Medium, Messenger, Transmission

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Methodological Considerations

Is a Metaphysics of Mediality Possible?

The following section continues with a look at contemporary reflections on media, albeit limited to the discourses of cultural studies and philosophy.

Media Marginalism and Media Generativism – The Scylla und Charybdis of Media Theory?

The debate over media that was first articulated in the 1960s and continues to flourish today is confusing, multivocal and heterogeneous: there is no consensus in the phenomenal domain, the methodological approach or even the very concept of media. Nevertheless, through the multitude of heterogeneous voices – at least in the cultural studies camp – it is possible to perceive a certain vocal range that could be called the ‘bon ton of the media debate’. This ‘bon ton’ involves reflecting and researching media with an attitude that is committed to a maxim of generativity. Lorenz Engell expressed this maxim with enviable clarity: ‘Media are fundamentally generative.’

The meaning is obvious: in contrast to a marginalizing perspective, which treats media as negligible vehicles that add nothing to the messages they convey, this maxim signals a change in perspective that turns towards the media themselves rather than their contents. By shaping their contents, media fundamentally participate in the generation of messages – when not entirely producing them. Marshall McLuhan’s provocative thesis ‘the medium is the message’ radically challenges the assumption that media are transparent and thus a secondary phenomenon that offers the most unimpeded view of the ‘actual’ objects of humanistic work, like ‘sense’, ‘meaning’, ‘spirit’, ‘form’, and ‘content’ – an assumption that had previously been taken for granted by the humanities. The ‘culturalization of the humanities’, which was so characteristic of the outgoing twentieth century, thus found a support and a material grounding in the medialization of sense, spirit, and content. In the heterogeneous field of media theory a small common denominator is the idea that media not only relay their contents, but are also fundamentally generative.

Doesn’t this assumption of the shaping power of media towards their messages represent a necessary presupposition for all media theoretical efforts, insofar as these efforts would make themselves meaningless without this assumption? Where then lies the problem with the ‘generative maxim’? In order to trace this problem, I will now turn to philosophy.
The media debate reached philosophy late, but the first drafts of a media philosophy are available, the meaning and scope of philosophical media reflections are being debated, the history of media philosophical thought is being written, and the status quo of media philosophical reflections are being analyzed. This inspiring orientation towards questions of media certainly originated at the margins of academic philosophy. Core areas in philosophy, like the philosophy of spirit and language, epistemology, and the theory of science, not to mention ontology and metaphysics, still remain largely unaffected by the issues in media theory. Why is philosophy struggling with these questions?

Perhaps an evident family resemblance can lead the way to a possible answer, which emerges between the ‘medial turn’ in cultural studies and the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy.

The strategic goal of McLuhan’s identification of the medium with the message was to take away the transitory transparency and neutrality of the media and make visible their autonomous opacity and instrumental shaping power. This is precisely the central theme of the ‘medial turn’. The discovery of the formational power of media parallels the ‘linguistic turn’ that took place at least fifty years earlier through the work of Austin, Ryle and Wittgenstein, who determined that linguisticality was a basic condition of our relation to the world. However, the discovery of language as a constitutional condition of experience and cognition presumed precisely that language could not (any longer) be interpreted as a medium. This does not at all mean that the mediality of language would have played an explicit role in the philosophy of language. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the modern era philosophical concepts of language also always implicitly reinforced the idea that language represents a verbalization of thoughts, and linguistic relations therefore constitute the – more or less successful – expression of a system that is prior to language – a system based on the structures of the world or human intellect. While philosophy inaugurated the ‘linguistic turn’ by conceptualizing language and communication no longer as representational instances but rather as productive sites of mind and spirit, rationality and reason, it also challenged the merely derivative status and medial secondarity of language. As a result, language or (as with Peirce) signs or (as with Cassirer) symbolic forms became a constitutional condition of the world and its cognition: in keeping with a strategy of thought that was established since Kant’s critical turn, language and sign systems thereby become a condition of possibility for our experience of and relation to the world.

The family resemblance between the medial and linguistic turns should now be clear: in both cases it involves a reflexive figure whose goal...
is to reconstruct the opacity and autonomy of transitory and secondary phenomena, thereby showing that something considered derivative and inferior actually has the power to define structures and systems. The generative potential attributed to language and media also involves something demiurgical, for when this creative power is attributed to something it is ennobled as an Archimedean point in our relation to the world, and it is thus thought to be as fundamental as it is unavoidable.¹⁰

At the same time, however, there is a remarkable contradiction between the ‘linguistic’ and ‘medial’ turns. As mentioned earlier, establishing the linguistic a priori meant that language was no longer ‘only’ a medium. This shift was certainly based on an understanding of the medium as a vehicle and carrier in the sense of a *transitory medium*; however, over the course of the debates concerning media such a concept was gradually rejected in favour of an *instrumental media concept*. As a result, by virtue of this instrumental-generative dimension the media a priori can now actually compete with the linguistic a priori.

It is now necessary to return to Derrida. The radical nature of his deconstructive philosophy reveals itself precisely in the assertion once again – therefore recursively – of the reflexive figure of language criticism as opposed to simply the results of this criticism, insofar as he undermined the primacy of speech in the name of the secondarity of writing. This undermining does not lead to the replacement of the writing a priori with the linguistic a priori, however, but rather it results in the baring of dilemmas or aporias: in Derrida’s perspective writing becomes a condition of both the possibility and *impossibility* of speech and semiosis.¹¹ Derrida’s interpretation will not be pursued any further here, but it suggests an idea that is more important for our considerations.

If Derrida’s reflections on writing are interpreted in an undeniably oversimplistic way as a (recursive) application of media criticism to language criticism, it shows that the traditional transcendental reflexive figure ‘condition of the possibility of’, which still underlies Kantian epistemology, modern language criticism and implicitly also contemporary media criticism, is not simply transformed but rather collapsed in its recursive self-usage. Basically, with the linguistic turn the media critical break proves to be both a breakdown as well as an ultimate justification of the idea of the a priori. It also proves to be a breakdown of the attempt to distinguish, universalize and thus make autonomous one phenomenal domain as a prior matrix of our being-in-the-world. When the media critical impulse is brought to bear on the linguistic turn, therefore, it reveals aporias that are distinctive to all a priori processes.
An explanation of this aporetic approach would require a separate study. For the purposes of this book, however, it is easier to postulate on the basis of this diagnosis, thus heuristically, that one rather obvious method remains completely barred to philosophical reflections on media: the method which posits that an engagement with media is philosophically legitimated by the fact that media are seen as a priori of our experience of the world, which elevates media to an unavoidable condition of the possibility of perception, communication, and cognition. According to this position, there can be nothing ‘outside’ of media. If it does not make sense to think about media in this way – to insert them in the line of succession of the linguistic a priori – then how else can and should a philosophical reflection on media proceed?

**The Disappearance of Media in Their Implementation?**

In addition to the transcendental program there are also other reflexive figures of philosophical assurance. One of these figures can be called the ‘metaphysical gesture’. This gesture does not consist in the Kantian sense in inquiring after the condition of the possibility of something, but rather it consists in the Platonic sense in reflecting on what lies behind a given appearance – namely, what it really is. Kant’s ingenuity consisted in showing that those accepted a priori forms and concepts are to be sought and found behind appearances, which first enables the coming-to-appearance of something in our own experience. At the same time, however, it was also clear to Kant that the things that determine the world cannot simultaneously be *in* the world and *from* the world. Plato, on the other hand, was convinced that the ideas that constitute the archetypes of all appearances are real – more real in any case than all material phenomena. The reflexive movement that penetrates the sensible, perceptible surface of a concrete, particular event in order to enter into its depths and expose the concealed entity hiding behind it, which is universal and invisible but nevertheless real and therefore effective and at the same time constitutes the ‘essence’ of this event: this approach provides a philosophical figure of thought that is widely accepted and has not at all gone out of use with the cognitive a priori. It is this figure of thought that will now be addressed.

I thus propose to reflect philosophically on media in a way that does not conceive of media as a condition of the possibility of our relation to the world, but rather grapples with the question of what lies ‘behind appearances’. To begin, I will pursue this gesture of attending to what lies ‘behind’ and grapple with media and mediality from this metaphysical perspective. This now appears – at best – to be in need of explanation, and at worst as a
regression back to Platonism, which has long been obsolete. My intuition and intention is nevertheless entirely different: I want to show how applying a Platonic figure of thought to the use of media does not restore Platonism, but rather undermines it. I will now provide a brief summary of what this means.

In their everyday use media enable something to emerge, but this thing is not precisely in the media themselves, but rather in their messages. *In the media event, therefore, the sensible, visible surface is the meaning, while the ‘deep structure’ constitutes the non-visible medium.* The use of media is thus ‘an-aestheticizing’, as media remain hidden in their noise-free implementation.12 Like it or not – or also paradoxically – this is why a metaphysics of mediality leads to a ‘physics of media’, to take up a term coined by Walter Seitter.13 But this is premature. First, I must make sense of the argumentative hinge of this ‘metaphysical approach’, which is the fact that while enabling something to emerge media themselves tend to remain invisible.

We hear not vibrations in the air, but rather the kettle whistling; we see not light waves of the yellow colour spectrum, but rather a canary; we hear not a CD, but rather music; and the cinema screen ‘disappears’ as soon as the film grips us. The smoother media work, the more they remain below the threshold of our perception. ‘Media make something legible, audible, visible, perceivable, while simultaneously erasing itself and its constitutive involvement in this sensuality, thus becoming unperceivable, anesthetic.’14 At the same time that media bring something forth, they themselves recede into the background; media enable something to be visualized, while simultaneously remaining invisible. And vice versa: only noise, dysfunction and disturbance make the medium itself noticeable.

A medium’s success thus depends on its disappearance, and mediation is designed to make what is mediated appear unmediated.15 The perceptibility of the message, or the appearance of what is mediated, is thus inversely proportional to the imperceptibility of the messenger, or the disappearance of the mediator. This results in the paradoxical idea of an ‘unmediated mediacy’, an ‘immaterial materiality’, or an ‘absence in presence’. *The implementation of media depends on their withdrawal.*16 I will call this ‘aesthetic self-neutralization’. It is important to note that this neutralization belongs to the functional logic of media. It is not an inherent feature of the medium itself, but rather it only takes effect when media are in use.17 The invisibility of the medium – its aesthetic neutralization – is an attribute of media performance.

Even a media theory that is only close to being comprehensive and productive cannot overlook the fact that media remain latent in the
manifestation of their messages. Niklas Luhmann’s media theory, which explores the relationship between medium and form, is the most thorough attempt so far to explain why we always see the forms but not the media themselves, but I will not discuss Luhmann here, as he is oriented towards media of communication. Instead, I would like to focus on two positions that are concerned with media of perception and that are also important for an understanding of the principle of ‘self-neutralization’ because of their reflections on the ‘invisibility’ of media: on the one hand, Aristotle’s aesthetic-oriented concept of media, in which the transparency of the medium becomes a conditio sine qua non of its function, and on the other hand Fritz Heider’s interpretation of the transparency of the medium as a symptom of the ‘external conditionality’ of media and thus its subordination to an external system.

Aristotle opened the philosophical reflection on mediality insofar as he claimed that all perception was inevitably dependent on media. The eye is a distant sense: whatever touches the eye directly cannot be seen. For Aristotle, sight is dependent on distance in two different ways. On the one hand, spatial distance is necessary for something to be seen. On the other hand, sight also requires the renunciation of interaction: vision cannot be explained as the interaction of the perceiving subject and the perceived object. Lastly, there is also a third: it is not enough that an empty space merely extends between the seer and the seen. Rather, the space in between the subject and the object must actually be filled, and this is precisely the task of the medium that mediates between the seer and the seen as a third. Aristotle thus grants the medium a material facticity as well as a functional autarchy. At the same time, however, Aristotle also articulates the sole condition under which media can fulfil their task of enabling perception, which involves ‘media diaphana’ or diaphanous media. Media are indeed bound to materiality, but their transparency is practically required: air, water or crystals are thus the most favourable materials for media of perception. However, this transparency is – as Walter Seitter emphasized – not simply a physical characteristic of the corporeality of media, but rather a functional attribute: it could almost be called a property, which all media of perception to different extents (must) always possess. In the transparency of the medium materiality intersects with the transitory: transparency thus emerges as a conditio sine qua non of Aristotle’s concept of media. As Thomas Aquinas later notes, the medium is qualified to convey a manifestation only when it does not manifest itself: ‘A diaphanous medium must be without color.’ Mediation is dependent on the illusion of immediacy. To summarize these reflections, transparency
(the diaphanous) as a characteristic of Aristotle’s perception medium is an early thematization of the phenomenon of medial self-neutralization.

Although the idea of the transparency of the medium emerges within the context of perception theory, it is then taken up in modern theoretical discussions of signs and symbols and in linguistic theory, or more precisely in reference to the specific nature of language with respect to the figurative modality of signification.26 Linguistic signs are always already designed not to make their material form apparent but rather to make it recede into the background, so that the sign practically converges with the meaning it conveys. The incarnation of such materiality, whose specialty is making itself ‘immaterial’, is the voice, in which this disappearance takes the form of sound. Hegel thus notes: ‘The word as sounded vanishes in time.’27

I will now jump to the first half of the twentieth century, when Fritz Heider took up the idea of medial transparency and gave it a significant twist in his theory of perception. Heider also defines a ‘true medium’ as one that can be ‘seen through without obstructions’.28 While Aristotle understood this transparency quite literally, Heider interpreted it as a metaphorical symbol of the non-autarchy or other-directedness of media. Regardless of what media do, this ‘external conditionality’ always remains significant for their activity: the activity of media involve ‘forced vibrations’, such that what is visible during the media event constitutes an external system, for which Heider also employed the expression ‘false unity’.29 ‘Media processes are only important insofar as they are chained to something important, but they themselves are mostly “nothing”.’30

It is not necessary to trace here the intricacies of Heider’s concept of media. Naturally Heider was aware that media must also have their own system, albeit a system that must be conditioned to allow the highest possible degree of plasticity. Aristotle already conceived of this malleability when he emphasized that the emollience of wax made it possible for the first time to record the form (but not the material) of the signet ring.31 The special quality of media thus consists in being materially conditioned to separate the material and the form from one another in the course of their operations. Heider conceived of this unconnected multiplicity of elements, which were not firmly established and were thus considered loose or soft, as the physical nature of media. This thought would later be taken up again not only by Niklas Luhmann but also Walter Seitter, who made it the focus of his ‘physics of media’. What matters now is that Heider understood the transparency and plasticity of the medium as evidence of its constitutional external conditionality: ‘The media event […] is externally determined.’32
Aristotle and Heider’s reflections on media, which were motivated by perception theory, can be summarized as follows: a medium always occupies the position of middle and mediator, and it is thus fundamentally non-autonomous. Media are not sovereign, and heteronomy is their defining feature. Aristotle’s idea of the ‘diaphanous’ as distinctive of media of perception and Heider’s concept of the ‘false unity’ of the media event represent two different ways of conceptualizing this heteronomy. To condense this into a catchy formula: There is always an outside of media.

Because it is a third placed between two sides, which fills the space between them, the corporeality assigned to media is a ‘transitory corporeality’. Media are bodies that can be disembodied; the kind of materiality that appertains to them is the kind that is ‘immaterial’ during their usage.

On the Difference Between Signs and Media
This transitory nature, which manifests in the functioning materiality of media, nevertheless does not appear to be specific to media. In a long tradition of semiological discourse, signs also present a kind of materiality that ‘stands for something else’ and thus points beyond itself. Take for instance the most basic meaning of the concept ‘sign’ as a relation between a perceptible carrier and an imperceptible meaning: in this perspective, the sensibly factual signifier has the task of bringing to mind a mostly insensible signified. While avoiding the semantic simplification that the signifier represents the signified, which Saussure already made obsolete, a syntactic relation still remains dominant: according to Charles Sanders Peirce we can and must start from the premise that every particular, perceptible sign event is identifiable as a sign because and insofar as it is an instantiation of a universal sign type. But when the material sign carrier is only individualizable as the realization of a universal model, then isn’t this sign carrier in its material-sensible givenness the incarnation of the heteronomy and other-directedness that Aristotle and Heider attributed to media? Doesn’t this indicate that sign carrier, signifier and medium are all one and the same?

Media and material sign carriers are actually conflated quite often. Nevertheless, all that matters here is a definitive difference between sign carrier and medium. This is a pivotal point in my argument. However, to avoid any misunderstanding in advance: the distinction between medium and sign (carrier) in the following cannot be understood as disjointed sorting in the sense of two classes or types of objects. There are not simply signs and in addition also media. Thematizing something as either a sign or a medium refers to two perspectives that describe the very same thing – for example,
language – in different ways. But how can the difference between these two perspectives be understood?

A sign must be perceptible, but what is perceptible in a sign is secondary, while the meaning of the sign, which is usually assumed to be invisible, absent and perhaps also immaterial, is considered primary. When something is viewed as a medium, however, it behaves in the exact opposite way: what is perceptible is usually the message itself, and the message is also what matters most in the media event. The message is thus considered primary, while the medium itself is secondary; it neutralizes itself, becomes invisible and disappears in its (noise-free) use. *In the semiological perspective, the meaning is 'concealed' behind the sensible; in the mediological perspective, on the other hand, the sensible is 'concealed' behind the meaning.*

This difference reveals a strange inversion in the way the binaries of visibility/invisibility, surface/depth and secondary/primary are allocated in each case. If a metaphysical approach is applied to signs, then a universally trusted formula emerges: behind the sensible (‘token’) lies the sense (‘type’). If a metaphysical approach is applied to media, then this formula is inverted in a significant way: behind the visible message lies the invisible medium. The metaphysics of mediality thus leads to a ‘physics of media’.

It should now be clear why the difference between material sign carrier and medium is so pivotal for these theoretical considerations. To put it in an exaggerated way: the procedural logic of signs fulfils the metaphysical expectation to search for meaning over and beyond the sensible, but the functional logic of media reverses this metaphysical expectation by going over and beyond the meaning and confronting the sensibility, materiality, and corporeality of media concealed behind it.

That the visible constitutes the message while the invisible constitutes the medium is nevertheless only ‘half the story’: it is not the whole story because in this constellation of ‘surface versus depth’ the medium all too easily assumes the position of a source; it is thus regarded as a generative and hence conditional mechanism, which emphasizes its autonomy. If a metaphysical approach is adopted to seek out the concealed materiality of the medium behind the surface of the meaning, then it *must at the same time be agreed* that the medium possesses a demiurgical power, which is always implied by the concept of a ‘medium behind’. When the medium is encountered on the reverse side of that which reveals itself as the message, therefore, its ‘mode of being’ excludes the possibility that the medium is endowed with an autonomous creative power and can be conceived as a quasi-sovereign actor or constitutive conditional relationship.
This line of thought suggests for the first time a good reason for the proposed messenger perspective. Etymologically the word ‘medium’ denotes not only means, but also middle and mediator; yet media theory has (still) hardly explored this dimension. It is precisely this facet that will be addressed here.

The Medium as Middle – The Messenger as ‘Dying Messenger’

A brief etymological explanation is now in order. There were originally two significant ways of using the word ‘medium’. On the one hand, it was a grammatical form of Greek, which remained neutral with respect to active and passive. It was a genus verbi for activities that constituted a mixed form between doing and suffering, production and reception or making something happen and something happening to oneself. ‘πείδομαι’, for example, did not simply mean ‘I am persuaded’; rather, in a far more subtle way it signalled grammatically ‘I allow myself to be persuaded’. The speaker is thus not simply in the position of object, but also at the same time in the position of subject, which is similar to what happens when people wash their hands. A person is receiver and sender at the same time, while also holding the middle position between receiver and sender.

On the other hand, ‘medium’ refers to the middle term in a syllogism. The terminus medius appears in both premises of a syllogistic deduction and it establishes the correlation between these premises, which in turn makes deductive reasoning on the basis of these premises possible. The conclusion lies in connecting the terms that are not middle terms, but this only happens in the act of effacing the middle term. ‘All mammals are warm-blooded; all polar bears are mammals. Therefore, all polar bears are warm-blooded.’ By establishing a connection, the terminus medius ‘mammal’ makes itself superfluous. The medium fulfils its function in the process of its own elimination.

These comments on grammar and logic as characteristic sources of the concept of media obviously do not provide an etymology of the concept of media. Nevertheless, the early use of the word casts an interesting light on the concept. Occupying the middle is precisely what the position of the medium represents. This ‘middle’ can be understood in three ways: spatially as an intermediate position, then functionally as mediation and finally formally as neutralization. And – as evidenced at least by the use of logic – the medium disappears in its successful implementation. Its role consists not in being retained, but rather in being made superfluous. Media cannot be collected.
The idea that the medium becomes superfluous is emphasized most clearly in the legendary figures of dying messengers in myth, religion, and art. In the legend passed down by Plutarch, the runner from Marathon delivers the message of the victory of the Athenians over the Persians – in full armour no less – and then immediately drops dead.\textsuperscript{37} The messenger is consumed through his activity. In the transmission of his message, he himself perishes. The motif of the dying messenger can be pursued further to a fresco by Lauretti Tommaso (circa 1530-1602), which shows the statue of Hermes, the messenger of the gods, shattered in pieces at the foot of an altar featuring the crucified Christ.\textsuperscript{38} The fresco is called \textit{The Triumph of Christianity}. Its creator thus intended it to be an allegory of the victory of the Christian age over pagan antiquity. In his commentary on the fresco, however, Michel Serres noted: ‘Both Mercury and Christ are at the point of death, their limbs wracked and their bodies torn. Messengers disappear in relation to their message: this is our key to understanding their death agonies, their death and their disaggregation.’\textsuperscript{39} The ‘life’ of the message purchased with the death of the messenger; the messenger sacrificed through the delivery of the message; Is there a connection between being a messenger and being a sacrifice? In any case, the motif of the dying messenger is a radical version of the idea of the eliminatability of the medium, a more moderate version of which was already seen in the aforementioned discussion of syllogisms. The ‘becoming invisible’ of the carrier is therefore not a phantasm or an idealization: it is fundamentally connected to the messenger function.

This concludes my methodological considerations. The main idea, therefore, is that it is possible to trace the ‘disappearance of the medium behind its content’ and at the same time reveal the non-sovereignty, the constitutive external conditionality of the medium by understanding what a medium ‘is’ according to the messenger model. According to the messenger principle, ‘foreground’ and ‘background’, the sensible and the insensible, are very clearly allocated: what the messenger brings to the eye and the ear is not simply ‘himself’, but rather the message he has to convey. In the messenger, who ‘speaks with a strange voice’, a process emerges that is typical of media events, by which the medium withdraws and neutralizes itself in order to transmit its content.