

# Restoring rhetoric: From the regressive progress of the masses to tribal servitude on the Internet<sup>1</sup>

## *Rescatar la retórica: Del progreso regresivo de las masas a la servidumbre tribal en red*



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**Abstract:**

The unlimited range of face-to-face relationships agglomerated with varying degrees of cohesion on social networks, with interactive dynamics that are highly analogous to what Cooley called “primary groups”, has fostered an infinite variety of communicative practices. The most muddled excesses have become everyday means of persuasion. Fake news and post-truth are novel anglicisms that have leaped into everyday language. The Internet has become a rhetorical stage for long-distance interaction as complex as it is sometimes fleeting, in which the distinction between truthful information, hearsay, chicanery, and reliable opinion has been blurred. We have set out to review *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La rebelión de las masas*), as well as McLuhan’s notion of the “global village”, by contrasting them with Bauman’s posthumous work, *Retrotopia*, in which he describes the Internet environment as a “return to the tribes” in which the user accepts “voluntary servitude”. This review also serves as a phenomenological framework for deliberating the importance of a social revival of the classic art of rhetoric on the Internet.

**Keywords:**

Primary groups; rhetoric; revolt of the masses; populism; global village; voluntary servitude.

**Resumen:**

*El ilimitado alcance de relaciones cara a cara que se agrupan con distintos grados de cohesión en la red social, cuyos procesos de interacción son tan análogos a los que Cooley llamó los “grupos primarios”, ha favorecido todo tipo de prácticas comunicativas. Los más turbios excesos han pasado a ser modos cotidianos de persuasión. Fake news and posverdad, anglicismos novedosos que han saltado al lenguaje corriente. La red se ha convertido en un escenario retórico de interacción a distancia tan compleja como a veces fugaz, en que se desdibujan las diferencias entre información veraz, rumor, bulo y opinión solvente. Nos proponemos revisar *La rebelión de las masas* y la noción de “aldea global” de McLuhan contrastándolas con *Retrotopía*, obra póstuma donde Bauman describe el entorno de la red como una “vuelta a las tribus” en el que el usuario asume una “servidumbre voluntaria”. La revisión nos sirve también de marco fenomenológico para argumentar sobre la importancia de una recuperación social de las artes retóricas clásicas en la red.*

**Palabras clave:**

*Grupos primarios; retórica; rebelión de las masas; populismo; aldea global; servidumbre voluntaria.*

## 1. Introduction to the notion of “regressive progress”<sup>2</sup>

In this study, we have used the expression “regressive progress” to contrast the teleological concept of progress proposed by enlightened “progressivism” with an empirical criterion of progress concerned with the social enrichment generated by the accelerated potential of industrial production. Progressivism regards progress as the advent of social harmony, firstly through education and, afterward, through a political plan to democratise society and end class differences. The oxymoron “regressive progress” indicates agreement among the authors analysed that progressivism is illusory, and that technological-scientific progress does not contribute to linking individual autonomy with the development of universal brotherhood”

From the pragmatic perspective adopted by the philosophy of technology from Ortega y Gasset (hereafter Ortega) and shared by McLuhan (Núñez Canal and Núñez Ladevéze, 2021), there is no connection between a political plan and a predetermined outcome without forcing the will of those involved in the proposal. This connection is contradictory to the harmony intended as it cannot ensure that the consequences of coercion are not more pernicious than beneficial to its fulfilment. For both, social

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2 The reviewers have recommended an introduction and clarification of the expression “regressive progress”, which the authors entrusted to the unfolding of the text. The researchers appreciate the suggestion to specify objectives and to clarify the meaning of this oxymoron early in the article.

progress is linked to technological efficiency as the application of scientific knowledge, which is foreign to social planning (Popper, 1961). In his review of the liquid society, Bauman concludes that in technological globalisation, there is no firm ground to support democratic expectations based on an egalitarian course of action inherent to a political plan. Apart from nuances, the analyses of these authors concur that technological progress in the globalised society is accompanied by a return to the circumstances of primitive societies. Progressing backward into the past without advancing toward a *progressive* society can be expressed by the oxymoron, “regressive progress”.

To use the expression of Marx<sup>3</sup> the progress of industrial capitalism “dissipates” the past. This is the starting point of Bauman’s analysis of the “liquid society.” According to Ortega and McLuhan, the past remains, but in different ways. “The mass man believes that the civilisation into which he is born is as spontaneous and primitive as Nature, and *ipso facto* becomes primitive” (IV, p. 429). From the Orteguian concept, we use the term “regressive progress” to describe the belief that the civilised man experiences his technological circumstance as if it were natural, with the same ingenuousness that a “primitive” understands that “the natural thing” is to live in his cave. Thus, by inserting himself into the electric urban environment, his attitude toward technological progress is no less given to him than a village is given to a primitive man, according to McLuhan, whose work describes a type of progress that returns to the communicative circumstances of the tribal village.

Bauman laments that the global interdependence of technology cannot reconcile a teleology that might harmonise personal autonomy with the postulate of universal solidarity. Scientific-technical changes and socio-economic advances consolidate the “restoration of the tribal model of community” (2017, p. 18), which post-Enlightenment progressivism had sought to overcome. All the chapters of *Retrotopia* have the word “return” in the title, based on the assumption that in global interdependence there are no reasons to trust in progress toward a human fraternity. Technological progress strengthens the desire for domination without contributing to cosmopolitan consciousness. The Internet strengthens the identity of tribal groupings and nationalism, which are vulnerable to militant populism.

In *Aude Sapere* (Dare to Speak Your Mind), Ortega perceives the risk that individual opinion might become unfounded critical judgement used to discredit any bond of solidarity established by authority, whether democratic or traditional, and warns that the shaping of public opinion, which is vulnerable to the “dangerous power of demagogues [...] in order to intoxicate the masses” (*De Europa meditatio quaedam* (Meditations on Europe) X, p. 114), could serve as a regressive channel toward mass “primitivism”.

McLuhan associates global communication with patterns of a return to the face-to-face modes of communication characteristic of tribal coexistence.

The dissipation of utopia returns us to the reverie of the past, says Bauman. The past is *revenant*, says Ortega, and we must “reckon with it” (*La rebelión de las masas*, IV, p. 432). The tribal environment is the current setting in the Internet, according to McLuhan. The common thread of these texts is the study of the incorporation of technology, especially in relation to the medium of communication, as a factor of historical change and a filter for the permanence of the past in the social processes of

3 “*Verdampft*”. Berman was inspired by this paragraph to title his famous work *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (1988, p. 83 and 90). Bauman was inspired by Berman when he spoke of “liquidity”. The expression is taken from the Communist Manifesto: “*Alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft, alles Heilige wird entweiht, und die Menschen sind endlich gezwungen, ihre Lebensstellung, ihre gegenseitigen Beziehungen mit nüchternen Augen anzusehen*” (All that is stately and upright evaporates, all that is sacred is profaned, and people are finally forced to look at their position in life, at their mutual relationships, with sober eyes”. (Marx, Engels, 1972, p. 465. “evaporates” is the most common English translation.

human communication. This is the common ground between these authors. In the present article, we are specifically interested in dormant forms of rhetoric (a social institution that regulated argumentation through a set of rules for two millennia) in the present circumstance of the Internet, which is a past environment unrelated to its disciplined craftsmanship of argumentation.

## 2. Restoring body language in the audio-visual medium

Previous studies related to linguistics, the anthropology of language, and semiology have confirmed the importance of non-verbal communication. Ortega had devoted a fair amount of attention to this topic in chapters VII and X of *Man and People (El hombre y la gente)*, which were read by McLuhan (1971, pp. 124-125). The body can be the medium of courtship as the glottis is the medium of words (Knapp, 1982, p. 40). If we look at non-verbal communication, its expressiveness is shown through signals transmitted by the body. As Flora Davis warned: "I belong to the class of people who do not fully trust the telephone [...] because I cannot be sure what the other person really means. If I can't see them, how can I guess their feelings?" (1971, p. 11). The relevant issue is not that these works tie in with McLuhan's discussion of the social meaning of "the medium is the message". What is relevant is that if the medium is the message, then "the body is the message" as well, as shrewdly concluded by Davis (1971, p. 52 ff.), who paraphrases McLuhan.

This concept of gesture as an expressive function emanating from a thinking organism and sharing or completing the attributes of spoken language, which grammarians usually link to intonation, creates a breach with the intellectualist discipline that underestimates the passivity of the spectator before the image and exalts discursive abstraction. If reasoning is understood as a distinctive faculty of thought, it is limited to a cold mental process. Deliberation aspires to be reproduced in a formal mode. Dialogue is focused on an argumentative function disassociated from the expressive manifestations that contribute to elocution. The criticism of reason is only "pure" when the critical activity isolates its object from the circumstances that include the interests or feelings that motivate expressivity. Rationality is understood as a method or faculty detached from imagination, emotionality, or even memory.

If the criticism of the rationality of authority by tradition linked science to the demonstrative automatism of an apodictic logic, the return of interactive conditions of audio-visual proximity on the Internet issues the death warrant for these pretensions. Enlightened idealism began this task by deducing a transcendental subject from the Cartesian programme. Critical theory has concluded it by diluting the subject in "communicative action" and the "ethics of recognition". The question today is not how this Cartesian inheritance, which was criticised by Husserl, is being interrupted, or whether through its decline the old rhetoric has returned uncontrolled in the circuit of the Internet. The question to ask is under what conditions this regression is re-established within the new technology. Rhetorical rules had been forged as an argumentative model of persuasive exposition for two millennia. Study and observation were refining guidelines in order to make such rules available for oratory related to topics and common places. These standards had been recorded for centuries in order for the memorising effort not to interfere with the speaker's argumentative fluency (Curtius, 1995).

In the new post-Cartesian and anti-Darwinian atmosphere that was common in vitalism, pragmatism, and interactionism, McLuhan understood that technology was bringing about a new historical "circumstance". The development of communication through the means of electricity and transportation was leading to planetary unification. The Communist Manifesto had forecast

this situation by referring to a “global market”. The suggestion that technological progress might be regressive is expressed in *The Revolt of the Masses*. Ortega saw a process of human unification in accelerated technological progress that went beyond the market:

From the 16th century onward, all of humanity has entered into a monumental process of unification, which has reached its insurmountable culmination in our own day. There is no longer any trace of humankind that lives apart -there are no islands of humanity. (2005 IV, pp. 455-456).

Ortega was not entirely correct about the “insurmountability” of “the term”. It seems strange that the person who wrote in “Man the Technician” that the human animal does not reflect an evolutionary origin, but instead experiences historical progress through technical mediation, could be called upon to reach an “insurmountability” in an era of comprehensive technological progress. This indicates that he did not clearly grasp the extent of the change that was taking place, although few people of his stature had foreseen that this technological transformation was making the world much smaller:

For nearly a century, there has been talk that how the new means of communication –movement of people, transfer of products, and transmission of news– have brought countries closer together and unified life on the planet [...] Suddenly, and realistically, in recent years each nation has received such a large quantity of updated news about what is happening in other nations, up to the hour and up to the minute, that it has created the illusion that one is, in fact, located in other nations or in their immediate vicinity [...] For the purposes of universal public life, the size of the world has suddenly contracted (2005 IV, pp. 519-520).

Ortega heralded globalisation not only in terms of mercantile relationships, as the *Manifiesto* had warned, but also as a form of ubiquitous, simultaneous interdependence of human relations facilitated by the new media in which the new phenomenon of “the revolt of the masses” was taking hold. He feared that liberal individualism could lead to a kind of “barbarism” in which everybody would have a capricious opinion in order to free themselves from the constrictions of the rule of law, moral conservatism, and traditions encouraged by “capitalism”. Ortega put scientific knowledge ahead of the capitalist market. As he had put an end to the idealistic pretensions of the pure individual, he thought that the activity of an organism that thinks when it feels and feels while it thinks cannot be channelled in the rationalist mode of the transcendental individual. The progressivism of the Enlightenment entrusted the social process to a dream, so that the consequences of the process of free opinion might not favour social cohesion, and could even perniciously replace the emotional bonds of solidarity with unsupportive individualism. The belief that social liquefaction was a by-product of industrial capitalism was a reductionist approach because the effectiveness of the industrial revolution would be impossible if it were not linked to a new kind of knowledge. McLuhan foresaw that the new media, mainly television and radio, reproduced neighbourhood-style communicative circumstances in the global planetary space (Núñez Ladevéze; Vázquez Barrio, and Núñez Canal, 2020), similar to the face-to-face relationships of primitive villages. Of course, face-to-face relationships were not a thing of the past, as they had never become extinct. On the contrary, they were expanding as the human race encompassed the entire surface of the planet through interconnection by the communication media. As McLuhan concludes, if it is true that the past is preserved in the present, the present might return to the past, as stated by Ortega as well:

The human past does not fade away, if fading away means it ceases to be the human past [...] it persists in every present [...] man carries all of his past on his back, even the most primitive, that is to say, it remains, and thanks to that, he is man. Man is an animal that carries his history within him, that carries all of history within him. There is no less Darwinian definition (2009 IX, pp. 1347)<sup>4</sup>.

McLuhan read the concepts of Ortega (Núñez Canal y Núñez Ladevéze, 2021). He had read in the *Revolt of the Masses* that man “accumulates his own past, possesses it, and makes use of it” (V, 369). In Ortega’s “Man the Technician”, McLuhan had also read that inherent to the human condition is the need to preserve the stages of the past in the present, and that technology is an assumption of periodisation that is more solid than the replacement of classes (588-590). In *History as a System (Historia como sistema)*, the Canadian philosopher read that “society is, primarily, past... There is past, and there will be past as present acting in us now” (2006 VI, pp. 69-71).

When literacy became detached from oral language, its basic components –letters, syllables, words– made it possible to replace the evanescent oral transmission of memory with the written record. Thanks to the inscription of alphabetic symbols on durable materials, the reader was spared the arduous task of memorising and recalling what was said by others, so he could read it literally without having to make the effort to remember it. *Verba volant, scripta manent* (words fly, writing remains). This had advantages and disadvantages, as Plato pointed out in *Phaedrus*, a dialogue that received comments from Ortega (e.g. “*Mission of the Librarian*” in V, p. 367), as well as by McLuhan (1969, p. 52). This situation was significant due to the fact that when text was reproduced by the technology of the printing press, “the audience” was created (1969, p. 8), along with a new type of social relation that simultaneously connected everyone’s opinion, thereby converting this opinion into indispensable, collective utility, according to Ortega, (*Man and People - El hombre y la gente -X*, pp. 269 ff.). McLuhan was not referring to the “abstract visuality of the alphabet” (1996, p. 44), but rather to “the new visual culture of the printing press” (1996, p. 36), in order to distinguish it from the face-to-face relationships of the neighbourhood and the manuscript reader. The printing press delimited the public (1969, p. 357) for half a millennium in the “closed” environment of alphabetic writing, a specific technology segregated from social relations

### 3. From primary groups in the physical neighbourhood to the tribal village on the Internet

This notion of the audience as a dispersed multitude of recipients without any physical, face-to-face relationship, which Cooley (2006) used to distinguish “primary groups” from “open classes”, comes from Gabriel Tarde (1986). Cooley was referring to the family and the neighbourhood as domains for the allocation of “primary ideals” which, in his view, underlie democracy and Christianity, in order to contrast them with the “numerous, impersonal open classes... which absorb a vital part of the individual without moulding them” (2009, p. 248 ff.) “In chapter XI, he refers to the fact that when people come into face-to-face contact, they feel social emotion and reach higher levels of consciousness” (2009, p. 109)<sup>5</sup>.

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4 For Ortega, the past is active. The past is unavoidable in the present no less than the future is active as a project to be carried out in the past. We experience the past in the present by readapting it to the circumstance in which we find ourselves which, in turn, adapts us by updating our actions so that the future adapts to our present. As the circumstance is partly unpredictable, so is our future. For more information about the presence of the future in Ortega’s works, see Alonso, M., 2014.

5 For a general overview of Cooley’s work, see López-Escobar 2020.

In our view, it is the strength of this distinction that is put to the test by social networks in the “liquid society” (Núñez Ladevéze; Núñez Canal e Irisarri, 2018). The difference between the “primary group”, which is viewed as the result of in-person, “face-to-face” contact, and the “virtual group”, is blurred on the Internet where personal relationships are also established. It is important to clarify that the creation of virtual, face-to-face relationships has not come from a sudden leap in technology, but instead is the consequence of a long process facilitated by the technological advance of writing. The intensity that Cooley attributed to “primary groups” is both spreading and becoming weaker at the same time. It is spreading because the Internet is a realm where groups fleetingly appear and disappear. Friendships, personal associations, and groups with common interests emerge, most of which are ephemeral and dissipate quickly (Núñez Ladevéze y Vázquez Rubio, 2020). This strengthens the cohesion of physically pre-established primary relationships and simultaneously fosters the disjointed heterogeneity of dispersed groups in the transience of the Internet (Bauman, 2017 p. 101). It is obvious that technology has overcome the primordial communicative limitations of physical, face-to-face contact. However, Cooley was not able to read Ortega’s “Man the Technician” (Meditación de la técnica).

McLuhan read it sufficiently in order to confirm that the distinction between “personal” and “impersonal relations” was bound to be blurred by the progress of communicative technology. Looking at the discursive methods of popular culture, advertising, and consumption, he announced that electric technology such as radio and television were opening up the space of public opinion to the illiterate, who were becoming a type of audio-visual public that Tarde had not foreseen. Moreover, this illiterate public had previously been excluded from the public realm due to the fact that the printing press, which was the generator of public opinion, had limited access to the public domain to literate citizens.

Meanwhile, technology was progressing even further. The telephone and radio had made it possible to establish personal relationships from a distance. Sola Pool (1986) asserted that the point-to-point telephonic and telegraphic relationship between two people without physical contact initiated an era that would progressively diminish the differences between personal communication limited to physical presence and communication by distance, simply by allowing personal relationships to be remote. Cooley’s interweaving of primary groups and personal relationships was fraying. Twenty years later, Burke and Briggs (2002) used this notion to describe the system of relationships that the internet was already spreading.

Telephonic virtuality fostered new social practices, as pointed out by Marvin (1990). Sola Pool (1983) had warned that public authorities in open societies would soon seek to control this communicative potential facilitated by electronic technology. His apprehension was not related to the freedom of citizens to use it, but to the temptation of political power to control it, limit freedom, or monopolise its potential –nothing new under the sun. The same thing had happened with the printing press. Too much has been written on the subject to doubt the assertion. One only needs to read Milton’s libellous *Areopagitica* to understand the respect by political authorities for the printing press. However, what was at risk regarding the democratising aspirations encouraged by the egalitarian potential of technology was precisely the opposite: that the egalitarianism of the medium commits the user to obeying rules because it democratises his or her choices. It is not surprising that with the Internet, the same situation has occurred, as happened with the prevention of telephone control by Sola Pool (1977), and before that with writing and the printing press –the enthusiasm with which the changes were interpreted soon turned to fear (Van Dijk, 2013).

The “primary group” was disseminated over airwaves and wires. Television made it possible for every individual, literate or not, to connect face-to-face with every other individual. As Ortega warned, the individual through the medium was an opinion promoter,

regardless of distance. McLuhan understood that the new medium of television did not discriminate like the technology of the printing press; on the contrary, it made literate and illiterate audiences equal. Was it democratising? That is the question. A world interconnected by television, telephony, and radio re-established the interaction of primitive villages on a planetary scale, and the result has been a return to the communicative conditions of the tribal village on the global stage. A new scenario was emerging, the meaning of which had to be understood rather than criticised. To paraphrase Cloutier (1973), a technology that combines audio-visual with the written word does not diminish, but rather adds the advantages of one to the capabilities of the other.

Ortega and McLuhan had no illusions about the medium as a democratising factor. They were pragmatic about the social reach of communicative progress, and they agreed that the advantages of the televisual only slightly compensated for the restrictions of the printing press. Therefore, did the universality of communicative conditions imply an egalitarian democratisation that teleological progressivism had presaged in order for humanity to progress from infancy to maturity? (Kant, 2004). Did it mean that the dissolution of the relations of servitude and domination, which the Enlightenment had attributed to the social conditions conveyed by an infantile state of consciousness, was within reach due to the potential of the communication media?

According to Critical Theory, which preceded Bauman, a dual, indispensable requirement still had to be fulfilled: the relationship between sender and receiver had to be transitive, not receptive, and at the same time had to be contemplative and critical, not merely a complaisant reflection (Núñez Ladevéze, Vázquez Barrio, and Núñez Canal, 2020).

The technology of the Internet fulfils the dual requirement. If the printing press created a closed visual environment, television opened it by joining specific acoustics and visual images to abstract visuality which, until then, had been limited to physical relationships in the neighbourhood. “Electrical technology is beginning to return the visual, or *eye man*, to tribal and oral patterns with its continuous web of links and interdependencies” (McLuhan, 1996, p. 71). After television, relationships on the Internet became transitive, interactive, and critical. McLuhan’s prediction of critical interactivity and its implications for a return to “tribal and oral patterns” was so accurate that Bauman went so far as to identify the critical egalitarianism of the Internet as a “return to the tribes” (2017, pp. 54 et seq.). Communicative progress was regressing to the primitive village in the interconnectedness of the global village. What Bauman found was that users do not adopt it in order to emancipate themselves, but instead, they accept technological advances with the same submissive complacency with which primitive man submissively accepted his tribal condition.

#### **4. From mass rebellion to the return to the tribes**

There is a decisive difference, however. To paraphrase Ortega, the communal tribe is not chosen: one is simply in it. Virtual tribes, on the other hand, are fleeting. They are selected, sought, found, and eluded. Moreover, they are transitory and can fade as soon as they are formed, vanish on a whim, and be ephemeral or continuous, depending on the desires of the user. Is this capitalism? Not only. It is a global phenomenon that is happening everywhere. However, it is not a belonging that is imposed by patterns of previous ways of life. The Internet is compatible with continued patterns acquired in primary relationships by living in proximity. (cf. Núñez Ladevéze and Vázquez Barrio, 2020). The way they interfere with these patterns in order to modify them is an empirical question. Any use of the Internet can be an interactive instrument to emplace or withdraw the self and its automatisms (Mead,



1991), imitate or reject the practices of others, establish or modify personal distinction, and reaffirm or refute any acquired status. What is established is disposable at will. Tarde had already referred (2011) to the importance of these “automatisms” of use, as Ortega called them, but we could also refer to them as “dialectics” of “imitation” and “distinction”, or of “emplacement” and “withdrawal” (2010 X, pp. 269 and ff).

It was obvious that the mass production of cultural goods produced a regressive progression thanks to technology. This was Ortega’s answer to the question posed by the researcher de la Boetie (1986) as to why a man will subserviently accept submission to another man out of habit:

After suffering a defeat in his audacious, idealistic attempt, man is completely demoralised [...] man feels an incredible eagerness for servitude. He wants first and foremost to serve another man [...] Perhaps the name that best fits the spirit that begins after the decline of revolutions is that of the servile spirit (2005 III, p. 640).

Ortega wrote this passage in *The Theme of Our Time (El tema de nuestro tiempo)*, presaging Bauman’s speech by nearly three quarters of a century when the latter received the *Premio Príncipe de Asturias* (Prince of Asturias Award), on which occasion he lamented the spread on the Internet of “this incapacitating inclination (sic) of ours”, which Étienne de la Boétie called “voluntary servitude” (2010b). The Enlightenment adopted the discourse of servitude as its own. It claimed the concept as an inheritance of the past from which it would have to rid itself. It turned nostalgia for an earlier time into the bondage of traditions from which it was necessary to become emancipated.

The Enlightenment sought to alienate this dependence on the translation. Its criticism was the breeding ground for ideology, enlightened idealism, and the materialistic programme of social emancipation. The egalitarian aspiration lacked any true foundation on which to sustain the relationship between “I” and “Us”. It linked a relationship nurtured by an affective bond to the result of a contemplative act. Mass individualism spreads the dilution of aesthetic and normative ties, yet offers as a replacement only the complaisant arrogance of the rebelliousness of the mass individual when each one becomes fully conscious of the fact that his right to be, or not to be, crudely illiterate entitles him to scorn the norms that demand of him the effort not to be so. The door has been opened for a *rebellion without a cause*.

The process of emancipation toward maturity required the detachment from the ties passed down as a communal legacy. If progress toward mass culture entailed “the revolt of the masses”, then factors leading to the global village are reinforcing that capacity for self-affirmation of individualised massification. On the path that leads to the acceptance of the medium as an instrument lies the “voluntary servitude” of the processes that make the mass revolt possible. To avoid the paradox, Adorno and Horkheimer (1998) interpreted cultural massification as the product of a capitalist scheme to present legal freedom as a cover for servitude to the system.

It is interesting to observe where McLuhan, so often misunderstood as an apostle of mass culture, places the regression. Convinced that the future heralded by technological innovation would replace the selective culture of the printing press with a new culture open to the illiterate and linked to the implosion of the media, which were transmitting a massively individualistic cultural egalitarianism, it might seem that he was defending something like the democratic egalitarianism of popular audiovisual culture against an aristocratic, selective, literate culture whose troops were supplied, among others, by Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (1923), and Sartori in *Homo Videns* (1998).

At the McLuhan Galaxy Conference held in Barcelona on the occasion of McLuhan's centenary in 2011, there was only one text linking McLuhan to Ortega, even though McLuhan, who mentions in passing *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La rebelión de las masas*) in his work entitled *The Cliché and the Archetype*, cites Ortega with careful attention in *War and Peace in the Global Village*, which was his major work immediately following *Understanding Media*. The simplified view offered by this reference to Ortega in the McLuhan Galaxy Conference resulted in the commentary that contrasted the revolt of the masses with McLuhan's capacity for prognostication and, at least apparently, egalitarianism:

Some, elitist and conservatives, look to the masses as if they were the embodiment of all degeneration of individuals, and looked at the "mass man" with suspicion as the most dangerous, destructive power against social order [Ortega y Gasset, 2004] (García Arnaú, 2011, p. 420).

Yet this interpretation is hardly compatible with McLuhan's pragmatism nor with Ortega's ratio vitalism. It is a myopic simplification. (Cfr. Núñez Canal and Núñez Ladevéze, 2021). Let us now look at the confluence of the two:

## 5. Rhetoric in the everyday gaze

"Television incites dramatisation in a dual sense: it stages an event in images," as stated by Bourdieu (1996, p. 24). If an image is worth a thousand words, this is because in an instant it conveys information that cannot be described in a thousand words. The impact of an image measured in bytes cannot be compared to that of the text that describes it. This foregone conclusion prompted Jeffrey Green to ennoble information in the transversal, open, specific language of the transmitted image, which modernity had devalued in favour of that which was written, alphabetically closed, and abstract. As the phenomenological shift toward vitalism showed that the precision of feeling linked to the expression of body language is inherent to spoken language, audio-visual access has recovered a certain amount of prestige lost to writing, as the former visually extracts the acoustic content and the visible image. What is clear is that the essence of communicative relations is not changed by the fact that they take place unidirectionally in reading or through spoken exchange. The fact that the writer is often self-absorbed, and that speech involves dialogue does not mean that monks did not read aloud, nor that reflective meditation is the monopoly of writing.

McLuhan understood that in the circumstances favoured by the new technologies, the remote visualisation of body language opens the circle that had been closed by the printing press. While it is true that the medium is the message, it does not determine the attitude or establish its communicative usefulness. As radio and television have made it possible for citizens to participate in politics without having to obtain information through reading, political actors rarely prioritise the dissemination of their programmes through writing when they can do so more effectively and extensively through a debate or on-camera interview. Nor will it be important for viewers to know the content of the programmes in order to choose the proposals of one candidate over the other. This is a type of audience that is novel, as it is more egalitarian simply because it is *not* "selective". As a descriptor, the gaze of the eye combined with the word that is heard perceives information not provided by reading. Moreover, if it can be displayed on a medium, or in other words, if it can be reproduced and modified on a screen, it can also be the focus of thoughtful attention just as much as the written word. It is therefore logical that those who have responsibility as experts and strategic designers should study the gestures, mannerisms, mimicry, and body language used by candidates in order to capture the viewer's attention. If the new technology entails a return to the communicative conditions of neighbourhoods (Núñez Ladevéze, Vázquez Barrio y Álvarez

de Mon, 2019), it also implies a return to the argumentative terms of visual oratory, or in other words, to the arts and schemes used to captivate the viewer by exercising the relegated rhetorical arts.

There was no need for intellectuals such as Bourdieu (1996) and Bueno (2001) to understand that through television, the viewer gains access to the candidate's personality and can either feel drawn to his or her cause, or reject it (Núñez Canal and Núñez Ladevéze, 2021). The instruments used to arouse this appeal are inherent to the rhetorical art of audio-visual communication, which aims to captivate an audience of individuals who listen as they watch. In these conditions, there is nothing to prevent emotional expressiveness from winning over the spectator as much or more than the capacity for reasoning, as it provides relevant information about the attitudes, intentions, and motivations of the actor. What is important is that the act of reasoning is stimulating because there is nothing to prevent reasoning from being emotional. There is no contrast between deliberative democracy and sentimental democracy (Arias Maldonado, 2016). Assuming it is more desirable to filter emotionality as a component of argumentation, if it were true that the deliberative individual is inseparable from the emotional one, as stated by Ortega, then the claim would be utopian. There is no reasoning more abstract than the vacuous rhetoric of mathematics, yet mathematicians can be just as sensitive to rhetoric as the rest of their fellow human beings. No one is invulnerable to demagoguery, as Machiavelli rightly presumed.

Thus, the proposal by Jeffrey Green (2009) to highlight the relevance of the audio-visual image as an instrument of regulation and democratic participation in the digitised society could be countered by claims that assembly participation responds more positively to deliberative discourse than to indirect representation. In the first place, direct participation is not the message. Nothing guarantees that the discourse among participants will involve a debate where the deliberative aspect prevails over that of emotion (Arias Maldonado, 2016). If emotionality is inseparable from deliberation, it can reinforce deliberation as much as weaken it. The same argument can be more effective if it is emotional rather than non-emotional. Secondly, the participants in an assembly are minorities who gain access through a socially selective process (Zaller, 2014). Not all concerned have an equal position nor the same opportunities to participate.

Thirdly, as the division of tasks makes the process socially selective, assembly members have a surplus of representativeness of the people that populism needs in order to grow (Laclau, 2005). Lastly, the shaping of opinion generated in primary groups is not predetermined by exposure to the environment, as shown by double flow theories. As a result, leadership in the primary group is an element that simplifies, complements, and collaborates with the voter's decision.

This pragmatic analysis was pioneered by Cooley, who insisted on the formation of the self in primary groups, and by Lippmann (1964), who stressed the shaping of political opinion through face-to-face interpersonal relationships. Goffman defined them "as the reciprocal influence of one individual on the actions of the other when both are in an immediate physical presence" (1981, p. 27). These authors anticipated studies on personal influence in the shaping of public opinion. Zaller completed a formidable model of political opinion formation going back to Lippmann (Zaller, 2014, pp. 28 and 37). The RAS model, based on the examination of questions and responses in election polls, has the distinction of integrating the four points mentioned above. According to Zaller, citizens are divided into different segments with different interests in political issues. Hence, their opinion formation is dependent on opinion leaders who have precise information regarding the issues and an explicit conception of their socio-political and doctrinal implications. It is not a matter of distinguishing between second and first class citizens, but

of accepting the fact that “we are second-hand consumers of ideas originating from afar within some elite [...which] includes politicians, high-level officials, journalists, and certain activists, along with a wide variety of policy experts and specialists” (2014, p. 28).

Based on the ideas of Lippmann, Zaller demonstrated that in civil society, which is not professionally involved in politics, citizens simply do not have the time to become informed, nor are they immediately interested in forming an opinion on the issues about which they are asked. Studies related to the concept of dual flow, analyses of agenda setting, and explorations of frames of reference, the latter of which is a notion extrapolated from Goffman’s micro sociology of interaction in everyday life, have shown that the acquisition of criteria for political decisions occupies a secondary position in people’s lives, without implying a reduction of intellectual status. The position of authority in an area of professional, artisanal, commercial, or artistic activity does not coincide with opinion leadership in public affairs. However, the work of Goffman (1981), who was heir to the formation of the self by Mead (1991), was based on the persistence of the past. The former author studied everyday relations as the structuring of norms between people in proximity, whose faces are physically within site (Sánchez de la Yncera, 1995), which is a space that has now been opened to distance relationships by Internet.

Even though the relationship between Ortega and American pragmatism was scant<sup>6</sup>, the relevance of Zaller’s proposition lies in the fact that without referring to the relation, his proposal reproduces the underlying sense of the distinction between majorities and minorities that Ortega had endorsed in *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La rebelión de las masas*) and other works. It links these groups in order to distance them from the idealistic pretension of placing reflection as a distinctive feature of rationality. By acknowledging that all the components of the social majority can be considered minorities, or leading authorities in a discipline, occupation, commercial activity, craft, or other field such as sports or fashion, it may seem that substantive aspects of Ortega’s approach have been corrected. However, that was not Ortega’s warning when he referred to a revolt of the masses –it was precisely the opposite. What he was saying is that any reason for acknowledging merit is contaminated by an individual’s claim to aesthetic and moral autonomy, or in other words, by insubordination to the rule of respect for merit of the one who knows best, teaches best, or works best in his or her art.

Returning to Green, the various facets of everyday life would be meaningless without reference to the scrutinising gaze. If we are spectators in everyday life, it is no wonder that sight is the organ used to participate in public life as citizens. Most people usually have only enough time to observe how politicians act. Observation is a source of information, the aspects of which can vary according to the capacity for reflection. The detailed, critical interpretation and analysis of their programmes and activities is reserved for specialists. Nevertheless, the observer can discriminate based on the expressiveness of the image rather than discursive exposition. The observer can also formulate reasons to trust or distrust the speaker, observe the ethos of sincerity or pretence, and notice the knowledge or lack of knowledge conveyed in the speech. Reading a programme does not capture the intentions of the writer. Visible body language provides information inaccessible to an abstract conception of rationality.

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6 For details and bibliography we refer to the doctoral theses of Armenteros 2003 and Gutiérrez Simón, 2020. Nubiola has been paying attention to the relationship between Ortega and pragmatism, mainly Peirce’s, Cfr. (2019). Ortega’s pragmatic bias can be followed especially in chapters II, III, and VI of *Man and People* (*El hombre y la gente*). We have addressed this in Núñez Ladevéze, Núñez Canal and Álvarez de Mon, 2021.

Green's thesis devalues the misgivings that have often been raised about the image as a means of communication as opposed to the spoken or written word. It debunks the criticism that technological progress linked the image and spectacle to audience passivity in front of the screen. It disconnects intellectualist abstraction from sentient intelligence. It does not speak of the masses, but of participants. If such participants are usually spectators of events in life, they have no reason to stop being spectators when it comes to administering public affairs. Generally, we are patient observers of the actions of those we trust when we put ourselves in their hands, whether it involves going to a hospital, a shop, or seeking a professional service. The observer understands the vulnerability to which he or she is exposed when watching and listening, but reading a programme does not bring them any closer to understanding the emotional rhetoric of the pathos that drives the intentions of its writer. As the main feature of the new technology, the most authoritative commentators describe its ability to enable every individual to contrast the images of the world without restrictions through interconnected screens or the individualised fluidity of the Internet. By looking and speaking through them, we know what is happening beyond our limited experience (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2009). During the Enlightenment, people read from a distance, but looked and listened in physical proximity. Now we read, listen, and look from a distance and in virtual, non-physical proximity. As Ortega presaged, and McLuhan verified, the proportions of the world have been reduced to the setting of a global village within the reach of anyone's sight and hearing.

## 6. From rhetorical craftsmanship to the disenchantment of the Internet

From the point of view of McLuhan, who was more attentive to this point than Ortega, "the printing press, or mechanical writing, introduced a separation and an extension of human functions, [...an] astonishing technique of spatial analysis that replicates itself immediately" (1996, pp. 118 and 132). It does not require a stretch of the imagination to understand that this "separation" reflects the Cartesian dichotomy between the power of reflection and the sensorial scheme. Of course, the printing press does not explain the separation, but it gives rise to the reductionist concept of man as a reflective subject. Reading makes it possible to review again what has been read, to reflect, to meditate on each word, dissect a paragraph, or to deconstruct a text so it can be rectified or modified. In *Phaedrus*, Plato observed that writing was a remedy for the fragility of precise memory. The literate reader is more immune than the illiterate to the thread of reasoning being lost through memory. Nevertheless, writing is not a substitute, but rather an extension of people's speech by technical means. With writing, the spoken past remains.

In the millenary tradition of rhetoric, the exercise of memory was essential for persuasive effectiveness. The orator practiced it by learning mnemonic rules and cultivating commonplaces or clichés in order to limit the expository effort and minimise the risk of repetition. The rules of rhetoric linked *pathos* and *ethos* between speaker and audience. This served to control the quality of the argumentation. It did not understand exposition as the manifestation of an abstract faculty concerned with transferring the aspirations of an apodictic logic to language. This claim was made clear in the *Novum Organum*, the predecessor of the rationalist imperative, which urged the criticism of pure reason from the perspective of the Cartesian *cogito*. Once the argumentative unity of an organism that thinks and feels has been restored, rhetoric finds its way back into anthropology, philosophical pragmatism, interactionism... or a world that is there, as written by Mead (1991, p. 166).

It is through this door that a specialist in medieval literature returns to the tribal village. He observes that the printing press was slow to break the tie that bound rhetorical craftsmanship to the argumentative, intellectual tradition. As Ortega stated, the ties to

the past survive in the present. With Curtius, McLuhan subscribes to Treveylan's thesis that "medieval ways of life subsisted until the mid-1750s" (Curtius, 1955, p. 813).

This spoken aspect of manuscript culture not only affected the way of composing and writing profoundly, but it also meant that writing, reading, and speaking remained inseparable until well after the advent of the printing press (McLuhan, 1969a, p. 87).

It is not his responsibility that classical rhetoric, the rules of which respond to an art that has been shaped and socialised over two millennia, has lost its field of application due to the transfer of scientific interest toward logic and mathematics. The search for a logical, precise language to replace the imperfect mother tongue has been continuous since modernity. Rhetoric is losing meaning as the scientific approach to grammar, such as that of Port Royal, gains ground, but most of all since Leviathan, the first part of which is an anti-linguistic philosophy of language. While the art of persuasion looked at itself through models of mathematics and calculus, it was logical that people's speech had to be inappropriate for rational purification. (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1970).

If rationalism linked science to conclusive automatism, the return of networks to audio-visual, interactive conditions is the death warrant for the rationalising pretensions of the transcendental subject. The question today is not how this Cartesian tradition is being interrupted, nor whether the decline of discursive logic is renewing the rhetorical tradition. The question to ask is under what conditions this tradition will be re-established with the spread of the new technologies. Rhetorical rules had been forged as an argumentative model of demonstrative thought since the time of Aristotle. They served as a quality control mechanism for the speaker. They were not required in order to satisfy abstract reason or to serve as an instrument for a claim to rationality. They represented an institution used to practice the artisanship of discourse where *ethos* was part of the art of persuading the audience. Depending on their intensity, they can be ethical (*ethos*) or sympathetic (*pathos*) (Lausberg, §43,2,b and §§69-70). Study and observation refined the normative mnemotechnical guidelines made available to the different types of discourse in the topics or commonplaces that had been registered for centuries, so that the memorising effort would not interfere with the argumentative or expository fluency.

What is not clearly revealed by Ortega in *The Revolt of the Masses* (*La rebelión de las masas*) is that these quality controls, which are currently being applied in a similar way in order to discern publishable papers, rate publishers, ensure suitability for academic functions, socially accredit acquired scientific knowledge, or for other presumed social rules, are being renewed in the deontology of informative and cognitive rigour, despite the fact that they were being lost with regard to the criteria of aesthetic taste. Many rules are applied in order to guarantee functions that are analogous to those fulfilled by the rhetorical art to certify social trust. The proliferation of consumption and the conversion of the consumer into a user has encouraged implementation of instructions that act as security controls in consumer exchanges on the Internet. Consumers learn when they can and cannot trust services and payments with Bizum. Trustworthiness acquires social value precisely when the flow of transfer allows the arts of deception to flourish. This is the case with corporate reputation, which is carefully safeguarded by large corporations (Núñez Ladevéze, Irisarri and Morales, 2015). The cognitive environment of scientific dissemination has replaced rhetorical deontology with academic standards. Writing, citations, contrast of sources, peer reviews, and professional manuals that are sometimes antiquated have taken their place. It can be said that rhetoric continues to exist by having been transformed into outlined procedures for reviewing scientific texts and rules of professional ethics in the management of truthful information and fair-minded opinion. On

the Internet, however, where traffic flows unchecked, disinformation and opinion circulate unbridled, and the only regulation is provided by the fact that we find ourselves simultaneously equal as internet users in a global space without rules, which is distributed so that everyone can find what suits their own tastes. The Internet lures populism. This is what worried Bauman.

Ortega also foretold this situation in *The Revolt of the Masses*: “What is characteristic of the moment is that the vulgar soul, knowing itself to be vulgar, has the courage to assert the right to vulgarity, and imposes it wherever it wants” (IV:380). Rumours, fallacies, and sophistic arguments emerge. Fake news is the anglicism used to refer to the lack of control of disinformation in the egalitarianism of the Internet. By extending face-to-face relationships to the public sphere, communication technology has dissolved the boundary that separated rumour and hoaxes inherent to private spaces on the one hand, and verifiable information in the media on the other. Blanco (2020) has identified features that distinguish “the precarious influence” of facts inherent to fake news from post-truth, or “an intangible reality”. Bauman laments that adherence to the tribe prevails over verification, and that it takes precedence over comparison or refutation. The effort to point out the value of one’s own account over that of others makes it virtually impossible to verify the truth or falsehood of one or the other (2017, 54 et seq.).

In this “intangible reality”, everyone accepts or rejects according to desires, acknowledges what must be reinforced in order to establish themselves, and rejects whatever casts doubt on their primary or secondary beliefs. Functionalists had already warned of these selective preferences when dealing with personal influence. This gave rise to Festinger’s theory of cognitive incoherence, which also translates as pragmatic incoherence (Núñez Ladevéze and Pérez Ornia, 2002). There is no social appeal that leads to differentiating or separating truth from lies, as the distinction is pre-social or, if you prefer, objective. Classical rhetoric brought together deontological rules accepted by secular purification of a millenary tradition to teach how to distinguish between equanimity and exasperation, which would lead to separating and understanding the causes of indignation from reasons for hope. If confusion is unavoidable today, it is because the unpredictable web of the Internet has broken the ties to the rules that made the art of rhetoric trustworthy. The resources for deliberative rhetoric that permeate the Internet are immune from any argumentative discipline that might inspire trust. Quality is generally a deontological matter (Núñez Ladevéze, 2015), for it is preserved wherever deontology, as a regulative principle of professional or specialised behaviour, finds a “pragmatic field” of application (*Man and People -El hombre y la gente-* X, chap. III and IV). As on the Internet, all the cats are browner than in the Phenomenology of Spirit, and the lack of differentiation serves as a common encasement for the most recriminatory attitudes that circulate, indiscernibly embraced as the most sublime.

On the one hand, this capricious lack of differentiation between the ploys to feed desire or recreate the group’s own identity when threatened by another, and on the other hand, the factual adequacy, equanimity, and normatively disciplined arguments of rhetoric, which distinguish intellectual authority from ignorant audacity, is what Ortega called “the revolt of the masses”, and what Bauman called “back to Hobbes and the tribes”. Classical rhetoric understood the expressiveness of *pathos* as a link between sender and receiver of argumentation. On the Internet, emotional appeal has given way to an uncontrolled market of interests that feed on exaltation, animosity, and arbitrariness. Nationalist and ideological drives, as well as the impulses and preferred tastes of ephemeral tribes that coexist with stable blood ties, led Bauman to return to the global manifestation of “voluntary servitude”.

Rhetoric has been replaced by the rebellion of the individual who has been communicatively standardised in the digital labyrinth, which has now turned into an environment where equality of access is the key ingredient for sharing voluntary servitude in the web-based process.

The coexistence of criteria without motivation, which was latent while attention was focused on the egalitarian features of the *television village*, has emerged with the implementation of the Internet as a means of communication in the global village, even more egalitarian, if that were possible, as this scenario is comprised of reciprocal interactions of individualised, sometimes anonymous users. The hope of indignation evaporated as quickly as the expectations of the dreamers had been aroused. They became instruments of “voluntary servitude” in the process of reproducing the system, whether it was capitalist, American (USA), Indian, Chinese, or Islamic. Their spectacular and rapid entrenchment, the possibilities of free access to all sources of information, the capacity to establish unlimited personal relations without spatial barriers, as well as anonymity and confusion, have contributed both to increased concern and to the undermining of illusions about its virtual liberation.

With the advent of the Internet, which has aroused so many expectations among those who support progressivism, it suffices to share the following statement from Bauman:

Space and time no longer limit the effects of our actions. Our moral imagination has not progressed much beyond the level it reached in primitive times. The responsibilities we are willing to share do not go as far as the influence that our everyday behaviour exerts on the lives of people who are increasingly distant from us (2010a, p. 108).

The reasons that led Bauman to pessimism are the opposite of those of Ortega. If Ortega’s analysis in *The Revolt of the Masses (La rebelión de las masas)* is valid, this is not due to its being disheartening. Ortega is not pessimistic because he thinks rebellion is a step backward. He is pessimistic if we judge him from the point of view of those who still feel concerned with idealistic aspirations. Now that hope has become “disenchantment”, to use Bauman’s adjective, since neither Ortega nor McLuhan had any illusions in this regard, they are not included among the disenchanted. As written ironically by McLuhan (1969b, p. 14), “Now all the world’s a sage”, as if he had read “the barbarism of specialisation” in *The Revolt of the Masses (La rebelión de las masas)*. Pessimism appears among those who assumed the pretentious triviality of modernity which, confronted with its own illusions of eliminating enchantments, has declared itself dissatisfied. Having put reason on its feet, the Enlightenment became a strategy of domination by some over others that planned the class struggle in order to establish equality and freedom among men. Bauman’s pessimism comes from the fact that having accepted these aspirations, he comes to recognise that the road travelled leads “back to the tribes”. The servitude of the “tribes” nourishes discontent that is no different in its overall assessment from the warning that the rejection of the past might result in a “revolt of the masses”.

Bauman (2001) recounts the “discontentment” of postmodernity. Ortega did not allow himself to be duped by the critical technique of “disenchantment”. The Internet has globalised the communicative conditions of a primitive stage, restored by the technological implosion that cannot be applied in this regressive progress to the communal norms of the tribes. On the Internet, every individual knows what they want, assuming that what they want is to connect in order to dominate or influence others. The current challenge is to discover how to restore the lost art of rhetoric in order to re-establish deliberative trust in the communicative labyrinth of the Internet.



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