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Sticky Media. Encounters with Oil through Imaginary Media Archaeology

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Abstract

This paper investigates how media archaeology and the concept of deep time could be taken literally, by bringing authors of early media studies (McLuhan, Innis) together with contemporary eco-material approaches (Gabrys, Parikka) on the topic of oil. Following these conjunctions of media and oil the article first traces certain prevailing narrations in media studies, before turning to the understanding of oil beyond its industrial uses and its catastrophic dimensions in the petro-imaginary of *Satin Island* by Tom McCarthy. In terms of imaginary media archeology, petro-imaginary provides a conceptual space in which a new relation of images of material reality to media technologies can be drafted, tested, and reviewed. By proposing the figure of sticky media, in contrast to the prevailing metaphors of fluidity, I emphasize their material moments.

Keywords

Imaginary media archaeology, raw materials, eco-material media, sticky media

Introduction

It is remarkable that Edward Burtynsky's distinguished photo series entitled *Oil* consists of over 100 images, but just a few of them show the raw material itself. From a bird's-eye view the large format photographs depict areas of urban and natural environments pervaded by street networks and vast machine ensembles for the extraction, refinement, and transportation of oil. Since the petro-industry provides a range of refined petroleum products such as gasoline, diesel, and kerosene for automobiles, aircrafts, ships, motorcycles, and tractors, also the powerful industries of iron, plastic, and metal has risen up. While the cultural, natural, economic, and political witnesses are assembled on Burtynsky's pictures in order to testify the tremendous activities of the black matter, there are no close-ups of the substance itself. The photographs convey that oil does hardly enter into our senses. In fact, oil never stands entirely alone, since it is always associated with the human-made-world. Nevertheless, the larger the underrepresentation of oil, the more greater is the astonishing fascination arouses by the mute, glimmering material.

Because of the ambivalence of its invisible ubiquity, it is worth remembering, that the hydrocarbon products of petro-chemistry include besides fuels also the chemical compounds required for fertilizer, crop protection, ink, ointments, nylon stockings, antifreeze, paints, asphalt, mattresses, chewing gum, CDs, and DVDs: we sleep on oil, we chew oil, we rub oil into our skin—by which are meant especially the people who are living in the Global North. Since the first drillings in the second half of the 19th century, oil has became the most potent medium of the daily life by pumping and seeping in almost every corner of cultures, politics, and, perhaps first and foremost, in digital media technologies themselves.[1] With regard to oil as one of the most used energy source, Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer stresses: "Without the forms of energy to which we've had access and which we've come to take for granted, we would never have been modern."[2] By focusing in the last recent years on ecological crises and climate change attributed to carbon emissions, oil has become an intensively researched topic in humanities culminated in the questions about the human in the so-called Anthropocene.[3] In addition to these cultural, economic, and

[1] For a discussion of carbon dioxide emissions related to media technologies see "Digital carbon footprint. Steps in the right direction, " *The Guardian*, 3 October 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/sustainability/sustainability-report-2012-digital-carbon-footprint.

[2] Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer, "Introduction. On the Energy," *in Humanities Energy Humanities. An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 1-15, 4.

[3] Cf. Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil. Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014); Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden eds., *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson and Imre Szeman eds. *Petrocultures. Oil, Politics, Culture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

ecological aspects of "petro-modernity," a term coined by Stephanie LeMenager, I would like to propose a media archaeological approach by following the conjunctions between oil, media technologies, and media theory. While, in a first step, I "excavate" the omissions regarding oil in early media theory, I want to pose the question, in a second step, if oil can be perceived as unconscious medium of the modernity by following the sticky trails which oil has left behind within media narratives. In a third step, I suggest a less anthropocentric perspective as I ask through the lens of imaginary media archaeology how oil can be understood as geo-historic deep time medium. Media archaeology is meant in two ways: Firstly, as a tool for "unearth" certain narratives in archives of media studies, and secondly, as an instrument for taking the eco-material constitution of media and media technologies into account.

By adopting Isabelle Stengers' postulation of a renewed capacity of wondering about matter and material processes,[4] I undertake an attempt to unclose a perspective that doesn't consider oil neither as passive resource of industrial production nor as solely destructive material whose extraction often induced neocolonial conditions. The following attempt at approaching oil concerns more than just a single encounter with material and deals therefore with different levels how media can be understood.[5] Switching finally the level to an imaginary perspective on media and oil, I try to take serious Patricia Yaeger's urgent injunction to examine our "energy unconscious,"[6] which is of course also the unconscious of the technical media culture.

Missing Fossil Fuels

The question concerning materiality of media technologies—not in a metaphysical or metaphorical, but in a literal and physical sense—can be approached in terms of information and noise which address the critical problem of medium (materiality) and content (meaning).[7] To mention just one aspect of this wide-ranging debate, I would like to refer to Marshall McLuhan's often quoted dictum in which he has proclaimed "that the 'content' of any medium is always another medium." As "content" or "message"—terms which are commonly disposed to address a certain function, usage, or activity—McLuhan

[4] Isabelle Stengers, "Wondering about Materialism," in *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism,* eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), 368–380.

[5] In this paper, I do not follow a homogeneous—neither technological nor human-focused—notion of media. My understanding of media, for instance, refers to Eva Horn, "Editor's Introduction: 'There Are No Media'," in *Grey Room,* no. 29, 2008, 7-13.

[6] Patricia Yaeger et al. "Editor's Column. Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources," *PMLA*, vol. 126, no. 2, March 2011, 305-326, 306.

[7] For a discussion of this broad topic, see exemplarily Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017).

places inversely the medium itself. According to that dictum, the subject of a particular interest of media studies that McLuhan had in mind is not the represented semiotic content, but rather the ways of organizing, linking, amplifying, enlarging, or accelerating already existing or totally new constituted processes, scales, temporalities, and patterns. Using the example of electric light McLuhan explicates: "Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the 'content' of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light."[8] It is illuminating that on the first page of his anthology *Understanding Media* electric light takes on a special position inasmuch as it is not limited to any specific content or message. According to McLuhan, electric light and therefore electricity can be used for almost all kinds of media. Because of its status as a hyper-plastic media, electricity is considered to have no content. "The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name." While, on the one hand, the content of writing words is speech, whose content is the nonverbal process of thoughts, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is in turn the content of the telegraph. On the other hand, in case of the electric light, the chain of reference is evidently short: electric light as such has simply no content. Therefore one could argue, electric light has itself as message, it becomes in a tautological loop its own content.[9] To underline the idea of the separation between content and medium in order to highlight the latter—an idea that is often perceived as one of the foundation stones of contemporary media studies—McLuhan takes electricity as an example to emphasize the general tendency of the disappearance of the medium behind its content—without considering, however, the possibility that electricity has another content than itself.

It is well known that within McLuhan's conception of media the increasingly widespread of electricity has induced the most greatest reversal of the electric age which superseded or superimposed the formerly hyper-medium of writing that in turn characterizes the century of Gutenberg Galaxy. In this argumentation, electricity is the content of time-eliminating media and space-eliminating media such as radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV. Hence, electricity can be considered as the new medium *a priori:* a medium that precedes all other media which have consequently assumed electricity inherent properties, namely pervasiveness, instantaneousness, and decentralization.

Almost 60 years after McLuhan's media understanding, the study of the intertwining relations between environmental issues and media technologies offers a slightly different picture. Instead of reducing media analyses to cultural alteration and social impact, scholars like Jennifer Gabrys, Jussi Parikka, Nicole

[8] McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," 8-9.

[9] Cf. Florian Sprenger, *Medien des Immediaten. Elektrizität, Telegraphie, McLuhan* (Berlin: Kadmos, 2012), 23-24.

Starosielski, Janet Walker, John Durham Peters, and Richard Maxwell have started to map aspects of the multilayered intersections between media-technological environments and natural environments. In the last years a growing emergence of questions relating to raw materials, energy politics, and the ecological and geophysical embedding of media technologies can be observed. Despite their heterogeneity, these approaches share the common perspective on media that do not understand them merely as human-made artifacts transmitting semiotic content and having effects on human societies and cultures. Media technologies reach for ecological environments and interact with them in various and complex ways. With increasingly acceleration, a process gets recognizable, "in which nature and technology leak, spill over, blend into each other,"[10] as Marie-Luise Angerer has put it. In these discussions, the earthy realm of minerals, crystals, ores, metals, and undoubtedly also oil occupy a central position. Minerals like cobalt are used for lithium-ion batteries, germanium is indispensable for optical fiber cables and indium builds up displays. To put it in Jussi Parikka words, earthy materials are the "premediatic media material."[11] Varying Donna J. Haraway's concept of *naturecultures*, Parikka proposes the term *medianatures* with which is meant that the geophysical reality makes media happen, and moreover to draw attention to the often unseen exchanges between media technologies and fossil fuels, power relations, economy, and work. In short, the double-binded ecological ties of media show: "Media are *of* nature, and return *to* nature."[12]

To come back to McLuhan, informed by an eco-material view, it can be argued that the dictum—a medium always contains another medium—results in the disregard of the huge quantities of fossil fuels. However, of course the fossil fuels are essential in order to unleash the new electric medium, after which an entire age is named. On the basis of this simple observation, it becomes evident, that we have to rethink the presumed status of electricity as medium *a priori*. Instead of thinking his own dictum—a medium always contains an other medium—radically through, McLuhan has determined electricity as "pure" and therefore as auto-referential, pre-existent and immaterial. The idea of purity is equivalent to the self-generated and self-identical process of autopoiesis and therefore an expression of the stale dream of generating energy from nothing. The forthcoming tendency to neglect the material condition of media technologies becomes therefore already apparent in this early consideration by McLuhan. However, it quickly becomes clear that electricity isn't an auto-poetic matter made out of nothing, but in fact it is enabled (mediated) by a branch of

[10] Marie-Luise Angerer, *Ecology of Affect. Intensive Milieus and Contingent Encounters* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2017), 18.

[11] Jussi Parikka, *Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.

[12] Jussi Parikka, "Introduction. The Materiality of Media and Waste," *Medianatures. The Materiality of Information Technology and Electronic Waste*, n. p., Open Humanities Press. Accessed September 30, 2013; http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Medianatures.

technological systems and great amounts of fossil fuels in the form of coal, natural gas, and oil.[13] Steam turbines powered by fossil fuels convert kinetic energy of a moving fluid to mechanical energy in order to produce electricity. In times of anthropogenic or technogenic climate change and geological alterations it becomes more difficult to sustain the persistent idea of the disappearance of oil and other fossil fuels behind more recognizable media such as electricity. If oil as content of electricity flows through and undergirds phones, recorded music, computers, and the Internet, concerned substantially with what counts as culture, we have to speak in media studies instead of *the electric age about the age of fossil fuels.* So, isn't it time to consider oil as overlooked content of electricity—and therefore as unnoticed research subject of media studies?

Since the age of written culture is regarded as finalized and the beginning of the electric age was announced, also the content of the predominant medium has changed. The content of the medium, after which the present age is named, is no longer the human thought—content of the medium of speech and therefore also linked to the written world—, but a substance deep from earth, whose existence cannot be definitely explained.[14] In what follows, I will take a shift towards the question, if oil itself can be regarded as medium by tracing how raw materials are related to early understanding of media, especially those by McLuhan and Harold A. Innis.

Space-Binding Media

As many media scholars pointed out, media are determined by an oscillation between invisible immediacy and constitutive mediation. Media make visible, writable, audible, or, generally spoken perceptible, while they neutralize themselves and negate their constitute involvement in enabling sensualities. Michel Serres reminds us, efficient mediation means always a negation of any mediation: "Given, two stations and a channel. They ex-change messages. If the relation succeeds, if it is perfect, optimum, and immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, that means that it failed."[15] With regard to that first axiom of media theory in which is assumed that a medium is disappearing in the act of the mediation, similar conclusions may be drawn about oil that, how previously mentioned, remains invisible despite its ubiquity. Oil is seamlessly channeled from the bellies of ships via kilometers of pipelines, pumped in subterraneous tanks of private households or of gasoline stations.

[13] For a discussion of infrastructures related to petro-industry see Benjamin Steininger, "Pipeline. Am Puls der fossilen Moderne," in *Stoffe in Bewegung Beiträge zu einer Wissensgeschichte der materiellen Welt,* eds. Kijan Malte Espahangizi and Barbara Orland (Zurich: diaphanes, 2014), 231-244, 238.

[14] There are mainly two explanations about origin and formation of petroleum. Cf. Vincent Summers, "The of Crude Oil or Petroleum: Biotic or Abiotic?," *decodedscience*, April 28, 2015; https://www.decodedscience.org/origin-crude-oil-petroleum-biotic-abiotic/54008.

[15] Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 79.

Equally whether the oil is processed to heating oil, petroleum, or diesel, only sometimes its unpleasant odor lies in the air.

Presumably inspired by media theory, which is directed in its core against the dream of an instantaneous transmission and a self-generating process, literary scholar Stefanie LeMenager argues for oil's shaping force by drawing attention to the substance as "petroleum medium." By which she means "the objects derived from petroleum that mediate our relationship, as humans, to other humans, to other life, and to things." She continues with exploring oil as form of "petroleum aesthetics," by deriving meaning of "aesthetic" from its basic etymological root as sensibility and perception: "[F]orms of representation and value expressed by means of display, spectacle, concealment, and stealth. We experience ourselves, as moderns and most especially as modern Americans, every day in oil, living within oil, breathing it and registering it with our senses."[16] Media technologies are not only heavily indebted to oil, but oil itself becomes a force of enabling forms of perceptions and relations. LeMenager expresses pointedly: "To step outside of petromodernity would require a step outside of media."[17]

Since, at the first glance it probably might be unusual to interpret raw materials like oil through a media theoretical lens, it must be remembered that McLuhan's hypothesis of the formative power of the medium was substantially inspired by the social impacts that have emerged from staples, by which he meant especially exportable raw materials. He explicates,

> that technological media are staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil. [...] Cotton and oil, like radio and TV, become 'fixed charges' on the entire psychic life of the community. And this pervasive creates the unique cultural flavor of any society. It pays through the nose and all its other senses for each staple that shapes its life.[18]

Already in *Report on Project in Understanding New Media* from which the essay collection *Understanding Media* was rewritten and expanded, McLuhan has mentioned this idea: "[S]taples are media and media are staples [...] media are, in fact, themselves staples or natural resources. [...] and these staples are not limited to any geographical area, but are co-extensive with the human family itself."[19] McLuhan emphasizes the connection between staples and communication media

[16] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 6.
[17] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 71.
[18] McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," 21.
[19] Marshall McLuhan, *Report on Project in Understanding New Media* (Washington: National Association of Educational Broadcasters, 1960), Part V, 1.

by describing their common capabilities of being co-extensive and modifying—even though he seems not to be interested in going beyond drawing analogies. However, his considerations compel the general but the crucial conclusion, that neither media nor materials are passive containers, but rather, enabling constitutive processes which are relatively invisible—a characteristic that requires elsewhere further explanations.

McLuhan's conceptualization of media as staples shows continuity with Harold A. Innis' *Staple Theory*, in which Innis was concerned with the rise and fall of civilization in relation to media. For Innis, besides technical forms of communication, media also include rivers, lakes, and horses as well as elementary goods such as oil, fish, fur, wood, and wheat. Today Innis is particularly known for having introduced the notion of time and space to the field of media studies—understood as dimensions whose perception is intrinsically constituted and continually altered by media.

Take together the assumption, noted above, that oil can be materially considered as content of electricity with Innis' broad definition of "medium," the conceptual overlapping of oil and media foregrounds not just any form of medium, but shows primarily the specificity of space-binding media.[20] According to Innis, space-binding media are for example paper or electricity, which are relatively flexible and able to knit distinct points in space together across great distances. Space-binding media span far-flung territories and create a common institutional space supportive of trade exchange and accumulation of capital. It is evident that today's nearly unlimited mobility on water, air, and land enabling global trade exchange would not exist without oil as it is based 90 percent on oil or on other fossil fuels. With regard to McLuhan and Innis, it could be argued that oil makes walkable, flyable, driveable, and consumable by providing gasoline, kerosene, and diesel—forms which mediate the modern human.

In tradition of these Canadian media scholars, John Durham Peters has recently derived an understanding of media as infrastructural ordering devices for managing nature and culture. In Peters' understanding, media are ways of enabling environments that provide habitats for manifold forms of beings, including other media on which the very existence of nonhumans and humans depends. His concern is to acknowledge forms of media which are mostly disregard by media theory due to their supposedly poor qualities of meaning-making, as he has put it.[21] In a quite similar way, McLuhan has emphasized that not the motor car is the medium, but the "high-way, the factories, and the oil companies" forming the "hidden environment of services created by an

[20] Cf. Harold A. Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950).
[21] Cf. John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds. Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3.

innovation," and which is the "thing that changes people."[22] Explicitly referring to oil, LeMenager writes: "Asphaltum, the semisolid form of petroleum that bubbles in the misnamed tar pits, refers out [...] to its 'electric media' culture, to riff on an old McLuhanite term for film and television media powered by electricity—and is indebted to fossil fuel."[23]

In dialogue with recent eco-material media conceptions, media-archaeological insight of early conceptions of media has shown that the key moment of defining media as shaping forces derived from analysis of the social effects induced by staples. However, my point is not to generalize the notion of media in an ontological sense, rather, to take minor traits of media studies and ignored genealogies between media and material into account, in order to show, how media (theory) is entangled with natural entities and processes.

Encounters with Oil through Imaginary Media Archaeology

In the first part of my text, I have emphasized the meaning of oil by offering a broad understanding of media, particularly of space-binding media. In the following pages, I suggest a perspective on oil beyond human concerns and before oil is transubstantiated into the medium of petro-modernity. This involves to begin the narration of oil not at the point when it pervades civilization, industry, or media technologies, but to start from a much earlier point in time. Hence, it might be helpful to refer to Karen Pinkus' distinction of fuel and energy. For Pinkus, energy is the fundamental ability to enable several contemporary forms of work, whereas fuel means a broader field of potentialities. In opposition to energy, the emphasis of fuel marks the attempt made by nonexperts and nonengineers to grasp oil as the primal element at various points alongside the way to consumption and combustion and before it has been inserted into a system that will consume it. For Pinkus, the notion of fuel aims "to undo a kind of passivity with regard to the place or placement of fuels into vast and interconnected machines, grids, pipelines, storage containers, ecosystems, and even extra-planetary or off-worlds."[24] While asking for fuel and withdrawing from considerations of oil as energy, I have been leaving the first level of encounter with oil where it is represented in a normative sense as it exists for humans in order to bring into being the modern industrial capitalism always fully encompassed by human knowledge and technologies.[25] Contrarily,

[22] Marshall McLuhan, "Living at the Speed of Light," in *Understanding Me. Lectures and Interviews*, eds. Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), 225–243, 241-242.

[23] LeMenager, *Living Oil*, 144.

[24] Karen Pinkus, *Fuel. A Speculative Dictionary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 2-6.

[25] Eugene Thacker has called the level where oil is used for human purposes "anthropic inversion [...] the unhuman can only be understood through the lens of the human." The following level "where the unhuman is encountered," is the anthropic subversion. Here is an inversion of the relation between human and nonhuman initiated. "[A]s opposed to the anthropic inversion

the second level of encounter deals with questions concerning the meaning of nonhuman material.

In order to speak about oil from the second level of encounter, I have to switch the media-archaeological approach. In the following, I leave the archives of theoretical conceptions of media and enter the archives of media imaginaries. Hereafter, I inspired by the tool of imaginary media, proposed by Eric Kluitenberg.[26] Imaginary media is intended to complement the field of media archaeology with the archives of dreams, ideas, desires, and hopes evoked by media and emanating from them. In his reading of an "imaginary media archaeology," Kluitenberg provides an understanding of media that interrogates media less in their functions of transferring data or their representational uses, but rather addresses the imaginary potential of media technologies themselves. Media are considered by Kluitenberg as "partly real and partly imagined."[27] The actual physical manifestation of media technologies is of less significance than their ability to evoke dreams and imaginations. As described below, imaginary media can be understood as manifestations of *intra*-imaginary rather than *extra*-imaginary. What means that the imaginary can not fully perceived as projected affective dispositions emerged from a human mind. The imaginary meaning of oil occurs *in-between* human and medium. In this sense, the approach of imaginary media can be understood as a genuinely medial one, since it is induced by a reciprocal translation between medium and human, her perceptions and intuitions, and its symbolizations. Kluitenberg gathered a range of imaginary media which neither ask for their realization nor lead teleologically to the current condition of high-tech media devices. Therefore, the approach of imaginary media is an expression of the belief in the unsufficiency of present media history and the canonized narratives. In this sense Kluitenberg's archaeological understanding of media corresponds largely to Siegfried Zielinski's practice of telling contra-narrations.[28] In his *Variantologies*, he has proposed to reliever media from the fables and genealogies of an inexorable, quasi-natural progress which constantly outplaces the primitive apparatus in order to strive for the complex one—as I will detail later.

In the following, I am leaving the margins of Burtynsky's photographs, whose almost godlike bird's eye view has given me assurance of the existence of a

(human don't use oil, oil uses humans)." Cf. Eugene Thacker, "Black Infinity. Or, Oil Discovers Humans," in *Leper Creativity. Cyclonopedia Symposium*, eds. Ed Keller, Nicola Masciandaro, and Eugene Thacker (New York: punctum books), 173-181, 176.

[26] For the first known discussion on the conjunctions of oil and fiction see Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction. The Oil Encounter and the Novel," *New Republic*, March 1992, 29–34.

[27] Eric Kluitenberg, "Second Introduction to an Archaeology of Imaginary Media," in *The Book of Imaginary Media. Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*, (Rotterdam: NAi Publication, 2006), 7-28, 7.

[28] Cf. Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media. Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press Cambridge, 2006), 3, 7.

safe space between oil and me. When I am now submerging into oil through petro-imaginaries, I discover very quickly that oil is in opposite to the view from above, uncanny near and especially intrinsically sticky. Drawing on extracts from the novel *Satin Island* by Tom McCarthy, I show in which ways the theoretical-fictional imaginations—*with* oil, not *about* oil—may contribute to repurposing imaginary media archaeology concerning with the imaginary potential of media like oil. The imaginative capacity of fiction provides a conceptual space in which an altered attention towards images of matter in relation to media technologies is drafted, tested, and reviewed. In the following, I focus, firstly, on the relation between media technology and the conception of nature suggested in *Satin Island* and, secondly, I re-read the media-archaeological concept of deep time in a material way.

Accomplices in Imagination

U., an ethnographer of the contemporary and the main character in *Satin Island* is fully dedicated to the task of writing the "Great Report": a report, that is supposed to grasp the contemporary thickness of things, in which we live, as Andrew Pickering called it, or, to borrow Donna J. Haraway's term, to witness the troubled times.[29] In order to develop a "Present-Tense- Anthropology," an "anthropology that bathed in presence, and in newness,"[30] McCarthy's novel is saturated with scraps of current theories by Paul Rabinow, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Gilles Deleuze. These famous scholars can not obscure that due to the attempt of Present-Tense-Anthropology oil is the true protagonist of the text. *Satin Island* is a striking manifestation of oil as "lubricant of narrative,"[31] as Karen Pinkus would put it.[32] In order to become tangible as narrative lubricant, oil has to leave the perfectly matched infrastructural systems of extraction, refinement, and transportation, since it is only the disruption of a properly functioning system that provides insight.[33] Consequently, the previously discussed first axiom of media studies—a medium vanishes through mediation—is underscored by the second axiom: in the moment of noise the medium manifests itself. Therefore it

[29] Cf. Andrew Pickering, "In the Thick of Things," Keynote on Conference, February 2001; http://www.sociology.illinois.edu/doc/pickerin/itt.pdf; Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2016).

[30] Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island. A Novel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 89.

[31] Pinkus, *Fuel*, 76.

[32] In the acknowledgements of Satin Island, McCarthy explains that the novel "gestated during a 2010 residency at the International Artists Studio Programme in Stockholm, which I spent projecting images of oil spills onto huge white walls and gazing at them for days on end." Cf. McCarthy, Satin Island, 221.

[33] Every year for over 50 years there is a disaster like the explosion of offshore drilling rig of for instance Deep Water Horizon. It is estimated, that in Nigeria were 6800 oil spills between 1976 and 2001. Cf. Rowena Mason, "Shell sued over oil spill in Niger Delta," *Telegraph*, 02 May 2011. In Satin Island U. also recognizes that the oil spill is no singular occurrence, but rather "an ongoing event." Cf. McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 134.

is hardly surprising that U. encounters the oil in the inevitability of the devastating scale of its externalities. The leaking oil stirs U.'s imagination and releases boosts of overdetermination that is well known in cybernetic theory of communication. In these theories noise is considered not simply as "anti-information," but rather, as productive ambiguity emerged from the assumption that noise is not too less but in fact *too much* information.[34] Contrary to the free-flowing oil in the pipelines that is directly infiltrate to the energy systems of petro-modernity, the leaking, "noisy" fuel implies a notion of overdetermination and, in case of *Satin Island*, a systemic openness for interpretation. Deeply affected by the masses of oil which are spilled after a massive underwater leak, the anthropologist U. goes into raptures and identifies a deeper principle beneath the ecological catastrophe or—prosaically spoken—beneath the demonstration of chemical propensities: "When you watch swell and surf rolling through a sea that's turned to oil, is it not like watching the whole process in slow motion? All the grace of a wave rendered through high-end visual software that manages to hold and frame each moment without interrupting or arresting."[35]

It is most striking that the petro-imaginary which occurs between oil and U. and which is initiated by the oil spill, isn't experienced neither on-side nor in real time. Rather, oil is transmitted "through the airless medium of water and the odourless relays of fiber-optic cable, through the mangling of digital compression, the delays, decays and abstractions brought about by storage and conversion."[36] Oil is visualized, mediated, and animated by great amount of screens, which surrounds the main character on airports, sports bars, and mobile gadgets: "Around me and my screen, more screens: of other laptops, mobiles, televisions."[37] Liquid crystal displays, made from tenuously woven grids of the slimy colloids (a substance of microscopically dispersed insoluble particles), not just screen the black masses, but intensify and animate them. With their ability to transform the content by transforming their own molecules—which of course are made of minerals and powered by energy—the liquid crystal displays must be considered themselves as a form of animation.[38] In this regard, the often described vividness of earth which is proved in several narrations by oil as pulsating subterranean life-form, is mainly created by the processes of vivification through media technologies.[39]

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[34] See for example Serres, *The Parasite*, 79.
[35] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 130.
[36] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 43.
[37] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 6.
[38] For the qualities of animating through LCD see Esther Leslie, *Liquid Crystals. The Science and Art of a Fluid Form* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 105-107.
[39] For the theme of living oil in fiction see for instance Oxana Timofeeva "Ultra-Black. Towards a Materialist Theory of Oil", *e-flux*, Journal #84 - September 2017, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/84/149335/ultra-black-towards-a-materialist-theory-of-oil/.

Relating to the question of the nonhumanity of oil, Richard Grusin's observation concerning the media technologies as nonhuman form can be mentioned: "Technical mediation itself needs to be understood as a nonhuman process within which or through which humans and nonhumans relate."[40] If we consider not only the human relation to the nonhuman, but also the conjunctions between the nonhuman-natural and the nonhuman-technological, we recognize—of course from U.'s point of view—that the examined petro-imaginaries vehemently stirred up the fixed categories of nature(s) and technologies. The petro-imaginaries presented in *Satin Island* are contrary to the often assumed idea of nature and technologies as antagonist forces, rather they are described as *accomplices in imagination*. Since what else could oil stand for than the manifold forms of nature(s) or rather material reality. Oil is nothing more than "organic compounds—animal, vegetable and mineral—broken down and concentrated by the planet's very crust."[41] Oil and media technologies are mutually originated themself in order to reveal oil—and therefore nature—as the principle of "endless metamorphoses [...] stretched and folded, stretched and slapped. Alchemy. Metamorphosis. Material culture."[42] Sticky oil dreams nature through slimy colloids. Having a concept of nature in mind that is inherently reliant on transformation and alteration, the petro-imaginaries constitute within brief moments a picture not of untouched nature, but of nature touched by technology. Engendered by liquid crystal displays, oil appears in a medial-aesthetic sense, in the way LeMenager understands the term 'petroleum aesthetics' as an certain access of perception and sensibility.

In this regard, the widely held assumption, that nature is replaced by media technology, how for instance Jean Baudrillard's idea of Simulacrum suggested, can no longer be uphold. In media studies it is often argued that only through "denaturalization," only through the fundamental withdrawal of naturalness, nature can be made operational for technical applications. According to this, grasping or even thinking about natural environments, entities, and processes often seems merely to be possible as technological effects. In the tradition of postmodern thinking nature is meant as semiotic or discursive mastery of representing nature and media as social and psychological influences, rather than environmental forces related to physical realities.[43] U.'s petro-

[40] Richard Grusin, "Introduction," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), vii-xxix, xiv.

[41] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 134.

[42] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 128. My interpretation of "nature" in *Satin Island* follows a contemporary tendency in humanities, which "do not present their subject matter as a mirror of spirit, a universe of God's creation, [...] but seek to discover nature as such, to think about the very nature of nature that is naturally independent of thought." Timofeeva "Ultra-Black."

[43] Cf. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, "Greening Media Studies," in *Media and the Ecological Crisis*, ed. Richard Maxwell al., (New York: Routledge, 2014), 79-91, 90. For a range of illuminating approaches in cultivating the connections that inhere between media about the

imaginaries show that neither the materiality of media technologies not the natural material blend into the background. In neither case the materiality disappears during the mediation. Albeit one has only just begun to recognize the contemporary inevitable redistribution of the relations between media technologies and material realities, the petro-imaginaries in *Satin Island* can be understood in a sense that they unquestionably exemplify non-transcendental re-wondering or technological re-enchantment rather than disenchantment of "nature." [44] Media technologies seem not be targeted at any form of denaturalization, but rather at re-naturalization or at over-determination, in the sense, that oil gains meaning beyond human concerns.[45] However, oil is not only examined how it potentially epitomizes the principle of nature effected by media technologies, rather it is also perceived assuming the guise of media technologies and therefore a medium of deep time, as I will argue in the following.

Medium of Deep Time

During U. is pondering how the black masses uncovered by the oil spill can be regarded with significance and sense, he gradually begins to understand the principle of nature as it were in guise of a nonhuman media-nature conveyed by oil. By demonstrating forms of media in the black masses, the oil spill discloses the secret of geological earth as a medial one. In fish corpses merged in oil, U. recognizes ancient techniques such as ichthyomancy which uses livers, kidneys, brains, and hearts of fishes as fortune-telling media especially for weather or sickness. Furthermore, the oil spill has revealed modern media forms, such as archives and vinyl records which can be viewed, just like ichthyomancy, as forms of time-storing or time-binding media, which include according to Innis particularly clay, stone tablets, and oral sources, but also all other media emphasizing continuity and duration in general.

> Is not the flow of oil the flow of time itself: slowly but inevitably crawling, in a series of identical, repeating pulses, to some final shoreline? It embodies time, contains it: future, present, past. [...] How many epochs of pre-history are lodged in this Paleozoic ooze? What back-catalogues of Vendian biota, proto-Cnidarians and Ediacara, their amalgamated urolites and coprolites and burrows, their trace-fossils? [...] [E]ven the smallest drop—to attend to it faithfully, exhaustively—would be to let time expand

environment and media in the environment see Nicole Starosielski and Janet Walker, *Sustainable Media. Critical Approaches to Media and Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[44] Cf. Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind. A Contribution to a Psychoanalysis of Objective Knowledge* (Manchester: Clinamen Press Ltd, 2002), 240.

[45] Also Peters points out: "Nature has meaning, but not for us. [...] The hard task was to hear nature's mute music, which it might express in urea or stalactites as much as in sunsets." Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*, 379-380.

> beyond its Ordovician and Precambrian borders, till it overflowed all measurable limits. When oil spills, Earth opens its archives. That it takes the form of vinyl when it hardens is no chance occurrence; what those men in body-suits on beaches should be doing is not brushing it away but lowering a needle to its furrows and replaying it all, and amplifying it all the while to boot: up and up, exponentially, until from littoral to plain to mountain, land to sky and back to sea again, the destiny of every trilobite resounds.[46]

By discovering oil through media of perception and models of thinking, U. realizes that the oil spill sets free the history of various ancient living organisms, from bacteria to dinosaurs whose dead and decomposed bodies are nothing but the present medium of petro-modernity. These more than two million tons of oil that are pumped up every year from the spatial and temporal depth are the material culture, buried in the abysses of earth's archives. The "paleozoic ooze" was migrating through the rock layers until it accumulated after several million years beneath layers of sand, silt, and clay dozed often side by side with natural gas. Geological (hi-)story stored in oil could be able to tell from so many epochs of geological pre-history, if they would be recognized as viewable, readable, audible, or generally spoken comprehensible media. However, regardless of whether they are recognized, in a truly geo-historical sense oil could be perceived as *medium of deep time*, binding or storing ancient bodies of earthy critters over millions of years together in order to be freed today.

By taking periods of time over 2,500 million years into account, the geological concept of deep time gives a counter-proposal to restricted timescales such as years or decades which have mostly been occupied humanities in general and especially historical studies. Having precursors since the 18th century, the term 'deep time' emerged in the 1980's brought forward by the discovery of vertical strata of slate much older than the layers of granite lying above them. By positing earlier stages in the development of geological features shaped by cycles of sedimentation and erosion, the existence of deep time exhibits a great biological diversity and rises beyond all human measurements of time. Comparable with the dizzying Copernican shift, the concept of deep time throws both explanations for creation into question, a God-given as well as a man-made plan.

The conceptual implications of deep time play a crucial in the media(un)archaeological approach of Siegfried Zielinski. Loosely modeled after certain conceptual premises derived from geological and geo-historical works around the notion of deep time, Zielinski has suggested to explore the temporal layers and sediments of dead or hidden media behind the clean high-tech

[46] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 136.

surfaces of media devices. At one hand, there is the idea of a natural, linear, and progress oriented timescale of media-technological evolution embedded in the predominant narratives or imaginaries of technologies. Besides this normative storytelling which encourages the ideas of rationality and growing complexity of digital media, there is, on the other hand, a timescale of media that is yet to discover, named by Zielinski "deep-time of media."[47] Instead of insisting on a single timescale, the understanding of time which underlies the conception of deep time offers a variety of temporalities and timescales.

Since Zielinski's initial adoption, the notion of deep time has been reviewed less metaphorically and methodologically rather than literally by eco-material media scholars such as Gabrys, Parikka, and Shannon Mattern.[48] For instance, Parikka has used the temporal variety of media devices in order to explore, firstly, "materiality of media [which] starts much before media become media" and secondly "to discuss the media that are not anymore media."[49] The main purpose of these approaches dealing with different deep times is to decoupling narratives of media from progress, in order to "examine the more complex temporalities and materialities that accompany distinct media technologies,"[50] as Gabrys has put it. Inspired by these investigations on the material condition of media technologies which are maintaining Zielinski's accentuation of counter-temporal means of writing media histories, I suggest to regard "deep time" again from a different angle. The proposed perspective on oil as *storage medium of geological deep time* decouples narratives of media from their exclusive disposition as description methods or analytical tools used for processes concerning human societies, cultures and human temporalities. Instead of merely regarding oil as energy powering media, it could be argued that within the perspective on oil as deep time medium further terrains emerging which are hardly received attention until today due to the human-centered position that has been occupied media studies.[51] To put it in media-archaeological vocabulary, the consideration of oil as deep time medium can be related to one of the most deepest layers beneath the present high-tech media.

To return to the question of oil as time-binding or time-storing media in *Satin Island*, it can be observed that U.'s "Present-Tense-Anthropology" notices the simultaneous presence of different timescales. On the one hand, the present

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[47] Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*, 7.

[48] Cf. Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish. A Natural History of Electronics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013), 10; Shannon Mattern, "Deep Time of Media Infrastructure," in *Signal Traffic. Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, eds. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 94-114.

[49] Parikka, *Geology of Media*, 36.

[50] Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish*, 10.

[51] Originally the concept of media was linked to physical and elemental processes. Cf. Leo Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance. An Essay in Historical Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 3, no. 1, September 1942, 1-42.

time seems to be epitomized by progress and acceleration which are especially provided by space-binding media which are powered, of course, by energy supplier like oil, as I have already discussed in the first part of my paper. Whereas on the other side, geologic periods such as Ordovician and Precambrian are assigned to long-term temporalities and temporal longevity. These two timescales—the dense present and the deep past—which are named by Michel Serres "geological time" and "technical time," seems to face each other today. While the first addresses the long periods needed to amass reservoirs like oil, the latter means the moment in a matter of seconds that is sufficient to use these reservoirs up.[52] Considering, that oil consists of amalgamated plants and other organisms deposited over million of years, it have developed *itself to a storage of time*. To quote again from *Satin Island*: "The flow of oil embodies time, contains it: future, present, past."[53] Also Serres argues, oil and other long-term reservoirs "conserve, preserve what can re-serve. In fact, the reservoir or the reserve is a pocket of time."[54] In this sense, oil is a substance, but it is also time which can be re-served and re-used. If, from a paleontological standpoint, fossils are media of geo-history, which provide insight into prehistoric times, then, from a standpoint of imaginary media archaeology, oil can be considered as deep time medium, without content of semiotic meaning but with content of time—and therefore the key to altering timescales. Powering our space-binding media like the Internet, smartphones, and cars with fossil fuels results in a densification of our current time. To pursue this a bit, I might further speculate that the contemporary consumption and release of oil which lead to more time by replacing physical labor with machines and media devices, is exclusively due to the deep time of oil. The often described density of the present is indebted to the deep time that is stored in oil and released in energy. In this sense, talking about the matter of oil must be take into account relations to time and alterations of timescales by oil. As Serres stresses: "It is matter but it is only time."

In his interrogations on geological and technical time, Serres is moving forward from the first reservoirs of so-called raw materials to the contemporary databases of information. After arriving there, he notes "we have not entered the great beyond of essence. [...] Alas, it is not the marvelous transcendence that we expected: it is simply the end of a story. Meta-physics descends, losing its prefix." Behind all the reservoirs, behind the "cosmological, astronomic, energetic, entropic, and informational times" are only "subsuns," deposited heath and

[52] Cf. Serres, *The Parasite*, 171.

[53] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 136

[54] Serres, *The Parasite*, 171. Reza Negarestani has similarly wrote: "If narrative development, the unfolding of events in a narration, implies the progression of chronological time, for contemporary planetary formations, history and its progression is determined by the influx and outflow of petroleum." Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia. Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), 22.

energy. "All kinds of materialism, [...] join together with various energetics [...] all subcults of the sun."[55]

Sticky Media

In this final section, I return once more to *Satin Island* to examine how the two outlined levels of encounters with oil resonate with the figure of stickiness. I suggest "stickiness" as epitome of deep time in opposite to the prevailing metaphor of fluidity that are often used for contemporary considerations of media and their relation to time. My observations begin with the physical state of oil itself. Unlike solid matter, fluids are inherently mutable. Their essential principle is radical and continual change. As U. notices when he is monitoring oil: "No part of it, no molecule, would ever occupy the same spot in the overall formation twice."[56] But of course, oil is neither solid nor fully liquid, rather, it is a sticky medium. Its true quality reveals immediately, when it is begin to displace water:

> An oily sea, a sea whose body, while it still performs the functions and ceremonies of a sea—flowing, lapping, breaking into waves and the like—has become dark and ponderous, what we're in fact encountering is not a sea at all. It's oil that has ousted the sea, usurped it, packed it off into exile and assumed its position. It's a putsch, a *coup d'état*. [...] the usurper has kept all the infrastructure of the *ancien régime* in place, the rules and regulations governing its rhythms and activities. [57]

The core of oil's capacity is its viscosity, its capacity to adhere and stick. U.'s petro-imaginaries begin immediately when oil is transforming the liquid water into a viscous substance. The old principle of life, water—principal business of the ocean—becomes usurped by oil that follows slowly but ineluctably the paths left behind by the vertebrate organisms from their aquatic to terrestrial transition. "The worst-case scenario, the event that the authorities, environmentalists and the oil-company itself most feared, had come to pass: the oil had reached the mainland."[58] The viscosity of oil not only usurped the ocean and crossed the border between water and land, it also dissolves the line between the mental and the material by occupying and affecting U.'s mind.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre the stickiness is not only the physical property of matter, but also possesses an intellectual value. For Sartre the viscous is "neither material (and physical) nor psychic, but transcends the opposition of

[55] Serres, *The Parasite*, 171-174.
[56] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 44.
[57] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 130.
[58] McCarthy, *Satin Island*, 112.

the psychic and the physical, by revealing itself to us as the ontological expression of the entire world."[59] The unnamed state of aggregation between liquid and solid that is exposed by Sartre's "material imaginations"[60] is a special one which symbolizes for the philosopher
the merging of the subject and the world. The ambiguous character of the sticky is highlighted by Sartre's vibrating and vortex-like description, in which the sticky, slimy, or viscous matter (orig. in French *visqueux*) marks the moment of subversion from the level of human to the level of material reality—that of course also includes the human. The slimy, he writes,

> appears as already the out-line of a fusion of the world with myself. What it teaches me about the world, that it is like a leech sucking me [...] The slimy is compressible. It gives us at first the impression that it is a being which can be possessed. Doubly so: its sliminess, its adherence to itself prevent it from escaping [...] The slimy is docile. Only at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me. Here appears its essential character: its softness is leech-like. If an object which I hold in my hands is solid, I can let go when I please; its inertia symbolizes for me my total power. [61]

For Sartre, the power of possession assured by both solid and liquid matter is totally inverted by the sliminess. Consequently, it marks a mode of existence, a moment of transition from clear allocations and assignments to a new order marked by tilting moments. In this regard, material reality has, according to Sartre, two different meanings. The first is the *world-for-us* or the conscious being-for-itself (*pour-soi*), which is presented by the solid and fluid state of aggregation and correspond to the figure of the possessor. The second meaning of the material world is the *world-in-itself* or the unconscious being-in-itself (*en-soi*) expressed in the figure of the slime or sticky. Despite the interpretive openness of Sartre's considerations about the slime, I would like to underscore the moment of deception that appears in Sartre's description as well as in McCarthy's statements on oil: at the first and distant glance, the sticky matter could easily mistaken for fluid matter. The crucial point is that stickiness marks inherently a space of re-volution or subversion from deception to perception.

From a media archaeological standpoint that are looking for counter-narrations, the figure of stickiness could be perceived as the exact opposite to the

[59] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 606.

[60] The approach of imaginary media archaeology shows some resemblances to the conception of "material imagination" proposed originally by Gaston Bachelard. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (New York: Citadel Press, 1965), 600-604.

[61] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 606, 608-609.

metaphors of fluidity and liquidity—and therefore as the opposite of the presumably most prevailing picture of the present times since the advent of digital media technologies and the Internet. "Flows are not just one element of the social organization: they are the expression of processes dominating our economic, political, and symbolic life."[62] Similar to Manuel Castells' assumption quoted here, several other sociologist like Richard Sennett or Zymunt Bauman have scrutinized, especially in the 1990's, the fluid state of aggregation as key marker and time-diagnostic model of post–World War II capitalism.[63] The arrival and progress of modernity that Bauman calls "liquid modernity" can be undoubtedly traced using many and different markers, but one of the crucial attribute of modernity is the altered relationship between space and time, intrinsically depended on time-binding or rather space-binding media. Moreover, it is striking that digital media technologies are described as having a "fluid ontology," as for example Lev Manovich has remarked,[64] or expressed most exactly by the key term 'flow,' as Sandra Braman has discussed.[65] Without going here into detail, it could be argued that these positions share the perspective of a progressing development went from traditional distribution media (e.g. television, radio, newspaper), that are mostly perceived as "solid," to huge systems of algorithm-based "liquid" networks. The metaphors of fluidity and liquidity—which can be still considered as today's predominant narratives and imaginaries of media—reinforce the prevailing picture of immateriality and therefore undermines the productive as well as destructive materiality of media infrastructures always attached to ecological environments.[66] In this regard, the accentuation of stickiness highlights the fact that medial liquefaction is no dematerialization. By insisting on the stickiness as third figure between solidity and fluidity, I emphasis the material ties between media technologies and the ecological environment through physical-material tangles, including, of course, electricity.[67] Moreover, the value provided by the figure of stickiness lies in telling counter-narrations of predominant media histories. According to Sartre, stickiness marks a space from which one can not tell about humans as isolated entities and their outside material reality which is merely conveyed by media technologies, while staying untouched by them. In this regard, media

[62] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 442.

[63] Cf. Richard Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 13; Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

[64] Cf. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 186.

[65] Cf. Sarah Braman, "Flow," in *Digital Keywords. A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture*, ed. Benjamin Peters (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 118-131.

[66] Cf. Thomas Sutherland, "Liquid Network Sand the Metaphysics of Flux. Ontologies of Flow in an Age of Speed and Mobility," *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 5, no. 30, 2013, 3-23.

[67] It is interesting that until the beginning of 20th century the pre-scientific spirit comprehended electricity itself as sticky and adherent glue. Cf. Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, 109-110.

technologies can be satisfactorily described neither in terms of solidity (such as sender and receiver), nor in terms of liquidity (such as well-functioning networks)—latter is eventually coined by concerns about the loss of the durability and stability promised by the solid state of aggregation.

To return to the motif of subversion, which is, according to Sartre, expressed by the figure of stickiness, it could be argued, that the *liquid modernity* is technically subverted into the *viscous modernity*—if we still can call the present time "modern."[68] When liquid modernity stands in its core for a linear development—induced by certain media technologies—from solid things (e.g. values, identities, social and working relations as well a media devices themselves) to processes of liquidation, uncertainty, acceleration, and dissemination of and by media technologies, then *viscous modernity* proposes a certain different picture. It is an idea that crystallizes the intimate entanglement between human and matter and between ecologies and cultures emerging alongside with media technologies. Instead of considering just free floating processes and seamlessly transmitted messages, the marker of viscosity emphasizes sticky relations and sticky media.[69] Surely, oil can be considered as such a sticky medium that inherently possess the property of radically subversion or usurpation. Besides the oily usurper in *Satin Island*, there are numerous examples of sticky petro-imaginaries: The protagonist in Fritz Leiber's short story entitled *Black Gondolier* wonders, if it is possible, "that man hadn't discovered oil, but that oil had found man?"[70] Against the theoretical and political backdrop of climate change Angela Last has raised the question: "When it comes to our [...] dependency on these energy sources, scientists and social scientists have started to re-examine preconceived notions of cause and effect: are fossil fuels shaping human society and not the other way round?"[71] Even though the ways of interpreting the moments of sticky reversal are numerous, media can surely be considered in a metaphorical way as an apparent example of this effect. As Elisabeth von Samsonow has put it: "Therefore, it appears completely reasonable to conclude, that these are the classical characteristics of a medium, to be able to turn the positions, so that not human has the medium, but

[68] For further—and especially feminist—remarks of stickiness or viciousness as time-diagnostic figure see Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity. Witnessing Katerina," in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 188-213.

[69] There are a lot more sticky media to discover, also in traditional media history. The viscous and plastic medium of wax is a secret protagonist of the philosophy from René Descartes to Sigmund Freud. As well as Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin have complained about letters and typewriters, that became sticky. Cf. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone. Film. Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999), 206-208.

[70] Fritz Leiber, *The Black Gondolier & Other Stories* (New York: Open Road Media, 2000), 15. Cf. Eugene Thacker, "Black Infinity. Or, Oil Discovers Humans."

[71] Angela Last, "Super-natural futures: One possible dialogue between Afrofuturism and the Anthropocene," 2013; https://mutablematter.wordpress.com/2013/08/13/super-natural-futures-one-possible-dialogue-between-afrofuturism-and-the-anthropocene/.

the medium has human."[72] The figure of stickiness takes into consideration the possibility of much deeper and denser media technologies such as geo-historical media alongside the understanding of mediation of information for humans: nowadays the liquid media have changed into sticky media.

"Stickiness", on the one hand, can be understood as figure for the unquestionable profound conjunctions between the cultures of media technology and the realm of minerals, crystals, ores, metals, fossil fuels as well as ecological habitats like oceans. The Anthropocene—and other narratives of the determining agency addressed in projects of renamings like Capitalocene, Mediocene, Chthulucene, or Technoscene—can be interpreted as proposals for an alternative telling of (his)stories between human(s), culture(s), media and the fields of materials, ecologies, elements, and animals. Therefore, on the other hand, I suggest "sticky media" as an invitation to encounter these overlappings in more speculative and imaginary ways then catastrophic scenarios and cybernetics phantasies. In opposition to Sartre's haptic encounter with the stickiness through materials like honey or tar, the stickiness in our troubled times requires imaginary or speculative tools to become perceptible. [73]

Conclusion

Although, we stick on oil or rather oil sticks on us, we are barely aware of it as such. Understood as a tool for examine narrations of media as well as imaginations of media, media archaeology provides one route to consider these material entanglement as neglected medial processes. By bringing oil together with media theoretical concepts such as McLuhan's and Innis' considerations about media and raw materials, Zielinski's concept of deep time and the figure of the viscosity and liquidity, I understand my paper as an expression of the claim to extend the conceptual metaphors of "archaeology," "ecology," and "geology" in order to uncover the material past and present of media devices. As for example Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller have argued: "[A]n archaeological approach could be modified to include the ecology story of our technological past that is empirically, conceptually, and productively at odds with conventional media history."[74]

Moreover, I have media-archaeologically excavated some of the various deep layers leading into nonhuman temporalities and materialities. Of course, there are neither solely human timescales, but technological mediated timescales,

[72] Elisabeth von Samsonow, "Die Wiederkehr des Totemismus. Die Bedeutung des Tierwerdens für die zeitgenössische Medientheorie," in *Verwandlungen*, ed. Aleida Assmann (Munich: Fink, 2006), 381-400, 396. (My translations)

[73] In current debates about the uncertainty of futures (of media technologies), the value of imagination, fabulation and speculation is increasingly acknowledged. See for example Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* or Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys, "Climate Change and the Imagination," *Wires Climate Change*, vol. 2, no. 4, July/August 2011, 516-534.

[74] Maxwell and Miller, "Greening Media Studies," 91.

nor purely cultural media devices, but rather "an ensemble of the natural and the artificial."[75] And yet contemporary media culture that is substantially indebted to oil has been invited us to think of media as material, temporal, and natural alongside human concerns but not independent from them. If nature is not opposite to technology and culture, and if minerals and fossil fuels are part of (media) culture, the contrary question could be asked, namely, if culture has also be regarded as something inherently of nature. The dizzying inversion which manifests in oil understood as a sticky medium can be finally expressed with Vicki Kirby: „what if media was really Nature all along"?[76]

[75] Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds*, 9.

[76] Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies. Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 75.

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