neo-orthodoxy on Ellul, with its theme of freedom and “biblical dialectic” of “both the No and the Yes of God’s word over the world” (p. 124).

The depth of Christians’ work in human intellectual history are revealed in his discussion of Ellul’s development of la technique and the triumph of means. Here Christians looks to Galileo as the figure that establishes the materialist assumptions of modern science which privilege empiricism as the test of truth, severing science from philosophy and “relegat[ing] all supernaturalism to the fringes of human experience” (p. 126). Christians then develops in much greater detail what Kluver had time to only touch upon—the “revitalization” (p. 128) that a religious perspective makes possible. But Ellul’s Christian understanding of the effects of the Fall sets up yet another dialectic—between “necessity” and “freedom” (p. 131). In order to break free of the triumph of the means and necessity, desacralization of la technique is necessary. Once again, what Kluver introduces Christians is able to develop more thoroughly—those who “attack Ellul’s pessimism fail to realize that his vigorous desacralization is but one element in a larger perspective, the first step in a longer journey” (p. 133). Christians ties together the threads developed over the course of the essay to show how they offer a hope that such desacralization is possible through a “spiritual reality” (p. 133).

In terms of presenting an intellectual biography of Ellul, Kluver and Christians combine to provide a full and rich understanding of him. Kluver provides more of an overview and summary, while Christians develops this understanding in a way that is often limited to volumes that are dedicated exclusively to a study of Ellul. In terms of making connections between Ellul and the development of the media ecology analysis, Kluver is much more specific. Christians deals with Ellul’s connections with Mumford and McLuhan briefly (and often on general points rather than the media in particular; see esp. pp. 119 & 126-127) and provides an even briefer discussion of Postman and Innis (p. 134). Kluver, on the other hand, has a section headed “Ellul and Media Ecology” (pp. 106-110) in which he does much more to explicate the connections. He identifies three points of connection between Ellul and McLuhan, Postman, Innis, Mumford and Ong. The first is agreement on “the ubiquity of media and its necessary degeneration into propaganda” (p. 108). The second is the common “emphasis on technology as the defining characteristic of modern society” (p. 108). The third is “the issue of the word, or the means of different technologies of communication” (p. 108), which Kluver develops in some detail. The difference in the directness of connections to media ecology is also reflected in the conclusions at which each of the two authors arrive. While Kluver bemoans the “absence of response to Ellul” (p. 114) by media scholars and suggests specific ways in which Ellul’s analysis could be incorporated into media scholarship today, Christians concludes more generally, arguing that “Ellul’s explicitly Christian framework” (p. 135) “must meet the standard of religious diversity to be credible” (p. 136).

The essays in this volume suggest the opportunity for Ellul scholars to find a sympathetic and interested audience among media ecologists. One disappointment is that that has not already occurred to a greater degree. Amidst all of the discussion of Ellul, there is only one reference to an article from the Forum—and that was an article dealing with Mumford, rather than Ellul—even though articles that could inform a greater understanding of Ellul’s thought and analysis have appeared in the Forum. Conversely, I don’t recall having read anything in the Forum that indicated the

degree to which Ellul's ideas form a part of this school of media studies. It is to be hoped that the essays in this volume will help encourage further dialog and provoke continued scholarship that accomplishes the Forum's goals.

Digital Matters: The Theory and Culture of the Matrix

by Paul A. Taylor and Jan Harris

(Routledge, 2005), 210 pp.

Reviewed by David J. Gunkel

Associate Professor of Communication,
Northern Illinois University. dgunkel@niu.edu

Digital Matters: The Theory and Culture of the Matrix is one of those books where the title says everything. In the first place, *digital matters* is a deliberate oxymoron, pregnant with ambiguity. It denotes, on the one hand, a concern with the subject matter of digital technology and culture. And in indicating this, the phrase inevitably calls to mind the essential immateriality that has been the subject of so much theorizing about new media technology and computer systems. Being digital, as individuals like Nicholas Negroponte have argued, is all about a transformation from the antiquated culture and slow-moving economy of atoms—large, heavy, and inert masses—to a new world of weightless and ephemeral bits of information that circulate through global networks at the speed of light.

On the other hand, *digital matters* can also be interpreted in a much more literal and material sense. In this way, the title names the inescapable and often ignored material circumstances (e.g. the working and living conditions of individuals involved in chip manufacturing, the unequal distribution of and access to information technology, the environmental impact of toxic waste from discarded IT components) that make the digital and its utopian promises of immateriality possible in the first place. *Digital Matters* is a book that not only plays on this double meaning but, most importantly, demonstrates how and why the material conditions of digital technology do in fact matter for all things digital. In this way, the book identifies and critically examines techno-culture's *im/materiality*, a neologism introduced by Taylor and Harris in order to name and give expression to this complex issue.

Second, the subtitle deploys and trades on the polysemia that has accrued to the word "matrix." Clearly the immediate reference for many readers will be the Wachowski brother's cinematic trilogy, not just because of the films' popularity but also because of the numerous academic books and articles that have offered interpretations of the narrative's social and philosophical significance. *Digital Matters*, although employing these pop-culture materials as a recognizable point of departure, does not mount a direct critical assault on the film and its interpretations. Instead Taylor and Harris address the trilogy indirectly by investigating the larger cultural and theoretical matrices that already inform, animate, and structure the im/material ideology that is articulated by this particular techno-myth.

For this reason, *Digital Matters* understands and deploys "matrix" in the full range of its multifarious meanings, including: environment that shapes, supporting structure of organic form, signal transposition, and the place of reproduction. Understood in this way, Taylor and Harris's investigation can be categorized as an innovative and more sophisticated articulation of *media ecology*, where media technology does not just frame new social

environments but innovations in technology are also situated in and informed by a socio-cultural matrix that already shapes and informs technical developments. In other words, *Digital Matters* tracks down and examines both the social and cultural material in which digital technology has developed and the very real social and cultural environments that this immaterial information helps to create.

In order to get at this, Taylor and Harris marshal an impressive array of theorists, many of whom are not usually considered part of the official pantheon of cyberstudies and new media technology. Instead of concentrating on the work of self-stylized techno-theorists like Lev Manovich, Nicholas Negroponte, N. Katherine Hayles, et al., Taylor and Harris turn their critical eye toward Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Kittler, Michel de Certeau, and Walter Benjamin. This is not just an exercise in "old school" theorizing. Instead Taylor and Harris demonstrate how these thinkers' ideas already structure our understanding of digital technology and how they might be repurposed to introduce innovative methods for critically rewiring the matrix of our technological present. Consequently, *Digital Matters* does not simply apply, for example, Ellul's work to digital technology, but opens up a critical dialogue between Ellul's theorizing and contemporary media *praxis* that has the effect of transforming both. In the final analysis, *Digital Matters* is a remarkable book that pushes the envelope in new media theory. It should be of interest to anyone concerned with media, technology, and contemporary theory.

International Jacques Ellul Society

www.ellul.org

P.O. Box 5365, Berkeley CA 94705, USA
IJES@ellul.org Tel/Fax: 510-653-3334

The IJES (with its francophone sister-society, L'Association Internationale Jacques Ellul) links together scholars and friends of various specializations, vocations, backgrounds, and nations, who share a common interest in the legacy of Jacques Ellul (1912-94), long time professor at the University of Bordeaux. Our objectives are (1) to preserve and disseminate his literary and intellectual heritage, (2) to extend his social critique, especially concerning technology, and (3) to extend his theological and ethical research with its special emphases on hope and freedom.

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