

# An Appreciation and Preview of Andrey Mir's Book: Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror: Jaspers' Axial Age and Logan's Alphabet Effect

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## An Appreciation and Preview of Andrey Mir's Book: *Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror: Jaspers' Axial Age and Logan's Alphabet Effect*

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### Pre-Amble

Andrey Mir's (2024) book *Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror: Jaspers' Axial Age and Logan's Alphabet Effect* starts out innocently enough with his Introduction: Replaying History Backwards where Mir wrote: "We expect that new media will do new tricks to cover our old needs." This raised no alarms nor did the reading of all the chapters of his book until I came to the concluding chapter: Conclusion: What was the Axial Age Anyway? After reading it I then I realized that digital media coupled with AI, innocently enough, poses a real danger to human culture world-wide. Read my review and you will understand how I came to this conclusion and then read Andrey Mir's book which provides us with a warning that we **must heed**.

### Introduction

In my 59 years as an academic I have been the recipient of a modest number of honours but none of them are as dear to me as Andrey Mir's book with its focus on Jaspers' notion of the Axial Age and my book *The Alphabet Effect*. Although I am the sole author of that book, I want the reader to know that the book is in part an extension of an article I co-authored with Marshall McLuhan entitled "Alphabet, Mother of Invention (McLuhan and Logan 1977)." McLuhan and I never had a chance to work on the alphabet project together other than our 1977 article due to his untimely passing so I wrote *The Alphabet Effect* (Logan 2004) on my own, which was published in 1986.

I have used the term appreciation (as suggested to me by Bill Kuhns) in the title of my essay because this essay is not a traditional review per se' of Andrey Mir's book in the usual sense of the word but an appreciation of what he has written at two levels. The first level, and the more trivial one is an appreciation of the kind things he has written about me and my book *The Alphabet Effect*. The second level, and much more important, is an appreciation of the insights he has developed into the way in which digital media has changed and will continue to change our culture with hints and a warning of how its effects may evolve in the future. This essay is therefore focussed on and summarizes the interesting things I have learned and you will learn from reading Andrey Mir's book but it is not a classical review in that I will not attempt a critical evaluation of the book's content as that would be in part like reviewing my own work. With that said here are my thoughts from reading Andrey's fascinating book in which he compares the theses in Jasper's notion of the Axial Age with the ideas developed in my book *The Alphabet Effect* and more importantly considers the way in which digital media has impacted and will continue to impact our society especially in terms of culture, literacy, scholarship and science.

### The Preview: The Interesting Things You Will Find in Andrey Mir's Book

Mir (2024, 10) describes his book with the following one liner: "This book is about orality that became obsolesced by writing and about literacy that is becoming obsolesced by digital media." His book is

much more than this as it is full of fascinating insights into the effects of digital media and what we can expect of their evolution and their impact on all aspects of human culture. It also helps us to understand how media evolved from the spoken word to the written word to electric media and then to digital media and now to AI.

In order to achieve his objectives Mir (2024) connects and contrasts Jasper's (1949) notion of the Axial Age as developed in his 1949 book entitled *The Origin and Goal of History* with the notion of the alphabet effect as first formulated by McLuhan and Logan (1977) in an article entitled, *Alphabet, Mother of Invention* and then further developed in my book *The Alphabet Effect* (Logan 2004) where it is posited that the phonetic alphabet gave rise to or contributed to the development of monotheism, codified law, individualism, deductive logic, and abstract science.

Mir (2024, 11) sees a connection of the Axial Age and the Alphabet Effect when he writes,

For Logan, the alphabet contributed to such phenomena of civilization as monotheism, codified law, individualism, deductive logic, and abstract science. Not only does the emergence of these phenomena coincide with Jaspers' Axial Age, but they also perfectly fit into the logic and spirit of the Axial Age "awakening".

The one caveat I have with this connection is that although the Chinese writing system was not alphabetic, they nevertheless were an Axial culture as described by Jaspers. Mir deals with issue in Chapter 10 of his book, which I will treat later in this essay.

## **The Axial Age Defined**

Mir (ibid. 34) wrote:

Jaspers calls Axis, or the Axial Period – I prefer the translation "Axial Age" – which happened in 8<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE. This Axis signified the awakening of humankind towards its future unity – the pivotal turn from human evolution to the history of humankind. In the Axial Age, the fundamental moral, spiritual and metaphysical concepts were discovered that are universal for all humans and characterize humankind as one.

The emergence of electric and digital media changes everything as Mir (2024,12) points out when he writes: "Electric and now digital media have created the ideal conditions for civilization reversal. By reversing literacy and retrieving orality, digital media, essentially, are replaying the Axial Age backwards."

Having identified this reversal Mir (2024, 14) identifies the objective of his book: "What is digital orality? This book starts a series of projects answering this question." Here is how Mir (ibid., 12-13) describes 'digital orality':

Social media recreate orality in digital form by enabling a new linguistic phenomenon: digital speech. Digital speech encompasses the features of both oral and written speech. Like oral speech, digital speech permits the instant exchange of replies; like writing, it leaves behind a record and can be transmitted in time and space. On the one hand, digital speech is an exchange between two or more people; on the other hand, it is fixed and observable to the audience. Exposure to an audience heats any conversation up. Digital speech is impulsive but not evanescent – it stays and involves others.

The ease of exchanging digital speech has shifted the focus of mass communication and the entire culture from reflections to reflexes and from substance to attitude. Historically and technologically, digital speech inherits from print literacy but retrieves orality. That is why it produces the state of mind and culture that can be called digital orality. Robert Logan was the first to use the term “digital orality” in 2007 (apologies readers, for this self-promotion).

## **Yellowstone Wolves and Media Determinism**

One of my favorite sections of Mir’s (2024, 20-27) book is the section entitled: Yellowstone Wolves and Media Determinism, where he demonstrates the parallel of media determinism and hence media ecology with biological ecology by describing how the introduction of wolves into the Yellowstone National Park triggered a number of changes to the population of both flora and fauna in the park.

## **Reviews: Chapter by Chapter of Mir’s *Digital Future in the Rearview Mirror***

In **Chapter 2: Karl Jaspers and his “Schema of World History,”** Mir (ibid., 40) describes Jaspers’ three divisions of human’s habitation on planet earth “into three successive phases”:

- i. prehistory (the time before the emergence of writing);
- ii. history (beginning with the first written accounts of human activity and included the Axial Age from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BCE;
- iii. world history (beginning in Europe in the 1500s) and representing the Technological Age.

Mir (ibid., 54) then notes that like McLuhan, but “ten to fifteen years before McLuhan, Jaspers comes to the same idea: communications made the world small.”

In **Chapter 3: What Caused the Axial Age,** Mir examines the question of what caused the Axial Age in terms of the media effects of horses and the clash between sedentary and nomadic mentalities.

In **Chapter 4, The History of Writing,** Mir provides a detailed account of the history of writing from the earliest forms of notations to the alphabet. One of the charming elements of this chapter is the way he relates his grandmother’s practice of tying knots in her head scarf as reminder of things she had to do to, paralleling the first instances of simple notations using knots.

In **Chapter 5, The Media Ecology of Writing,** Mir develops the following interesting ideas:

- i. “irrigation was the mother of writing;”
- ii. writing created the development of institution to promote it, namely libraries and schools;
- iii. writing made possible codified law, science, history and philosophy;
- iv. and finally, he describes both the services and disservices of writing.

In **Chapter 6, “The Features of Orality,”** Mir describes in detail, as the title of his chapter indicates, the nature of oral society which differs from literate society in more ways than just the absence of written records. Mir suggests that,

For a literate person, the comprehension of the oral mindset might be hard (ibid. 107)...Orality is relation-oriented, while literacy is object oriented...the very notion of objective truth was not invented yet in primary orality; objective truth was a by-product of literacy (ibid. 127).

Mir then turns to digital orality and observes that,

Social media have not only retrieved relational bias and status competition but has also enabled an individual's request for affirmation at an unprecedented scale. This is, perhaps, one of the most important features of digital orality and one of its most powerful retrievals from primary orality. Billions of users, anyone who goes digital, display their existence for others to react to and affirm (ibid. 128-129).

I now turn to Mir's section in Chapter 6 entitled "Bragging" and please forgive me for bragging as I quote Mir quoting me:

Robert Logan observed that the Hebrews were the first people who created a nonmythological and realistic history of themselves. The other literate cultures of the ancient world, from the Sumerians and the Egyptians to the Assyrians and the Hittites, recorded their historical events, but their historiography was very crude, events were recorded in isolation, and, most importantly, they tended to record mostly their glorious moments. According to Logan, it was alphabetic literacy that helped the Hebrews develop their historic sense (ibid. 131).

Mir goes on to note:

Orality has no appetite for objectivity. On the contrary, all the functional features of orality – collective involvement, status competition, the request for affirmation, and environmental immersion with its imperative of occupying more or new space for greater benefits – emphasize the affordance and necessity of bragging. By its very psychological nature, bragging repels sober self-reflection that could be detrimental to tribal authenticity. Bragging might not be encouraged in a literate society, but in orality bragging is a beneficial or even a survival strategy (ibid., 131).

Mir explains how knowledge of their past was preserved in oral cultures. "People had to constantly retell what they knew about the world to keep knowing the world (ibid., 157-58). As a result, the knowledge of the world acquired the features of its medium" i.e. the features of the oral epics like those of Homer.

**Chapter 7: A Catalog of the Effects of Writing and the Alphabet**, is the longest chapter in the book in which Mir makes considerable use of McLuhan's notion of visual and acoustic space.

He writes, "Visual space transforms the *sensorial faculty* of vision into the *cognitive ability* of inner vision (ibid. 161). He also makes use of my chart on p. 163 of the characteristics of acoustic and visual space from my book *McLuhan Misunderstood* (Logan 2013). He then notes that with the emergence of digital media the objectification of knowledge, a characteristic of literacy is being lost (Mir 2024. 167). Mir describes the explosion of abstract concepts with the alphabet (ibid. 172). For example, rather than ascribing natural phenomena to the gods the Greeks began the practice of explaining things in terms of natural forces of nature which began the emergence of natural science. He wrote: "Replacing gods with

principles, the Greeks accidentally discovered Nature (ibid. 175).”

He makes it explicit that alphabetic writing gave rise to science when he writes: “Phonetic writing and the alphabet begat science. Abstract science – thinking in abstract concepts – is a media effect of the alphabet (ibid. 185).

Mir (ibid. 176-182) also notes that alphabetic literacy also gave rise to individualism and all of its implications. He also describes how alphabetic writing gave rise to fragmentation and analysis (ibid. 186), which is now being reversed by digital orality (ibid. 192), which he then compares to primary orality (ibid. 193-94). He then compares classification with digital media to written media prior to the digital revolution (ibid. 194-98).

Mir (ibid. 198-203) treats the impact of writing on legal systems especially the emergence of codified law. He then tackles the use of logic that written expression gave rise to (ibid. 203-209). He then ends this chapter with two topics that illustrate the impact of written text particularly alphabetic text in: From Collective to Personal Inquiring (ibid. 210-15) and in Monotheism, Absolute, and the Universal Law (ibid. 215-223).

In **Chapter 8: Differences Between the Effects of Writing and the Alphabet**, Mir deals with Ong’s notion of secondary orality, which Ong coined and which is the orality of literate people making use of speech on electronic media such as the telephone, radio, and television. Mir cites Roger Ailes, as exemplary of this as the creator of Fox News with its

delivery of an affirmative emotional world picture that would talk to viewers at their homes and within their value systems. Television stopped being news--centered and started being viewer-centered...starting the process of cultural and political polarization (ibid. 241).

Summarizing, Mir writes,

The evolution of interpersonal and mass communication can be seen, through the lens of the sequential “enhancement” of oral communication... succeeded by writing, which refined the high form of orality into rhetoric. Then, the development of writing led first to electronic communication and secondary/electronic orality and then to digital communication and tertiary/digital literacy (ibid. 243).

In **Chapter 9: The Mystery of Greece: The Pirates and the Alphabet**, Mir deals with the adoption of the alphabet by the Greeks and the impact that had on their development of science, logic and philosophy.

During the Greeks Dark Age (1100-750 BCE) palace writing was abandoned and forgotten. But then the alphabet triggered an explosion of literacy (ibid. 269)... In Greece, due to the effect of borrowing, orality jumped right to the alphabet in the period between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. That is why, perhaps, Greece gave the purest examples of those transformations that Jaspers ascribed to the Axial Age (ibid. 271).

Another interesting element of Mir’s Chapter 9 is the section “The phantom literacy of Homer.” Mir wrote, “All Homeric scholars tripped over an element of the Iliad that should not be there – the Catalog of Ships.” A catalog is not part of the oral tradition. Mir also notes, “the Iliad also contains a direct mention of writing (ibid. 274). In the story of prince Bellerophon there is mention of “baneful tokens, graving in a folded tablet many signs and deadly (Illiad, Book 6, 167-170)” indicating the existence of writing.

In **Chapter 10: The Mystery of China and the Axial Age**, Mir deals with the fact that because the

Chinese writing system was non-alphabetic that the emergence of the Axial Age cannot be attributed to the alphabet. He describes how an understanding of why abstract science began in the West despite China's superiority of technology at that time led to the formulation of the Alphabet Effect by Logan and McLuhan. He then makes use of my chart of The Comparison of Chinese and Western Cultural Patterns on page 285. Mir ends the chapter by describing how the Chinese were able to use an alphabetic keyboard on computers to create Chinese characters on the screen.

In **Chapter 11: The Meaning and Goal of History when the Medium is the Message**, Mir addresses the meaning and goal of history when the medium is the message. This chapter begins with a Marxist critique of McLuhan. "They (the Marxists) focus on what powerful people do with media, while media ecology explores what media do to people, powerful or not." Mir then suggests, "Digital media have become the final and ultimate historical and cultural equalizer." Through education literacy is now more or less universal but residual orality survives through electronic media such as TV, radio, movies and also face to face storytelling and small talk. The Internet to use Mir's expression has created an "explosion of authorship" and through social media "a new form of language that serves digital conversation: digital speech or orality. Users of digital media/Internet spend hours 'without the body.' They are "space-ignorant and time-biased." Mir concludes the chapter with this dire thought:

Media evolution exploded humankind into the world... The final stage of this explosion, the Singularity, will also be the last reversal – it will implode the world into humankind, when humankind, its new medium, and its environment become one.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Mir wrote: "The Digital Age Plays the Axial Age in Reverse"

Readers, you now understand why I wrote what I did in the Pre-ambles, which bears repeating: What was the Axial Age anyway? After reading Mir's book you will realize that digital media coupled with AI, innocently enough, poses a real danger to human culture and literacy world-wide. I beg you to read Andrey Mir's book which provides us with a warning we must heed.

<https://www.amazon.ca/Digital-Future-Rearview-Mirror-Alphabet/dp/1777358914>

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