

## FRANÇOIS LARUELLE AND (NON-STANDARD) COMMUNICATION

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### Abstract

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The work of François Laruelle is not often mentioned in the fields of communication and media studies. Those research notes propose to outline three points of the intersection. The first point is a short essay Laruelle wrote specifically about communication. Alongside a brief overview of this essay, it is suggested that a model already exists –shared by various authors– that could be for communication what non-philosophy is for philosophy. This model is dubbed “non-standard communication”. The notes proceed to offer two additional ways in which this non-standard communication intersects with Laruelle’s non-philosophy. The first intersection is found in the fact that non-standard communication does not communicate anything other than itself. The second intersection has to do with the fact that non-standard communication does not take place between two agents but instead is how agency occurs in the first place.

### Key Terms

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communication, Laruelle, philosophy, incommunicability, media, community

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# FRANÇOIS LARUELLE VE (STANDART OLMAYAN) İLETİŞİM

## Öz

İletişim ve medya alanlarında François Laruelle'in çalışmasından pek sık söz edilmez. Bu araştırma notları, bu kesişimin üç noktasının ana hatlarını çıkarmayı önerir. İlk olarak, Laruelle'in özellikle iletişim üzerine yazdığı kısa bir deneme ele alınacaktır. Söz konusu denemeye hızlıca bir genel bakışın yanı sıra, felsefe için olmayan-felsefe neyse, iletişim için de –pek çok yazar tarafından dile getirildiği gibi- bir modelin halihazırda varolduğu öne sürülmektedir. Bu model "standart olmayan iletişim" olarak ifade edilmiştir. Bu noktadan sonra çalışma, standart olmayan iletişimin Laruelle'in olmayan-felsefesi ile kesiştiği, iki ilave yol önerisiyle devam etmektedir. İlk kesişim, standart olmayan iletişimin kendisinin dışında hiçbir şeyle iletişim kurmadığı gerçeğinde yatmaktadır. İkinci kesişimdeyse standart olmayan iletişim, iki fail arasında yer almaktan çok bu faillğin en başta nasıl meydana geldiğiyle ilişkilidir.

## Anahtar Terimler

İletişim, Laruelle, felsefe, ifade edilemezlik, medya, topluluk

To this day, the work of François Laruelle is not often mentioned in the fields of communication and media studies. In the brief research notes that follow, I propose to quickly outline three points of possible intersection. First, I revisit a very short essay Laruelle wrote specifically about communication. In doing so, I show that his understanding of what theories of communication are is based on the linear model of transmission. While this model alone does not the account for all those developed in communication and media studies, it can be said to represent a "standard" model. I suggest that, aside from Laruelle's short critique of this standard model of communication, there already exists a conception shared by various authors that could be, for communication, what non-philosophy is for philosophy. I call this model "non-standard communication". I proceed to offer two ways in which this non-standard communication intersects with Laruelle's non-philosophy. I identify the first intersection in the fact that non-standard communication does not separate between truth and its manifestation. Non-standard communication, in this light, does not communication anything else then itself. The second intersection has to do with agency or the lack of thereof. Non-standard communication does not take place between two agents but is revealed to be the event of agency in the first place. In lieu of a conclusion, I suggest further avenues of development that could contribute to a renewed understanding of both communication and the uncommunicable.

## Two Hermes for François Laruelle

In this very short text first published in French in 1987 as *“La vérité selon Hermès”*, French philosopher François Laruelle suggests that the “dominant way of thinking” is characterized by the “Hermeto-logical Difference”: that is “the undecidable coupling of truth *and* communication” (2010, p. 19). Communication, in that sense, is the process by which truth is made manifest to human beings, either as accessible (as *logos*) or as inaccessible (as a “supposed secret”). It belongs to the “unitary” way of thinking which, historically, is the thinking “of Being, then of Difference” (2010, p. 21). This thinking is furthermore characterized by the forgetting of the “essence of the One”. In the essay, it is personified by a “greco-Western Hermes” (2010, p. 21). One could say about this Hermes what Laruelle says later about the “unitary philosopher”: he is a “servant of the Postal and Telecommunication Ministry; a transmitter and decoder of hermetological Difference”, a mailman of truth (2010, p. 21). Laruelle believes the “Hermeto-logical Difference” is a “matrix for what is called “metaphysics” in general” (2010, p. 20). That is why he thinks that this dominant way of thinking is more powerful than “all possible theories of communication”<sup>1</sup>:

The hermeto-logical circle is deeper and more original than the “hermeneutic circle.” Hermeto-logical Difference is a fundamental invariant, a matrix for what is called “metaphysics” in general. It is more powerful than its modalities or avatars, among which the hermeneutics conflict of interpretations, as well as the textual and signifying critique within hermeneutics, and all possible theories of communication (2010, p. 20).

Laruelle calls the “One” or the “Real” the principle that is prior to this economy of difference. “Non-philosophy” is his attempt to develop an understanding of this principle. For all that, non-philosophy is not a theory *of* philosophy, nor its dialectical opposite: such a view would simply amount to another iteration of the philosophical decision<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This broad, sweeping statement echoes similar ones, often repeated by Laruelle, that distinguishes non-philosophy “from all philosophies” (Laruelle, 2013, p. 49; Mullarkey and Smith, 2012, pp. 6-7).

<sup>2</sup> François Laruelle once acknowledged the expression “non-philosophy” could, in that sense, create some confusion. Since he has proposed to call what he is invested in “non-standard philosophy”: “Maybe the term non-philosophy is too problematic, induces either fear or amusement, whereas “non-standard philosophy” would be just as evocative and more open, while remaining anchor in a closure or a “no”, resolutely inevitable (my translation, 2009).

In his short essay, Laruelle also points to *another* communication. This “mode” of communication is not reducible to the “unitary” way of thinking. Indeed, next to [“à côté”] the common Hermes, there exists another Hermes. This less obvious Hermes personifies a secret that is not dialectically determined by the potential manifestation of an alliance between truth and meaning, as it is the case with the communicable secret mentioned earlier. Laruelle is insistent of that point: this secret “has never appeared in the horizon of presence” (2010, p. 20). However paradoxical this may seem (it is not), this absence is the very effect of the secret’s positive essence (2010, p. 20). Another way to put it would be to say that the second Hermes carries no proposal of alliance and, as such, that he is the messenger of nothing, except maybe of his own mode of messaging (2010, p. 21). “The secret,” writes Laruelle, “is *index sui* prior to any indication” (2010, 20). “*Index sui*,” meaning the secret, as secret, marks itself before being an indication of something else, and before referring to or representing something else.

This is a reference to the principle mentioned in Spinoza’s 74th letter addressed to Albert Burdth at the end of 1675: “For the truth is the index of itself and of what is false” (1889, p. 417)<sup>3</sup>. This idea, which Spinoza expresses more than once in different forms can be traced back to Aristotle’s treatise *On the Soul*: “by that which is straight we discern both straight and crooked” (1986, 61). The Christian tradition offers a variation of something similar in Mark 8:12: “He sighed deeply and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to it.’” (in the New International version)<sup>4</sup>. Laruelle certainly remains consistently critical of what he describes as Spinoza’s so-called immanence (1999, p. 141; 2013, pp. 124–125). However, he also makes consistent use of the “*index sui*” principle. Since at least the end of the 1970s, he used the principle in relation to science, the Real, and linguistics. In his 1978 piece “Toward an Active Linguistics (The Notion of Phonesis),” Laruelle discussed the possibility for “speaking” to become “*index sui*” if its instrumental conception was to be rendered inoperative, hence allowing us to understand speech “as the speaking of language” (2013b). The same principle allowed Laruelle to argue that science “furnishes on its own the means and above all else the immanent rules of its description” (2016, p. 43). That science is “*index sui*” is something Laruelle insists upon on a number of occasions (2015, p. 26; 2017, p. 67). However, to be precise, it should be noted that Laruelle makes use of the Spinozist

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<sup>3</sup> In the original Latin, “*Est enim verum index sui et falsi*” (1844, p. 351).

<sup>4</sup> To learn more about the rich tradition the Spinozist expression “*index sui*” is inherited from, see the instructive study of Frédéric Manzini, which some of the present indications borrow from (2010).

principle while criticizing the decision that traditionally separates immanence from transcendence. In *Principle of Non-Philosophy*, he evokes the “Spinozist motif” while expressing the need for “radicalizing it”. Indeed, in Laruelle’s hands, “*index sui*” cannot be said to be immanent or transcendent. As a criterion, it is rather immanently transcendental<sup>5</sup>. For instance, while “the immanence of the Real is *index sui*,” it is also the case that, in regard to science, “*index sui*” can be described as a transcendent criterion in so far as it is rigorously immanent (2015, p. 26). Laruelle further insisted on his radicalization of the Spinozist motif by underlining how “*index sui*” can operate on its own without the need to relate to the false. He thus rejects decisive interpretations which use the motif as a differentiating principle by “plac[ing] the *index veri et falsi* solely in the *et* of this formula” (2010b, p. 205). In other words, the fact that the false exists does not mean the “*index sui*” motif relies on it. In *Theory of Identities*, the false is identified by Laruelle with philosophy and –just as important for the topic at hand– representation (2016, pp. 43, 193).

It is possible to understand how the second Hermes’s incommunicable secret has no need for the kind of communication that is the object of the usual theories of exchange, of meaning, of transmission, etc. Instead, this secret should be understood as being prior to “all possible theories of communication” (2010, p. 20). That is why Laruelle provides it with its “own mode” (“*son mode propre*”) of communication which allows it to determine “the communicational games in the last instance” (2010, p. 21). Although Laruelle does not use this expression, it would be coherent to argue this special mode of communication is to communication the way non-philosophy is to philosophy: a “non-communication” or a “non-standard communication”. As non-philosophy does not oppose philosophy, Laruelle second Hermes does not oppose Hermes-the-messenger. If it were the case, there still be a coupling through contradiction, whereas between the two Hermes, writes Laruelle, there is no conflict, no war, perhaps not even a ‘dialogue’ ” (2010: 21).

In light of all this, one understands that not *all* communications fall under the “Hermeto-logical Difference”, although “all theories” of communication may very well do, especially when they are understood as theories of transmission, of meaning, of exchange, etc. In other words, Laruelle holds a rather specific understanding of what “all possible theories of communication” can be. In what follows, it will be suggest this

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<sup>5</sup> It would be interesting to compare Laruelle’s non-decisional thought on immanence and transcendence with Jean-Luc Nancy’s conception of “transimmanence” (Gratton and Morin, 2015, pp. 232-234).

common –but quite narrow– understanding of communication-as-exchange is also shared by some of his commentators.

Without fully diving into non-philosophy, it remains possible to identify points of contact between Laruelle’s *special* mode of communication –what I have tentatively labelled “non-standard communication”–, and a unique paradigm of communication explored various authors in recent times. The point being this other conception of communication, although not quite common, does not belong to a single author not a specific school of thought, but can be traced back in the work of various thinkers. If there is a common thread between those thinkers, it may be found in the attempt to think human co-existence after the withdrawal of the traditional foundation upon which a humanity was once conceived.

Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito all explored such another understanding of communication. Together they share strongly coherent lines of thought, and often explicitly refer to one another. Among other aspects, their understanding of communication is not grounded in the dialectical coupling of differences. It is neither the means to an end, nor the sharing of something. It precedes human agency, and possibility any kind of agency in general. In so many words: it is a conception of communication without exchange. For the purpose of these research notes, the examination will focus on the work of Bataille, Nancy, and Esposito. In presenting those points of contact, I am not suggesting that those authors are “Laruelians”, nor that Laruelle’s “non-philosophy” can be merged into a broader tradition of thinking.

### **Incommunicability: Communication without exchange**

Laruelle’s essay was translated into English in 2010 by Alexander Galloway, who discussed it the same year in the fifth session of his seminar *French Theory Today – An Introduction to Possible Futures*, at the Public School New York. Galloway’s lectures were made available in five “Pamphlets” which also include special contributions from various guests (2010a). For the session on Laruelle, published in the fifth pamphlet, Eugene Thacker also addresses Laruelle’s essay on Hermes in his contribution:

All philosophy, says Laruelle, subscribes to the “communicational decision,” that everything that exists can be communicated. In this self-inscribed world, all secrets exist only to be communicated, all that is not-said is simply that which is not-yet-said. (2010, p. 24)

In the mid-60s, the Palo Alto school put forward a similar view. In Paul Watzlawick's *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, the very first axiom clearly posits "the impossibility of not communicating" or, to put it another way, that "one cannot not communicate" (1967, pp. 48-51). However, while Watzlawick *et al.* studied the problems of human communication, they were not concerned with what allows communication to be a reality for human beings in the first place, whether as a process of relation or separation. This blind spot in their investigation is precisely what allows them to see communication everywhere. Watzlawick *et al.* were specifically interested in behavioral communication (1967, p. 50). Although their views certainly do not represent all theories of communication –notoriously diversified–, one can understand how they could be associated with a common, dominant conception of communication.

The ideas shared by Galloway and Thacker in 2010 were later expanded in a book they coauthored with McKenzie Wark. *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation* (2014) contains one essay by each of the three authors. As their programmatic introduction makes clear, the perspectives they propose to explore are significantly informed by Laruelle's ideas. This is worth mentioning, as it currently remains one of the very few attempts to bring non-philosophy to the field of communication and media studies.

In the book, Galloway, Thacker and Wark do not refer to Watzlawick *et al.* Instead, when it comes to commenting on Laruelle's ideas, they discuss the linear model of communication. They chose to understand "the elements of the modern communicational apparatus" as "sender, receiver, channel, message" (2014, p.19). The field of communication and media studies is widely diversified, to the point that its limits are notoriously fuzzy. Furthermore, as Robert T. Craig once remarked "the transmission model, as usually presented, is scarcely more than a straw figure set up to represent a simplistic view" (1999, p. 127). Its notoriety is proportional to the amount of criticism it has been subjected to –rightly or not– since its inception. It is without a doubt an easy target, sharing this predicament with Claude Shannon's mathematical model of information transmission published around the same time (1948). Certainly, efforts are being made to revise the predominant perceptions pertaining to Lasswell's model (Sapienza, Iyer and Veenstra, 2015). Similar concerns motivated the activity of a recent workshop organized by the European Communication Research and Education Association in Vilnius, on the topic of "Models of communication: Theoretical and Philosophical Approaches":

It is often claimed that the early phases of media and communication studies were dominated by a linear conception of communication, modelled as a process of transmission. The hegemony of this model may have been exaggerated – it never prevailed in studies of interpersonal communication, for instance – but it has undeniably provided a favourite target for critics of various stripes. (ECREA Philosophy of Communication, 2015).

However simplistic, the principal elements of this transmission model of communication can be described as standard and canonical. They were already present in the analysis of oratory offered by Aristotle in his treatise *Rhetoric* (2006). Mass communication research emerges in the United States as a reworked version of this linear model (Lasswell, 1971). From this standpoint, communication as a means of exchange or transmission is a process employed toward an ideal end, usually represented by the transcendence of differences between individuals, or by mutual agreement or consensus. Thus, it is evident how models based on this understanding can fall victim to Laruelle’s contested “hermetology”, as they split truth between a meaning and its transmission<sup>6</sup>. Inspired by Laruelle, Galloway, Thacker and Wark consequently propose “to move beyond” the limits of this canonical conception of communication. Hence they make their proposal for “excommunication” as a way to “push media and communication theory further” (2014, pp. 20–21). By venturing beyond the difference between communication and incommunicability, they show how it is possible to cross the threshold of the hegemonic model of mediation. They shed light on the possibility of yet another way to think about communication, one which I choose to name “non-standard communication”.

Indeed, such efforts have been made outside the fields of communication and media studies. Georges Bataille is well known for having proposed a view of what could be called a “communication without exchange”, as it is called by François Bizet (2007). The formula is reminiscent of one of the many aporetic ways in which Bataille described his project: “Profound communication demands silence” (1988, p. 92). This “negative” horizon of Bataille’s communication far from being an esoteric glitch or a mere literary artifice had and still has a strong legacy (Libertson, 1982; Collier, 1975; Besnier, 1991; Mitchell et Winfree, 2009). In the past three decades, they were significantly and coherently developed by authors such as Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), Maurice Blanchot

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<sup>6</sup> A rigorous proposition to rehabilitate the transmission model can be found in Sybille Krämer’s *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy* (2015).



(1988), Giorgio Agamben (1993) and Roberto Esposito (2010). Those authors have in turn proposed a unique take on communication which is reminiscent, in some aspects, of Laruelle's special mode of communication.

This view is very much concerned, in one way or another, with the communication of incommunicability or, to use Nancy's words, with the fact that "the incommunicable communicates" (2002, p. 8). For the matter at hand here, "incommunicability" should not be understood as a predicate of communication: it does not stem from a (failed) process of communication. For example, it is not the same as the incommunicability of Kant's noumenon, which still manifests itself as an inaccessible secret. Instead, the incommunicability at hand here actually communicates no-thing: a gap, a groundlessness, an opening, the lack of anything.

Understandably, this incommunicability cannot be confused with the inherent ambiguity of the communicative process either. The fact that communication both unites and separates –this "duplicity", as Thacker calls it in his essay which is also concerned with incommunicability– is still often presented as a dialectical process, especially when, among other things, it is subordinated to a positive end (indeed, an ideal end: the successful communication).

Instead, this incommunicability is prior to this ambiguity, and prior to communication itself, when one understands "communication" as the common, canonical way discussed above. In some respects, it could be another name for Laruelle's second Hermes, whose secret "is itself the Uninterpretable from which interpretation emerges" (2010, p. 20).

### **Community: Communication without agents<sup>7</sup>**

The communication of incommunicability is not an exchange: it does not happen between agents of communication who would exist prior to its taking place. The question of agency is another potential point of contact between Laruelle and the non-standard communication one can find in the work of Nancy, Agamben and Esposito, even if –or especially as– they are dealing with the topic of community. As Galloway explains in his 2010 lecture, putting aside the "human agent", "receptive perceiver" or "human perceiver" is an important requisite for non-philosophy: a way to contest the dominance of the "Hermeto-logical Difference" (2010b, pp. 7-8).

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<sup>7</sup> I have further explored the idea of a communication without agent in another journal article (Choukah and Theophanidis, 2016).

Bataille's understanding of communication makes a very unique use of human agency. Thacker picks up on this aspect in his chapter of the book *Excommunication*:

Whenever Bataille speaks of communication or mediation, his reference is always that of the mystical tradition of the *via negativa*; for him mediation and communication always imply the dissolution of sender and receiver, leaving perhaps only the message that is the gulf or abyss between them. (2014, p. 136)

That being said, communication without agency does not mean that we get rid of the problem of coexistence; quite the contrary. Bataille was notoriously concerned with the problem of community. *Contre-Attaque*, *Acéphale* and the *Collège de sociologie* were all laborious attempts at confronting human coexistence as the very tragic problem it had become in the middle of the 20th century. Nancy, Blanchot, Agamben and Esposito respectively, and very consciously, picked up on this problem where Bataille had left it. Given what is at stake, how could their views on communication do without human agency or, as Galloway puts it in his 2010 lecture, without the "fluff of human mediation" (2010, p. 9)?

It is possible precisely because all those attempts refuse to ignore the fascist catastrophe of World War II. This research on community takes place in a historical horizon where human exceptionalism is severely brought into question as a guiding principle for human coexistence. This is clearly manifest in *The Inoperative Community*, an important book Nancy wrote after spending a year teaching the work of Bataille, in the early 80s. When it comes to the nature of the community, Nancy writes:

it is not obvious that the community of singularities is limited to "man" and excludes, for example, the "animal" (even in the case of "man" it is not a fortiori certain that this community concerns only "man" and not also the "inhuman" or the "superhuman," [...]) (1991, p. 28).

To a certain extent, Nancy's remark is reminiscent of the way Laruelle understands non-philosophy. After all, a "non-human" take on communication could *not* be understood as the opposite of an anthropocentric perspective, but rather as the deactivation of the dialectical operation by which the human exists in a differential opposition to something else (animals, things). The critique of anthropocentrism does not require us to get rid of humans. This is what allows Nancy to list together, at the very beginning of *Being Singular Plural*, "(...) all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails, gods—and "humans" (...)" (2000, p. 3). The process of

“indifferenciation” used by Agamben to deactivate the dialectical process at work in the “anthropological machine” has already been compared to Laruelle’s non-philosophie (Agamben, 2004; Watkin, 2014, p. xvii, footnote 4).

The fact that there is a kind of communication that is prior to any form of agency can still be illustrated in another manner. In *Communitas*, Roberto Esposito suggests a revision of the Heideggerian formula *Es gibt sein* in order to address a special kind of “donation” or *munus*: one that is entirely constituted by a “with” (2010, p. 90-91). Following Nancy’s re-reading of *Being and Time*, Esposito further explains that “all that exists, coexists” (2010, p. 93; see also Nancy, 1993). In other words, what is given through the *munus* is the *cum*, and not “something” in particular: no essence, no meaning, no information. Not only is nothing given –except coexistence– but no agent is responsible for the “donation” as well: the given is without givenness. It is, as Derrida once wrote a “giving that gives but without giving anything and without anyone giving anything” (1992, p. 20)<sup>8</sup>.

On this basis, one could probably argue that while *there is* (*Es gibt*, or in French *il y a*) communication, this non-standard communication is actually prior to any agency, whoever or whatever they may be. Instead, this communication is how agency takes place in the first place: it is how “we” take place. As such, non-standard communication, while communicating no-thing except its own incommunicability, is nonetheless that by which the frail event that is community happens, endlessly.

### **(Not even) a “dialogue”**

Far from presenting a complete model of non-standard communication, these brief research notes call for much-needed further development. At the very least, they suggest the extent to which Laruelle’s non-philosophy could be of interest to those thinking about communication and incommunicability in a different light. The question remains to properly weight how non-standard communication should become –or, even more to the point, *if* it could become– an object of inquiry within the fields of communication and media studies. On principle, a non-standard model may very well require a precarious existence at the threshold of established disciplines, teetering between the knowable and the unknowable. This movement may be like thinking itself, a process of continuous estrangement which nonetheless requires the familiar it keeps moving away from.

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<sup>8</sup> How exactly does Laruelle’s own “*don sans donation*” (given-without-givenness) differs from the *Es gibt* of *munus* is a question that would be worth further inquiry.

If this endless journey is to continue, a number of issues require further consideration. First and foremost, a more systematic attempt should be made to assess the function fulfilled by Laruelle's conception of communication in his overall philosophy. The authors associated with non-standard communication likewise demand a more careful examination. This needs to be done with concern not only for the various ways they explicitly deal with the idea of communication, but also to examine how they differ from one another, as well as from Laruelle's own understanding of communication. The non-standard model –if it is to be called a model at all– must also be further differentiated from specific “standard” models, as they are widely studied and used in the fields of communication and media studies. Special attention must be given to “standard” models of transmission and mediation, and to the ways they have been challenged either from within the established fields or at their margins. This will highlight more precisely how and if those fields could indeed benefit from an encounter with Laruelle, or if, as he suggested in his short piece on communication, between them “perhaps not even a ‘dialogue’” is possible. The latter does not necessarily constitute a negative result. Such a “failure to communicate” could, after all, help to distinguish between communication theories and the philosophy of communication, especially in light of a renewed understanding of both communication and the uncommunicable.

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