On Dialogue, Dissemination and Materialization:
An Interview with John Durham Peters

**Dialogue, dissémination et matérialisation :
une entrevue avec John Durham Peters**

**Diálogo, difusión y materialización: una entrevista
con John Durham Peters**

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ABSTRACT

John Durham Peters, professor of English and of Film and Media Studies at Yale University, is known for his work on the history of media and communication. His first book, *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication*, gained worldwide fame thanks to its transdisciplinary outlook on humanity's thirst for communion, which it finds not in cables and

signals, but in its very human condition. In *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, he invites readers to expand their understanding of media beyond mass media. François Cooren, professor at Université de Montréal's Department of communication, invited John Durham Peters to give a presentation for the department's 40th anniversary and took the occasion to discuss with him about his conception of communication. The two men exchange their views, among others, on the need to get past the separation between an apparently immaterial realm of communication and the material world it would merely represent. Benjamin Peters, assistant professor at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, joins them and shares his interest in how digital media intersects with regimes of space, time, and power.

Keywords: media, philosophy of communication, materiality, dialogue, dissemination

RÉSUMÉ

John Durham Peters, professeur d'anglais et d'études cinématographiques et médiatiques à l'université Yale, est connu pour ses travaux sur l'histoire des médias et de la communication. Son premier livre, *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication,* a connu un succès mondial grâce à son regard transdisciplinaire sur la soif de l'humanité pour une communion qu'elle ne retrouve pas dans les câbles et les signaux, mais dans sa condition humaine même. Dans *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*, il invite les lecteurs à étendre leur conception des médias au-delà des seuls médias de masse. François Cooren, professeur de communication à l'Université de Montréal, a profité d'une conférence de John Durham Peters donnée à l'occasion du 40e anniversaire de son département pour s'entretenir avec lui au sujet de sa conception de la communication. Les deux hommes discutent notamment de la nécessité de dépasser l'opposition entre le monde apparemment immatériel de la communication et le monde matériel qu'elle représenterait. Benjamin Peters, professeur adjoint à l'université de Tulsa, en Oklahoma, les accompagne en partageant son intérêt pour les régimes spatiaux, temporels et de pouvoir qui se tissent autour des médias numériques.

Mots-clés: médias, philosophie de la communication, matérialité, dialogue, dissémination

RESUMEN

John Durham Peter, profesor de inglés y de estudios cinematográficos y mediáticos a la universidad Yale, es conocido por su trabajo en la historia de los medios y de la comunicación. Su primer libro, Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication, ganó fama mundial gracias a su visión transdisciplinaria de la sed de comunión de la humanidad, que no se encuentra en los cables y las señales, sino en su misma condición humana. François Cooren, profesor del Departamento de Comunicación de la Universidad de Montreal, invitó a John Durham Peters a hacer una presentación para el 40 aniversario del departamento y aprovechó la ocasión para discutir con él sobre su concepción de la comunicación. Los dos hombres intercambiaron sus puntos de vista, entre otros, sobre la necesidad de superar la separación entre una comunicación aparentemente inmaterial y el mundo material que sólo

representaría. Benjamin Peters, profesor adjunto de la Universidad de Tulsa, Oklahoma, se une a ellos y comparte su interés por la forma en que los medios digitales se cruzan con los regímenes del espacio, el tiempo y el poder.

Palabras clave: medios, filosofía de la comunicación, materialidad, diálogo, diseminación

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John Durham Peters is the María Rosa Menocal Professor of English and Professor of Film and Media Studies at Yale University, which he joined in 2017 after teaching for thirty years at the University of Iowa. He is best known for his work in the history of media and communication. His first book, *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication* (1999, University of Chicago Press), gained worldwide renown for casting a wide net and situating humanity's thirst for communion not in wires and signals but in its very human condition, through a philosophical, religious, literary and sociological journey that begins with Socrates and Jesus, all the way to William James and Kafka. More recently, and among many other works, Peters wrote another provocative book, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (2015, University of Chicago Press), where he invites readers to expand their conception of media beyond mass media. Rejecting at once the distinctions between "new" media and older media, and nature and technology, Peters thus locates the notion of media in practices, rather than in the support itself.

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Université de Montréal's Department of Communication, chair François Cooren invited John Durham Peters to offer a guest lecture, and took the opportunity to engage with him in a conversation concerning his conception of communication, which is reproduced here. Cooren, who, among other distinctions and roles, is a past president of the International Communication Association, a former editor of the journal *Communication Theory*, and a Distinguished Scholar of the National Communication Association, has himself reflected on the need to repel the so-called "bifurcation of nature" that separates an allegedly immaterial realm of communication from the material world it would merely represent. Recognizing communication's materiality and, conversely, that communication is not the prerogative of human beings, is crucial in accounting how communication participates in constituting our collective and social life (Cooren, 2000, 2010, 2015).

John and François are joined by Benjamin Peters, Hazel Rogers Associate Professor of Media Studies and Media Studies department chair at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who also happens to be John's son. Ben also has a keen interest in how media intersects with regimes of space, time, and power, with a special focus on digital media.

François: Thank you for being here. I think it's good to be able to have a dialogue about what interests us reflectively. One thing I really loved in *Speaking into the Air* is the fact that you are trying to acknowledge the two traditions of communication studies. You call the representatives of the first the Dialogians and, while you don't use that word, I would call the representative of the second the Disseminators.

John: Right, that's your innovation!

François: An interesting thing you do is that you associate the Dialogians with Socrates and the Disseminators with Jesus, both of them being sorts of embodiment of these respective traditions. Could you speak about the downsides and upsides of both dialogue and dissemination?

John: When I recently re-read *Speaking into the Air* for the first time after 20 years, I realized that while a lot of people accuse me of not being fair to dialogue, or of over-emphasizing dissemination, in fact the argument is quite dialectical and quite fluid. It's clear that where Jesus talks about dissemination of the seeds openly and broadly to everyone, he also dialogues with his disciples one-on-one, and is also interested in that sort of generativity. On the other hand, it's also clear that Socrates's notion of love refers to interpersonal love but also to universal love, because you're tapping into the truth that came with you before you came into the world. So, it isn't necessarily only personal, it's also something bigger. So, if you push the concept of dissemination, it starts to morph, like a Moebius strip, into dialogue, and the dialogue morphs into dissemination. I'm opposed to the idea of making either one too rigid.

François: I agree. Another risk that you mention in the book is that dialogue may in fact involve a tyranny of reciprocity. Dialogue comes from the idea of reciprocity, which can actually be quite evil.

John: Reciprocity, of course, is essential to humanity at so many levels. Turn-taking is so fundamental in terms of interaction. It is also fundamental in terms of economic exchange obviously. However, it's also central to warfare: the way that warfare typically works is someone kills someone and then someone kills someone else to get revenge, and so one, and then you have this cycle that never ends, in which tit-for-tat is our quid pro quo. The sort of violence of stopping, and turning the other cheek as Jesus taught is, actually, a disseminating strategy of stopping the pathology.

François: There is also an indirect critique of Derrida at the end of your text on the history of the idea of communication, which is perhaps a critique of his view of dissemination. You write that "Derrida is right to combat the philosophical principle that behind every word is a voice and behind every voice an intending soul that gives it meaning. But to think of the longing for the presence of other people as a kind of metaphysical mistake is nuts" (J. D. Peters, 1999, p. 270). There is the same critique, more or less, in the more recent book, where you seem to suggest that the weakness of dissemination is that we are not expecting anything from others. Like the Greek notion of agape, it's a form of unconditional love, that in a way can seem cold, in the end, because if we don't expect anything from the other, there is a core absence of warmth, so to speak. We love everybody but what does love mean at that point?

John: It's very true. Love requires vulnerability, risk and breakdown. For one thing, you have to accept the gift. Emerson has a great essay about gifts, in which he says that we all hate receiving gifts because they're insults to our dignity. That would be the attitude of the advocate for agape, who loves everybody indifferently, because it makes them immune to any contact. Genuine love, though, is vulnerability. We could talk about my critique of Derrida, whom I admire in some ways and less so in others.

François: To continue on our relation with the other, you also write, "all mediated communication is in a sense communication with the dead, insofar as media can store 'phantasms of the living' for playback after bodily death" (J. D. Peters, 1999, p. 149). So, I think we agree that any communication is mediated. Even our communication right now is mediated, and at the end of *Marvelous Clouds*, you insist on the fact that there are at least milliseconds between the moment where I speak and the moment you hear me, so there is mediation. Obviously, there are more mediated and less mediated forms of communication, but even face-to-face communication is mediated communication. So, when you speak about communication with the dead, I understand it to mean that the person that I was when I uttered my words does not exist anymore when you hear them.

John: We're like stars. Our speech is like the light of the stars. Once it's received, we have changed, we're different. I get criticism for that whole argument. Laszlo Solymar, who is an electrical engineer at Oxford, of all people, wrote a review of *Speaking into the Air* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and invited me to have lunch with him at Oxford College. He insisted that communication is about moving information from point A to point B, and asked me, "Why do you talk about communicating with the dead? Why not just call it communication between past and present?" But for me, this is a really important point.

François: I definitely agree. One of the things I often do with my students, and that I've taken from Derrida's (1988) *Limited Inc.*, is show them that we also use the notion of communication to say, for instance, that this room communicates with the hallway, through the door. The door is then a medium, through which to communicate. It allows us to show that communication, in the very way we use the notion, allows us to speak about nonhumans communicating with each other.

John: One of the great things about the concept of communication, and this is chapter six of *Speaking into the Air*, is its ontological flattening, its indifference to forms of embodiment. So, we can talk about aliens and animals and gods and demons and computers and hallways and people all communicating.

François: You have an interesting passage on dialogue with the dead. People would say, "The dead can communicate with you, but you cannot really communicate with the dead because they are not there anymore to listen to you." And you say, "Dialogic ideology keeps us from seeing that expressive acts occurring over distances, and without immediate assurance of reply, can be desperate and daring acts of dignity. That I cannot engage in dialogue with Plato or the Beatles, does not demean the contact I have with them. Such contact may be hermeneutic and aesthetic rather than personal or mutual" (J. D. Peters, 1999, p. 152). So, to what extent would you speak about dialogic effect with people who are not there anymore?

John: Isn't that the prime example of dialogue? Dialogue is no less dialogue when one end of the conversation does all the turn-taking. So, if I'm reading Plato, I'm the animator of the text, but in some ways, Plato is very much alive. I'm the necessary condition for Plato to be alive. The mystery of reading, to me, lies in the opposition between a dead material substrate, a support of paper and scribbles, and the reader's eyes and cognition and body and labor and stance and knowledge of the language, which all bring a world into being. It is not a world that the reader is making up or projecting. This is not shared idealism. It is an encounter with another. We all know that reading is extremely difficult and often, to read is a strenuous encounter with alterity, a very different mind, a very different way of thinking, which I think is what dialogue is at its best.

François: But couldn't some people say, "The person who died, let's say, Homer or Plato, may be able to communicate with you, to speak to you, but he's not able to respond"? I suppose we could answer that the reader can imagine how he would respond to a question, because they know his work and can try to maybe make up a response.

John: You're saying that the reader *makes up* the response, but I want to think of Plato as making the response. The dead retain their otherness; they are not our projections.

François: So, the reader becomes the voice of Plato, but of course they might also betray Plato completely.

John: I find when I teach students how to read, one of the hard things is to get them to be open to surprises. The text will talk to you, will reply to you in really rich ways. I teach *Moby-Dick*, and a lot of my students just think, "Big story about a whale, and it's going to be boring." Then they start reading it and they say, "This is weird, and this is strange, and he is talking to me about race and sex and money and capitalism and longing and loneliness and..."

François: Yes, and the dead, through their texts, can address a variety of contemporary issues. There are passages in your work, in that sense, where you make connections with other sub-fields of communication, like organizational communication. For example, you present Kafka as a great organizational communication scholar. I would agree with that, but you say something interesting: "Bureaucracy is a world

in which the ultimate sources of all messages is hidden" (J. D. Peters, 1999, p. 203). Soviet bureaucracy, or any kind of bureaucracy for that matter, has this dimension, I would certainly imagine.

Ben: As someone who has written a book recently on the surprises of Soviet bureaucracy (B. Peters, 2016), I might hazard a thought here. Perhaps we could say that dialogue, when reduced to its core features, ends up resembling a kind of arithmetic in its edginess and its over-demanding exactness. Whereas dissemination, once reduced too much, ends up resembling a kind of statistical anonymity, a spread of a message to the point its source is diffused beyond recognition. But here, to return to your argument about reading, reading a bureaucracy shows how neither of these end points—dialogue or dissemination—are enough to understand communication. Bureaucracy is full of vibrant matter, there's no bureaucracy without some kind of vibrant matter: signatures, dates, filing systems, and the committee minutes that obscure sources and reasoning, etc. Every time we encounter communication in the embodied condition, we are surprised by the superabundance of whatever the matter of the medium brings, like the print of Plato. So, I think we can see that embodied excess even in bureaucracy. Even as we can imagine how bureaucracies end up being spaces for Kafkaesque tragedies, despair, and the impossibility of life connections, they also end up so much more than just dead paper.

John: It's a problem of interpretation, because I've been on search committees, for example, and how we arrived at the outcome, I couldn't understand and nor could anyone else. There are these very strange processes in which we all participate, and yet no one understands what their meaning is. I've heard my Dean at the University of Iowa say things that I thought I knew, before I realized I had no idea what she was saying. Maybe the point was to make it impossible to be understood. Obviously, that's what politicians do a lot: they say things that are completely unintelligible.

François: A kind of strategic ambiguity.

John: Yes, exactly.

François: To continue on the implications of communication performing an "ontological flattening," as you mentioned earlier, many pragmatists and semioticians seem to disagree with me when I say that a pragmatist view of communication allows us to say that nature speaks to us. That's one of the main points you make at the end of *Speaking into the Air*. You write: "Does nature speak, does God speak, does fate speak, do bureaucracies speak, or am I just making all this up? Where do projections of myself end and where do authentic signals from the other begin?" (J. D. Peters, 1999, p. 204). This brings the question of treason. We claim that we make nature speak, for example, or that we make God speak, but sometimes, maybe, we are betraying nature and God. Latour would speak in terms of translation always involving treason. *Traduttore, traditore*, as the Italians would say. How do we deal with that?

John: I have a colleague in German at Yale and who studies the phenomenon of "Fürsprache," which means "speaking for, speaking on behalf of." This is actually the Greek word, "προφήτης" (*prophétés*), which gives us our word "prophet," the one speaking on behalf of another and not only speaking beforehand. Prophets are dangerous! Jesus himself said, "Beware of false prophets." A prophet can say, "Nature tells me that I have to kill you, or God tells me that women have to wear certain clothing," or whatever.

François: Yes, or, "The situation dictates that we do that." But at the same time, that's the only way we can increase our authority, so we cannot escape that. Obviously, there are moments where we are misusing this principle, but at the same time, whenever scientists want to prove what he or she wants to prove, he has to start to speak on behalf of results, for instance. So that's a curse of communication, so to speak.

Switching to *Marvelous Clouds*, in this book, you are really going beyond traditional ways of understanding media. At least since McLuhan and Innis, we know that media are more than just ways by which we convey meanings. So, what is your definition of media, if there is such a pure definition!

John: Incidentally, I just started a short essay that's called "What Is Not A Medium," because I get this question a lot. Obviously, at the beginning of that book was a student asking me, is a cloud a medium? I tried to come up with the answer, "yes." Is everything a medium? Of course not, but also, everything *could be* a medium. So, my definition of media is that they are in the middle, and what the middle is depends on the situation. So, media are phenomenological, they're species-specific, they're situation-specific. In some cases, the ocean is a medium and in some cases it isn't. That's kind of the point of the whole chapter. The sea is a medium in a very different way for humans, because we have ships, and we have nautical vessels for travelling, than it is for dolphins, who have the natural evolutionary apparatus to swim in the sea without any infrastructure.

François: They have techniques but not technology.

John: Exactly, yes.

François: When you speak about what may be a medium, you use a phrase that I like a lot and says that something can be a medium "under a certain description." It is so as a medium, as a means. It's becoming a medium, but it's never a medium per se. Otherwise, that would make these *final* descriptions, which for Peirce would not make any sense.

John: Right, pragmatists don't like essences. We like practices.

François: Yes, and something very interesting you wrote is that media are perhaps most interesting when they reveal what defies materialization. This converges with my thinking, which is that whenever there is a medium there is materiality. By definition, a medium has to be material. At the same time, though, there is a degree, and I found on page 178 a reference to Peirce that I love: "'being is a matter of more or less,' a quantitative matter" (J. D. Peters, 2015, p. 178), and I see materiality in the same way: we have to deal with more or less materiality. So, my understanding of your point here is that the media that may be the most interesting today are the media that seem ethereal, that seem perhaps immaterial.

John: That's one reason why I picked the notion of the cloud, of course, because it's such a perfect target for the dialectic of immaterial and material. The IT business wants us to believe in the cloud as completely ethereal, when in fact it's very smoky and carbony, with data centers.

François: Speaking of production, though, I would like to invite you to comment on a sentence that you wrote: "The history of media is the history of the productive impossibility of capturing what exists" (J. D. Peters, 2015, p. 11). I understand there is a hint of capture, of course, but Derrida would also say that nothing can ever be proper. There is never anything that can be completely captured, so to speak. Is it what you mean here when you mention the impossibility of capturing what exists?

John: Pragmatists don't like perfection, and they don't like the dream of perfection. So, the rhetoric of perfect fidelity, which sells us record players or earphones, or the perfect image fidelity, always hides a form of slippage. I've always been interested in that little margin. Derrida has that good notion, the margin of incompleteness, which is where freedom and growth are possible. The universe would get very crowded if we got perfect really fast.

François: So, it is a claim for finiteness.

John: Yes.

François: You also write, "Like entrepreneurs, hackers, and revolutionaries, media theorists think in the ablative case: 'by means of which.' Media are not only about the world; in ways it is our task to specify in these pages, they *are* the world" (J. D. Peters, 2015, p. 21). My understanding of what you write is that everything could potentially be a medium. Right now, for instance, as I speak, I am the medium of Derrida, the medium of Latour, and the medium of yourself, actually.

John: I guess, indeed, that you're a better medium of me than I am! (laughs)

François: The way I hear it is also in relation to this very interesting expression by Latour, in his *Inquiry into the Modes of Existence*, "l'être en tant qu'autre," which means "being as alterity" (Latour, 2013, p. 285). In other words, what we are is also, in fact, made of many other things. That may be pretty close to what you're saying. I am my attitudes, I am my passions, I am my body, I am all these things, that define improperly what is proper to me.

John: Yes, there's a wonderful passage in William James that I love, in the *Principles of Psychology*, in which he defines what a "self" is, and it's a long list (see James, 1890, p. 291). His idea is very similar, in that the self is this sprawl of people and memory and places and even, as he notoriously puts it, bank accounts, which continues to annoy some of his readers.

François: Yes, I'm also my bank account, it's a good point. We are getting to the ontological question. When you say, "The event is the record. And the universe is perceptions" (J. D. Peters, 2015, p. 320), which urges you to go as far as saying – and I would agree with you – that "media studies sees itself as the successor discipline to metaphysics" (J. D. Peters, 2015, p. 27).

John: We're talking about George Berkeley here.

François: Exactly. We're talking about Berkeley, who is often criticized, obviously, as a solipsist, but you have a very generous reading of his work.

John: I have a pragmatist reading of Berkeley, because of James and Borges. I've got an essay on Borges, who was influenced by James in his understanding of Berkeley. What James says is that while some write off Berkeley as being very silly, it is also possible to see his ideas as very practical. He asks, what is the universe? His answer is that the universe is so much perception. It's actually a nice way to think about it.

François: Which also ties it to media and to what you were saying during your presentation at the Université de Montréal, about how telling the weather cannot distinguish between the weather itself and meteorology, in the same way as technology and technique sometimes blur into each other. There's a moment when you cannot distinguish them, or you decide not to distinguish them.

John: There's a Latin saying, "*quod non est in actis, non est in mundo*," which means that if it's not in the files, then it's not in the world. It's the Spanish king and queen Ferdinand and Isabella who coined that, then Phillip II would repeat it. And then the German media theorists loved this expression, because it raises the distinction between the file and the world, or between the weather and meteorology. As we said during my presentation, "la météo," as the word for "weather report" in French, has come to mean the actual weather, in general.

Ben: Oh, that's interesting!

François: So, in a sense, it's a new way to speak about existence itself. That is, being and existence are

a matter of degree. Someone could say, "This organization exists on paper, but does not really exist." The organization hasn't been founded, and yet it does exist, to some extent, on paper. We could also look at Derrida's wonderful analysis of the US Constitution (Derrida, 2002). When the Founders started to write the Constitution, it started to exist, but it also already started to exist before that, when they were thinking about the Constitution and discussed what they would write in it. It shows us that being or existence is really a matter of degree. Why would the only important thing be our bodies? They'll die one day. Or why would only our minds be important? Is it because they supposedly prove our existence?

John: Maybe you know this joke? So, two cave people are sitting in a cave and the first says, "I predict that, in ten years, the wheel will be invented." The second person asks, "What's a wheel?" The first explains, "Well, it's a round thing which you attach to your tools and it makes your work much easier." And the second exclaims, "I think you just invented it!" (laughs)

Ben: I didn't know this joke! Like "la météo," what is "the wheel" except the report on a thing becoming the thing itself?

François: I suggest we end this interview by speaking about God. I found it quite intriguing when you wrote, "All things that exist are particular, including deity" (J. D. Peters, 2015, p. 370). It sounds like a finitist view. I would like to hear more about your view, as it sounds like it opposes the usual view that God as somehow being everywhere or everything. For you, it has to be an entity?

John: God is embodied, in my understanding. Ben and I actually wrote an essay on this, about Norbert Wiener and finitist theology (J. D. Peters & Peters, 2016), because Norbert Weiner is also influenced by William James in his theology. My own theological tradition is that of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which insists on the embodiment and materiality of God.

François: How does this view articulate the multiplicity of embodiments?

John: So, there's Father and Son, and they are both embodied, but there is potentially a multiplicity of embodiments, because all of God's children could become like him eventually, and therefore they are embodied. This is also an answer to the deep, ticklish problem of theodicy, because if God is embodied, then perhaps he's not able to actually intervene with respect to all the suffering.

François: My idea of embodiment, and I don't know if it would be yours, is that embodiment or incarnation is not the materialization of something that would otherwise be completely immaterial. For example, in French you say of the actor playing a role, say Cyrano de Bergerac, that they "incarnate" the part. The actor is material, but Cyrano de Bergerac is also material in a way, because the character has been written down and has been played before and will be played again. So, there's more than one embodiment. Most importantly, embodiment for me is not that you have something completely immaterial that is embodied into something material. It's one materiality into another materiality into another materiality. Would this argument work also for God? Can we say that there is no such thing as an immaterial God? Or is God always embodied, in which case we would be closer to Spinoza's God. That would be a very "terrestrial" God, in my understanding of Spinoza.

John: I find Spinoza very tempting sometimes, but I believe God has a human form; or that humans have a divine form, which is actually a better way to put it. There's something important about this particular configuration of materiality and about the question of what a body would be that doesn't die, which I haven't quite figured out. Obviously, part of embodiment is metabolism and processing, and eating and sleeping, and sickness and illness, and all these oppositions that we face here.

François: Would the soul have a form of materiality for you?

John: This is really interesting, because for me a soul is the spirit and the body combined. And I certainly do believe that spirit is material. We should ask Ben about this too!

Ben: I don't know that I have a direct comment on the soul, but I think in that it occupies a juncture. It's not only important, but essential, because it's a combination of two other categories—body and spirit—each of which alone is insufficient, but together they do something more. Spirit alone is evacuated and body by itself is subject to entropy. When combined, though, action becomes possible, and instead of *essence*, we get *practice*. Perhaps the soul, whatever it is, is another word for a practical solution to the problems of embodiment and spirit? I do not claim to have the answer, but I suspect it reflects back on your earlier question about how an embodied God and a finitist theology help limit the basic problems that arise when we imagine God to be omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent.

François: So, can God be overwhelmed by its creature, in a sense? Can God be overrun or surprised by them?

Ben: I am continuously overwhelmed by my creatures. I have four—*only* four. Why would one imagine God at work in the cosmos dotted with creatures to be any less overrun?

François: People like to portray God as omnipotent, capable of doing everything.

John: There's a wonderful passage in the scriptures of our religion, which shows God weeping at his children. That means God can experience sorrow, and it must be fascinating to be watching us and seeing the Divine Comedy! (laughs)

Ben: It wouldn't be much of a drama if one side had all the "omnis." As Norbert Wiener says, if Milton's battle between Satan and God is nothing more than a stage for a professional wrestling match in which the outcome is already known in advance, that's a disappointing show. There has to be an actor who is subject to surprise, calamity, and sorrow.

François: There needs to be eventfulness.

John: God has to be at risk, which is also part of the fact that God came to Earth and that God was crucified. So, the incarnation is not always a happy condition. That's a sign of God being overwhelmed, surprised or turned against by his creatures.

François: Keeping with the gist of the conversation, a core concern for both Christianity and for pragmatists such as James or Dewey is education. So, in conclusion, I would like to ask you how the way we conceive of materiality, and of the blur between media and non-media, helps think about education, about how we educate or teach?

John: One idea I'd start with is that media studies allows us a fresh way to make the humanities alive for our students today. I find that, at the University of Iowa, if you say we want to talk about big ideas, we want to talk about literature, we want to talk about philosophy, the students were saying, "Oh no, it's too hard and I need to get a job." But if I say, "I want to talk about media," then people are in it. However, to talk about media, we've got some problems we need to think about. I typically start with Plato's *Phaedrus*, and then show that it lays out all the questions we've had ever since. They would still say, "Well, it's hard," but I'd be able to answer, "You need to think through this in order to learn how to think about media," and they would get it.

The reason why I care about the humanities, of course, is that I think it's essential for democracy for people to be reflective, critical and thinking. It's important for cultures and languages to have a deep sense of their

tradition and their literature. It's very scary when students don't really understand the great English literary tradition, for example. And you can seduce people with media. A term I use sometimes is "seducation." (laughs)

Ben: One way of rethinking Snow's *The Two Cultures* (1959/2001) is to say that if we accept that divide between scientific cultures, we're in big trouble, since a two-culture divide relegates the question of technology to one part of campus where engineers and scientists abound. Technology, understood in the older tradition of technique, has long and, I think, should continue to preoccupy the humanities and the "softer" social sciences. Media studies—a milieu for acculturating and cultivating thought about technique and culture—offers a kind of conduit or training space for integrating the two campus cultures into one, three, or thousand cultures. Media studies teaches that technique and technology have politics, history, and philosophical stakes. Projects that land grants also provoke new ethical dilemmas. Whatever it is about media studies that permits us to do that kind of work disciplinarily can also be useful pedagogically.

John: Another thing I'd say is that for the pragmatist tradition, education is one of the fundamental forms of political action. Some people will say that I should be more of an activist, I should be out in the streets, but I also feel like the university is a public sphere. I am able to teach to so many students; just yesterday, for my presentation, there were about 150 people! That was an amazing public moment, an opportunity to try to present new ideas in a clear way and help people think about the planet, think about justice, think about the weather, think about media. So, I really feel that we shouldn't neglect the classroom as a place for raising consciousness and for making democracy possible. This is good old-fashioned John Dewey, obviously, but it is important to remind ourselves of our role!

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