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## Media, Mediation, Mediality

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What are media? What do they do? Are these two questions the same? And is the process we have in mind in asking them that of mediation or of mediality?

In debating the issue, we came to realize that we are also dealing here with a translation problem. When a German and an Israeli speak in English about media, mediation, and mediality, it is only natural, given the different cultural and academic contexts, that there will be differences in understanding. Whereas in German the difference between mediation as *Vermittlung* and mediality as *Medialität* is quite clear, this hardly is the case in English. The Anglo media discourse often uses mediation and mediality interchangeably, and largely as related to the Aristotelian *metaxy*, a third that is in-between or *in medio*: [a]–[M]–[b]. But in German this refers to *Vermittlung*: the mediator (*der Vermittler*) by virtue of being in the middle mediates (*vermittelt*) something to be mediated (*das Vermittelte*). Importantly, the task of the mediator is tantamount to its ability to dissolve in the process, to bring things together while receding to the background.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, media designate the conditions for mediation so as to put the relata in relation in the first place. Conversely, *Medialität* refers to the specific structure of a specific medium, i.e., its aesthetic obstinacies, technical operations, or semiotic significations. Thus, in English, discussion on *Medialität* actually takes place under “mediation,” which in German is normally translated as *Vermittlung*. However, at stake is more than conceptual inconsistencies. The translingual comparison suggests something essential to the understating of media.

Indeed, when attempting to dig out the conceptual assumptions underlying mediation and mediality, we might have hit Pandora's box of media studies. First comes out the Hegelian *Geist*, the mediation by which oppositions collide and combine through the intervention of a third. This process involves rising up to a higher order while the mediation undertaken thereby dissolves in the process. The mediating logic of Hegelian dialectics depends for its success on incorporating and transcending the elements to be mediated. In this sense, the Hegelian philosophy of history can be seen as a process of mediation at the end of which comes the end of history. Such a progressive process would also apply to a certain account of the history

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<sup>1</sup> The medium in the middle allowing for a mediation of something while receding itself, this appearing while disappearing, has been stated already by Aristotle and has since been taken up by the Stoics in their aesthetics of late antiquity, philosophers working on optics in the Middle Ages, natural philosophers, classical physicists, Herder in his philosophy of language, and Hegel in his aesthetics. With McLuhan, Kittler, and other media theorists, this dialectic has become the starting point of recent media theory. See Aristotle, *De Anima, or about the Soul*, trans. Glen Coughlin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2022), 418b-419b; Dieter Mersch, *Medientheorien zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2006), 18-27.

of media and of understanding media. From the box comes another presence: the Aristotelian *metaxy*, the in-between, which was translated by Thomas Aquinas into Latin as *medium*.<sup>2</sup> This translation led to a tradition taken up by optics in the Middle Ages, stretching all the way through natural philosophy, physics, romanticism, and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Here the medium as a material entity mediates at the expense of the perception of the medium itself. The medium neutralizes and dematerializes itself, giving the illusion of immediacy and immateriality through mediation. Apparently, it is exactly this inherent transparency of the medium, its diaphanous quality—crucial to the aesthetic process it enables—that was neglected (in fact taken advantage of) in order for the mediating process to succeed. Transparency is used as functional means to an operative end. This conception of medium as attending to external forces became apparent with the discovery of invisible forces like electricity, magnetism, and gravity in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, impregnating the medium with magical, occult, or esoteric powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (tele-phone, television, tele-pathology). The primary modality of a medium thus understood is transmission, be it a message, representation, social or technical apparatus of which it is only a part (from here to there, from the dead to the living, from the past to the present). A medium is dependent on an outside, allowing for heteronomy to pass through it. It is that which trans-mits (*über-trägt*), trans-lates (*über-setzt*), trans-poses (*über-führt*), or even trans-substantiates (*um-wandelt*). The Latin *trans*, the Greek *meta*, and the German *über* indicate not only a movement of crossing (through and across) but also of ascending (over and beyond). This is a point that is not noted enough: every instance of transfer carries with it a moment of transcendence. With the connecting force there is also a leap over an abyss, from one state of matter to another: sound waves transform into grooves, light waves etch the celluloid, ink turns into words, electric pulses into data.

Apparently, there is no consensus about the nature of media, whether understood as mass media or more elaborately as language, image, infrastructure, or some form of hybrid entities like quasi-objects. And even its relation or difference to the symbol, imagination, representation, or thing remains an issue when the medium is taken as an intermediary between the symbolized and the symbol, between imagination and representation, and so on. What we want to suggest here is differentiating between two modalities of approach to media: between understanding media—which might typically fall under the category of media theory—and questioning media, that is, questioning the very logic by which media are theorized—

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima, or about the Soul* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2022), 418b; Thomas Aquinas, *Sentencia libri ›De anima‹* (Rome: Commissio Leonina [et al.], 1984), 131-32.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Hoffmann, *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2002).

a modality we propose to consider as media philosophy. While the Ancient Greek *theoria* indicates a distancing from the world by looking at it, leading to objectification, science, technology, and apparatus, a media philosophy attempts to opt out of this tendency to objectify. We therefore suggest that staying with the question of how to approach media—indeed insisting on it—is what distinguishes media philosophy from media theory. This will necessarily have implications for how to address the distinction between mediation and mediality.

In rethinking mediation, we find not only horizontal connection between previously separate domains, but also vertical connection with elements or forces presiding above or below. In German idealist philosophy, to mediate means reconciliation between God and Man, Spirit and World, Idea and Object, Subject and Object. As said, for Hegel, *Vermittlung* (mediation) describes a climactic process by which every step needs to be mediated with the next higher order.<sup>4</sup> Here we find built-in teleological verticality within mediation, aiming at the constitution of consciousness and reason up to an absolute knowledge by way of reconciliation. Marx famously turned Hegel on his head while nevertheless retaining the process of *Vermittlung*, but redefining it materialistically to include power, technology, and labor. Although reversed, Marxist mediation is no less vertical and teleological than the Hegelian: if the latter strives upwards, the former goes downwards to the infrastructure and the underlying conditions.

Another version of downwards-going verticality is that of Innis and McLuhan.<sup>5</sup> Here media are understood as the conditions for human experience, knowledge, and social relations. Media dematerialize themselves through their operation, which is necessarily materially rooted. In the 1980s, discussions on the “materialities of communication”<sup>6</sup> picked up from this point, shifting it more radically towards what Friedrich Kittler called “technological a priori.”<sup>7</sup> Operations, formal algorithms, and hardware make up the foundations of thinking (regardless of its being human or not). This approach can be traced back not only to McLuhan but also to

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<sup>4</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 659.

<sup>5</sup> Harold A. Innis, *Empire & Communications*, ed. David Godfrey (Victoria, BC: Press Porcépic, 1986); Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, ed. W. Terence Gordon (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Karl Ludwig Pfeiffer, ed., *Materialities of Communication*, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 117.

Foucauldian discourse analysis,<sup>8</sup> which itself traces back to Heidegger's fundamental ontology, specifically the modality of "readiness-to-hand" or "handiness" (*Zuhandenheit*),<sup>9</sup> and possibly even further back to Nietzsche (who famously stated in a letter to his assistant: "Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts."<sup>10</sup>). On the basis of this technical conditioning, Kittler provides his triad of mediation—transmission, processing, and storage—which characterizes much of the thinking today in media theory. Such a generic understanding of media knows no outside of media. According to Kittler, history is technologically driven—that is, the result of technological mediation—and in this respect, his stance is not as far from Hegel's as he would make us believe. But if everything comes from media, how is it that media came to exist in the first place? What happened to Aristotle's notion of *metaxy*? It seems that techniques and technology took over its aesthetic dimension.

The implicit verticality of mediation, whether idealistic or materialistic, ascending or descending, calls for further unpacking. As is evident from our lost-in-translation incident, there is another way to approach mediation: that of *mediality*. Like mediation, mediality is in between, in the middle, and therefore takes place where the etymology of medium indicates. Also, like mediation, it is a relational concept and a conditioning factor. But there are also fundamental differences: insofar as it indicates what is transpiring profoundly in the in-between, mediality entails rejecting any media a priori, any predetermined middle. If mediality is neither trans-substantial nor reconciliatory nor a priori, what is it left with? Perhaps with the question itself: for mediality problematizes the very interplay between *relata* and their relation, their mutual formative influence, and their recursiveness. At issue are the multiple conditioning factors, apparatuses, practices, and social integration that come together to constitute the in-between. In other words, the mutual generative constitution of something else, a third, a hybrid, through the process of mediation. Concepts like entanglement, loose or tight coupling, and plasticity all articulate forms of mediality in and through different media.

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> In their translation of *Being and Time* from 1962, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson coin the term "readiness-to-hand," while a recent translation by Joan Stambaugh translates *Zuhandenheit* as "handiness." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 98; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 65.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 210; Friedrich Nietzsche, "Brief an Peter Gast, Feb. 1882," in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Bd. III.1*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 172.

Mediality in this sense relates to the flat ontology of the mutual emergence of medial processes, relations and relata, together with their reciprocal effects. If mediality expresses local formations that, while having their root in material reality, are nevertheless self-determining, then the following questions arise: How to describe mediality and its relation to media once we accede there is no predetermined epistemological model for such an analysis to begin with? We thus enter a state of suspension, for the distinction between mediation (understood as *Vermittlung*) and mediality (understood as *Medialität*) we are trying to sketch here is not merely terminological. It entails a gestalt shift between two different modes of approaching media. Media theory that subscribes to media a priori of various strands (media archeology, cultural techniques, media genealogy), runs the risk of producing the concepts of analysis in terms of the media analyzed, the triad of storage, processing, and transmission being a paradigmatic case. Like the quantum physicist, the media scholar gets different results depending on the instruments at work. An alternative media theory would advocate for intermediality whereby one medium is approached through another in order to gain insight into its logic and effects. While this allows for a horizontal relation between one medium and another, with a reciprocal reflection, it is still limited in its purview because the observed medium is necessarily conditioned by the observing medium. What remains is circular regress. If there is justification for a media philosophy, it is to be found here: rather than opting for a theoretical trajectory of an *adaequatio intellectus et rei*, media philosophy stays with the question of mediation and mediality and insists on re-invoking it. Thinking in this sense does not end up in appropriating reality, but in performing the doing and undoing of appropriation—with no other end than performativity itself.

An important perspective to consider here is Dieter Mersch's negative media theory. According to Mersch, the withdrawal of the medium, that it becomes invisible through its operation, is true not only for the process of mediation but also for mediality.<sup>11</sup> This point would probably also be acceptable to media philosopher Sybille Krämer, yet the two thinkers differ in the consequences they draw from this observation. While Krämer uses mediality to elucidate the messenger model insofar as it mediates what exists outside the process of transmission, for Mersch, this outside is the starting point to think mediality in the first place, which has consequences not only for whatever mediality might mean but also for how to do media philosophy. For Mersch, this withdrawal marks an originary difference within the medium, which leads to the suspension of mediation as transmission and suggests instead a performative stance: here and now something takes place that was not before. And

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<sup>11</sup> Dieter Mersch, "Tertium Datur: Introduction to a Negative Media Theory," *matrizes* 7, no. 1 (January/June 2013): 218.

the effects of this process may potentially also affect the medium itself. This is radical performativity: it is about singular, unrepeatably instantiations, setting in motion chains of events. What is emphasized here is “dia-mediality”: the horizontal *dia* (across and through) instead of the *trans* and *meta* (over and beyond).<sup>12</sup> It is about responsiveness rather than intentionality, attending to irrevocable alterity. That which is typically neglected, forgotten, put aside, or exploited, is put front and center—while still escaping direct grasp. Any knowledge about mediality, circuitous as it necessarily is, only takes place within the medium itself, in its operations and practices. Insisting on tensions, paradoxes, and incongruences is not a capricious whim, but a fundamental epistemological concern. A different approach to media is at work here, one that is at odds with the messenger model and its transmission function.<sup>13</sup>

Although we posit mediation and mediality in opposition for the sake of the argument, the two modalities are in fact intertwined. Mediality is implicit in mediation while remaining largely unrecognized, latent, or made invisible by the wonders of technical functionality. Yet mediation is nevertheless needed in every discourse on mediality, including the one attempted at this very moment: something must work, function, and operate in order for the process to be perceivable and recognizable. Absolute negativity is impossible while absolute functionality is frightening.

If there is a hypothesis that we intend to venture here, it’s this: media theory and media philosophy not only follow different paths, but the latter also leads to resistance against the exploitation of media and mediation by means of technological operations. Media philosophy itself is a performative act, an intervention—and as such, de-ontologizes both media and media theory.

A common piece of wisdom in media studies is that media become visible when they malfunction, thereupon making their operation evident precisely by virtue of failing to operate. But instead of taking dysfunctionality as the final word in attempting to understand media, we might pose yet again the question of mediality, yet in a way that resists setting an opposition between “meta-mediality” and “dia-mediality.” While transmission seems to obliterate alterity through its operational processes, traces of incompleteness nevertheless persist. Every act of transmission is a feat against various disruptions along its trajectory. Every act of transmission therefore involves a leap from one state of matter to the other, a media sublimation as it were, which is simultaneously an accomplishment of mediation and a

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<sup>12</sup> Dieter Mersch, “Meta/dia two different approaches to the medial,” *Cultural Studies* 30, no. 4 (2016): 665.

<sup>13</sup> Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

relinquishment of mediality. Verticality is achieved at the expense of horizontality, which demands its own verticality—that is, its own mediation—in order to be approached as such. Deference and suspension require a call for resumption; their announcement depends on mediation, in fact, parasitizes on it.

Neither functionality nor dysfunctionality, neither message nor noise, the thought suggested here is a form of parasitism. Its image is that of ambiguity itself, a *Kippfigur* that does not separate mediation and mediality but rather contains both simultaneously. As Michel Serres emphasized, parasitism presents a form of alterity prior to the distinction of same and other, prior to any economic production and exchange.<sup>14</sup> Highlighting such impure mediality invokes thirdness that insists not only on a *tertium datur*, but on different varieties of otherness.<sup>15</sup>

If such thirdness is linked to mediality, attending to it calls for a different ontology—indeed for undoing ontology. If it were to be described in spatial and temporal terms, these would be such that unsettle manifest coordinates of time and space. If it were to be distinguished from the verticality of mediation, its orientation would be that of inclination.<sup>16</sup> Mediality is not simply “there,” but always already at work. Its effects are to be gleaned rather than captured; its consequences to be invited rather than anticipated. If mediation comes to pass through relation and relata, mediality spills sideways, extending to peripheries, internal and external. This originary imbalance gives rise to dynamism and constant unsettlement. Perhaps the initial question of media does not demand an answer but is already a form of answering insofar as it insists on the question and on the inclination animating it.

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Watkin, “Not More of the Same: Michel Serres’s Challenge to the Ethics of Alterity,” *Philosophy Today* 63, no. 2 (2019): 513–533.

<sup>16</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).



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