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Brad Rubin

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The Powers of Silence: Cistercian Monasticism as a Radical Critique of Information Age Epistemology

Brad Rubin

Brad Rubin is a senior majoring in Philosophy. This paper is part of a 2005 Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant Project mentored by Dr. Francine Quaglio. Brad also presented his work at NCUR in 2006.

Preface

The following is the text of a talk I gave at the 2006 National Conference on Undergraduate Research. It outlines the salient results of research which I began in 2005 in preparation from my undergraduate thesis. These results aim at a theoretical analysis of certain monastic deployments of silence and their relevance to socio-epistemological problems identified by certain contemporary social theorists.

Introduction

Eight Quotations:
Everywhere the masses are encouraged to speak, they are urged to live socially, electorally, sexually, in participation, in festival, in free speech...The spectre must be exorcised, it must pronounce its name. Nothing shows more dramatically that the only genuine problem today is the silence of the mass, the silence of the silent majority (Baudrilard 1983, 23).

Who sits in solitude and is quiet hath escaped from three wars: hearing, speaking, and seeing (Waddell).

But this silence is paradoxical—it isn’t a silence which does not speak, it is a silence which refuses to be spoken for in its name. And in this sense, far from being a form of alienation, it is an absolute weapon (Baudrillard 1982 21-2).

I have endowed him with my spirit that he may bring justice to the nations. He does not cry out aloud, or make his voice heard in the streets (Isaiah 42:2).

Should we initiated an information dietetics? Should we thin out the obese, the obese systems, and create institutions to uninform? (Baudrillard 2001)

Go and sit in thy cell, and thy cell shall teach thee all things. (Waddell).

...Now, in fact, the masses have no history to write, neither past, nor future, they have no virtual energies to release, nor any desire to fulfill; their strength is actual, in the present, and sufficient unto itself. It consists in their silence, in their capacity to absorb and neutralize, already superior to any power acting on them... (Baudrillard 2001, 2).
From the beginning I have been silent. I have kept quiet, kept myself in check. I groan like a woman in labor. I suffocate, I stifle (Isaiah 42:14).

The preceeding words were those of theorist Jean Baudrillard, the Christian desert monastics, and, finally, Yahweh himself. Taken together they create a dialogue about the strategic power of deployment and retention, discursive practice and intuitive reticence, the a/historical capacities of speech and of its refusal. These concerns can be summarized in terms of two questions: What are the powers silence? And why should they be exercised?

For the past year I have been writing a thesis which addresses these questions in two parts. In the first part I posit a socio-epistemological problem: The ultra-proliferation of information accompanying the global economy has constituted the sublation or displacement of conventional forms of meaning in the West. The second part analyzes a system of physical, epistemological, theological, and philosophical structures which has theorized and deployed silence as a meta-sign for counter-cultural practice. This is the Catholic tradition of Cistercian Monasticism. The rest of this brief talk will be aimed at giving you a sense of how each main part of my thesis addresses my two initial questions.

I. And why should they be exercised?

The input/output of electronic media has replaced physical production as the driving force behind political, economic, and interpersonal life; thus “information age” becomes a platitutde. What is not widely acknowledged is that this shift in cultural geography constitutes a violent reconfiguration of human epistemologies. Our idea of “knowledge” and how to access it is inextricably linked to the possibilities we have for representing, viewing, and cognizing word and image. As McLuhan noted:

...After three thousand years of exploration, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technology, the Western world is imploding...[electronic technology] is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal lives...Whether the extension of our consciousness, so long sought by the advertisers for specific products, will be “a good thing” is a question which admits of a wide solution. (McLuhan 3)

McLuhan’s anxiety about the ultimate social effects of this shift has been born by out by the present condition of conventional channels of meaning and by the irruption in the kinds of sources by which meaning is thought to originate. Let us consider this irruption of epistemic venues in terms of two conventionally Western meaning-structures: social discourse, natural science, and ontology.

The Social

Since the immediate aftermath of Gutenberg and continuing until the late 20th century the Western model of social discourse has been characterized by the propositional nature of speech and text and by the quantitative limits which analogue mediums imposed on them. In other words, social discourse was thought most appropriate when it took the form of rational argumentation expressed within the structural limitations of speeches, newspapers, and books. Neil Postman writes:

To engage the written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference-making and reasoning... It also means to weigh ideas, to compare and contrast assertions, to connect one generalization to another. (Postman 51)

Conventional Western understandings of the nature of meaning are related to both this notion of propositional interconnectedness and to the quantitative limitation of information through analogue formats. Meaning is concerned with integrating diverse informational fragments in such a way as to construct an intelligible, purposive reality. For this to occur it is necessary that information be manageable in terms of its context, quantity, and cognizability.

Speech and text, however, are no longer primary in the sphere of the social. Rather, the perpetual flicker of the image has become the model both of social “knowledge” itself and of the appropriate avenues of its exchange. This is to be seen in clearly documented phenomena such the hegemony of television in domestic life, the decline of the newspaper, the 24 hour news feed and its 30 second sound bites (Stephen 10). The problem here is twofold. Firstly, image-based media do not structurally allow for the kind of propositional argumentation which has historically constituted the social; the graphics of the poll replace the op. ed. letter as the voice-space of the masses. Secondly, the speed of the digital has proliferated information to such a staggering degree that it casts the process of coherently integrating informational fragments into a space of improbability and pastiche. Or, as Baudrillard puts it, this new epistemological currency constitutes “.....a liquidation of all referentials....a material more malleable than meaning in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatory algebras” (Baudrillard 1994, 2).

The Scope of Nature

Earlier I spoke of the onset of the digital economy as constituting a shift in cultural geography. In in a sense, it is a shift in physical geography—or at least in the relation between physical space and our “knowledge” of the natural world. The speed and ubiquity of the digital constructs a world of perpetual presence which is at the same time ontologically displaced by its fundamental status.
as presentation or projection of electronic media. Paul Virilio describes this situation in terms of optical perception:

This is an active (wave) optics, replacing in a thoroughgoing way the passive (geometric) optics of the era of Galileo’s spy-glass. And doing so as though the loss of the horizon-line of geographical perspective…necessitated…a substitute horizon: the “artificial horizon” of a screen or monitor, capable of permanently displaying the new preponderance of media perspective over the immediate perspective of space. (Virilio 14)

This imposition of a new perceptual horizon—a new, total “place-ness” of media—carries our discussion from the epistemological to the ontological. What is it to be in a world delimited by virtual space, by the tele-present?

Simulation
For Baudrillard the answer is that meaning-structures such as ontology no longer have anything to signify—nor do they signify nothing. Rather, they operate as simulations: virtual signs which neither point to a reality nor deny a truth. Rather, they obviate the difference between affirmation and denial. Baudrillard writes: Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction. Because it is difference that constitutes the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. The imaginary of representation…disappears in the simulation whose operation is nuclear and genetic, no longer at all specular or discursive. It is all of metaphysics that is lost…(Baudrillard 1994, 2)

Meaning is an anachronism….

Or is it? Despite his avowed nihilism, Baudrillard does offer glimpses of strategies which might oppose the simulacrum of information-culture. Virtually all of these glimpses focus on techniques of absence, reduction, negation, and silence. In Fatal Strategies Baudrillard poses a question which I quoted earlier. “Should we initiate an information dietics? Should we thin out the obese, the obese systems, and create institutions to uniform?” (Baudrillard 2001, 193) In a manner of speaking, the rest of this paper is about an institution to uniform. Really, it is about a way of thinking and living which uses silence as constructive strategy and a deconstructive weapon in order to preserve a model of meaning in the reality of its practitioners.

II. What are the powers of silence?
The monastic order of Cistercians was founded at very end of the 11th century by French Benedictines looking for a simpler and more rigorous observation of the Benedictine rule. This included a strict observance of silence which became a central concept as the Cistercians theorized their practice in opposition to succeeding worldly cultures. In order to get a sense of what this practice has entailed I invite you to consider one aspect of the Cistercian strategy:

Silence and The Binary
Echoing the impossible unity of a tripartite God, Cistercian thought does not see silence as functioning through dialectical opposition; silence is not opposed to language, effacement to support, destruction to stability. Rather, these events are constituted by the same act of sublimation. The author of a monastic training book writes:

They had adopted the famous maxim of St. Arsenius: Fuge, tace, quiesce; fly from everything that diverts you from God, observe an interior and exterior silence that so you may be enabled to hear the voice of God, allay all agitation of mind and heart in order to enjoy repose in God (SD 36).

This stands in contrast to the conventional Western understanding of legitimate conceptual reasoning. Following Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction, Westerners generally understand meaning in binary terms: true/false, action/inaction, speech/silence. Historically, capitalist ethics and Enlightenment heritage work together, providing their own mythology of meaning; it’s motto: “paucity of meaning must be countered with informational maximalization. Or, in binary terms: information/enlightenment/meaning // silence/darkness/meaninglessness.

Following the model of the crucifixion—the ultimate silencing which becomes the final redemption, Cistercian theory rejects meaning as a binary modality.

Silence as Epistemology
This rejection is closely linked to the Cistercian understanding of silence as an alternative epistemological space which moves between rationality and intuition. Silence becomes a mode of discernment or listening which by its very emptiness deconstructs information and provides an extra-rational context in which specific kinds of meaning emerge. Thus we read the opening line of the Benedictine Rule: “Listen my son, and with your heart hear the principles of your Master” (RB Prologue). It is significant that, from antiquity to the medieval period, the conceptual “heart” was seen as the bodies’ epistemological space, circumscribing intellectual and spiritual activity. Also related to the idea of “discernment” or listening is the notion of God as the Word. Like ordinary language the Word is something which allows for and even demands understanding and exchange. Unlike ordinary language the Word requires a special mode of relation, the extra-rationality of engaged silence. For this reason Cistercian daily life is structured as rigorously staged performance of choreographed speech, silence, and text.
Conclusion
Perhaps what Cistercianism recommends to the laymen or secular is a perversely meaningful version of what Baudrillard calls “the strategy of the object” (Baudrillard 2001 85). This is the strategy of non-resistance, inertia, and refusal to respond. Note that in this strategy one acts paradoxically by renouncing subjectivity in order to achieve desired ends. Conversely, on this model (which is entirely consonant with Cistercian practice) it is the active acceptance of subjectivity which deters one from the strategic goal.

I hope that by now it is clear why I began with the quotations I did. Discourses as diverse as Catholic theology and postmodern theory—discourses which deny each other’s foundational claims—often have much to say to each other in light of a particular problematic. I hope that, as limited this talk has been, you have some intimations of why we are “urged to live socially, electorally, sexually, to pronounce [our] name,” why Isaiah’s bringer of justice “does not cry aloud or make his name heard in the streets,” why Yahweh has kept quiet, kept himself in check, how silence can be “an absolute weapon.”

Works Cited