THE PROBLEM OF ORALITY AND LITERACY
AN INQUIRY THROUGH THE VOICE OF CATHERINE PICKSTOCK

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The Problem of Orality and Literacy
An Inquiry through the Voice of Catherine Pickstock

In operational and practical fact, the medium is the message.
Marshall McLuhan

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.
The Apostle Paul

A Word of God entered history with the unpredictability of the word.
Jacques Ellul

Introduction

"The medium is the message” – McLuhan’s pithy statement has become anecdotal. But what exactly does it mean? Indeed, this provocative sentence is as enigmatic as it is familiar. McLuhan himself, a lover of puns, kept playing with the words "mass age", "mess age", and "massage" as he sought to make the point he was so keen to get across to his audience in his whole oeuvre. However, offered in many different ways, from a variety of perspectives, his main message was clear: media of communication¹ have consequences that go beyond their immediate use.

¹ As I will argue below, McLuhan often used the words “technology” and “medium” interchangeably, because he believed that any new technology is an "extension" of the human body and nervous system and thus a new medium of communication.
Whether it is the “technology” of writing, electricity, or the railway, McLuhan argues that any medium has “personal and social consequences;” but, and this is his warning and clarion call to his audience, we mostly remain unaware of these. As he put it using a characteristically provocative metaphor, “any medium has the power of imposing its own assumptions on the unwary. … The spell can occur immediately upon contact, as in the first bars of a melody.” In other words, as University of Toronto scholar Mark Federmann suggests, McLuhan’s adage expresses the important critical observation that while we tend to focus on what is obvious, the “dynamic processes that are entirely non-obvious . . . all work silently to influence the way in which we interact with one another, and with our society at large.”

McLuhan’s range of interests concerning the nature of this influence – the “spell” of different media of communication – was notoriously broad. He was convinced that in the electronic age it is impossible to isolate technological events “in the way that classical physics dealt with physical events,” as if they could be studied independently of each other. However, there is one “technological event” that he – as well as many others – considered decisive in the history of (Western) culture: the invention of the phonetic alphabet, and, as its later extension, of the printing press. Language, McLuhan knew, was the primary “tool” that “made it possible for man to accumulate experience and knowledge;” thus among the different “outerings” of sense that he saw as the origins of technology and the media, the “problem” of, or conflict between, orality and literacy, sound and sight, “written and oral kinds of perception and organization of existence” occupied a central place in his reasoning. Indeed, “civilized Western man,” he suggested, “with his rational, aggressive drive for goals was invented by this visual alphabet.”

But does “the medium” – especially orality and/or literacy – matter to theology? To put it differently, does ”the medium is the message” hold true for the ”message” of Christianity in general, and for the theological endeavour in particular? Does the problem of orality and literacy, the difference between the spoken and written word, bear upon theology in any way?

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3 Ibid., 16.
6 Ibid., 5.
7 *Understanding Media*, 17.
9 The terms ”orality” and ”literacy” have not individual persons but cultures as their reference, orality referring to cultures where writing is not widely spread, while literacy denoting cultures where most people know how to
Could it be that the words of the Apostle Paul about the letter (literacy) and the spirit (orality?) express a conviction that chimes with that of McLuhan about the “consequences of writing”? And is Jacques Ellul right when he compares the Word – the human Jesus – to the “unpredictability of the (spoken) word”? Indeed, is it possible that when we do theology, in the background there might exist “dynamic processes that are entirely non-obvious. . . [and] work silently”? If that is the case, why should it be so and, even more importantly, what difference does it make?

Although strictly speaking this is not the subject of this thesis, before answering these questions it may help to clarify the meaning of the concepts “medium/media.” Even when focusing on just one of the possible meanings of this concept this is not an easy task, however, as definitions vary not only in time, but even in (academic) communities; for example, media theory, media philosophy, communication studies, etc., attribute somewhat different meanings to these concepts. While in everyday usage the plural form “media” mostly refers to mass media such as newspapers, radio, television, etc. – even if these days these mostly appear in their digitalised versions – academics usually take their starting point from the original meaning of the Latin word: “the middle” or “in between,” and thus relate the concept to “mediating,” “making a connection” (“Vermittlung”) between two things. Even when taking our starting point from this definition there might be different interpretations, though; for example, light may establish a connection between things, and McLuhan, for one, did not eschew this wider meaning. In contemporary scholarship, however, “medium” is mostly understood as the “middle/in-between” between the sender and receiver of a message, in this way establishing a close link between “medium” and communication; hence the phrase “medium of communication.”

read and write. However, because of their mutual interdependence, the difference between the medium of communication used by an individual as opposed to a whole culture is not always clearcut; one of the criticisms of Ong and McLuhan, as I will explain below. For the sake of simplicity, though, I will use “orality and literacy” even when referring to an individual, adding “the spoken/written word” as a reminder of the difference from time to time.

Although our interest is in one particular meaning of the word ”medium,” over time this concept has been used in many, very different contexts, as shown by Stefan Hoffmann, Geschichte des Medienbegriffs (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2002).

Communication between human beings may happen in many ways, with the help of material or non-material mediators. One well-known way of differentiating between these forms was established by Harry Pross, whose classification included primary (no material mediator, use only of the body and the senses; spoken language, mimics, posture, etc.), secondary (material mediator on the side of the sender: use of fire and flags as signs, but also writing and print), and tertiary (material mediators on the side of both the sender and receiver: telecommunication devices) media. On summarizing Pross’ classification Heinz Pürer adds that today a “quaternary” form should be added, namely digital communication, when both sender and receiver needs to have internet connection. Harry Pross, Medienforschung. Film – Funk – Presse – Fernsehen (Darmstadt: Habel, 1972),
It is in this sense that the wider question, “Does the medium matter to theology?” and, with regard to the main focus of this thesis, “Does the difference between orality and literacy affect theology in any way?” must be answered. First of all, “theology” by definition is “speech” about God – thus its essence cannot be detached from questions of the “medium” of language, whether spoken or written, in its relation to the content, the “message.” Secondly, although “theology” itself is a generalisation, if we consider the different fields or branches of theology, the answer is also a definite: “Yes, the medium does matter!” To begin with, given that one of the primary sources for Christian theology is the Bible, which, Christians believe, is itself some kind of – written? – communication from God, the issue of how the medium of writing affects communication will be of significant concern for theologians. It is not surprising that biblical scholars, studying both the Old and the New Testament, have paid considerable attention to questions of the “media” of speaking and writing, orality and literacy, and the connection of these with both the content and the interpretation of Biblical revelation.\(^\text{12}\) Besides biblical studies there are several other theological disciplines where media-related issues constitute an important dimension of study. Church history, homiletics, liturgiology and missiology are, among others, branches of theology in which questions around the spoken and written word, as well as other media, play a crucial role. The role of the printing press in the Reformation, the role played by the *spoken* word in preaching, as well as that of other media – the “smells and bells” – in the liturgy, or the problem of reaching oral cultures with the gospel are just a few of the topics that have been considered by theologians.\(^\text{13}\)

Even based on this very cursory overview, the first question posed in this Introduction may, then, be answered by “Yes, the medium ‘matters’ to theology;” in many different ways what

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the medium of communication is does make a difference, and the problem of orality and literacy is of particular concern for different branches of theological inquiry. But why should it be so? In other words, how can we assess this relationship theologically?

1.1. Research question

If oral communication is indeed the primary medium of communication but writing has played a key role in the development of western man and culture, then the “problem” of orality and literacy is without doubt an important issue for theology, “logia” about God. As I suggested above, the issue of orality and literacy has been a central theme for scholars in the fields especially of biblical studies, hermeneutics, church history, as well as some of the other disciplines of theology. It would be highly interesting to review the different approaches and conclusions that theologians have arrived at in these fields regarding the role played by orality and literacy for theology. An even more fascinating question, however, is why and how the spoken and/or written word, orality and literacy, affect and change the message of theology. In other words, what I want to explore in this thesis is a (systematic) theological description and interpretation of the relationship between orality, literacy and theology.

As far as I can tell, this question has not been given much consideration by dogmatics or systematic theology. One important work that has paid considerable attention to this topic – a systematic theological consideration of orality and writing – is After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy by Catherine Pickstock. Pickstock is one of the most important (founding) members of the Radical Orthodoxy movement; because of this affiliation the model she adopts to provide a theological interpretation of orality, writing and their relationship to theology is clearly rooted in the very specific Radical Orthodoxy approach and its peculiar agenda. For this reason, I find her analysis unsatisfactory on the whole; but in the course of her argumentation she addresses and thus identifies theological and philosophical issues that, I suggest, are foundational in providing an answer to my question concerning a theological interpretation of the relationship between orality, literacy, and the message of theology.

My goal is to review, evaluate and critique Catherine Pickstock’s treatment of orality and literacy in After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy and determine in what

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As we shall see, logocentrism is now increasingly regarded as a typically Western bias by some scholars of communication
way her philosophical-theological model may contribute to a systematic theological framework in which the relationship of these media to the message may be more adequately described. Based on these findings, I hope to propose a scheme that I believe is a more compelling model than Pickstock’s account in *After Writing*. My suggestion is that a version of Eric Przywara’s *analogia entis* as revised by Hans Urs von Balthasar provides a better alternative to the questions raised by Pickstock’s theory, and that the validity of this framework may be tested and assessed by looking at relevant aspects of both theological thinking and practice today.

1. 2. Methodological considerations and structure of the thesis

The question this thesis has set itself to answer is a rather complex one; thus there are two important methodological considerations that must be mentioned before outlining its structure. It must be noted, first of all, that while this is a thesis in systematic theology, the question regarding orality and literacy, the medium and the message, is not a typical theological problem. Although, as we have just seen, it clearly has important implications for various fields in theology, the topic itself is the primary subject matter of different other – both natural and human – scientific disciplines. I concur with Graham Ward, however, that in our time we need a systematic theology that “seeks to relate theology to cultural and social life, most particularly the life of the Church.”¹⁵ I suggest that the questions around orality and literacy, and, in the wider sense, the medium and the message, which have always been part and parcel of culture and social life, is an example of this kind of “engaged systematic theology.”¹⁶

As Ward argues, interdisciplinarity often enables “the particularity of what Christians believe to become more visible for what it is: enmeshed within networks of social relations, discursive effects, and cultural productions within and without.”¹⁷ As will be argued below, this “being enmeshed” of particular doctrines within these very same networks, relations and cultural productions is especially relevant when we talk about orality and literacy, but also other media in the narrower sense. In fact, David F. Ford contends that theology in dialogue with the sciences, whether human or natural, does not only offer test cases for theology’s engagement with modernity but “will also contribute to understandings that may help to shape twenty-first

¹⁶ Ibid., Introduction
¹⁷ Ibid., 140.
I suggest that with the advance of electronic communication, the role of orality and literacy, as well as issue of the medium and the message more generally, is one of those topics that are already shaping twenty-first century life and will likely do so to an even greater extent and which, for this reason, calls for a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue even more urgently.

The second methodological consideration has to do with the fact that, as indicated above, my research question is focussed on Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing*. My analysis and critique show that Pickstock’s approach is problematic as a philosophical-systematic theological formulation of the relationship between orality, literacy and the message of theology, while at the same time her work supplies me with those dogmatic concepts that can act as resources for a more adequate theological model. *After Writing* thus functions as a kind of case study in that it is the starting point for two, “essential and complementary directions,” namely “a movement from concrete reality to abstract concepts” – as I hope to show, in this case these “abstract concepts” are some of the most important dogmatic resources of systematic theology, such as ontology and epistemology, transcendence and immanence, phenomenology, sense perception and the subject – and from abstract concepts “back to concrete reality.”

In this process the “movement back” is my proposal of a (concrete) theological framework that, based on the now established “abstract concepts,” offers a different model of the same relationship. Finally, the validity and usefulness of this scheme can be assessed by looking at concrete, contemporary examples of the role played by orality and literacy, but also other media, within various theological disciplines.

The structure of the thesis follows this logic when it is made up of three chapters. In Chapter One the field of orality-literacy studies, as well as the more general area of media (or communication) studies will be briefly introduced in order to provide an overview of the “networks of social relations, discursive effects, and cultural productions” relevant for our enquiry. Issues around the medium and the message in general and its most often referenced field, orality and literacy in particular, have been studied by many different scholarly disciplines; the most important of these will be surveyed in their brief history, recent

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20 More will be said about these definitions below.
21 Ward, 140.
developments and most significant emphases, within the framework of their reflecting on, and critiquing of, each other.

In terms of the development of the research question Chapter Two is the main part of the thesis as it presents a summary of relevant parts of Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* from the point of view of her treatment of orality and writing, followed by an evaluation and critique of her model for describing and interpreting the relationship between these media and the message they convey. My critique here takes its clue both from the theories of the previous chapter and from other, theological sources. Based on my conclusion with regard to this “case study,” the role of the second part of the same chapter is to then identify those theological concepts or dogmatic resources that must be addressed, and may be relied upon, when providing a systematic theological formulation of the original question.

Based on these concepts and resources, Chapter Three proceeds to present a different, more adequate framework than that of Pickstock within which orality, literacy and the role they play for theology may be interpreted. My suggestion, which I introduce and explicate in this chapter, is that the idea of the *analogia entis* as formulated by Erich Przywara and further developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar is a model that is better able to interpret this role. Finally, in the Conclusion I assess the validity of my findings by looking at concrete examples, and point out their significance for the life of the Church and systematic theology in the 21st century.

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22 More will be said below about Pickstock’s pairing of “orality” not with “literacy” but with “writing.”
Chapter One

The Medium and the Message: Orality, Literacy and Media Ecology

I. 1. Introduction

The goal of this interdisciplinary, “critical detour”\(^{23}\) is to provide an overview of the various angles from which the issue of orality and literacy has been examined; to identify the most important questions different scholarly disciplines have considered, while pinpointing controversies as well as those areas where (some kind of) agreement has been reached.

It seems that for a long time there has existed an awareness that shifts in the channels of communication have effects which go beyond the mode of communication itself. In particular, it was the puzzle of writing and the changes it effected that fascinated scholars – understandably, as the invention of writing effected a huge shift in human history and culture. Thus Plato in his *Phaedrus* and the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian believers\(^{24}\) already commented on how the use of writing alters human memory and behaviour, and Antonio de Nebrija, author of an early European vernacular grammar, concluded that alphabetic writing was the greatest invention of humankind.\(^{25}\) Later in history famous thinkers such as Rousseau, von Humboldt, Nietzsche and others showed keen interest in how societies where no widespread use of writing existed differ from the writing- and print-based modes of thinking and acting.\(^{26}\)

\(^{23}\) In *Paul Ricoeur Between Theology and Philosophy: Detour and Return* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010) Boyd Blundell argues that what he calls a ”hermeneutical theology” must undergo ”many of its critial detours if it is to be effective.” Among the disciplines he suggests theology should engage so as to understand itself better he mentions not only philosophy, but anthropology, sociology and psychology. Ibid., 177.

\(^{24}\) Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 6: ”For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

\(^{25}\) ”Among all the things that human beings discovered through experience, or that were shown to us by divine revelation in order to polish and embellish human life, nothing has been more necessary, nor benefited us more, than the invention of letters.” Nebrija, E A. de, *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana*. London: Oxford University Press., 1926 [1492]: 234 Book I, chap. ii, quoted in Ruth Finnegan, *Where is Language? An Anthropologist’s Questions on Language, Literature and Performance* (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 16.

\(^{26}\) See e.g. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, published posthumously in 1781, or Nietzsche on rhetoric.
It was still the effects of the medium of writing on oral societies that preoccupied scholars when more focussed research began to be carried out in the 20th century; first by classicists, anthropologists, ethnographers, as well as literary critics who studied ancient oral societies and literatures, and/or contemporary people groups where orality is still predominant. In the meantime, however, the 20th century produced its own new media in the form of the radio, film, the telephone, TV and, more recently, the computer, mobile and smart phones, and research started to include the effects of these new media of communication on humans and societies. In a rather sketchy account, this is how the scholarly discipline first of orality-literacy studies, and soon of a more general field, communication and/or media studies, as well as media theory – or, as it is sometimes referred to these days, media ecology – came into being.27 With the social sciences – especially social anthropology and sociolinguistics – gaining ground in academia, many of the findings of the ”old” orality-literacy scholars came to be severely critiqued, and the newest fields of ”New Literacy Studies,” ”Multimodality,” ”Anthropology of the senses,” as well as different combinations and variations of these were born.

Although my focus is on the “media” of orality and literacy, the spoken and written word, these more recent developments must also be introduced if we want to get a full picture of this broad topic. Thus, in the following I will first present the most important representatives of the field of orality-literacy studies; summarize their main ideas, and then mention the criticism that has been directed at their theories and review the important new directions in the different related fields of enquiry. To conclude, I will survey the most important theories and approaches regarding the relationship between orality and literacy, as part of the larger framework of the issue of the medium and the message, with a special view to those that play an important role in Catherine Pickstock’s After Writing. The range of themes and areas of research that have grown out of, or side-by-side with, orality-literacy related issues has vastly expanded; so many scholars and publications have entered the academic discussion in this field that it is impossible to take them all into consideration,28 so I will limit myself to those investigations that I consider most important and relevant with regard to the topic of this thesis.

27 Today, alongside the term ‘media studies’ another discipline has emerged called ‘communication studies/theory’, which is an even wider field, as it considers the whole process of communication. For the sake of simplicity, I will continue to talk about ‘media studies’ and ‘media philosophy,’ although, as we shall see, the concepts of ‘media’ and ‘communication’ overlap. The term ‘media ecology’ was popularized by Neil Postman who borrowed it from Marshall McLuhan; he used the originally biological term to underline the fact that media can be regarded as technologies that define the environment within which human culture ”grows.”

28 Richard Kelder, for example, provides a thorough rethinking of literacy studies in a paper given at the 1996 World Conference on Literacy in Rethinking Literary Studies: From the Past to the Present, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED417373.pdf
I. 2. Orality-literacy Studies and the “Literacy Thesis”

There is no doubt that the most important actors in the initial development of orality-literacy studies are Marshall McLuhan and other members of the so-called Toronto School of Communication. In the following I offer a brief overview of the thought of these scholars so as to provide an introduction to this field and thus to the criticism of their thought by the work of a new generation of thinkers.

I. 2. 1 Marshall McLuhan and the Toronto School of Communication

Before outlining the most pertinent ideas of this group, it is worth briefly mentioning two antecedents of their theories. Significantly, these come from the discipline of literature (as Walter Ong pointed out, even the word “literature” spontaneously, but mistakenly, presupposes something that is written down) and from the field of psychology. Firstly, classical Greek literature, especially the magnificent epic poems of Homer, had always intrigued classicists. In the early 20th century, while trying to explain the process which enables oral poets to improvise poetry, classicist Milman Parry came up with the so-called “oral-formulaic theory,” which assumed that there was a marked difference between oral and written composition and attributed this to the special features of oral communication; a premise that Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, etc., often quoted in support of their theories. Another impetus for orality-literacy theories, and especially for McLuhan in writing The Gutenberg Galaxy, was psychiatrist J.C. Carothers, who in 1959 published an article entitled “Culture, Psychiatry and the Written Word.” In this he contrasted his observations of non-literate natives with literate natives, and non-literate man with western man in general, especially in terms of their cognitive processes. Carothers here makes many statements that McLuhan used in support of his ideas concerning the difference between the spoken and the written word and the attitudes these foster:

The non-literate rural population lives largely in a world of sound, in contrast to western Europeans who live largely in a world of vision. Sounds are, in a sense, dynamic things… Sounds lose much of this significance in western Europe, where man develops, and must develop, a remarkable ability to disregard them. Whereas for Europeans, in

29 Only later “canonized” as a “school” of thought, the most important scholars who belonged to the Toronto School of Communication Theory were Harold Adams Innis, Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, Northrop Frye, later Jack Goody as well as others, and, indirectly, also Walter Ong.
general, “seeing is believing,” for rural Africans reality seems to reside far more in what is heard and what is said.\textsuperscript{30}

In terms of his significance and influence, however, it was Harold Adams Innis that inspired McLuhan and orality-literacy theory the most. Innis was primarily a political economist but became interested in the role of space and time, and, subsequently, of the media in social history. He developed his insights into how different media, while prioritizing either duration or extension, that is, time or space, tend to lead to a kind of bias that in turn furthers the growth of an empire.\textsuperscript{31} He argued that – unlike ancient civilisations – modernity was typically and crudely space-biased, pragmatic, secular, materialistic, furthering not tradition but technique, and added that if either time- or space bias is upheld over a long period of time, the result is a static culture, which inhibits open and creative thought. Thus, he maintained, recovering the balance between space and time is the only way Western civilization – now in the grip of a spatial condition – can be saved from what is a dangerously frightening social and cultural state. Reinvigorating the oral tradition, he believed, was the only way forward, as spoken language has qualities that foster a balanced use of the senses; furthermore, oral tradition had the characteristic that it promoted tolerance for ambiguity in meaning,\textsuperscript{32} which, Innis emphasized, was vital for upholding this balance.

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), the best-known member of the Toronto School of Communication, was strongly influenced by Innis. In particular, McLuhan took up Innis’s insight into the role of the phonetic alphabet in the development of Western culture and thought and made it into the cornerstone of his theories; he echoed Innis when he maintained that "with writing came the first step towards science, secularism, and mastery over space instead of mastery over time."\textsuperscript{33} Communication technology and the dichotomy of space and time kept their importance in the thought of McLuhan, but while Innis focused mainly (though not exclusively) on time- and/or space-bound \textit{media}, McLuhan reconfigured these biases in terms of \textit{perception} and the \textit{senses}: he talked about visual and aural/tactile media.

\textsuperscript{30} Quoted in McLuhan, \textit{The Gutenberg Galaxy}, 19.
\textsuperscript{31} Harold Adams Innis, \textit{Empire and Communications} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), and \textit{The Bias of Communication} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951).
What are the “effects on bodies, perceptions, and on new configurations of culture”\(^{34}\) of technology, especially of media of communication? – was the question that figured predominantly in McLuhan’s imagination. He suggested that our technologies function as “extensions of man;” for example, the electric media are extensions of the human central nervous system.\(^ {35}\) In fact, it is mostly because of his insights about electronic communication that McLuhan has recently made a comeback in the field of media studies. Although some of his optimistic insights about the changes electronic communication would affect have been proved wrong, in the age of the world-wide web several of his ideas make him seem prophetic. In a lecture in 1979, for example, he talks about “the Fourth World… the electric world, the computer world, the instantaneous communication world” which “can come to Africa before the First or Second Worlds”\(^ {36}\) – a sign of prescience regarding the importance of the medium over the message, it seems, even in the 21st century.

McLuhan’s original degree was in literature, and another significant influence on his thought came from New Criticism, a school of literary theory that he encountered during his graduate studies. New Criticism had developed a new theory regarding the human response to art, a methodology that features Gestalt psychology as well as the theory of rhetoric.\(^ {37}\) For example, the theories of I. A. Richards, one of its main representatives, underline the materiality of language, “the way that meanings depend on context, and how the presence of an active reader produces meaning.”\(^ {38}\) Richards’s psychological theory of the interpretation of poetry influenced McLuhan’s thought to a great extent. "If words were ambiguous and best be studied not in terms of their ‘content’ (i.e., dictionary meaning) but in terms of their effects in each context, and if those effects were often subliminal, the same might well be true of other human artefacts – the wheel, the printing press, and so on”\(^ {39}\) – he wrote. According to some critics it is in fact this Gestalt-theory inspired significance he attributes to the *ground* in perceiving the *figure* that governs McLuhan’s famous statement regarding the relationship between the medium and the message.

\(^ {36}\) Ibid, 283.
\(^ {37}\) Gestalt theory, developed by the 20th century school of psychology of the same name, is best known for its study of perception. It suggested that the whole is always greater than its parts; true perception can hold together the ”figure” and the ”ground,” the obvious and the not-so-obvious.
\(^ {38}\) Marchessault, 7.
\(^ {39}\) Marchand, 39.
Members of the school of New Criticism probably also gave McLuhan the first inklings of what later became one of the most important elements of his ideas: the conviction that perception varied according to which senses were used most dominantly by the perceiver. T. S. Eliot’s “auditory imagination” or Yeats’s suggestion that he spent his life “clearing out of poetry every phrase written for the eye” must have already left him with the sense that the visual mode of perception is very different from the auditory.\textsuperscript{40}

However, the decisive role assigned by McLuhan to the sensory nature of our apprehending reality might be traced to yet another source. His conversion to Catholicism, as well as his humanistic education, made him acquainted with the ideas of thinkers of the Middle Ages and early modernity; most importantly, with the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Reaching back to the work of Aristotle, the role of the senses is foundational for Aquinas in his understanding of how we acquire knowledge: “The senses are a kind of reason. Taste, touch and smell, hearing and seeing, are not merely a means to sensation, enjoyable or otherwise, but they are also a means to knowledge – and are, indeed, your only actual means to knowledge”\textsuperscript{41} – a conviction that is echoed again and again by McLuhan.

In addition, McLuhan also relies heavily on the Church Fathers and Aquinas concerning the role of analogy as a tool in his reasoning process. As his biographer Philip Marchand put it, “analogical thinking shaped his view of life in the way that laws of probability colour existence for mathematicians. It was a mode of thinking that became as ingrained and unremarked for McLuhan as his accent.”\textsuperscript{42} But what did he mean by analogy? He was not a theologian, so there was no clear theological or philosophical reasoning behind this impetus for his thinking. This is what he said in a letter to Father John Mole on this question: “I am a Thomist for whom the sensory order resonates with the divine Logos. … Analogy is not concept. … It is resonance. It is inclusive. It is the cognitive process itself.”\textsuperscript{43}

At this point it is important to see that two of the defining sources of McLuhan’s intellectual formation – the New Critics and Catholicism with its analogical reasoning – exist in a kind of tension. As suggested above, New Criticism, with its background in Gestalt theory, is founded on the materiality and thus ambiguity of language and perception; Catholicism, on the other

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{41} Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica} 1.81.
\textsuperscript{42} Marchand, 30.
hand, is more static, less sensitive to history and change, in its transcendental orientation with
its emphasis on analogy. Different critics have noticed and commented on the existence of this
tension in McLuhan’s thought. Judith Stamps, for example, believes that McLuhan’s
experimentation with the concept of acoustic space in fact reflects an attempt at resolving this
same tension between the Thomist (static) and the Gestalt (historical) outlooks.

Tension, however, may also be understood constructively. Marchessault, for example, judges
McLuhan’s handling of this tension as something positive when she refers to it as ”dialectic”
and a ”kabalistic paradox;” indeed, as something that embodies ”the relatedness of multiplicity
and unity, of the one and the many.” McLuhan himself generally refuses to operate with
concepts, but this tension in his thought pinpoints a critical theoretical, philosophical issue; the
question which, as we shall see, is also at the heart of the (systematic) theological formulation
of the relationship between the medium and the message. Marchessault, I believe, correctly
identifies the problem as that of the relatedness of unity and multiplicity, the one and the many,
the unchanging and the changeable. It is the task of the next chapters, however, to further
expound on this problem.

Two further points are worth briefly mentioning in connection with the thought of McLuhan.
First of all, it is important to point out “the centrality of pedagogy in McLuhan’s enterprise.” He was convinced that, as a consequence of the visual bias of western man, our culture is
submerged in what Blake had called “single vision and Newton’s sleep,” and thus saw his
pedagogical task as waking people up from this sleep by confronting them with their ignorance,
and by stimulating new forms of awareness in relation to the media we use in our life and
communication. Secondly, he was especially concerned about the Church’s blindness to the
role of the media: “There is no harm in reminding ourselves from time to time that the ‘Prince
of this World’ is a great P.R. man, a great salesman of new hardware and software … and a
great master of the media. It is his master stroke to be not only environmental but invisible, for
the environmental is invincibly persuasive when ignored.” “The medium is the message” —

44 Which she defines as “a diffuse, umbrella term for a set of epistemological boundary experiments” See
Stamps, 133.
45 Ibid.
46 Marchessault, Introduction, xiv.
47 Marchessault, 35.
48 Marchessault, 132.
49 Ibid., 133.
beyond the fascinating insight hidden in this statement, for McLuhan this adage was thus a wake-up call as much as a theory.

I. 2. 2. Walter Ong

Although strictly speaking he did not belong to the Toronto School of Communication, for many the field of orality-literacy studies is most closely associated with the name of Walter Ong, SJ (1912-2003), whose book, *Orality and Literacy*, has become something of a flagship study in the history of the discipline. Ong, a student of McLuhan’s, chose the topic of his doctoral dissertation – which later became his first scholarly success – on McLuhan’s advice. *Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue* and its companion volume, *Ramus and Talon Inventory*, have remained foundational references for scholarly work on the 16th century educator and philosopher Peter Ramus.

Even though the starting point and major thesis of Ong’s treatment of Ramus concerns the changing role of rhetoric in and after the great educator’s time, in his Preface to the paperback edition of *Ramus Method* Ong explains that

Ramus’ streamlined reorganization of the age-old Western tradition of logic and rhetoric seemed to signal a reorganization of the whole of knowledge and indeed of the whole human lifeworld. … The major (but not the only) underpinning of the new Ramist mindset turned out to have been print technology. Print gave to visualist organization of thought and to textuality (both initiated much earlier by writing) a force unknown before, and in doing so effectively served pedagogical expedience and at the same time dissociated knowledge from discourse and gave it a quasi-monologic setting.53

The concerns characteristic of Ong’s whole oeuvre seem to be already present in this first work: shift(s) in consciousness, a reorganization of knowledge and “the whole of the human lifeworld,” a critique of a visualist organization of thought – also referred to as the “spatialization of thought” – a focus on the role of print, and of knowledge as grounded no longer in dialogue.

But it was *The Presence of the Word* and, more than a decade later, *Orality and Literacy*, that established Ong as the father of orality-literacy studies. Both books are less scholarly than *Ramus and the Decay of Dialogue*; their subject matter is wide, embracing social and cultural history, literature, anthropology, psychology, theology, and philosophy. Should one try to sum up his most important ideas, we could say that Ong has several preoccupations in common with McLuhan. In their works, both focus on the different types of media environments created by orality, chirography, print and electronic communication. Like McLuhan, Ong relies heavily on the thought of Lord, Parry and Havelock when he suggests that their studies occasioned “the greatest awakening to the contrast between oral modes of thought and expression and written modes.” What interests Ong is especially the way different media environments across the ages have influenced human communication and knowledge, what he calls the “psychodynamics” of the successive media environments of “primary orality,” literacy, and “secondary orality.”

In his main work, *Orality and Literacy*, Ong provides detailed descriptions of this “evolution of consciousness” in terms of the psychological, social, and cultural changes effected by the difference in our methods of communication in general, and orality and literacy in particular. But what is the basis of these descriptions – of the remark, for example, that “whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance, sound pours into the hearer. … A typical visual ideal is clarity and distinctness, a taking apart. The auditory ideal, by contrast, is harmony, a putting together”? As Thomas Farrell points out, in the face of criticism of his work as grand theory Ong expressed his dislike for the word “theory” and voiced his preference for the characterization of his thought as phenomenological (or descriptive) in nature, adding that “from the time of my studies of Peter Ramus and Ramism, my work has

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55 Eric Havelock, a British classicist, was one of the important representatives of the Toronto School of Communication. His name is, first and foremost, associated with the main premise of this school of orality-literacy studies, which came to be known as the “literacy thesis,” first articulated – more or less independently – by two important publications: Havelock’s *Preface to Plato* and an influential article by Ian Watt and Jack Goody (*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 5, No. 3, April 1963, 304–345.) Both publications proposed a thesis according to which the Greek “Enlightenment” of the 4th and 5th centuries B.C. could be causally related to the invention and spreading of alphabetic literacy in that period, the result of which was the development of logical, syllogistic thought and reasoning.
57 The term “secondary orality” was used by Ong to denote the media environment created by modern developments that once again give priority to the spoken word; the telephone, radio, TV, and, most recently, electronic communication through the internet.
58 Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 71.
59 More will be said about the nature of criticism below.
grown into its own kind of phenomenological history of culture and consciousness, … elaborated in terms of noetic operations.”60 I will come back to this below, but “phenomenological” and “noetic” are especially important terms when evaluating the approach of Ong (as well as McLuhan) to issues connected to what they see as the changes brought about by different media, especially orality and literacy.

Of the many other ideas of Ong, this “free-ranging polymath,”61 another emphasis especially relevant for our purposes is his preoccupation with the “word.” For him, not only is the word primarily oral, but it only becomes a word when it is addressed to another person. “Word” and “presence” are for him intimately connected; not in an abstract philosophical way, but by their phenomenological definition: “The oral word is essentially a call, a cry. … It is not a thing or a reification, but an event, an action. The oral word is a call from someone to someone, an interpersonal transaction. No interactive persons, no words.”62 It is for this reason that for Ong, who was influenced by Martin Buber’s philosophy of personalism, God’s ultimate Word, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, is itself an event “not only in the objective world but also in the history of communication, the mystery of sound.”63

I. 2. 3. Ong, McLuhan, and Christianity

A final word must be added about the relationship between their ideas about the relationship between medium and the message and the Christian faith of McLuhan and Ong. As they are the two scholars who were professing Christians, it is especially interesting to know how they connected their theories to their faith.

As for McLuhan, he was reticent in public about his Christian faith and, as already noted, was admittedly not interested in theology;64 however, in his letters he often made comments that may be of interest regarding the relationship between the orality, literacy, as well as other media, and theology. These concern especially the nature of print and how he sees Protestantism closely linked in its identity to the printed Word on the one hand, and – as already mentioned above – admonitions to the Catholic Church about the need for a greater awareness of

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61 Ibid., Foreword, xi.
63 Ong, The Presence of the Word, 324.
64 According to Philip Marchand, “In the same way that McLuhan avoided conventional philosophical approaches to the study of earthly phenomena, he also avoided theology in his religion, at least after his decision to convert. Making the decision itself settled all theological questions for him; they no longer had to be reasoned out in his mind.” Marchand, 52.
contemporary media on the other. To these admonitions he also adds a short paragraph, however, that is related to our considerations:

The cradle of the Church was Greco-Roman literacy, and this was providentially designed, not humanly planned. The fact that Greco-Roman Culture has set apart the largest proportion of mankind from ever becoming Christian has never been discussed. It is taken for granted that missionaries will probably get the faith across by the written word. But now we have suddenly a way of propagating information and knowledge without literacy. I would say it is a wide-open question whether the Church has any future at all as a Greco-Roman institution. It would be a good time to be Russian Orthodox: they split off from Rome because it was too literate. The Eastern Church is an "ear" Church; Rome was always very far along the visual road to visual power.\(^6^5\)

Although this sounds like a perfunctory statement and prediction and his conclusion about Russian Orthodoxy is rather dubious, in many ways time seems to have proved McLuhan right. Indeed, we have already alluded to the fact that mission theology has come to recognise the role of the medium for the transmission of the message, namely that literacy is not the necessary condition, or even the best way, of bringing the gospel to the nations.

Unlike McLuhan, Ong had no hesitations about making his Christian faith a subject matter of his explorations within the wider framework of media-related studies. Thus, in *The Presence of the Word* the "profane" history of the word is discussed alongside the "sacred," and although Ong’s main conclusions are not theological, he commented repeatedly on how his findings had important theological consequences. For example, in the essay entitled "Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book," Ong asks, but does not answer, several theologically relevant questions that are connected to questions of orality and literacy. "Is revelation to be thought of as earlier or later, before or after textuality?" or, more practically, "What are the faith implications of the divergent psychodynamics of the two processes, the oral and the chirographic? How can the reader of the Bible today be assimilated to a listener? Or should he or she be so assimilated?"\(^6^6\)

Ong, it seems to me, sees more clearly than some theologians the kinds of questions orality-literacy issues raise for Christian theology and practice.\(^6^7\) A scholar well versed in the history

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\(^{67}\) As we saw in the Introduction, some of these questions have been asked and answered by various branches of theological enquiry; others will be mentioned in this thesis below.
of the Church, he knows that the questions he poses about the "word-ness" of God’s Word are not new; but, he suggests, "the framework in which they are presented [in his own work] is … restructured in accord with our newly reflective awareness of the technological transformations of the word in past and present." In other words, reflective awareness of the issues concerning the different media of communication, both old and new, reveals that the (Christian) message and the medium in which it in presented are intrinsically related, and their relationship must be carefully studied and evaluated. In Ong’s somewhat provocative formulation, "the history of the word and thus of verbal media has rather more immediate religious relevance than the history of kingdoms and principalities."

Ong asks, but does not answer questions about the “faith implications” of the difference between the spoken and written word, and he certainly does not attempt a systematic theological formulation of the issue. But like McLuhan he, too, reflects on the different relationship to the word of Catholics and Protestants (though not the Orthodox, as McLuhan does). In terms of their attitude to the sacraments, Ong suggests that Protestant and Catholic understanding is deeply affected by their different attitudes to the word. In Catholic theology, the efficaciousness of the words in the liturgy suggests a sense of the word ”as something belonging to the world of physical power,” which really is a characteristic of oral cultures. In contrast, the extreme Protestant doctrine seems to reflect the typographic state of mind, which takes the word to be something quite different from living things. By this Ong means that according to the Protestant (mainly Reformed, I would add) theology of the sacraments, “words must affect the heart or interior consciousness of the hearer as something isolated from the exterior world;” a sign, he adds, that the classic Protestant sensibility is clearly influenced by a ”feeling for words as processed through writing and, even more, print.”

The Catholic answer to the new media situation effected by print, on the other hand, Ong believes to have been formulated at the Council of Trent when it was proclaimed that “divine truth and teaching is contained in the written books of the Bible and in ‘unwritten traditions’.” Strangely, adds Ong, post-Tridentine Catholic theologians came to regard tradition as a kind of

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68 In the framework of Ong’s thought, ”word-ness” refers to the oral, and thus contingent, personal, etc. character of what he sees as the original meaning of the word.
69 Ong, The Barbarian Within, 271.
70Ong, The Presence of the Word, 181.
71 Ibid., 280.
72 Ibid. As we shall see, Pickstock reaches similar conclusions in After Writing.
73 Ibid.
"second Bible," that is, even they had difficulty in conceiving of tradition as "truly unwritten;"74 a sign, he suggests, that in the end no learned men, whether Protestant or Catholic, could escape the consciousness-altering effects of print.75

To sum up, both McLuhan and Ong saw consequences of their orality-literacy theories for Christianity in general and the life of the Church in particular. Both seem to have attributed a key role to media-related differences regarding the history of the Church (Catholicism, the Orthodox Church, Protestantism), but neither of them intended to formulate these effects in the language of systematic theology. In addition, while McLuhan’s concern was mainly pedagogical – he pleaded for the Catholic Church to be more aware of the media – Ong’s main concern might have indeed been to transform technological culture in accordance with Christian values.76

I. 3. Critique and New Directions in Orality-Literacy Studies and Media Ecology

McLuhan’s The Gutenberg Galaxy, but especially Ong’s Orality and Literacy, are by many regarded as milestones in communication and cultural studies as well as in what is now called media-ecology; the latter work, some suggest, “firmly establishes orality-literacy studies as a field in its own right.”77 Although several decades have passed since the publication of the works by Innis, McLuhan, Ong, Havelock, Goody, etc., issues of orality and literacy continue to be of interest to scholars, and while research has taken important new directions, almost none of the new insights or results of research proceed without taking into consideration the foundational work of these thinkers. Discussions, however, often take the form of strong criticism of these earlier scholars. In the following I will summarize the most important points of critique and then proceed to introduce the new approaches and directions in answer to these.

I. 3. 1. The Great Divide

One of the main points of criticism of the Toronto School concerns the so-called “Great Divide;” a phrase which first appeared in a book based on anthropologists Scribner and Cole’s literacy-focussed research project with the Vai people of Liberia. In this work they maintain

74 Ibid, 277.
75 However, Ong is convinced that "the Catholic Church is the continuity of revelation with its past, which, as far as the word is concerned, is necessarily an oral continuity, for, as we have seen, the meaning of anything written in the past can be ascertained only in terms of the present spoken word. The Catholic Church is sacred history. For those who live within her, she is the presence of the Word.” Ibid., 320.
76 Thomas Farrell also seems to think so; see Farrell and Soukup, Ibid., 19.
77 Ibid., Foreword, xi.
that the theory of the "great divide" considers literacy "as a key ingredient in the packet of social change which separates primitive from civilized, concrete from abstract, traditional from modern thought." 78 Their findings among the Vai, however, question the thesis of Ong, McLuhan and other theorists: based on their research Scribner and Cole came to the conclusion that literacy cannot be defined as simply learning how to read and write a particular script; an essential element of literacy must be the capacity to apply this knowledge for specific purposes. This means, they argue, that "inquiries into the cognitive consequences of literacy are inquiries into the socially organized practices in other domains." 79 In other words, literacy cannot be held to be the source of differences between individuals and/or communities simply by suggesting that it generates differences in thinking or cognition; other, mainly social factors play an even more important role.

I. 3. 2. Autonomous and Ideological Models

Similar criticism has been directed at the ideas of the Toronto School by another, especially prolific, thinker in the area of literacy. In the chapter "A Critical Look at Walter Ong and the 'Great Divide'" of his book Social Literacies 80 Brian Street claims that Ong’s version of the "great divide" theory has dominated the approach to literacy, but that "it is important to confront Ong’s views directly… and to ask why they are so powerful." 81 Street’s critique partly concerns Ong’s methodology: he raises the question of how individuals and cultures are connected, and whether an argument may be held to be equally valid for both. In Ong’s work, he argues, "it is not clear whether the claims for mental progress are attributable to individual cognitive states or whole cultures. … Are we concerned with subcultures, … with aspects of all persons, with periods, or with whole eras of human development? The claims appear to be pitched at the highest level, but the arguments slide from one to the other." 82

Street’s most important criticism, however, is on a theoretical level. His key argument is that the characteristics Ong attributes to literacy are in fact those of the social context and the culture in which the literacy he describes is located. 83 According to Street, Ong and others represent an "autonomous" model of literacy, which supposes that literacy, the ability to read and write,

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79 Ibid., 236-237. Italics mine.
80 Brian Street, Social Literacies (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1995)
81 Ibid., 153.
82 Ibid., 156.
83 Ibid., 157.
autonomously, *in itself* will bring about changes in cognitive practices. There is a danger, however, that this notion disguises "the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it so that it can then be presented as though they are neutral and universal." Street argues that this view is misleading because literary practices vary from one context to the other; thus, one should not talk about literacy as an acquisition of a skill, but about "multiple literacies," literacy as a social practice which is always "ideological" because by definition it is grounded in a particular world-view. As we shall see, Street’s "ideological" model – often referred to as the most important representative of the New Literacy Studies – has its own weaknesses; before we come to that, however, another, closely related angle of criticism has to be mentioned.

I. 3. 3. Ethnocentrism and “Sanctified Prejudices”

If, as Brian Street asserts, there are only multiple literacies, and these are always ideological, it is not surprising that the “great divide” version is now seen by many as representing typical western ideology. As an African scholar, Emevwo Biakolo, suggests, by putting forward the orality-literacy “bricoleur” orality-literacy theorists such as McLuhan, Ong, Goody. etc., reproduce “the classic opposition of cultures: prelogical versus logical, wild versus domesticated, primitive versus civilized, hot versus cold, traditional versus modern, magical versus scientific. . . all of the discursive baggage of Western anthropological thought.” Although McLuhan, Ong and others probably had no intention of promoting the kind of cultural and racial prejudice that Biakolo detects in the idea of the "great divide," it can indeed be argued that they "depoliticized communication" by not taking these questions into consideration. Although one may contend that in their time they did not have the ethnographic background to warn them of the "insidious manner" in which these “sanctified prejudices” are set out, but this does not undermine the validity of this critique.

I. 3. 4. Critique of the Critique

It is now becoming clear that the questions around the relationship between orality and literacy are complex and manifold. This complexity is also shown by the fact that the New Literacy Studies...
Studies (NLS) and the different "ideological" models of literacy have also had their share of critique. This critique mainly concerns what is construed as "the limits to the local;" it calls for a more balanced view when it argues that NLS should be more prepared to "take account of relatively ‘autonomous’ features of literacy without succumbing to the autonomous model with its well documented flaws."\(^\text{89}\) For example, in an article on knowledge and literacy, based on research among the Iban people in Sarawak, John Postill criticizes the approach of the New Literacy Studies when he suggests that, in the end, the question for NLS is not "how literacy affects people but how people affect literacy;" in effect this means that "proponents of the ideological model reject the autonomy of literacy only to exaggerate the autonomy of human agents."\(^\text{90}\) In fact, Brian Street himself acknowledges that at the heart of some of the critique of NLS there is a universalist/particularist "impasse."\(^\text{91}\) While Ong, Goody, etc. might have erred on the side of "universalism" when they regarded orality and literacy as autonomous, universal characteristics, the ideological model’s approach is guilty of a different kind of error, this time on the side of “particularism,” the autonomy of the human agent.

At the same time, experts point out that the "ideological" models of literacy that are advocated by social scientists overlook another "universal," namely the "universal" of the human body. We saw how McLuhan, Ong and others take for granted the role of the senses and of perception in any kind of human communication. According to cognitive psychologist Stanislas Dehaene,

> In the social sciences, the acquisition of cultural skills such as reading … is rarely, if ever, posed in biological terms. Until recently, very few social scientists considered that brain biology and evolutionary theory were even relevant to their fields … This view of mankind, which denies the very existence of a human nature, has often been adopted without questions. ... It holds that human nature is constructed, gradually and flexibly, through cultural impregnation. ... I refute a simplistic view of the adaptability of the brain to culture. ... All over the world, the same brain regions activate to decode a written word.\(^\text{92}\)

Neurobiology is not the topic of this thesis, neither am I qualified to pass judgment on these scientific issues, but it seems that it is now universally acknowledged that the biological

\(^{89}\) Street, “Autonomous and Ideological Models,” 6.

\(^{90}\) John Postill, “Knowledge, literacy and media among the Iban of Sarawak: a reply to Maurice Bloch” in Social Anthropology (11) 1: 79-100, at 88, 90.


characteristics of human nature cannot be ignored even in the social sciences, for example when considering cultural and social aspects of literacy. The “nature/culture” dilemma – which really is one version of the universalist/particularist impasse encountered by the ideological models of literacy – has recently also been engaged by neuroscientists, with special attention paid to the so-called “reading brain”. The area of neuroscience (or neurobiology) is a relatively new, but fascinating field of science, with a very wide scope, embracing several different disciplines. The latest findings of research in this field, however, also seem to suggest that “in the case of learning and cognitive development neurobiological and cultural factors interact.”

Literacy in general and reading in particular have been particularly favoured subjects of research for neuroscientists because they are key examples of the brain’s innate potential to adopt those new functions that are required for reading in any form and language, that is, in very different cultural and social circumstances. With regard to – among others, but not exclusively – the issue of reading, the social and the biological are now “seen more as continuum than dichotomy. A model of gene-environment interaction is superseding the older mutually-exclusive opposition between ‘nature’ and ‘nurture,’ seeing them instead as both going on at the same time.” In fact, while, as we have seen, McLuhan, Ong and others relate orality, literacy, or the media in general to cognition, there is now a new area of research, called “Situated Cognition Studies,” which offers a view that integrates the science of the brain with society and culture. This also underlines the fact that within the wider, intricate framework of orality-literacy studies the ”old” and ”new” approaches, the universal and the particular, nature and nurture, the brain and society, should mutually complement each other; they both have their different role to play.

I. 3. 5. Multimodality and Sensory Studies

We started our overview of the scholarly field of orality and literacy with the Toronto School of Communication, especially Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong. We then saw how, over the years, this area of research has broadened and diversified as criticism of various aspects of the older model gave birth to new insights, for example the social literacy theory of the New

Literacy Studies. Although this is not related strictly to orality-literacy, but to the wider field of media ecology, there is one last development that must be mentioned before looking at a rather different approach, the unique confluence of philosophy and media-related questions.

We have seen how, for McLuhan, Ong, and others the question of the medium and the message is closely connected to perception and the senses. At the same time, even though they both acknowledged that the spectrum of the use of the human senses in communication is wider than that of the ear (the spoken word) and the eye (writing and print), because of their primary focus on language – “the word” – the senses of hearing and sight were given priority by them. Recently, however, anthropology and ethnography, the two disciplines that have traditionally studied non-western peoples and the different aspects of their life, have increasingly exposed the logocentrism of western science, including orality and literacy-related studies, and have called attention to the multiple modes of human communication – referred to as multimodality – that exists beyond, or alongside, language.

That is the emphasis from which the fields – or approaches – of Multimodality and Sensory Studies was born. As David Howes contends, "once the encompassing grip of ‘the science of signs’ (modelled on linguistics) is broken, we are brought – perhaps with a gasp of surprise or recoil of disgust – into the realm of the body and the senses. … From a sensory standpoint, the rhetorics of logocentricity do seem unbearably artificial and rigid.” In an attempt to break away from logocentricity, the body and all the senses are the objects of study by scholars such as Ruth Finnegan, Constance Classen and others who have researched and described the role which not only sight and sound, but smell, taste and touch have played and still play both in different historical periods and in different cultures. These thinkers, while commenting on the earlier, universalizing theories of Ong, McLuhan and others, argue that whereas western societies are largely dependent on vision and the verbal faculties, other, non-western societies use and combine the senses in very different ways.

Constance Classen is especially stern in her critique of orality-literacy studies:

The oral/literate model of culture tends to assume that the different senses will possess the same social values and have the same social effects across cultures. Thus societies

96 More will be said about this connection below.
97 It is perhaps more appropriate to talk about approaches rather than fields of study; as far as I can tell, the terms “multimodality,” “anthropology of the senses,” “sensory studies” and a few other phrases are often used without a clear definition or differentiation in academic discourse.
which give priority to sight (pre-eminently the West) will be analytic and concerned with structure and appearance, for such is the nature of sight. Societies which give priority to hearing, in turn, will be synthetic and concerned with interiority and integration, such being the nature of hearing. The vision which is deemed rational and analytical in the West, however, may be associated with irrationality in another society, or with the dynamic fluidity of colour. In the light of such potential cultural differences in sensory meaning, the anthropology of the senses holds that universalist sensory models of culture, whether they be visual or auditory, text-based or speech-based, must give way to culturally specific investigations of particular sensory orders.  

While Ong, McLuhan and others also realized the need for a look at different modes of communication, their background and experience might have kept them from deeper engagement with modalities other than orality (primary or secondary) and literacy, and from the acknowledgement of the role that cultural and social factors play. That there are more varied forms of meaning-making than language is, however, now recognized also by literacy scholars. Indeed, the meaning of “literacy” has changed; that our digital world with its multimodal media requires an even newer kind of literacy is now widely discussed and acknowledged by educators as well as communication and media experts.

I. 3. 6. Orality, Literacy, and Philosophy

Finally, a rather different approach to the problem of orality and literacy is the one taken by philosophy. Because in After Writing Catherine Pickstock claims to achieve the “consummation of philosophy” by going beyond, or transcending, writing, it is important that we get an idea of the possible meaning of, and relationship between, philosophy and different media of communication (including orality and writing) by looking at how philosophy has addressed these questions.

That sense perception, its role in cognition and in the use of different media, should intrigue philosophers is not a new phenomenon. The relationship between philosophy and vision has received a lot of scholarly attention, as vision has for a long time deemed to be defining the essence of (western) philosophy. It has often been argued that in the West "the theory of


100 It seems, though, that digital literacy is a much wider and more complex ability than "traditional” literacy; it involves cognitive, technical, and moral (decision-making) skills and abilities.
knowing is modelled after what was supposed to take place in the act of vision;”\(^{101}\) that, beginning with the Greeks, as articulated by Plato, visibility was seen as the guarantee of certainty, while Descartes, though undermining the role of vision as illusion in the physical domain, transferred the properties of the visible “to the mental domain, whence they … illuminate metaphorically the powers of reason to attain certitude as clear and distinct ideas.”\(^{102}\)

I.3.6.1. Phenomenology

More recently, however, the focus on vision in connection with philosophy has been contested and the attention has shifted to other senses, as well as to other media. In our brief overview of a much larger topic, three of the – relatively – new approaches in philosophy deserve special mention because of their attention to issues related to the media, especially the media of the spoken and written word. The first one is phenomenology,\(^{103}\) a movement and approach in philosophy for which the role of experience and consciousness, including sense perception, is of paramount importance. It would exceed the scope of this thesis to attempt to even briefly review and assess the different versions of the philosophical programme of phenomenology. Also, its leading figures (such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and others) in their works focused mainly on the more theoretical, conceptual aspects of this method. For this reason, I shall mention only two of its representatives whose work has special relevance for our topic.

German-born philosopher Hans Jonas included a whole chapter on the phenomenology of the senses in his The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology.\(^{104}\) Although in his analysis Jonas does not mention the spoken and written word, orality and literacy, his arguments related to sight and hearing are in many ways very similar to those of McLuhan and Ong – who, as we noted above, see the phenomenology of these two senses as establishing the difference between orality and literacy – and thus deserve attention. Jonas, while stressing the decisive role vision (or sight, as he refers to it) has played in the history of western philosophy, compares the phenomenological characteristics of sight with both hearing and touch when he tries to


\(^{102}\) Dalia Judovitz, “Vision, Representation and Technology in Descartes” in Levin, ed., Modernity, Ibid., 63-64. It must be added, though, that the Romantic tradition (for example Herder, for whom the medium of thought is feeling or Gefühl) worked in an alternative frame of reference, and in the 19th and 20th centuries philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas and some others tried to shift the emphasis of seeing or vision to speaking or language.

\(^{103}\) Phenomenology can refer either to a philosophical movement, or to a method of inquiry or approach in the history of philosophy. See https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/.

explain sight’s unique position philosophically. He suggests that while sight is characterized by a simultaneity of presentation, sound (or hearing, as he calls it) is dynamic, is always related to time. He establishes that "the sense of hearing … is related to event and not to existence,"\textsuperscript{105} and frames this phenomenologically based observation in philosophical terminology in the following way: "Sight, with its extended 'present’ of enduring objects, allows the distinction between change and the unchanging and therefore between becoming and being. … Only sight therefore provides the sensual basis on which the mind may conceive the idea of the eternal, that which never changes is and is always present."\textsuperscript{106} A further feature of sight, he notes, is its objectivity – unlike in hearing or touch, there is no causal connection between the self-contained subject and a self-contained object – and it is this feature that enables the "mental feat" of making theories. This objectivity, however, is attained at a price, as it offers "a becalmed abstract of reality denuded of its raw power,"\textsuperscript{107} and thus may lead to a discrepancy between theory and praxis.

Finally, sight operates in distance, which, he suggests, provides the seer a sense of infinity. Thus, in conclusion this is how Jonas sees the relationship between sight and questions of philosophy:

\begin{quote}
We turn back to the beginning, the partiality of classical philosophy for one of the bodily senses. Our investigation has shown some grounds for this partiality in the virtues inherent in sight. We even found, in each of the three aspects under which we treated vision, the ground for some basic concepts of philosophy. \textit{Simultaneity of presentation} furnishes the idea of enduring present, the contrast between change and the unchanging, between time and eternity. \textit{Dynamic neutralization} furnishes form as distinct from matter, essence as distinct from existence, and the difference of theory and practice. \textit{Distance} furnishes the idea of infinity. Thus the mind has gone where vision pointed.\textsuperscript{108}
\end{quote}

I have quoted Jonas at some length for two reasons. First of all, he foreshadows some of the dominant topics of this thesis when he points to the connection between a phenomenology of the senses and some of the questions asked by both philosophy and theology: questions about being and becoming, essence and existence, objectivity and subjectivity, time and eternity; issues that will figure importantly in the argumentation below. Secondly, although he doesn’t

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 139.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 145.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 148.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 152.
theorize the relationship between the senses (and their relationship to the spoken and written word) and philosophy, he anticipates the findings of cognitive scientists about the “embodied mind” and conceptual metaphors when he suggests that “the mind has gone where vision pointed” – a point that we shall return to later.

The other branch of phenomenology that must be mentioned briefly is that of cultural phenomenology. The term was coined by anthropologist Thomas Csordas to refer to the intersection between the body and culture: a "phenomenological approach to self and the specificity of self-processes in cultural context." Cultural phenomenology, I suggest, although a relatively new approach, could be the answer to Street’s criticism of Ong’s methodology with regard to the latter’s sliding from individual cognitive states to that of cultures (whether oral or literate), as it may help to unite the personal, individual, and the social, cultural aspects that define the lived experience of sense perception. Although this goes beyond the topic of this thesis, I believe that this linking may indeed become even more relevant when, as a result of the steady increase in technologically mediated cultural practices, today "perceptual experience itself continues to undergo dramatic transformations."

1.3. 6.2. Post-structuralism and Jacques Derrida

The other important new direction in philosophy that is closely related to the problem of orality and writing, the medium and the message, and thus to Pickstock’s After Writing, is best explained by referring to what we identified as the primacy of vision in traditional philosophical enquiry. From the late 19th century on, however, philosophers started to question the legitimacy of this kind of obsession with vision in philosophy. As Hannah Arendt suggests, "since Bergson, the use of the sight metaphor in philosophy has kept dwindling … as emphasis and interest have shifted entirely from contemplation to speech, from nous to logos.” One of the consequences of this rebirth of the logos in philosophy is the fact that the notion of “text” has become part of the discourse in different branches of the human sciences, to the extent that


111 For philosophers, starting with Plato, „vision” was not related to writing, though, but was used in a more general sense.

Brockmeier and Olson even talk about a "literacy episteme," arguing that there has arisen an all-encompassing cultural discourse around different meanings, competencies and practices of reading and writing. They suggest that “concepts such as writing, reading and text have become travelling concepts, theoretical metaphors, and methodological shorthands that have effortlessly crossed borders between disciplines and discourses.”

How this criticism of a vision-based understanding of reality has led to the replacement of nous by logos in philosophy cannot be analysed here in any detail. However, Jacques Derrida, one of the philosophers connected with this development, plays such an important role in the argument of our next chapter that his interpretation of orality and writing, though much more sophisticated than could be given proper consideration here, must be mentioned in this context. To put it very simply, we know that in reaction to Husserl’s phenomenology – including his interpretation of speech, which, according to Derrida, does not break with a metaphysics of presence – he gives prominence to writing which, as a kind of non-immediate, secondary medium (phenomenologically) ensures *différance*, the lack or even impossibility of self-presence. In this way Derrida places language in general, and writing in particular, at the heart of philosophy and insists that, unlike for traditional philosophy, which assumed that experience was at the root of conceptual thought, it is *language* and *writing* that provide the foundation for these. From the point of view of our topic this means that Derrida’s work takes its place at the theoretical end of the “literacy episteme” when he insists that our existence in the world is never given to us in a kind of immediacy of experience – for example, sense perception – as phenomenology suggests, but is always mediated by systems of signs and symbols, of which language is paramount. Signs, however, never refer to their signified in an explicit and fixed way. Like in writing, and, indeed, in language in general, meaning is endlessly “deferred;” there never is a one-to-one correspondence between our experience and the words we use to describe it, and when words are committed to writing, their interpretation is even farther away from the original signified.

What exactly does it imply when we suggest that Derrida’s work is theoretical in nature? Mike Sandbothe maintains that the strategy followed by Derrida in his discussion of writing/literacy

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114 Brockmeier and Olson, Ibid., 4.
is “theoretician” because “it abstracts form all concrete contexts of interest.”\textsuperscript{115} His ideas are never tied to a concrete time and place, whether of a person, society or culture. Indeed, différance is altogether disengaged from real sense perception, whether vision or hearing; so the “order which resists this opposition … belongs neither to the voice nor to writing \textit{in the usual sense}.”\textsuperscript{116} Indeed, Derrida himself makes it clear that he uses the word “writing” not in the “narrow sense,” but as “arche-writing,” the difference that “always precedes and makes possible any presence to self, any truth, any stability, any beginning.”\textsuperscript{117} Based on all this, one might conclude that Derrida in fact renounces any form of critical realism.\textsuperscript{118}

The many questions around Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction go far beyond the scope of this thesis. However, because his thought relies so heavily on the concept of writing – which is why Catherine Pickstock engages him so heavily in \textit{After Writing} – it is important for us to be clear, at least on the basic level, both about his emphases, and the criticism directed at his work which is significant from our standpoint. Of the thousands of studies devoted to an evaluation and critique of Derrida’s thought, let me quote what social anthropologist Ruth Finnegan sees as the main weaknesses of this approach. First of all, she underlines what we have already mentioned, namely the high level of sometimes rather fanciful abstraction in (post)structuralist analyses such as that of Derrida. She suggests that these "tend to combine authoritative pronouncement with quite speculative interpretation. Sometimes, it seems, the meanings are ‘found’ as much through the analyst’s ideology, self-reflection or verbal wizardry as from ethnographic investigation of the processes among particular participants.”\textsuperscript{119}

Secondly – closely related to this – Finnegan notes that even though post-structuralists emphasize instability and contingency, the “meanings” they seek are often “sought in abiding or widely-applicable codes with less interest in the specificities of varying experiences, interpretations or performances. … There must be doubts about picturing systems of codes as

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid. no page.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Steven Shakespeare, \textit{Derrida and Theology} (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 61.
  \item \textsuperscript{118} It should be added that not everyone agrees with this conclusion; according to Colin Wight, for example, it is simply that deconstruction – in a somewhat Kantian fashion – starts with the \textit{a priori} of denying the possibility of coming to know the real; or, put differently, the real is simply the radical alterity "which transcends the conceptual resources of any discourse that would attempt to come to know it;” and, argues Wight, this might actually be seen as a kind of critical realist approach. See Colin Wight, "Reading Derrida as a Critical Realist” in Jonathan Joseph and John Michael Roberts, \textit{Realism Discourse and Deconstruction} (London: Routledge, 2004), 205.
  \item \textsuperscript{119} Finnegan, \textit{Communicating}, 19.
\end{itemize}
independent of their activation by human communicators in specific settings.” Here, I suggest, is voiced the main problem with this kind of “media philosophy.” As we saw in the work of Ong, McLuhan and others, orality and writing are so intrinsically connected to dynamic human reality, both on the individual and the social/cultural level, that any kind of abstraction is bound to lose some of their important aspects. We shall return to this problem in connection with Pickstock’s thought below.

Finally, it must be added – almost like a footnote, but still significant for my argument – that just like in the case of orality-literacy studies and media ecology, in media philosophy, too, there has been a growing realization and trend away from logocentrism. In his influential book *A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* Michel Serres laments the fact that “the philosophy of language is our reason, and always will be; it has converted us, and is winning. There is no doubt that it has the upper hand over phenomenology; we must declare it the winner.” He wonders, however, if the senses might prove to be better channels for philosophy; “Of course, knowledge comes from language; but what if philosophy came to us through the senses?” This, according to David Howes, is the “sensual revolution,” the realization that we do not have to look to language or linguistics, with its “sensorial poverty,” for models of philosophical interpretation, but can, indeed, must, “recover a full-bodied understanding of culture and experience.” But, adds Howes, Serres errs if he looks to the senses as the new universal source of philosophy. The body and the senses are as socially and culturally conditioned as is language; “perceptual systems” are also cultural systems, and “perception is a shared social phenomenon.”

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120 Ibid. Italics mine.
121 It must be added that there also exist other philosophical interpretations of both writing/literacy and the speaking/orality. In his book *The Voice and Nothing More* Mladen Dolar, for example, notes that “the phonocentric bias may not be the whole story of the metaphysical treatment of the voice;” Lacan, for example, provides an alternative hermeneutic. “If, for Derrida, the essence of the voice lies in auto-affectation and self-transparency, as opposed to the trace, the rest, alterity, and so on, for Lacan this is where the problem starts. The deconstructive turn tends to deprive the voice of its ineradicable ambiguity by reducing it to the ground (self-) presence, while the Lacanian account tries to disentangle from its core the object as an interior obstacle to (self-) presence.” See Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (MIT Press, 2006), 42. As we shall see, it is this same ambiguity of the voice that, just like Ong and McLuhan, Pickstock stresses in *After Writing*.
123 Ibid., 195.
125 Ibid., 5.
I.3.6.3. Paul Ricoeur and Hermeneutics

Thirdly, although somewhat peripheral to our main topic, the name of Paul Ricoeur should be mentioned as a philosopher in whose thought “writing” plays a significant role. Within a rich oeuvre, the focus of Ricoeur’s later work on hermeneutics is really based on a theory of the text. The way in which he locates the main differences between spoken and written language in many ways echoes the writings of Ong, McLuhan and others. It is phenomenologically based, but what Ricoeur draws out are the consequences of fixation in writing for the meaning, and consequently the interpretation, of the text. It is because of the nature of the (written) text that, he suggests, the event of the speech act “is surpassed by the meaning;”¹²⁶ this means, however, that without the presence of the speaker/author and thus of the help of intonation, gestures, etc., “only interpretation is the ‘remedy’ for the discourse which its author can no longer save.”¹²⁷

Ricoeur’s thought is of course much more complex and prolific, embracing many different topics, but it is the “spirituality” of writing, its inscription in “external marks,” – which is also the prerequisite of “the universality of its address”¹²⁸ – that makes the text the model for his theory of hermeneutics, not only of the interpretation of texts, but of action and thus also of the human sciences. His hermeneutic theory has, in turn, provided inspiration for different areas of research, from design to interdisciplinary theology.¹²⁹

I. 3. 7. Evaluation and concluding remarks

The goal of this interdisciplinary “detour” was to provide an overview of “accounts of the world which we receive from other sources of knowledge,”¹³⁰ in this case as these see the problem of orality and literacy and how it bears on the relationship between the medium and the message. We have seen that schemes and views related to the role played by speech and writing, orality and literacy, have a long and complex history of theories, refutations and contrasting theories, and that the number of scholarly disciplines that address related issues has

¹²⁷ Ibid.
¹²⁸ Ibid., 203.
¹²⁹ Besides Boyd Bundell, as quoted above, Kenneth Reynhout’s Interdisciplinary Interpretation: Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Theology and Science (Lanham/Louisville/Guildford/New York: Lexington Books, 2013) draws on Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory.
itself greatly expanded, especially over the last few decades. However, a few basic approaches or paradigms within which aspects of the issue have been considered may be distinguished.

We noted, first, that although the difference between oral and written poetic composition had already been suggested before, it was the Toronto School of Communication – Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Jack Goody, etc. – who, while aware of the role played by all kinds of different communications media, held that writing – and later print – indeed functioned as the “great divide” in the history of culture and thus paid special attention to the difference between spoken and written communication; hence the designation “orality-literacy studies.” One important consequence of this “great divide,” emphasized especially by Innis, but also by McLuhan and Ong, was how, in the course of cultural history, space came to take precedence over time. At the same time, McLuhan’s famous dictum, “The medium is the message,” was the expression of their belief that the media affect human consciousness and cognition in a way that is often indirect and hidden. In their descriptions they relied primarily on the phenomenological method; they believed that we attend to any medium through our senses, and thus considered communication, media – especially speech and writing, – sense perception, and cognition as concepts and phenomena that are mutually dependent and interwoven. In the words of Ong, “From the time of my studies of Peter Ramus and Ramism, my work has grown into its own kind of phenomenological history of culture and consciousness . . . elaborated in terms of noetic operations.”¹³¹ Likewise, McLuhan, whose thought and work is, admittedly, “beyond categorization,” commented that “[P]henomenology [is] that which I have been presenting for many years in non-technical terms.”¹³²

Secondly, we saw that the so-called New Literacy Studies as well as other contemporary literacy scholars criticize the old school’s “autonomous” approach and consider literacy as primarily social practice and thus ideological in nature. Rather than using the phenomenological method to establish their analyses, the ideological models assume that it is primarily the social context, including the worldview of a particular cultural or economic/political framework or situation, that defines the effects and characteristics of orality and/or literacy (or rather of each particular instance of one or the other; as we noted, they maintain that there is no such thing as literacy in general, only “literacies.”) Brian Street, for example, stresses that literacy is not a

¹³¹ Ong, Interfaces of The Word, quoted in Farrell and Soukup, An Ong Reader, 19.
(neutral) "technology of the mind" or a set of skills, but a social practice which is always "embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles."\textsuperscript{133}

Thirdly, we called attention the fact that recently anthropology and ethnography have also criticized the autonomous model of literacy, though from a somewhat different angle. Ethnographers such as Ruth Finnegan have denounced what they see as the "western myth of the centrality of language" by calling attention to the fact that we tend to “overlook the multi-media multimodal nature of our learning,”\textsuperscript{134} while sensory anthropology has underlined the existence of considerable sensory diversity among non-literate peoples.\textsuperscript{135} Indeed, multimodality has emerged as a new area of enquiry, not only in ethnography and anthropology but even as a task for theology.\textsuperscript{136} Both of these scholarly fields, as well as the relatively new discipline of cultural phenomenology, acknowledge the role of both sense perception and of culture and society with regard to communication media in their attempt to study "the immediacy of embodied experience [and] the multiplicity of cultural meaning in which we are always and inevitable immersed."\textsuperscript{137}

We were also reminded that Ong, McLuhan and others already relied on certain scientific, mainly experimental-psychological findings, but that the last few decades have seen an enormous advance in the sciences – especially in cognitive neuroscience – including research on issues surrounding language and literacy and noted how the results of this research have confirmed the tandem in which neurobiological and cultural factors work.

Finally, we suggested that while in all of the above cases the difference between orality and literacy is considered in the framework of what might be called "concrete contexts of interest,"\textsuperscript{138} that is, real time and real people, the fourth approach, that of philosophy, at least in its post-structuralist version,\textsuperscript{139} takes a different, more abstract and theoretical path when it

\textsuperscript{133} Street, “What’s New,” Ibid., 1, 2.
\textsuperscript{134} Finnegan, Ibid., 1, 14.
\textsuperscript{136} Pete Ward, for instance, argues that “‘when the only kind of communication theologians recognize is linguistic, then most people with intellectual disabilities from group homes become nonpersons, or, at best, objects of pity.’ This epistemological horizon in theological ethnography is as promising as it is urgent.” Pete Ward, ed., Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), viii.
\textsuperscript{138} See above, 39.
\textsuperscript{139} As we have seen, there are also other approaches in philosophy, for example that of Hans Jonas or Paul Ricoeur, which also take their clue from phenomenological description, but apply its results to such questions as are of concern for philosophy; for example, that of being and becoming, hermeneutics, etc. We also mentioned
argues that "our existence in the world is never given to us in a kind of immediacy of experience (as phenomenology suggests) but is always mediated by systems of signs and symbols, of which language is paramount."\textsuperscript{140} Although his work is more complex than this, we saw that that is why Jacques Derrida, for example, treated speech and writing as systems of codes "independent of their activation by human communicators in specific settings."\textsuperscript{141}

What has become clear is that questions related to speech and writing, orality and literacy – as well as other, non-logocentric media – and their workings in communicating a message are indeed deeply imbedded both in social-cultural relations and discursive practices and the living human body with its physical and psychological exigencies, including, especially, sense perception. My next task is to show how "the particularity of what Christians believe" is "enmeshed" in all these contexts; in other words, how the dogmatic resources of theology can explain these experiences. One attempt at providing a theological framework within which to interpret the above is presented by Catherine Pickstock, especially in her book \textit{After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy}, so it is this work to which we now turn.

\textsuperscript{140} See above.
\textsuperscript{141} See above.
II.1. Introduction

After the “detour” of the last chapter into the scholarly field(s) of orality-literacy studies and
the broader discipline of media ecology, the present chapter is at the heart of this thesis as it
hones in on the interpretation and evaluation of the role played by orality and literacy in their
relationship with theology. As indicated above, I will do this by focusing on a particular work,
Catherine Pickstock’s After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy in which,
as the title indicates, the author accords a key role to orality and writing. I will first summarize
those parts of this intricate book that deal more directly with the topic, and then evaluate and
critique them with the aim of identifying the theological issues and concepts that must be
considered before, in the last chapter, taking the next step and establishing a theoretic
framework to answer my research question and offer a description of this relationship. Before
closer engagement with Pickstock and After Writing, a brief introduction to the Radical
Orthodoxy movement is necessary to provide a background to her thought.

II.2. Radical Orthodoxy

In 1990 John Milbank, a Cambridge theologian, published a book entitled Theology and Social
Theory: Beyond Secular Reason,142 whose opening statement has often been quoted as
programmatic for the whole enterprise of the so-called Radical Orthodoxy movement. “Once,
there was no secular” proposes Milbank, the “founding father” of Radical Orthodoxy; a curt
comment, characteristic of the Radical Orthodox tendency to provocative summary statements.
Milbank’s views were widely discussed and disseminated among his students in Cambridge;
one of these students was Catherine Pickstock, who, in 1998, published After Writing: On the
Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy, which is the key text of this thesis. Milbank himself

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then published another work, *The World Made Strange*[^143], before the volume *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*[^144], co-edited by Milbank, Pickstock and Graham Ward appeared in 1999. This work was regarded as the launching of the theological movement of Radical Orthodoxy, and has been followed by many more books and articles. In fact, both Routledge and Blackwell now devote a whole series to works inspired by the movement (entitled *Radical Orthodoxy* and *Illuminations*, respectively) and an online academic journal: *Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics* was launched in 2012.

Since the publication of the first “manifesto” a large number of review articles, studies and, by now, volumes have been devoted to an evaluation and critique of Radical Orthodoxy, a fact that no doubt testifies to the significance of the movement. Priorities and insights that are characteristic of the Radical Orthodoxy “sensibility”[^145] serve as the background to the thought of Catherine Pickstock, so – even at the peril of generalization and simplification – I will mention some of the basic convictions of the Radical Orthodox sensibility, adding that, as any movement, it keeps shifting its shape, adding new insights, and modifying others.

Milbank’s statement, as quoted above, is programmatic for the movement in its rethinking of basic philosophical and theological issues: the relationship between the One and the Many, subject and object, nature and grace, reason and faith, the sacred and the secular, to name just a few. In terms of the “once,” that is, the pre-secular – which for Radical Orthodoxy is by and large synonymous with the pre-modern – Plato, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are the most important thinkers whose insights are built upon to provide the guidelines in the quest for a theology that is both radical and truly orthodox. The idea of participation, for example, first articulated by Plato and further developed in a uniquely Christian fashion by Augustine and Aquinas, plays a key role in Radical Orthodox reasoning. It is a notion closely related to the concept of analogy, which postulates the principal conviction that “we only have existence attributed to us by virtue of our relation to God as creator,” and, consequently, although there indeed are substantial entities in creation, “but only insofar as they participate in the gratuity of God’s gift of being.”[^146] For Radical Orthodox thinkers the notion of participation provides

[^145]: Ibid. The use of the word ”sensibility” by Oliver signifies the fact that rather than theology in the traditional sense, the intent of Radical Orthodoxy is not “rational” speech about God; in a postmodern mode, what Radical Orthodoxy offers is more a sensibility than a system.
[^146]: Ibid., 17.
the theological basis for returning not only philosophical, but also political, economic, social and cultural thought to its proper place in, and not outside of, theology, which, they are convinced, alone can provide the necessary solutions to the problems of (late) modernity.\textsuperscript{147}

The other source that occupies a significant place in the work of all Radical Orthodox theologians is 20\textsuperscript{th} century philosophy, especially in the form of what has come to be called postmodern, more specifically post-structuralist, thought.\textsuperscript{148} Several elements in the critique of modernity put forward by postmodern thinkers are acknowledged by Milbank, Pickstock and other Radical Orthodox theologians as legitimate responses to its ills. This is what Milbank says about Radical Orthodoxy and its relationship with the postmodern:

I think that many postmodern theories – perhaps in the wake of modern physics – have questioned the idea that you can get determinate meaning and clear certainty in any human field. So there has been a strong insistence all the time that when you think you’ve got definite meaning, or some clearly grasped area of value, you’re deluding yourself, and in fact you are suppressing the questions, the ambiguities always remain. And part of [the Radical Orthodox] case involves the claim that theology is on the side of indeterminacy, and of a certain and inescapable vagueness, because if we live in a created universe which only reflects in multiple finite ways the infinite plenitude of meaning, then there is a sense in which everything is always somewhat partial and uncertain, veiled, fragmentary and never foreclosed. ... Only theology can teach us to live with uncertainty, because of our corresponding belief that we also have some remote approximation to the truth and hope for a final disclosure of mystery which will nevertheless not cancel out its unfathomable depths.\textsuperscript{149}

Looking closely at this quote it is important to mention that while Milbank acknowledges the correlation between postmodern and Radical Orthodox thought regarding the uncertainty and ambiguity of \textit{meaning} (the semiotic connotations of this word are worth noting), his reference to \textit{the truth} sets him apart from postmodern reluctance with regard to any truth claims. His statement about the \textit{created} universe’s \textit{reflection} of the “infinite plenitude of meaning,” and the

\textsuperscript{147} See Milbank and Oliver, 24.
\textsuperscript{148} As Sarah Coakley puts it, Radical Orthodoxy “uses postmodernism precisely against itself.” Sarah Coakley, \textit{God, Sexuality and the Self: Essays ‘On the Trinity’} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 72. More will be said about this below.
\textsuperscript{149} Milbank and Oliver, 31-32.
"remote approximation to the truth" foreshadows the Radical Orthodox principle of participation; but more will be said about this below.

Besides an emphasis on the necessity of uncertainty and vagueness, the “linguistic mediation of reality”\(^{150}\) is another axiom that Radical Orthodoxy shares with postmodern thinkers and which is also a major premise of Pickstock’s emphasis on orality as the main characteristic of the liturgy in the “consummation” of philosophy. However, the linguistic turn of postmodern philosophers is not radical enough for Radical Orthodoxy. In the post-structuralist system, Milbank and Pickstock are convinced, it only leads to agnosticism and nihilism. But if it is conceived analogically, they argue, the linguistic turn may generate the “liturgical turn”\(^{151}\) in which our speaking participates in God’s “plenitude” as the divine comes to meet us in the materiality of the “liturgical offering,”\(^{152}\) of which liturgical language is a key element.

There is no doubt that Radical Orthodoxy has become an unavoidable force in the English-speaking debate about theology, culture, and political theology. At the same time, although it has abetted somewhat in recent years, the controversy about some of the more radical statements of the movement continues. A more detailed critique of Catherine Pickstock’s ideas in After Writing will follow shortly; at this point, in advance to this, I want to call attention to some general but significant characteristics of the RO approach to, and style of, argumentation.

In a perceptive phrase one critic describes the fundamental convictions of Radical Orthodoxy, briefly introduced above, as the "constraining systematic framework structured by negative philosophical verdicts."\(^{153}\) The words “constraining” and “negative philosophical verdicts” are especially pertinent, as they identify the boundaries set by the – disputatious – manner of the Radical Orthodox argumentation, for reasons that will be clarified below in our analysis of Pickstock’s book. Another feature of the Radical Orthodox approach that is especially relevant for an evaluation of Pickstock’s thought is that, as a consequence of its vigorous critique of modernity, one of the most important coordinates of this constraining systematic framework is “a move away from the human subject, or more specifically, a move away from any sort of

\(^{150}\) Ibid.


thinking that puts human consciousness, intention and reference at the centre of discourse and meaningfulness.”154

As for the “noetic outlook” of Radical Orthodoxy, this kind of thinking and reasoning has resulted in a style of discussion that Paul D. Janz entitles “the new obscurantism,” a way of writing he characterises as “blithely imprecise” and “tactical,”155 whose authority, in Milbank’s own words, “mingles exegesis, cultural reflection, and [anti]philosophy in a complex but coherently executed collage.”156 This, critics suggest, is due to the fact that in the place of the subject of autonomous rationality Pickstock, like Milbank, imagines a different form of subjectivity; one that is based on “the aesthetic dimension” and which thus “opens up for a (revealed) truth beyond the faculty of reason.”157

This aesthetic epistemology poses a question for a thesis like this: how is criticism possible, if “criteria of truth become at best metaphorical”?158 If the “open courts of reason” are not the context of such a critique, how should one go about this task? I must admit that this was the most difficult part of using Pickstock and After Writing as the focal case study of this thesis. Radical Orthodoxy’s “free-floating, insular coherence”159 may indeed lend itself more to an aesthetic than to rational evaluation, but that is not an option in an academic essay. However, because various scholars have reacted to and analysed Radical Orthodox convictions, I decided that it must be possible – if difficult – to afford reasoned critique. Indeed, as Lars Albinus suggests, Radical Orthodoxy itself ”seems to navigate . . . between the self-deceiving ‘rationality’ of secularism and the nihilistic prospect of postmodernism and total criticism.”160 The fact that in the course of this navigation it ”makes a halt halfway”161 might be a necessary to enter the field of academic discourse, but should also make it possible to engage in a dialogue with it; which is what the rest of this chapter attempts to do. The strategy I will employ is to look very closely at what Pickstock says, hoping that in this way even this metaphorical-referential use of language can provide a clue to the underlying ideas inside the hidden networks and collusions of the rational and the aesthetic.

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154 Ibid. Italics in original.
155 Janz, Ibid., 370.
156 Milbank, Oliver, 378, 384.
158 Ibid.
159 Janz, Ibid., 370.
160 Albinus, Ibid. 353.
161 Ibid.
II. 3. Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*

Reader in Philosophy and Theology at Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge, a former student of John Milbank’s, Catherine Pickstock is one of the significant members of the Radical Orthodox movement (which recently has been dubbed “the Cambridge school). Based on her doctoral dissertation, her first book-length study, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*\(^{162}\) was published in 1998. Since then she has co-edited *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* with John Milbank and Graham Ward, and *Truth in Aquinas* with John Milbank.\(^{163}\) Her most recent book, *Repetition and Identity: The Literary Agenda*,\(^{164}\) also deals with issues of theology, hermeneutics, signs, language and literature.

As already mentioned, I have chosen Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing* for a case study because she is among the few theologians in whose thought considerations regarding speech/orality and writing/literacy play a central role – especially in her first work, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. It is interesting that although *After Writing* has often been reviewed and critiqued in the decades since its publication, this aspect of the book has received very little attention. Could this perhaps be explained, at least partly, by the fact that, as one critic suggests, for Radical Orthodoxy ”the return to postmodern sites (such as the body, space, language, and so forth) remains only a series of improvisations on … postmodern themes”\(^{165}\)? As we shall see, orality and writing, as language-and body-based themes in *After Writing* fit into this category of postmodern sites; whether they indeed remain only improvisations will have to be decided with the help of this analysis.

Pickstock’s book is no easy reading as it exhibits many of the characteristics of the Radical Orthodox noetic outlook and style of writing mentioned above; one reviewer even describes it as ”dense, abstract, complex, impenetrable, out of reach and off-putting.”\(^{166}\) On the back cover John Milbank himself characterizes Pickstock’s work as “a labyrinthine treatise with … hermetic inner corridors;” and indeed, *After Writing* roams over such varied fields of enquiry as the classics (Plato’s philosophy), postmodernism, cultural and political philosophy,


\(^{165}\) Hanvey, ”Conclusion,” in Hemming, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic Enquir* y, Ibid., 163.

\(^{166}\) Ashley Woodiwiss, ”Movement Tries to Put Secularism in Its Place,” *Christianity Today* (August 2005), 55.
linguistics, theology of the Middle Ages and of the 20th century, and liturgical studies – just to name a few.

Notwithstanding its labyrinthine paths, the title of *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* affords a clue to the main themes of the treatise. The relationship between writing, the liturgy and philosophy figure as the key elements in Pickstock’s argument, and the title also presents her main thesis: liturgy is, in one way or another, the medium or mode that “consummates” – transcends the truth, reality and meaning of – both writing and philosophy. What Pickstock means by ”writing” and how writing is related to philosophy is at this point yet unclear, although her linking writing and philosophy in the title suggests a reference to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida.

We also know that, as suggested above, the Radical Orthodox vision of reality insists that the divine is already manifest in, and mediated by, various aspects of human experience; for example in language, especially in the ”textual and sacramental relics” of the liturgy.167 Indeed, as we shall see, Catherine Pickstock’s ”liturgical turn,” first articulated in *After Writing*, presents a very concrete demonstration of this general Radical Orthodox conviction when she maintains that language itself can analogically manifest the divine; but, she adds in this particular work, it is the orality of the liturgy (especially the Roman Rite, which she considers to be a ”privileged linguistic or symbolic” form) and not writing, as claimed by Derrida and privileged in modernity, that is able to analogically disclose reality and true meaning.

Why should this be so? As the title of the book implies, Pickstock is convinced that the liturgy is not just the key part of a usual – though highly significant – act of worship in a church building; her main thesis is that the Mass in fact deals with “concerns that relate directly to the themes of theology and philosophy.”169 As I will argue in this chapter, in many ways this is a correct and highly important conclusion, which is why *After Writing* might prove to be a profitable case study in my quest for a theological formulation of the role played by the “media” of the spoken and written word, even if the themes of theology and philosophy that it introduces might give rise to different conclusions on my part.

In the course of my argumentation I will first summarize, evaluate, and critique Pickstock’s claims with regard to orality and writing in the book. Structurally, *After Writing* is arranged in
three main parts, only two of which deal directly with questions that concern orality and writing, so these are the parts that I will focus on. In Chapter One above we suggested that issues concerning the medium and the message in general, and orality and literacy in particular, have been approached in different ways by different scholarly fields and disciplines. Because of the complexity of the issues addressed by After Writing, a fruitful starting-point for my evaluation and critique of Pickstock’s approach may be to compare her model with those of other scholars in the field. This is what I will attempt in this chapter and based on these findings hope to arrive at the “abstract concepts,” that is, a systematic theological formulation of the most important issues in relation to orality and writing, and, more generally, the medium and the message, in the next chapter.

As a reminder, in our attempt to specify the different ways and modes of describing and evaluating the relationship between orality and literacy we saw that, because of what is now seen as the logocentric modes of communication characteristic of the western world, for a long time it was the difference between the spoken and written word and between oral and literate cultures as well as its perceived consequences for human cognition that received special attention. We also added, though, that the field of media ecology and communications theory have recently greatly expanded their scope; the issues examined by these disciplines have diversified beyond orality and literacy, as have the emphases and research methods (phenomenological, sociological, philosophical/semiotic, etc.) of the different scientific fields. Except for the post-structuralist, semiotic approach – of which Derrida’s ”arche writing” is the prime example – all the different methods and directions take their starting point from the human life-world, whether in its biological, cognitive, social, cultural or historical aspect. Most recently several of these approaches integrate in their study of communications media special attention to the different senses, our bodily resources for human interconnection. Indeed, where the different ”schools” converge is the need for a composite approach that includes both nature and nurture, the universal and the particular, the physical and the social.

170 Part I is entitled “The polity of death” and is comprised of three chapters, the first of which is based on Plato’s Phaedrus and its reading by Jacques Derrida, and is entitled “Writing and Exteriority;” the second focuses on the issue of spatialization as “The Middle of Modernity,” whereas Chapter 3 is entitled “Signs of Death” and takes up the issue of what Pickstock sees as modernity’s and postmodernity’s ”necrophilia.” As its title suggests, inbetween Parts I and II there is ”Transition;” subtitled as ”The evacuation of liturgy;” this section mainly addresses historical theological and cultural issues which, Pickstock suggests, led to the emptying of the liturgy in the late Middle Ages, but this part does not touch on any of the themes of interest to us. Part II is entitled “The sacred polis” and its three chapters comprise ”The impossible liturgy”, ”The space of doxology” and ”The resurrection of the sign,” all of which interpret different aspects of the liturgy and also deal with orality-literacy issues.
I will now turn to Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, first by outlining the main theses of the book in relation to our topic chapter by chapter – or, if more relevant, subchapter by subchapter – and then, after each summary, by providing an initial evaluation and critique theologically, as well as by comparing her model with the different other approaches to orality and writing introduced above.

II. 3. 1. Pickstock on Plato and Derrida

In the first chapter of *After Writing*, “Socrates Goes Outside the City: Writing and Exteriority,” Pickstock begins by focusing on Plato’s relationship to writing in the *Phaedrus*, one of Plato’s best-known dialogues. The argument that Plato – speaking for Socrates – voices against the negative effects of writing in the *Phaedrus* has often been cited not only by orality-literacy scholars but also by historians of culture. In *After Writing*, Pickstock uses Plato’s reasoning to introduce the thesis that is one of the cornerstones of her argument in the book, namely that in this dialogue Plato’s preferential treatment of orality foreshadows his partiality for a doxological/liturgical use of language – especially spoken language.

True to her procedure in the whole book Pickstock presents her argument while at the same time challenging Derrida, who gave his own interpretation of the *Phaedrus* in an essay entitled “Plato’s Pharmacy.” All through this chapter Pickstock fights on these two fronts: on the one hand, she discusses the *Phaedrus* from the point of view of Plato’s critique of the sophists and their mode of doing philosophy – especially their preference of writing over speech – and at the same time contends that, contrary to Derrida, Plato’s argument in the *Phaedrus* can be read as supporting not an unambiguous, self-present truth, but a way of using language primarily as doxological rather than either sophistic or poetic/mythological.

What, however, does Pickstock mean by ”writing’ and how does her understanding of ”orality and writing” drive her argument? These are vital questions that need clarification already here at the beginning if we want to understand Pickstock’s approach. Pickstock’s use the concept of

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171 Derrida gave his own reading of the *Phaedrus* in an essay entitled “Plato’s Pharmacy” in the volume *Dissemination* (London: Athlone Press, 1981). Here he refers to and plays on the different possible meanings of the word *pharmakon*, used by Plato in the dialogue, and suggests that Plato’s critique of writing is an implicit proof of his metaphysical bend because, by showing preference for the spoken over the written word, he is the first philosopher to invoke the self-presence that later characterizes all Western metaphysical thinking. It is this self-presence that Derrida tries to deconstruct when he refers to the equivocity of the meanings of *pharmakon* – which at one point in the dialogue Plato uses to refer to writing – thus underlining the implicit supplementation and difference inherent in what is supposed to be “medicine” against sophistry. He also claims that Plato devalues the temporal and the material because of its exteriority to the soul and the differentiation it achieves in time and meaning while striving towards the eternal, the self-contained and intelligible.
writing in this first chapter is built on her own, special interpretation of the *Phaedrus.*\(^{172}\) This interpretation is built both on Phaedrus’s conduct – whom and whose master, Lysias, Pickstock identifies with the sophists against whose methods he sees Plato/Socrates offer “a sustained critique”\(^{173}\) – and on his words, on what he says. Based on these, I will first examine the different interpretations of “writing” and “orality” that Pickstock proposes on these pages, and then comment on what this reveals about her theological project.

II. 3. 2. Orality and writing in “Socrates Goes Outside the City

Writing and orality are examined from a number of different aspects by Pickstock in this chapter; as we shall see, some of these – characteristically for Pickstock – represent very different approaches or points of view.

*II. 3. 2. 1. Writing as “Capital”*

Writing is part of a reality that can be best characterized as “commercial,” suggests Pickstock, based on the fact that Phaedrus carries Lysias’s speech concerning a proposed contractualization of erotic partnerships written on a scroll, under his cloak. This means, she argues, that for Phaedrus writing is transportable and can be applied to any situation, independent of place and time. The fact that writing (the scroll) can function as a “commodity” in a linguistic interchange – for example the desired interchange between Phaedrus and Socrates – instrumentalizes language, she suggests. Furthermore, she adds that there is also a certain violence of ownership exhibited by Phaedrus which parallels “the written nature of Lysias’ speech;” the reason for this being that the written speech “cannot be addressed to any particular boy,” in contrast to spoken language, which always takes place in a concrete situation and is addressed to a concrete person. Thus, Pickstock concludes, “writing is… structurally parallel to capital as the absence of the higher eros, and as the standardization of exchange.”\(^{174}\) Socrates attacks the sophists, she claims, exactly because they make use of both rhetoric and writing in a way which assimilates these to any cause and usefulness. Significantly, her conclusion is that all this results in a “closure of difference, or sheer indifference”\(^{175}\) – words that are reminders of the terminology used by Derrida in his repudiation of orality – but, unlike for him, in Pickstock’s mind refer to writing and so assert the opposite of Derrida’s theory.

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\(^{172}\) The plot of the *Phaedrus* is re-told by Pickstock on pages 4-6 of *After Writing*, which I will not repeat here.

\(^{173}\) *After Writing*, 5. (In the following the abbreviation *AW* is going to stand for *After Writing*)

\(^{174}\) *AW*, 10.

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 6.
II. 3. 2. 2. Writing as a Depository of Certain Knowledge; Orality as Representing the Partial Nature of all Knowledge

The fact that Phaedrus “repeatedly asks for precise verification of details regarding whether a particular myth is rooted in fact,” suggests Pickstock, underlines the sophists’ quest for verifiable facts or “unchanging units of knowledge,” whose goal is an “immanentist security.” That is, for the sophists writing is the ideal science because it can claim clarity and knowledge as foundations, rather than having to accept and work with the obscure origins of (oral) myth. Socrates, on the other hand, does not desire “instant certitude;” according to Plato, it is only through memory that the Socratic truth emerges as “the living and breathing word of him who knows.” Let us note that Pickstock designates “the empirical certainty and fixity” that the sophists would like to possess and which they hope to find in writing “the epistemology of the book;” on the contrary, she suggests, through his preference for orality Socrates advocates “the partial nature of all knowledge.” This, she adds, is the kind of knowledge that can be best represented by a (Socratic) dialogue, which is a dramatic form, because this kind of oral exchange “obfuscates any attempt to discover abstract principles or essences of knowledge” and allows what is to be known “to remain open and mysterious.”

II. 3. 2. 3. Orality as Time- and Body-dependent, Writing as Bypassing Time and the Body

While in the Phaedrus orality is associated with lived time and thus with physicality and the body, writing is independent of time and place and thus abstract and impersonal, argues Pickstock. Since it is written down, Lysias’ speech is “spread out in lateral form and kept as an investment for the future” by Phaedrus; this is some characteristic which points to capital’s desire to outwit and overcome time. By attributing a great value to “the inert spatiality of the written word,” Phaedrus really wishes to re-enact his own past role as the beneficiary of an artful speech. This, however, suggests Pickstock, is nothing else than “an immanentist attempt

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176 Ibid., 9.
177 Ibid., 9.
178 Ibid., 19.
179 Ibid., 18-19.
180 Ibid., 19.
181 Ibid., 20.
182 In his Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), James K. A. Smith talks about “the new Plato” when he comments that “recent scholarship … has challenged [the] reading of Plato as a dualist who devalues embodiment and immanence.” 106. It is this “new Plato,” with his interest in what Milbank and Pickstock call a “participatory ontology” that Radical Orthodoxy has appropriated as one of its forerunners.
183 AW, 8.
to *circumvent* temporality and contingency and to spatialize time by gathering up the present moment.”\(^{184}\)

Socrates, on the other hand, is clear about the fact that our only access to true knowledge is “via physical performance. This means, concomitantly, via *language*, an aspect of the physical world,”\(^{185}\) because language – in this case dialogue, which is primarily an oral mode of discourse – is itself integral to our realization of truth. A further reason for the Socratic preference for orality and consequently physicality, Pickstock believes, is the fact that “the breath of orality” is something that is very much alive, which is underlined by the fact that it does not remain immune to death; the voice ”penetrates bodies and ‘escapes.’”\(^{186}\)

This is also where Pickstock sees an important problem with Derrida’s insistence on the priority of writing over speech: its denial of the body. When Derrida associates orality with a *metaphysics* of presence, contends Pickstock, he – ”subtly” – denies the fact that language, especially spoken language, requires *bodily* presence. By doing so – that is, by interpreting orality and writing on a metaphysical level, ”Derrida argues that language needs no speaker;” in his interpretation language is just ”a trace of a speaker who was never present to begin with”\(^{187}\) – suggests Pickstock.

From this she concludes that if one had to characterize language as either written or spoken, the reason she would want to designate language as *spoken* is because “this would include all that Derrida would want to stress in terms of an infinite series of traces, but at the same time, would allow for the inclusion of living bodies at every stage.” In fact, based on her reading of the *Phaedrus* Pickstock believes that it is precisely ”his care for these living bodies, for time, and for exteriority, which dictates Plato’s preference for the oral world.”\(^{188}\)

**II. 3. 2. 4. Orality and Doxology**

As we suggested above, it is also in this first chapter of *After Writing* that Pickstock introduces her thesis regarding the close link between orality and doxology/the liturgy (she seems to be using the two words interchangeably.) Establishing a link between orality and doxology, however, is not quite as straightforward as it may be between the various other characteristics

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\(^{184}\) Ibid., 9. Italics in *immanentist* is mine.

\(^{185}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{186}\) Ibid., 26.

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 21-22.

\(^{188}\) Ibid., 25.
of orality or writing. Pickstock herself admits that she only sees “intimations” in the *Phaedrus* of what she calls “an alternative configuration,” namely that Plato is not hostile to signs in general – as Derrida supposes because of Plato/Socrates’ dislike of poetry, rhetoric and written language – but that he (Plato) “construes the true language as doxological, that is to say, as ultimately concerned with praise of the divine.”\(^{189}\) That is, regarding doxology, Pickstock’s arguments seem to rest on moral, rather than other criteria. After all, the sophists, too, use spoken language in their rhetoric, but, suggests Pickstock, it is the *use* they put it to that makes it non-liturgical. In her view, the mimetic arts Plato is so hostile towards are also condemned by Socrates not because of their oral roots but because of their taking “base objects as their models.”\(^{190}\) So what does it look like when language is truly doxological? Pickstock believes that the “second *eros* filled speech” of Socrates is an example of such language, one that is “offered as a liturgy, a linguistic gift to the gods.”\(^{191}\) That is, rather than the actual spoken or written language, it is the purpose and use that language is put to that makes it doxological.

Pickstock also offers a somewhat different interpretation of doxological language when she quotes another platonic dialogue, *Laws*, which describes the life of the city, and where the philosophic life "is also expressed through celebration and singing."\(^{192}\) This means, she suggests, that Socrates does not oppose “play” to the serious, but defines it “as the true ethic, defined as doxology, music, and dance.”\(^{193}\) Whereas Derrida regards Socrates’ preference for orality as leading to a self-present, interior, and thus manipulative subject, the Socratic subject may be defined in just the opposite way, contends Pickstock; it "finds itself in and through its liturgical role in the polis."\(^{194}\)

**II. 3. 2. Evaluation and Critique**

Already in the first chapter of *After Writing* we can detect intimations of the questions and issues that arise in connection with Pickstock’s approach to our topic. Comparing Pickstock’s interpretation of orality and writing with that of the different approaches we introduced in the last chapter, it seems that there exist both similarities and differences.

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189 Ibid., 36.
190 Ibid., 40.
193 *AW*, 42.
194 Ibid., 45.
First of all, it is conspicuous that Pickstock argues from within a complex, and rather ambiguous framework of presuppositions. To begin with, as noted above, she uses the term “writing,” not “literacy;” and in her use of language there is a remarkable dominance of terminology such as “exteriority,” “supplement,” “trace,” “‘metaphysical’ interior subject,” etc.; the same concepts as applied by Derrida and the philosophical-semiotic model. At the same time, many of her pronouncements are clearly made from a phenomenological point of view. Before quoting some examples, however, it is important to consider briefly what I mean by “phenomenological.” Although this is a subject that goes far beyond the confines of this thesis, the concept of “phenomenological description” plays an important role in my line of argumentation, so a basic understanding and explanation is necessary.

II. 3. 2. 5. 1. Phenomenology – An Excursus

Although phenomenology is also a philosophical movement, when Ong and McLuhan talk about “phenomenology” and “phenomenological,” they do not – primarily – refer to this philosophical movement, but, as suggested by Ong, a method for describing aspects of culture and consciousness. This is the definition of the more general meaning of “phenomenology” from the Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy: “Phenomenology is the study of ‘phenomena’: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings things have in our experience. Phenomenology studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view.” In other words, phenomenology as an approach or method of description, according to Patrick Masterson, “emphasizes the fundamental significance of conscious subjectivity in our appraisal of everything,” adding that phenomenology is thus ”a philosophy of cognitional immanence” – conclusion which, as we shall see, is significant from the point of view of our argument.

Concerning phenomenology as a method of enquiry which tries to explore and understand the ”intuitively given subject-relative experience of the life-world” it must be underlined that this experience is, and always has been, an "indispensable source of meaning and justification," even if the phenomenological method is, naturally, not the only way of exploring ourselves,

195 See https://www.britannica.com/topic/phenomenology
others, and reality. There are, according to one expert, two primary methods of examining the world around us: the third-person, scientific approach, which is “the perspective of the detached observer,” and the first-person, “unreflectively experiential,” phenomenological perspective. Vogelsang stresses that the rationale of this latter, experiential mode of description is closely related to our inescapably bodily existence, “which determines the way we relate to reality and to other beings … we cannot view reality from the outside; we must explore it from the inside.”

If our bodily existence is the main reason why our subject-relative experience is, in one way or another, fundamental, it is not surprising that perception and the senses play a primary role in what is designated by experts as “phenomenal consciousness.” "Phenomenal-conscious states are experiential. . . We have P-conscious states when we see, hear, smell, taste and have pains." It is significant that sensory perception is cited as the prime example of a P-(phenomenal) conscious state; as Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out, all (phenomenological) consciousness is perceptual, because "the body is our general medium for having a world."

Finally, just as individual and collective consciousness presuppose each other, phenomenological description, too, exists at both the individual and the collective or cultural level. As noted above, "Cultural phenomenology” is a relatively new area of research that examines different aspects of culture by using the phenomenological approach; it emphasises the role of intersubjective experience and thus suggests that the close relationship and mutual dependence of nature and nurture/culture is as pertinent to the method of phenomenology as it is, for example, to issues of identity and memory, which are important aspects of consciousness and thus of our knowledge of the world. As Jan Assmann suggested, “collective and individual identity, society and self, cultural and individual memory, the social origin and individuation of consciousness and conscience mutually condition each other and form two sides of the same culturally objective and socially mediated knowledge.”

In summary, we could claim, first of all, that the phenomenological method as such has to do with the intuitive, experiential first-person perspective of how we perceive the life-world

200 Ibid., 308.
around us; and, secondly, that it is both subject-relative and closely related to consciousness as well as to bodily, sensorial perception. It is a way of acquiring knowledge of the world around us (epistemology in the broad sense), and has not only individual, but also cultural-historical dimensions. Although they were not phenomenologists in the strict sense and did not theorize their method of description and, as we saw above, often did not pay sufficient attention to the social and cultural origin of consciousness, it was the same phenomenal consciousness, with its perceptual origin, on which McLuhan, Ong and other members of the Toronto School based theories. It seems, then, that phenomenological description, cognitional immanence and sense perception are, by definition, intrinsically related.

II. 3. 2. 5. 2. Pickstock and Phenomenology

Unlike Ong and McLuhan, who make it explicit that their findings regarding orality and literacy rest on a kind of phenomenological history of consciousness and culture, Pickstock does not clarify her own approach in a direct way (although she does so indirectly, as we shall see). It is clear, however, that many of her statements are made from the phenomenological, subject-relative point of view – even when her conclusions are phrased in the Derridean language of ”exteriority,” ”supplement,” ”trace,” ”metaphysical’ interior subject,” as we noted above.

We saw an example of this phenomenological framework when we quoted Pickstock’s characterisation of writing as “capital” because the scroll is transportable and may be hidden under Lysias’s cloak. This judgment is made based on how one subjectively experiences the scroll as a physical object. Pickstock’s statement about the “openness,” “mysteriousness” and “ambiguity” of spoken language – as opposed to the written word which, in the Phaedrus, she sees as “representing an immanentist attempt to circumvent temporality and contingency and to spatialize time by gathering up the present moment”204 – is also explained from the first-person perspective of the subject. However, what she concludes from this phenomenological description – which is very similar to how Ong and McLuhan characterize speech – is that these characteristics make orality a suitable linguistic sign, even to the point where she can assert that “in a sense writing is transcendentally oral” – a typically enigmatic statement, by which Pickstock means that it is open and ambiguous in its nature as sign – “rather than speech being transcendentally written, as for Derrida.”205

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204 AW, 8-9.
205 Ibid., 24.
As I mentioned, the phenomenological analysis of orality-literacy scholars arrives at conclusions regarding the most important characteristics of the spoken, as well as the written, word that sound very similar to those of Pickstock. Thus, according to Jacques Ellul “the word is uncertain. Discourse is ambiguous and often ambivalent;”\(^{206}\) while, as Ong puts it, “auditory syntheses overwhelm me with phenomena beyond all control.”\(^{207}\) However, for Ong, McLuhan, etc. this ambivalence or ambiguity does not reside in the spoken words themselves; it is a result of our perceiving, experiencing them (hence my italics for me in the quote above). For them it is not the sign but the one(s) interpreting the sign, and thus its effect on consciousness, that make(s) the difference. In anticipation of our conclusion below I suggest that they see orality and literacy as being primarily about “what is learned and known in and from the body,”\(^{208}\) that is, something that has to do with our experiencing of, and relationship with, the world around us. In the terminology of philosophy this could be categorised under the rubric of epistemology – whereas interpreted within Pickstock’s liturgical-semiotic framework the same openness and ambiguity embodies nothing less than “a vision of the divine.” In the Radical Orthodox model, based on participation, this points to our origin, “the very source of things,”\(^{209}\) and thus to ontology; but we must return to this later.

A similar polarity is apparent in “Socrates goes out of the city: Writing and exteriority,” where Pickstock makes a statement about the dialogic form that also sounds very similar to those made by Ong and McLuhan. Ong, for example, comments that "the paradigm of communication is dialogue, a two-way transaction in a world of sound, which is a world or response, of echo. Vision by contrast is of itself a one-way operation."\(^{210}\) So important was this dialogic structure to McLuhan that he even tailored the form of his own writing to it; "he designed his constellations to resemble or mimic an open dialogue."\(^{211}\) Pickstock also underlines the importance of the dialogic form as practised by Socrates when she suggests that this is a dramatic form which “obfuscates any attempt to discover abstract principles or essences of knowledge” while allowing “that which is to be ‘known’ to remain open and mysterious.”\(^{212}\) The different emphasis of the two approaches, however, is once again unmistakable. For both


\(^{208}\) Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, viii.


\(^{211}\) Stamps, 135.

\(^{212}\) *AW*, 20.
Ong and McLuhan, dialogue – whether in speech, which is its natural setting, or in written form – is a form of communication; it implies the participation of different speakers, the consequence of which is that you "don’t know where you are coming out. You stand to be modified by the other man; he stands to be modified by you."\(^{213}\)

For Pickstock, on the other hand, the significance of the dialogic form appears on the level of meaning or signification, based on the to-and-fro dynamic of the linguistic sign; she implies that this characteristic guarantees that there is no unambiguous "essence," and so that which is to be known remains "open and mysterious." Of course, we assume – theoretically – that for a dialogue to take place at least two people are necessary, but for Pickstock the emphasis is not on their communication or the mutuality of dialogue, but on the semiotic, meaning-making – or, in this case, meaning-hiding – nature of the linguistic sign (here orality). Behind all this, however, there is an issue that haunts all Pickstock’s argumentation about orality and writing. Even though “bodily presence” as a condition of orality is repeatedly emphasized by Pickstock – and, as we saw, is one of her main arguments against Derrida’s interpretation of writing – the primarily signifying, rather than communicating, role she attributes to (spoken) language is such that in effect it, too, brackets the presence of real persons with concrete physical bodies; and thus, in the end, also a real phenomenology.

This ambiguity in Pickstock’s use of the phenomenological approach is already apparent in her use of terminology – rather than “sound,” “spoken word,” or “hearing,” she talks about “orality” – which is a concept that has a cultural, not subjective and body-related meaning. As we have seen, for Ong, McLuhan, etc. the terms “orality” and “literacy” refer to historical/cultural formations or environments; we can talk about the “orality of language,” but “orality” as such contrasts with “literacy” (hence the title of Ong’s important work, _Orality and Literacy_,) not with “writing.”\(^{214}\) Thus for these thinkers issues of orality and literacy, though they relate them to cognition, are intimately related to history and culture – even if we saw Street, Heath, Finnegan and others argue that literacy is as much – or more – a social practice than a cognitive skill (which is their main criticism of the Toronto School).

Regarding the oral and written as “social organizations” (McLuhan’s term for the social and cultural context of a given time and place), Pickstock’s approach is rather ambiguous. Her

\(^{213}\) George Riemer, “An Interview with Walter Ong,” in Farrell and Soukup, _An Ong Reader_, 79.

\(^{214}\) Some critics regard this kind of confusion as a sign of the "metaphorical" usage of words characteristic of Radical Orthodoxy, while others – and I agree with this view – see it as an indication of a more fundamental confusion of levels of discourse.
handling of Plato – for example in “Socrates Goes Outside the City” – has been the object of much criticism;\textsuperscript{215} at this point I only want to highlight the lack of any reflection on the cultural/historical or social context of Plato’s ideas regarding the issue of orality. This is remarkable because, as we have seen – although to a different extent and certainly controversially – several orality-literacy scholars regard Plato as the first representative of the early, tension-filled stage of literacy. Following on the work of Havelock, both McLuhan and Ong emphasize the fact that “the Greeks invented both their artistic and scientific novelties after the interiorization of writing”\textsuperscript{216} and that “the philosophical thinking Plato fought for depended entirely on writing.”\textsuperscript{217} According to most critics, the riddle of why Plato should banish traditional (oral) poets from his Republic and at the same time defend orality in the face of writing in the \textit{Phaedrus} can hardly be solved without recourse to the cultural-historical background of his age. Henri-Jean Martin, for example, in his popular \textit{The History and Power of Writing}, says the following:

Plato’s rejection of written philosophy and his much-reiterated proclamation of the pre-eminence of oral expression make us wonder about the relationship between his own written work and his oral teaching. One wonders whether Plato was not using this rejection of writing as a way of making a hermeneutic appeal for its proper use. How can we deny that underlying his theories there is an implicit vision of the written word and a logic of the division of labour that reflect the logic of the alphabet? Writing forcibly removed speech from the instant. By the same token it invited the sage to distinguish truth (\textit{episteme}) from received opinion (\textit{doxa}). … Since Plato held that thought is made by joining separate elements it is hardly surprising that he compared the dialectician’s task of analysis and synthesis to children’s efforts to learn their letters, then to decipher increasingly complex syllables, and finally to understand words and phrases. The two processes seemed to him quite evidently based on the same technique.

The point here is not so much whether Martin’s analysis is correct, but that unlike him, Pickstock makes no mention whatsoever of the issue of “the logic of the alphabet,” which all

\textsuperscript{216} McLuhan, \textit{The Gutenberg Galaxy}, 54.
\textsuperscript{217} Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, 24.
orality-literacy scholars and cultural historians comment on.\textsuperscript{219} The only reference she makes to the historical background of writing and related issues in Plato’s time is in the context of her criticism of Derrida, whom she chides for not providing qualifications to his statement that writing is more democratic than orality.\textsuperscript{220} In that context she argues that “the question of the availability of texts, of censorship or quality, plus the factor that one must first learn to read” also affect the problem of what is democratic and what is not and, in a footnote, adds that fifth-century Greek historians and dramatists “portrayed writing as an essential tool of tyrants”\textsuperscript{221} – a remark that is clearly meant to support her thesis, based on a phenomenological analysis of Lysias’ scroll, that writing equals control and dominance. But is it not inconsistent to refer to cultural-historical circumstances in connection with some arguments, while completely ignoring them in connection with other questions?

Although it is only in the next chapter of \textit{After Writing} that Pickstock directly addresses the topic of the nature of the (human) subject, the issues around her use of the phenomenological method just mentioned already hint at one of the problems that keep re-appearing in the book, namely that of the role of the (knowing?) subject – one of the quintessential Radical Orthodox concerns. As we suggested above, the self-consciousness of the Kantian, absolute knowing subject is one of the main targets of Radical Orthodoxy’s critique of modernity; one of its two main “negative philosophical verdicts.”

In the context of this chapter it is worth noting, however, that according to several critics Pickstock misrepresents the original meaning of Platonism when she “underplays the essential role of the noetic grasp of reality in Neoplatonic thought.”\textsuperscript{222} Eli Diamond, for example, argues that because of Radical Orthodoxy’s postmodern attempt to escape modern subjectivity, Pickstock mixes Hellenic and Neoplatonic Platonism in an inconsistent, even contradictory way, and because of her liturgical interests she defends a Neoplatonic version of Platonism. This, however, ”assumes a free individual, complete in itself. … Returning to Neoplatonism to overcome subjectivity is rendered incoherent by the fact that it is in Neoplatonic thought that one finds the origins of the modern subject.”\textsuperscript{223} In this same essay Diamond also stresses the role

\textsuperscript{220} \textit{AW}, 23.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., Note 37.
\textsuperscript{222} Diamond, Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid., 5, 6.
of the “noetic grasp of reality” as well as the clear – and necessary – differentiation of thought and doxological language in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought.

Of course, the Neoplatonic subject, even if in some way preparing the ground for the modern subject, cannot be equated with the Cartesian or Kantian knowing subject. Still, as the quote emphasizes, the fact that its “free individuality,” including a noetic – not primarily liturgical – grasp of reality was possibly impacted by the changes that the use of the alphabet and writing brought with them both cognitively and socially, cannot be denied, and makes Pickstock’s covert theory of the subject in this chapter of After Writing questionable.

Indeed, it seems that already in this first chapter we encounter problematic aspects of Pickstock’s thought as expressed in her handling of orality and writing. On the one hand, her use of phenomenological description presupposes – at least to some extent – a conscious, experiencing self with a real body, for whom spoken and written language, orality and literacy, “operate” based on sense perception, and are means of cognition and communication. On the other, she refutes these same features when she treats spoken and written language as characterized by the results of her phenomenological observations (ambiguous, open, mysterious, etc.) as purely semiotic, or in some cases as socio-political (writing as capital), moral, or theological (calling on and manifesting the transcendent) in nature. These incongruities, as we shall see, also persist in the rest of After Writing.

II. 3. 3. Pickstock on Ramus, Descartes and Spatialization

After her analysis of orality and writing as these appear in the controversy between Plato and the sophists in the Phaedrus and comparing it with the Derridean interpretation of the same, in the second chapter of After Writing, “Spatialization: The Middle of Modernity,” Pickstock turns to the period of early modernity. In the focus of her attention are two important thinkers, Peter Ramus und Rene Descartes. The reason for this is that she sees them as instrumental in establishing the condition she calls “spatialization” – which, in turn, she considers “the middle of modernity,” that is, the condition that in different ways establishes and defines modernity.

Pickstock believes that Ramism and Cartesianism are the “extensions of sophistic mathēsis” – a scientific, mathematically-based approach to knowledge, which in Part I of After Writing she associated with writing, and which, she suggests, is the result of the sophists’ denial of the ambiguity and openness of orality and the liturgical character of the polis. According to

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224 AW, 48.
Pickstock’s main thesis, in early modernity – along with the breakdown of the traditional religious order – the facility of printing encourages a general attitude that gives priority to space over time. Printing encourages "spatial illusion," because the basis of printing is identical repetition, and so it gives people a false security when they are "led to imagine that the ease and predictability of operations within a new artificial sphere exhibit our true, primary relationship to the world." 225 As well as security, the space occupied by the printed page also gives the illusion of eternity; whatever has been printed is apprehended as something that is unchanging and can "bypass the interventions of human temporality and subjectivity." 226

Plato, Pickstock suggests, was able to provide a "remedy" for sophistic spatialization in the form of the dialogue. But with the coming of modernity the structures of sophistry are now "inscribed into our linguistic and social practices" 227 and have thus become part and parcel of our (Western) culture. How exactly did, or does, this inscription happen? Pickstock quotes the example of Peter Ramus and Rene Descartes as main actors in modern spatialization. In the following I will briefly review how she sees the role played by writing – in this case mainly print – in these monumental changes.

II. 3. 3. 1. Peter Ramus

Pickstock sees the first crucial figure in the move towards spatialization in Peter Ramus. While Ramus’s – primarily pedagogical – endeavour was to introduce a "method" that would make learning clear and simple, the charts and diagrams he developed to this end "occupy space in a timeless domain of abstract lines," 228 and seem to make language, the voice of the teacher, expendable. Ramus may be regarded as one of the first who came to regard thought as something that is primarily spatial and visual and is thus to a large extent quantified, objectified, and "available." 229 This kind of search for both methodological and pragmatic security was becoming apparent during the successive crises of the late Middle Ages and the Reformation, proposes Pickstock. 230 The manoeuvrable type of the printing press fed into this desire, as it

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225 Ibid., 48-49.
226 Ibid., 48. It should be added, though, that it is not technology in itself, but the breakdown of the religious order that Pickstock considers to be the main culprit in this change; it is once eternity has been banished that space is now regarded as absolute.
227 Ibid., 49.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid., 50.
230 Ibid., 52.
suggests "infinite transferability" and thus "universal applicability,"\textsuperscript{231} giving the illusion of safety from ambiguity and contingency.

Such an apprehension of reality also carried its dangers; not only because memory is no longer regarded as testifying to the temporality of knowledge, but also in the way it affected the role and use of language. Pickstock here refers explicitly to Walter Ong’s contribution, who, in his study of Ramism talks about "the decay of dialogue,"\textsuperscript{232} when rhetoric as traditionally understood is degraded as Ramus’s dialectic method lost its connection to spoken language altogether and became completely textualized.\textsuperscript{233} These changes to language were even apparent in syntax and punctuation, suggests Pickstock; while in spoken language syntax was time-bound and thus aggregative and “punctuation” (colons and commas) was expressed by pauses or emphases related to oral delivery, these now became abstract, written signs and thus also logic-bound.

In summary, Pickstock seems to agree with Ong’s verdict that printing had an unmistakable impact not only on the acquisition of knowledge, but also on how knowledge was regarded; the dominance of relying on the eye when using the diagrams of Ramus and his method meant that knowledge was increasingly apprehended as something "given" which could be discovered without the presence and mediation of the personal, of (spoken) language.

\textit{II. 3. 3. 2. Descartes and Spatialization}

Spatialization becomes even more embedded in the philosophy of Descartes, argues Pickstock, because for the "politico-architectonics" of Descartes the perfect city is "primarily written and wholly immanent."\textsuperscript{234} Why should that be so? In his \textit{Discourse on Method}, the main analogies employed by Descartes are those of architecture, and Pickstock suggests that what this “architectonics” demonstrates is, again, a preference for the homogeneous over the multiple and diverse; and yet again, this is effected by “a substitution of the spatial for the temporal.”\textsuperscript{235} Just like in the case of Ramus, all this is related to the mode of acquiring knowledge; just as for Ramus, reality for Descartes, too, is the “given,” that which is “transparently available.”\textsuperscript{236}

\textsuperscript{231} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{232} Ong, \textit{Ramus and the Decay of Dialogue}.
\textsuperscript{233} However, notes Ong, classical dialectic, as practised through dialogue and disputation, is also turned into a monologic art.
\textsuperscript{234} \textit{AW}, 57-58.
\textsuperscript{235} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., 62.
For Pickstock, spatialization is thus closely related to another important change that takes place in modernity: things are no more regarded in relation to their transcendental origin but are seen as “given” and have reality only in as much as they are (immanently) known; ontology loses its pride of place, and representation and epistemology triumph. Unlike the Platonic city, for Descartes the goal of civic life is not the mediation of the good, but the universal method in thought; his formal arrangements present an ideal “whose autonomy refuses the mediation of tradition, myth or transcendence.”

Like Lysias with his scroll, in his *Regulae* Descartes already dreamed of a “portable method;” and it is only a spatial, written arrangement, unchanging and undisturbed by “oral transmission through time” which can achieve this kind of portability. But this kind of certainty and transferability can only be achieved because “the city has now been drastically subordinated to the individual,” a fact that Pickstock once again contrasts with the Platonic city where “the individual is still formed through public education and dialogue.”

However, the Cartesian subject itself is “textualized” because, by substituting method for memory, it has distanced itself from time, place and anything that is material. In this way “the written subject” is also self-governing, as it recognizes no authority, whether transcendent or not, “from which to borrow its own existence;” it has simply become the “knowing subject.”

Descartes took further the process of textualization and spatialization begun by Ramus, concludes Pickstock, both in terms of his attitude to the *polis* and his construal of being, knowing, and the subject. While Ramus, even in using charts and maps, in some sense still relied on “inhabited time and space,” for Descartes physical space is replaced by a “purely rational, homogeneous substrate which houses … idealized figures or signs which, as interior, appear to ’get outside language’ itself” she suggests; and this interior may be seen as sustained not through speech, but through writing.

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237 Ibid., 60.
238 Ibid.
239 Ibid., 61.
240 Ibid., 73.
241 Ibid., 69.
242 Pickstock here makes an interesting point when she contends that Descartes’ “epistemological writing,” though alphabetic, is close to the derridean *hieroglyph* in its preference for the morphological and pictorial arts. These, Derrida felt, could act as better counter-examples to the assumed immediacy and transparency of speech and/or alphabetic writing. *AW*, 70.
In the last part of “Spatialization: The Middle of Modernity,” Catherine Pickstock turns her attention to an interesting, perhaps unexpected concern: the effect of spatialization on language. Although she doesn’t go into the details about exactly when and how, she suggests that the different manifestations of textualization and spatialization have become normative, “in such a way that it is no longer possible even to observe it as a distinct phenomenon. …The central point of power is now scattered by our own linguistic signs, disseminated in and through the locus of our creativity, where it takes root invisibly.”243 But how can linguistic signs play these tricks on us without us being aware of them? Pickstock mentions two areas of linguistic use where this kind of linguistic “disempowerment” happens: an increased use of the noun as a part of speech, especially in twentieth-century poetry and linguistic practice, and “the implications of this for discourse structure, namely the inevitable substitution of complex by simple asyndetic structure.”244

As for what she terms “nominalization,” the title of the next sub-chapter, “Nouns: a hardness as of cut stone” betrays her judgement. She argues that nineteenth-century historical representation, in its striving towards depiction – both in words and in pictures – led to a high estimation of objects, which betrays a striving towards the “summoning of reality distilled from the flux of time, as a spatial given.”245 She detects this elevation of objecthood in the artistic movements of Imagism, Cubism and Futurism, among others, where, she notes, we often encounter a ”succession of concrete nouns and noun phrases, and an elimination of verbs.”246 This search for ”reality” conceals the same idealized object as we have seen in the philosophy of Descartes, believes Pickstock, as the noun does not show either time (tense) or person and thus ”appears both permanent, unchanging and given”247 – similar in its effect to Cartesian spatialization.

Pickstock then cites contemporary public discourse, where, she believes, the use of nouns derived from verbs is yet another example of the ”ascendancy of the object,” which is especially dangerous because it often goes unnoticed while yet manipulating our ”civic realities.”248 She detects this kind of manipulation in the mostly impersonal language of media news reports,

243 Ibid., 88.
244 Ibid., 89. Italics mine.
245 Ibid.
246 Ibid., 91.
247 Ibid.
248 Ibid., 92.
political speeches, and official, managerial discourses and suggests that although most of the
time this seems to serve “linguistic efficiency,” in reality this kind of nominalization, by eliding
grammatical voice, represents an abdication of responsibility,\textsuperscript{249} with the result that in the
contemporary spatial city, the person is no more seen “as a genuine subjectivity performed and
renewed as public acts of citizenship, but as the absence of a person.”\textsuperscript{250}

Besides nominalization, the other area where Pickstock believes we can see spatialization at
work in language today is discourse structure, especially the use of \textit{asyndeton}. Asyndeton is
syntax characterized by the absence of co-ordinating and subordinating conjunctions;\textsuperscript{251} but
Pickstock amends this definition by claiming that in its effect asyndeton, too, can be linked to
the search for clarity and the unambiguous rendering of reality, as its ”cumulative, stichomythic
swiftness and ’curt’ style seem to satisfy many of the epistemological and aesthetic demands”\textsuperscript{252}
of this effort. A further significant feature of the logical and linguistic structure of asyndeton is
that the reader keeps attempting to supply the missing object, which is ”lurking beyond the real
(textual) object;“\textsuperscript{253} the result of this, suggests Pickstock, is that what appears as real, human
desire, turns out to be ”desire as lack.”\textsuperscript{254}

\textit{II. 3. 3. 4. Evaluation and Critique: Orality, Literacy and Spatialization as the Middle of
Modernity}

There is no doubt that the part of \textit{After Writing} which has the most in common with the thought
of Ong, McLuhan and some of the other orality-literacy scholars is ”Spatialization: The Middle
of Modernity.” Setting aside questions of historical perspicuity for the moment,\textsuperscript{255} it is here that
Pickstock’s method is closest to that of Ong and McLuhan; particularly Ong, whose study on
Ramus is also referenced by Pickstock. Most importantly, the crucial concept of this chapter,
that of “spatialization,” an explicit contrasting of space with time – which was already

\textsuperscript{249} “When a politician speaks of ‘inflation,’ ‘privatization’ or ‘recession,’ the lack of any explicit or implicit
expression of personal role” means that what he or she really does is do away with agency and consequently
”encourage an unquestioning acceptance of the phenomenon as a mythicized authority.” \textit{AW}, 93.
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{251} The example of asyndeton quoted most often is ”I came, I saw, I conquered” instead of ”I came and I saw and
I conquered.”
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{254} Adding that this is the same lack that ”resides at the heart of capitalist economy.”
\textsuperscript{255} Several scholars have commented on different aspects of Radical Orthodox historiography, including its
casting Descartes in the role of the villain who introduced the subjective ”cogito” of modernity. See Hankey et
al., Chapter 7. The notion, definition and timing of ”modernity,” and with it the assumption of its
”demythologizing” role has also been contested by historians; see most recently Jason Josephson-Storm, \textit{The
Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences} (Chicago: University of
introduced in “Socrates Goes Outside the City” but plays a primary role in this chapter – mirrors the key role assigned to time and space and their relationship with different communications media by orality-literacy scholars. As we saw above, for Innis it was the space-time bias in communication that determined the fate of whole civilizations, especially empires; and he already maintained that modernity was typically and crudely space-biased, secular, and focussed on technology. The relationship of orality and literacy to time and space also played an important role in the thought of McLuhan and Ong. Ong suggested that “writing restructures consciousness” because of its reconstitution of the word, spoken in time, in visual space, adding that later print “embedded words in space more definitely,” with the result that it reified them, made words into a commodity, disengaging them from real-life personal discourse.256

It seems, then, that Pickstock agrees with the Toronto School in this respect: the medium greatly affects the message because it may change our relationship with time and space, which in turn often define how we see and understand the world. In addition, just like Ong and McLuhan, Pickstock relies on phenomenological description to reach this conclusion. For example, she builds on our “subject-relative experience” when she talks about the “clarity,” “availability” and “accessibility” of method, words or concepts that describe the experience of looking at, or reading, a Ramist diagram. She even explicitly mentions the role played by the experiencing subject in this cognitive process when she remarks that the Ramist pedagogical “stance of the methodizer . . . depends entirely upon a new distinction from, and elevation above, the flow of reality on the part of the subject, which… permits reality to apparently render itself in terms of … clarity and distinctness.”257

In this respect her pronouncements are in fact very close to how Hans Jonas evaluated the meaning of vision and hearing from a philosophical phenomenological point of view. As noted above, Jonas, too, suggested that vision (sight) engenders a sense of distance, objectivity, and eternity, while hearing (sound) is subjective and temporal.258 Not only does Pickstock resemble these other scholars in that she employs phenomenological description, but, like Ong and McLuhan, she also makes a connection between spatialization, knowledge – or the search for knowledge – and the knowing subject. In fact, she also comments on the emergence of a newly formed collective, cultural consciousness when she concludes that the kind of methodological

256 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 77, 119, 121.
257 AW, 52. Italics mine.
258 It must be added, though, that as we have seen, Pickstock does not talk about sight and hearing or sound, only about orality and writing, which underlines the fact that her focus is not on the bodily/sensual but on the semiotic.
security that the Ramist method, with its spatially formal arrangements affords, reveals ”a new cultural fear … scarcely concealed.”259

Besides these similarities, however, there are also significant differences between how Pickstock and Ong, McLuhan and others see the role and effect of the medium of – in this case – print. In his analysis of Ramus and his method Ong underlines that in Ramus’ time a decisive issue was ”the struggle between sound and sight, between habits of thinking based on listening to voices and habits of thinking based on looking at surfaces, between living in a world inhabited by persons who talked back and living in a world occupied by passive objects scattered in ’systems’ through the new Copernican space”260 – that is, he views the effects of Ramism (method, and print) in the “concrete contexts of interest” of people’s thinking (cognition) and the kind of world they would live in: the world of objects instead of relationships and thus dialogue. As we have seen, in many ways Pickstock seems to suggest a similar kind of change with her emphasis on the role played by knowledge for both Ramus and Descartes.

Taking a closer look, however, we see that in Pickstock’s interpretation writing and print are not just media that effect a change in the “message” (a focus on knowledge now felt as certain and unchanging) and may thus have negative or dangerous consequences, but are the means of a departure from the ideal of liturgical orality, with its acknowledged dependence on the divine source. She interprets ramist and cartesian reform not only as a change in the “ratio of senses” and a shift in emphasis from time to space – as do orality-literacy scholars – but as a key stage in the change from the primacy of ontology to epistemology. What is more, she posits a causal relationship between (ramist and cartesian) knowledge and the loss of this ontological dependence; she believes that the main feature of this knowledge is exactly that: “immanentism,” a denial, or at least forgetting, of our transcendent origins.

This kind of interpretation is not surprising, as it follows form the Radical Orthodox framework that defines Pickstock’s thinking: the anti-modernity, anti-(knowing)subject outlook, and the Platonic-Christian synthesis, within which language, too, has sacramental qualities and may thus be an instrument and expression of our ontological dependence. We should not forget, however, about the third element of the Radical Orthodox scheme, Pickstock’s semiotic approach. While, as we saw above, she criticizes Derrida for his disregard for real bodies, she, too, treats (in this case) written, printed language as primarily sign and thus extracts it from real

259 Ibid., 53-54.
260 Ong,”Ramus and the Transit to the Modern Mind” in Farrell and Soukup, 236. Italics mine.
life and makes it in a way transcendent and unchanging, abstracted from all concrete contexts of interest. But, as already argued, at the same time she establishes the characteristic features of these linguistic expressions (such as nominalization, asyndeton, etc.) by using *phenomenological* description, which assumes a conscious, experiencing subject.

At this point it should be added that Pickstock’s including language *usage* among the consequences of ramist and cartesian spatialization is intriguing; thinkers of neither the "old" nor the new literacy studies, of ethnographers or other scholars have devoted much attention to this topic. The concrete analysis of nominalization and asyndeton is especially interesting and anticipates the role Pickstock attributes to language usage in the liturgy. It is significant, though, that the conclusions of this analysis in “The Language of Modernity” are also phenomenologically founded. Pickstock mentions, for example, the “phenomenology of nominal density” of Imagism (the poetry of Ezra Pound is quoted as an example) which sought to “attenuate time” with the help of the (phenomenological) effect created by “a dizzying and clotted succession of concrete nouns and noun phrases.”

In the same section she also clearly employs the “what-it-feels-like” phenomenological approach when she calls attention to a similar phenomenon in our time, namely the increased use of nominalizations in public discourse. She mentions nominalizations such as “allegation,” “inflation” etc. which are “characteristic of the formal and impersonal prose of media news reports, political speeches, and bureaucratic discourses” and concludes that although we might think we only *use* these words/nouns as they appear in public discourse, they in fact ”give rise to the nature of what they name. And yet we think we arrive after the naming, and so our consciousness does not think to question what we take as given. … These words … deliver to us, in linguistic form, the nature of our city and our creative role within that city.”

This is a very interesting statement. In fact, it sounds like a somewhat differently phrased version of “the medium – in this case language usage occasioned by the advancement of the printed word – is the message.” Is this not a proof that Pickstock agrees with McLuhan in that orality, writing, and print all influence our epistemological apparatus? The difference to McLuhan’s understanding seems to reside in the emphasis; while McLuhan’s concern was with the effect of the medium on the consciousness of the perceiving subject, Pickstock suggests that

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261 McLuhan in his *The Gutenberg Galaxy* briefly discusses modernist poets and painters from this point of view.  
262 *AW*, 91.  
263 Ibid., 93.  
264 Ibid., 92. Italics mine.
although our consciousness plays a – passive – role, it is the sign, in this case language, words, phrases that “give rise to,” “deliver,” or point to something. This makes them appear almost like active agents – for better or worse – orality for a connection to transcendence, writing and print for all the effects described above.

As for the role of the historical-cultural and social context, it seems that although the cultural history of the media seems to play a certain role in Pickstock’s argument in this part of the book, regarding print and the connected spatialization this role is still secondary and subservient to the theological-philosophical point of view described above. In fact, the brief subchapter on Ramus is the only part of After Writing where the cultural/social context of orality-literacy issues – in this case, the new technology of print and its role for education – is taken into consideration at any length. Further on in this same chapter reference is made repeatedly to ”Ramist or Cartesian cartographies,” but social and cultural embeddedness only appears tangentially, with little relatedness to the technology of the time or the means of communication. There is no reference whatsoever to the role of the changing media or social context in Pickstock’s characterization of ”baroque excess,” or, later, to the language used in ”modernist poetics,” for example.

Furthermore, after her analysis of modernity, including the role of nominalisation in the language of journalism, one might expect to get Pickstock’s view of the contemporary, postmodern cultural situation (not forgetting that the book was published in 1997). The last brief allusion to the historical/cultural context, however, simply states that ”the contemporary city is publicized in and through these simulations of myriad ‘events’ and their analysis. … Whereas in the baroque, the representation of the king produced this continuity consciously, today, it is conveyed through the warp of the fabric of sensory impressions produced and regulated by a market economy whose condition of possibility is … the impression of controlled chaos.” What these sensory impressions are, why and how they are regulated by market economy, and if they have got anything to do with the media – orality, literacy, or the multimedia characteristic of the 21st century, in the form of ”secondary orality” or electronic communication – is left unexplained.

To sum up, in her assessment of the relationship between the medium and the message Pickstock is the closest in this, second chapter of After Writing to the topics discussed, as well

265 Ibid., 83.
266 Ibid., 91-94.
267 Ibid., 99.
as the methodologies employed, by different media scholars. Her emphasis on spatialization – the effect of printing, which happens in space – gaining prominence, echoes Ong, McLuhan and others also who also regard Ramus and early modernity as introducing decisive changes in the relationship of the medium and the message. However, although Pickstock also uses phenomenological description to make her point, she designates spatialization as “the middle of modernity” because, in the framework of the Radical Orthodox “negative philosophical verdicts,” she can show how it gave rise to the modern preference of epistemology over ontology, with the “knowing subject” at its centre. By assigning written/printed language the role of the sign that delivers this new kind of subject, many of the social and cultural consequences of this change in media ecology are seen as secondary only; furthermore, the effect of print on theological thinking is dealt with in a very superficial way.

II. 3. 4. Signs of Death: Pickstock on the Necrophilia of Postmodernity

In a metaphorical, succinct sentence, Pickstock suggests at the end of the chapter of *After Writing* just discussed that the written and printed, spatial order of modernity is where, from the baroque era onwards, we have increasingly come to live and in which ”that which is multiple, different, or fluctuating” – including orality, dialogue? Pickstock does not specify it here – epitomizes the reality of death, against which the clarity and dependability of spatialization seems “the only possible defence.”268 The next chapter of *After Writing*, entitled ”Signs of Death,” continues the story where it had left it: postmodernity’s attempt at breaking out of the spatialized city; which, however, Pickstock suggests turned out to be not a break from, but the continuation of, modern spatialization.

Pickstock’s main dispute in this chapter is with significant postmodern thinkers, especially Derrida, and the main question she addresses is the relationship of moderns and postmoderns to death. Her introductory discussion of what is often considered to be (post)modernity’s necrophobia but, she suggests, is really necrophilia, is complex and philosophical. What is relevant from our point of view is her suggestion that this life/death dualism of postmodernity is especially apparent in recent postmodern philosophy, and explicitly so in Derrida’s theory of language as writing. While the theory Pickstock puts forward on the relationship between writing and death in this section is intriguing, it doesn’t deal with our enquiry directly, so I will summarize it only briefly.

268 Ibid.
For Derrida the essence of writing is that the meaning of the written sign is always postponed; but in reality this is identical with death as the “pseudo-eternity of spatial permanence,” because the written sign occupies an idealized space, without any real context, suggests Pickstock. She then ends her argument with a rhetorical question: "Do not these characteristics suggest that a written meaning is somehow independent, or in excess of, events in time?" Her answer is, of course, clear: Derrida, by making writing into the arché of any signification, stamps out agency and converts an event in time into "the spatial domain of givenness." Pickstock’s final conclusion situates this chapter in the framework of the previous two chapters and that of the next two: Derrida’s "city which seeks to live only in spatial immanence is a necropolis defined by its refusal of liturgical life;" it is only the liturgy, the Roman Rite in particular, that, by virtue of its orality which does not suppress temporality can withstand the “life/death dualism" and thus ”consummates” or achieves the perfection of philosophy, be that pre-modern, modern or postmodern.

II. 3. 4. 1. Evaluation and Critique

There is one passage in this chapter of After Writing that offers a clue to many of the issues discussed in this part of my thesis and which is therefore worth quoting at length. As I noted earlier, Pickstock does not directly clarify the basis from which she approaches orality-related questions; but she does so indirectly, in this paragraph.

[Derrida’s] association of orality with the metaphysical must . . . be called into question. First, Derrida’s characterization of speech as fading in favour of pure presence rests upon a phenomenology of speech (it appears to fade; it appears to be commanded by the subject, etc.) as compared with writing, even though it is claimed that phenomenology itself is disturbed by the primacy of writing and the trace, since the trace is more primordial than present appearing. Is it, then, that we need a phenomenology to show that we cannot have a phenomenology? But this contradiction is avoidable. For Derrida’s phenomenological account of orality as fading towards ideality occludes an alternative phenomenology – namely, that speech is dying and living at once, in such a way that the recurrent dispossession of each syllable of the spoken word, rather than

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269 Ibid., 104.
270 Ibid., 116.
271 Ibid., 117.
272 Ibid.
273 Ibid., 103.
being related to the ontological disposal of the sign toward and anterior ideal, is in fact, as Augustine explained, the condition of possibility for there to be a sign at all. … One could argue that because, for Derrida, the meaning of the written sign is always postponed, and is therefore identified with death – that which one can never experience – in a certain way makes meaning complete, just as the written text itself, in all its distance and assumed authority, would seem also to present knowledge as accomplished, and to impose a gulf between subject and meaning. Derrida disallows any sense of meaning as non-ideality, as an inhabited, developing occurrence, but instead presents it as an absent ideal which does not permit even the slightest degree of participation. 274

This rather lengthy paragraph is significant from a number of different points of view. First, I believe that Pickstock is right when she points out the inconsistency in Derrida’s argument in using phenomenology to disprove phenomenology. Indeed, although initially Derrida’s work was meant to be a critique of Husserl’s phenomenological method – presence signifying the presence of the subject defined by intentional acts – with time the focus of his thought shifted. Schaeffer and Gorman rightly point out the difference in Ong and Derrida’s use of the same word:

Ong and Derrida each invoke ‘presence’ to describe a key element in their accounts of the epistemological status of written texts. Yet each came to mean something entirely different by the term. For Ong ‘presence’ denotes the quintessentially human, that is, the presence of a human subject behind and in every human communication. For Derrida ‘presence’ denotes the signified as an essence, that is, the philosophically unworkable assumption that a signifier denotes a signified that is ‘present,’ full and entire, in the signifier. 275

Even though Derrida exchanged the phenomenological starting point for a semiotic one, Pickstock is not wrong to insist that in a way he still uses phenomenology to disprove phenomenology. But, I want to suggest, Pickstock can be charged with a similar inconsistency.

As for the particular aspect of the phenomenology of speech (or orality – Pickstock uses the two terms interchangeably) alluded to in this passage, it is worth remembering that the same, unique characteristic of the spoken word, namely that each syllable has to “fade” (die) in order for the next to arrive, is pointed out by Ong when he reflects on the nature of sound: “Sound

274 Ibid., 115-116. Italics in original except for ”occludes an alternative phenomenology,” which is mine.
275 Schaeffer and Gorman, Ibid., 857.
has a special relationship to time ... Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word ‘permanence’, by the time I get to the ‘-nence’, the ‘perma-’ is gone, and has to be gone.”276 If we analyse Pickstock’s words in the quote, we can observe a number of differences between Ong’s and Pickstock’s approach. First of all, unlike Ong, Pickstock does not talk about sound, only about speech and orality. She does not even differentiate between the two; as we suggested, for McLuhan, Ong, etc. sound (the spoken word) is a body-related, physical occurrence and “speaking” is a mode of individual expression, while orality is a culturally defined term. This, too, is a sign that the senses, perception, the “actual body” as well as the cultural environment where speech takes place are not the focus of Pickstock’s attention. Her use of words like “ontological,” “sign,” “ideal,” “supplementarity,” “subject” and “meaning” becomes conspicuous and confirms that just like Derrida, in effect Pickstock, too, treats sound and orality from within a semiotic framework, with all the consequences of this approach that were described above.

Once again, this highlights the tension between Pickstock’s phenomenological description and its semiotic application. Even though she mentions that which “seems” and what the (human, speaking) subject must be “reconciled to,’’ in several sentences in this paragraph the (grammatical) subject is not the speaker, but “the word” or “meaning.” In the last two sentences, for example, the characterization of the written or printed text as “distant” as well as possessing an “assumed authority” (whether a text is always seen as possessing authority is a different question that pertains more to cultural assumptions) and thus presenting “knowledge as accomplished” reinforces the sense that this statement is phenomenologically-based. Her conclusion that this imposes “a gulf between subject and meaning” is also true phenomenologically, if we only think about the relationship between the reader and the text, and thus the often-noted need for interpretation. However, Pickstock’s emphasis is again on the concepts of “sign” and “meaning,” which appear to possess an almost independent existence of their own, and not on how the medium – the spoken or written word – affects the message, that is, not on the “subject-relative experience of the life-world.”

Pickstock’s critique concerning Derrida’s opting for the ideal over ”living bodies” is perfectly valid; we commented on this aspect of post-structuralist thought in the last chapter. At the same time, although Derrida sometimes plays with words and is not always consistent in his use of

276 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 32.
the word “writing,” we have seen how his notion of *arche-writing* makes it clear that what Derrida means when he uses this concept is a certain type of relationship which precedes the possibility of both speech and writing as inscribing signs. That is, he does not even attempt to tie writing in this other, particular sense to physical bodies. I suggest that by acknowledging that Derrida’s scheme rests on an “alternative phenomenology,” Pickstock in a sense tacitly admits its (alternative) validity; however, she chooses not to pursue this line of thought – the “alternative” offered by Derrida – but continues with the line of her own argument. Could this be a sign of the above-mentioned “ideological determination” of her argumentation?

Because Derrida’s semiotic interpretation of *writing* is indeed independent of concrete contexts, the absence in this section of cultural-historical considerations is practically self-evident; but there are other important issues that are addressed in this chapter that we must consider in the next section below.

II. 3. 5. Transition and Part Two

The section between Parts I and II of *After Writing*, entitled “Transition”, bears the subtitle “On the Evacuation of the Liturgy”. Although what it is that makes the liturgy so pivotal for Pickstock’s argument is hinted at in her analysis of Plato, it is only fully explicated in Part II, and *Transition* prepares the way for this through its construal of changes that were brought about in a particular historical period. Pickstock defines this as the time when “corruptions of the theological intelligence and liturgical culture of the late Middle Ages … permitted the return of a spatialized sophistic outlook.”\(^{277}\) Although they have their role in the argument of the book, neither of these developments is directly related to our topic, thus I shall only mention the main points made by Pickstock in this section.

Regarding the “corruption of theological intelligence,” Pickstock (and most of her Radical Orthodox colleagues) view Duns Scotus as the culprit who, through his doctrine of the univocity of being, introduced a breach in the theology – especially the analogical way of thinking and speaking about creation – that characterized St. Thomas and his followers. The “corruption of liturgical culture,” on the other hand, Pickstock deems to have taken place within the wider phenomenon of cultural politics. Her argument here is complex and concerns both the social/political and the familial realm; she argues, among other things, that a sense of temporal homogeneity, rather than the view of time held by Augustine and St. Thomas, for whom time

\(^{277}\) AW, 121.
was never separable from the movement of memory and desire, resulted in replacing “the liturgical order” in different spheres of life. All this, Pickstock suggests, was part of the already mentioned “drift towards spatialization,” which during the Middle Ages also affected the liturgy and Eucharistic theology. What happened was that the mysterious, diachronic, temporal understanding of the liturgy gave way to regarding it as a spatialized event, “a simple, positive, authoritative ‘miracle’ in the present.”

It is not the task of this thesis to analyse and critique Pickstock’s theological genealogy, her interpretation of historical figures, in general, and Duns Scotus in particular; several studies have been written on this topic. However, even this brief summary of the sweeping genealogy provided by Pickstock – not only of different thinkers but also of social and cultural changes – warrants the conclusion that the complex, intricate nature of the many different factors in historical change, for example during the Late Middle Ages, are not given the necessary considerations by her.

II. 3. 5. 1. After Writing: Liturgy as the ”Consummation of Philosophy”

Part Two of *After Writing* is devoted to a deeper examination and discussion of the liturgical alternative “to the sophistic, modern, and postmodern refusal of liturgical life” – in the book this alternative is referenced as “the sacred polis.” It is in this part that Pickstock expounds her main thesis, namely that the liturgy is the answer or solution to the problems of what has gone amiss in philosophy, both in its modern and postmodern variants (the Radical Orthodox “negative philosophical verdicts”) because the liturgy “consummates,” completes in every way those aspects of philosophy that have been proved to be deficient in the first chapters.

Like the rest of the book, Part Two of *After Writing* is a labyrinthine discussion, with many twists and turns, different topics, themes, and connections, of which it is impossible to give even a brief overview. The question, from our point of view, is this: What kind of relationship does Pickstock suppose between orality and/or writing and the liturgy on the one hand, and

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278 Ibid., 139.
279 Ibid., 159.
280 Ibid., 161.
281 There is a chapter by Richard Cross on Duns Scotus and Suarez in Hankey et al, *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy* (Ibid., Chapter 5, 65-80); while recently Daniel P. Horan has devoted a whole volume to this question: *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).
282 *AW*, 121.
283 The title of Part Two is ”The Sacred Polis.”
theology on the other? How does she see this relationship work, and what contribution can this make to finding an answer to the research question posed by this thesis?

Pickstock offers two main reasons why the liturgical way of life can be counterposed to the polity of death, which, as we saw her suggest, is one of the consequences of spatialization. The first one is that life in the “sacred polis” implies the use of liturgical language, which is able to assign both time and space their legitimate place; and the second is that it suggests the possibility of a subject with a liturgically constructed identity. These are the two aspects of philosophical enquiry that, Pickstock argues, neither modernity nor postmodernity were able to deliver from what she calls “immanentism” and the dichotomies (e.g. of time and space, life and death) inherent in it. Much of Part Two of After Writing is devoted to these two issues.

In her discussions of the liturgy and its significance for the ”consummation of philosophy” Pickstock’s benchmark is the Roman Rite, which was used by the Latin Western tradition until the liturgical reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council. It is this Rite, she argues, that best exemplifies life in the liturgical city because it can provide a model for ”a genuine consummation of language and subjectivity in and through a radical transformation of space and time.”284 Before explaining how the Rite accomplishes this, however, Pickstock cannot avoid a discussion of the reasons why she and the liturgical reformers of Vatican II, who regarded the Roman Rite as ”a corruption of an ’original liturgy’,” disagree about the merits and failings of the Rite.

Pickstock’s arguments for her preference of the Roman Rite go back to the ”cultural assumptions” which, she contends, are implicit in that text. According to her, the liturgy of the Middle Ages was embedded in a culture which was ”ritual (ecclesial-sacramental-historical)”285 in character; a fact that must be taken into consideration by any attempt at reform. The problem with the attempts of Vatican II to reform the liturgy, she believes, is that their ”reforms” in fact perpetuated some features of the secularizing modern era.286 According to her the structures of the modern secular world are ”wholly inimical to liturgical purpose,” so a true liturgical reform ”would either have to overthrow our anti-ritual modernity, or, that being impossible, devise a

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284 Ibid. 169.
285 Ibid., 176.
286 She argues that the Council imposed structural concepts such as ’argument,’ ’linear order,’ ’segmentation,’ ’discreet stages’ on the text, and that the notions of ’new information,’ ’linguistic redundancy’ are likewise impositions on a Rite ”whose oral provenance and theological context is wholly oral and apophatic, set within a passionate order of language.” AW, 175.
litrurgy that refused to be enculturated in our modern habits of thought and speech.” But does this proposal represent a real possibility? This is a question to which we shall have to return later.

II. 3. 5. 2. The “Oral Provenance” of the Roman Rite

What Pickstock intends to show about the Roman Rite is that although, because of the Fall, humans now have difficulty truly praising God, the Roman Rite at the same time manifests and overcomes this “difficulty of liturgy;” and – significantly for our purpose – it does so because of the “peculiarly oral dimension of this struggle.” Pickstock examines a number of different aspects of this oral dimension, and in the following I will briefly introduce these and try to identify the connection between the oral medium and its message.

The characteristic of the orality of Roman Rite that Pickstock considers most important has to do with its structure, which, she suggests, is repetitive and often appears haphazard. While for several liturgiologists this structure presents problems, Pickstock thinks that the many re-beginnings, the “liturgical stammer,” belong to the essence of what she calls “the impossibility of liturgy.” This is because unlike the “ordered precepts of spatial thinking” (such as beginning and end, clear stages, argument, etc.), the repetition and re-beginnings of the (oral) Roman Rite reveal an important theological message; they are “ineffably ’ordered’ through genuine mystery and transcendent ’distance’ ... the liturgical stammer bespeaks its admission of distance between itself and the transcendent ’real.’” At the same time, she adds, this kind of “stammer” also expresses the perception that the subjectivity of the worshipper is “neither foreclosed nor ironic.” That is how in the liturgy – the Roman Rite – language and subjectivity (identity) recover their real meaning; here they are interwoven as closely as possible through the oral provenance.

Another linguistically based characteristic of the Roman Rite which is typically oral is the use of the so-called “apostrophe.” Apostrophe is a key rhetorical figure, which is used to signify vocative address to an absent, dead, or wholly other person, idea, or object. It is characteristic of dramatic and exclamatory styles of discourse and is supremely vocal and emotive.” (The

287 Ibid., 171. 176.
288 Ibid., 177.
289 Pickstock summarizes the Rite and dwells at more length on some parts beginning with page 178.
290 Ibid., 176
291 Ibid., 178. Italics mine.
292 Ibid., 177. 178.
293 Ibid., 193.
examples of apostrophe that Pickstock cites here are, for example, "Iudica mea, Deus, et discerne causam meam..." or "Confiteor tibi in cithara, Deus meus" etc.) Pickstock stresses that besides expressing desire, apostrophe has a fundamentally dialogic aspect, as the "personification and temporalizing of that which is physically absent." For this reason, she maintains, apostrophe is the obverse of modern nominalization, which, by the elimination of verbs, is more suited to transferring information than to dialogue and is thus characterized by a "possessive individualism."

This dialogic dynamic of the apostrophic voice has another important consequence, and this Pickstock connects with the nature of the subject when she suggests that the "apostrophic call" implies that "the invoking subject is ontologically dependent upon that which he invokes." Based on this conclusion, Pickstock arrives at the rather radical statement that "without the liturgy, there is no subject," but even the liturgical "I–Thou relationship" involves the worshipper in a steady struggle, because living in the framework of the secular assumptions of "the immanentist import of spatialized structures, inimical to voice," she must steadily fight for this "ontologically necessary liturgical dispossession of the 'I'."

Besides apostrophe, Pickstock considers and discusses several other features of the syntax of the Roman Rite that she connects with the oral mode of discourse. These are the anaphora, supplementation, and "the bardic tradition of narration," which, she suggests, also reflects the oral character of the New Testament. Regarding the latter, narration, she remarks that unlike in Homeric bardic epic, where standard epithets define heroes’ character, in liturgical characterization the "identifications of God (and the worshipper) are subject to ambiguity and distension."

One example of this ambiguity, she suggests, appears in the way the Roman Rite identifies the Trinity as represented in the Credo. Here the word Trinity is not used at all, but "the reciprocally constitutive relations between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are performed syntactically," through coordination and subordination, which are used organically in the narrative about God, Jesus and the Spirit. In this way the syntactic features of the statements – by being co-ordinated

294 Ibid., 194.
295 Ibid., 93, 94.
296 Ibid., 6.
297 Ibid., 196, 198.
298 Ibid., 119, 120.
299 Ibid., 203.
300 Ibid., 205. Italics mine.
or subordinated, referring forwards or backwards – perform both the unity of the Trinity and at the same time the difference of its persons.\(^{301}\) Finally, the Credo fulfils its catechetical role not as an exposition of doctrine but as a performative “act of faith;”\(^{302}\) and “performance” is, typically, again a feature of the orality of liturgical language. As for the worshipper, the narrative mode of the Credo, this “performance of faith,” also implies that whatever the worshipping subject knows and does is subordinated to “that which passes through him, beyond his analytic grasp.”\(^{303}\)

\textbf{II. 3. 5. 3. The Liturgy as Both Text and Voice; Time and Space in the Liturgy}

Although up to this point Pickstock has emphasized those structural and linguistic aspects of the Roman Rite that imply an “oral provenance” and thus ”dislodge a metaphysics of the liturgical ’book’ as a static presence,”\(^{304}\) she acknowledges the fact that the liturgy has been handed down to us in the form of a written text. Thus, she now sets out to demonstrate that the combination of oral characteristics with the fact that the liturgy is, at the same time, a written text affords a ”peculiarly Christian negotiation” of the duality of orality and writing, because this is “the linguistic and structural precondition for the liturgical achievement of an open yet continuous subject.”\(^{305}\)

In her argument she focuses on the act of the reading – what she calls the “enunciation” – of the Gospel in the course of the Rite and employs intricate reasoning when she suggests that the word used here by the Celebrant is the Latin ”\textit{nuntiare,” which means ”to make now.”\(^{306}\) This, Pickstock notes, reminds us of the contingency of the events narrated, “despite their condition of writteness.”\(^{307}\) Furthermore, before the reading the Celebrant has to request his purification so as to ”worthily proclaim” the Gospel; in Pickstock’s interpretation this means that what is requested now – every time when the Gospel is read – happened in the past, but is expected to happen again in the future. That is, ”it is just this entanglement of anteriority and posteriority which is redemptive; for Christ, who contains all our true identities, is eternally present in God’s decrees, a presence which is to be correlated with that of the written word. As such, he can

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\(^{301}\) Ibid., 206.
\(^{302}\) Ibid., 207.
\(^{303}\) Ibid., 208.
\(^{304}\) Ibid., 216.
\(^{305}\) Ibid., 216. Italics mine.
\(^{306}\) I am not an expert and so cannot judge if this etymological conclusion is correct; however, according to etymological dictionaries the root of ”enunciate ” is not ”\textit{nunc}” but ”\textit{nuntius}, ” meaning ”messenger.” See e.g. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=enunciate
\(^{307}\) Ibid., 218.
purify that which lies both 'ahead' and 'behind.'” In this way, she suggests, the liturgy points beyond the orality-writing dichotomy.

After establishing the fact that "the distinctive temporality" of the liturgy can be linked to "its character as both oral and written," Pickstock examines the characteristics of liturgical time and space more closely. Regarding time, she contends that – in contrast with pagan temporality – the time of liturgy is not closed, because its time does not end when the Mass is over, but is an anticipation of the world to come, of the beatific vision. This anticipatory character, she believes, is "enacted by the spoken word itself, whose ultimate reconciliation to the passage of each syllable" – given the (phenomenological) characteristics of sound – “is the condition of possibility for there to be a [whole] word at all.” In this way, a word is something that “arrives both from the past ... and the future – as that which can only arrive because of the futurity of each subsequent syllable” – and, Pickstock argues, by placing this discussion into the framework of liturgical time, this “ultimately betokens the futurity of resurrection.” She then adds that a similar, self-consuming character is also characteristic of the "figure” of incense, because the disappearance of its fragrance, like that of the apostrophic call, is “paradoxically necessary for the fulfilment of its sensuous message.”

As for liturgical space, Pickstock suggests that in the liturgy space cannot be defined as pure, immanent extension, as it is for Descartes. Space is given a different, beneficial role when, for example, in the Roman Rite spatial location is used for identification, both of the angels (for example Archangel Michael “at the right hand of the altar of incense,”) and for Jesus Christ (“seated at the right hand of the Father”). In addition, liturgical space is communal and relational in nature. The worshipper is reminded of his communality when he says the words "nos tibi semper et ubique gratias agere,” which is in the first-person plural. These words, contends Pickstock make a statement about "language as doxological gift;” but this gift primarily appears as "the relational reception and bestowal of peace,” and the nature of this gift is the "vision of sacral community as consummating space and time.”

308 Ibid.
309 Ibid., 220.
310 Ibid.
311 Ibid.
312 Ibid., 236.
313 Ibid., 237.
II. 3. 6. Eucharist: The Resurrection of the Sign

If liturgy is the consummation, the fulfilment, of philosophy, the Eucharist is the climax of the liturgy – that is the substance of the last section of After Writing. It is in the course of a complex argument, drawing on, and at the same time criticizing, the work of Henri de Lubac, Jean-Luc Marion and Louis Marin that in the end Pickstock arrives at her oft-quoted phrase about "transubstantiation as the condition of possibility for all meaning."\textsuperscript{314}

Without going into the intricate details of her argument, let me summarize Pickstock’s main theses. First of all, she claims that the Eucharistic event is a mystery, a sacramental ”secret” in the sense that even when it is revealed, it remains hidden for human rationality. This kind of secrecy, she argues, is characteristic of signs in general and the Eucharist in particular, in the sense that one can ”look at the bread in a mode of equal uncertainty and certainty, an uncertainty which results from an absolute empirical discontinuity between Body and Bread . . . and an absolute certainty of faith.”\textsuperscript{315} When Jesus, and now the Celebrant, utters the words ”This is my body,” and not something like ”This will turn into my body,” what happens is that the Eucharist casts ”all language as flowing in time from eternity” and thus ”allows all signs to become concelbration.” In other words, in the Eucharist the levels of referent and sense cannot be held separate, and so ”the words underline that things are only ever present in the mode of sign, that there is no leaping over language.”\textsuperscript{316}

Finally, in the last section, the “Conclusion,” of After Writing Pickstock first ”non-identically repeats” her thesis concerning the Eucharist: it is a theological sign, born into a tradition which it ”disseminates.”\textsuperscript{317} She then summarizes her former argument, concluding that the options in terms of an attitude to time, space, subjectivity and language (especially orality and writing) that she considered in the course of the book – the sophists, modernity and postmodernity – make clear that on the immanent level ”there can only be a dialectic between the metaphysical and nihilistic variants of depersonalized spatiality and depersonalized nothingness.”\textsuperscript{318} In contrast, the liturgical city can offer a restoration of both the subject and of language.\textsuperscript{319}

\textsuperscript{314} Ibid., 261.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid., 257.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid., 262. Italics mine.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid., 267.
\textsuperscript{318} Ibid., 268.
\textsuperscript{319} Ibid.
The origins of such a liturgical attitude, she adds, can be found in antiquity, as demonstrated in Part One. At this point, however, the question arises: "What does the Christian form of liturgy... add to the Platonic one?" Pickstock answers this question in a number of "non-absolute" ways. Of these, one of her arguments – based on her critique of what she sees as Kierkegaard’s individualism – has to do with the role of the Church and sociality. There is, she argues, an intimation of intersubjectivity in the Phaedrus; however, the lover and the beloved are here not part of a whole community. Also, Plato makes no suggestion for "a prospective movement through time" – towards the beatific vision – “as an embodied event,” and with him the idea of sacrificing the body “for a greater spiritual gain” still persists. In the Phaedrus, there is no resurrection of the body either, whereas "every Eucharist is an essential repetition of the incarnation." Pickstock’s conclusion regarding the difference between Plato and the Christian liturgy, then, is that "with Christianity, the optimum of meaningfulness and the optimum of living subjectivity coincide within the world – with all its temporality, space, and embodiment,” which implies that the spirit and the body are also "together received back again on the eschatological morning.”

II. 3. 6. 1. Evaluation and Critique

"The Sacred Polis” is at the heart of Pickstock’s thesis regarding the transcending or "consummating" of philosophy. The Roman Rite, she argues, can – and does – provide a model for the possibility of that which modernity and postmodernity were not able to achieve, namely "a genuine consummation” of both subjectivity (the thinking and experiencing self as the highest authority, the aspiration of modernity) and language (its role in shaping knowledge and reality, the passion of postmodernity.)

In this part, once again we see the curious parallel use of the phenomenological and philosophical-semiotic approach; Pickstock uses phenomenological description, but then transfers the “burden of proof” from the experiencing subject to the sign. As I have already suggested, the problem is that by doing so she empties the ”subject-relative experience of the lifeworld” of its very basis; of its bodily, physical reality, including the historical and cultural circumstances of the orality and writing that she analyses. Her use of the very abstract,

320 Ibid.
321 Ibid., 272.
322 Ibid., 273.
323 Ibid., 273.
324 Ibid. Italics mine.
metaphorical language is, as in the case of Derrida, a sign of this shift in focus and thus an indication of how she interprets the role of orality and writing, or, more generally, of the medium for the message. There are several examples in the chapters "I Will Go Unto the Altar Of God," "Seraphic Voices: The Space of Doxology," and "The Resurrection of the Sign" which could be used to illustrate this point. Of these I will only quote two.

As we have seen, one of the structural aspects of language in the Roman Rite analysed by Pickstock is syntax, and one particular “syntactic dynamic” she discusses is anaphora. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, anaphora refers to the “use of a grammatical substitute (such as a pronoun or a pro-verb) to refer to the denotation of a preceding word or group of words;”325 Pickstock describes anaphoric relations as structures ”whereby a clause reaches further behind its immediate precursor to find its semantic satisfaction.”326 A minor point, perhaps, but it is telling that Pickstock uses a verb phrase that is otherwise used with personal subjects, “find one’s satisfaction,” to refer to a linguistic structure, a sentence clause – another indication that she regards signs almost as active agents, enacting meaning in an autonomous fashion.

The clearest example of anaphora, Pickstock suggests, is in the Credo ("Credo in unum Deum ... Et in unum Dominum Iesum Christum, etc. ) where the "zig-zagging of anaphoric references," each clause referring back to the opening clause "Credo in unum Deum" while the proclamation itself is moving on "[performs] both the unity of the Trinity and the analogous difference of its persons … [engaging] the worshipper in a complex activity, simultaneously anamnetic and anticipatory."327 Once again, it is a linguistic structure that is the subject of verbs such as "perform" and "engage." It is the zig-zagging of anaphoric references that performs the theological truth and reality of the Trinity, namely its concurrent unity and difference. But how does it achieve this? According to Pickstock, when hearing and saying these words, the worshipper is "engaged” in such a way that he/she recalls that which was said at the beginning of the Credo ("I believe") and at the same time anticipates the next thing that will be pronounced. The question, though, is this: Is it the “psychodynamics” of hearing – the spoken word – that "produces” this “subject-relative experience, or is it the Credo that “performs” something?

325 http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anaphora
326 AW, 205.
327 Ibid., 206.
At this point Pickstock, in a Footnote, makes a comparison between the Roman Rite and the newer versions – e.g. the *Roman Missal* (1975), the *Alternative Service Book* (1980) and the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* (1979) – which she criticized earlier. She notes that the replacement of the complex asyndetic syntax of the *Roman Rite* in these texts by a division into five paragraphs of discrete sentences results in ”textually disjoining the Trinitarian persons” and, as a result, "this strategy does not perform the cyclicity of eternal relationships portrayed in the former versions."\(^{328}\) But can a text ”disjoin the Trinitarian persons”? Or is it us who, at best, *feel or experience* the persons (of the Trinity) as more distinct when separate predicates follow each noun, whereas having only one verb "we believe,” standing for all grammatical objects, in its ”psychodynamics” contributes to the subject-relative experience of a unity and at the same time cyclicity between Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

My other example is that of a rhetorical device, apostrophe. As we saw above, apostrophe signifies vocative address, is “characteristic of dramatic and exclamatory styles of discourse” and plays an important role in the Roman Rite, in which there are many invocations (”*Iudica mea, Deus, et discerne causam meam*...” or ”*Confiteor tibi in cithara, Deus meus*” etc.) There is no doubt that apostrophe has a dialogical aspect – it calls on another person – and is thus close to the oral lifeworld. There are two other statements, however, that Pickstock makes concerning apostrophe which are meant to underline her general thesis regarding the Roman Rite as the ”consummation of philosophy” which are worth pondering, especially as they are not easy to make sense of. First of all, she suggests that the fact that in the Rite the vocative address of God is repeated again and again might be considered as a ”problematising of what constitutes the real” and thus it inverts “the immanentist epistemology according to which reality is that which ’appears’ and is appropriable by the subject.”\(^{329}\) But what is the logic of this statement – is there one, or is this simply another ”cryptic” remark?

These words regarding ”what constitutes the real” and ”immanentist epistemology” with regard to the role of apostrophe may, perhaps, be translated into everyday language in the following way: ”Invoking someone (something) other than yourself repeatedly means that – or feels like – you need external help or verification; your knowledge of what and who really is or exists is uncertain; you have admitted that you cannot rely on your own judgement, which you had thought was certain.” Pickstock then adds that the presence and use of apostrophe implies that ”the invoking subject is ontologically dependent upon that which he invokes. For the

\(^{328}\) Ibid., Note 96.

\(^{329}\) Ibid., 196.
apostrophic voice does not merely invoke an absent 'Thou,’ but in the process of invocation is itself dramatized or enacted.”330 The – psychodynamic, phenomenological – interpretation of this sentence may be that by calling on someone else “you realize that you are not self-sufficient; what’s more, it is this realization which clarifies to you your real nature.” One can perhaps, with difficulty, make sense of these phenomenologically formulated utterances; but it seems to me that they are rather close to what we saw Janz describe as ”at best metaphorical,” and the style and logic of these statements may even be described as ”tactical” and ”ideological,” as their role is clearly to direct one towards the end-point and goal of Pickstock’s argument.

There are several more passages in ”The Sacred Polis,” more or less closely related to the orality of the liturgy, that could be cited in a similar way. In essence, these underline my suggestion that, firstly, it is a phenomenological description of the orality – as well as the writtenness – of the liturgy that constitutes the starting point of Pickstock’s argument. Secondly, however, because – given that she is working form within the Radical Orthodox constraining systematic framework – Pickstock transposes these phenomenologically made observations into assertions that she can employ to show how the orality of the liturgy transcends or “consummates” Derrida’s semiotic interpretation of writing, their origin in real life is compromised and they become the abstract, tactical and ideological notions already mentioned above.

Rather than citing more examples, let me briefly comment on one more paragraph before drawing a conclusion. We saw above that – because we do not live in an oral society any more, and the Roman Rite clearly exists in a written form – Pickstock must also give account of how the liturgy as text contributes to the ”consummation of philosophy.” In the paragraph already quoted she suggests that the written text of the liturgy in fact ”gives rise to a peculiarly Christian negotiation of the ’duality’ of orality and writing itself,” because ”this is precisely the linguistic and structural precondition for the liturgical achievement of an open yet continuous subject.”331 This argument, too, may sound like a rather arbitrary allegation where terms “mean what they are declared to mean” and where ”language thereby installs truth by assertion.”332 A phenomenological, subject-relative-experience based interpretation could hold, though, that ”open yet continuous” here puts into words the ”feeling” that although – as explained above – the subject is ”open,” not self-sufficient or autonomous, when you have got something already

330 Ibid., 196.
331 Ibid., 216. Italics mine.
332 In Hemming, ed., Radical Orthodoxy? A Catholic Enquiry, 82.
written down which you then recite, your feeling is that you are not inventing something anew; you are in continuation of an already existing, but now newly articulated story. However, this is an explanation or exegesis that, once again, sounds contrived and does not come easily and naturally.

The fact that she considers the liturgy from within a semiotic framework is stressed by Pickstock herself when she declares that "the liturgical city, as we shall see, is avowedly semiotic. Its lineaments, temporal duration, and spatial extension are entirely and constitutively articulated through the signs of speech, gesture, art, music, figures, vestment, colour, fire, water, smoke, bread, wine, and relatioality."333 Two things are worth noting about this statement. First, Pickstock’s approach here is multimodal: not only language, but colour, smell, space, etc. are among the signs that she sees as fulfilling the task of the liturgy. On the one hand, this could mean that she takes our bodily nature seriously; as we have just observed, the phenomenology of some of these senses (for example smell, in the case of incense) forms part of her argument.

At the same time, however, the assumed – and stressed – sign-nature of all these aspects, even if it points to signifiers other than language, echoes Derrida’s understanding of orality and writing as markers of the difference between representation and meaning, that is, the trace or différence. It is the dichotomy of orality and writing, assumed by Derrida, that Pickstock believes is transcended in the Roman Mass; which, she persists, may in the end be seen as both oral and written. But if this transcending is primarily a question of semiotics (with the metaphysical consequences associated with it by Pickstock), then the danger is that, as suggested in the last chapter, it will abstract “from all concrete contexts of interest and all determinate targets set by human communities.”334

Even Pickstock’s including ”relationality” alongside speech, gesture, vestment, etc. as a sign of the liturgical city confirms our suspicion regarding the nature of this (semiotic, metaphysical) interpretation of orality and underlines the curious dichotomy between the two sides of her approach; that of the concrete, phenomenological, and the abstract, semiotic, which “resists the opposition. . . between the sensible and the intelligible.”335 Relationality in this framework is not more than an abstract term, and even semantically does not fit in with the other, multimodal

333 AW., 216.
335 Ibid. no page.
signs mentioned in the same sentence. As we shall see, Pickstock does not really succeed in making relationality more concrete elsewhere either; this concept, too, remains on the level of the abstract and theoretical.

Regarding the social and cultural dimension of orality and writing in this part of the book, it has been pointed out that Pickstock’s treatment of the Romans Mass is also curiously free of a cultural-historical setting, not the least in connection with orality. According to one scholar, “while she constantly insists on the oral provenance of this prayer, [Pickstock] misses the improvisatory origins of that orality which respects the historical and cultural specificity of the praying community and combines the prayer’s doxological and pastoral purposes.”336 This criticism recalls the conclusions of the New Literacy scholars who insisted that it is not only the psychodynamics of orality that will determine its effects, but the social, historical and cultural specificities cannot be left out of the equation either. These, however, are hardly addressed by Pickstock in this last part of the book. This is also why Steven Shakespeare may suggest that “Pickstock’s Latin Mass seems to float above all history. It is an abstraction, quite divorced form the power relations that would have shaped its actual performance at any one time and place”337 – another reminder of the role played by the social, even political, context of not only the media environment in general, but of the Roman Mass, or any concrete form of liturgy, in particular.

In conclusion, it seems that just like in the previous parts of the book, in the last section of After Writing, too, Pickstock’s approach to orality and writing is different from that of the various orality-literacy and media scholars we reviewed in the last chapter, in a number of ways. Although she utilizes phenomenological description, her combining it with an avowedly semiotic view of the meaning of the liturgy leads to ambiguities and contradictions. One example of this is her disregard for the role played by social and cultural factors in the relationship between the medium and the message of theology; in this case the theology implicit in the Roman Mass. How can we evaluate these differences from the point of view of our research question, and what are their implications for a description, using the dogmatic resources of systematic theology, of the relationship between the “media” of orality and writing and the message of theology?

II. 4. Summary and Underlying Theological Issues

As I suggested in the Introduction, the purpose of this chapter is twofold. At the heart of it is the careful, perhaps even meticulous, examination of parts of a theological essay that assigns a serious role to orality and writing and their connection with the message of theology. Catherine Pickstock, one of the key members of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, is one of a few theologians who perceive and attempt to investigate the link between the medium of writing and/or orality and theology. She does so especially in her book *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, the topic of the first part of this chapter. In my – admittedly rather long – review, evaluation and critique of this work I have found that the fact that she is working from within the framework of Radical Orthodoxy makes some of her conclusions rather problematic. In the second main part of this chapter I will first briefly summarize my conclusions regarding Pickstock’s use and interpretation of the relationship in question. Then, based on this, I will attempt to identify those theological issues that must be addressed when formulating a more fruitful theological model or framework to describe the relationship between orality, literacy, and the message of theology. It remains to be the task of the next chapter to propose this model.

II. 4. 1. Summary

*After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* is an extraordinary accomplishment in the breadth and width of its subject matter, as well as regarding its bold and original conclusions. The summary and evaluation, part by part, that was attempted above can therefore by no means be regarded as exhaustive or absolute in every respect of this remarkable work. My focus was on those passages that deal – more or less directly – with issues related to orality and writing, or, in some cases, the medium and the message more generally. My analysis of these sections has led to a few observations. I have concluded that Pickstock’s interpretation of the characteristics of, as well as differences between, orality and writing is sometimes very much like those established by the scholars introduced in the last chapter. First of all, I established that Pickstock, too, founded her conclusions regarding these features on phenomenological observation. Her associating orality with time and writing and print with space, as well as the consequences of prioritising either the one or the other, are also strongly reminiscent of the importance assigned by Innis, McLuhan and Ong to the issue of time and space.
It has also become clear, however, that there are important differences between their and Pickstock’s interpretation of the relationship between orality and literacy and the nature of the difference between the two. While McLuhan, Ong, etc. suggest that writing, print, etc. change the noetic, cognitive structure or outlook of individuals and cultures, because she is working from within the Radical Orthodox framework, Pickstock rejects the role of the knowing subject and of epistemology, both of which she regards as typically modern distortions. Her sacramental outlook, which is that of the Platonic-Christian synthesis, connects the (phenomenological) characteristics of orality to ontology, not epistemology. This conviction, however, makes her use of the phenomenological method problematic, because it offsets most of the characteristics – the role of sense perception and of the body; of the cognitive/noetic aspect, and thus of subjectivity and consciousness – that define this (the phenomenological) approach, as well as the cultural-historical marks of different media that we saw spelt out in the work of the different media scholars.

Not only does orality in After Writing have little connection to culture and history, but it does not take account of the possible social determination of orality and/or writing either. Moreover, even though Pickstock mentions the part played by the “medium” of incense when enacting the unity of life and death as resurrection by the ascent of the burnt object, she suggests that it is primarily orality, spoken language, that accomplishes the consummation of philosophy; thus she, too, remains within the framework of the traditional (western) focus on language at the expense of other sensory modalities.

Pickstock’s ethnocentrism is conspicuous on another level, too. It is evident from the cultural-historical genealogy she cites in her argumentation – starting with Plato, through Augustine, Aquinas, Ramus, Descartes, up to Derrida and 20th century theologians such as von Balthasar, Jean-Luc Marion, etc. – but also from her discussions of Vatican II and her critique of its liturgical reform. Namely in this context she makes no mention of discussions within the Catholic Church that point beyond her (western) framework, even though one of the results of the Council was that “the document of the [reformed] liturgy, for instance, promoted a

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338 As we noted above, one critic suggests that it is not always clear how these thinkers see the relationship between the individual’s cognition and the larger community or culture.

339 *AW*, 187.
reconciliation of the church with non-Western cultures by inviting symbols and rituals from those cultures into the liturgy itself.\footnote{It Taught Us to Live in a New World” Interview with Jesuit historian and theologian, John W. O’Malley, Professor at Georgetown University in Washington http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/concilio-18819/ No page.}

As I have already argued, all these problems and exigencies originate in the Radical Orthodox philosophical-theological framework. The double, pre-modern and postmodern commitment requires that, on the one hand, sensing and consciousness, which are the means of our apprehending different media – the spoken, written or printed word – are “ontological rather than epistemological,”\footnote{Milbank and Pickstock, Truth in Aquinas, 75.} and, on the other, that as a result of the language-based, semiotic paradigm the phenomenological features of both orality and writing only define their features as (unchanging) signs and have no relation to real life situations.

How can all these problems related to sensing, consciousness, phenomenology, epistemology, ontology, sacramentality, language and culture be framed in the language of systematic theology, and what are the doctrinal resources that can found a theological framework to describe the relationship between orality, literacy and theology more adequately? Before attempting to answer these questions in the next section, I want to call attention to one more aspect of Pickstock’s thought that might not be so conspicuous but is also quite telling.

I have used Pickstock’s “voice” to inquire into the research question asked by this thesis about the relationship between orality, literacy and the message of theology; and indeed, based on her thesis about the role of orality in the liturgy one might suppose that she prizes sound, the spoken word, over vision. However, her repeated allusion to the beatific vision as the goal of life in the sacred polis, via the mediation of the liturgy, betrays her preference for vision (writing) over the spoken word (orality). It seems that just like in the case of Derrida, the paradigm from within Pickstock works is visually based; and even if unintentionally, in the end this leads to abstraction and a “denial of human intimacy.”\footnote{Schaeffer and Gorman, 870-871.} Above we referred to Hans Jonas’s analysis, who argued for the nobility of sight based on its objective and unchanging nature; and indeed, the priority given by Pickstock to ontology and the transcendent seems to mirror this conviction.\footnote{It must be added, though, that this observation is based on the text of After Writing. There are other texts – for example Truth in Aquinas – where Pickstock and Milbank argue for the priority of touch over the other senses. See Ibid., 60-87.} However, more will be said about this below.

\footnotesize

\footnote{“It Taught Us to Live in a New World” Interview with Jesuit historian and theologian, John W. O’Malley, Professor at Georgetown University in Washington http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/concilio-18819/ No page.}
II. 4. 2. The Issues

Although her final thesis about how the liturgy transcends the dualism of orality and writing makes this somewhat ambiguous, in most of After Writing Pickstock would seem to agree with McLuhan about the significance of the medium for the message. In particular, we have seen her suggest that while orality—especially the orality of the liturgy—sacramentally mediates something of Being, writing has contributed to a desacralisation of the “sacred polis.” But how exactly does Pickstock envision this “mediation”? In an interview already quoted above she makes the remarkable suggestion that the Mass "deals with concerns that relate directly to the themes of theology and philosophy"344—and let us not forget that the orality of the Mass is for Pickstock one of its most important features. She then goes on to add that these concerns “include ontology, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and the soul.”345

I suggest that in this statement Pickstock in fact identifies some of the most important theological issues that define the relationship between orality and writing—for a long time the primary media of communication—and the message of theology.346 But, as already argued above, because of the constraining systematic framework of negative philosophical verdicts within which she operates, the way Pickstock theorises the relationship between orality, writing and the theological “message” of Mass is problematic, and so inadequate for a valid (systematic) theological formulation of this relationship. In the following I will first attempt to show that the “concerns” mentioned by her, ontology, epistemology, “the soul”—and the related issues of transcendence and immanence, I suggest—are indeed the key concepts and dogmatic resources for a (systematic) theological description and definition of the relationship in question. Then, in the next and last chapter, I will propose a theological framework or formula that I believe is more adequate than that offered by Pickstock.

II. 4. 2. 1. Ontology, Epistemology, and the Subject

As we saw in Chapter One, for McLuhan, Ong and other orality-literacy and media scholars it is assumed that the different media play and important role in our acquiring knowledge of the reality around us; not only because of their content, the information, but also, or even more importantly, by the mode we receive the information. They were convinced that the medium is,
or at least significantly affects, its content, the message; the figure and the ground mutually condition each other and are together more than each one on its own, as stated by Gestalt theory. Thus, orality and literacy, as well as other media and modalities – touch, smell, taste and the “technology” associated with them – were, for them, closely related both to perception and to human knowing or cognition; these, in turn, they saw as functions of consciousness, a basic feature of the self or subject. The approach of these and other media scholars was not that of philosophy, nor that of theology, though; they did not theorize the relationship between ontology and epistemology, being and knowing.

However, in some of his talks, letters, or essays McLuhan made comments that show his interest in the theological side of the question: “In ordinary perception men perform the miracle of recreating within themselves – in their interior faculties – the exterior world. ...The exterior world in every instant of perception is interiorized and recreated in a new matter. Ourselves. And in this creative work that is perception and cognition, we experience immediately that dance of Being within our faculties which provides the incessant intuition of Being.” Following on Aquinas, for McLuhan the “miracle of cognition” was indeed the way to an analogical intuition of Being. Interestingly, this sounds very similar to how Pickstock and Milbank interpret Aquinas’s theory of truth and knowledge when they suggest that for Aquinas “all sensation is a proportion between psychic and material” and thus “our knowing of anything at all – however local – is in some measure an advance sight of the beatific vision, and unity with the personal interplay of the Trinity.” But this divine physical (sensed, perceived) manifestation, they add, must be elicited by us “through our crafting of liturgical enactments” – an echo of Pickstock’s proposal of the Mass as the “liturgical consummation of philosophy.”

For McLuhan, on the other hand, perception, cognition, and their “intuition of Being” is not confined to the liturgy; our faculties always perform this “creative work.” It seems, then, that for McLuhan epistemology (in the general sense of acquiring knowledge, especially through sense perception) and ontology (the doctrine of origins, of being) presuppose and complement each other (as do transcendence, “the dance of Being,” and the immanence of the “ordinary perception of the exterior world” – but more about this below). It must be added, though, that as we saw above, these two – the changing, historical character of the different media and the

348 Truth in Aquinas, 77. 18.
349 Ibid., 87.
static nature of Being – exist in a kind of tension in McLuhan’s work. However, as we also noted, Marchessault believes that even though it was never expounded by him, in McLuhan’s thought this is a Kabalistic paradox rather than a self-contradiction – but I will come back to this.

The concepts of ontology and epistemology also play a key role in the Radical Orthodox “constraining systematic framework.” According to the Radical Orthodox genealogy epistemology – and its auxiliary, the knowing subject – are forces of a modern disease which, Pickstock suggests, is closely linked to spatialization. As expounded in After Writing, Pickstock believes that it was due to the spatialization of language, which started with the Sophists’ preference for writing over orality and continued with the headway made by print and thus by identical repetition in space, that Ramus and then Descartes departed from “the pre-Scotist notion of being as something with unknowable and unanalysable depth.” 350 This originated a breach in (western) philosophy, argues Pickstock, as reality – “being” – was no more seen as the gift of the transcendent God, mysterious, contingent, arriving through time and never fully knowable, as revealed by the spoken word, but as clear, simple, quantifiable and representable: the written and printed word in space. The changes inaugurated by Ramus and Descartes thus became the first step to “an epistemological circuit whereby knowledge is based entirely on objects, whose ‘being’ does not exceed the extent to which they are known.” 351 That is, she concludes, “being” is defined by knowledge of the thing known; epistemology has absorbed ontology.

The same Radical Orthodox “dogma” regarding the relationship between epistemology and ontology is phrased by John Milbank, in this case within the context of his critique of post-structuralist thought:

Linguistic concerns … were being dealt with [by postmodern thinkers] in a manner that implicitly assumed that language or grammatical structures operated rather like a set of Kantian pre/given transcendental categories. This meant that a modern predominance of epistemology over ontology – of knowledge as knowledge of our mode of knowing rather than of things known – was still surreptitiously in place. To the contrary, one can argue that if one takes the linguistic character of thought yet more seriously and recognises that the linguistic mediation of reality always exceeds any determinations of

350 After Writing, 63.
351 Ibid.
a priori structures, including those which try to fix what language is capable of, then it becomes at least possible to suppose that our mode of knowing is continuously reshaped by what there is to be known.  

“Our mode of knowing,” I suggest, encompasses the medium of communication, for example orality, writing, vision, sound, etc. Thus understood, Milbank’s “linguistic mediation of reality” – the postmodern theme that Radical Orthodoxy has taken up – implies that orality, for example, may ontologically “mediate” God’s reality. That, in fact, is what in our analysis above we saw Pickstock suggest about the Roman Rite, when she claims that the orality of the liturgy “performs” Being. The way it does so is based on “a kind of real relation or occult sympathy – a proportion or harmony or convenientia – between being and knowledge.” However, as we have seen, the kind of “knowledge” that produces this “real relation” can only be described phenomenologically – which presupposes consciousness and some kind of a “knowing subject.”

The Radical Orthodox model provides an explanation for the seeming contradiction between these two assertions when, as Pickstock does in After Writing, it presumes a “middle-voiced” subject. This might be possible if, as Milbank and Pickstock suggest, the analogy between knowing and being “presupposes not just metaphysics of participation, but also a phenomenology of participation” – although, they hasten to add, this is not to say that it is phenomenology that founds the metaphysics of participatory ontology. On this view consciousness itself is not “primarily an attribute of cognition, but rather an ontological horizon outside of which we could not even make sense of ‘a being.’” The word “primarily” is significant in this statement, I suggest. According to Milbank and Pickstock, then, cognition through the senses exists, but – primarily, or “rather” – as a tool of mediating “a divine physical presence in the world (though this is not visible).”

It is in this way that the orality – or writtenness, for that matter – of the liturgy, as well as the movements of the priest, the incense, but especially the “taste” of the bread and wine, etc. mediate God’s presence and Being. This is possible because a “radically orthodox” position [is] primarily characterised by a … persistent refusal of distinct ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’

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352 The Radical Orthodoxy Reader, Ibid., 31.
353 Truth in Aquinas, 5.
354 The Radical Orthodoxy Reader, 48.
355 Ibid., 74.
356 Ibid., 94.
phases” – which, however, shows up the serious problems with this understanding of the relationship between ontology and epistemology. It has been shown, namely, that the kind of knowledge mediated, or conveyed, by the spoken and written word, as well as different other media, through sense perception but also analysis, interpretation, etc., can be very different, even in the case of the same medium – depending on the person’s previous experience, historical, social and cultural environment, etc. In other words, some kind of a concrete “knowing subject,” physically, historically and socially situated, must be present if there should be real cognition and thus real analogical participation. As Sarah Coakley put it, theology involves “not merely the metaphysical task of adumbrating a vision of God, the world, and humanity, but simultaneously the epistemological task of cleansing, reordering, and redirecting the apparatuses of one’s own thinking, desiring, and seeing.” And, she adds, in this task we need the help of an ongoing interaction with not only modern and postmodern philosophy, but also of the social sciences.

It seems that Pickstock faces the same problem that McLuhan did, namely that of somehow dealing with the tension between “the historic materiality of language as cultural artefact and the transcendental aspects” of the Radical Orthodox, Platonic-Christian-Thomistic views. But while McLuhan, as was indicated above, did not try to resolve this tension, working within the framework of the Radical Orthodox negative philosophical verdicts Pickstock has priorities that compel her to opt for the primacy of an ontology of participation. In this way, however, she collapses epistemology into ontology, even, or especially, when – slightly paraphrasing her own words about Derrida – she, too, uses phenomenology (the phenomenology or psychodynamics of orality and writing) to refute the most basic characteristics of phenomenology, and thus of the role of media of communication (in this case orality and writing) in the transmission of a “message.” Thus one cannot but wonder whether Adam Kotsko is right when he suggests that if epistemology is thus ostracized, in the end the Radical Orthodox call for a “robust ontology” may also prove to be nothing more than a utopia, a project that is, in the end, directed towards the unchanging and the unchangingly known.”

So far our “case study” of Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing* indicates that, however creative they might be in other areas, Pickstock and the Radical Orthodox theological framework are

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357 Ibid., 21.
359 Marchessault, Ibid., Introduction, xiv.
360 Adam Kotsko, ”’That They Might Have Ontology’: Radical Orthodoxy and the New Debate.” *Political Theology* Vol.10.1, (January 2009), 115-122, at 122.
not adequate in their formulation of the relationship between orality, writing and the message of theology. Even though Pickstock correctly points out that the questions around the orality of the liturgy concern issues of ontology, epistemology, and the subject, she is unable to uphold the tension, the “Kabalistic paradox,” between these. We need a theological framework that can embrace and define the role played by both ontology and epistemology if we want to take seriously the task of examining the relationship between the historic and cultural materiality of the spoken and written word on the one hand, and the way these might analogically and sacramentally express God’s reality, on the other.

Before proposing a possible formula, however, there is another aspect of the relationship between orality, writing and the message of theology that, while closely related to ontology, epistemology and the nature and role of the subject, is even more fundamental regarding the key concerns that define this relationship – so to this now we turn.

II. 4. 2. 2. Immanence and Transcendence

The other conceptual pair, which is also recognized by Pickstock as marking out the role of orality and writing (as well as of different media in general) for the message of theology, is that of transcendence and immanence. Before considering this aspect, it is important to remember, though, that there are different ways in which the concepts of transcendence and immanence are understood and in which this conceptual pair is used, depending on the context in which they are considered, so a clarification of the terminology is necessary.

Although – unlike ontology and epistemology – neither transcendence nor immanence are included in the Analytical Index of After Writing, the pair play an important role in Pickstock’s argument regarding the role of orality and writing as well as other aspects of her argument. Already in the Preface she contends that orality, because it is a proof of the doxological character of language, indicates a transcendent reference; subsequently she defines “genuine transcendence” as “doxological reliance on a donating source which one cannot command;” a clear indication of how the concepts of ontology and transcendence are linked together by Pickstock. In the same paragraph she then adds that the suppression of this “donating source” – and, she suggests, writing and print are examples of this suppression – means that “without

362 AW, 49. Italics mine.
eternity, space must be made absolute,” which amounts to “sophistic immanentism,” that is, a state or framework where, in the absence of a reference to the source (to ontology), all that remains is what is seen as knowable and measurable by sense perception, in space. According to the categories suggested by Wessel Stoker, Pickstock here interprets the transcendence/immanence pair existentially, as an expression of religion or worldview, when she defines them in terms of “crossing over ‘transcendence’ from the sensorily observable (immanence) to the supersensory or transcending historical time to the primal time of myth or a forward movement to utopia.”

Pickstock’s use of the concepts of transcendence and immanence is somewhat fuzzy, though. She suggests, for example, that in the case of Socrates we see “an opening of the self to receive the mediation of the transcendent in and through the immanent;” but in most cases – especially in the parts of After Writing where she describes the modern and postmodern polis, associating it with spatialization and writing – she uses the concepts “immanent” or “immanence” with a negative meaning. I suggest that Pickstock has an ambiguous relationship to immanence: on the one hand, both by her use of the phenomenological description of orality and writing, and her repeated insistence on “physical embodiment,” she seems to emphasize and uphold the role of the immanent, the sensory and historical (for example orality and writing). On the other hand, however, she doesn’t really allow for real, “changingly known” contexts of interest; for real bodies and places, changing cultural and social environments, which is, as we have argued above, inescapable if we take seriously the role played by orality and writing (as well as different other media) for theological thinking.

How exactly is the issue of the “correlative conceptual pair” of transcendence and immanence related to our main question regarding the relationship between the medium and the message of theology? In her intriguing study, The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God, Mayra Rivera places this conceptual pair within the framework of the ”cosmology” of Radical Orthodoxy. She argues that this cosmology is – admittedly – predicated upon the platonic vision of reality; a reality that is

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363 Ibid.
364 Stoker, Ibid., 514.
365 AW, 25.
366 Understood in the sense as defined by Stoker above, namely as that which is sensorily observable, in historical time.
divided into two distinct realms: the sphere of the intelligible forms that are eternal and immutable, on the one hand, and the worldly realm of becoming, on the other. The worldly realm derives its reality from its ‘participation’ (methexis) in the immutable forms. … Reasserting this basic cosmological structure, radical orthodoxy seeks to recover the notion of participation to describe the relationship between the divine and the worldly realms. … The divine is imagined as inhabiting, indeed constituting, an external space of ontological elevation which is also the telos of all creatures. … The relationship between the worldly and ‘transcendent’ poles is not a mutual intertwining of two distinct realities, one human, the other divine. The divine is not only spatially distant and high, but also eminently real. … The inherent reality of creation is thus called into question.368

Above we argued that for Pickstock (and Milbank) ”knowing things,” as well as the “knowing subject,” seem to belong to this sphere of the worldly realm, the realm of becoming, which has no inherent reality and thus all that is described by, for example, orality-literacy scholars regarding the senses of hearing and vision and their role in communication and cognition is ”purely human,” and for this reason ”devoid of transcendence.”369 (To be fair, this statement has one qualification, but I will come back to that shortly.) Rivera thus sees the contrasts that we saw Pickstock (as well as Milbank) set up between epistemology and ontology, immanence and transcendence as rooted in this cosmology. Indeed, ”where God is imagined as extrinsic to creation, immanence and transcendence are in tension, if not sheer opposition.”370

As mentioned before, the Radical Orthodox genealogy provides a historical, philosophical-theological explanation for this cosmology; things have not always been like this, only since Scotus, or Descartes, or modernity, when the thinking subject was ”cut off from the transcendent and started worrying about whether it really knows anything”371 have events taken a turn towards “immanentism.” At the same time – and this is the qualification – it is still possible to reconnect with the transcendent, if we allow ontology to take back what is hers and, by acknowledging our participation in the divine, let ”what is” reshape ”what we know.” This, we saw Pickstock argue in After Writing, happens in the ”privileged linguistic or symbolic forms deemed to be especially disclosive”372 – pre-eminently in the orality of the (old) liturgy.

368 Ibid., 23. Italics mine.
369 Ibid., 50.
370 Ibid.
371 Shakespeare, Radical Orthodoxy, 163.
372 Milbank, ”The programme of Radical orthodoxy”, Ibid., 44.
In other words, even though our senses and perception are “fallen because of Adam’s pride and the rebellion of our senses,” there is a possibility — and in *Truth in Aquinas* Milbank and Pickstock suggest that it was the Incarnation, the hypostatic union of the transcendent and the immanent, the infinite and the finite, that made this possible — that our “knowing” may be restored through “divine humility and the re-education of the understanding by the senses.”³⁷³

There are, however, major problems with this interpretation of transcendence and immanence. First, what does Pickstock mean by ”privileged forms” and ”especially disclosive”? If anything outside of the ”sacred polis” is secular and ”wholly immanent,” does that mean that the Radical Orthodox sacramental, participatory ontology only applies to that which is focussed on the praise of God, the liturgy, whether in the Platonic city or the Roman Mass? When and how exactly does the “re-education of the understanding by the senses” happen? If the only – privileged? – contact between God and the world is the liturgy, what about those features of orality – its relationship with time and memory, its contingency and ambiguity, etc. – that for Pickstock make it suitable for mediating God, in its representations other than the liturgy? Can sound (music) or the performing arts mediate God’s truth outside of the context of the liturgy?

There exist answers given to this question that, while upholding the analogical framework, imagine a different relationship between transcendence and immanence. Thus, participatory ontology – the key element of the Radical Orthodox systematic framework – is equated with what they call “sacramental ontology” by several contemporary theologians. Hans Boersma, for example, suggests that the Great Tradition of the Platonist-Christian synthesis regarded human realities as elements of the ”sacramental tapestry,” in which ”earthly signs and heavenly realities are intimately woven together;” in other words, the sensorily observable, “immanent” world participates in a greater reality, from which it derives its meaning.³⁷⁴ This tradition holds that the sacrament of the Eucharist is but the richest, fullest expression of this sacramentality; we experience the participation in heavenly realities ”nowhere as gloriously as in the Eucharist.”³⁷⁵

However, what provides the basis for this experience is not so much the words of the Eucharist, as for Pickstock – though these have their role in the mediation – but the general sacramental

³⁷³ *Truth in Aquinas*, 62.
³⁷⁴ Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2011), 24. I suggest that although Boersma here uses the words “earthly” and “heavenly,” in fact he, too, is talking about the systematic theological concepts of “immanent” and “transcendent.”
³⁷⁵ Ibid., 57.
ontology of the Great Tradition. Indeed, shared humanity implies that Christians and non-
Christians equally have a degree of participation in being, even if this participation in being and
goodness “comes in degrees of intensity” because “the alien intrusion of evil in the world
diminishes this participation.”376 From the point of view of our topic this would mean that the
characteristics of, for example, sound and hearing (orality) but also vision and other modalities
may sacramentally mediate something of God’s reality even outside of the liturgy, but – and
we shall say more about this below – human sin and fallenness may diminish their effectiveness.

The same problem has another, reverse aspect. As Rivera points out, based on the Radical
Orthodox view of transcendence and immanence – this cosmology – both Milbank and
Pickstock assume the existence of “a purely Christian realm, clearly divided from the purely
human one,” which is somehow unaffected by all kinds of human assumptions or interests,
whether conscious or not, past or present. “In short, the discussion seems to imply the presence
of a realm detached of historical contingency.”377 In the light of the previous section I would
add that this purely Christian realm of the liturgy in After Writing also seems to be detached
from the physical, social and cultural contingencies related to the use of different media – that
is, of the contingencies of cognition – as well as of human sin and weakness. It is this same
“immunity” that we discovered earlier in this chapter in our analysis of Pickstock’s treatment
of orality and writing; regarding the functions of the body and the different processes of
cognition, but also in terms of the historical, cultural and social aspects of these media. Indeed,
several critics of Radical Orthodoxy in general, and of Pickstock’s use of the liturgy in After
Writing in particular call attention to this aspect of the Radical Orthodox model of cosmology,
namely that while the different features of language and other signs (mainly orality and writing
in After Writing) seem to be void of “purely human” attributes, in the framework of the Roman
Rite these very characteristics are seen as transcending the human.

As Milbank himself phrased this controversial Radical Orthodox conviction, “contrary to being
real limitations at all, our participation in language … link[s] us directly into the mind of
God.”378 In After Writing Pickstock attributes the same capacity to the eucharistic sign when
she suggests that it “[leaps] over the stage of indication or reference” and thus allows things to
“exceed their appearance.” 379 In summary, unlike for Ong, McLuhan or other scholars, in

376 Ibid., 28.
377 Rivera, 50.
378 Katie Terezakis, “J.G. Hamann and the Self-Refutation of Radical Orthodoxy” in Lisa Isherwood, Marko
Zlomislic, eds., The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy, Ibid., 32-57, at 46.
379 AW, 262.
Pickstock’s interpretation orality and writing don’t have to do with (human) communication or cognition, but are mediators of “what is;” epistemology is collapsed into ontology. The other side of the same coin is that while Radical Orthodoxy posits a stark duality between transcendence and immanence, “there is no duality any more at the epistemological level … it is now explicitly stated that to know is to have a look into the mind of God.”

In an excellent essay in which she analyses Milbank’s reading of Johann Georg Hamann, Katie Terezakis, I believe, correctly identifies the “two irreconcilable tunes … with no means of linking them together” played by Milbank, and, I would add, also by Pickstock. Terezakis argues that Milbank’s – and Radical Orthodoxy’s – rejection of what they see as modernity’s philosophical conceits of agnosticism, finitude and subjectivity means that they deem it necessary to substitute these by the “properly Christian narrative,” as this puts them within a framework that ensures in advance “infinitude, certainty and divine omnipotence” and thus also “the supernatural character of embodied life.”

With this Terezakis pinpoints that which I have tried to describe in this chapter as the main problem with Pickstock’s approach to orality and writing. She suggests that Radical Orthodoxy “pre-empts,” usurps, the modern philosophical conceptions of finitude and subjectivity; and indeed, that is what we saw in After Writing regarding those features of orality, writing, print, etc. that can be associated with finitude and subjectivity: sense perception, cognition, social and cultural differences, etc. As Terezakis points out, Milbank (Pickstock) wishes Radical Orthodoxy to be a theology which transcends the opposition between finitude and infinity, epistemology and ontology, transcendence and immanence, “the demands of materiality and the promise of spirituality.” But, she adds, Hamann’s basic thesis is precisely that the (Kantian) metacritical standpoint “obliges us to remain clear about the finite, immanent conditions of our assertions of faith” – even when that faith is practised in the context of the liturgy – and even when those assertions are expressed in our (more or less) systematically phrased theology or philosophy. In other words, in our attempts to understand and interpret the

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381 Hamann’s metacritique of Kantian pure reason was based on his conviction of the radical embeddedness of all human language, which Hamann also saw as requiring us to not lose sight of the “finite, immanent conditions of our assertions of faith.” Terezakis, Ibid., 52.
382 Terezakis, Ibid., 50.
383 Ibid.
384 Ibid., 55.
385 Ibid., 54. Italics mine.
relationship between the orality, writing and the message (of theology), we must take into account “the entanglement of the secular and the spiritual realms” when we seek a systematic theological formulation.

II. 4. 3. Conclusion

The goal of the central chapter of this thesis was to introduce a work that provides a theological interpretation of the relationship between orality, writing and the “message” of theology. Orality and writing are assigned a key role in Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, which is why I made this book – or parts of it – the object of my analysis and critique, hoping in this way to identify the questions that should be addressed when formulating a theologically relevant and applicable framework or formula to describe this relationship. Admittedly, my summary, evaluation and critique of the book have been lengthy and somewhat arduous, one reason for which is the difficult, labyrinthine nature of the work itself. During this long process, however, certain issues have come up repeatedly, which, I believe, point to the most important topics that must be taken into consideration by a theological formulation.

What is the role of orality – in the case of *After Writing* – or of the medium in general in expressing theological truth? Pickstock’s answer is, in a sense, very much like that given by McLuhan, when she asserts that the “oral provenance” of the liturgy contains, mediates, the “message” of the heavenly realities, the beatific vision of God’s reality. Her methodology is not unlike that of the orality-literacy scholars either; by examining some parts of the book closely, we ascertained that she also used phenomenological description, thereby acknowledging the role played by sense perception and consciousness in the relationship between the medium and the message.

However, while, as we suggested, McLuhan never wanted to resolve the tension between these two different approaches, namely that “language could be conceived statically, as analogical mirror” but also “more dynamically, as historically conditioned,” we discovered various discordances in the different roles Pickstock assigns to orality and writing. These are due, I suggested, to the Radical Orthodox “constraining systematic framework structured by negative philosophical verdicts,” as a result of which, as Rivera suggested, there is a deep tension

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387 Stamps, 122.
inherent in their cosmology. Instead of listing these problematic issues once again, let me summarise the conclusions of my analysis.

I hope to have shown that, as Pickstock herself suggested, the question about the significance of issues around the difference between orality and writing – as well as the wider issue of the relationship between the medium and the message – for theology involves some of the most important philosophical/theological issues, namely those of epistemology, ontology and the nature of the subject and consciousness on the one hand, and transcendence and immanence (in their religious meaning) on the other. Can a certain medium,388 for example the spoken word, express, mediate something of God’s reality, and if so, in what way, what context? Is it subject to changing historical and cultural circumstances, to finitude, human weakness and subjectivity, or can it help us see into the transcendent, unchanging mind of God? These and similar questions have emerged as we reviewed Catherine Pickstock’s use of orality and writing in After Writing, and these are the issues that we have identified as related to the “metaphysical concerns.” We concluded that for the reasons spelt out above, the theological framework – that of Radical Orthodoxy – within which Pickstock defined this relationship is in many ways problematic and cannot adequately answer these questions.

We need a theological framework or formula that can hold together these different aspects of orality and writing: epistemology and ontology, including the role of the conscious subject, as well as transcendence and immanence. It must be a framework that, as Johann Georg Hamann put it, reminds us to always “remain clear about the finite, immanent conditions of our assertions of faith” – in this case the (epistemological) role played by both orality and writing – while at the same time allowing for the possibility that, due to its mode of reaching our consciousness, the spoken word, just as other communications media, may analogically “mediate” something of God’s reality. Our task, then, is to identify a formula that fulfils this requirement.

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388 In this case our focus is on “natural” media of communication, which achieve their aim through perception and the senses, such as the spoken word, touch, smell, and writing in that it needs and uses vision.
Chapter Three
A theological framework

III. 1. Introduction

In my investigations of the question about the relationship between orality, literacy, and the "message" of theology we have arrived at the last step: the identification of a framework, a formula, which can integrate the insights gained from the evaluation and critique of the “voice” of Catherine Pickstock in *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, as outlined in the last chapter.

Before suggesting such possible frameworks, I want to make a small digression as an introduction to the main part of this chapter. Although the reason for my choice of *After Writing* as a “case study” was that Pickstock is one of a few theologians who have offered a theological interpretation of the role played by orality and writing, there are, as already mentioned, others who have addressed similar issues – especially the role played by sense perception and different media (in the wider sense, including such components as music, vestment, movement, etc.) in the liturgy. Consequently, even if indirectly, they have also treated the relationship of epistemology and ontology, as well as the role of the subject. For this reason, I will first introduce some of those thinkers whose ideas I have found fruitful when attempting to answer my research question. Although I will also set them against Pickstock’s approach, my primary goal is to see if their insights confirm my conclusions regarding the key issues that must be addressed, or might add further elements to be considered, when suggesting a more adequate framework for the theological interpretation of the role played by orality and writing for theology.

III. 1. 1. Liturgy, Medium, Subjectivity: Other Approaches

The role played by the liturgy in the Christian life is, understandably, a topic that has been addressed by several theologians, from very different points of view; sometimes rather practical, and sometimes – as in the case of Pickstock – more philosophical or theoretical. Because the liturgy is the primary context of Pickstock’s interpretation of the relationship between orality, writing, and theology, in the following I will quote a few of those whose view
of the role played by the liturgy intersects with the issues I have considered in my evaluation of *After Writing*.

Although Augustine does not figure prominently in Pickstock’s argument in *After Writing*, she quotes him in support of her suggestion that signs are only possible because of their “ontological disposal … towards an anterior ideal” and contends that Augustine, like Plato, can only “perceive ‘being’ once it has recollected its own transcendent source.”[^389] However, there seems to be a considerable difference between the way Radical Orthodoxy and thinkers referenced by them – in this case Augustine – see the relationship between real knowledge, ontology and the role of the subject. We have seen that according to Pickstock it is by engaging in doxology, “the liturgical apprehension,” that we can truly “recollect our transcendent source” and thus acknowledge that “the true nature of things known is their teleologically ordered nature towards the good/God.”[^390] But, as Maarten Wisse points out, it is exactly here that the difference between Augustine and Radical Orthodoxy can be best seen. Pickstock’s conviction implies, namely, that the problem with the human condition after the fall is “that I lost track of upon whom I am dependent” – I don’t have a correct ontology – and if someone tells me and I acknowledge “the true condition of the world and celebrate it in acts of doxology,” for example by participating in the liturgy, which can reconnect me with my origin, “everything is in order.”[^391]

Indeed, dependence on God is of paramount importance for Augustine as well; however, for him the dependence is not located at the intellectual level, at the level of knowing what the true state of creation is; he is convinced that the problem has to do with our will, not with our knowledge. “I need a relationship to God that concerns my human identity as a subject rather than a mere cognitive recognition of the origin of creation.”[^392] This, adds Wisse with reference to Pickstock, also applies to the validity of the liturgical mediation of truth and meaning; we cannot identify a ”body of text or a ritual” with the (even if believing) subject’s participation in truth. In other words, formulated in the terminology of philosophy, “truth cannot without qualification be identified with being.”[^393] For Augustine, the *human subject and will* play an

[^389]: *AW*, 71.
[^390]: Wisse, Ibid., 159.
[^391]: Ibid., 160.
[^392]: Ibid.
[^393]: Ibid., 161.
indispensable part in our participation in the truth; recollection of our transcendent source – Pickstock’s emphasis on ontology – is not enough.

The same conviction is expressed by Hans Urs von Balthasar when he suggests that sacramental eating and drinking is “pointless unless it is accompanied by living faith and love” because it is the latter that make it “an effectual, supernatural sign.” 394 Just like Augustine, von Balthasar does not contrast the existential, immanent, subjective and intentional – in the case of the liturgy he calls this “the disposition of the recipient” – with the Eucharistic sign as the bearer of meaning. He is more realistic about what happens when we participate in the liturgy; unlike for Pickstock, his subject is not abstractly embodied, but a self with a real body, consciousness, psyche and social life. Indeed, he acknowledges that “practically and psychologically, the effect of the Church’s liturgy fades as the day proceeds, and the world’s work is for the most part remote from it” 395 – that is, it is one thing to recollect our origin, and a different one to live our daily lives as humans who are in their being directed towards God, in this world. This view of the liturgy is very different from that offered by Pickstock. Rather than creating a new dualism between ontology and epistemology, transcendence and immanence, it sees the “two parts” as fitting together within the “twofold being” of the Church. 396

Other, contemporary theologians are also mindful of the role the believer’s sensual, cognitive and volitional apparatus plays when participating in the liturgy. We have already quoted Sarah Coakley, who in her work also assigns an important part to the liturgy. For our purpose it is significant that, according to her, our participation in the liturgy “implicitly involves a full range of epistemological ‘practices’… sense experience, introspection, memory, inference, evaluation, etc.” 397 She is clearly talking about epistemological practices, the basis of these being sense experience, which, however, is processed by our other, mental and spiritual faculties. She adds that the different features of the “epistemic negotiations” we employ in the course of our doxastic practices are always informed not only by the above mentioned bodily and spiritual endowments, but also by history. As Nicholas Wolterstorff stresses in his study on the belief-forming self, referred to by Coakley, “we, as belief-forming selves, are in good

395 Ibid., 120. Von Balthasar then goes on to argue that it is the role of contemplation to make space for the Spirit “to refashion the Christian’s everyday life.”
396 Von Balthasar talks about the two-fold relationship of the church with Christ, as both identity and non-identity.
measure creatures of history… not just the broad sweeping currents of social history but our personal histories, these incorporating, each in its own way, those broad currents.\textsuperscript{398} That is, our appreciation of, and participation in the liturgy will also depend on our family and life history – for example, the kind of (religious) education we have had, and what we were taught about the liturgy; a fact that, as we saw above, New Orality Studies have also emphasized regarding the role of social determinants in the relationship between orality and literacy.

It would make an interesting, and certainly worthwhile, study to compare the ”practices” named by Coakley (sense experience, memory, etc.) with Pickstock’s analysis of the workings of the liturgy as described in \textit{After Writing}; there is no doubt that we would find some overlap. The main difference, though, is that Pickstock does not acknowledge these to be \textit{epistemological} practices – which is not surprising, given the Radical Orthodox systematic framework which, as we have noted several times, is wary of what it sees as the ”modern,” knowing, subject. Yet another aspect of this difference is that – consistent with her view of selves or subjects as ”embodied knowers” – Coakley emphasizes the fact that what she calls ”liturgical practice” is not an automatic, unchanging behaviour or performance, but a ”complex means of training the mind and senses, over time, in order to come into a right relationship with God.” She calls this process ”sensory cognition” and suggests that in the course of participating in the liturgy it can only take effect by way of ”repeated acts.”\textsuperscript{399} This does not fit into the framework within which Pickstock interprets the liturgy either; neither participatory ontology, nor the nature of orality as sign allows for \textit{change} or development over time, as both see language – just as Pickstock sees the liturgy – as in a sense steady and unchanging.

Giving a theological appraisal of the liturgy from a different starting point, David F. Ford, too, talks about an ”eucharistic habitus;” he interprets Jesus’ words, ”Do this!” as including ”a wisdom of habituation;” just like the reading of Scripture, confession, praising, intercession and petition; ”within a dramatic pattern [all these] \textit{slowly become} second nature.”\textsuperscript{400} We shall have to say more about \textit{being} and \textit{becoming} below, but we can note the difference between Pickstock’s interpretation of the liturgy as revealing \textit{being} and Coakley as well as Ford associating it with the order of \textit{becoming}. In fact, after his brief considerations about identity and the Eucharist, Ford adds that there would be a need for ”a full anthropological study of

\textsuperscript{398} Nicholas Wolterstorff,” Historicizing the Belief-Forming Self” in Crisp, Davidson, Vander Laan, eds., \textit{Knowledge and Reality}, Ibid., 111-136, at 131.

\textsuperscript{399} Ibid., 137-138. Italics mine.

This, I suggest, is an acknowledgment that eucharistic practice has fundamental anthropological aspects, just as we have also seen von Balthasar and Coakley include these in their discussions of the liturgy. Pickstock’s participatory ontology, however, seems to have difficulty integrating this reality into her philosophical framework.

Besides stressing the role of epistemological practices, Coakley also emphasizes another important feature of "liturgical cognition" when she comments that although the goal of the liturgy is that we “perceive God,” this is a kind of perception that implies “knowledge by acquaintance, founded in trust and sustained by repeated acts of adoration and worship.” We see here the same kind of emphasis that we did with Augustine; the nature of the subject is not defined by its being or knowing, but by being loving and trusting. The cognition – or rather perception – that “happens” in the liturgy does not take place primarily at the noetic level; it is a kind of cognition that, while incorporating bodily knowing (especially sense perception), highlights the significance of personal relationship “as a matrix of any ‘knowing that’.” This is a human subject whose identity is established by relationship; an emphasis that echoes the conviction of Hans Urs von Balthasar regarding the nature of subjective consciousness, namely that “the infant is brought to consciousness of himself only by love, by the smile of his mother.” We shall come back to this later; for now let’s just remember that several theologians affirm the possibility of, or need for, a subject and a definition of consciousness that is defined by being in relationship with others.

But, one could contradict, in the context of her critique of Emmanuel Levinas Pickstock also echoes von Balthasar’s insight when she contends that ”it is not the demand of the other but the gift of the other that introduces us to being – as for von Balthasar, for whom it is the mother’s smile which inaugurates us, by bringing us into an intra-subjective communion.” Pickstock’s use of words here is telling, however; while von Balthasar talks about the love of the mother, Pickstock conducts her argument on a more abstract level when she talks about the gift of the other. Just like in the case of her emphasis on the role of the body, in the absence of any real, concrete subjectivity and physicality, her invoking of inter-(or intra) subjectivity remains abstract. As Mayra Rivera also suggests, if Pickstock took the embeddedness of all language

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401 Coakley, Ibid., 97.
402 Ibid., 139.
403 Ibid.
405 AV, 114.
seriously, she would realize – as Coakley and von Balthasar do – that the God-human relation is mediated not only by language and other signs, but also by real, concrete relationships with other people. Rivera’s point here is worthy of an extended quote:

Although Pickstock describes the Eucharist as a collective event, the depiction offered suggests the image of a priestly God dispensing the elements to a congregation of individuals with no sense of each other. In this model, we find a collection of selves turned toward the overwhelming subjectivity of a God that gives them from without whatever reality they have. This relation reconstitutes the community entirely from without, without the mediation of human hierarchy. Apart from the difficulties and dangers entailed in any claims to dislodge human activity from its entanglement in its context, this scene of the human/divine encounter as a model for the constitution of a collectivity seems to occlude an essential element: other human beings. Human relations recede in the background. The selves in this scene never look at or talk to each other.406

Although the aim of this paragraph is to underline Rivera’s claims about the Radical Orthodox cosmology, it is a good formulation of the problem in Pickstock’s understanding of the liturgy that she here calls attention to; namely that any human activity, including participation in the liturgy, is “entangled” in a context, and this context will, in some way, always involve other people, thus some sort of “human hierarchy.” Concrete examples of this same aspect of the liturgy are offered by Luke Timothy Johnson when he emphasizes that ritual involves communion not only with the divine, but also with other worshippers; for example, when we sing hymns, we are involved in the ”choral experience” of becoming one body; and the kiss of peace "links body to body, and spirit to spirit, in a moment of communion."407

Finally, there is yet another consideration which, although not directly related to participation in the liturgy, might be an important addition to considerations of the role of epistemological practices. Johnson also reminds us that human embodiedness as "the privileged arena of God’s self-disclosure,"408 though it certainly enables, can also limit human freedom; human experience is "dangerously erratic, and all too susceptible to delusion and sin."409 This aspect of bodily knowing – of the senses and perception, and thus indirectly of the use of different media – namely that they may disclose as well as hide and deceive, seems also to have been

406 Rivera, 32.
408 Ibid., 4.
409 Ibid.
well understood by Jewish thinkers. Tamas Turan, a Hungarian Jewish scholar goes as far as to contend that "the problem of idolatry and anthropomorphism is, to a large extent, a medium-related problem." In his theological-anthropological examination of Jewish iconophobia he suggests, for example, that rabbinic literature, aware of the power of the eyes to lead to sin – by wanting to get hold of the object that is seen and desired – has always been wary of sight and the eye.

It is significant that in his fascinating study of both biblical and rabbinic literature Turan also makes mention of the role of writing. He suggests that while in an oral society speech about God is mainly dramatic and narrative in character, the written word easily makes God’s revelation into attributive-declarative statements. In this context he quotes Moses Mendelssohn, who calls attention to the propensity of alphabetic writing for abstraction and speculation. There is not enough time or space here to detail Turan’s conclusions regarding the role of images, writing, and their connection with idolatry; what is significant for our purpose is his insistence that, theologically and anthropologically, vision, looking and seeing, hold dangers as well as possibilities in relation to humans’ relationship with God. To quote Johnson again, the human body is "a primordial mystery or symbol of [both] human freedom and bondage… both sinful and sanctifying."  

III. 1. 2. Other Approaches: A Summary

The goal of this digression has been to see if the theological issues we identified as the most important elements of a systematic framework for interpreting the role of orality and writing for the message of theology in the last section – the correlative conceptual pairs of epistemology/ontology, transcendence/immanence, as well as the nature of subjective consciousness – can be confirmed, and perhaps supplemented, by other theologians’ considerations of the same (or similar) questions, especially as these emerge in relation to the liturgy. The theologians whose thought has been considered above all explore topics related to the role played in the life of Christians by the liturgy in general, and/or by sense perception and its role in connection with orality and writing, but also the use of different media.

To begin with, I would suggest that all of the thinkers quoted confirm the thesis that is also held by Pickstock that the liturgy (including all that it implies in terms of our “doxastic practices”)

411 Johnson, Ibid., 24.
as a primary place and means of worship of God – and, because of its role played in the liturgy, the human body as the “privileged arena of God’s self-disclosure” – are capable of pointing us beyond, and of establishing a relationship with, and some kind of knowledge of, the transcendent God, our origin. However, at the same time all of them see this “knowledge” and relationship as dependent on and impacted by our subjective, physical, psychological, moral – in one word, immanent – human condition. We have seen that the different theologians put the emphasis on different aspects of this “immanence:” the will or disposition of the human subject (Augustine, von Balthasar); the role of consciousness and everyday psychology (von Balthasar, Coakley, Ford); the role of our “sensual and cognitive apparatus,” that is, our epistemic practices such as sense perception, memory, inference, etc. (Coakley); the influence of social and cultural factors in our individual and communal history (Wolterstorff) and related to this the inescapability of sociality in our relationship with God (von Balthasar, Rivera, Coakley); and, finally, the recognition that all these may be sinful as well as sanctifying, instruments of delusion and idolatry as well as of worship and knowledge of God (Johnson, Turan).

The conclusion of all this is that regarding the key philosophical/theological issues or dogmatic resources we are trying to determine, an adequate (systematic) theological framework to describe the role of orality and writing – as the most typical instance of the relationship between the medium and the message of theology first of all cannot collapse epistemology into ontology, but will have to embrace both of these, as well as of the role played by consciousness and subjectivity – but this will be a kind of subjectivity that is based on real relations. Secondly, but very closely connected to this, it will have to take into account both (religious) transcendence and (religious) immanence, with all that these entail. It is the task of the next section to suggest such a model.

III. 2. The Theological Framework

In Chapter Two we demonstrated in what ways ”the constraining systematic framework structured by negative philosophical verdicts” of Radical Orthodoxy proves to be inadequate when trying to determine a framework, formula, or model within which to consider the relationship between the “media” of orality and literacy and the message of theology. With the help of an evaluation and critique of Catherine Pickstock’s *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* and then, in the previous section of this chapter, some other theologians’ interpretation of the liturgy, we identified those significant theological and philosophical issues – in Pickstock’s words ”metaphysical assumptions” – that must be
addressed regarding the nature and workings of orality and writing. These included questions related to the role of the body and the senses, as well as of the subject, consciousness and language; the nature of the liturgy, and the meaning of analogy and participation, epistemology and ontology, immanence and transcendence. Based on all this I suggest that when we consider the “problem” of orality and literacy as a subtopic of the larger question regarding the relationship between the medium and the message (of theology), we are, in fact, confronted by David Burrell’s “quintessential theological task,”¹⁴¹² that of formulating on the one hand the distinction, and on the other the relationship between God and the world.

If this indeed is the quintessential theological task, it is to be expected that there have been many attempts, ways and modes of addressing it in the history of Christian theology. Thus, in our quest for an appropriate theological framework we must narrow down our approach as we try to find answers to the questions raised by our case study, After Writing. To do so, we shall first stay a little longer with the thought of Pickstock and Radical Orthodoxy and, as a prelude to the rest of this chapter, take a somewhat closer look at the concepts of analogy and participation, the defining notions of the Platonic-Christian synthesis and one of the key elements of the Radical Orthodox systematic framework. These are two of the concepts that are used by Pickstock regarding orality and writing, but they did not figure significantly in the book and so were only briefly mentioned in the last chapter’s critique and list of philosophical-theological issues to emerge from After Writing. However, as I hope to show, not only are they key elements of the Radical Orthodox framework but are also closely connected to all the other issues identified as necessary aspects of an alternative theological model when addressing a theological formulation of the problem of orality and literacy.

III. 2. 1. Analogy and Participation

In Chapters One and Two we commented on how different critics of McLuhan’s oeuvre highlight the extent to which Thomism and analogical thinking inform his thinking. We were reminded of the fact that Aquinas’ idea about the role of the senses acted as a decisive analogical point of reference for McLuhan; as he himself emphasized, he was ”a Thomist for whom the sensory order [i.e., the world] resonates with the Divine Logos.”¹⁴¹³ At the same time, we saw that the tension in McLuhan’s thought between the ”Thomistic/static and Gestalt/historical

¹⁴¹² Burrell, Ibid.

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analysis” was never resolved. Indeed, even if analogy did play an important part in his thinking – John Fekete suggests that “in McLuhan myth and analogy are fundamental structures of consciousness” – McLuhan’s goal was always primarily pedagogical, rather than theological or metaphysical, and he did not attempt to settle the tension between the two conflicting approaches. In the end, he put his contribution – the many lectures, articles and books – to the study of communication, with all its tensions between analogy and history, at the service of the training and education of the senses.

As for Pickstock, it is intriguing that while the word participation is mentioned twenty-nine times in After Writing, analogy figures only eight times in the circa 270 pages. Neither does Pickstock provide a definition of her understanding and use of either of the two concepts. The meaning and nature of analogy has, of course, been the object of a huge number of studies. In particular, the role assigned to the concept of analogy by Thomas of Aquinas, one of Radical Orthodoxy’s heroes, has been studied and analysed by several theologians and philosophers, and within this context different scholars have also addressed Radical Orthodoxy’s (mis)appropriation of Aquinas. The questions related to analogy are much more wide-ranging and extensive than can be addressed here; however, both analogy and participation are closely connected to all the other ”metaphysical assumptions” that a more adequate framework than Pickstock’s must attend to, and may thus prove to be important in our quest for an alternative model.

In the article quoted above Paul de Hart analyses what he sees as the polemical context of John Milbank’s claims about Aquinas, namely Milbank’s assertion that “the doctrine of analogy in Aquinas is peculiarly implicated with his entire ontology,” while vigorously repudiating the “grammatical” or “linguistic” interpretation of theologians such as Herbert McCabe, David Burrell and Nicholas Lash. As a reminder, De Hart’s conclusions have already been alluded to above: Milbank – and Pickstock, I would add – want to prove that analogy in Aquinas cannot be understood in semantic (or grammatical) terms, but “is already inextricably included within his ontology of creaturely participation in the creator.” As we have seen in our critique of

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414 Stamps, Ibid., 133.
416 The special importance of Aquinas for Radical Orthodoxy is attested by the fact that as part of the Routledge Radical Orthodoxy Series Milbank and Pickstock co-authored a book, Truth in Aquinas (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); as a response, as part of the Routledge Series in Religion Paul DeHart published Aquinas and Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Inquiry (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
417 De Hart, Ibid., 244.
418 Ibid., 253.
After Writing above, for Pickstock this view of analogy and participation also implies a kind of cognitive relationship between human minds and created things; a relationship which, with regard to the liturgy, means that the different characteristics of orality we discussed above (apostrophe, asyndeton, etc.) directly mediate the divine to the participant; “rather than forbidding proper knowledge of their creator” – for example by all the contingencies of human sense perception, as well as human sin, participation – “positively implies such knowledge.”

Pickstock also refers to this kind of knowledge in connection with analogy when, commenting on Duns Scotus and the univocity of Being, she talks about “the possibility of figural or analogical determinations of God that give us [some] degree of substantive knowledge of His character.” Significantly, for her this knowledge, although only to some degree, is also substantive; but in the same passage she then bemoans the fact that for Scotus “the miraculous is no longer to be found in the analogical resemblances of the created order.” Like DeHart, Bruce D. Marshall also disagrees with Milbank and Pickstock concerning Aquinas’s understanding of analogy. He calls attention to Thomas’s well-known dictum that “the known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower;” from which we must conclude that “the linguistic order follows, indeed coincides with, our order of knowing, rather than the order of being. … Thomas, then, gives us good reason to distinguish clearly the analogy of names from ontological similarity and participation.” The disagreement about the nature of analogy in Aquinas is, of course, much more complex than can be engaged here. I suggest, however, that Marshall makes an important point here and this thesis of his is vital for our considerations of the role of orality and writing. Even if ”the linguistic order” cannot be fully identified with orality, literacy, or any other “order” of the media of communication, our argument so far, I believe, supports Aquinas’s statement that orality and writing “follow the order of knowing,” even if at the same time they might analogically reveal something of God and his reality.

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419 Ibid.
420 AW, 123. Italics mine.
421 Ibid., 132.
423 As we have noted, the media of communication are part of a complex biological, social, cultural framework which is broader than language.
424 In Truth in Aquinas John Milbank devotes several paragraphs to contesting Marshall’s argument regarding “semantic analogy.” As I have noted, this question, goes beyond the topic of this thesis; however, as I argue above, in terms of what has been said so far regarding the role of sense perception in issues of the media, “the mode of the knower” supports Marshall’s rather than Pickstock and Milbank’s understanding.
The debated notions of both analogy and participation are persistent topics in theology. In our argumentation so far, we have also listed the kind of consequences that Pickstock’s understanding of analogy and participation generates. To recall and put what was said above slightly differently, this is how David Schindler identifies the ”dangers” of the Platonist idea of participation:

The notion of participation bears a logic that seems to lead away from a Christian view of the world in at least two respects. First, insofar as the reference to the ”beyond,” implied in the structure of participation, constitutes the very identity of things, the notion seems to tend toward pantheism. Second, … the notion of participation by the very same token seems to deprive the finite, temporal, and physical world of any reality of its own. … If the Neoplatonic tradition is correct to say that the form is, as it were, infinitely higher than any particular instance of that form because that instance will always express merely a partial reflection of the whole idea, Kierkegaard is also right to affirm that the individual is infinitely higher than the universal, because the individual alone exhibits the ineluctable seriousness of existence. From a Christian perspective, an adequate notion of participation must somehow have room for both of these affirmations.425

This, view, I suggest, echoes the “kabbalistic paradox” of multiplicity and unity, the one and the many, which Marchessault identified in McLuhan’s thought; what Schindler calls the “beyond” could be substituted by transcendence, while the finite, temporal, physical by immanence. What Thomas Aquinas achieved, adds Schindler, was exactly this, more adequate notion of participation, when he affirmed that the two principles of the universal and the particular, the beyond and the below, transcendence and immanence exist reciprocally; they are inseparable, but neither can the one be reduced to the other. What we are talking about here, he suggests, is “a pervasive and inexorable polarity in the core of worldly being” – but, he adds, at the same time it is exactly this paradox that represents the deepest truth of our created reality.426

We could thus conclude that it is the co-principles of immanence and transcendence, epistemology and ontology, the world and God – or earth and heaven, using Boersma’s terminology – and the question about their relationship that must ground the answer to our

426 Schindler,”What’s the Difference?” 22.
question about the “problem” of orality and literacy in relation to the “message” of theology and it is the acknowledgement of the truth of this “inexorable polarity” which cannot be transcended even by a “middle-voice” that seems to be missing from Pickstock’s handling of orality and writing in After Writing. Any philosophical-theological framework that is better suited to addressing the initial question of this thesis than Pickstock’s will have to assign a central place to incorporating the “reciprocal causalities” mentioned above.

As I already noted in connection with the concepts of analogy and participation, this is a question that is indeed fundamental to the task of systematic theology and has consequently been addressed, from different aspects, by almost all theologians. Of these, in the following we shall examine the solutions offered to this problem by two significant theological voices whose approach is complementary with several of the topics identified in this chapter so far. In his important book Analogy Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm Erich Przywara reinstated a doctrine that he regarded as “the fundamental Catholic principle” (the Catholic Denkform), by which as we shall see, he undertakes to provide a philosophical-theological framework to address the questions raised by this same inherent tension. The other theologian we shall consider is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who, under the influence of Karl Barth, integrated the analogy entis into his own thinking in a unique way.

III. 2. 2. Przywara and the Analogy Entis

Although, as was indicated above, it is Thomas Aquinas who is at the centre of debates about the meaning of analogy, whether his position might be described as advocating the “analogy of being” is still contested. It was Erich Przywara who, in his masterful – if controversial – work developed the doctrine of the analogy entis or “analogy of being.” This book is far too important and complex for us to engage with in greater depth; however, because I want to argue that the issues it addresses centre around the problems that we have seen to be at the heart of Pickstock’s After Writing, some aspects of this work may prove to be a helpful guide in further identifying and evaluating the points most relevant to our discussion of the relationship between the “media” of orality and literacy (or writing) and the message of theology.

427 As well as of several other issues, of course – ours is only a very particular concern, one of the many aspects of finite life and existence.
428 The first full English language translation of Przywara’s work, originally published in German in 1932, was translated and edited by John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014).
429 See Bruce D. Marshall, Ibid., 280. John Milbank in Truth in Aquinas, while acknowledging that analogy entis was coined long after Aquinas, suggests that it is nonetheless not entirely inappropriate to say that it reflects Aquinas’s understanding of analogy.
According to John R. Betz, “for Przywara the analogia entis in fact emerges from within philosophy as the liberating (ultimately theological) solution to philosophy’s own inherent contradictions.”\textsuperscript{430} These, I suggest, are the same contradictions that we identified above regarding Pickstock’s reasoning, in particular those between the conceptual pairs of ontology and epistemology on the one hand, and transcendence and immanence on the other. It is important to note that although “emerging from within philosophy,” according to Przywara the answer provided by the analogia entis is an ultimately theological solution to philosophy’s inherent contradictions. In some way it might seem as though this echoes Pickstock’s theological because liturgical solution; but this, I suggest, is misleading; I believe that given the Radical Orthodox constraining systematic framework structured by negative philosophical verdicts” of \textit{After Writing} Pickstock’s solution in the end is more philosophical than theological.\textsuperscript{431}

It is significant, I suggest, that Przywara starts his discussion of the “fundamental principle” of the analogia entis by recognizing that philosophy happens when “my ’act of consciousness’ interrogates being regarding its ’ground and end and definition’.”\textsuperscript{432} This, he explains, immediately introduces the duality of ”the act of knowledge” (my thinking) and ”the act of being” (the object of my interrogation). My consciousness is necessary to even think about being; which means that philosophy itself emerges first as an epistemological question and manifests itself as the issue of methodology. This is how he phrases the question:

Is a metaphysics (understood as the question concerning the ’ground and being and definition in itself” of being) primarily one that takes its point of departure from a reflection on the act of knowledge (and so from a \textit{meta-noetics} of being \textit{qua} being)? Or is it primarily one whose intention proceeds immediately towards the object of knowledge (and is thus a \textit{meta-ontics} of being \textit{qua} being)?\textsuperscript{433}

Przywara believes that this epistemological and/or methodological tension and correlation – which can also be framed as ”the epistemological problem of the relation between being and consciousness”\textsuperscript{434} or, from a different angle, “philosophy’s most difficult problem: the

\textsuperscript{430} John R. Betz, ”After Barth: A New Introduction to Erich Przywara’s Analogia Entis” in White, ed., \textit{The Analogy Of Being}, 59.
\textsuperscript{431} As already noted, the Radical Orthodox view of the relationship between philosophy and theology is a point of criticism of Radical Orthodoxy, see e.g. Hemming, ed., \textit{Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic Enquiry}.
\textsuperscript{432} Erich Przywara, \textit{Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm}. Translated by John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 120.
\textsuperscript{433} Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{434} Betz, \textit{After Barth}, 59.
relationship between subject and object,” is one that has defined the history of philosophy. He suggests that while the meta-ontic starting point of a “transcendental metaphysics” predominated in antiquity (e.g. with Plato and Aristotle), modernity saw the predomination of meta-noetics in the form of a ”metaphysical transcendentalism” (of Kant and others).435 However, if this correlation and tension is inevitable, then what it makes clear is that ”there is no pure meta-ontics any more than there is a pure meta-noetics; for just as no meta-ontics can fail to consider the role of consciousness and intentionality in our perception of being, no meta-noetics can fail to consider the gratuity of being to consciousness.”436 This means that ontology and epistemology, being and consciousness, object and subject mutually presuppose each other; neither exists without the other. Przywara illustrates this from the history of philosophy:

Thus Kant employs the most traditional of ontic categories in his supposedly rarefied, transcendental table of the categories. Thus Husserl (for all his transcendental phenomenology) cannot help but affirm the givenness of being and the intuition of the categories themselves (not to mention the readiness with which he speaks of regional “ontologies”). In fact, even the “act” of consciousness, the starting point of an ostensibly pure meta-noetics, is already informed by the venerable ontic categories of potency and act.437

But this ”dynamic tension and ultimate correlation,” Przywara suggests, goes even deeper than epistemology and thus the methodology for philosophy’s starting point; ultimately it is ”rooted in a dynamic ontological tension between essence and existence” – first of all of creaturely being, which, however, ultimately intimates an even greater mystery, that of God himself. It is this dynamic – not dialectical – unity of essence and existence, which causes ”the inherent instability of creaturely being as such,”438 which Przywara describes with the help of the somewhat cryptic formula ”essence in-and-beyond existence.” In a way it seems that this formula assigns priority to the meta-ontic over the meta-noetic, the “beyond” meaning ”essence over existence,” while still emphasizing ”essence in existence.” However, as Keith Johnson

435 Ibid., 61.
436 John R. Betz, ”Beyond the Sublime: The Aesthetics of the Analogy of Being” (Part Two), Modern Theology 22/1 (January 2006), 1-50, at 23.
437 Ibid.
438 Betz, After Barth, 60.
suggests – and I agree with his interpretation – the “beyond” simply means that the human knower acknowledges that a reality exists above and beyond herself.\textsuperscript{439}

The same creaturely tensions, adds Przywara, also manifest themselves in other ways – for example in the tension between two kinds of emphases: ”an a priori metaphysics (with its emphasis upon the purity of a transcendental subject and its alleged capacity for timeless, superhistorical truth) and an a posteriori metaphysics, which takes history, the senses, tradition and embodiment seriously as that through which any superhistorical truth is discerned.”\textsuperscript{440} Once again, we should beware of assuming that either exists as "pure, absolute in itself,"\textsuperscript{441} and neither deprive history of any truth nor dissolve truth into history. Rightly understood, ”truth, which is known 'beyond history,' is known only 'in history';” because truth belongs to the region of essence, and history to the region of existence. The formula ”truth in-and-beyond history” thus reflects the more basic formula “essence in-and-beyond existence.”\textsuperscript{442}

Przywara suggests that the approach that can rightly capture the relationship between God and creatures – the quintessential theological task, ”the mystery of the between of God and creature”\textsuperscript{443} – is that of analogy in general and the \textit{analogia entis} in particular. For him the \textit{analogia entis} is not a principle “native to any purely natural metaphysics,” but the expression of the analogical “interval that \textit{disrupts the continuity of being} within that order of participation.”\textsuperscript{444} It is this tension and rhythm of the dualities mentioned above – the polarity of in-and-above – that, Przywara maintains, can express the ”similarity-in-ever-greater-dissimilarity” of Lateran IV’s understanding of analogy.\textsuperscript{445} In yet other words, the \textit{analogia entis} is capable of achieving a metaphysics that is adequate to creaturely being when it asserts that human beings exist “within the polarity of the transcendence and immanence of God.”\textsuperscript{446} Indeed, it can function as a genuinely \textit{theological metaphysics}, because it ”does justice to the creature \textit{qua} creature, as well as to divine freedom and transcendence. … We come to see that the tension intrinsic to creaturely being (essence-in-and-beyond existence) points to and is ‘vertically intersected’ by the still more basic formula ‘God \textit{beyond}-in creation’.”\textsuperscript{447}

\textsuperscript{439} Keith L. Johnson, \textit{Karl Barth and the Analogia Entis} (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 130.
\textsuperscript{440} Betz, “After Barth,” 61. Italics mine.
\textsuperscript{441} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{442} Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{443} Przywara, Ibid., 245.
\textsuperscript{444} DeHart, ”The Destiny of Christian Metaphysics,” 401. Italics mine; in the light of our discussion so far, the fact of the ”disruption of the continuity of being” in the order of participation is especially significant.
\textsuperscript{445} Schenk, 178.
\textsuperscript{446} Johnson, 75.
\textsuperscript{447} Ibid., 63.
Przywara’s argument in *Analogia Entis* is of course much more comprehensive and far-ranging than can be introduced within the confines of this thesis; but I suggest that it is a good starting point in our quest for a philosophical-theological framework within which to evaluate the relationship between the medium and message of theology. Of course, *Analogia Entis* also received much criticism from Przywara’s contemporaries – especially Karl Barth and Martin Heidegger – as well as others since its publication. This is another topic, though, that is so vast that it would require a whole dissertation and thus goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Thus, I will only briefly touch on some points of the criticism to validate my use of this “fundamental Catholic principle” as a key point of reference in my argument, as well as to call attention to some of the issues around it that are also connected to our topic.

Betz suggests that of the (contemporary) critics, whereas Martin Heidegger rejected the notion of any Christian philosophy, that is, “any admixture of theology in philosophy,” Barth in turn rejected any admixture of philosophy in theology (dogmatics), and thus also the *analogia entis*, which he saw as Przywara’s “natural theology.” There is no need for me to replicate Betz’s argument here, which I find quite convincing; let me only refer to his reminder that, in time, Barth himself admitted that “analogy is somehow indispensable to theology” and, more importantly, that he did misunderstand – or at least misrepresent – what Przywara meant by the *analogia entis*. In summary of a much lengthier and more complex argument, I agree with Betz that, as Przywara later puts it in an essay “the *analogia entis*, as what is ultimate to metaphysics and religion, ultimately ‘explodes the limits of metaphysics as such’” because, in the end, “the dynamic of the *analogia entis*, as a truly fundamental principle, is manifest in the structures of consciousness and the principles of thought itself.” This is a particularly interesting idea. If, as was noted in Chapter One, sense perception is acknowledged to found the principles of thought and thus the structures of consciousness with its metaphors, then the concept of the *analogia entis* must be of real interest for us in the framework of our enquiry about the medium and the message – including the workings of orality and literacy. Then the media of communication we use, via sense perception as well as our other epistemological practices, may be seen as having both ontological and epistemological significance, turned towards transcendence while situated fully in immanence. The spoken word, for example, might

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448 The two latest volumes, by Johnson and White as editors have already been referenced above.
450 Ibid., 94.
451 See Ibid., 83ff.
452 Ibid., 81.
453 Ibid., 94.
mediate something of the divine – and not only in the sacred polis – while at the same time being contingent and socially and culturally determined.

There is, however, a criticism that was raised by Barth in connection with Przywara’s thought which I see as equally legitimate and relevant. This issue is that of sin; namely that in her natural situation man (and woman) is separated from God and so there is no continuity between man and God “from below” but only “from above.” As Barth’s words, even though Przywara “uses human consciousness as a basis for his discussion of the *analogia entis*, by ignoring the reality of sin, he never really discusses true human consciousness, or being, at all;” the analogy he draws, claims Barth, is between God and an ideal human “rather than the actual human, the human sinner.” In my view, the principle of *analogia entis* does not necessarily refute this conviction; however, as Betz also admits, although Przywara does not deny that human nature’s openness to God is severely compromised by sin, he might have been more optimistic about human nature than Barth and “only came to sense the depth of human sin gradually.” Indeed, as we argued in the last section, human sin and weakness distort our natural capacities; on this point McLuhan with his strong words of caution, rather than Przywara may act as a corrective to Pickstock and thus point the way forward— but I will come back to that shortly.

To sum up, it seems that the idea of the *analogia entis* as understood by Erich Przywara contains many elements that could act as anchors for the theological framework we are looking for (this is what case study methodology calls the end point of the first "direction … from concrete reality to abstract concepts"). Based on the conclusions of the last chapter and the Excursus at the beginning of this one, though, this formula must be amended and complemented, as some other elements that should be part of the relationship of the medium of orality and literacy and the message of theology are still missing.

III. 2. 3. Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theological Anthropology and the Dramatic Structure of Truth

The other theologian whose thought I suggest reinforces, but at the same time complements Przywara’s *analogia entis* in important ways is Hans Urs von Balthasar. Von Balthasar was a

454 Ibid., 90.
456 Ibid., 120.
contemporary of Erich Przywara and so a witness of the controversy around the *analogia entis* generated by Karl Barth (who was also his friend and an important influence on his thought), and although rising to Przywara’s defence, he did not defend the *analogia entis* “in exactly the same way as Przywara did.” 458 In fact, later in life Balthasar criticised elements of Przywara’s thought; but in the secondary literature on Balthasar there is general agreement that he learned much from him and drew on his thought in different ways. As one biographer put it, “the degree of Przywara’s influence is difficult to overstate. This influence is identifiable in most of Balthasar’s theology and in his early engagement with Barth.” 459

Balthasar, however, developed his own unique approach. He retained the “Denkform” of the “Catholic ‘and’,” the conviction that theology needs to simultaneously embrace the transcendent and the immanent, the “from above” and the “from below,” the ontological and epistemological, the object and the subject. But he interpreted the tension inherent in this inescapable polarity in a unique way. By his use of the concept of “drama” – which he applied in different contexts in his oeuvre – he sought to emphasize that dramatic tension, while not cancelling out the tension, affirms a sort of unity “that is profound enough to be conditioned by what it brings together.” 460 The way von Balthasar adopts “drama” in his work is pervasive and comprehensive, but what is important for us is the way in which he applies it in relation to our topic, namely issues that in some way can be related to orality and writing, or, in a broader sense, the medium and the message. This, I believe, happens from two major directions.

First of all, von Balthasar is convinced that philosophy should not avoid “the appropriating of beginnings” – for example that of the conscious subject – as recent (postmodern, post-structuralist) philosophy suggests; because, he adds, “the only alternative is in fact a kind of abstraction, which … always ends up in dualism.” 461 It is exactly this kind of abstraction that we have seen not only with Derrida, but also in Radical Orthodoxy and in Pickstock’s approach to orality and writing. According to von Balthasar, the attempt to “transcend” the duality of opposed principles leads to disruption and “blurry lines,” – a perfect description of much in Radical Orthodox thought and *After Writing*, I suggest – and ultimately to the upholding of a

461 Ibid., 155.
kind of dualism, whereas drama recognizes these dualities as good, even necessary, even if neither is sufficient on its own.462

Balthasar follows the from below, “concrete method” – which means that he takes “the originary experience of consciousness” as his starting point. One cannot overstate the significance of this approach; in fact, according to David Schindler Balthasar’s approach to consciousness is nothing short of a paradigm shift.464 Schindler calls this method Balthasar’s meta-anthropology, as it assigns the situation of man as the starting-point for theological reflection. This means that for him the self is “required in order to grasp anything else at all in its ontological truth.”465 We saw above that Przywara, too, recognized the originary role of (the act of) consciousness as that which “interrogates being,” but for him this role remained on the level of the theoretical, philosophical. Balthasar, however, is more radical in that he “starts metaphysics with the rich multiplicity of concrete forms of Being.”466

It is this same “multiplicity of concrete forms of Being,” I suggest, that we encounter when we examine the different media and their relationship with the message they convey, in different historical periods, social and cultural environments, via the use of different sense modalities. Likewise, we have seen the originary role played by consciousness (whether individual or collective) – even if, at the same time, we acknowledge that science hasn’t been able to solve the “mystery” of consciousness. Von Balthasar’s unique achievement is that his meta-anthropology and concrete method transform those ambiguous aspects of these origins – consciousness and the self – that postmodern thought denounced. Unlike Pickstock who, as we saw, succumbs to the suspicion that this kind of drive for the originality of consciousness necessarily results in “the oppressive domination of a mathesis universal,”467 von Balthasar develops a new sense of consciousness when he suggests that the apriori of consciousness “is not one that belongs titanically to the subject but rather belongs to the joint subject-object whole.”468 Knowledge does not have to be a grasping, but may be understood as “letting be,” knowing that things have both their truth and their being from God. 469 At the same time, within

462 Ibid., 23.
463 Ibid., 155.
464 Ibid., 98.
465 Ibid., 425.
466 Ibid., 40.
467 Ibid., 147.
468 Ibid., 160.
his dramatic structure, this kind of self-presence and so this kind of knowledge is always, fundamentally, relational – it is only awakened by the “Thou” of the mother’s smile.

Von Balthasar’s metaphysics (if it may be called metaphysics at all) is truly unique and has further elements; but based even only on what has been said so far and using the terminology we have encountered in this thesis, we could say that it is a "metaphysics within the limits of phenomenology;” just as Przywara, von Balthasar seems to be convinced that being in itself and being as it appears cannot be separated or reduced one to the other.470 Thinking about being starts with a conscious self; but the meta-anthropological starting point requires that the self, the knower, be engaged as wholeness, body and soul, and in relation to others. Von Balthasar’s argument on this question is elaborate and detailed; for now, suffice it to say that he sees the body-soul polarity as part of the drama of the whole, within which he also posits an analogy between the mind or spirit and the senses, and underlines the “irreducible role of the senses in the act of knowing.”471 Given the dramatic structure of truth, “Being as mediated by beings”472 will, for Balthasar, always appear in the “personal, particular, concrete quality of God’s action on the creation’s behalf,” and this means “fleshiness and bloodiness,” a kind of “non-repeatable particularity.”473

An important aspect of this “fleshiness and bloodiness” is von Balthasar’s emphasis on the Christological aspects of the analogia entis.474 One of the consequences of this emphasis, however, is especially noteworthy for us, as it implies that – more than Przywara – von Balthasar was aware of the “anthropological impasse,” that is, the fact that as human beings, although we bear the image of God, because of the effects of sin this image is a broken one, and this presents a dilemma also for the meaning of human love and relationships. His emphasis on this, problematic, aspect of being human has sometimes been regarded as pessimistic; and indeed, he affirms that man needs grace – the grace available to us in Jesus Christ – to enable him to respond to the Word. We could perhaps say that even though he does not explicitly connect the issue of sin to epistemology, von Balthasar acknowledges that our knowledge, including our sense-perception, is not innocent in itself. In this sense he would probably concur

470 Schindler, Dramatic Structure, 365.
471 Ibid., 285.
472 Ibid., 152.
474 Casarella, 198. The place of Christology in von Balthasar’s theological anthropology is one of its key aspects which, however, we cannot address here as it would go far beyond the confines of this thesis.
with Turan’s admonitions regarding the dangers of idolatry; with the addition of the possibility of grace being able to redeem nature. For Balthasar, nature and grace embrace each other in the same dramatic relationship as all the other opposing principles; human freedom is integrated into divine freedom, “which leaves the necessary room (the analogy of being) for an autonomous and authentic ‘play’ of human freedom,” but in a way that at the same time this is “interior to the ‘dramatic action’ of the divine freedom.” More radically than Przywara, Balthasar is aware of the inherent tension of creaturely being, the “gaping hole” or “wound deep within the heart of reality,” which carries with it a certain risk; it can mean either alienation or glory.

Indeed, it is this realism regarding what it means to be human that we also noted in Balthasar’s assessment of the liturgy when he observed that the effect of the Church’s liturgy fades in the worshippers’ “practical and psychological” life. In this respect, too, he reiterates what Coakley, Hart and others stress, namely that participating in the liturgy is not a once-and-for-all, unchanging event but requires a habitus, the repeated acts and thus training of “sensory cognition.” This, too, is part of von Balthasar’s penchant for dramatic integration, of his emphasis on the whole: the conviction that “man as spirit dwells in being in its totality, and likewise through his body he dwells in the whole of nature, and can never detach himself from it.” That he uses the liturgy to illustrate this “drama” of the spirit and the body, being and nature, is significant from the point of view of the topic of this thesis; it underlines our conclusion that the liturgy, even the sacraments, cannot bypass the natural processes of, for example, sense perception, but “correspond with man.” If, as von Balthasar states, they are not so much “the effect of a free, arbitrary ordinance on the part of God as of an accommodation of divine revelation to the actual laws of creation,” then the relationship between the medium – the spoken word, but also vestments, music or incense – and the message of, in this case, the liturgy, may indeed best be described as the dramatic structure of truth: man as both spirit and body, in his immanence, through grace, partakes in divine Being. Transcendence thus does not stand in opposition to immanence; its “supravisibility” does not contradict its visibility.

476 Schindler, 43.
477 Von Balthasar, Prayer, 120.
478 See above, p. 109.
479 Like McLuhan, Balthasar, too, made use of the concept of ”Gestalt,” the whole that is larger than its parts.
481 Von Balthasar, Explorations, 83.
482 Schindler, 170.
ontology does not conflict with epistemology. Indeed, as Schindler adds quoting Balthasar himself, “the transcendence increases along with the immanence.”

III. 2. 4. Summary and Conclusion

At the end of Chapter Two we noted how, according to Pickstock, one of the reasons why the liturgy figures so importantly in her work is because it appertains to “concerns that relate directly to the themes of theology and philosophy.” Indeed, in the course of the evaluation and critique of After Writing our conclusion was that the main problems with Pickstock’s approach to questions of orality and writing may be seen as related to two pairs of important philosophical-theological themes: the relationship between the correlative pairs of epistemology and ontology on the one hand and transcendence and immanence on the other. In other words, we suggested that the questions around orality and writing – or more generally the role of the medium for the message – are in fact related to the “quintessential task of theology,” that of defining the distinction, and so the nature of the relationship, between God and the world. Can orality (or the spoken word) and literacy (or writing) analogically, by way of our participation in God, directly communicate or mediate God’s reality when they are put to use in the worship of God in the context of liturgy, as Pickstock suggests, or is it possible that they do not only determine, but might also distort our thinking? To be able to answer these questions conclusively, it was necessary to identify a more adequate philosophical-theological framework than the one used by Pickstock. That was the task of this last part of thesis.

Because Pickstock’s study examines the role of orality and writing in the context of the liturgy, I decided to first examine how other theologians approach this – especially the role of the subject and of different media in the liturgy – hoping that this might clarify some issues and add further viewpoints to the discussion. What I found after considering a few alternative interpretations of the liturgy was that, although with different emphases, all of these other theologians attribute a significant role to our epistemic practices – whether sense perception, practice, habit, or relationality – when we participate in the liturgy. This underlined my conviction that the role of the knowing subject – epistemology (in the broad sense) – must in some way be taken into consideration in our evaluation of the role played by orality and writing, or, more generally, the relationship between the medium and the message. As a next step, I reflected on the deeper meaning of analogy and participation, as both McLuhan and Pickstock

483 Ibid.
use these concepts in their work widely, but neither gives them a considered definition. What I ascertained is that the idea of analogy as understood by Aquinas, who is most closely associated with this concept, calls attention to the deep tension or polarity “in the core of worldly being” when he uses this concept to stress the underlying similarity and dissimilarity between God and creatures.

The theological framework that can adequately clarify the relationship between orality and literacy – as well as other aspects of “worldly being,” for example as other media – and the message of theology by incorporating all the theological-philosophical dualities described in the last few sections would thus have to address the “quintessential theological task,” a formulation of the relationship between God and the world. This task has been undertaken by theologians in every generation; with different starting-points, and in similar, as well as very different, ways. It would have been possible to single out a different approach as a possible model for our purpose, but, for reasons that were then explained, the framework I introduced in this chapter was Erich Przywara’s *analogia entis*, as complemented and developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, especially with his concept of drama. What Przywara achieves with the analogia entis is offering a solution to philosophy’s inherent contradictions, including those between the correlative concepts of ontology and epistemology, being and becoming, essence and existence. I suggested that the starting point of his argument, that consciousness and being cannot be separated from one another, identifies and formulates one of the main incongruities in *After Writing*. As we argued above, although Pickstock has difficulty including this in her framework, even if unwittingly, it is our(?) or Pickstock’s(?) consciousness that makes the phenomenologically-based observations about those features of orality which then in the liturgy “interrogate,” ask questions about, being, ontology.

Using Przywara’s terminology, in *After Writing* Pickstock – unsurprisingly, given the constraining framework of her thought – takes her departure from a reflection not from the act of knowledge (consciousness) but, like Plato and others, “proceeds immediately towards the object of knowledge;” hers is a meta-ontic, not a meta-noetic starting point. However, as her phenomenological approach makes it clear and as Przywara demonstrates in *Analogia Entis*, there is no pure meta-ontics (ontology without epistemology), as any meta-ontics will necessarily consider the role of consciousness in the perception of being; Pickstock couldn’t

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484 Another approach, for example, could have been that of Bernard Lonergan, whose cognitional theory also addresses many of the questions raised by this thesis. Interesting and fruitful though it may be to compare his approach with the one I have advocate here, this would make for the topic of another dissertation.
have "perceived being," seen the divine mediated in the oral aspects of the liturgy if she had not used the phenomenological, consciousness-based approach. Even in her own argumentation meta-ontics and meat-noetics as methodologies are interdependent; conclusions regarding ontology could not have been made without epistemology.

Other aspects of the *analogia entis* also shed light on the problems of the medium and the message. The "dynamic tension and ultimate correlation" exists not only between ontology and epistemology; it also appears in the tension between essence and existence – the transcendent and the immanent – both of creaturely being, but ultimately in God himself. In the case of Pickstock, her apriori metaphysics, with its emphasis on "the transcendental subject and its alleged capacity for timeless, superhistorical truth"485 meant that for her orality and writing (literacy) were, as we observed, independent of both historical, social-cultural, and bodily-physical determinations (which negates the convictions of all other orality-literacy scholars).

But, Rivera’s critique made it clear, the Radical Orthodox cosmology, with its radical division between the transcendence and immanence of God is problematic in many ways. In this context, too, the *analogia entis* confirms that as creatures, human beings exist within the polarity of the transcendence and immanence of God. The formula that Przywara used to describe this all-embracing polarity and tension was the somewhat cryptic "in-and-beyond;" "truth in-and-beyond history," and, ultimately, "God beyond-in creation."

The *analogia entis* provides a useful framework to ensure the interdependence and inexorable polarity of ontology and epistemology, transcendence and immanence, the beatific vision and history. However, as we suggested, Barth raised an important question when he warned that Przywara’s scheme was overly optimistic about human nature. If a medium – for example sight – can really occasion idolatry, then this insight must also find its place in a framework that is adequate for our purpose. Furthermore, although Przywara did not engage in a discussion about the nature of consciousness, because of the Radical Orthodox "negative philosophical verdict" that repudiates the modern knowing subject, it is important to clarify the nature of knowledge and of the subject.

It is at this point that we enlisted Hans Urs von Balthasar’s contribution to the discussion. By his "dramatic" meta-anthropology of embracing the originary experience of consciousness, yet in a way that eludes a sense of the “titanic,” autonomous subject, von Balthasar keeps the tension – the drama – of the *analogia entis* alive, while also highlighting the fundamental role

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485 See above, p. 117.
played by relationality for human identity. He can affirm both particularity, history, change and physicality, while at the same time upholding “creaturely nature’s embedding in the supernatural” when he applies a method that is at once phenomenological and metaphysical. In this way his approach embraces all the different aspects of the relationship between the medium and the message that we saw the different media scholars address (nature and nurture, the cognitive and the social and cultural) – except for the post-structuralist philosophical approach that, as we demonstrated, is an inadequate method for our purpose – while placing it within the framework of theology. At the same time – and this may be due to Barth’s influence – Balthasar also acknowledges the presence of sin and thus of gaps in the analogical relationship, which, he maintains, can only be restored by the grace of Christ, embedding Przywara’s ”theological metaphysics” more deeply both in theology and in anthropology.

At this point the question arises: in what concrete ways are the analogia entis and von Balthasar’s dramatic structure adequate frameworks to describe the relationship between orality, literacy, as well as the other forms of communications media discussed in Chapter One and theology? I would suggest that the “in-and-beyond” of the “suspended middle” will have two main elements. First of all, the analogical relationship between God and creation will mean that the different media of communication – meaning, in this case, not different technologies but the “primary” media that are used by humans to communicate, most importantly by use of the different senses – may be able to reveal something of God, the nature of created reality, and consequently of the beatific vision, and in this way may be instruments, methods, or ways of expressing theological ideas and truth. At the same time the immanence of creation and creatures will entail that these media will not ensure an immediate intuition of being, but are instruments of knowledge, epistemological tools, that give us only an analogical idea of God. This immanence will be manifest especially in the bodily, physical, as well as the historical, cultural and social determination of the knowledge that they supply. Finally, this “dissimilarity” will also mean that, because of sin, sense perception and the different media that make use of it may easily mislead, even prompt idolatry, which calls for humility and vigilance on the part of the one doing theology.

486 Howshare, 19.
487 Przywara uses this term, ”schwebende Mitte,” in Analogia Entis to express the fact that the actuality of human beings, as creatures, is suspended between their potentiality and their end, which is both in them, and beyond them. See White, The Analogy of Being, 63.
Orality, literacy, and other communications media in general are very practical, concrete aspects of our life. After the rather abstract and theoretical reasoning in the last two chapters it is especially important to remember that, as Amos Yong put it, “the work of the systematician is not finished until practical theological proposals are factored in.” Thus the it is one of the roles of the Conclusion to provide concrete examples by which we can both evaluate the validity of our findings and make suggestions about their significance for theological thinking.

Conclusion

1. Introduction

What is the “problem” of orality and literacy – and what has this got to do with theology? The answer to the first question is provided by Marshall McLuhan in his famous statement: “The medium is the message.” McLuhan, as well as Walter Ong and others insisted that there is a contrast between “oral modes of thought and expression and written modes;” the “focus on texts had ideological consequences.” But if this is true, it clearly has important consequences for theology, whose key constituent parts are “modes of thought and expression.”

For a thesis in theology which has “The problem of orality and literacy” as its topic, one way to approach this question would have been to point out and analyse the manifestations of the problem in different fields or disciplines of theology. This has been done, to a different degree, in different fields, by different theologians (I briefly mentioned some of these in my Introduction). What has intrigued me as someone interested in systematic theology, however, was how the relationship between the medium – especially orality and literacy – and the message of theology might be explained and interpreted in the conceptual language of systematic theology. To provide a focus for my inquiry – in the form of something like a case study – I chose to analyse, evaluate and critique one of the very few existing studies on this topic and use this to identify the theological themes and concepts that must be addressed when establishing a (systematic) theological framework that can describe and explain “the problem of orality and literacy.”

Because the impetus for my research question came not from a theologian, but from Marshall McLuhan, a media scholar – though also a Christian – as well as other thinkers, before the theological enquiry it was important to survey the most important results and developments of orality-literacy studies and media ecology, to then be able to compare these with my critique and proposal. A common element in the thought of McLuhan, Ong and others was that although the concept “medium of communication” has a broad definition that includes language, the human body, as well as technologically mediated communication, sense perception is the most important means by which the message is “translated” to consciousness and thus to cognition. Critics of the Toronto School of Communications have pointed out, however, that orality and

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489 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 6, 10.
literacy cannot be regarded from the viewpoint of cognition alone. Social, cultural, even political factors are as determinative as the psychological, biological ones.

The central part of the thesis was a summary and critique of Catherine Pickstock’s important work, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*. In this book she argues that orality, rather than writing – as in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida – is capable of transcending the philosophical cul-de-sac of both modernity and postmodernity, and it does so eminently in the liturgy in its original form, the Roman Mass. *After Writing* is a difficult, labyrinthine book, and it was in the course of a lengthy and painstaking analysis that I arrived at the final evaluation of the case study. My conclusion was that the Platonic-Christian synthesis of Radical Orthodoxy, which is the context of Pickstock’s reasoning, is at variance with her use of the phenomenological method of description in her appraisal of orality and writing. In particular, this incongruity concerns the nature of the conscious subject, the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent, ontology and epistemology, as well as the role of history and culture.

All this pointed to the conclusion that when we talk about the relationship between orality, literacy, and the message of theology, what we are faced with is the inescapable tension that exists between the two faces of our humanness: using Przywara’s terminology, we are “suspended” between God, our origin and Creator, who transcends our consciousness, and the sensorily observable, immanent world that we are part of as creatures. To describe and interpret the dynamic tensions inherent in these different features of created being we require a philosophical and theological framework which accounts for the fact that ontology – the potential of the oral Mass to sacramentally “enact” the relationship with transcendence – is always bound up with epistemology – the physical, historical, cultural determinations of orality writing. *What* we know cannot be divorced from *how* we know it (our body, consciousness, our senses, history, culture, etc., all of which is often described with the help of the phenomenological method). Recognizing that there have been many different attempts to conceptualize the way in which it is possible to hold together these unresolved tensions and thus accomplish the quintessential theological task, I suggested that for our purpose it is the concept of the *analogia entis*, as introduced by Erich Przywara and reshaped by Hans Urs von Balthasar, that may be the best framework to formulate this complex philosophical and theological issue.
First of all, by building a “helpful bridge between the modern turn to the subject and the more objective doctrinal reality” Balthasar’s theology is able to answer the problematic issues we raised concerning Pickstock’s evaluation of the role of orality and writing; secondly, by his emphasis on the originary experience of consciousness, but placing this within the larger unity of Being he can do justice to both the “likeness” and “unlikeness” aspects of analogy. In terms of the medium and the message this means that orality (sound or hearing), but also other sense modalities such as vision, smell, touch, movement, may at the same time mediate something of God’s unchanging truth and do so in an imperfect, immanent, historically and culturally changing way.

Pickstock’s *After Writing* provided a good point of departure for my inquiry; with its assistance I could determine the most important sets of meanings related to my research question. But how can I assess the validity of my findings? Is the “dramatic structure” of truth applicable to different fields or disciplines within theology when we consider their use of orality, literacy, or other media, and if yes, how does that affect (systematic) theology or theologies? And if Amos Yong is indeed right about the work of the systematician not being finished “until practical theological proposals are factored in,” what could these practical proposals be?

I suggest that coming back to the “ground,” to very concrete settings, is the way to accomplish both these tasks. In the Introduction we already saw that there are several theological disciplines where the role played by orality and writing has been recognized and studied by theologians. We now have to decide if the role of these and other media can indeed be accurately described by Balthasar’s version of the *analogia entis* as defined above. What is more, I suggest that if it wants to be faithful in pursuing truth, theology must depend on and/or take into consideration the effect of the medium on the message – a proposal that must also be confirmed, however. The most important branches of theology where, I submit, orality and literacy, but also some other media can be shown to be in this kind of key relationship with theology are – besides liturgical theology – confessional theology, historical theology, global or contextual theology, mystical theology (the spiritual senses,) as well as the general field of theological method. In the last part of this thesis I will take a brief look at these, with special attention to the workings of the dramatic form of the *analogia entis* in their practice.

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490 McIntosh, 105.
491 As, following Ong, McLuhan and others I argued in Chapter One, communication always, necessarily, happens with the help of our senses, and so the issue of the medium and the message is – more or less directly – always connected to sense perception.
1. 1. Liturgical Theology

It is not incidental that the liturgy plays such an important role in Pickstock’s thought and that it is in this context that she defines the meaning of orality (as well as, somewhat surprisingly, writing); as we have seen, others also see the liturgy as the primary space where immanence and transcendence intersect when different media of communication, with the help of the different senses, join our materiality with God’s spirituality. In this respect, After Writing is indeed a rare and brilliant analysis of the ways in which elements of the liturgy – especially the spoken word – contribute to this sacramental mystery. While the Eucharist as the central element of the liturgy has often been the object of theological discussion, the spoken word is rarely understood as carrying the same kind of transcendental (while also immanent) qualities that we saw Pickstock attribute to it.

We have seen, however, that while liturgical theology clearly posits an analogical, sacramental relationship between the communications media used in the context of the liturgy and the “message” of God’s transcendent Being transmitted by them, it has tended to pay less attention to the “unlikeness” aspect of analogy, the “existence” angle of the analogia entis. This, I believe, is one of the reasons why the tension of the in-between-two-worlds of creaturely being has led to such controversies even among liturgical theologians. What should the role of the humanities, especially anthropology and phenomenology, be in liturgical theology? Should liturgical theology proceed from its intellectual (theological) fundament, from the rubrics of the liturgy, or from considering the liturgy as “phenomenon”? The new liturgical movement has been, and still seems to be wrestling with these issues. It is not our task here to suggest solutions to these questions; but my contention is that the issue at their core is the same that we have come to identify in the course of this thesis, namely the tension between transcendence and immanence, ontology and epistemology, essence and existence, the likeness and unlikeness aspects of participation and analogy.

1. 2. Confessional Theology

“How and what we think about God is shaped by various aspects of our immanent, creaturely being, including the communications media we use; which in turn works through sense

492 See e.g. the different studies, articles and reviews on their website, http://www.newliturgicalmovement.org/
493 I am not an expert in the field of liturgical theology; however, it seems to me that Przywara’s observations about the possibility of either a meta-ontic or a meta-noetic starting point also applies here, and for those who are convinced of the importance of the one, it is often difficult to acknowledge the necessity of the other.
perception as this appears to our consciousness” – could be the conclusion of this dissertation. Another branch of theology where the validity of the findings of this thesis may be checked and where they may have significance for further study is the question that examines the characteristics of different church or denominational traditions, sometimes referred to as confessional theology.494 Studying the role played by the “ratio of the senses”495 depending on the preferred media used in different ecclesial traditions is an issue which could itself be the topic of a dissertation; for this reason, I will only cite a few examples in order to prove the validity and significance of the topic orality and literacy also for this branch of theology. To begin with, in Chapter One we saw that even though this was not their primary concern, both McLuhan and Ong made connections from their media theories to “confessional theology,” especially with regard to how they thought orality and writing affected the differences we now see between the Catholic, Protestant, and, in the case of McLuhan, Orthodox Church. Usually these were only views they mentioned perfunctorily, however, and neither did they provide any deep theological justification for their ideas.

It is in a somewhat similar way, without making a direct theological connection to the rest of his work, that in an intriguing essay Hans Urs von Balthasar engages these issues and suggests that “a phenomenology of the various ways in which the senses perceive would have very great importance for an insight into our intellectual knowledge of reality… in the realm of the Church.”496 After presenting a brief phenomenology of seeing and hearing497 Balthasar applies this phenomenology to the life of the Church; for example, he suggests that “the East is Johannine: it is the Church of seeing. The West is synoptic-Pauline: it is the Church of hearing.”498 He adds that whereas in the East Logos means “meaning” and “idea,” in the West it means Verbum, “word,” a means of communication. The word for the East appears “as the embodiment of all intellectual realities. The separateness that is also denoted by the act of seeing becomes clearly seen in the distinctively Eastern concept of intermediary beings between God and the World … and the all-determining sense for representation.”499 The phenomenology of

494 To my knowledge, this is not regarded as a separate field of enquiry everywhere; in Hungary, however, “felekezettudomány” or “the study of denominations” is among the topics theological students must study.
495 As we noted above, following the lead of Harold Adams Innis, Marshall McLuhan called attention to differences in what he called the “ratio of the senses,” referring to the “proportional elaboration of the senses within a particular cultural logic.” See Howes, “Culture Tunes Our Neurons,” Ibid., 23.
497 Von Balthasar’s phenomenological description here follows a similar pattern to that of Hans Jonas.
498 Ibid., 451.
499 Ibid., 482. Once again, one has to think of Pickstock when von Balthasar finishes his analysis in this way: “The summit of all vision … is the aim of all seeing: the unmediated encounter face to face of the creature with
hearing, on the other hand, lends itself to a Christianity that “knows abiding creatureliness, obedience, and worldly character of the one who hears and a relationship of immediacy … to the word of revelation.”\textsuperscript{500} This Christianity, the Christianity of the \textit{Word}, is “bowed down under the act of hearing,” he suggests and thus her goal and desire is “not towards immediate vision, not deification, but contact with God in obedient hearing.”\textsuperscript{501}

He takes his argument even further when he applies his thesis about seeing and hearing in the East and West to the liturgy, arguing that while in the radical East the liturgical signs, although perceptible to the senses, are nothing but “thin veils for a Gnostic-heavenly event,” in the West “the pure word makes all objectivization in image and sacrament impossible.”\textsuperscript{502} His conclusion is to argue for an equilibrium between seeing and hearing, “‘sacrament’ and ‘word’, objective and existential event of salvation,” where the coming world is present not as a “Platonic-pneumatic realm beyond this world that stands in no relation to the present, lost world;” on the contrary, the liturgical event must take place as a real, visible fellowship of the people, in the sphere of “the real and worldly Church.”\textsuperscript{503}

As noted before, von Balthasar does not directly integrate this analysis into the rest of his theology; but I think it was worth quoting at such length because it is a concrete, practical application of his use of the \textit{analogia entis} and his ideas about the dramatic structure of truth, as well as his warning about the possibility of error. Of these he mentions Gnosticism and monophysitism as temptations for the East and sees “the actualism of the pure word” and “the activism of pure activity” as the possible errors of the West. His final hope, however, is directed towards a “sensual-intellectual total awareness of the Western-Eastern Church;”\textsuperscript{504} that is, a dramatic “play” of the sensual and the intellectual, the transcendent and the immanent.

Considering the role played by orality and/or literacy, besides the Church of the East and the Church of the West other denominational differences could be mentioned – for example, as we saw both Ong and McLuhan discuss it, in the West between Protestantism and (Roman)

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[500] Ibid.
\item[501] Ibid., 483.
\item[502] Ibid., 484.
\item[503] Ibid., 485, 486. What this means concretely we have already alluded to in the previous section when, for example, von Balthasar suggests that “the fruitfulness of the sacramental \textit{opus operandum} depends in degree on the dispositions of the recipient … [which is] something existential and personal.”
\item[504] Ibid., 486. I suggest that this ”hope” is in many ways reminiscent of McLuhan’s ”auditory space,” where time and space, hearing and vision, don’t cancel out, but reinforce each other.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Catholicism. A more relevant example, however, may be Pentecostalism, whose reliance on orality has been emphasized repeatedly. The Pentecostal tradition is also a good example of how social, cultural and historical aspects of orality-literacy combine with its phenomenology, and ultimately with theology. Early in the history of Protestantism dissenters rebelled against what they felt as the rigidity of the written liturgy and advocated the freedom to preach and pray “as the Spirit led.” It is interesting that, as Janet Wootton notes, there are also linguistically defined consequences of this difference: “Many traditions of worship are structurally oral in nature … These include charismatic worship in which there is often a high level of participation;” but whereas the written form “tends to use Latinate vocabulary … spoken English uses shorter, ‘plainer’ words.” That the use of the spoken rather than the written word might also result in differences in language use is a fact that we have also seen Pickstock allude to. This is another intriguing consequence of the “problem” of orality and literacy – but the relationship between linguistic usage and “the message” (for example of theology), though also a fascinating topic and closely related to cognition and consciousness, must be left to linguists to explore.

Similar conclusions regarding the orality of the Pentecostal tradition are reached by Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, who uses these conclusions to advocate a new approach in Pentecostal theological education. He surveys the different philosophical, social, cultural and linguistic features of orality and literacy and argues that oral cultures and literate cultures support different and sometimes competing understandings of theology and the meaning of the Christian faith. … Oral Christians … have a fundamentally different way of imagining what [the truth] might be like, where it is found, how it is validated, and how it ought to be communicated to the next generation. The theology of the oral Church is automatically more pragmatic, more experiential, less critical, less logical, and more personal. It relies, if you will, more on testimony, and less on written texts. Written texts – even the Bible itself – are judged according to this different set of expectations, and they play a fundamentally different role in the daily life of the Church than they do in the technical world of scholarship.

505 Although he includes Protestantism in the category of “the West,” the Church of the ear, von Balthasar also includes a critique of Protestantism in his essay.
For this reason, Camery-Hoggatt is convinced that, while not dispensing with (Pentecostal) academic theology, this should also take into consideration orality’s somewhat different vision of God and human experience, of right and wrong, virtue and vice. “We must be bilingual,” he suggests, because orality may act as a corrective to the “imbalances and insensitivities that come with print. Maybe testimony and storytelling embody dimensions of truth that are lost to the systematic theologian who insists that truth can be reduced to what can be written down in outline form and verified by canons of objective research.”

The Pentecostal tradition is, I suggest, one of the best proofs of the close relationship between orality, literacy and (systematic) theology, as well as the practices arising from it, of the particular community using those media. It underlines the cognitive/noetic, but also the cultural-social, linguistic, and even moral effects of using certain media. The other, equally striking example that can lend very concrete support to our thesis about the mutual interdependence of transcendence and immanence, ontology and epistemology etc. in connection with the role orality-literacy plays for theology is that of contextual, global, or Third World theologies.

1. 3. Culture: World Christianity

The awareness that orality (in the general sense; as we saw above, it is by now accepted by all scholars that there is no such thing as “orality,” only “oralities”) makes for a different kind of theology is becoming ever stronger not only in the Pentecostal tradition, but regarding many non-Western, contextual theologies as well. We know that in several parts of the world oral forms of communication – even when they exist side by side with literacy – are still the norm, with the result that in these places theology is “essentially oral, expressed in prayer, group discussion and story.”

Neither is language the only means whereby theology finds expression. Different art forms, music, dance and ritual are also made use of not only in everyday life but also to express Christian convictions and experiences. “These may not be less

508 Ibid., 253.
509 As far as I can tell, several categories are used interchangeably to describe non-Western theologies; however, according to the Rev. Dr. J. Paul Rajashekar, "World Christianity," 'Global Christianity,' or 'Non-Western Christianity,' are relatively new categories that have entered Christian theological and missiological vocabulary in recent years. What these new categories mean or their implications for Christian self-understanding are not always clear. As academic constructs, these categories are intended to define, understand, analyse, and structure the emerging realities within Christianity from a certain vantage point, usually from the perspective of Northern Christianity. They are popular, especially in the European and North American theological/missiological discourses, but they are rarely invoked in theological discourses of the Global South." https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/632.
profound than those found in a weighty tome of systematic theology,” 511 believes John Parratt; though they will certainly be different, as different as the different senses of perception (epistemology, immanence) provide access to different aspects or reality (ontology, transcendence).

Once again, this is a very important, but also broad and complex topic. The ways in which different cultures use not only language (oral and written, relying on the senses of vision and hearing) but also the other, “lower” senses (smell, taste, and touch) and the way that these affect the culture’s relationship to the world around it has become, as we noted in Chapter One, the subject of the relatively new disciplines of multimodality and the anthropology of the senses. Similarly, missiologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, theologians have been paying more attention to the role played not only by language but all the other senses, as well as the many social, cultural, technological factors that constitute individual cultural systems, including their beliefs. Thus, what I want to do at this point is only quote two concrete examples of how this dramatic structure of epistemology/ontology, immanence/transcendence tension and still unity manifests itself in Third World theologies.

My first example is the role assigned to (oral) story-telling in Korean Minjung theology, where, according to Parratt, “the story is a way of comprehending reality, a different epistemology possessed by the poor and oppressed. … The story uses a language considered to be vulgar, used only by the uncultivated, but therein also lies its strength. It not only gives them a special identity, but when the stories are told with songs, and dances performed by the body, it is expressed, felt and experienced before reflected upon.” 512 Interestingly, that which Parratt sees as a different epistemology – storytelling – another theologian contrasts explicitly with the kind of theology it inspires; in this case with systematic or dogmatic theology. The latter, he maintains, is “transcendental and deductive [and] is the theology of rulers, while Minjung theology … is immanent and inductive. … For him, revelation comes from ‘below’ in the struggle and suffering of the minjung at the grassroots level.” 513 Here the medial differences (in the “ratio of the senses” that appear through the practice of story-telling rather than reading) are closely linked to the cultural and cannot be divorced from social differences, and these together

511 Ibid.
512 Parratt, 100.
513 Chang-Hee Son, Haan (han, Han) of Minjung Theology and Han (Han, Han) of Han Philosophy (University Press of America, 2000), 51.
have led to differences in how these Christians see God and reality; that is, a difference in their theology.

Another example underlines the fact that although the two “higher” senses, vision and hearing, play a dominant role in many cultures, the “lower” senses, too, may be used to express theological insights. In her essay “McLuhan in the Rainforest” Constance Classen cites the example of the indigenous cultures of Latin America where thermal symbolism plays an important role in understanding and describing the world around them. In Tzotzil mythology and cosmology, for example, the male principle is associated with the heat of the sun, whereas the female is connected to the coldness of the moon; the former is the guardian of moral order, and the latter represents disorder. Classen then quotes the Tzotzil version of the crucifixion of Jesus as the best example of the dominance of this symbolism. In this rendition “the central myth of Christianity [is transformed] into a thermal allegory, with the heat-force of ‘Our Father,’ the arbitrator of cosmic order, triumphing over that of the ‘Jews,’ the representatives of disorder;” and consequently, “taking the analogy further, the Tzotzil interpret the Resurrection as the rising of the sun in the east.”

These examples, I believe, further affirm the drama of the analogia entis; the message (of theology) is indeed in and beyond orality, literacy, or any other medium. Finally, although we already briefly touched upon the discipline of historical theology in the Introduction, it may be worth taking another look at how our findings are validated by examples from the history of theology.

1. 4. History: The Media Environment

As we saw in Chapter One, the concept of media ecology – including orality-literacy studies – relates communication technology to the wider issue of sense perception or multimodality. Innis and McLuhan, when they introduced the concept of the “sense-ratio,” attributed the changes in the ratio of the senses to the changing – developing? – technologies of communication, the most important of which, writing, print and electronic communication, were given the most attention in the work of McLuhan. As we noted in the Introduction, the effect of writing and then print on theology has been explored by several scholars, but mainly from the point of view of Biblical studies and church history; that is, based on the “external” contribution that writing in its

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514 Classen, "McLuhan in the Rainforest: The Sensory Worlds of Oral Cultures” in Empire of the Senses, Ibid., 152.
different forms (codex, book) and later print made to the spreading of Bibles and other texts, for example religious pamphlets during the reformation.

A few scholars, though, have examined the effects of changes in technologies of communication also from the anthropological, psychological, phenomenological, as well as the theological point of view. Carol Harrison is one of these theologians. In *The Art of Listening in the Early Church* she emphasizes the fact that late antiquity was an auditory culture where listening was the primary attitude of people in general and of the early Church in particular. Based on Iain McGilchrist’s theory of right and left-hemisphere differences in our experiencing the world, she suggests that listening as a right-hemisphere activity – or rather attitude – was characterized by an “open, patient, intuitive ‘listening’ to God’s inward illumination” which led to the theological conviction that “He cannot be grasped or captured directly, as He is, but His elusive voice must be patiently attended to, believed, and forever sought out.” As a result, in terms of (systematic) theology, this meant that for the fathers this process had less to do “with theology as a rational, systematic attempt to define and pin down explicit, verifiable facts about God, and more to do with theology as an art of listening to God.”

Harrison’s argument is, of course, much more comprehensive, and she also explains the fathers’ more left-hemisphere-type attempts to put this revelation in words and systematize it so that it could be communicated to the community of Christians around them; but what matters from our point of view is that we have an example here of how changes in media of communication – in this case once again from an oral to a literate culture – determine, or at least greatly influence, theological thinking.

Another example of scholarship that focuses on the phenomenology that is closely connected to changes – revolutions – in media technology is Ivan Illich’s *In The Vineyard of the Text* where, based on an exegesis of Hugh's Didascalion, he compares the differences between 12th century, mainly vocal, reading practices and those of later ages. He concludes that reading aloud was like an act of incarnation; it brought the written word alive, as reading aloud involved the whole body and thus engaged all the faculties of a person, whereas silent reading focussed on what was seen, and thus on visible arguments; exegesis and hermeneutics now interpreted not the world, but texts. Technological changes, especially the printing press and its effects are, of course, also the changes that (based partly on Ong) Pickstock mentions regarding Ramus, even though in this case she does not focus specifically on theological issues.

515 Harrison, 229, 17.
One last example that must be mentioned is the next big media technological change, already identified by McLuhan, namely electronic communication; and, in our time, the internet and the role of cyberspace in our 21\textsuperscript{st} century lives. Yet again – understandably – research on the relationship between these new technologies and theology has recently expanded. For example, in his analysis Paul Soukup suggests that the intrinsic effects of information technologies on theology can be examined in different ways. They will affect "the context for and of theology, the resources theologians work with, the communication methods linking people, and the cognitive processes with which we approach any intellectual work."\textsuperscript{517} In this thesis so far we have focussed on the last one, the cognitive processes we make use of when we do theology. As we have seen, even looking backwards to times past, it is often difficult to see how social, cultural, and neurological, psychological factors interact in forming these cognitive processes. Regarding the internet and other information technologies we are still very much at the beginning of a new – though fast changing and developing – era, so it is even more difficult to say anything definite or confirmable.

Nonetheless, Soukup and others have attempted to do so; for example, Soukup suggests that "today, people live more in a communication process that includes image, word, sound, and movement. Montage matters nearly as much as logic. We have shifted from left-brain exclusivity to a more equilibrated employment of the right-brain: using imagination, association, creativity, art, and music." This, I suggest, is exactly the kind of psychological/cognitive role of the medium that McLuhan and Ong, among others, call attention to. Consequently – though Soukup does not apply this thesis specifically to theology – it is true that today, especially in the contemporary intellectual community, "many have moved closer to a paradigm that is less focused on proving truths via win/lose debates than on mutual enrichment via win/win dialogues."\textsuperscript{518} How this might affect theological study and conversation is a fascinating question.

In \textit{Cybertheology: Thinking Christianly in the Era of the Internet}\textsuperscript{519} another scholar, Antonio Spadaro, talks about the "anthropological mutation" that results from "the new existential context"\textsuperscript{520} generated by the internet and cyberspace. The internet, he argues, transforms not only the means of communication, but also the human self, "affecting his or her capacity to

\textsuperscript{517} Soukup, 368.
\textsuperscript{518} Ibid., 374.
\textsuperscript{520} Spadero, xii.
comprehend reality and therefore his or her faith.” What exactly this transformation looks like, and how it affects the way this “anthropological mutation” understands herself and her faith – that is, how all these changes affect the theology of the 21st century – is an important question that will most probably have to wait for an answer. For now, all we can state, yet again, is that theological thinking cannot be cut off from changes in media technology as these always affect the cognitive as well as social capacities of the human self.

1.5. Mystical Theology or The Spiritual Senses

The last branch of theology where orality-literacy related issues have a role to play is that of mystical theology. So far, we have looked at orality and literacy – from the point of view of cognition – as defined by sense perception as a bodily, physical phenomenon – modified and enriched by cultural and social components – and have examined its influence on theological thinking as it varies across times, cultures, denominations. Theology, however, knows of another kind of perception that is closely related to our knowledge of God: the so-called spiritual senses, “certain features of human cognition that make perception-like contact with God possible.” Although here the emphasis is not on external media of communication, such as the spoken or written word, but “only” on sense perception, because it is in at least some ways related to our topic, it is worth briefly considering this intriguing question.

Over the centuries the understanding of how exactly this immediate, non-physical perception of God, expressed by using the terms otherwise reserved for the five senses works, has varied. Initially – beginning with Origen, who is credited with “inventing” the spiritual senses – some of the Church fathers could not leave behind the dualist philosophical tradition and looked on the spiritual senses or, as they sometimes put it, “intellectual vision,” as of a higher order than natural, sensuous perception. Medieval monastic and mystical writers also used the language of spiritual sensation, the “inner senses;” Bernard of Clairvaux, for instance, provided specific discussions of the different spiritual senses. Just like his predecessors, seeing was still given priority by Bernard; but a later mystic, Hadewijch of Antwerp privileged “the language of taste and touch above hearing and seeing.” What would this have meant for her thinking.

521 Ibid., 6.
522 According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia, ”mystical theology is the science which treats of acts and experiences or states of the soul which cannot be produced by human effort or industry even with the ordinary aid of Divine grace.” http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=11462
524 See Mark McInroy, Balthasar on the 'Spiritual Senses': Perceiving Splendour (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11.
about God? If it is true that “taste and touch imply an immediacy of contact, a reciprocity of action between lover and loved, and, at least for touching, a sense of force and movement, even of turbulence,”\textsuperscript{525} then it is no wonder that Hadewijch, the “love mystic,”\textsuperscript{526} seems to have had an even more immediate, even erotic experience of God’s love.

The concept of the spiritual senses did not completely disappear in the modern period either; Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, for example, in their own way gave it an important place in their respective doctrines. In the last century Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar revitalized the concept, while most recently there have been several scholarly publications that engage with this topic. As Paul Gavrilyuk and Sarah Coakley conclude in the Introduction to their comprehensive study of the history and role of the spiritual senses, the matter has been and is attractive, if controversial; however, at the heart of all the different spiritual senses traditions is “the attempt to do full epistemological justice to the radical implications of the incarnation.”\textsuperscript{527} I believe that what Gavrilyuk and Coakley mean by this comment is that any knowledge of God must somehow be connected to worldly reality, the body and materiality; using the senses, even if metaphorically, express something of the “dramatic structure” of the God-human, God-world relationship, of God in-and-beyond created reality. This is also what connects this tradition to our investigations; the acknowledgement that always in our knowledge of God – whether theoretical, in theology, or personal, in mystical experiences – the transcendence of Being is never disconnected from the immanent with its “epistemological” capacities.

1. 6. Theological Method: Sense Perception as Cognitive Metaphor for Theology

The last issue that I want to consider in this attempt to validate our concluding thesis about an adequate theological framework to express the relationship between the medium and the message of theology, and at the same time test its significance, is not a branch of theology, but a more general discussion about methodology. In this case, however, just like in connection with the spiritual senses just discussed, we look beyond the significance of the concrete media of orality and literacy and consider the wider role of the senses and perception for cognition (epistemology) and theology (ontology).

\textsuperscript{525} Bernard McGinn, “Late Medieval Mystics” in Gavrilyuk and Coakley, 199.
\textsuperscript{526} Minnemystiek, or love mystic, was a specific type of mysticism that was popular especially in the 13th century.
\textsuperscript{527} Gavrilyuk and Coakley, 18.
In their book quoted above Gavrilyuk and Coakley contend that in twentieth century scholarship on the subject of spiritual senses it has become common “to distinguish between the ‘analogical’ and ‘metaphorical’ functions of the language of spiritual perception.” Although they believe that the intellect operates in a different, unique way when God is the object of its vision, this is an important distinction, as it calls attention to the fact that was already mentioned in Chapter One, namely the role of the so-called “cognitive metaphors” that recent scholarship has identified. As we saw George Lakoff argue, it is now held by many scientists that sensorimotor experience provides the basis for our thinking by supplying metaphors that are then used by our minds. As he puts it, “conceptual knowledge is embodied, that is, it is mapped within our sensory-motor system.”

This would mean that it is not only spiritual perception that will operate based on our perception-based cognitive metaphors, but also intellectual perception, conceptual thinking, including thinking and speaking about God; that is, theology. That starting with the Greeks, philosophical – and theological – thinking in the West “was drawn to the tuition, the authority, of sight” is a commonplace. We have also seen, however, that there are now attempts at finding new conceptual metaphors to express philosophical, but also theological truth. For example, a strong sense of the possibilities hidden in conceptual metaphors based on sensory-motor experience for theology is present in Mayra Rivera’s image of “the touch of transcendence.” In the last chapter we repeatedly alluded to Rivera’s critique of the Radical Orthodox cosmology, including its understanding of transcendence and immanence, but we did not have the space to spell out all the different aspects of what she calls “a postcolonial theology of God.”

A major feature of Rivera’s vision of divine transcendence is captured by the sensual metaphor of “touch.” The cosmology of Proverbs, she maintains, is suggestive of “a creation that emerges out of Godself and the primacy of tactile images … The boundary, the envelope of God, allows God to touch creation, to envelope its dwelling places in a nonconfining embrace. … It is by touching the other that the body is a body, absolutely separated. Touch reveals the simultaneity of transcendence and intimacy.” There is, of course, much more to Rivera’s use of the metaphor of touch; for us now what matters is the example of a sensory metaphor other than

528 Ibid., 6.
530 Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision, 1.
531 Rivera, 135.
the orality of the liturgy that is used to conceptually frame theological ideas. We could also refer here to what was said about contextual theologies, where different cultures use different sensory-motor metaphors to describe theological concepts and ideas.532

We have already seen that for Hans Urs von Balthasar drama as a (literary) genre which makes use of the spoken word, gesture, and movement, seems to be able to capture something of the complexity and tension of the Christian faith. Balthasar is not the only one, though, to have related (some aspects) of theology to drama. David Ford, in his recent volume The Future of Christian Theology, also recommends drama as the best way of conceiving Christian theology. Although he does not elaborate on the features of drama from the point of view of sense perception, it is clear that when he talks about drama, he means drama that is performed; one whose basic characteristics have to do with sound, the spoken word and oral interaction. This is how Ford describes the links between drama and theology:

Drama, like life, unfolds over time. … It is able to convey the dynamic particularity of human existence, with its physicality, surprises, initiatives, contingencies, necessities, tensions, and multileveled complexity. It may present large overviews of life or delve into the intimate interiority of one character, but its core perspective is that of characters and events in interaction, and irreducibly social. As it unfolds, a drama invites us to become engaged, to inhabit its world, and to look toward its as yet open ending.533

Of course, besides its orality and kinaesthetic qualities plot and narrative are also important features of drama, but orality, with its social, communicative potential, is – as von Balthasar, Ford, and others make it clear – vital to why it might act as an especially productive means of conceiving Christian theology.

As another example let me mention Calvin Schrag, who uses the – also sensual – metaphor of texture to illustrate his idea of communicative praxis that encompasses both discourse and action, language and social practice, thus pointing beyond the modern-postmodern divide. Ronald D. Arnett, in his review of Schrag’s work, suggests that when we enquire about the texture of something, we “learn about something that is difficult to define, but in the attempt,533

532 It is very interesting that in Truth in Aquinas Milbank and Pickstock also use the sensual metaphor of “touch” in their argumentation, the context of which is Aquinas’s commentary of Aristotle’s De Anima. Their approach, however, is very different from Rivera’s; their focus is on how, in touching, the soul “does not receive impressions from the physical but rather at once receives and produces convenientia between spirit and matter,” which, they suggest, is why, in the end, “all sensation is touch,” a relationship between objects, and not a subject and an object. See Truth in Aquinas, 60-77.
one learns about what one knows as one makes contact with another. Schrag takes us from ‘the privilege of seeing and the centrality of the eye’ to texture that can be understood only with and through extension of the senses. From feeling the texture in wood to hearing texture in music, one senses a world beyond sight.”

Although Schrag is not a theologian, his (and others’) model of transversal rationality has been used by philosophy and theology, and his concept of texture is a good illustration of the possibility of a conceptual metaphor based on sensory-motor experience other than sight.

Finally, sound, and music in particular, are also often used as metaphors to express theological convictions. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, talks about truth as ”symphonic” to express the possibility of different tunes, aspects of truth, “sounding together.” At this point I also want to call attention to the subtitle given to their translation of Przywara’s Analogia Entis by Betz and Hart. When they characterize the analogia entis as “original structure and universal rhythm” what they mean is, comments Betz, that in employing the ”universal rhythm” subtitle, they wanted to underline how Przywara’s writings “resonate with a nuance, patience, and erudition” that may be best described with this sense-related metaphor.

1. 7. Summary

Orality and literacy as media of communication and the message of theology are mutually interdependent – this has been the thesis of this study. To put this conclusion in the conceptual language of systematic theology, we suggested that a modified version of the analogia entis – with its emphasis on the in-and-beyond, the dramatic tension between transcendence and immanence, ontology and epistemology, and the likeness and unlikeness aspects of analogy – is a helpful framework for expressing what happens when we, consciously or unwittingly, use the spoken or written word – or in some cases also other communications media – in thinking and talking about God. Indeed, as created beings we cannot escape our in-between status, and this will show in all the different aspects of our lives. Our use of different communications

535 The work of Jeremy Begbie on music and theology is an especially rich resource for investigating the connection between music and theology; see eg. his Theology, Music and Time. Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
537 https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/analogia-entis/
media is, however, one of those aspects whose effects we do not often consider, but of which Ong, McLuhan, and the discipline of media ecology remind us.

Thus, one of the tasks of this final, concluding part has been to test and in this way validate this conclusion by examining concrete examples within the field of theology and call attention to the role played by orality (the spoken word) or literacy (writing) or any other media in these cases. We have seen that while liturgical theology is founded on the assumption that sense perception – especially hearing the spoken word – sacramentally discloses something of God’s truth and reality, the existence of different church traditions, of varied theological convictions in the course of the history of the Church, and especially the theologies of non-western Christian communities underline the immanent aspect of different media (noesis and the role of social and cultural factors) and are thus reminders of the “greater unlikeness” in the proportion of analogy. In addition, the reality of human weakness and sin affects the “likeness” in the liturgy and the arts as well, while the foregrounding of different sense modalities and media of communication, for example in several non-western cultures, may at the same time reveal features of God’s truth little known or appreciated in primarily literate cultures.

Finally, we briefly alluded to two very interesting aspects of theology where the main focus is not on the medium itself but on sense perception, whether hearing (orality), vision (literacy) or smell, touch, etc. The spiritual senses in mystical theology and the role of sense perception in our use of conceptual metaphors in theology both underline the fact that the in-and-beyond, ontology and epistemology, essence and existence cannot be separated, and that within this broader philosophical/theological framework, the question of the media and sense perception plays a significant role for theological thinking.

2. Summary and Conclusion

Coming to the end of a long line of argumentation it is important to ask ourselves at least three questions. What was the issue, the research question, that we tried to investigate answer in the last several pages? How did we do this, and with what result? And, finally, what is the significance of all this – what practical theological proposals can we factor in?

2.1. Summary: The Issue

"The Church is so entirely a matter of communication that like fish that know nothing of water, Christians have no adequate awareness of communication. Perhaps the world has been given to
us as an anti-environment to make us aware of the word.” Marshall McLuhan’s curious comment is a rather unusual adoption of the “like fish in the water” idiom. While in the simile “water” is usually referred to as the environment where fish feel most at home, McLuhan here turns it on its head and points out that fish are so used to living in this homely environment that they are unaware of its existence, its role in their life.

McLuhan suggests that we find ourselves in the same situation regarding the Church (Christians) and communication. The environment where the Church exists and which makes its life possible is communication, but Christians ”know nothing of it;” it acts as if communication – whether with God or the world – was immaterial for its life and being. Indeed, helping us to become ”aware of the Word” by paying close attention to the ”anti-environment” of the world was the task McLuhan set himself, and the result was a fascinating, kaleidoscopic body of work.

It was the ideas of Ong and McLuhan about (a lack of) ”awareness of communication” that intrigued me when I first came across them and which set me on the road to writing this thesis. The question, then, that this thesis took upon itself to answer was whether McLuhan is right in his complaint that Christians do not ”have an adequate awareness of communication.” McLuhan understands communication in a very broad sense, but as the difference between oral and written communication plays a central role not only in his – as well as many other communications scholars’ – thought but, traditionally and understandably, also for Christian theology (although primarily in the Western world, as we have seen) I made that the focus of my inquiry. Furthermore, as I am a theologian and this is a thesis in theology, the question for me was reshaped into framing the role of orality and literacy for theology theologically.

A theological answer to my question has been provided by a Cambridge theologian, Catherine Pickstock, in her important book After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy. Thus my research question was extended to include an analysis and critique of this work, with the hope that this would provide the starting point for my own proposal of a theological description and interpretation of the relationship between orality, literacy and the message of theology. Before my “case study” of Pickstock, I had to establish a frame of reference for my considerations, which I did from two angles. While, according to McLuhan, Christians do not have adequate awareness of communication, there has been, and still is, some awareness of the “problem” of orality and literacy. Thus, in the Introduction I referred to different branches of

538 McLuhan, The Medium and the Light, xxi.
theology that have taken into consideration issues of the media and communication, with a special view to orality and writing. The other angle in the initial frame of reference I tried to set up was an introduction to what McLuhan called the ”anti-environment of the world,” an (intellectual) awareness of the significance of communication which, he suggested, is lacking in the Church.

In Chapter One we saw that this awareness in fact goes back a long way; starting with Plato, philosophers have called attention to the changes brought about by writing, while the last century saw whole new disciplines emerge for the study first of orality and literacy, and then more widely of the different modes, modalities, and media of communication. We noted that different – often opposing – schools of thought emphasize different aspects of this complex problem. Is there a Great Divide between oral and literate societies or is this another example of Western bias? Do the changes brought about by writing and print work ”autonomously,” merely by affecting human cognition, or is it the social environment that plays the key role? How can we describe the role of communications media in the language of philosophy?

The answers given to these and other questions differ, though as we concluded there seems to be agreement on some of the issues. For example, most scholars highlight the connection between orality (speech and hearing), literacy (writing and reading) and sense perception, by analysing these either phenomenologically, describing lived experience, or neurobiologically, from scientific data. The twofold impact of nature and nurture, biology and society, is also widely acknowledged, as is the logocentrism of the traditional Western scientific approach. The discipline of multimodality, for example, insists that different modalities afford different interpretations of the world epistemologically, but these cannot necessarily be assessed in terms of cognition. Finally, while philosophy has recognized the significance of media-related issues for its investigations, this has often been done in a very abstract way. In summary, we concluded that the field of what was once called ”orality and literacy” may now be seen as a much wider area around McLuhan’s question regarding the medium and the message.

2.2. Summary: The Case Study and the Conclusive Formula

In the course of my analysis, evaluation, and critique of Catherine Pickstock’s ”voice” in After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy, it became clear that it is the ”constraining systematic framework structured by negative philosophic verdicts” within which Radical Orthodoxy operates that also defines Pickstock’s agenda and her approach to orality and writing. That is why, even though she arrives at the basic propositions of her thesis with the help of a phenomenological analysis of the spoken, as well as written or printed, word, this
phenomenological starting point is at variance with her repudiation of ”modernity’s cult” of the knowing subject, epistemology and immanence. But if – just like Derrida – Pickstock ”need[s] a phenomenology to show that we cannot have a phenomenology,”539 then she herself provides the proof that ontology and epistemology, the conscious subject, transcendence and immanence presuppose each other; one cannot exist without the other.

In other words, what Pickstock’s attempt at a philosophical-theological evaluation of the role of orality demonstrates is that, in the end, the question of the medium and the message (of theology) in general, and orality and writing in particular, directs us to the reality of a tension at the heart of theology, especially theological anthropology, namely that as creatures we are “suspended” between two worlds; we partake both in (religious) transcendence and in immanence. The task of formulating the relationship between the medium and the message of theology is, in the end, one aspect of the quintessential theological task, ”the problem of knowledge and ’participation ’” – namely ”How does the world share in God’s being, how is its reality related to the single authentic reality?”540

In summary, applied to our theme this is how we could present the state of affairs. Orality, literacy, multimodality, etc. as parts of ”the world,” belong, first of all, to ”authentic,” immanent reality; in terms of both nature (the psychology, neuroscience and phenomenology of perception) and nurture (history, the cultural and social environment). Secondly, they are closely related to cognition and thus, philosophically speaking, epistemology, as both our senses and their ”extensions”, the different media, are primary ways of us, subjects with consciousness, acquiring experiences and knowledge of the world. Thirdly, because our created reality participates in God’s being, our senses and sense perception also, analogically, tell us something about that which is beyond our immanent experience (transcendence, or the beatific vision, as Pickstock refers to it). However, finally, this analogical mirroring should never be taken at face value but be treated with suspicion, and always within the personal, relational, grace-dependent framework of the Christian life.

If we take all this seriously, we must conclude that the Radical Orthodox constraining framework, by ”subsuming postmodernism’s cyberspace “ while at the same time ”reading through the tradition,” – the Platonic-Christian synthesis read through a postmodern lens – is not able to incorporate all these aspects of the different media of communication in their

539 AW, 115.
relationship to God’s being into its theology; we need a better theological framework or formula. When looking for a "model" that embraces all these criteria I found that the concept of the *analogia entis*, as developed by Eric Przywara, but interpreted within the framework of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theological anthropology, might serve as useful guideline. Of course, the important but elaborate and controversial concept of the *analogia entis* is much more wide-ranging and complex than can be presented in a simple way. As argued in Chapter Three, why it may prove to be helpful from the point of view of our topic is that it takes seriously the "inexorable polarity" of existence and essence, transcendence and immanence, ontology and epistemology, "the act of knowledge" and "the act of being."

Without repeating the argument of the previous chapter, Przywara’s insistence on the dynamic relationship between these two, seemingly opposite sides of the "creaturely tension," the "in-and-beyond" of the *analogia entis* is a helpful starting point also in our thinking about issues related to orality, literacy and different other media of communication. We can start with the "in": "existence," "nature and nurture," the phenomenological, neurobiological as well as cultural and social features of orality and other modalities of sense perception, while at the same time acknowledging that they point to a "beyond," a reality that exists beyond us. However, Przywara is too optimistic about human nature; that is why, we suggested, Hans Urs von Balthasar, with his embracing of the "concrete method" by accepting the originary experience of consciousness, but placing it in the context of *relationship* and *trust* can direct our attention to that which is missing from the formula of the *analogia entis*.

2. 3. Conclusion: The Difference

Having summarized the questions, issues, arguments, conclusions that this thesis has posed and offered so far, the question arises: What is the significance of all this? What difference does it make if, as we concluded, a dynamic, dramatic tension (some kind of *analogia entis*) exists between various aspects of immanence, including embodiment in its different manifestations – for example our speaking, listening, writing, reading, or touching – and theological thinking?

I see three ways in which our findings can make a difference for theology. They can clarify issues and help understanding; they can make a difference in attitudes; and they can point to future directions for theology.

First of all, our conclusions can clarify and help us understand the role our embodiment, especially sense perception which is the channel for the communications media, including
orality and writing, that we use – plays in theological thinking. As Joel B. Green put it, "Embodiment extends also to human experience of God . . . This is not because God can be reductively explained as an expression of embodied cognitive functions, but because the capacities that allow humans to experience God are themselves embodied and subject to study by the cognitive sciences"—the cognitive and social sciences, I would add. The media of communication that we use, be that the spoken word (hearing), writing or print (vision), or electronic communication (both hearing and vision), as well as touch, smell, etc., are all capacities that allow us "to experience God."

Above we analysed the way this “experiencing” happens in liturgical theology, but also how orality, writing, and other media, via our embodied cognitive functions, affect theology when considered historically, the theology of different church traditions, of non-western theology, as well as in mystical theology (the spiritual senses) and through the cognitive metaphors we make use of in systematic theology. Often, we are not aware of the causes behind different theological convictions and emphases; perhaps the findings of this thesis may help this understanding and clarify some of the sources of the differences.

Secondly, in terms of attitudes, the conclusions of this thesis should move us to wonder, humility and vigilance. Wonder at the extent, riches and many-sidedness of the world that surrounds us, both in terms of our body and its capacities for sensation, perception, communication, and of the media we communicate with, and as a result, of God’s truth. As a consequence, they could also make us humbler at the realization that our knowledge of God, including our theology, is always fragmentary and affected by our human errors and limitations, one of which is related to our time and culture in terms of the sense modality that we mostly rely on and the media that we use. At the same time, all this should remind us of Ong and McLuhan’s call for vigilance, for continued awareness and reflection, especially regarding the nature of the media environment that surrounds us. In Ong’s words about orality and writing, once again,

> The world is both personalist and objective. Our intellectual understanding of it is at its optimum not only like sight but also like hearing as well as like smell and taste and touch. The sensorial organization specific to any given time and culture may bring us to overspecialize in certain features of actuality and to neglect others. Each organization

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of the sensorium will likewise predispose us for errors typical of such an organization: verbomotor man can overplay the personal as visualist man can underplay it. As in all activities caught in human limitations and human fallibility, the remedy here will be reflection. When we cannot do away with our limitations, we can at least neutralize them to the extent that we can assess them as limitations and thus keep ourselves from being taken in.\textsuperscript{542}

The other side of vigilance regarding our own specific sensorial and social organization is, I would add, openness; openness to, acceptance of, and, what is more, a willingness to learn from those who rely on different conceptual metaphors than we do. But this takes us to our next and last point.

Finally, in terms of directions for the future of theology, a number of – closely related – theological proposals could be mentioned. In the 21st century we live in a world that is becoming ever more of a “global village” – to use McLuhan’s adage – and where, thanks to the communications revolution, we are now able to learn about far-away peoples and cultures. With Christianity’s focal point having shifted to the non-Western world, the presence of non-Western theologies has brought about new challenges as well as opportunities for theology. The emergence of intercultural theology is one answer to these challenges. Intercultural theology is an approach that ”pays particular attention to the cultural embeddedness of all theological forms and displays a reflexive attitude towards it, as well as an interest in comparison, whereby other cultural expressions are also considered important for theology.”\textsuperscript{543} As we argued, orality-literacy and multimodality are important aspects of cultural embeddedness, and have already given rise to new theological emphases – we have seen, for example, how non-Western theologians call for an acknowledgement of oral theology. One direction for the future of theology may be the paying of serious attention to the theology of Christian communities with different media-ecologies; this, in turn, may ”problematize the familiar” and challenge the ”’monological’ character of much Western theologizing in the past”\textsuperscript{544} – taking us back to a new form of ”orality,” to open and faithful listening to, and dialogue with, each other.\textsuperscript{545}

\textsuperscript{542} Ong, \textit{The Presence of the Word}, 175.
\textsuperscript{544} Ibid., 3-4.
\textsuperscript{545} The methodology and practice of intercultural theology raises the intriguing issue of ”to what extent is abstract theologizing (perhaps ‘transcendental’ theology) de-legitimized by the intercultural emphasis?” Ibid., 4. – but that is a different topic, which Cartledge and Cheetham address in their book.
The need for not only intercultural, but “engaged,” interdisciplinary, contemporary theology is another direction that is, as mentioned in the Introduction, increasingly emphasized by theologians. Systematic theology, in particular, cannot give up interaction with not only the natural, but also the human and social sciences if the task of theology is “if implicitly, a recommendation for life.” Today, media and communication studies are among the most important – and popular – disciplines of the social sciences, and their importance for religious studies and theology is now also increasingly realised.

Indeed, a key part of life in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, the huge, media-related cultural change that is taking place in our days – the daily use of the internet and of other multimedia tools – sets the course for more theological reflection on the role of the media, and within that especially a necessary renewal in theological education.

Having emphasized the need for an acknowledgement of a more balanced ratio of the senses – also in theology – one question arises: Is it not contrary to this conviction that this thesis, too, is a written piece of work, and is thus predisposed to all the distortions and weaknesses of the written word? David Howes, editor of \textit{Empire of the Senses}, put the same dilemma into words:

\begin{quote}
It would seem to be the fate of the senses that their astonishing power to reveal and engage should forever be judged and ‘sentenced’ in the court of [written] language. …

A certain paradox remains, a certain tugging of unstated sensibilities, a certain sense of alienation from lived experience. … The limitations of [written] language are unavoidable as long as language is the medium of communication. What it is possible to avoid, however, is the expansion of [written] language into a structural model that dictates all cultural and personal experience and expression.
\end{quote}

It is my hope that this dissertation has called attention to this risk and has, in this way, served its purpose.

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547 Thus the VU, too, offers a specialisation in Media as part of the Theology and Religious Studies Programme, calling attention to the need for students to "reflect critically on the media’s role in constructing everyday images of social and cultural reality, religion and identity." https://masters.vu.nl/en/programmes/theology-religious-studies-media/index.aspx#accept
548 \textit{Empire of the Senses}, 4.
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Summary

“The medium is the message” declares Marshall McLuhan’s well-known adage. But what exactly does this saying mean, and is it true? And if it is, how does it apply to the Christian message, and to the “message” of theology? Even more basically, why should the medium affect the message – in other words, how can we formulate theologically this relationship? This is the question this thesis has set itself to answer. To provide a focus for my research, I have looked for already existing studies on the topic. One of a few such works is Catherine Pickstock’s After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy, a book in which two important media of communication, orality and writing, are assigned a key role. My strategy was to examine Pickstock’s approach, evaluate and critique it, in this way identify those theological concepts that are essential for a systematic theological formulation of the problem of orality and literacy considered within the larger framework of the medium and the message of theology, and then propose a theological framework or model that fits these criteria.

Before this key part of the thesis the Introduction contains a review of previous research, in different fields of theology. Although little doctrinally defined appraisal exists with regard to the problem of orality and literacy, biblical studies, church history, as well as practical theology, but also other disciplines within theology have long been aware of the influence on the “message” of the different media – especially the spoken and written word – of communication. To cite just one example, questions concerning the oral (?) context of New Testament material continue to be objects of interest and debate, which also emphasizes the importance of my topic.

Marshall McLuhan is not a theologian but a media scholar, and thus a research question which deals with orality and literacy, even if its focus is on theology, requires an interdisciplinary outlook. In Chapter One I provide an overview of the most important topics and developments in the field that was initially called orality-literacy studies but has since widened its scope to include media ecology, multimodality, sensual culture studies, and media philosophy, among others. While based on their phenomenological approach,

549 The study of communication systems as environments.
McLuhan, Ong and others saw the role of the media of communication mainly in affecting cognition, the New Literacy studies decry this view and call attention to the role of social and political factors. At the same time, anthropology and ethnography underline the western bias toward the “literary episteme” at the expense of other sense modalities in communication. For Jacques Derrida “writing,” rather than orality, describes the working of language and meaning; indeed, for some forms of postmodern philosophy everything is really a “text.”

Although they should not and cannot reduce or explain away the theological interpretation, the social sciences, among them media ecology, function as “handmaids” of theological awareness in my argument when, in the main part of the thesis, I first compare Catherine Pickstock’s handling of orality and writing with those of the different approaches reviewed in Chapter One. My conclusions here are not unambiguous. On the one hand, I demonstrate that the way Pickstock describes and interprets the characteristic of orality and writing in After Writing is also phenomenologically based, which is why on some matters she arrives at the same conclusions as the scholars in Chapter One. On the other hand, however, because of the Radical Orthodox “constraining systematic framework structured by negative philosophical verdicts” – anti-modern and anti-postmodern, with its foundations in the Platonic-Christian synthesis, but with a postmodern emphasis on language and signs in meaning-making – within which she operates, her metaphorical, analogical understanding of orality (and writing) does not allow for all the biologically, historically, culturally changing variations that define the use of not only spoken and written language, but other media as well. Because of her (Radical Orthodox) repudiation of the knowing subject, orality, writing, but also other sense- and perception-mediated ways of communication cannot be considered as ways of “knowing,” but only ontologically, as the modes of intuiting Being and thus at least remotely participating in the beatific vision. It is because of the – phenomenologically established – features of orality which, Pickstock suggests, are so basic for the workings of the Roman Mass that the liturgy consummates, that is, transcends in what it accomplishes, not only modern – written – spatiality, but also Derrida’s philosophy that is based on “writing.”

The inconsistencies signalled by the discrepancy between the phenomenological method and the “constraining systematic framework,” while closely related to Pickstock’s view of the (human) subject, may be nailed down in especially two conceptual pairs that are basic to systematic theological interpretation: epistemology versus ontology, and immanence versus transcendence. While McLuhan, although he never theorised this theologically, kept the tension – the “kabalistic paradox” – between these pairs, in After Writing Pickstock collapses
epistemology into ontology, and assigns immanence (understood as the purely sensorily observable) a wholly negative meaning. Based on Chapter One it seems, however, that if we want to make sense of the relationship between the medium and the message (also of theology), we need a balance between these pairs, which may be achieved by an understanding of subjectivity that is not self-sufficient, but fundamentally relational.

Chapter Three offers one such model when it argues that the concept of the *analogia entis*, as formulated by Eric Przywara and developed in a unique way by Hans Urs von Balthasar, does justice to these requirements in a way that may provide a more satisfactory description of the relationship in question. Przywara’s *analogia entis*, I argue, upholds those tensions that he himself regards to be philosophy’s inherent contradictions; those between the acts of consciousness (knowledge) and the acts of being, or, from a different point of view, existence and essence. These, in fact, are also the two key aspects of the workings of the different media (eg. orality and writing) that we have considered. Thus, concludes Przywara, human beings exist “within the polarity of the transcendence and immanence of God” – and one aspect of human existence is our living with, and using, different media of communication.

What is missing from Przywara’s formulation, however, is an acknowledgement of the distortions due to our fallenness. This is one aspect of (systematic) theology where Hans Urs von Balthasar – partly due to the influence of Karl Barth – developed or corrected Przywara’s formulation. This is especially important for our topic, though, because already McLuhan and other media scholars, as well as theologians, called attention to the ways in which different media may distort our natural capacities of perception, thinking and moral behaviour. Von Balthasar’s unique approach, whereby he takes seriously both the originary experience of consciousness and the concrete realities of faith – including the existential experience of participating in the liturgy, for example – means that he is aware of sinful humans’ need for grace, which comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Once I have identified a suitable theological model, the question is how the validity and usefulness of the suggested framework may be assessed. For this reason, the Conclusion specifies a number of different concrete examples to demonstrate the presence of this polarity of the relationship between orality, literacy as well as other media and the message of theology. One example – closest to Pickstock’s first concern – is liturgical theology, where we can most clearly see both the analogically disclosive, mediating, and at the same time the existentially ambiguous side of sense perception and the different media; which is the reason
for the ongoing controversies in the liturgical movement. Another case is that of confessional theology. It would have been beyond the confines of this thesis to analyse the priority given to orality and literacy, or hearing and vision, by different church and confessional traditions, but there is no doubt that this is one area where the relationship between the medium and the message of theology can be most clearly discerned. The role played by the icon in the “visionary East” and of the Word in the West; of the Eucharist in the Catholic, and of preaching in the Protestant tradition; of orality in Pentecostalism and in some Majority World contexts, are only a few examples that underline the reciprocality of the relationship between the medium and the message. Not only that, but – especially if we also involve the social sciences in the equation – we can see how all this has consequences first of all for theological thinking, but also for church history and mission. Last but not least, I suggest, the significance of a theologically increased awareness of the issue is underlined by an engaged theology’s “embeddedness” in 21st century life, where the presence of multimedia tools – television, the internet and smartphones, even for faith-related purposes – makes such reflection mandatory.