Angels: Communication through Hybrid Forms

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In religion, myth, legend, and above all in the arts there is an imaginary space populated with messengers: It is the world of angels, of placeless mediators between heaven and earth. The study of angels (‘angelology’) is an epiphenomenon of monotheism: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have added a more or less extensive army of angels to the statuary isolation of their God; the constitutional invisibility, unrepresentability, and remoteness of God is therefore supplemented with the offer of something holy that is visible, representable, and close, which takes on an allegorical form in angels. Angels are not simply there, but rather they are active, as Augustine notes: ‘angelus enim officii nomen est, non natura’. ‘Angel’ is therefore the name of an office, a function. The Greek word ‘angelos’, the Hebrew word ‘malakh’, the Arabic word ‘malak’, and the Persian word ‘fereshteh’ all denote ‘ambassadors’. The primary duty of angels is thus to serve as holy messengers. In addition – as Siegert points out – the Greek word ‘angeloi’ is derived from the ‘angaréion’, the attendants of the Persian relay post system. As Horst Wenzel notes laconically, ‘The establishment of the postal system preceded the heavenly messenger.’ In the word ‘angel’, therefore, a predictor becomes a name, which is the process of allegorical formation par excellence. The following considerations focus on the angel as an allegory for the office of the messenger and question whether this form can shed an interesting light on the mediality of the ‘messenger’s errand’.

An Archaic Vision of the Information Society and a Nebulous Form of Mediology?

I will begin with a perspective that is already familiar through Michel Serres’s work: In a world that revolves around the axis of the information-technical exchange of messages, angels can serve as a model for a network that does not consist of things or living entities but rather of channels for the transmission of messages. ‘Each angel is a bearer of one or more relationships; today they exist in myriad forms, and every day we invent billions of new ones. However we lack a philosophy of such relations [...] The angels are unceasingly drawing up the maps of our new universe.’ Angels create relations precisely because their transmission activities establish an intermediary space situated between the realms of the divine and the
human, and they connect these worlds by literally opening a channel between them.7

Michel Serres’s standpoint also resembles that of sociologist Helmut Wilke, who sees angels as the legendary anticipation of a method of transmitting messages of any kind to any place, which has since passed to the megamachines of information processing.8 For the first time data can be sent from any point on the globe to any other point: The invisible hand of the market described by Adam Smith thus returns once again in the form of the invisible hand of communications machines and networks.9 A utopian society is emerging, for which the principle of location has become irrelevant, and this society is approaching – according to Wilke at least – our visions of angels.10

Nevertheless, ‘space’ is not ‘place’. And if location is not an issue for angels, then neither is the spatiality of a world in between, which they create through their errands.

The analogy between this imaginary space and the contemporary globally expanded space made possible by information transmission machines makes evident the messenger angel’s ability to be able to establish connections and correspondences between distant parties by not being tied to any particular place. The texture of the border-crossing network of pathways formed by the angels’ errands is thus grounded in the very meaning of ‘space’, which is not based on the principle of location: Angels are homeless and placeless.

Régis Debray goes the furthest in exploring the information-technical aspects of angelology, as he believes it represents a media theory avant la lettre, a still nebulous stage of a mediology.11 The angels, ‘the Almighty’s petty telegraphers’,12 reveal three principles that are fundamental to his mediological approach: the structure of the mediatizing third between the sender and the receiver of a message, the hierarchical organization of this world in between, as well as the diabolical inversion of transmission into an obstruction. Debray also refers to an ideological problem: The ethnological analysis of ‘foreign myths’ – like the work of Lévi-Strauss or Malinowski – is considered very prestigious, yet the ethnology of our own European mytho-religious beliefs, to which the angels significantly belong, is (still) hardly acceptable and thus avoided.13

I am therefore turning to the theme of angels because they represent the imaginary embodiment of the messenger and the activity of transmission more than any other phenomenon, yet I am only concerned with angels as fiction and idea, as permanent residents of symbolic worlds and enduring figures in our collective imagination. There are no angels, but there is a
multitude of religious as well as artistic representations and conceptions of angels, which are the subject of the following considerations.

What Do Angels Do?
Is there anything more distant and different from one another than God and man? What truly distinguishes heaven from earth is not only distance per se, but rather the divide between two worlds that are apparently conceived to be as different from one another as possible. The divine is related to the human like the unconditional to the conditional, the ineffable to the effable, the invisible to the visible, the absolute to the relative, the infinite to the finite. The monotheistic God is the incarnation of everything that eludes visibility and therefore also representability. It is thus no surprise that the empty distance separating God and man is filled with messengers and mediators who offer their own solutions to the problem of how the invisible nevertheless manifests itself and how the infinite can be effective in the finite world. I will now look more closely at this ‘solution process’:

The purpose of an angel’s existence is to be a messenger; angels are sent from God, and they are destined to transport divine messages. Angels are dependent; they do not act on their own impulses. They are instantiations of a task. Angels act in the name of a foreign authority. This is why they are preferably called ‘Angels of the Lord’ in the gospels. The Old and New Testaments are thus ‘ultimately less interested in the being of the messenger than the appropriate alignment of the message’.

The power of this message is borrowed from or delegated by the ‘almighty’. Angels do not create anything, they do not leave anything behind, they have no success and also no history. The hands of angels remain empty. Their existence is fulfilled in the act of speaking on behalf of someone else. In this capacity they can nevertheless participate in the primordial ‘creating’ performativity of the divine word, which recalls Benjamin: the angel’s annunciation coincides with Mary’s conception. Moreover, it is also the angels’ duty to bear witness; they bear witness to God in the presence of humans so that God manifests through them. Angels represent the trace of God in human reality.

They populate a world in between; they are only present to humans in the moment of their proclamation; their appearance as messengers of God is always characterized by their disappearance and withdrawal: ‘The first duties of the transporter are: eclipse, stepping aside, flight and withdrawal.’ This placelessness and the ability to withdraw predestine angels to be border crossers who can mediate between positions without themselves taking or having a home. And it is entirely consistent that these border crossers
should assist humans precisely during the borderline situations of their lives. In the New Testament angels tend to appear in situations of flight into exile, birth and death.

On the Angels Themselves
The angel is a virtually crystalline ‘materialization’ of the concept of the neutral, dependent, border-crossing messenger who fulfils his task and thereby makes himself obsolete. These facets of the mediator and transmitter are familiar enough through the messenger model, but how does the transmission of divine messages through angels reveal new aspects of the mediality of a transmission event? I will concentrate on four such aspects: (1) embodiment, (2) hybridization, (3) demonic inversion, and (4) hierarchical multiplicity.

(1) Embodiment: Angels are considered ‘fundamentally immaterial’, yet this immateriality obscures the important fact that their corporeality – and here I am in agreement with Petra Gehring – is a conditio sine qua non of their position as messengers. This corporeality undoubtedly has paradoxical features: It is the embodiment of ‘incorporeality’, an ethereal ‘spiritual physicality’ that tends to dissolve into light or air. Nevertheless, this special form of corporeality could be considered the most suitable way of materializing the messenger function. Angels substitute the incorporeality and invisibility of God, which implies the impossibility of direct communication with humans, for human-like corporeality and visibility: ‘Because angels are transmitters, they must communicate according to human standards. They must be physically and verbally active [...] Without bodies they would not be angels at all, but rather like God himself.’ The corporeality of angels is the incarnation of their ability to be seen and heard. The body of an angel has no weight of its own; it is – in a way – ‘an impossible body’.

In his philosophical reflections on the figure of the mediator, Christoph Hubig emphasized that a mediating instance can be understood in two ways: the ‘forms of the mediator’ are either conceptualized as ‘impersonal instances of mediation’ or they are represented ‘in the form of a messenger of the gods, of the savior, of the redeemer, which is shown in the world religions as a personal instance of mediation’. Hubig continues: ‘This last-mentioned approach represents the essence of every theology of incarnation.’ This idea of embodiment also applies to the in-between world of the angels: it is no accident that Christ is also equated with angels as Christos Angelos.

The theological doctrine of God’s incarnation in Jesus himself now constitutes an ongoing dilemma for the theo-christological interpretation. ‘The Word became flesh’ (John 1:14): This appears to be a mystery, a paradox that bears witness to the fact that faith rather than reason is the medium
that brings one closer to God. And enlightened-philosophical proponents of Christianity like Lessing have also consequently avoided the concept of ‘incarnation’ as much as possible. Luther even refers to Jesus as a mediator in the course of the Reformation, and Zwingli emphasizes that this position requires Christ to adopt characteristics of both of the spheres to be mediated. This brings me to a fundamental attribute: the hybridity of angels.

(2) **Hybridity:** Jesus is a mortal human, and thus flesh, as well as immortal God, and thus spirit. When these dimensions blend together they do not become unrecognizable; rather, the uniqueness of these qualities is retained. Christ does not represent the synthesis of two worlds, which gives rise to a third, ‘higher’ world; rather, the resistant features of these opposing worlds continue to persist in parallel to one another, which is precisely how a connection is established. What emerges is an in-between world where – in the words of H.J. Hamann – ‘Christ is the speech of God’.

This incarnation, which achieves its paradigmatic religious form in the figure of Christ, also holds true for the angels. Angels are hybrid entities. This is meant, first of all, in an entirely ‘profane’ sense. Angels are – not unlike Hermes – winged creatures, which carries a ‘fundamental mythic significance’ and implies a ‘similar origin for birds and angels’. Massimo Cacciari notes: ‘*Mehr Vogel* [...] is the title given by Klee to one of his drawings on the theme of the angel: more bird [...] than Angel.’ In the prosaic words of Thomas Macho: ‘Angels are intermediate beings, and they appear as a blending of birds and humans [...] archaic aviation pioneers; they can ascend to heaven and hover over land and sea. After subtracting metaphysics and the scholastic art of speculation, all that remains are feathers and wings.’ Their airworthiness predestines the angels to eliminate spatial distance in a literal sense.

Yet the wings of angels represent only the profane side of the sacred hybridization that constitutes their ‘mode of existence’. Their immortality and weightless mobility exist in parallel with their human-like corporeality and their ability to speak. Angels participate in the divine and human spheres: ‘The world of angels unites on the same plane that which is irreconcilably distant and opposed.’ The fact that opposing forces can join together in one form is crucial to understanding the ‘mechanisms’ of angelic transmission. Communication via holy messengers is possible only insofar as they share something with both of the worlds to be mediated. The most interesting aspect of the angels’ function as messengers is thus the fact that they transmit messages through hybridizing embodiment.

Angels allow the divine ‘to emerge from the shadows of distance’ and manifest itself as something close to human, and they are able to do this
because as hybrid creatures they combine the attributes of the divine and the human in a subtle conflation of incorporation and excorporation.\textsuperscript{32}

(3) \textit{Demonic Inversion}: In their hybridity, angels literally occupy the \textit{middle}. They are mediators insofar as they are \textit{intermediary members}. And they fall as soon as this middle position is no longer readily available. The demonic suspension of the mediator’s position is condensed in the image of the ‘fallen angel’: the closer the angel is to God the more likely it is that he also wants to be like God,\textsuperscript{33} yet those who aspire to be equal to God are hurled to Earth. Lucifer’s diabolical fall bears witness to the fact that forsaking the hybrid world situated between God and humans also entails a repudiation of the angel’s messenger function. While the Hebrew Bible does not recognize ‘Satan’ as a fallen angel, Satan, Beelzebub, or Belial has a central importance for the followers of Jesus.\textsuperscript{34} And it is no accident that it is precisely corporeality that becomes the gateway of the demonic fallen angel: According to St. Teresa of Ávila, the soul can only be influenced through the body; angels possess such a body, but not God.\textsuperscript{35} At the same time the relativization of the absolute in the perceivable corporeality of angels also gives rise to the phenomenon of the lapse, of ambivalence. ‘Evil’ emerges as an inversion of ‘good’. What Satan is ultimately left with – from a modern perspective – is no longer the transmission of divine messages, but rather the purchasing of souls through the exchange of services in a demonic pact. This is also a form of transmission, incidentally, which will become more revealing when money is seen as a medium of exchange.

(4) \textit{Hierarchical Multiplicity}: Angels only exist in a multitude, and this multiplicity exhibits a sense of order that is reminiscent of the military: Angels constitute the army of God. This is not the military aspect that interests me here, although the idea of the ‘angel with the sword’ (not only the archangel Michael as the general of God\textsuperscript{36}) consistently grounds and complements that of the messenger angel.\textsuperscript{37} Rather, what is more significant is the gradation of the intermediary world according to the proximity and distance to the senders or receivers of holy messages. Such a hierarchization of the world between God and humans was first described by Dionysius the Areopagite around 500 A.D. For Dionysius the hierarchy of angels is an answer to the unrepresentability of God. Dionysius proposes that a highly structured universe of intermediary beings stretches between the Seraphim, the symbols of light and fire that stand next to God, and the guardian angels, which are close to humans. This can explain one thing: the talk of a ‘third’ that occupies the middle position between opposing forces is only a shorthand way of saying that an abundance of gradations
are operative between dichotomous extremes, which does not leave this in-between space empty, but rather marks it as a transitional space.

The notion that the in-between world of the angels makes an abundance of modularizations visible by virtue of what is distant from one another and yet nonetheless affects one another and is connected to one another leads to one last consideration: The angel as the embodiment of an ‘ontology of distance’.38

The ‘Ontology of Distance’ and the ‘Representation of Unrepresentability’: Interpretations of Angelology

How can distance be overcome and preserved at the same time? How can distance be transformed into proximity when it cannot provide the immediacy of contact or a bridge between distant points and it thus remains ‘insurmountable’? This is the problem of monotheistic religions and angelology is an attempt to solve or at least offer some compensation for this problem. Andrei Pleșu and Massimo Cacciari have interpreted this problem in two different ways using an onto-epistemological approach and an aesthetic or image-theoretical approach.

Pleşu revised the problem: The point is not that people are unable to maintain a relationship across distances, but rather the contrary: The mostly familiar view of what lies in the distance, which is transcendent, utopian, absolute, and unavailable, directly obscures the view of what lies close by. It is not the distant, ‘it is the near that becomes inaccessible to us. Every celestial metaphysics has its morbid counterpart in the suppression of the feeling of closeness’.39 This ‘crisis of proximity’ – and this is Pleșu’s epistemological trick – thus depends on rigid dichotomies. However, if angels transform the ‘abyss between God and humans into an information space’40 and if the solution to the problem of distance consists precisely in filling the hollow space, the emptiness of this abyss, with mediating figures, then this generates a cognitive-epistemological resonance phenomenon: being-in-the-world must be understood not simply as a static dichotomy, but rather as modulations; people must overcome their ‘polarizing instinct’ and their ‘obsession with binary simplifications’41 in the context of this image of a Jacob’s ladder that is made possible by the hierarchy of angels, which establishes gradations between things that are distant from one another. This constitutes the ‘technics of overcoming’ distance, which is crystallized out of angelology, because it takes the distance apart and ‘transforms it into a series of proximities’.42 This also implies an anthropological directive: humans should conceive of themselves not simply as dualistic but rather as a triadic composition of will, intellect, and emotion. This restores the
realm of the imaginary to the border between interior and exterior instead of reducing it to mind-body dualism.\textsuperscript{43}

This space of imagined messengers is the space of visualized images, and it is at this point that Massimo Cacciari now comes into play.

Cacciari also understands his reflections on angels as a confrontation with the issue of an irreducible distance, but he nevertheless treats this – with reference to Walter Benjamin\textsuperscript{44} – as a ‘problem of representation’ and thus an aesthetic problem.\textsuperscript{45} If the graduating modularization of the in-between space is the one form that establishes the proximity of a distance, then forming an image of the distance brings about another modality. The inconceivability and unrepresentability of God finds its paradoxical echo in the diverse images of angels, all of which are epiphanies of a withdrawn God who establishes contact without exposing or revealing himself.\textsuperscript{46} However, the angel thus becomes ‘the exact image of the problem of the image’,\textsuperscript{47} for an image is always different from and more than a symbol: Images also contain something magical in the form of a real effect of the depicted; they are at the same time both distinguishable and indistinguishable from that which they represent. They are the living presence of a distance, the projection of the absent in the present. For this reason, ‘every true image is never only a simple representation’; rather, it is one with its own state of being-distant – ‘it is one with absence’.\textsuperscript{48} Like Pleșu, Cacciari also addresses the imagination.\textsuperscript{49} By revealing this imaginative dimension the angel rescues perception from ‘merely being perception’ and it thus becomes apparent that every perceived object is always also a ‘fictum’.\textsuperscript{50}

People therefore do not see angels, but rather they always only see images of angels. By referring to the question of how it is possible to represent that which cannot be seen, Sigrid Weigel emphasizes how paintings of angels embody ‘the moment of visualization’ and they thus serve as a ‘means for reflection on painting itself’.\textsuperscript{51}

Cacciari and Pleșu also call attention to a further dimension of the iconicity of angels, which is their mirror function.\textsuperscript{52} In the discourse about angels since time immemorial they have been characterized again and again as mirrors.\textsuperscript{53} ‘The world of angels – mundus imaginalis – resembles a mirror between the world of God and the world of humans, which reflects both worlds and unexpectedly brings them into contact.’\textsuperscript{54} Mirror images are precisely not subordinate to the regime of (arbitrary) semiotics; in other words, they are not symbols. Mirrors always reveal the ‘trace of a presence’ caused by synchronous action, but they are never the presence itself. Furthermore, mirror images are – in an optical sense – virtual images. They
move what is reflected to an illusory place. If an angel mirrors God in the world of humans, for example, then God appears in a place where he is not. The presence of a divine absence emerges in the image of the angel as the proximity of a distance.

The virtuality based on their mirror-like iconicity and the information-technical virtualization anticipated by their relentless activity as messengers thus intersect in the figuration of the angel.

**What Does Transmission through Hybridization Mean? A Conclusion**

Where are these reflections on the imaginary figure of the angel leading if they are construed as a media theory *avant la lettre*? I want to emphasize five ideas:

1. **The problem of communication does not consist in overcoming distance, but rather in the otherness of the worlds between which a connection is to be established.** Given the differences between almighty God and mortal human beings, this connection is then (largely) unidirectional.

2. **The art and technique of this connection – and this is the central idea – lies in hybridity, or the notion that contact between the heterogeneous can be established when the ‘contact organ’ is composed of attributes of both of the worlds to be mediated.** It is precisely the juxtaposition and simultaneity of these opposing characteristics that allows the angel to function as a mediator.

3. **Such hybridity can only be achieved through embodiment.** While reflections on angels tend to emphasize their immateriality, they can only communicate with humans insofar as they themselves also have bodies. The transmission of God's word is impossible without embodiment.

4. **The neutrality associated with messengers and their position in the middle and in between are always also vulnerable and subject to change.** Lucifer, the messenger who develops a life of his own by denouncing his heteronomy and his intermediate position, is therefore only the reverse side of heavenly message transmission. The *fallen angel* is a structural element of the mediator’s position.

5. **Angels are more than ‘God’s cute telegraphs’: They bring the distance of the monotheistic God closer, they make his absence present and they make his invisibility visible.** Angels do not simply reveal something imperceptible; rather, they reveal the *imperceptibility* of something that is nevertheless operative in the presence of his non-presence. Angels are therefore not only the messengers of God, but also *traces* of God.