

Writing in the Air

The garden is lush, the house rich-looking and the trees beautiful. In front of the ivy-covered façade are the Chappe children. There are five of them. They are lined up, single-file from shortest to tallest. The littlest one is in front, the oldest, far taller than the others, is last, his back against the wall. They stand still, their hands at their sides, as if posing for a photograph. However, at the time, back in the 1780s, photography had not yet been invented. So, they aren't posing after all—they are getting ready for something.

Facing them is a young girl, the Chappe sister. She checks to see that the others are lined up properly. Apparently satisfied, she makes a sudden gesture. There is a burst of activity. One of the brothers holds out his right arm, bending his forearm so that it points down toward the ground. Another brother holds his left arm out horizontally. The sister gives a sign. The brothers drop their arms alongside their bodies once again. The sister gives another sign. The others once again hold out their arms—either straight or bent, pointing up, down or horizontally—forming broken lines that stand out against the facade of the Chappe house, which is located in a small town in France's Sarthe region.

By moving their arms, the siblings, like a well-oiled machine, form a series of well-regulated figures.

"Believe it or not, this is how the optical telegraph was born. I'm Abraham. That's me, right in front, with the glasses. When I was a child, those glasses really bothered me. I couldn't keep myself from playing with them all the time. Now, I sort of like the way they make me look. I am a handsome fellow, and quite stylish".

Let's get back to the Chappe house. At the very back is Ignace, the eldest—he is a representative at the Legislative Assembly. In front of him is Claude—he's the one who made the Chappe family's name famous. He invented the optical telegraph. And to think he almost became a priest! In front of him is René, dit des Arcis. And in front of him...

"We Chappe brothers were as close as peas in a pod. Which really helped us. When we first started out—well, you should have seen us! The first time we tried our machine was right after Louis XVI was locked up in Temple Prison, in the autumn of 1792. We were up in one of the towers, among the trees in Ménilmontant, but someone saw the arm of our machine move. 'Look! Over there! They are sending signals! They are sending messages to Louis to help him escape!' The mob rushed our tower. Claude, who was up at the top, totally absorbed in his work, didn't even notice what was happening. I went up the ladder. We had just enough time to climb back down and hide among the trees. The mob gathered firewood and soon our first machine went up in smoke. Ignace, imposing in his official garb, arrived with the National Guardsmen. He was the one who got us out of trouble. Sometimes, having a brother on the Legislative Assembly helps! But we were all so upset. All of our work was ruined. Here I am going on and on and I haven't even told you what the machine was for! To communicate!

"What goes faster than a galloping horse? A bird, you might say. It is true; the swift is the fastest bird in the world. Well then, go and find a swift to ride! And the gazelle, you ask? I challenge you to find one in France. Indeed, the issue is not so much to go fast as it is to go fast and far. And to go whenever you want. That is where the optical telegraph, which Claude had just invented, came in. At the time, people said that we were trying to write in the air. There is some truth to that. And it's a nice way of putting it—to write in the air.

"It reminds me of a gunner I once knew, a giant. He once asked me in a mocking tone, 'Will your words go faster than my cannonballs?' I retorted, 'Faster, even. I don't know. Farther, surely. Imagine a cannonball that bounces from station to station, only exploding when it reaches the last one. A cannonball that, instead of killing, transmits information. A cannonball that whispers messages in your ear!' To that, he had no reply.

"I was young and full of energy, which was fortunate, because you had to be back in those days. What a time it was! It was terrible and dangerous, but awfully exciting. For the first time in history, we heard it said that all men were born free and equal. Can you imagine how heady a time it was? A dream, no less! A dream we all shared. Freedom turned you into another kind of man—a man with pride and dignity, a true citizen. But not everybody was pleased with what was happening, especially those who felt that they were superior—you know, better than the rest of us. They did everything they could to halt the Revolution. That's right; I forgot to mention that it was the Revolution. Have you ever heard that word before? I like the way it sounds. Don't you? Foreign armies had invaded our country from all sides. France wasn't exactly a shining example with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. It had to be hidden at all cost. People—wherever they were in the world—absolutely had to be kept from finding out about it. It put mad ideas into their heads. It terrified them. Their roughneck soldiers invaded our country, trying to destroy us, to keep us quiet, to destroy what we had created—freedom and dignity. Brotherhood, well, that's a bit more complicated. What we wanted was to defend our Republic. And defend it we did. I wish you had seen that gunner I mentioned—he fought like the devil. We were strong because we were right. And because fighting was the right thing to do.

“At that time more than ever we needed to know what was happening throughout our country. And there we were, the Chappe brothers, with our machine.

“I still remember what St. Just—a young fellow, but tough, really horrible—said back in 1794. ‘I hope that Europe finds out that you no longer want a single unhappy person in all of France. I hope that this serves as an example for other places on Earth, that it propagates the love of virtue and happiness. Happiness is a new idea in Europe’.

“Happiness, a new idea in Europe! Imagine, sending that message everywhere with our telegraph! And, a few centuries from now, will happiness still be a new idea? Will the telegraph help the different generations and peoples around the world to understand each other better? To understand each other without losing their unique personalities? What I would really like is to see universality and difference coexist someday”.

And, day after day, the moving arms of the telegraph that the Chappe brothers gave us transmitted many messages that must, of course, be kept secret.

Denis Guedj

