In this article, the argument is put that "distortion thesis" apologies for the necessity of illusion in the content of journalism constitutes a conceptually lethal approach both to mass communication, and to media criticism.

Dans cet article, l'auteur soutient que la "distortion thesis" invoquée pour justifier le besoin d'illusion dans le contenu journalistique constitue une approche conceptuellement sinistre, à la fois pour les communications de masse et pour la critique des média.

Within the body of mass media criticism, it is argued with growing frequency that the media are guilty of a great deal of misbehavior, that in ways both deliberate and unwitting they supply information to their publics in varying shades and hues of untruth. Often these criticisms are substantiated with litanies of atrocity stories; and the critical charges themselves are framed in standard terms such as 'deception,' 'distortion,' 'bias,' 'fabrication,' 'illusion' and so on. There may be an element of rhetorical overstatement to many of these assessments, and some may feel that the treatment of the media has been excessively harsh; but the meanings of the terms in which these criticisms have been cast have generally been unproblematic, and the messages coherent. There is, for instance, the shared perception among commentators that terms like 'distortion' and 'fabrication' denote unwelcome states of affairs which nonetheless still are corrigeable, at least in principle. It also is generally assumed by these same critics that audiences are entitled to truthfulness and accuracy in media portrayals, and that this entitlement reflects what readers and viewers want.
In the last dozen years of so, a more disturbing kind of media interpretation has begun to emerge. Its appearance as an explicitly developed critique is only infrequent, but the fact that it already has poked its camel's nose inside the tent means that it is not too early for us to pay it some mind. Essentially this kind of commentary amounts to arguing that distortion (illusion, fabrication) in the realm of mass communication is commonplace, that it is unavoidable, and that being at least partially deceived is something that the public really wants and expects. Accordingly, it is argued, we ought to recognize and more or less tolerate this condition as universal and necessary. Let us call it the "distortion thesis."

The thesis is ambivalent. It begins as a description of existing states of affairs, but quickly takes on a normative or prescriptive profile. It says, in effect, that this is the way people and organizations communicate, that this is what people really want, and so certain kinds of distortion aren't really all that unusual or intolerable. To understand all, as it were, is to forgive all.

But there is more. This curious style of apologia also is predicated upon a concept of language and communication which is ultimately incoherent. Moreover, it is a conceptually lethal approach to mass communication and media criticism because it blurs the distinction between communication and illusion. In so doing, it undermines the benchmarks of truth and intelligibility upon which communication criticism ultimately must rest.

Two clear examples of this kind of criticism are Theodore Levitt's "The Morality (?) of Advertising," and Lewis H. Lapham's "Gilding the News." The latter piece was published in Harper's in 1981 while Lapham was editor. Levitt's article first appeared in the Harvard Business Review in 1972, but has enjoyed wider subsequent circulation, and now seems to command something of the status of a manifesto. It has been included, as a representative piece in Lee Thayer's Ethic's,
Morality and the Media, and it is listed as a bulk-sale item in a catalogue of the Canadian Advertising Advisory Board.

Cosmetic Distortion as Imperative

Levitt's thesis is that "embellishment and distortion are among advertising's legitimate and socially desirable purposes" (pp. 185-186). To this he contrast "falsification with larcenous intent," which he acknowledges as being "illegitimate." The rub, as he goes on to suggest, is that the distinction between the two kinds of advertising is "not as simple, obvious or great as one might expect." That concession, as it turns out, has some serious ramifications when we take into account the practical implications of his position. In any case, Levitt's main preoccupation is with defending the non-larcenous species of advertising distortion as being a perfectly defensible mode of communication.

The basic structure of the argument can be briefly reconstructed as follows:

1. The purpose or intent of rhetoric, and of poetry and art, is "to convince and seduce" (p. 186), to persuade, to get us to feel and to perceive and to believe in certain ways. The artist is characterized as one who seeks "to convert" the human soul; as one "who meddles with man's soul" (p. 189).

2. Art and poetry do not represent things and events as they truly are. Instead, they exaggerate, distort and falsify. Keat's "Ode to a Grecian Urn," notwithstanding its poetic merits, becomes an "exaggerated, distorted and palpably false description" (p. 186). The domain of human production and expression is inherently deceptive, because all peoples and societies through all times are occupied with "the purposeful transmutation of nature's primeval state...Everybody everywhere wants to modify, transform, embellish, enrich and
Terminal Distortion/Cunningham

reconstruct the world around him—to introduce into an otherwise harsh or bland existence some sort of purposeful and distorting alleviation" (p. 188).

3. Advertising is involved with the same kind of distortion and seduction that we find in art and poetry. "Both art and advertising are rhetorical, and both literally false" (p. 190). Commerce "takes essentially the same liberties with reality and literality as the artist, except that commerce calls its creations advertising, or industrial design or packaging. As with art, the purpose is to influence the audience by creating illusions, symbols, and implications that promise more than pure functionality" (p. 186).

4. There is nothing really remarkable or unsuitable about this widespread, commercially induced environment of illusion because it is rooted in the human being's need for embellishment and cosmetic distortion. Nature in the raw is unendurable; and T.S. Eliot is approvingly quoted as having observed that "human kind cannot bear very much reality." The blandishments of packagers and advertisers are represented as palliatives which contribute to our survival: "Without distortion, embellishment, and elaboration, life would be drab, dull, anguished, and at its existential worst" (p. 192). If religion uses architecture and music to attract and hold its audience, the argument continues, and if sex is enhanced through perfumes and powders, then "it is ridiculous to deny the legitimacy of more modest, and similar, embellishments to the world of commerce" (p. 193).

5. All communication, all symbolic expression entails distortion; and so it is unremarkable that the advertisers' copy and images should turn out to be distorted and skewed. How could they not be since they are only symbolic constructs?

6. At stake, then, is not the prevention of distortion. That would be impossible to avoid. Rather, "it is in the end, to know what kinds of distortions we actually want so that each
of our lives is...made bearable" (p. 195). To this end, Levitt concludes his article with a list of suggestions enabling businessmen to steer "a middle way" between acceptable and unacceptable modes of distortion.

Levitt is equivocal about the status of advertising distortion. For the most part, non-larcenous advertising, while it is also called 'distortion' and 'illusion,' is more often characterized in euphemistic terms: "embellishment," "blandishments," "enhancement," "exaggeration," "elaboration," "allurements," "promotion," and so forth. It would seem, then, that part of his defense is to represent distortion in a weaker sense—distortion, that is, which promotes dreams and make-believe but which, on a spectrum of deceit, still falls short of outright falsity with intent to deceive. In one place, too, he speaks, of "the so-called distortions of advertising, product design and packing" (p. 192). While this has the effect of making advertising distortion appear to be problematic, it can just as easily be taken to stand as a paraphrase of distortion in the weaker sense. And yet, the use of terms like 'distortion' and 'illusion' seems to suggest that something more is at stake than just an innocent fuzziness or a minor absence of focus. After all, they belong to that family of negatively epistemic terms like 'falsity,' 'misleading' and 'untruthful' which connote states or situations which stand in opposition to the truth. What then are we to make of this distortion or enhancement which bears a strong semantic affinity with falsity, yet which is still somehow socially desirable?

Given Levitt's collection of easily digestible synonyms, it is tempting to believe that his thesis is innocuous, that he really is talking about the harmless practice of presenting products in their best light; and that the distortion which he countenances is a sort of misnomer, no worse than a peccadillo. An interpretation as benign as this does little to resolve our uncertainty, however. At best, it would only reduce his commentary to the trivial and unexciting claim that it is
legitimate for advertisers to present their product in a positive and attractive light. This, to be sure, is a point that no one would seriously contest, but it is also one which at the same time would make Levitt's exercise appear to be as needless as it would be uncontroversial.

More disturbingly, there are statements made by Levitt which show that this supposedly weaker rendition of distortion is part of a larger and more serious picture. He admits that "it is difficult, as a practical matter, to draw a line between legitimate distortion and essential falsehood...the distinction is not as simple, obvious, or as great as one might think" (p. 186). Given this confession, the following question poses itself: If advertisers and media practitioners adopt policies and procedures based upon an acceptance of some forms of distortion, then, by virtue of unclear boundaries and equally indeterminate perceptions, what is to prevent the application of these same practices when the distortion is no longer innocent, yet still indistinguishable? A distinction, that is, which is difficult to detect and which doesn't seem to be much of a distinction, will certainly be no less difficult to respect in the complexity of the market place.

The benign or harmless interpretation of Levitt's thesis is unlikely for another reason: The defence of distortion associated with advertising (and with the arts) is semantically embedded within a much wider claim. Not only does he single out the falsification of art and poetry, but he states as well that distortion is endemic to the entire realm of symbolism: "Communication can never be the real thing it talks about. Therefore all communication is in some inevitable fashion a departure from reality" (p. 187). This statement is the fulcrum on which Levitt's argument rests, and the enormity of its thesis is evident. A universal ('all') inference ('therefore') is being made to the effect that in the domain of human communication a situation of untruth of distortion ('departure') is unavoidable ('inevitable').
But why does this have to be so? No reason or evidence is adduced for this, other than the distinction itself between "communication" and "the real thing;" but what begins as a commonplace distinction between word and thing very quickly transforms itself into an unbridgeable epistemological rift. At first glance, "departure" might seem to lack the muscle of the other three words, but it functions very effectively even as a sort of weasel word: it picks up on the non-identity ("can never be") between communication and reality, but then, without further developments or reasoning, converts that non-identity into a slippage or retreat from some implied ideal of...what? Presumably an absolutely truthful, accurate mirroring of reality which ex hypothesi is impossible because the communicative process simply does not coincide with its object. Yet even if the stones themselves could speak or symbolize, why should we let ourselves think that their self-depictions would be any closer to the truth than those provided by human communication?

Truth as Unattainable

Virtually the same kinds of claims made by Levitt with respect to advertising were repeated and applied to journalism by Lewis Lapham when he undertook to write about the news media's condemnation of Janet Cooke of the Washington Post. Cooke, it will be remembered, had written a Pulitzer Prize article, "Jimmy's World," about an eight-year-old heroin addict. Later it was discovered that the article was a fabrication. Cooke was not alone. Shortly after her exposure, columnist Michael Daly of the New York Daily News was disgraced when it was learned that his copy filed from Belfast was fraudulent.

In many ways, editor Lapham's analysis of the news media's condemnation of Janet Cooke (and of others) is as disturbing as the mischief committed by Cooke herself. His point seems to be that denunciations of Cooke are forced, and somehow inappropriate, since journalists generally traffic in fabrications and all sorts of artful
deception. Cooke, he argues, was made to be a scapegoat because her invention threatened to unmask the random mix of fact and fiction which characterizes news services. Lapham does not exonerate Cooke, but what is disconcerting is that Cooke is made to appear unexceptional, and that in itself is a kind of exculpation. With a surprising degree of cynicism, Lapham expresses surprise at the denunciations since, as he would have us believe, we really cannot expect much better from a press which merely panders to the audience's desire to be deceived, to be fed a diet of myths and illusions:

If the media succeed with their spectacles and grand simplifications, it is because their audiences define happiness as the state of being well and artfully deceived. People like to listen to stories, to believe what they're told, to imagine that the implacable forces of history speak to them with a human voice. Who can bear to live without myths...? The media thus play the part of the courtier, reassuring their patrons that the world conforms to the wish of the presiding majority...By telling people what they assume they already know, the media reflect what society wants to think to itself. The images in the mirror compose the advertisement for reality (p. 37).

Given this unflattering portrayal of the public's desire, it is not surprising, perhaps, that the media should emerge as pimps and suppliers. Even the paean in the final lines of his article to "compassion, honesty and moral intelligence" seems half-hearted and unconvincing. By this point the reader already has been led to believe that these qualities are virtually non-existent in today's journalism.

Another major premise in Lapham's commentary is the old chestnut that 'truth is relative,' and that the process of theorizing and selection ipso facto renders any description skewed or fictitious. The media supply us with little more than contrived myths and fables:

...maybe people need to be reminded that the media tell stories. There is nothing reprehensible about telling stories. Some are more complicated than others. Gibbon told a story, and so did Einstein. Almost everything presented in the theatre of the news constitutes a kind of story, and to some
extent all the principal players...appear as composite figures, their quotations fitted into a context suitable to the occasion, their images made up of fragments as easily transposed as the bits and pieces of a mosaic or a documentary film (p. 32).

We are all engaged in the same enterprise, all of us caught up on the making of analogies and metaphors...Stories move from truths to facts, not the other way around, and tellers of tales endeavor to convey the essence of a thing...Journalists have less in common with diplomats and soothsayers than they do with vagabond poets (p. 33).

Consistently, but sadly, Lapham includes himself among the class of fabricators both in his past practices, and even while writing about Cooke: "I find myself doing the same thing in the writing of this essay...On at least one level of meaning, I have only a formal or theoretical grasp of what I'm talking about; Miss Cooke and Mr. Daly appear to me as characters in a play of ideas" (pp. 34-35).

Lapham, it is true, does not say (as Levitt does) that all communication is distorted and biased; and so to that extent his thesis appears to be more restricted. But by stressing the relativity of truth in writing, by repeatedly emphasizing the random difference between fact and fiction in the media as well as the media's wholesale commitment to fabrication and theatre, he does every bit as much as Levitt to reduce the sphere of journalism to fiction and illusion. It may seem disarmingly honest when he includes himself among the class of fabricators. But even so, why should we believe his words any more than the fictions of others...such as those of Cooke or Daly?

There is an enormous irony here. Lapham purports to provide us with a description of the real state of affairs in the media, but therein lies a paradox. Given the fictive nature of the journalistic enterprise, as well as Lapham's own sorry inclusion within it, how can he fail to realize that the truth-value of his own message is programmed to self-destruct in much less than five minutes?
Even if his own message were not intrinsically self-disqualifying, too many important distinctions have been ignored or minimized. There is, and ought to be, a difference between telling stories in novels and soft history on the one hand, and news reportage on the other. Journalists presumably are hired to provide truthful descriptions and sober commentary; readers expect non-fiction, and they have not been warned that figures and events portrayed therein are collages. It is reprehensible to tell stories under these conditions. While Lapham's analysis admittedly does not gainsay the distinction between truth and fiction as an ideal and at the conceptual level, the effect of his commentary and its unguarded generalizations is to render it chimerical in the real world. Similarly, it is obfuscation of the worst kind to reduce the work of Gibbon and Einstein to the level of 'story-telling' with all the fictive and illusory connotations that word contains. Then to compound the confusion by suggesting that journalistic hoaxes belong essentially to the same class makes matters even worse.

What Lapham neglects is to supply us with qualifiers (stronger than "almost" and "to some extent") that might have lent a little more balance and precision to his commentary. He might have said that some of the media deal in inventions, that they sometimes fabricate. Even if he had settled for complaining that most of the media distort, or that they distort most of the time, there still would have been enough of a distinction preserved between 'most' and the force of 'all' to save his message from sinking into incoherence. It is only because some news writers and broadcasters do the job right that we can in practice tell the good from the bad; the true from the false. Quite rightly, Lapham counsels the modern reader against placing his faith in the "contrived mythologies of the media:" but he might also have added that a sensitive regard for truth and accuracy as often as not is operative in journalistic decisions. Were this not so, it would be hard to know what to make of his concluding remarks about each individual having to discover the truth for himself each day by "working with the tools of his own though, imagination, and patient study" (p. 39). In Lapham's
universe of systematized media distortion and fiction, it is hard to know what to make of this individual's endeavor since, in today's world, such efforts would not take us very far without considerable reliance upon the self-same media which he so cynically denigrates.

The distortion thesis crops up elsewhere. In his widely quoted analysis of news production, Deciding What's News, Herbert Gans cinches more tightly yet the point made by Lapham and Levitt. Gans claims that undistorted news is impossible to arrive at; and once again this is because of something inherent in the process of communication itself:

Even if a perfect and complete reproduction (or construction) of external reality were philosophically or logistically feasible, the mere act of reproduction would constitute a distortion of that reality. Thus objective or absolute nondistortion is impossible (p. 305).

Once again, to describe is to distort. But on the same page, Gans adds a new twist when he says that "the concept of distortion is nevertheless valid, but only as a relational one." That is, the journalist's report is unavoidably and necessarily distorted, but it can be assessed as distorted or biased only in relation to a specific standard or ideal of non-distortion. Yet these standards or ideals themselves, in turn, never can be absolute or objective because they, in turn, rest upon a number of subjective reality and value judgments; and that, of course, means that bias or distortion is ultimately unavoidable. While these relational standards or ideals never can be absolute, Gans makes the point that they can become universal through agreement; and in this way, he brings out the political dimension involved in choosing journalistic values and ideals. However, the unremovable warp between word and object remains very much in place in Gans' account.

Though they might appear extreme, the arguments propounded by Levitt and Lapham are not really all that anomalous. In point of fact
they have only made explicit what many others assume or believe, and they have articulated what many media practitioners and social scientists have only hinted at or suggested. Their message also has a wider historical significance, because it echoes in modern idiom, and with special application to mass media, the old philosophical lament that human communication always falsifies reality; that our symbolic renderings are reconstructions which necessarily belie the structure of things and events in the real world. It is a complaint at least as old as the Presocratics. For Heraclitus and his commentators (Kirk and Raven, 1962, pp. 196-198), an expression such as "the same river" belies the relentless flux of flowing waters. According to Parmenides (Kirk and Raven, pp. 269-277), discourse with its assortment of plurals and negatives and talk about change leads us into confusion and perplexity, and away from insight into the radical unicity of being. In the early modern era, John Locke (ed. Nidditch, 1975) remarked upon the obscuring power of language:

...words...interpose themselves so much between our Understanding, and the Truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the Medium through which visible Objects pass, their Obscurity and Disorder does [sic] not seldom cast a mist before our Eyes, and impose upon our Understandings (p. 488).

More recently, philosophers as disparate as Bertrand Russell (see Clack, 1969, p. 17) and Henri Bergson (1946, 1955) have argued that natural language or scientific abstractions (in the case of Bergson) stand in the way of our truly understanding reality.¹ In After Babel, George Steiner argues eloquently that the essence of language lies not in its power to provide true and accurate descriptions, but in its power to disguise, to negate, to falsify. (Therein, he insists, lies our source of freedom and the protection of our sanity.)

...the use of language for alterity, for mis-construction, for illusion and play, are the greatest of man's tools by far...Thus it is inaccurate and theoretically spurious to schematize language as 'information' or to identify language, be it unspoken or vocalized, with 'communication.' The latter
term will serve only if it includes, if it places emphasis on, what is not said in the saying, what is said only partially, allusively, or with intent to screen. Human speech conceals far more than it confides; it blurs much more than it defines; it distances more than it connects (pp. 224, 229).

Knowledge and Language-Mediation

At first glance, then, it might seem that Levitt and Lapham, (and Gans), should have a lot going for them with this kind of philosophical support. First impressions, however, often are misleading. There are competing and saner philosophical considerations which do more to show that the distortion thesis is a confused and badly motivated one.

The first of these has to do with our recognizing that to know a language is already to know a good deal about our natural and social environment, and that without the mediation of language we would understand very little of what we perceptually encounter. The connection between our understanding and reality is anchored in the same learning experiences in which we acquire a language and its wide assortment of skills and techniques, in that complex melange of behavior, practices and conventions out of which our words take on uses and meaning. Knowledge of a language, then, is already freighted with rules and agreements which give sense to our speech acts, and focus to our understanding (Searle, 1969, ch. 3; 1971). The journalist ideals and standards to which Gans appeals for a merely relational validity are not unimportant, but their value presupposes the proto-rules and proto-convenants embedded within natural language itself by virtue of which we touch base with reality and with our social environment. Infallibility, of course, is not the issue here. On the contrary, the grammar of language, as Wittgenstein (1963, #109, #122) warns us, is not perspicuous: words mislead us, and our intelligence is easily bewitched by them. But it is still these self-same resources of language, and its linkages with our environment, which enable us to recover clarity and focus in the things we say and write. Proponents
of the distortion thesis overlook these deep-structured and self-corrective assets. Too precipitously they move from an awareness of some falsehood to the fallacious assertion that all communication is distorted.

Second, consider Levitt's claim that because communication is other than the real thing, then it is necessarily discrepant--(i.e., a "departure from")--with respect to that same reality. The inference turns out to be a puzzling one, because no further indication is given of what goes wrong between word and object. We are simply urged to believe that when it comes to communicating, communicators are in a 'no-win' situation because of some kind of gap or shield between what is and the human utterance. It would probably be too fantastical and too unfair to assume from this that Levitt, in true Kantian style, has in mind some sort of hidden transcendental reality masked by human words, or that he himself commands a wordless understanding of what lies behind the scenes. But it is not at all unreasonable to point out that if he is going to talk about or even mention a pre-symbolic, infra-linguistic realm of reality, he can do so only in a way which is still language-mediated, or in a way which will entail some remarkably privileged knowledge claims:

That this is so can be seen, from another angle, by considering how a critic of language claims to know that there is a "gap" or a "barrier" between language and reality. He must, it seems, know a good deal about reality in order to know, as he claims, that language does not and cannot fit it properly. But then, if he speaks at all, he refutes himself from his own mouth...The fact is that the sceptic, like all humans, cannot long remain silent, and in speaking he illustrates that we can know enough about reality for our purposes (Black, p. 152).

Our objection can be rephrased from a slightly different angle. The distortion thesis is universal in scope, and so it is natural to wonder where one could possibly stand--(in Heaven, perhaps?)--and what kind of footing one could ever hope to secure if one felt compelled to rebel against and to move outside our language-mediating, language-distorting
situation. But here it can supply no direction. The distortion thesis, by virtue of its unqualified portrayal of communication, turns out to be as uninformative as it is uninteresting:

...the underlying image of the "barrier" between language and reality is a symptom of conceptual confusion...It may be paradoxical, but it is true that a "barrier" that it is logically impossible to remove is not, in any interesting sense, a barrier at all (Black, p. 152).

Levitt's epistemology, then, is such that we can never hope to communicate a truthful and unclouded picture of reality in our descriptions. The implied conception of truth at work in Lapham's account amounts to much the same thing. Lapham seems to think that because the journalistic enterprise entails selection and abstraction, (true of any communication), then to that degree it merges into that which is mythical, fabricated and illusory. At this point, his theory of truth becomes indistinguishable from that of Levitt for whom all communication is a departure from reality. But as a general theory of truth and illusion, there is something exaggerated and unrealistic about this.

All descriptions are partial or incomplete since any one of them can be amplified indefinitely, and because selection is physically unavoidable. But that does not thereby render them false. Rather incompleteness, together with such features as perspective or angle, are by themselves nothing more than the ineliminable constraints under which any description is framed. The measure of a description's truthfulness, on the other hand, comes with the degree to which it conforms to reality and also with the degree to which it harmonizes with other credible reports; and also in many cases with the degree to which it conforms to methods and standards worked out through agreements among professionals. To acknowledge this is to recognize that some reports will be true, some false, some closer to the truth than others;
but it does not permit us to conclude that all descriptions or all communications belie and distort.

Third, there is equivocation in the distortion thesis. This is inevitable because of grammatical misuse. The grammar of a term, as Wittgenstein (1963, #5-9, #30-35) points out, includes a recognition of the ways in which that term or expression is used within a language, and that is something which is contextual or relational. The grammar of an expression, for one thing, means that we also must know a good deal about the other words in a language to which it is related. Now, the grammar of words like 'distortion' and 'deception' and 'illusion' is such that they work within our language to characterize a certain kind of defect in individual descriptions and stretches of discourse. It is also part of the grammar of this family of distortion terms that there must be at least some instances or forms of communication which are not distorted or out of focus in order to serve as a criterion of distortion itself. Were this not so, we would have no way of recognizing the defective descriptions. Just as the concept of a lie logically implies the institution of telling the truth, that of distortion and falsification implies as a minimum the possibility of undistorted discourse. Accordingly, when the distortion thesis is made to be the procrustean bed into which all communication or all the media are forced to fit, the grammar of distortion breaks down under the strain, and we move into a zone of meaningless or incoherent discourse. Applied to the whole system of language and communication, the term 'distortion' can gain no foothold because its necessary correlates, (truth, accuracy, focus, non-distortion), upon which it is semantically dependent, have been eliminated by the definitional constraints of the thesis itself. Wittgenstein put it best when he said that "a doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt" (1969, #450).

Finally, to grasp the full suicidal import of the distortion thesis as a mode of, or as a basis for, media criticism, it may be instructive to compare it with the method of universal doubt practiced by René
Descartes. Both in the *Discourse on Method* and in the *Meditations*, Descartes reasoned that because he had sometimes been misled by his perceiving and judging powers, he would never again allow himself to believe anything to be true until he could discover a proposition that was itself incontestably true. This procedure of distrust, then, was universal in scope, but at the same time provisional: he would doubt only in order to arrive eventually at that which was clear and distinct. At the same time this systematic distrust was also reinforced by two other powerful suppositions: (1) that what was only probable would be given a value no greater than that which was downright false; (2) and that there existed a powerful evil spirit which continuously worked to deceive Descartes at every moment of his conscious life. Given these superadded conditions, it is hard to believe that anyone could distance himself farther from a knowledge of the truth. Yet some of our modern critics have done just that.

Levitt, Lapham and Gans propound a universal thesis which sounds very much akin to that of Descartes, the thesis that we are confronted with wholesale distortion and illusion in the realm of symbolic activity. In their case, the reinforcement which assures a universal state of skew and bias is nothing less than a deep-seated pathological disorder within human communication itself: the inability to describe or report without fabrication and distortion. But the distortion thesis turns out to be much more lethal than Cartesian doubt because inextricability is now made to be absolute. For one thing, the Cartesian policy of suspending belief is only a methodology; its role is intended to be nothing more than provisional. But Levitt and Lapham purport to be describing a real and universal state of affairs, one which Gans says cannot be otherwise.

Second, Descartes never doubted the capacity of natural language to express his thoughts and to define realities (see Kenny, p. 21). But the new criticism does, and this is why it is not only an incoherent thesis, but a seditious one as well. It is incoherent, we have seen,
because it pretends to describe a universal state of affairs in terms and symbols and with communicative actions which are said in the same breath to be incapable of doing so. It is hard to see how a distorted description of a universal state of distorted communication can really get us anywhere. It is seditious because it undermines the authority and power of language to instruct and to inform. A fortiori, it deprives media criticism of the power and means to provide intelligible commentary within the domain of communication and journalism. To the unwary, it seems to be saying only that when we communicate we do so unavoidably with bias, and with a significant degree of fabrication; but by virtue of its incautious generalizations, it ends up saying and disallowing a great deal more.

Concluding Postscript

The scientist or the mathematician or the philosopher can hardly hope to flourish if he chooses to nullify the power of reason to combine premises and draw inferences. So too, if the media critic is to do his work, then the one thing he may not impugn is language and communicative competence. Our performance in the domain of symbolic action may be imperfect, but that does not gainsay the ability of the communicator to communicate, nor the office of the media critic to point out when and how something has gone askew.

Notes

1. Bergson's unhappiness with language is implicit in those passages where he offers a critique of the concept and the synthetic forms of science.

2. In a very different context, J.L. Austin (1964, p. 46) says something akin to this: 
   ...our common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth making, in the lifetime of many generations: these surely are likely to be more numerous, more sound, since they have stood up to the long test of survival of the fittest...(1964, p. 46).
Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue convincingly that understanding is grounded in a network of metaphors which characterize language and communication; and that metaphors derive from our experience of physical objects.

3. Wittgenstein grounds the acquisition of linguistic competence in behavior, and in the practices and conventions of a culture (see, for example, 1963, #23, #206, #208).

References


