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Writing onto the Clouds:

John Durham Peters and

Inscription Media

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Abstract

This short essay suggests that John Durham Peters' *Speaking into the Air* (1999) re-capitulates its arguments through form. In its written medium, with its hermeneutic mode, and by its promiscuous prose, the book exemplifies its own moral case for dissemination over (in Peters' chilling phrase) 'interpersonal mimesis'. The essay positions the book's first chapter, on Jesus and Socrates, as an unannounced nesting, in which Peters uses the parable mode to endorse a parable about the virtue of parables. Another facet of the book's formal re-enactment of its argument surfaces in Peters' method of discrete and serialized exegesis of old texts. *Speaking into the Air* is, in its way, a celebration of temporary breakdown, of the otherness of the other, of slippage and ellipses. Thus, it is fitting that the bulk of the book's page-time is given over to dialogue at a distance, suspended dialogue, dialogue with the dead. There is, finally, the book's polymathic weirdness—aphoristic, punning, etymological exuberance. Peters, on most pages, is overtopping the levees of meaning—a nod, I argue, to the book's skepticism about the dream of easy lucidity.

Keywords

John Durham Peters, medium analysis, writing, dialogue, dissemination

Speaking into the Air is sui generis. The book, when it appeared in 1999, had no counterpart, no generic bedfellows. There was no existing stream of discourse to join, not in communication studies. No community of scholars working on its questions—no antagonists nor any confederates. The book, then, was a genre of one, a singular text, remarkable and strange.

Scholarship is often described as a conversation, a back-and-forth between and among contemporaries. The norm, especially in the hard, urban disciplines that carry the mantle of 'science', is for fast turn-taking. The exchanges are live and late-breaking.

Speaking into the Air is not like that. All of its interlocutors are dead, survived by their textual remains. So Peters' book is a series of exegeses, delivered in the same written mode. These aren't conversations, since the authors can't reply. Peters—an estranged reader—catches what he can from letters that weren't addressed to him. And his own interpretations have the same character: Delivered as writing, they have no addressee. The book's playful and scattershot style—its runic overflow—is itself a notable abstention from dialogue. This is the main point of this brief essay: *Speaking into the Air* enacts its own argument. In its written form, with its hermeneutic mode, and by its promiscuous prose, the book exemplifies its own moral case for dissemination over (in Peters' (1999: 31) chilling phrase) 'interpersonal mimesis'. It is itself Speaking into the Air—or, as I prefer, writing onto the clouds.

So the book is not in conversation with fellow communication scholars. Nor is it—in the style of the late James Carey—engaged with contemporary thinkers outside the organized discipline. The book prefers dead-letter distant reading to engagement with the contemporary field. This comes across in the brilliant introduction—its sweeping history of twentieth-century thought on communication. Only one self-identified member of the U.S. communication research fraternity gets mentioned at all, and he (Wilbur Schramm) is dismissed by footnote.[1] Peters has said that communication studies has a long history but a short past. The book's preoccupation with the long history—the 'interpretation of stray texts' (Peters, 1999: 150)—is an argument-by-example. It's a claim that's buttressed by a writerly style—and by the medium of writing itself. And so I conclude with Peters' (2015a) remarkable meditation on 'inscription media' in his 2015 sequel, *The Marvelous Clouds*.

Dissemination as Form

Peters' thesis in *Speaking into the Air*, in its first unspooling, is that the dream of communication—frictionless contact between minds—is yearned for in vain. The dream, moreover, spawns a despairing doppelgänger, in the literary and philosophical

obsession with breakdown. Both sides of the 'solipsism/telepathy couplet', to borrow Peters' (1999: 16) phrase, are prodded into full expression by the new recording and transmission media of the nineteenth century. He recommends a less demanding, and more earth-bound, ideal. In Peters' (31) alternative, communication is joint action out in the world, though tuned—crucially—to 'splendid otherness'. He fashions a syncretic tradition that, in slogan form, is something like Dewey with a dash of Levinas.

In the first full chapter, however, the book's argument is recast—projected, as it were, onto the ancient past. The new focus is on *dialogue* and *dissemination*, as embodied by Socrates and Jesus. These are modes, and not ideals, though dialogue leans toward soul-to-soul communion, while dissemination—Peters' (1999: 51) preferred form—is looser and 'democratically indifferent'. The distinction, in this chapter, hinges on writing. But in the balance of the book, the real weight of the argument is on emergent media like radio: Broadcasting, for example, is one-way dispersal in the mold of the synoptic Gospels.

Still, I want to stick with the medium of writing, as Peters does too, at least in this chapter. His case against dialogue is built on an exhilarating re-interpretation of the *Phaedrus*, and Socrates' infamous critique of writing in particular. Socrates' problem with writing, Peters convinces us, isn't the medium itself. The issue, instead, is with the indiscriminate *audience* that writing invites.[2] Unlike the tight, dyadic coupling of dialogue, there is nothing reciprocal in the written mode. The speaker is cleaved from his own words, replaced by an inert and durable inscription that—worse still, for Socrates—can be read, or misread, by anyone. The concern, in Peters' (1999: 48) summary, is about 'paternity and promiscuity'.

The synoptic Gospels stand in for the counter-argument, which is Peters' too. In the parable of the sower, Jesus invokes the scattering of seeds. Most won't ever take root. The point is to spread the Word indiscriminately, without concern for any particular harvest. If dialogue favors the sender—the speaker, bound to his chosen audience of one—dissemination privileges the receiver—grants her, and anyone else, interpretive license. The 'blessedness of nondialogic forms', Peters (1999: 35) concludes, is that they don't expect a reply. The one-way dispersal is 'radically public' and 'open in its destiny' (53, 35). The strenuous Socratic ideal of reciprocal coupling is, in dissemination, relaxed.

At a second register—one that Peters draws out—the debate between Socrates and Jesus is enacted in formal terms, in their dueling modes of address. Socrates defends dialogue in the fitting form of a dialogue—one that, yes, Plato preserved in writing. The parable of the sower, likewise, is self-exemplifying, a 'parable about parables' (Peters, 1999: 51). It is, after all, addressed to a diverse, far-flung audience, and its message is indirect, even cryptic: 'The meaning of the parable', Peters writes, 'is quite literally the audience's problem' (52).

My claim is that Peters, in the chapter, has applied his own additional layer of formal re-enactment. There's the obvious, but not banal, fact that he has chosen the codex format, in all its indiscriminate scatter, to rehabilitate dissemination. It's also true that the chapter is itself a parable, a staged debate. Both protagonists, as Peters observes, have only a gauzy relationship to historical actuality—a virtue given Peters' aim to author a parable. His focus, he (1999: 36) writes, is 'the intellectual and moral shadow those personages have cast, not their precise historicity'. He hopes to 'orchestrate' a 'fusion of horizons'—a nod to Hans-Georg Gadamer's metaphor for hermeneutics (36). Socrates and Jesus are at once familiar and distant—and neither has the ability to talk back. Like the parable of the sower, Peters' fable places the interpretive burden on an unknown, and in some ways foreign, audience: Communication scholars don't speak, after all, in Peters' tongue. So his story, like the sower's, is a 'meta-parable'—a parable about parables. Indeed, his is an unremarked upon nesting, in which he deploys the parable mode to endorse a parable about the virtue of parables.

Hermeneutics as Mode

The book's formal re-enactment of its argument spills over, one could say, to the other chapters too. Peters' method is discrete and serialized exegesis of old texts. When he lingers on Augustine's *De Magistro*, Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, or Hegel's *Phenomelogy of Spirit*, Peters is engaged in dialogue. But this is dialogue at a distance, suspended dialogue, dialogue with the dead. These sustained acts of one-way interpretation, in the hermeneutic mode, are the spine of the book. Marx, Kierkegaard, Emerson, Cooley, James, Kafka, and Turing—to name a few other remote correspondents—take their turn in Peters' exegetical hot seat.

Communication with the dead, as Peters (1999: 149) writes, is the 'paradigm case of hermeneutics: the art of interpretation where no return message can be received'. The whole practice is predicated on a gap between writer and reader: a canyon of millennia, in the classic Biblical example. These aren't 'close' readings. There is no pretense of soul-to-soul communion, in the spiritualist key.[3] So Peters, in these iterative acts of distant reading, is putting his own argument into practice.[4]

Hermeneutics, to borrow Peters' (1999: 149) summary, 'starts from a shattered communication situation in which writer and reader are in some way estranged from each other, by distance in time or culture'. *Speaking into the Air* is, in its way, a celebration of temporary breakdown, of the otherness of the other, of slippage and ellipses. And so it is fitting that the bulk of the book's page-time is given over to dead authors.[5]

Exuberance as Style

Let me turn from Peters' readings to our own. The book's nested parable and its hermeneutic mode, together, build a formal case for the 'rehabilitation of dissemination', parallel to the explicit one (Peters, 1999: 35). Peters' halting communion with dead authors is, in turn, an address to future readers. Like all writing, *Speaking into the Air* has an indifferent, 'to whom it may concern' character (35). Slippage and ellipses are inevitable. My claim is that Peters, through his style, has accentuated the point. He has blown, lightly, on the embers of inscrutability. Writing is always and already enigmatic, in other words, but Peters widened that baseline gap between author and reader. The book's style exemplifies its ethics.

One way to characterize Peters' prose is through a contrast drawn by Roland Barthes. In *S/Z*, Barthes (1970) distinguished between 'readerly' (*lisable*) and 'writerly' (*scriptible*) literary works. The former, readerly sort makes things easy, with a sequential plot and simple sentences. The result is legibility, or at least an attempt to pin down authorial meaning. Barthes prefers the writerly alternative, those texts which embrace their instability through nonlinear structure and circumlocution. The writerly text invites its readers, in effect, to author their own novels. 'The goal of literary work', Barthes (1970: 4) wrote, 'is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the texts'.

Speaking into the Air is a writerly book. It revels in what Barthes called the pleasure of the text. There is, on every page, ludic spillover, a *jouissance* that invites interpretive work from the reader. This is, of course, another way of saying that *Speaking into the Air*, like the parable of the sower, is receiver-oriented. The gap that's always there in writing is exposed—made visible—through the book's gnostic style and structure.

Consider the book's temporal arc. The twentieth-century story comes first: a gallery of scholars and intellectuals who, for the most part, never reappear. Readers are soon plunged into the Socrates/Jesus bath, then carried through a pair of millennium-spanning, century-hopping chapters on ideas. The book's second half revisits the recent past, but the spotlight is now on the new mediums (in more than one sense). The brief and haunting conclusion outlines Peters' other-oriented communication ethics, but ends in a mysterious and moving reversal—a brief meditation on love, touch, and co-presence, a qualified rehabilitation of Socrates and dialogue.

Speaking into the Air is nothing like conventional intellectual history, with its linear narration and plodding re-iterations. Peters does not present an orderly, contextualist history of the idea of communication (an impossible project, regardless). The book, instead, is a series of grapplings around a focal theme, soul-to-soul connection. The engagements themselves, from Socrates to Turing, are all virtuosic, and yet there is no canonic statement of the argument, no taut summary to copy-and-paste. We have instead, as readers, a kaleidoscope of claims and interpretations that take on symmetrical shape, indeed—but fleetingly and in shifting configurations. The book moves through ideas, technologies, and ideas about technologies. We encounter angels dancing and dolphins leaping. This is, or must be, vertigo by codex.

Still, there is never, in a Peters paragraph, anything like the brooding obscurantism that typifies so much high theory. *Speaking into the Air* is composed with careful, and often lovely, sentences. There is, instead, polymathic weirdness—aphoristic, punning, etymological exuberance. The book, on most pages, is overtopping the levees of meaning. And so there's no pretense to authorial transparency. To quote Peters (1999: 52) on the parable of the sower: 'Though much is thrown, little is caught'.

The U.S. communication studies field, circa 1999, was in no position to catch much—not by disposition, nor by tradition.[6] But easy lucidity was not Peters' (1999: 52) aim:

'[T]he failure of germination is not necessarily something to lament'. And this is just to say, again, that the book's form enacts its argument—its skepticism, one could say, about the dream of easy lucidity. Peters' communication ideal is a 'dance in which we sometimes touch' (268). That's just what reading the book is like.

Conclusion

There is, finally, an irony in all this: Writing as a medium does not, in *Speaking into the Air*, get much explicit attention. The book's broad arc is from communication to media—from the idea of communication to the analog mediums of the nineteenth century that, in effect, filled out the 'dream of wondrous contact' (Peters, 1999: 197). The stars of the book, in that respect, are the camera, phonograph, telephone, and cinema. These late-arriving media of transmission and recording are, for Peters, decisive: They generate ghostly doppelgängers by 'duplicating and distributing indicia of human presence' (141). Seeing a recorded face, or hearing a voice: These 'media of multiplication' conjure spirits, even animate the dead (195). Telepathy and its appalling twin, solipsism, were only thinkable in their wake.

Old and alphabetic, writing is Peters' (1999: 138) hinge of contrast: 'Writing's handicaps—its blindness and deafness—were suddenly revealed'. Its nineteenth-century successors arrested time with novel and uncanny resemblance; the phonograph and the others mounted 'entirely new kinds of raids on and representations of the human form' (140). Writing, in *Speaking into the Air*, is a superseded side show. The book anoints broadcasting, and not writing, as the exemplar of dissemination; radio and television, in the end, are the seed-scattering mediums of polygamous address.

It's only in Peters' (2015b) third book, *The Marvelous Clouds*, that writing wins the stage. The book is a formalist encyclopedia, a remarkable march through 'environments and infrastructures' (4).[7] *The Marvelous Clouds* is an unannounced sequel to *Speaking into the Air*; Kittler, the dolphins, and the modal mode of thinking were all there in the original. The 16-year interval marked, among other things, the end of broadcasting; Minerva's owl flew in its dusk. 'Writing,' Peters (265) wrote in the 2015 book, 'has roared back to the center of everyday communication practices'. The twenty-first-century revival

of text was an occasion, then, to address writing's 'infrastructural neglect' (281). And that's what Peters does in the book's chapter on 'Inscription Media.'

The chapter (Peters, 2015a) is a love letter to writing. It's also quite possibly the finest example of Peters' written genius, his erudition with a human face.[8] The chapter is filled with superlatives: Writing is the 'most fundamental medium', the 'first great medium' (304); 'all other symbolic media sail in its wake' (264). Even the spectral character of nineteenth-century analog forms are, in *The Marvelous Clouds*, faint echoes of writing's own uncanny cheating of death. It's the written word that 'allows voice and mind to transcend the grave', that blurs the status of the living and the dead (278). Writing 'discovered how to trap the "winged words" of speech [...] a kind of phonograph long before Edison' (302). The chapter, in effect, turns Kittler on his head.[9]

And so it's fitting that writing is Peters' (1999: 62) own mode, his argument-by-example for the 'subtle splendors of dissemination'. Writing doesn't promise soul-to-soul communion. Absence, after all, is 'writing's genius' (Peters, 2015a: 286). The inscriptions in the clouds are there for everyone and no one.

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Notes

1 Citing Schramm's (1954) 'How Communication Works', Peters (1999: 6n6) writes: 'Those seeking to make the term theoretically precise for academic study have sometimes ended up only formalizing the miasma from the culture more generally'.

2 Peters (1999: 47) quotes the famous *Phaedrus* passage, which—in the light of his re-reading—has uncanny resonance, in this line above all: 'When it has once been written down, every discourse rolls about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it, and it doesn't know to whom it should speak and to whom it should not'.

3 Writes Peters (1999: 154), summarizing Emerson: '...what is possible is the anamnestic reading of the traces of the dead by the living. To visit the cemetery is to interpret a historical text, not to receive a spirit visitation'.

4 The 'distant reading' phrase needs reclaiming from its application to large-corpus text-mining and other literary computation (see Moretti, 2013).

5 In some ways, the modern hermeneutics tradition is Peters' model for communication, one that avoids the Scylla of telepathy and the Charybdis of solipsism. 'The task', he (1999: 21) writes in the introduction, 'is to find an account of communication that erases neither the curious fact of otherness at its core nor the possibility of doing things with words'. Peters explicitly identifies this 'middle position' with the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricœur, though he qualifies the anointment in favor of American pragmatism in its 'Emersonian lineage'. The pragmatists, he writes, are more sensitive to the practical fact of making-do, and also (crucially for Peters, one senses) to the uncanny—'the wildness of the signs and tokens around us' (22; see also 149–150). Even so, Ricœur in particular emerges as one of the book's hidden heroes. Peters credits Ricœur for the insight that most spoken dialogue is already textual, and therefore already broken down.

6 Peters, on his website, lists '[s]elected reviews' of *Speaking into the Air*, including a 'pseudonymous email' that links to an exasperated student letter: 'People have read and understood the entirety of *Finnegan's Wake* faster than they've gotten through the first half of your introduction.' Unknown author to John Durham Peters, 4 February 2013, [https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4Ylq WJ4zziOR2xRSE1jX2NJSTA/edit](https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4YlqWJ4zziOR2xRSE1jX2NJSTA/edit).

7 As an anonymous reviewer noted, my claims about *Speaking into the Air*'s written modes invite a question about *The Marvelous Clouds*: What of the sequel's argumentation-through-written-form? It's an excellent question. Granting the continuity in style over the two books, there is, in *Clouds*, a ramped-up aphoristic pointillism, a sense of montage in fast-forward. The book's ambition to excavate discrete elemental media is mimicked, perhaps, in its staccato, even digital, mode of delivery.

8 The meditation, in the chapter's concluding pages, on writing's transmogrifying blend of vision/space and hearing/time, is an electrifying case-in-point (Peters, 2015a: 302–313).

9 Peters' affection for the medium of writing is, even in *The Marvelous Clouds*, qualified. He closes the very next chapter, the book's last, with a meditation on Jesus, Socrates, and Confucius. Each of them opted against recording their doctrines in writing—an ethical decision, Peters insists, one that holds up well against Google's mania for completest inscription. 'In contrast to the tagging frenzy of our moment', [Jesus, Socrates, and Confucius] were not afraid of disappearance—which meant that they also knew how to be born and to give birth, the most marvelous of all things' (Peters, 2015b: 375). I owe this insight to an anonymous reviewer.

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