So What Does ‘Transmission’ Mean?

Making Perceptible

Up until now I have been dealing with forms of transmission in widely diverse fields. I have also been dealing with forms of transmission that are not obviously subject to the regime of a medium, like radio or television, as this – albeit entirely random – selection of transmission modalities was designed to trace by analogy the functional logic of the messenger precisely where the mediality of this process was not at all obvious. And the discovery of these forms of transmission was bound up with the hope that their subtlety and diversity could assess and also expand the categorical abundance of the rather simple theoretical model of the messenger.

These forms reflect very different transmission strategies: hybridization, transcription, desubstantiation, complementarity, affective resonance, and finally trustworthiness. Hardly any list could be so diverse, and every attempt to measure these various modalities according to the same coherent theory of transmission unavoidably exercises a kind of conceptual violence with regard to the abundance of phenomena. This danger is real. Nevertheless, I want to venture a generalizing perspective, which asks: Do these diverse transmission processes reflect a coherent set of attributes concerning transmission and mediality?

My answer includes four points, which also play a role in the messenger model but which have become clearer over the course of analyzing concrete forms of transmission: (1) Transmissions presuppose a difference that is not reducible to spatial or temporal distance. (2) The role of the mediator is not always to bridge and level this difference, but also to maintain it. Media – as seen in the functional logic of the messenger – thus make it possible to deal with difference. (3) The function of the messenger – and this is mediatheoretically generalizable – is to make something perceptible. Aestheticization thus constitutes the very nucleus of all transmission processes, and transmission can be reconstructed as a form of display. (4) This is possible through a transformation that manifests a difference by neutralizing what is ‘singular’ in each case. Medial mediation thus creates the impression of immediacy.

Difference as Prerequisite for Transmissions

As you will recall, the original meaning of the word ‘transmission’ was tantamount to ‘carry across’: A burden is taken up and carried ‘across
something’, like a bridge. It is a matter of overcoming not simply a distance, but rather a divide or a chasm. This image is quite revealing. Wherever transmissions are present, there must also be ruptures or oppositions, which could also be, in Thomas Mann’s words, ‘chasms of strangeness’. Transmission thus acquires a fundamental difference-theoretical dimension.

This encourages a reconsideration of the various transmission phenomena discussed thus far: Despite the fact that they were created ‘in the image of God’, humans project onto God precisely those attributes that are unattainable to them, such as being immortal or omnipotent; as a result, the monotheistic God is as distant and different from humans as conceivably possible. Is it possible to imagine an abyss or schism more radical than the one between infinite god and finite humans?

Or, to move on to contagion: In the transmission of diseases, the practice of immunization through a controlled infection with a pathogen depends precisely on the obliteration of the difference between the self and the other so that the chain of transmissions can be interrupted. And conversely, this ‘forced levelling’ also shows that a form of difference constitutes the prerequisite for medical infection, as there can be no infection without a difference between the self and the other.

Or consider the intermediary function of money: The role of money first emerges in situations where there is a divide between desire and possession, when someone wants precisely what someone else has. Using the principle that ‘one must give in order to be able to take’, money also contributes to the (relatively) peaceful equalization of this separation. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of goods is the motor that drives the exchange of goods, and the function of money is to make disparate things commensurable through prices. This heterogeneity applies all the more to the credit function money, which is central to my argument.

In psychoanalysis transference could help rather than disrupt therapy – as Freud originally assumed – precisely because the patient’s past, which was shaped by traumatic experiences, and his present, which is shaped by the affective resonance of ‘his’ analyst, are so clearly different that projecting an ‘old’ pattern of feeling onto the analyst potentially transforms rather than repeats that pattern.

And in the case of witnessing an irreconcilable difference obviously exists between, on the one hand, the perception and knowledge of the witness with regard to a past event and, on the other hand, the ignorance of the listeners before whom the witness testifies, who do not have access to this event.
In summary: A pronounced difference, an imbalance, a heterogeneity constitutes the ‘divide’ capable of sparking the maelstrom of a transmission event. The intensity of this difference can undoubtedly be modulated: It might simply be a separation in space and time, but in its most extreme form it is a reciprocal otherness and inaccessibility that can even make individuals afraid of one another. There is no transmission without differentiality.

**Levelling or Articulation of Difference?**

The fascinating question now is what happens to this difference in the course of transmission. As I already pointed out in my discussion of the messenger figure, messengers do not just bridge differences, but rather their acts of transmission also serve to maintain and reinforce these differences. This idea offers a more multifaceted image of transmission.

The same principle can be applied to Benjamin’s reflections on translation: Translators could certainly understand the act of translating as the transmission of a text from one language to another. In this perspective, if the meaning of the text seems to remain ‘the same’ then translatability implies the possibility that linguistic differences can be neutralized: The same thing can be said in different ways both intralinguially and interlinguially. For Benjamin, however, this is precisely the attitude of the ‘bad translator’. The ‘good translator’ does not depend on the equivalence of meaning; rather, he leaves space for the inherent deviations in the ‘ways of thinking’ to unfold, which brings the differences between languages to light. Instead of concealing the diversity and incommensurability of languages, therefore, translations make them apparent.

To return to the question of whether difference is levelled or articulated: Following Benjamin’s concept of translation, is it possible to assume that transmission can be viewed from both perspectives – as the levelling and articulation of difference – although the more revealing philosophical perspective is the one in which transmission does not conceal differences but rather makes them apparent? To accept the normative element of Benjamin’s ‘good translator’: If the question of what constitutes a medium is situated in the context of transmission, does this reveal an ‘ethos of the medial’ in the form of the demand that media must always manifest the difference in whose ‘in-between space’ they operate?

Consider the concrete transmissions that have already been discussed: A virus is insidious precisely because it is able to lodge itself in the cells of the host’s body and reproduce like the host’s own cells by transcribing and participating in the host’s mechanisms of cellular reproduction. In the case of viral contagion, therefore, the divide between the self and the other is
subtly and radically suspended without ‘instances’ coming into play that mark this original difference.

Interestingly, however, such ‘instances’ occur in the case of personal messenger figures: In the context of this bipolar function, the apparent double role played by both the psychoanalyst and the witness can also be interpreted as bridging and exposing a difference at the same time.

As a ‘neutral medium’ the psychoanalyst constitutes a projection surface on which unprocessed experiences from the patient’s past can be inscribed. This process thus opens up the possibility of repeating or re-experiencing problematic feelings from the past in the here and now of the psychoanalytic situation. As a participant, however, the analyst also establishes a personal relationship with his patient and becomes an affective resonant body, which makes it possible for a change to emerge from the repetition. A transformation of the patient’s mental and emotional life thus takes place, and as a result the past can be forgotten and is no longer repetitively acted out.

Like the psychoanalyst, the witness also performs a double task: He must prove to be an infallible recording device, a disinterested witness, a mere medium of a past event, but at the same time he must also appear as a person who is authentic, credible, and trustworthy. The dilemma of the Holocaust witness sheds light on precisely this situation: It is only after the survivors have once again become respected members of society and have situated themselves as people in this society – if it may be put like this – that they can appear (for the first time) as witnesses of their own depersonalized status as victims of the Nazis. They are only able to bear witness to their disintegrated past from the distance of their reintegrated present.

It is thus clear that transmissions are a way of dealing with difference; they make differences manageable. I now want to probe a little deeper, and perhaps also more radically, into the idea that transmissions can equalize and at the same time mark differences between worlds, fields, or systems. Such a transmission strategy is ‘ideally’ realized precisely when transmission is interpreted as a process of making something perceptible.

Making Something Inaccessible Perceptible
This represents a turning point in my reflections. The idea of the messenger depends on the semantic field of communication and language use. And because the idea of transmission as the relaying of communication is tied to the origin of the word ‘transmission’ as the carrying across of a burden, it is also connected to the semantic field of transportation.

The history of words is irreversible, yet we create our concepts ourselves. As a thought experiment, imagine that it were possible to conceive of
‘transmission’ in a way that evoked entirely different associations than those of movement, carrying, and thus transport. Imagine that this concept was associated with the possibility of bridging a distance by allowing one side to ‘visualize’ the other and thus discover something that normally eludes perception because it is either strange or just distant. This thought experiment calls attention to the productive function that lies in the ability of transmission to expose and mark differences. It shows precisely the visualization potential of the image, whose power is based on both the opening and closing of the separation between the absence and presence of image content.

Is the connection between the role of the messenger and the act of making something perceptible echoed in these transmission procedures?

I will begin with Benjamin: Perhaps the concept of ‘making perceptible’ can account for the peculiar sacred turn in Benjamin’s theory of translation and language, as the acknowledgment that ‘post-Babylonian’ linguistic diversity cannot be circumvented does not remain his final word on the matter: Benjamin actually starts from the premise that translations do not reveal identical meanings but rather divergent ways of thinking. However, because individual languages can be translated into one another they turn out to be different yet nevertheless compatible fragments of the ‘pure language’ that has been lost since the Fall of Man. This ‘pure language’ does not (any longer) exist, but translation can provide an image and an idea of it by manifesting a fundamental compatibility within the diversity of languages; the activity of the translator thus bears witness to the factual heterogeneity of languages while simultaneously revealing a universal bond that connects all languages in the vanishing point of the one ‘pure language’ that does not (any longer) exist.

Benjamin’s theory of translation thus reflects a tension that is inherent to any form of imaging that consists in sensualizing (and symbolizing) something that was previously distant and hidden. This tension was already discussed in the chapter on angels insofar as angels bridge the distance between the divine and the human and through their appearance they bear witness to the fundamental absence of God as well as God’s real activities among humans. It is this duplicity that induced Massimo Cacciari to conclude that angels represent the incarnation of the principle of the image, which he interprets as ‘(being) one with his absence’.

I now turn to the phenomenon of witnessing. The witness’s statement – ordinarily – testifies to something the witness perceived himself; his speech is not supposed to make any claims about an event in the sense of judgements, but rather he is supposed to convey an image of what he
perceived as precisely as possible; and he presents this testimony in a situation where the perceived event is irrevocably past and hidden because it is (usually) no longer reproducible. The ‘image’ produced by the witness is thus made from language, and it becomes a substitute for the perception of a past event, which has become impossible to perceive in the present. The verbalized testimony should – ideally – mean the same thing to the jury that the original perception meant to the witness, but this is impossible due to the separation between the witness’s private experience in the past and his public verbalization of that experience in the present; the witness perceived something, but the listeners before whom he testifies only receive a linguistic description of this perception, which can – intentionally or unintentionally – always be false. This is the origin of the paradox of witnessing, which is rooted in the fact that the witness must act in two different forms: as both a depersonalized recording instrument and at the same time as an authentic trustworthy person. The speech of the witness can thus be understood as the act of making something perceptible for others, yet at the same time it must also mark the impossibility of reproducing a private perception as a perception for others, as this making perceptible ‘only’ occurs in a linguistic form that opens up the possibility of false testimony.

In specifying transmission as a process of making something perceptible, as ‘aestheticization’, it is essential not to confuse this with ‘aestheticization’. As Martin Seel points out, aesthetic perception is a special mode of perception. It is directed towards the phenomenal individuality of an appearing object or the game of appearances in the simultaneity of that which manifests in the presence of an object. However, transmission processes make something perceptible while simultaneously evoking the absence of what is visualized, just as the messenger who speaks for someone else reveals the absence of the one in whose name he speaks while simultaneously making the ‘aura’ of this absent person present.

If transmission must be conceived as a process of making something that is sensually inaccessible perceptible, then a similarity becomes apparent: Isn’t this principle – making something perceptible while simultaneously revealing is hiddenness – connected to my previous discussion of traces? The trace reveals not simply ‘something’, but rather the ‘absence of something’. Wherever a trace is encountered or something is interpreted as a trace, this trace is understood as a material mark that refers to something which is no longer there – otherwise there would be no trace.

Until now I have focused on transmission within the context of the messenger model; is it possible and perhaps also time to conceive of traces
WHY DOES ‘TRANSMISSION’ MEAN?

As ‘involuntary messengers’ so that the meaning of ‘transmission’ might also be discussed in terms of the formation and interpretation of traces? Is it thus possible that what is strange about the messenger model (i.e. that the messenger is still a passive example of someone who has been commissioned for an assignment) could lose its potential for irritation to a certain extent if it is associated with the concept of the trace? Before pursuing this line of inquiry, I would like to explore a further attribute related to the ‘material of transmission’: What does it mean to reveal something precisely by withdrawing oneself?

**Articulating Difference through Self-Neutralization**

The messenger’s characteristic gesture, which is based on the heteronomy of the messenger’s errand, is *self-neutralization*. It is only by suppressing his own senses and structures that the messenger is able to manifest other senses and structures medially. The medium thus presents its message by withdrawing at the same time. There is an inherent connection between, on the one hand, the ‘immediacy’ of mediation, which is immanent in the medium itself, and, on the other hand, the suppression of the medium’s own logic. I will explain this more concretely:

Money reveals this process of self-neutralization in an exemplary way because its intermediary role is based on desubstantiation. There is only talk of ‘money’ when the means of circulation is no longer a concrete good, like wheat, pearls, or clams. In the conventional sense money can neither be ‘used’ nor can it be subject to any physical changes at all over time. Due to its mobility and its lack of qualities, which reinforces its ‘pure countability’ (discreteness), money thus embodies – whether as coins, paper, or electronic money – the function of providing a standard measure of value for relations of economic exchange. Money provides a standard measure for the exchange for goods precisely because of its ‘desubstantiated substance’ and its ‘indifferent non-content’, which enable the homogenizing quantification of qualitative differences.

Or consider viral infections. Aren’t viruses able to make themselves ‘unrecognizable’ to the host precisely by transcribing the DNA of the host’s cells and reproducing themselves in the host, thus becoming part of the afflicted organism itself? It is also possible to describe the viral transcription of cell DNA metaphorically as follows: Viruses neutralize their otherness by converting to the host’s mechanism of cellular reproduction and thereby donning the ‘mask’ of the host cell.

The interplay of depersonalization and personality is fundamental to the figure of the ‘personal messenger’. For Freud – unlike many proponents of the ‘interactive turn’ in psychoanalysis – the self-withdrawal of the analyst
in the sense of the suppressing of his own personality is precisely a *conditio sine qua non* of psychoanalysis. Various strategies of ‘anonymization’ – like sitting outside of the patient’s field of vision – are supposed to enable the physician to function as a suitable projection surface for the transmissions from the patient. However, the analyst is not supposed to consider himself and behave as a receiver of these transmissions, but rather he is supposed to act as a mediator between the (unprocessed) emotions of the patient’s past and his present emotions.

The figure of the witness also presupposes a seismographic potential (which is paradoxical, like all such unrealizable assumptions) in that the witness is an observer of rather than a participant in a past event and he must withhold his own judgement and commentary when describing this event.

And aren’t word-for-word translations, which Benjamin prefers because they manifest the differences between languages better than ‘creative’ adaptations, also a form in which the translator is considered ‘good’ precisely because he relinquishes his own personal ingenuity?

Various approaches to the self-withdrawal and self-neutralization of the medium have already been thematized – as pointed out earlier – such as Aristotle’s ‘diaphanous medium’, Fritz Heider’s ‘extra-conditionality’ of media, Niklas Luhmann’s ‘loose coupling’ by virtue of which the medium remains invisible in the visibility of the form itself, Dieter Mersch’s withdrawal of media in their implementation, and Boris Groys’s notion of the medium as a material sign vehicle that remains concealed behind the meaning of the sign and is only seen when the sign function is suspended, not to mention the topos of the ‘disappearing messenger’!

This raises the question of what has actually been accomplished by locating the an-aestheticization and self-neutralization of the medium in the *messenger’s errand*? What is the ‘added value’ of reformulating this phenomenon in the context of the messenger model?

To start with, the *definitional core* of my media concept is that the medium must suppress itself in order for something to be visualized. This conditional relationship can be considered the ‘basic law’ of the performance of media. The interrelationship between ‘making something appear’ and ‘withdrawing oneself’ provides a criterion that distinguishes media from related phenomena, such as signs but also technologies. To express this idea in a more ontologically cautious way: This criterion makes it possible to delineate the unique character of the *media perspective* from the perspective of signs and technologies. Moreover, this criterion represents the point at which medial disruptions and derailments are identifiable, as a medium
turns into a non-medium when it discards the neutrality of the mediator position in order to become a ‘party’ and actor itself. And the media of the arts can for the most part be understood as suspending this ‘functional law of mediality’, but in the process they also contribute to its illumination.

Nevertheless, the ‘added value’ of this concept exceeds the functional logic of mediality and the criteriological framework associated with it. It is related to a fundamental metaphysical intuition that the world in which we live is not the same as the world that appears to us. In the Western tradition, this intuition introduced a transcendence that was furnished with the index of an immateriality, which enabled it to elude localization in space and time. Yet regarding the medium as a messenger, who can only perform his task by withdrawing and suppressing himself, opens the possibility of reconstructing the relationship between the visible and the invisible (or: the audible, the palpable, etc.) as a *continuum of materiality*. And once again it is the trace – which I will address in the next chapter – that is particularly significant for this ‘grounding’ in materiality. First, however, I want to go one step further in answering the question of how the messenger perspective and the an-aestheticizing tendency of the medium provide a new dimension.

The messenger is a figure whose performance depends not on the strengthening, but rather on the weakening of the ‘self’: In order to reveal the other, the self must thereby withdraw. It is not an ‘I’, or even a ‘you’, but rather a ‘he, she, it’ in their unmitigated exteriority that are (made) present in the messenger’s errand. The messenger is the incarnation of the metamorphosis in which an *I becomes an other by transcending the self in the act and as an act of making the other perceptible*. Consider once again the metaphysical impulse to transcend one’s immediate existence. Is it possible that this impulse is based not simply on our epistemological relationship to the (visible or invisible) world, but rather – much more – on our ethical relationship to the other? To start with, does the ‘double world’ that metaphysics understands as its own reflection represent the social realm of experience of our personhood, which does not bear witness to the unalterable identity of the self but rather to the possibility of self-abandonment in order to render the other visible? The messenger perspective thus suggests that transcendence proves to be fundamentally self-transcendence: People do not transcend the visible world so much as the self in that they ‘speak with someone else’s voice’. It is no coincidence that the word ‘person’ refers to ‘*per-sonare*’, or speaking through the mask. How significant is the cultural-historical coincidence of theatre and metaphysics in this context?  

These thoughts anticipate the epilogue, but I will now turn to the question of how the idea of making something perceptible appertains to traces.
Reading Traces

This chapter will shed new light on the meaning of transmission by reflecting once again on the phenomenon of the trace. I will begin by clarifying the meaning of the term ‘trace’.

Traces as ‘Messengers from the Past’?
The word ‘footprint’ (Old High German ‘spor’, Middle High German ‘spur’) is etymologically significant because it provides a way of intuitively tracking down the conceptual origins of the trace. A footprint is an impression that reveals the presence of someone or something in the past; it crystallizes a movement in time as a spatial configuration. The presence of the trace thus bears witness to the absence of what caused it. While the trace is visible, what produced it remains withdrawn and invisible. In other words, the presence of the trace visualizes the non-presence of what left it behind. The trace embodies not the absent thing itself, but rather its absence.

The trace actually reflects the same quasi-magical ‘real presence’ that I already discussed as a facet of the efficacy of images, which similarly oscillate between the absence and presence of the pictured object: Because traces are due to the causal nexus of a past event, this event is ‘somehow’ projected into the present in the form of the trace. The trace thus reveals something that is irreversibly past yet still indirectly apparent at the time when the trace is recorded and interpreted.

Unlike the index, which signifies something synchronous even if it is perhaps not visible – like the (functioning) weathercock that demonstrates the direction of the wind – the formation of the trace is based on the fundamental asynchrony between the time when it is made and the time when it is read. Smoke is an index of fire, but ashes are its trace. Traces thus require a temporal break, as they always refer to a past event: traces are remnants.

This immediately suggests the question: Is it possible to conceive of traces as ‘messengers from the past’? Wouldn’t this provide the key to explain the presumably close relationship between messengers and traces, as messengers are understood as conveying transmissions across space while traces convey transmissions across time? Messengers and traces thus constitute different dimensions of transmission, which is understood in the former case as a spatial process and in the latter case as a temporal process. It would undoubtedly be possible to see it this way, yet this approach is not sufficient. From the very beginning, the basis of all transmission processes was described as the ‘in-between’ position of the messenger, which refers not only to spatial distances but to ‘difference’ in general.
Temporal displacements are therefore already implicitly included in the messenger model.

However, there is still a deeper underlying reason why it is insufficient to presume that traces are simply ‘messengers from the past’ – a reason, moreover, whose explanation suggests that the trace is more like a reversal of the messenger’s errand. That is therefore my hypothesis: Messengers and traces are paradigmatic configurations of transmission insofar as they are related to one another figuratively like the front and back sides of a page. As basic versions of transmission, messengers and traces are inseparably connected to each other. Nevertheless, they are connected such that – in keeping with the same metaphor – the ‘inscription’ that the messenger model leaves behind on the front side of the page is read ‘backwards’ and is thus inverted from the perspective of the back side – that of the trace. *Reading traces is thus considered the inverse function of the messenger’s errand.* This inversion suggests an expansion of the concept of transmission, but this expansion nevertheless reveals at the same time the borders of this concept.

So what does it mean to understand reading traces as an ‘inversion of the messenger’s errand’?

**Reading Traces as an Inversion of the Messenger’s Errand**

You will recall that the messenger is situated between two divergent heterogeneous sides and is thus associated with the postal principle. The roles of activity and passivity are clearly distributed: The sender tells the messenger to do something and the addressee receives something. The receiver is seen as the one to whom something is delivered; to express it in the language of telecommunications, he functions here only as an ‘information sink’. The messenger operates in the space of meaning deferral, which means precisely that the materiality and the meaning of the message are separate. The messenger’s ‘business’ thus unfolds in a continuum of materiality that serves its purpose when the transmitted message is received, regardless of the meaning that the message has for the receiver. Reception is independent of interpretation. That is why the postal principle is absolved of the burden of meaning – from the perspective of the messenger function at least.

But what happens to the distribution of activity and passivity and the abstraction of meaning when seen from the perspective of the trace? Can it be assumed that the one who left the trace behind plays the active role and the one who records and reads the trace more or less plays the passive role? Moreover, can traces also be localized in the intermediate space of meaning deferral, like messengers? Obviously traces cannot be reasonably
described in this way. And there are (at least) two interrelated reasons for this: The lack of motivation on the part of those who cause traces and the creation of traces through the act of reading them.

(i) I will begin with the lack of motivation: Traces are not produced, and this fundamentally distinguishes them from all other sign events – as well as from the messenger’s errand. Traces are unintentional remains: Only things left behind involuntarily, unintentionally, and uncontrollably can then be read as traces. If something is consciously designed as a trace, then it is not really a trace but rather the staging of a trace. It is not intentionality and conscious awareness that give rise to traces, but rather only the materiality and gravitational force of being; Traces are due to the ‘blind force’ of bodies acting on each other in the continuum of material worldly relations. This lack of motivation means that leaving traces behind is not a theoretical act: It is an effect, but it is never the intention, purpose, or goal of an action. Traces are not ordered or commissioned.

(ii) At the same time, the idea of intentionally creating traces does not completely disappear. In the messenger model it is the employer who actively creates, but in the case of traces this role is performed by the one who pursues and identifies them. Traces are thus constructed, and this insight shows how they invert the postal principle: Despite the fact that traces lack motivation, it is not absurd to assume that traces have a ‘creator’; however, this creator is to be found not where traces are caused, but rather where they are perceived and pursued. In order to understand this idea it is necessary to explain more precisely what it means to ‘read traces’. Traces are read – or at least this is what our language use implies; however, they are not written. The act of reading traces must therefore be understood as the act of ‘picking up’ and ‘reading out’. Traces are not simply encountered, but rather they originate in acts of securing and identifying traces, which in some cases are very difficult and elaborate. Strictly speaking, traces originate in the eye of the reader. Through the process of reading traces, ‘things’ that are the effects of something are transformed into traces for something. The direction of this process is shaped by the actual context of the search for traces or the interests that guide it. Furthermore, the search for traces is an activity that is only able to expose traces at all through intense engagement with the material that qualifies as a possible trace. Nevertheless, the use of the word ‘expose’, as well as ‘find’ and ‘discover’, is thoroughly ambiguous. When traces can be conventionalized in a kind of ‘sign register’, such as when ideal examples of tracks are represented in a hunting handbook, then it is possible to speak unproblematically of a
‘discovery of traces’ on the forest floor. However, this situation becomes much more complicated when the forest floor is half frozen and countless tracks run through one another; it is then a matter of determining how fresh or old the tracks are.

Actually, something only becomes a trace when it occupies a well-defined place in relation to a plausible story that produces a connection between the visible and the invisible. The formation of traces is always due to a disruption of order, which is then integrated into a new narrative order by reconstructing the trace-forming event as a story. And the story that corresponds to this reading – and thus the ‘semantic’ of the trace – is dependent on the interests of the reader, who is searching for a way to resolve something uncertain or unknown with the help of this practical and theoretical activity. Reading traces thus means ‘making things talk’, yet things are mute. They only become eloquent – and thus become traces – through the stories told by readers. And there are always many possible stories; traces are thus polysemic. Yet the idea of polysemy itself needs to be defined more precisely. Traces are not strictly speaking ambiguous, but rather the same perceptible mark can be transformed into entirely different traces of something depending on the narrative contexts and the reader’s orientation requirements.

Traces thus emerge through the work of interpretation, which is rooted in the actual context of the reader and is compatible with the narrative creation of causal dependencies. It is therefore impossible to separate what a trace is from the meaning associated with it. Traces represent the formation of sense out of non-sense.

Perhaps it is now clear: The concept of the trace as ‘involuntary messenger’ does not simply refer to traces of the past. Rather, some element of the material continuum, in which we are all embedded, is transformed into a medium insofar as something perceptible is regarded as a point of reference in order to reconstruct an event that is no longer perceptible. Causes have effects, but these effects do not have the status of traces. The transformation of an effect into a trace is not an act that can be attributed to those who caused the trace – who seldom have any interest in leaving traces behind; rather, it can only be attributed to those who receive what the trace medium can transmit. The trace is a ‘messenger’ that is ‘delegated’ – metaphorically speaking – by the receiver of the message.

In the context of the postal principle, this idea can also be expressed as follows: The reader of the trace acts as an addressee of something whose unintentional sender must first be reconstructed. It is precisely because of this role reversal that the trace is an inversion of the messenger concept.
Messenger and Trace, or On the ‘Sign’ as the Basis of Communication and Cognition

But what has been gained by this inversion? In other words, if the messenger and the trace are viewed as inverse media-theoretical figures that embody the ‘front and back sides’ of the postal principle, how does a consideration of this inversion expand the messenger perspective?

An answer immediately suggests itself: What the trace opens and adds is an *epistemological* expansion. Even though the transmission event is fundamentally about making something perceptible, the messenger is still an instance of *communication*. But the trace is part of the domain of *cognition*. The acts of identification associated with the reading of traces can provide a sense of guidance and transform uncertainty into certainty; the reading of traces is thus a cultural technique of knowledge production. When viewed from this perspective, reflecting on the trace expands the messenger model precisely by adding a dimension that is marked as a constraint in the transmission aspect of messages: namely, the idea that something new emerges and is discovered through transmission.

Carlo Ginzburg’s ‘paradigm of signs’ established a connection between, on the one hand, the ‘wild knowledge’ of reading traces as an archaic technique of orientation and, on the other hand, cognition through signs and symptoms as a humanities methodology.22 Even in the natural sciences – as Jörg Rheinberger already emphatically pointed out23 – the bulk of the investigations of what are often ‘invisible phenomena’ are due to the cultural technique of reading traces. Ludwig Jäger showed with his ‘transcription’24 approach that our ability to refer back to what we do as a trace, and thus to be able to maintain a distanced, observing, and reflecting relation to what we voluntarily and involuntarily create, is a if not *the* culture-endowing act. The aspects of this epistemology of the trace have been well examined elsewhere, so I won’t go into it here.25

A preliminary answer has now been found to the question of what is gained by shifting from the messenger to the trace. Our communication and our episteme are dependent on transmission conditions that are embodied in the figures of the messenger and the trace, which make something perceptible. When seen in the light of this concept of transmission, ‘signs’ prove to be the root of understanding (communication) *and* cognition.

However, as remarkable and momentous as the cultural and epistemological technique of reading traces is, *this* expansion of the messenger model is not yet enough. For the joke of the inversion of the messenger figure does not lie simply in the fact that it compensates for the deficits of the messenger model and thus expands it such that the act of ‘making the
imperceptible perceptible’ through transmission is not only fundamental to communication but also to cognition; even though this expansion is of considerable value. Rather, in the course of reflecting on traces the idea of transmission and medial mediation itself can become to a certain extent problematic and thus its borders can be made apparent. These borders emerge when the ‘reconstruction of the sender through the addressee’, which constitutes the nucleus of reading traces – up until now at least – is visualized as a ‘non-thing’, as something virtually impossible. And this dimension is revealed through Emmanuel Levinas’s reflections on the trace.26

Transmission as ‘Transition’: Mediality beyond Transmission

Levinas also leaves no doubt that traces can function as a kind of sign. While the mark lies in plain view, something concealed behind it can be deduced. In the process of interpreting this appearance as a trace, what is presently veiled can at the same time be unveiled. This is how a detective examines traces at a crime scene, how a hunter pursues tracks in the wild, how an archaeologist digs for the remains of past civilizations. Levinas actually distinguishes between signs and traces in terms of intentionality/unintentionality, but the trace always ‘also plays the role of a sign; it can be taken for a sign’.27 So, as my epistemology of the trace already shows, the trace is part of the universal referential context of the world, in which every effect can at the same time be considered a sign of its cause. When seen from this semiological perspective, the trace represents the possibility that the past is still available in the present through remains and the future can already be deduced in the present through signs. When the trace is viewed as a sign, according to Levinas, the world of the present merges with the past and the future in a more or less unified order. It is a ‘strategy’ that forces everything imperceptible back into the immanence of a discernible and manageable present, that reveals its transcendental character, and that integrates it more or less seamlessly into the familiar world. Through the semiology of the trace, the inaccessible beyond becomes part of the accessible world.

Yet this epistemological positivity obscures the specific meaning of the trace, which cannot be reduced to denotation and identification or revealing and unveiling. The authentic trace actually ‘disturbs the order of the world’28 insofar as it asserts an irresolvable unfamiliarity, an incomprehensible otherness, an irreversible pastness, a constitutive withdrawal. And it is this ‘disturbing’ function of the trace that reveals a mediality beyond transmission. I will address these points one by one.
First, visualize the philosophical motive that moves Levinas to understand the trace in the context of an ungraspable otherness. Western philosophy assumes that everything external, unfamiliar, transcendent, and otherworldly can be subsumed and absorbed into one’s own understanding by virtue of the egological function of consciousness. Odysseus, whose journey is ultimately a return to the self, thus becomes a symbolic figure: ‘This experience would still remain a movement of the same, a movement of an I.’29 This defence against the unfamiliar is an inherent part of human relationships, the fundamental aim of which is (usually) to unveil and understand the other and thus deprive the other of precisely his otherness.30 By understanding and assimilating the other according to the standards set by one’s own consciousness, the ‘I’ becomes absolute and the other becomes an ‘alter ego’.

But is this egological absorption the only possible way? What would it mean if the other actually remained ‘absolutely exterior’,31 if the ‘I’ experienced the other as something entirely external to the self – what Levinas calls a ‘heteronomous experience’32 – or, more precisely, if the ‘I’ was subjected to this experience of heteronomy? This would initiate a movement that does not return to its own starting point – like Odysseus; it would reveal a transcendence that no longer bends to the immanence of the self’s own familiar world.

This emergence of something other than the self occurs when the other is encountered as a trace – an ‘authentic trace’ that cannot function as a sign for something. Of course the other always remains a decipherable sign that can be deduced through ‘hermeneutics and exegesis’. But that is not the extent of its meaning. And this surplus of meaning, which is inherently beyond understanding, revealing, and unveiling, becomes apparent for Levinas in the ‘face’: ‘The phenomenon which is the apparition of the other is also a face’.33 Levinas’s concept of the ‘face’ must be understood as the manifestation of an inaccessible world whose essence cannot be found through the conscious interpretation of an appearance. This approach conceives of the face as an expression, but what manifests in the face cannot be understood as a sign. It is a sign that no longer refers to anything, and such a sign is precisely that of the ‘authentic trace’.

The face does not reveal a hidden world behind the visible surface, which emerges through the act of reading traces. The face is a kind of trace that is beyond our world; it transcends sign-mediated cognition. It is the trace of an absence that does not manifest in the present. ‘Such is the signifyingness of a trace.’34 The face reveals a transcendence that is opposed to the order of immanence insofar as time is experienced in the trace as absolutely
irreversible, as an irreversible past. It is therefore no longer a trace that is 'created' through interpretation, but rather it is a trace of the 'weight of being itself'.

So long as the trace is conceived as an index, it is always still committed to a model of simultaneity insofar as a past event becomes part of the present of a trace reader and this present can be successfully overcome through reference to the trace. In Levinas's interpretation however, the inimitability of the trace lies in the irreversible pastness of something; it testifies to a movement that is not (any longer) an Odysseian return and cannot be defined merely as 'passing toward a past'. Levinas does not say that time is spatialized in the trace or that time is thus inscribed in space, but rather that the spatial itself becomes temporal: ‘A trace is the insertion of space in time, the point at which the world inclines toward a past and a time.’

Traces are usually spatial configurations that accommodate our preference for representing and understanding temporality as spatial order (time frame, arrow of time, point in time...). Yet Levinas radically interprets traces as a temporal phenomenon, to which everything spatial must ‘defer’: As a result, the irreversible temporality that is encountered in the trace can no longer be converted into a simultaneity.

When the other is encountered as a face – Levinas emphasizes – he moves into the position of a third, which is outside the bipolarity of appearance and essence or ‘I’ and ‘you’. He becomes the ‘possibility of that third direction’ beyond the game of immanence and transcendence, which immanence always won. He is no longer subordinated to the ‘I’ and yet also escapes the familiarity of the ‘you’. He (‘il’) is the third person and is actually understood as ‘illé’ or ‘that’: Thirdness is encountered in the other as ‘illéité’. This inconceivability of the other permanently disrupts the egotism and autonomy involved in thinking of others as projections of the self. The face disarms the ‘I’. Levinas describes it as an ‘expulsion’ of the ‘I’ and his consciousness.

Yet for Levinas this ‘putting into question of the self’ is then transformed into a receiving of the other. And this reception of the incomprehensible other must be imagined as a call to be answered by the ego. The ‘I’ is virtually compelled to answer and the only thing that makes him unique is the fact that no one else can answer in his place. What emerges in the encounter with the inexplicable other is therefore responsibility as the nucleus of morality and ethics, which depends on this ‘practical turn’. Let it be understood: How this answer turns out, whether it results in solidarity or violence, is not at all certain. That is what makes the situation ethical: It can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ and it is thus characterized by the either-or of a moral
decision. With the ‘via negativa’ of the trace it becomes the starting point for exiting the self and entering into personal responsibility for the other. For Levinas, the ‘negative epistemology of the trace’ is transformed into a ‘positive ethics of the trace’, which can only be achieved as practical activity and practiced intersubjectivity.

‘Authentic Trace’ and Presence
How does Levinas’s idea of the ‘authentic trace’ contribute to these reflections on the theory of transmission?

(i) The authentic trace as opaque medium. To start with, it is a remarkable coincidence that Levinas’s concepts – summa summarum and taken literally – are reminiscent of the messenger model, as they involve a heteronomy, an exteriority that cannot be converted into an interiority, a thirdness beyond the relationship of ‘I’ and ‘you’, a passivity and a receiving, the spiriting away of interpretation and meaning, and even the material ‘weight of being’, which manifests itself instead of consciousness. The concept of reading traces provides a new perspective that expands the concept of the messenger by altering the distribution pattern of passivity and activity; instead of the sender, it is the interpreting and reconstructing reader and thus the ‘receiver’ who performs the active role. Although Levinas has good epistemological reasons for emphasizing this interpretative aspect of the trace as a sign, it is not philosophically appropriate for his concept of the trace, as everything there is to say about traces-used-as-signs has (already) been best explored and analyzed in semiotic discourse.

No, Levinas describes the reader of traces – the ‘I’ who encounters the face as a trace – as someone who receives and is even ‘afflicted’ but who precisely cannot seek refuge from this passivity in the activity of interpretation. What occurs here is a pole reversal of activity and passivity, if you will, as the ego loses the power of construction and interpretation granted to him as a reader of traces.

What the ‘I’ encounters in the trace is a form of mediacy that cannot dissolve into immediacy; it is not a transparent medium for another world, from which it bears witness to a message. The ‘authentic trace’ is a medium in its opacity: It is the appearance of the indissolubly unfamiliar, which does not belong to the world of the ego.

Until now the foundation of mediality has been characterized as ‘making the imperceptible perceptible’, which assumes that there is something beyond the medium that manifests in the medium itself, but this view must now be amended or to a certain extent revised: When the trace becomes an opaque medium for the ‘I’ rather than a referential sign, the result of its
refusal to ‘make something perceptible’ is that it elicits a response from the ‘I’ – no: it compels the ‘I’ to respond. But this response cannot be an epistemological-interpretative gesture, as Levinas rejects the notion that the medium mediates between the ‘I’ and a distant world. This response thus proves to be the elementary form of an ‘ethical act’ insofar as it initiates a relationship to the other – whether sympathetic or antipathetic. The ‘authentic trace’ of the other thus constitutes a medium, and the opacity of this medium precludes the possibility of semiological interpretation, which becomes the seed of (moral) action. For Levinas the difference between the sign and the trace, which can also be read as the difference between the sign and the medium, manifests as the difference between interpretation and action: Traces compel people to act. Does this relationship between mediality and action echo Benjamin’s claim that media have a performative dimension, as the immediacy of the medium reflects an agency that is most clearly expressed in the creative power of the word of God?

(2) The ‘authentic trace’ as the embodiment of a presence. Levinas’s considerations assume that by ‘using’ the trace as a sign for something, the reconstructed past as well as the predicted future are adapted to the regime of the familiar present. For the purpose of formulating a theory of transmission, this can also be understood as follows: The spatial implications of ‘carrying across’ – the etymological origin of transmission – ensure that references to time are based on simultaneity rather than asynchrony, which is inescapably tied to the idea of time as a continuous succession of events. Simultaneity is a spatially inspired notion of time that negates its irreversibility or its simple pastness.

Interestingly, this corresponds to an aspect of media that Friedrich Kittler saw more incisively than anyone else: It is the fact that all media have an inherent tendency towards time axis manipulation; the reversal of temporal orders is central to media technologies. There is no doubt that the mediality of the trace – inspired by Levinas – is to be understood as a break with this tendency to negate the irreversibility of time. It directly ushers in the irreversibility of time. For Levinas, therefore, ‘being other’ is actually ‘becoming other’, as it is contingent on the passage of time, and as a result the concept of ‘transmission’ is replaced by ‘transition’, which is embodied in the pastness of the trace. ‘Pastness’ should not be understood here as referring to a past event or to someone passing by who leaves behind a footprint that – potentially – allows him to be identified and recognized in the present. Rather, ‘pastness’ acknowledges the irreversible and ungraspable absence of these past events, which no media technology or interpretation is capable of bringing back.
While ‘transmission’ depends on and bears witness to the possibility of interrelating different things through simultaneity, the opaque trace is based on irreducible asynchrony. Yet this is precisely why the trace demands a response. The opaque mediality encountered in the face as a trace of the other at the same time proves to be the seed of an intersubjectivity that does not integrate the other into the subject’s horizon of understanding by transforming him into a sign, but rather allows him to ‘stand on his own’. The other is no longer a condensation of descriptions and designations, but rather he is ‘beyond representation’. For the first time, the other is truly present. The encounter with the other thus embodies a subversion of representation, which enables the experience of presence.

To return once again to the beginning of this study: From the outset it emphasized the difference between a medium and a sign – a difference, nevertheless, that should not be understood as disjointed ontological sorting, but rather as a methodological difference in the perspective that can be adopted with respect to one and the same fact. A medium is precisely not a material signifier. Indeed, what distinguishes a metaphysical approach, which attempts to unveil a hidden reality ‘behind the appearance’, is that the medium and the sign deviate from each other.

Material sign carriers must be perceptible, as their appearance to the senses promises an immateriality and transparency of the sensual that allows the meaning of the sign to be deduced (not through the senses). Media, on the other hand, convey meaning by virtue of their ability to conceal their own materiality and make themselves invisible. The relationship between mediacy and immediacy, between ‘depth’ and ‘surface’, is therefore transposed for the sign and the medium: The immediacy of the material sign carrier requires penetrating the surface and reaching the meaning of the sign, which is no longer visible but rather only interpretable. The immediacy of mediately conveyed meaning, on the other hand, requires leaving the surface behind in order to expose the hidden materiality of the medium in its ‘depths’. This materiality has just been explicated in the context of the transmission functions of the messenger.

Yet in the transition to the trace, which is considered an inverted form of the messenger model, a constellation emerges that is similar to the one between the sign and the medium. As a positive technique of orientation and cognition, the trace makes identification possible and thus proves to be semiological. The cause of the trace is therefore determined by the reader who interprets it, and it is only explicable as a narrative connection of transformations in the continuum of materiality of interrelated events. A posteriori, it could then be said of ‘successful’ interpretations that the
materiality of the perceptible trace represents their no longer perceptible and thus absent cause.

However, the materiality and exteriority of the authentic trace presents a presence that cannot be defined by relating it to something ideal or material or to causal relationships at all. And it is precisely for this reason that the authentic trace embodies a presence and (not only) a representation.

Understanding traces as modalities of the messenger serves to refine the distinction between the sign perspective and the media perspective, as this methodological distinction appears once again within the media perspective itself – namely, in the difference between the semiological and authentic trace.

Is it possible to conclude this discussion with a very general observation that signs are to media as representing is to presenting? Do media therefore create experiences of presence? Is this the source of their efficacy and fascination? The paradoxical ‘joke’ of this presence lies in the fact that – and this is precisely what is implied by the non-semiological dimension of the trace – it is the presence of an absence that cannot be converted into a presence but that still ‘draws in’ and involves the subject. (One example is Levinas's ‘response’ but another is ‘immersion’, a tendency inscribed in all media that does not begin with the virtual reality of the computer but rather already takes effect in the reading of a book, which grips and transfixes the reader.) *Media produce an immediacy of the mediated.* Does this involvement in something immediately at hand yet at the same time withdrawn constitute the nucleus of cultural practices? Is ‘unmediated mediation’ the term for this, and isn't this precisely what Benjamin understood by ‘medium’ (in contrast to ‘instrument’)?

The telos of the Enlightenment project seemed to be the discovery of symbolic difference, the categorical distinction between signifiers and signifieds, but in the late twentieth century this became problematic to a certain extent due to the discovery of the ‘quasi-magical power’ of the performative (Searle). ‘Performativity’ was thereby reconstructed as an attribute of semiotic processes insofar as these processes also perform and carry out what they signify.

It could also be said that in the performative representation changes into presence. From the perspective of the performative, the ingrained borders between ‘sign’ and ‘thing’ prove to be permeable. Can it be assumed that from the perspective of *media theory* presence is made possible through transmissions precisely because the imperceptible is made perceptible (as in the messenger’s errand)? Can it also be assumed that the perceptible appears as the irreducible and indissoluble presence of an absence (as in the
experience of the trace), which is no longer defined in relation to something imperceptible because medial presence is its *only* form of perceptibility and givenness? The complexity of the interplay between the messenger and the trace consists in the fact that both assumptions can be confirmed.