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No Thing is Not a Medium: Quick Thoughts on the Media Order of Things

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Everybody tries to be the medium.

—Peter Sloterdijk

A thing is a hole in a thing it is not.

—Carl Andre

Let me begin with the question that John Durham Peters chose as the title of his astute contribution to the last issue of this journal, “What is not a medium?”¹ Raised in its context, this question suggests *prima facie* that everything could be (considered as) a medium, that media, as a word or a concept, can be and is being used to refer to so large a variety of objects or phenomena that even the idea of “family resemblances” would fail to account for.² Indeed, when “everybody,” as Peter Sloterdijk observes, “tries to be the medium,” when transmitters themselves are seen as messages awash in messages, most of which come from where one knows not, and moreover, when all messages so circulate and saturate the world as to make it one-dimensional, we begin to see everything around us as media as well.³ More than that, not only do we see the world as one of media because we see them at every turn, but we also see media as a leviathan of command and control that makes and remakes the world in its own image. In any event, when writings about fog, clouds, fire, perfumes, salt waters, soap bubbles, insects, squids, homing pigeons, travelogues, maps, weather, and viruses are read as rightful texts in media studies, and when air conditioning, the Golden Record, walls, staircases, cave paintings, the Kilburn gun camera, typewriters, the Mars Rover, cryptocurrency, stock markets, cities, and beyond—indeed, anything from atoms to zebra stripes—are objects that have kept and should keep scholars of media studies

¹ John Durham Peters, “What is Not a Medium?,” *communication +1* 9, no. 1 (2022): Article 4, <https://doi.org/10.7275/epdv-p307>.

² Made popular by Ludwig Wittgenstein through his book *Philosophical Investigations*, the idea of “family resemblance” argues that things thought to be related to or resemble one another may in fact be connected by a series of overlapping similarities, where no one common feature can be found. Just as games, to use Wittgenstein’s example, refer to diverse activities that have no essential trait in common, media, as the term is used now, captures too wide a variety of objects and phenomena to be defined essentially. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953).

³ Peter Sloterdijk, *Selected Exaggerations: Conversations and Interviews, 1993-2012*, ed. Bernard Klein, trans. Karen Margolis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 2 ff.

busy, it is hard to imagine something that does not qualify as a medium.⁴ What is *not* a medium then? Hardly anything. The “not” in the question points to few things that are not what is being asked. Anything, it seems, could be a medium, so long as one is prepared to name it as such.

I

Media could be anything. Given reasons and under favorable circumstances, a thing, anything, can become the medium we take it to be. To be media is to (have) become the media that they currently are, which is to say, they may un-become and stop being considered or called media at a later moment and in other places. Media and things, though different entities in their own right, are interchangeable: one may (or may not) turn into another, depending on changes in space and time. Like everything that becomes or undergoes transformations, media are historical through and through, appearing and disappearing in the flow of things, in which they live a life not entirely of their own making. Referentially contingent, that is, lacking essential traits for being strictly historical, media are things hatched as such by the force of conditions that they may also transform in turn. Things are many, old and new, useful or not, but only some of them become what we call media—only to unbecome or become again, predictably or not. Stories of this becoming are what some of us will be happy to call media archaeologies.

To be is to be something. To be something, whatever it is, is to be among things. A thing *is* and *is* what it is only to the extent that it exists with other things, that there are things *about* it, near or remote. Limited inevitably by those around it, a thing is either *this* thing or *that* thing. It is, we could say, a certain something among things, something that in principle could be anything. To speak of any one thing, therefore, is to speak of numerous things—not only of things *hic et nunc*, but also of those from the past or far away—against which the thing in question may stand out as itself and without which it, as just intimated, would not be able to achieve its presence, its individuality, its identity, and its persistence. Things are because other things are; they exist because they coexist. Isolation, aloneness, or any condition of deprivation describe but a relation one thing has with others, not the absence of things.

⁴ Readers of this journal no doubt know (and might have read) the many popular titles of late in media studies I have in mind. For the case of bubbles as media, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Spheres Volume I: Microspherology (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext[e], 2011). In the beginning of the book, he discusses the soap bubbles blown to the air by a child, remarking that “For its creator, the soap bubble thus becomes the *medium* of a surprising soul expansion.” *Bubbles*, 16 (emphasis mine).

Invariably, a thing, we could say, is in each instance an “and so on,” which, as the principle goes, is also “a ‘not so on,’ and ‘not and,’ and an ‘other than thus.’”⁵

A thing is always one of things. Res is always *in medias res*. This may very well be what Pythagoras (Is it Parmenides, Zeno, or Lucretius, or someone else?) has in mind when he says “between any two, there is a third.” Pythagoras was a media theorist long before the term media was on philosophers’ lips. In any case, inasmuch as there are things, there is necessarily something—a medium, a third—that lies between any two. Media are everywhere because things are everywhere, and since things are everywhere, media are everywhere as well. Indeed, just as the presence of media implies the existence of multiple things, the multiplicity of things entails that media be there in multiplicity. To exist, we could say, is to mediate. Mediation is coextensive with existence, as each and every thing lies between any other two and stands in each instance as a *factum* attesting the being-there of all others. Things make the world as it persists, and since everything is a medium, the world is one of enduring mediation. It is, we could say, an unremitting medium of media.

Recall the original meaning of “thing.” A thing is that which gathers; it is a meeting of things, an assembly as much as a crossing of what comes or belongs together. A thing things, as Martin Heidegger claims famously.⁶ In thinging, one thing leads to another and on, and, wending this way, makes both seen and seen to go together. Just like the cross bringing heaven and earth, mortals and divines into each other’s neighborhood, a thing brings other like or unlike things into distant nearness, thus opening the world, a ready dwelling for every being-in-the-world, in which humans, always and already being there, find themselves as the possibility of truth and illumination in situ. In this world, everything is related to everything else in that, despite their differences in whatever respect, they are nonetheless the “same,” and they are the same in the sense that they belong or go together (*be-longen*). Going or belonging together, they form one veritable whole in which each thing is a part, and each part is a medium for other parts and is, for this reason, also a medium among media. Indeed, if we could have a relationship with the world, it is because there are things that place us among things, that keep this relationship alive, and that, bearing for us the weight they hold, “link us to our losses,” as Philip Larkin describes it.⁷ In

⁵ Werner Hamacher, *Minima Philologica*, trans. Catharine Diehl and Jason Grove (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 39.

⁶ “The thing things. In thinging it stays the earth and sky, divinities and mortals.” Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2001), 175.

⁷ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 106.

this world, perhaps in every possible world as well, everything is a medium—a third between any two.

II

In a thing is contained all the things there are, each of which lies between two others and, being the passage from one to the other, mediates all. Seen in this way, anything that exists can be said to come and to arrive at its place, not so much from an elsewhere unknown, but through its neighboring others, its media, a third between two. Nestled in things in this way, that is, mediating and mediated at the same time, one thing, we could also say, is both itself and the others it is there to fulfill. It is literally the hard-working member of a whole, a part that links all parts by lighting each other up and thus renders the whole whole. It is a hole in a whole, so to speak—a void, a point of in-completion, or an instance of dis-appointment—that makes it possible for a part to complete or fulfill the whole and, in so doing, accomplishes itself as a member of a totality as well. “A thing,” as Carl Andre puts it, “is a hole in a thing it is not.”⁸ A thing, in other words, is at once both itself and another thing that cuts through it, each being a pathway through which parts of a whole commute and by virtue of which one part comes to shine and may appear distinct and distinguishable from its neighbors precisely because it is inseparable from them. Just as a whole needs to have a hole in it to be a whole, a thing can keep itself as such only by permitting others to travel through the passage it is.⁹ Everything then “holds together on earth and in the air, and preserves the void, is preserved in the void by preserving itself.”¹⁰ If there is a relation between us and the world, it is, as remarked earlier, because things in the world make the world, because these things are there to keep that relation alive. In this world, each

⁸ Carl Andre, quoted in Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 3.

⁹ For a discussion on how a whole depends on an internal lack for its possibility of closure, namely, its coherence, see Briankle G. Chang, “Deleuze, Monet, and Being Repetitive,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 41 (Winter 1999): 184–217, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354525>.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. High Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 165.

thing is a medium for another thing, which goes to yet another, and so on. In this world, perhaps in every possible world as well, everything is a medium.¹¹

There are things, or there is nothing. However, since the idea of nothing presupposes the prior presence of things, that is, since nothingness, predicated as it is on negating preexisting entities, is secondary to and derivative from existence, things' existence is absolute, unconditional, that is, prior to human beginning. Simply put, they are always and already there, if not actually within reach or in view. More than that, they are there to *share* the world, dividing it while gathering themselves to form a coherent totality that is one of unity in multiplicity. Thus appears the world as plural as it is diverse. *E Pluribus Unum*, as we say. In this world, one is many, and many are one. In this world, each and every thing, each this or every that, is "like" every other. "This is like that," as we often say.¹² In saying this, we mean two things: first, any two objects, this and that, are alike in this or that respect, which is to say, this and that are unlike in other respects; second, and on this basis, any this and any that are both like and unlike and, beneath their apparent opposition, likeness and unlikeness are both one and the other at the same time. Like and unlike at the same time, things out there suit (*likjan*) one another; they belong or go together, as said above.

A thing is always one of multiple like and unlike things. Individually or in combination, they fill our eyes and spill over into our field of vision. Different in kind or in degree, things relate or refer to one another with undiminishing force. Like or unlike, they are being(s) *in common*. "What something is, something is like," as Paul North remarks.¹³ A rabbit is (like) a duck. A lotus is (like) a monk. And winds (are) like their colors. One thing goes into and becomes another. This is like that, and that this too, and so on and on.

The world is (a) whole, even if divisible or divided. In this whole, as in other like wholes, everything is a relay to others and is therefore a relay of relays. These

¹¹ Consider, for heuristic purposes, a passage from Hegel's *Science of Logic*, one of the most systematic writings in philosophy: "There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and *mediation*." Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, ed. Hywel David Lewis, trans. Arnold V. Miller (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1991), 68 (emphasis mine). Mediation in Hegel, as in others as well, is a tertiary affair, despite the fact that consciousness, being a medium for itself, remains singular from beginning to end.

¹² The discussion in this paragraph draws on my review of Paul North, *Bizarre-Privileged Items in the Universe: The Logic of Likeness* (New York: Zone Books, 2021), in the *Hong Kong Review of Books*. Briankle G. Chang, review of *Bizarre-Privileged Items in the Universe: The Logic of Likeness*, by Paul North, *Hong Kong Review of Books*, June 23, 2021, <https://hkrbooks.com/2021/06/23/bizarre-privileged-items-in-the-universe/>.

¹³ North, *Bizarre-Privileged Items in the Universe*, 135.

relays make the world and make it whole. In it, all things conspire; they communicate across the aether—breathing as one, via *sympathia*. Here we see what might be called the “media logic of the world,” a logic of one *and* many, but also of many as one, that is, of innumerable things ex-(s)isting in unity. Here we can also see the principle of communication, of like things coming and staying together, but also of unlike things swarming as one through affinity or contagion. Moreover, this explains why we find ourselves in the world the way it is, a world full of things, like or unlike, a world in which we, too, exist as things to one another. This world is the one into which we are thrown, provided we recognize, as Heidegger reminds us, that being thrown here means being thrown into things without our consent and finding ourselves in the midst of things without the possibility of escape and only after the fact, all in accord with the deep structure of care (*Sorge*).¹⁴ We *are* only inasmuch as we are in medias res. Put simply, it is not that we must learn to live with things; rather, it is that we would cease to exist in their absence.

Il y a; es gibt; there is. This is the fact before all facts. There is a world; the world is there (*da*). It gives and it is given. This world is given to us, and it is the best of all possible ones. It is the best world not because it is flawless or perfect, not because it is designed and unfolds according to our wish, inclination, or disposition, but because it is optimally rich in variety and reflects the highest degree of complexity proper to the rational order of being worthy of creation ex nihilo. With reason, but not knowing exactly why, we find ourselves in this world and find in it the very possibility of happiness and freedom. This world is our paradise—a round garden—wherein all the things, like or unlike, exist in universal harmony, and we, as becoming of any optimist, live ek-statically with all the things around by communing with all of them in happy and lasting terms.¹⁵ In this garden, which is full of like and unlike gardens, things breathe and vibrate as one, as said above. They communicate at a distance, and the world, and we too, are all the better for it.

What is a medium, a third between any two? Or, put in another way, what is not a medium? Looking around while strolling with a friend in the countryside, T. S. Eliot wonders, “Who is the third who always walks beside you?” After counting, he says to his companion, “[T]here are only you and I together. / But when I look ahead up the white road, / There is always another one walking beside you ... / —But who is

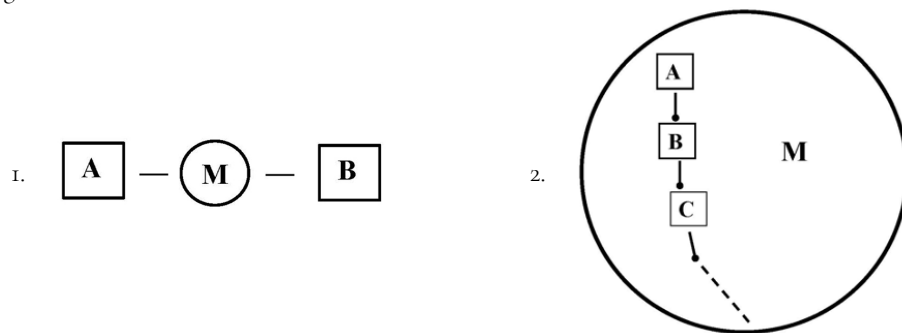
¹⁴ This is one of basic concepts of the “existential analytic” developed by Martin Heidegger in his attempt to address the “question of Being”; see his *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962).

¹⁵ On the idea of paradise, see Brian G. Chang, “Seeing Goddess in Typhoons,” *differences* 29, no. 3 (2018): 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-7266438>.

that on the other side of you?" he asks again.¹⁶ There is always someone beside(s) us, wherever we go. We do not know who or what he is, but there is always a third walking beside us. Someone is always there as long as we are here. He walks with and among us, between any two. A medium is that which stands between two. Ergo, everything is a medium, ourselves too. Or, as I say, no thing is not a medium.¹⁷

¹⁶ Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1934), 43.

¹⁷ Based on this discussion, we can visualize medium in two ways as follows, where A, B, and C = things and M = medium:



1 diagrams the process of communication as transmission across discrete moments, whereas 2 represents medium as an encompassing container, within which members of a set commute and communicate.

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