

Divine Impressions: Translating Spiritual Media

Welcome to the lecture “Divine Impressions: Translating Spiritual Media” in this course! Have you ever received an impulse or a premonition of something? Maybe you felt that you were supposed to move to a particular location or talk to a particular person? However you categorize these kinds of moments, as religious, spiritual, or completely insignificant, the Puritans seemed to have experienced something similar. In this lecture I will look at moments of communication that I call “spiritual impressions.” These are moments when the Puritans believed that they had heard from God or another heavenly being. We might think that they aren’t legitimate because they can’t be measured or detected by others. However, this doesn’t mean that they aren’t an experience that the Puritans themselves genuinely believed in. For the Puritans, “spiritual impressions” could occur at different times, but it seems that the communication is nonlinguistic, or wordless. The Puritans also describe them as “assurance[s],” “inspiration[s],” or something that “irradiated” one’s soul. In this lecture I’ll examine how spiritual impressions work as a medium and use Marshall McLuhan’s idea of media translation to analyze them. McLuhan was a well-known media scholar, both among academics and the public. He set forth a number of important concepts in the first part of his book *Understanding Media* that we can use to understand how media work. The learning goals are for you to be able to describe the medium of spiritual impressions amongst the Puritans, as well as to describe McLuhan’s concept of media translation.

Let’s look at some examples. So first, Cotton Mather writes in his diary about a time in March 1696 when he was lying on the floor of his study room and the Holy Spirit descended upon him and he started crying. He then describes receiving what he calls “assurances,” especially of two or three things. He describes this process: “I had my soul inexpressibly irradiated with assurances” (I: 188). He then tells us what exactly these assurances were about. The first assurance is that the Holy Spirit will make him use his tongue to speak appropriately and usefully for God. He describes this assurance, “Particularly, that the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ, would more than ever, take possession of my tongue, and cause mee with a more free, and fit, and useful speech, than ever to glorify Him” (I: 188). The second is that the Spirit would give him an understanding of what kind of time he is in in the present. The third is that there would be many changes in the British Isles for good, changes which would bring an end to impious things.

These kinds of spiritual experiences are recorded many other times in Cotton Mather’s diary. Here are just a few more examples. In February 1697 he writes, “In the close of the day, when I lay prostrate on my floor, in the dust, before the Lord, I obtained fresh and sweet assurance from Him, that altho’ I have been the most loathsome creature in the world, yet His holy spirit, would, with sovereign and glorious grace, take possession of mee, and employ mee, to glorify His name, exceedingly” (I: 225). This is an “assurance” that he will receive more of the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit would use him for the glory of God. In September 1697 he says, “The spirit of the Lord came near unto mee; doubtless the angel of the Lord made mee sensible of his approaches. I was wondrously irradiated. My Lord Jesus christ, shall yet bee more known, in the vast regions of America; and by the means of poor...mee, Hee shall bee so” (I: 234). Here Cotton Mather describes his spiritual impression using a different word from “assurance.” He uses the word “irradiated.” He experiences a sense of “irradiation” in which he learns that Jesus will be made known in the Americas and that God will use him, Cotton Mather, to do it. He writes in April 1701 that he is fasting that day and then, “...I obtained assurance

from heaven, that the Lord will gloriously defend me, and employ me, and rescue and increase my opportunities: and I shall quickly see a wonderful thing!" (I: 397). This "assurance" that he receives conveys that God will defend him and he has something wonderful to look forward to.

Here is an example from Increase Mather, Cotton Mather's father: Increase writes in his diary that he received an impression that Boston might be punished with a fire and his books might be burned in the process. This is in 1676. He says, "These impressions were so powerful upon me, as that I could not but preach a sermon on Zephaniah 3:7 'I sayd surely you wilt fear me; you wilt receive instruction, howsoever I punished them'" (Hall 303). Increase Mather describes the divine communications he receives as "impressions" in which he realizes that God has punished Boston through fire. Now, I have mainly identified examples from Cotton Mather and Increase Mather, so more investigation remains to be done about the presence of "spiritual impressions" in other Puritans' works. We will start our analysis with the examples from Cotton and Increase Mather for now.

Now I'll introduce McLuhan's idea of media translation.¹ This is a lens through which we can examine the medium that I call "spiritual impressions." Basically, media translation is what it sounds like. It is the idea that media are translations. They translate something from one form to another. They change information or ideas from one kind of expression to another kind. One of the most interesting things that McLuhan says regarding this idea is that when media translate, something crucial about the original medium itself is revealed. Media translations often reveal some of the core or most influential aspects of whatever is being translated. The example McLuhan gives is that of mechanization, of using machines to do various forms of labors. McLuhan says that this process of using machines "is a translation of nature, and of our own natures, into amplified and specialized forms" (56). Let's explore this statement more: the process of using machines "is a translation of nature, and of our own natures, into amplified and specialized forms." Machines are a kind of media that are linked to human labor, which we can think of as another kind of medium. Machines are like another version of human labor, a translation of it. Let's use a specific case study: Machines that make car parts. Machines that make car parts actually would do what humans used to do, since presumably before car part machines existed humans were the ones making car parts. The machines emphasize what exactly human labor was about, what it was used for. Maybe humans were tracing designs in metal and cutting them out in order to make car gears, but now machines do that. The machines emphasize the precision and design skills of humans. That is what McLuhan means when he says that machines translate human nature into "amplified and specialized forms." In our case study the machines demonstrate humans' abilities to cut out designs and to make them precisely. Machines help us identify some of the purposes of human labor.

Another example McLuhan uses are words. Words are translators because they, well, "put something into words," or they convey something in a linguistic form. We don't normally think of words as technology, but for McLuhan, they are. Words translate something into the form of language. We might say that they translate something called "experience" into language. Words bring out some specific aspects of "experience" when they are formed, when a statement is being made. I will talk more about this concept of "experience" and words as translators later in my lecture.

Now, let's use the concept of media translation to examine spiritual impressions and the Puritans. First, McLuhan's concept seems to show that the Puritans were actually attuned to

¹ Another way of saying media are translators is "technology is explicitness," a phrase McLuhan quotes from Lyman Bryson, an American author.

some media and how it worked. It seems like they were used to translating the medium of spiritual impressions. They realized that there were different ways of communicating besides just using words, such as these spiritual impressions. They then were able to put these spiritual impressions into words. The medium of spiritual impressions is not always “translated,” but many times it is. The people who received these spiritual impressions would express what the impression was about in language, after receiving it. In the examples I have used, they expressed this impression in written words in their diary. So spiritual impressions are translated into the medium of words. But what kind of a medium are spiritual impressions themselves? The spiritual impressions do not seem to be a linguistic medium. They are some sort of package which contains information or knowledge. They are described as something that seems more intuitive or amorphous—an “assurance,” or an “impression,” or something that “irradiates.” The way in which they are described shows how they are nonlinguistic. In the first example I gave in this lecture, Cotton Mather said, “I had my soul inexpressibly irradiated with assurances” (I:188). Mather’s words show that these “assurances” are like emotional or psychological sensations. Mather’s soul was “irradiated,” as if there was a change in how he felt or sensed things, but it’s not a linguistic message that he receives; it’s a different substance. To describe the experience as “inexpressibl[e]” means that it was a kind of process that he couldn’t quite convey, that it was more than just mere words. It would be like a kind of sensation that exists almost outside of language. The Puritans seem to have flipped between these two kinds of media frequently. They didn’t just stick to the spiritual impression medium or the words medium. Rather, they used both. A lot of scholars have emphasized that the Puritans were interested in print, in writing. For example, the Puritans lived in a time after the printing press was developed by Gutenberg and they were using printed versions of the Bible. One scholar named Neil Postman sees the Puritans as “embedded” in the medium of print (31). But, the medium of spiritual impressions shows how the Puritans were interested in another kind of medium that contrasted with written words. They realized that communication happened in nonlinguistic ways, in ways that involved one’s emotional and psychological facilities. They were attuned to diverse media and how they related to each other.

The second thing that McLuhan’s concept of media translation can help us to see is that the Puritans had some sort of conception of words as merely a medium expressing something more amorphous. They saw that words always have this other side, something that they are being translated from. Words were always translated *from* something nonlinguistic that could seem hard to grasp. But in a way, it was just a different side of the same thing. Language was merely an expression of something else. It was the medium of something irradiating the soul. The book of John in the Bible famously starts, “In the beginning was the Word.” Indeed, as I have explained, many scholars emphasized the Puritans’ attunement to words and to printed words in particular. But they might have had a broader understanding of what constitutes “the word” than we think. Before Cotton and Increase Mather write about what divine messages they received, they described how they received it -as an “assurance,” something that “irradiates.” It is this initial medium that they discuss first before explaining what it meant in words. The Puritans were aware that there was something on the other side of words, something that accompanied them and perhaps was inseparable from them. McLuhan writes of spoken words as one of the first translated media: “The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way. Words are a kind of information retrieval

that can range over the total environment and experience at high speeds” (57).² These moments of quick translation among the Puritans show us that words are ever so connected with the whole world of “sense experience”—of reality—of what we can even call the “spiritual world” or the divine.

In this lecture I’ve described a medium that I call “spiritual impressions” and how they work. I have given several examples of spiritual impressions, which Increase Mather and Cotton Mather recorded. Consisting of some sort of psychological or spiritual impartation of a “blob” of information, they were then put into words. I also introduced the concept of media translation in order to analyze these spiritual impressions more. We find that the Puritans seemed to have grasped how different media can connect with each other, and that they might have been attuned to how words are an expression of something that words themselves can’t fully contain. Now, it is your turn to respond. What do you think? What kind of a medium are spiritual impressions to you? Your discussion questions involve applying the theory of media translation to another medium in your life, as well as digging deeper into the perspective that Puritans were a word-centric people.

Discussion question 1: Use McLuhan’s theory of media translation to probe a medium in your own life. What is revealed to you about that medium, the medium from which it was translated, or the people who use it?

Discussion question 2: Give an example of a spiritual impression that this lecture describes. How would you describe what a spiritual impression is in your own words? Why do you think this medium might be important or interesting, and how does it help you to understand who the Puritans were?

² Are words the first or the second medium? While McLuhan describes them as the “first technology,” he later describes how they are a “translation of immediate sense experience into vocal symbols...” so it seems that the sense experiences are the first medium.

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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