The Theology of Sound: A Critique of Orality

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Abstract

ABSTRACT  This article offers an intellectual history and critique of the concept of orality as developed by writers of the Toronto School, focusing especially on the work of Walter Ong and, to a lesser extent, Marshall McLuhan. It argues that common scholarly uses of orality, especially as a theory of acoustic or sound-based culture, are derived from the spirit-letter distinction in Christian spiritualism and a misreading of Hebraic philology by mid-twentieth-century theologians. It argues for a new history of early media and for a new global anthropology of communication that does not operate under the sign of orality. We can thereby honour the curiosity of scholars such as Harold Innis and Edmund Carpenter without taking their findings as timeless truths.

RÉSUMÉ  Cet article offre une histoire intellectuelle et critique du concept d’oralité tel que développé par des auteurs de l’École de Toronto, en portant une attention particulière à l’œuvre de Walter Ong et, dans une moindre mesure, Marshall McLuhan. Il soutient que les applications académiques les plus communes de l’oralité, notamment en tant que théorie d’une culture acoustique ou sonore, se fondent sur la distinction esprit/lettre du spiritualisme chrétien et une lecture erronée de la philologie hébraïque par des théologiens du milieu du vingtième siècle. Cet article propose une nouvelle histoire des médias originaux et une nouvelle anthropologie mondiale de la communication qui dépasseeraient les conceptions conventionnelles de ce qu’est l’oralité. Nous pourrions ainsi honorer la curiosité de chercheurs comme Harold Innis et Edmund Carpenter sans devoir accepter leurs conclusions comme si elles étaient des vérités intemporelles.

Keywords

Anthropology; History; Literacy; Modernity; Orality/Oral culture; Phenomenology; Toronto School/Transformation theory

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In Orality and Literacy (1982), Walter Ong gives a list of the psychodynamic features of orality and indicates how they differ from literate forms. Space prevents a consideration of all of the features he proposes, so here I shall investigate just a few of them in reference to forms of computer-mediated communication. Just as relevant for this medium is Ong’s concept of the evanescence of speech. Speech is carried by sound and, as Ong states (1982:32): “Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word ‘permanence,’ by the time I get to the ‘-ence,’ the ‘perma-’ is gone, and has to be gone.” The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology 1 Michael Rosen. The question whether Marx’s theory has a moral or ethical dimension is one of the most controversial of all issues of Marx interpretation. The difficulty is easily seen. On the one hand, Marx has a number of uncompromisingly negative things to say about morality. Moreover, after 1845 at least, he affirms that his own theory is not a utopian or ethical one but “real positive science”. 2 Marx, K., “Towards a Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right. Introduction” in Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’, edited by J. O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1970), pp. 131-42, p.137. The interiority of sound 17. Orality, community and the sacred 18. Critiquing the commodity-centered frames of reference, this paper looks at property not within an economic logic, but as a set of practices that served to structure and reconfigure social relations. Moreover, the experience they gain will not only support the discipleship ministry of the church, but also its outreach to other young people, drawing them in by engaging and relevant performances of the biblical message. Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study challenges the traditional perspectives of Bible translation and Practical Theology, suggesting that ‘ordinary’ members of the community can enrich the translation.