

**The Parergon for Parergonal Critique:
On David R. Castillo and William Egginton's
*Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of
Inflationary Media***

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It would be reductive to claim that David Castillo and William Egginton's (C&E) *Medialogies: Reading Reality in the Age of Inflationary Media* stands or falls on the notion that the real question for our times is not "what would Jesus do?" but rather "what would Cervantes do?" (215), but it may help as a starting point for commentary. The question comes up in the book's last chapter, and it refers to the idea that Cervantes can be presented "as a model of what we call the defenders of being" because "he had a privileged vantage on the medialogy created by the first inflationary age" (215). "Defenders of being," then, against "the second age of inflationary media and its medialogy" in which we live—who are they, the ghosts of Cervantes among them? And what can they do?

C&E write:

Defenders of being are simply those whose creations, in whatever media they use, have the capacity to attune us to the ways in which the medialogy produces our sense of reality and generates our desires. They are writers and thinkers and artists whose work causes us to see outside the frame, and inspires us to imagine other ways of thinking, being, and desiring. (216)

From this, the final mantra issued by C&E ("mantra" is their word): "more humanities!" (216): "Reading literature and viewing art and thinking and writing about these experiences is the vital and indispensable foundation for

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any possible liberation from today's medialogy and the self-destructive traps of desire it engenders" (217). C&E call this "a baroque perspective," the one they recommend (220), but not in the invocation of the baroque spectacle and its own strategies for biopolitical capture and control. Rather, their proposal is for a "minor baroque," and the rescue of its "visionary legacy," in order to promote "reality literacy" against general zombification—against self-destructive enslavement, or destructive self-enslavement (225). It is a call for reality literacy, then, in the wake of the defenders of being whose work we inherit from the tradition.

Medialogies is a wonderful and astute book that engages in a reading of the symptoms of our time and makes a radically critical case of it. Our time, the second age of inflationary media, is a time when the world has become a mere "resource" following upon trends and perspectives the first inflationary medialogy, the one developed in baroque modernity, had already set in place. I would think one of the guiding intuitions of the work is given in the following quotation from Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which also comes toward the end of *Medialogies*:

The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. (Benjamin quoted in C&E, 200)

The point the authors make—the structuring point of the book's analyses—is that the absorption of the auratic thing in the twentieth century, given mechanical and then digital reproduction, erases any experience of transcendence. We are no longer in the Baroque, and the Neobaroque will not help. The minor baroque is a strategy for reading, not a proposal for a new creation.

If, in the first medialogy, print, for instance, created the perception that thought could refer to an unknown original or ideal form of which objects—books, paintings, architecture—were copies, in the second medialogy the copy is "the ideal," that is, the real:

Objects that had become copies of an ineffable real emerge as things in themselves with no further regression required. They are already real and hence require no transcendent reference to ground them. This reification of what had been relegated to the status of copies is the basis for an unconscious fundamentalism that spreads to all walks of life. (209)

Fundamentalism—the fundamentalism of worker-consumer identity, based on a principle of general equivalence (the “ineffable me” that everybody has come to own [59–63]) that has today become the true colonizer of spirit—is the organizer of today’s subjectivity, the authors claim, that is, of all (unreflective) subject positions: “In the conditions of the new medialogy, the individual is an unanchored island of solitude connecting via the media to others he or she conceives of as conjoined members of a community with unfettered access to the truth” (209). A crucial element of these claims is that what obtains today is itself derived from the first medialogy. Hence, reflection on the ways in which beings in the first medialogy tried to deal with it may become the very ground of resistance to and from the second medialogy—or so it is claimed.

To a certain extent, then, C&E are making a disciplinary claim. As specialists in the literature and culture of early modern Spain, they make a case that Spanish artists of the period were able not simply to attune themselves to their time’s hegemonic medialogy, but also to take a step back from it, to frame the frame, as it were, and to investigate what was pushed off-scene. The obscene, however, silently organizes the visibility of the scene. The emphasis on what we could call the parergon—parergonal critique—would have been decisive for artists such as Miguel de Cervantes or Diego Velázquez, for María de Zayas or Baltasar Gracián, for Pedro Calderón de la Barca, or for less well-known others. It is therefore important to return to them, not because they have a lot to say directly on our own time, but rather because what they were able to say at the time of the first medialogy could offer clues regarding what is to be done today—this is the “ethical optics” (181), an optics, we could say, of a second-order obscene, from which the authors of *Medialogies* propose to undertake the task of “reading reality” that their subtitle announces (“A critique adequate to the task . . . must understand how the struggles of our own times are rooted in those of the first age of inflationary media” [167]):

If the Spain of the seventeenth century was a hegemonic power, then its culture may have something to offer for understanding and resisting dominant cultural forms projected to the West and beyond from the United States as a hegemonic power: Cultural historians of the early modern period have identified the origins of our society of the spectacle in the seventeenth century. José Antonio Maravall in particular has linked the emergence of mass-culture to the organizational and propagandistic needs of the modern state and its imperialist drive. His conceptualization of the baroque as a guided culture of the spectacle has much in common with Debord’s theorization of the modern world as the society of the spectacle. (40)

C&E's important chapter (Chapter twelve, "The New Fundamentals") on the contemporary university is of course attuned to this non-disavowed disciplinary interest, which, incidentally, also gives the book a particular relevance for Spanish Studies.

Is the professor today a defender of being? Could she be? The professor herself is today in the hands of an increasingly psychotic machine, the university corporation, whose "legally defined mandate is to pursue, relentlessly and without exception, its own self-interest, regardless of the often harmful consequences it might cause to others" (David Schmid quoted in C&E, 112). The professor, certainly also in the humanities, must follow the imperative of "cash-driven (euphemistically enrollment-sensitive) intra-institutional funding models" that are "a reflection of the logic, priorities, and values of the global market economy" (112). Professors who must consider not just their students as objects but essentially the totality of their work to be driven by exploitation (and self-exploitation) for profit may no longer be in a position centrally to embrace the parergonal critique C&E recommend, which will turn out to be only the residual privilege of those of us entrenched enough in the institution to consider we still have a few years of relative academic freedom ahead: parergonal critique indeed, since its practitioners must now think of themselves as appropriately relegated to the woodwork. Is that residual position to be thought a "privileged vantage," as C&E suggest? Or does it rather point to the nostalgic dream of the liberal professor, long since ford-taylorized into submission by the institution that feeds him (or her)? These are not glib questions. Indeed, nothing could be more urgent for our own self-understanding, hence for an understanding of the potentialities of our task. After all, we are talking about "reading reality."

How can one "defend being" from a parergonal position? But the parergon is doubled. C&E nowhere claim that the professors can be "defenders of being." They simply claim, to repeat, that it is the function of the vanishing humanities to remain attuned to the defenders of being, that is, to those "writers and thinkers and artists whose work causes us to see outside the frame, and inspires us to imagine other ways of thinking, being, and desiring" (216). We read, not reality, rather its parergonal defenders, not just those of today ("Today this function is performed by comedians like Stephen Colbert or cinematic subgenres of horror that explore how the media frames our perceptions, desires, and behaviors," the authors say a bit perplexingly [166]), but also those of yesterday, and it is this second- or third-order approach that may inspire us to imagine something other, and to prepare a future. There is only the hope, no matter how enthusiastically expressed, still only just a hope that our active reading, Colbert, or walking dead movies will produce critical effects.

Martin Heidegger's essays "The Age of the World Picture" and "The Question Concerning Technology" are mentioned several times in the book,

and not casually. The notion of the “defenders of being” is attributed to Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, from *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx*, and has therefore also an at least vaguely Heideggerian provenance. We do not have to say this is a Heideggerian book, but, since I have been given by the editors, Julio Baena and Brad Nelson, the task of providing a “starting point for a discussion of some of the salient issues” in the book, let me refer briefly to the Heideggerian scenario, from which I will draw one question for C&E. Not without saying first that I consider this an admirable and extremely valuable work.

The notions of *Ge-stell* and *Bestand*, standardly translated as “enframing” and “standing reserve” respectively, are given in Heidegger’s 1949/1953 text “The Question Concerning Technology” as a clarification of unhomeliness, a clarification of the pervading harassed unrest that marks our lives in the age of modern machine technology. For Heidegger the question concerning technology is not simply a question about technology, but it is a question about the undwelling of our age—it is about what C&E formulate as the “loss of reality” attendant to the second age of inflationary medialogy (9), where “everything must be fit for global consumption, including nature, history, and culture, even the future” (36). The fundamental question for *Medialogies*, in my opinion, a question that *Medialogies* is by no means blind to, but may remain ultimately uncertain about, is whether such loss of reality—a loss of reality paradoxically understood as a total assumption of reality within the frame of the second medialogy—can be compensated or countervailed by the minor-baroque strategy of parergonal reading, by the strategy of interrogating the frame, or of reading those who have interrogated the frame.

Medialogy is technology. In the Heideggerian vocabulary our age is defined by technology to the extent that technology, as the latest and most extreme manifestation of the metaphysical arrangement of things, defines our lives. And it defines them as lives under *Ge-stell*, that is, as enframed lives—it is not only that the world is a resource, our lives are also experienced as resources, human capital, living labor, investment in exchange value. For C&E, if “the dominant frame of the first inflationary age generated a spectral object on which subjects focused their desires, a fantasy of ultimate reality, of fundamental and unchangeable truths,” then “today’s medialogy promises us it will give us the total reality we always knew was there, but couldn’t access” (59). But it gives it to us at a price, and the price is “the objectifying system of equivalences that drives the global market economy today” (99). The principle of general equivalence is the frame, and enframing the essence of technology, that is, not the essence of the human, but rather an essential determination of human lives in the age of technology, in the age of the second inflationary medialogy. It is the determination that throws our lives into a radical (dis) position, and that makes us conceive of our own spatio-temporal determina-

tion as, precisely, “a grasping toward world domination and the movement of settlement subservient to such domination” (Heidegger, *Hölderlin* 49). This is the “total reality” of the second medialogy in C&E—also, as quoted above, a total “loss of reality.”

I think C&E walk along Heideggerian paths even longer. For Heidegger, through the push for world domination the world becomes *Bestand*, that is, standing reserve: “Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately at hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering. Whatever is ordered in this way has its own standing. We call it the standing reserve” (Heidegger, “Question Concerning Technology” 17). But dwelling or undwelling in the world as standing reserve is still a form of dwelling. There is a covert relation, unclarified, between the grasping for world domination, the enframing of the world as standing reserve, and the poetic enterprise of dwelling in a proper relation to the home. Heidegger quotes the Hölderlin verse: “poetically dwells man upon this earth” (34). There are simply different historical forms of poetic dwelling. Heidegger uses the German word *Her-vor-bringen* for the general form, that is, to bring forth hither, of which he says: “Bringing-forth-hither brings hither out of concealment, forth into unconcealment. Bringing-forth comes to pass only insofar as something concealed comes into unconcealment. This coming rests and moves freely within what we call revealing (*Entbergen*)” (“Technology” 11). There is an echo of this in “Building Dwelling Thinking”:

The Greek word for ‘to bring forth or to produce’ is *tikto*. The word *techne*, technique, belongs to the verb’s root, *tec*. To the Greeks *techne* means neither art nor handicraft but, rather, to make something appear, within what is present, as this or that, in this way or that way. The Greeks conceive of *techne*, producing, in terms of letting appear. *Techne* thus conceived has been concealed in the tectonics of architecture since ancient times. Of late still remains concealed, and more resolutely, in the technology of power machinery. (337)

Or concealed in medialogy. Poetics, technics, media are forms of dwelling: “The essence of building is letting dwell. Building accomplishes its essential nature in the raising of locations by the joining of their spaces. Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build” (338).

This “building” seems to me what is at stake, what is recommended, in a ciphered form, in C&E’s *Medialogies*. Early in their book they say that the baroque strategy of dwelling had to do with *desengaño*, which they translate by “undeception,” although we know it is both more and less than that:

The basic idea is that we were naïve in our beliefs; we were living inside an illusion that we are now invited or guided to transcend. What the term *desengaño* describes is a *reframing* of reality, a realignment of the border between the visible and the invisible, and the new media— theater, perspective painting, the book—hold the promise of the truth beyond deceptions. (my emphasis 11)

For C&E, when this “reframing of reality” folds “back into itself to show that the deception is actually in the framing,” a revelation, an unconcealment ensues, hence a building, a dwelling, at least potentially, which would be the accomplishment of “the minor strategy of baroque aesthetics” as a defense of being (11). It is a powerful claim.

But what is the difficulty of building, of dwelling, in the age of the second medialogy? Heidegger says that poetic revealing, that is, the relationship of man to unconcealment, to truth, “does not unfold into a bringing-forth in the sense of poiesis” in modern technology (“Technology” 14). “The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging (*Herausfordern*),” a “setting upon,” a “challenging forth” (“Technology” 16). The world, under the sway of the impulse for human domination, becomes a standing reserve. Nature, and with it, life “reports itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and it remains orderable as a system of information” (“Technology” 23). Let me quote what I believe is the key passage in Heidegger’s text, the passage perhaps most relevant to a proper understanding of C&E’s *Medialogies*, or at least the passage most relevant for its discussion:

As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but does so, rather, exclusively as standing reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing reserve. Meanwhile, man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth. In this way the impression comes to prevail that everything man encounters exists only insofar as it is his construct. This illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself . . . In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence. Man stands so decisively in attendance on the challenging-forth of Enframing that he does not apprehend Enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself as the one spoken to, and hence also fails in every way to hear in what respect he ek-sists, from out of his essence, in the realm of an exhortation or address,

and thus can never encounter only himself. (“Technology” 27)

Have C&E taken into account the moment of the “precipitous fall”? Is their parergonal critique what happens just before the human’s precipitous fall, or is a parergonal critique only a possibility for the few who can claim to be the exceptions to the fall? In any case, there is, following Heidegger, within the second medialogy, but at its heart, something else, a spatial state that is worse even than the dislocation of harassed unrest. That would be what comes after the fall into the condition of absolute “illocation,” the condition that I will call of biopolitical life—when the human has become identified with a nature, or a life, beyond objectlessness, of mere calculability and orderability, a life which is as abstract as the abstract space that Heidegger counter poses throughout “Building Dwelling Thinking” to the space of dwelling. The passage of the human itself into standing reserve, a precipitous fall, is the passage into a generalized biopolitics—man is from then on only to be distinguished from nature as life, but to the very extent that the general procedures of human domination of the earth will now be applied to him. In biopolitical life we are ourselves standing reserve, we are the orderable and the extractable and the storable.

Enframed, we are at the same time but no longer primarily the enframers, as the minimal distance that gave the human still the possibility of addressing his own undwelling as plight is now lost. Because there is no longer plight, because the plight is now terminal as mere absence of plight, biopolitical life can resolutely proceed to the final arrangement of world domination, in total subservience to it. Man now dominates himself, but no longer as man—only as standing reserve, as a pool of genes or labor force, as human resource or consuming power, as the orderable and calculable or, inversely, as undesirable (dis)ponibility marked for disappearance or extermination. It is then that man encounters only himself or herself, in the mirror of natural life, believing that only his or her constructs exist. There is no longer an outside—only a generalized field of identity, but it is an identity that has managed to surpass the condition of harassed unrest into the unharassed rest of biopolitical fixity, of biopolitical infinity. I am not sure that C&E would not agree with this; nor am I certain that they incorporate or would wish to incorporate it into their critical strategy: hence my question.

I do not know whether “more humanities!” can be an interruptive response to such a state of affairs. I would like to believe it could help, I simply do not quite see how. The possibility must be taken into account, on the authors’ own terms, that “imagining other ways of thinking, being, and desiring” might be just another avatar of medialogy, a final delusion, yet another way of fulfilling the dream of subjective enframing. Parergonal critique, still a university function, caught up in the game of enframing, still within the

parameters of the great tradition, enframes the frame, in a vicious spiral that wants to challenge forth yet more dreams, more desires, more resources that become so much more fodder for the disciplinary machine. Perhaps it is not enough to dwell on the frame. Perhaps the frame must be broken. Perhaps a different game must be played—a game that Cervantes or Gracián could not have announced, could not have thematized.

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