In Memoriam: Paul Attallah, 1954-2009

Michael Dorland
Carleton University

If indeed (as the ancients claimed) philosophy teaches the art of dying, then the recent death of Paul Attallah should give us pause. Few of us, I imagine, can contemplate going into the fearful dark with the calm and equanimity Paul maintained to the very last—a teacher to the end.

Paul Michael Attallah died of liver cancer at sunset on January 9, 2009, having turned 54 two months previous. His early death painfully affects, most closely, his immediate family—his sisters, Julie and Louise, and especially his 84-year-old mother, Lee (Lolita)—his friends and colleagues, very often the same; his many students from Carleton University; and the larger Canadian and Australian communities of communication academics, for whom Paul was a notable figure, both personally and professionally.

Paul liked to boast occasionally that he was the author of the leading textbooks in the field of communication in Canada—and in both official languages. There is no question that his two books in French (Attallah, 1989, 1991), written when he worked for the Télé-Université of the Université du Québec à Montréal, have been long-standing staples of the communication curriculum in Francophone universities. In English Canada, *Mediascapes* (2002), (now in its third edition, two editions of which he co-edited with Concordia professor Leslie Regan Shade), while not a single-author work, was meant, as Paul saw it, to make certain claims about the study of communication in Canada: what it covered and what it did not. Without re-opening often tiresome debates, suffice it to say that Paul was no Canadian media nationalist. Quite to the contrary, he reviled many of the founding myths of such a take on media studies—spurious anti-Americanism, a complacent and mendacious regulatory system, and especially the CBC's perpetual commitment to driving away audiences.

Paul's larger field of interest, of course, was the study of television, and particularly that model of television embodied by its so-called golden age, during the dominance of the "Big Three" commercial U.S. networks. (And contrary to a widespread legend, his dissertation [Attallah, 1987] was not about the *Beverly Hillbillies*). The Big Three networks represented a successful, if complex, model of the relationship between a media technology, domestic space and its inhabitants—the audience—and an ethos he termed "fun." It was the utter lack of "fun" of the Canadian media context, its pompous seriousness, that drove Paul to some famous fits of vitriolic contempt.

Michael Dorland is a Professor in the School of Journalism and Communication at Carleton University, Rm 346, St. Patrick's Building, 1125 Colonel By Dr., Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6. Email: mdorland@connect.carleton.ca.

Paul's approach to television was not one derived from economics, though the latter (about which he knew a great deal) was a useful indicator of what TV was really about: broadcasters *and* audiences. This central relationship was for Paul fundamentally a *moral* or *ethical* one, mediated by images, but at the same time bounded by the various rationalities at play in modernity (advertising and technological integration, as well as the harnessing of emotions through images).

Deeply indebted to the Frankfurt School—not for its Marxism, which he had abandoned years ago, but more for its aesthetics and the ways in which its aesthetics were also an ethics—Paul was a very careful reader of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972).[1] And he was troubled by modernity's capacity, as Adorno & Horkheimer had argued, to reverse itself into its opposite, to flip from a system organized under the rules of rationality into, and toward, a system of the organized irrational. (This was reflected in his long fascination–repulsion with Nazism.) The ever-present possibility of the abandonment of rationality disturbed Paul,[2] above all because at the centre of the meaningful rationalities of modernity, he held to a theory of liberalism that anchored and guaranteed the right of individuals to their own perceptions, and with this guarantee came the obligation to at least try to make sense of these perceptions. Even if sometimes wrong or odd, the perceptions individuals drew from the media were what allowed them to define themselves in association with, or rather in relation to, other audiences, and thus to the possibility of community. Similarly, Paul believed in the importance of journalism as the cutting edge of new words and language deployment.

The audience for one medium often consists of the audience for other media. Just as media trade audiences, audiences also trade media. The audience therefore represented a set of increasingly sophisticated skills, of interpretation and negotiation, habits of viewing and ways of reading, that globally formed what one would call less a "democracy"—Paul was a democrat only in the capacity of each to reason—than the "public sphere."

The virtue of the Big Three model of broadcasting was that it was premised on a set of responsibilities to the largest possible audiences. While narrowcasting, the Internet, and other new media risked fragmenting audience communities, Paul maintained a profound faith in audiences' capacity to nevertheless make judgments and reason about the value and status of the content, to interpret and relate to the texts. It was this belief that made him such a remarkable teacher and mentor to so many students, undergraduates as well as postgraduates.

In this sense, too, Paul was fundamentally a moralist, in the French sense of the term—à la Montaigne, say. His preferred form of written expression was accordingly the essay, not the book. He found books tedious on the whole, with some notable exceptions, such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972), *Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984), or *Sources of the Self* (Taylor, 1989).[3] He reached his full flight in the classroom and in individual conversation, with his relentless questioning of why his interlocutor, be it a student or a colleague, believed what they claimed and for what reasons.

Very much of his own mind, Paul had learned to free himself from the doxa of our times, notably Marxism and Lacanism. In so doing, he had come to inhabit

an intellectual realm of his own, which he shared freely with others. He was, in short, an original thinker. Since these are few and far between, the loss of Paul is that much greater.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. Paul's BA was in art history.

2. This also fuelled his long interest in the claims of postmodernity, especially through Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984).

3. At a department seminar some two years ago, Paul expressed his admiration for Robert Merton's classic study of mass persuasion in the Kate Smith World War II bond drives (Merton 1946).

Link

Paul Attallah's publications while at McGill: http://catalogue.mcgill.ca/F/6BKK57DUU VCY8783XP9S12X1K4AEQ7S4MNBEQHTHT1MQE5PJCU-88620?func =find-acc&acc_sequence=004912486

References

Adorno, Theodor W., & Horkheimer, Max. (1972). *Dialectic of enlightenment* (John Cumming, Trans.). New York, NY: Herder and Herder.

Attallah, Paul, & Shade, Leslie Regan. (Eds.). (2002). *Mediascapes: New patterns in Canadian communications*. Scarborough, ON: Nelson Thomson Learning.

Attallah, Paul. (2002). Television studies. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *28*(4), 485-487.

Attallah, Paul, & Hampson, Keith. (2000). Editorial: Audience. *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture*, *3*(1). URL: http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0003/edit.php

Attallah, Paul. (1987). TV before TV: The emergence of American network broadcasting television and its implications for audiences, content, and study. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Communication, McGill University, Montréal, QC.

Attallah, Paul. (1989, 1991). *Théories de la communication* (Vols. I & II). Montréal, QC: Presses de l'Université du Québec.

Attallah, Paul. (1991). Of homes and machines: TV, technology, and fun in America, 1944-1984. *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, *4*(2). URL: http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/4.2/Attallah.html.

Lyotard, Jean-François. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Geoff Bennington & Brian Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Merton, Robert. (1946). *Mass persuasion; the social psychology of a war bond drive*. New York & London: Harper Bros.

Taylor, Charles. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.