



# MEDIALITY IN THE MIDDLE AGES ABUNDANCE AND LACK

by  
**CHRISTIAN KIENING**

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## **ABUNDANCE AND LACK**

**CHRISTIAN KIENING**

Translated from the German

by Nicola Barfoot

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Christian Kiening  
Zurich, summer 2019



## Chapter I

# INTRODUCTION

### Alterity

Mediality in the Middle Ages—for some this title may evoke communication with spirits, while others will be reminded of a popular internet clip, usually entitled “Medieval Helpdesk,” in which a monk who is learning to use a new medium is assisted by an expert. The monk complains about problems handling it, difficulties opening it, the fear that the text, once he has finally found it, might disappear again. The expert explains the logic of the medium to him: “Well you see, there are hundreds of pages of text saved in this thing. So to proceed you just grab one sheet of paper and turn it over like this.” The monk answers: “When you’re used to paper rolls, it takes some time to convert to turning the pages of a—beek [!].”<sup>1</sup>

The book in the form of the well-known codex is defamiliarized. It appears as an exotic, awkward object, which humankind has yet to learn to use, a tool which the user needs help with, a medium whose benefit has yet to manifest itself. This device—presenting one of the oldest media as if it were new—ironizes contemporary digital media culture—which, for its part, embraces this treatment. The scene, first acted on stage, then broadcast on television, had its greatest impact on the internet, where the book in fact looks like an archaic relict, something to marvel at from the point of view of media postmodernity. The sketch does actually evoke a key event in media history, the transition from scroll to codex. It does not situate it in late antiquity, however, but in an undefined present, which presupposes precisely those developments whose putative beginnings feature here. The fundamental advantage of the codex, allowing rapid movement in the text and discontinuous reading,<sup>2</sup> is demonstrated with a situation in which the consequences of the new technology have apparently not yet been understood; a situation, however, which is regarded from a specific point of view: the assumed end of the Gutenberg era. This perspective provides our own age of rapid media changes with a neat genealogy.

This little sketch shows a fundamental tendency of media forms: the tendency to assimilate or to reference other media forms. Thus the material medium of transmission (codex) contains, on a particular writing material (parchment, paper), arrangements of signs (writing), which can be produced with different techniques (handwriting, printing), and have their origins in a communication system (language). This constellation can in turn be reflected on by means of verbal or visual processes of mediation. And as in this example, it can use additional framing devices (stage, internet) to relate the

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from the show *Øystein og jeg*, Norwegian Television (NRK), 2001; author: Knut Nærum.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Stallybrass, “Books and Scrolls.”

media phenomena in ways that resemble not the logically structured layers of a Russian doll, but the paradoxical, discontinuous timeframes of a computer game.

Here the clip also shows a basic tendency in reflexive approaches to media: in each case, the new media are viewed in the context of the familiar. The present defines itself in relation to what has preceded it, and what is expected to follow. As the production of manuscripts increased in the High Middle Ages, novels and stories depicted scenarios of oral communication. Printing in the late fifteenth century was practically and theoretically related to the culture of the manuscript. Seventeenth-century newspaper theory defined the new medium in terms of older oral and written forms of communication, in particular other products of the printing press. In the pioneering phase of the modern media age, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, attempts were made to apprehend the new technologies with reference to older models: to explain film, for example, with reference to medieval panel painting or early modern theatre. In each case, the focus was on the potential benefits of new media forms. Often this could best be demonstrated by relating them not to the most recent forms, but to older, established forms. This resulted in discontinuous genealogies, which nonetheless tended to have a teleological slant.

Since the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964) it has been customary to understand media as “extensions of man,” extensions of the senses and the memory. From here it is an obvious step to classify these extensions as an evolutionary history: firstly the individual human, whose body serves as the primary medium in direct communication with other humans, then writing and printing media, which extend the body in various stages, and finally electronic and digital media, which can pick up or sublate the other media forms in hybrid fashion. From this perspective, it is mainly innovations and revolutions that are of interest: the transition from oral to written culture, from the manuscript to printing, from communication close to the body to communication far from the body, from simple forms to complex and hybrid ones. In view of the accelerated rate of innovation in the current media, and their ever-diminishing half-life, the timescale relevant for the present media age is shrinking visibly. Many media histories with a global perspective do not begin until the early modern period.<sup>3</sup> Others do discuss the period before printing, but depict the Middle Ages as an earlier history that is either empty or has been superseded, replaced by the technological developments of the modern period.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the hybrid nature of today’s media can lead to a return of things that have supposedly been discarded. When belief in the linearity of history weakens, its prior history appears in a different light. In the new digitally produced images, for example, traditional forms of image and principles of writing seem to be experiencing a resurgence. The media philosopher Vilém Flusser sees the (post)modern communication revolution, with its new orality and visuality, as a “return to the Middle Ages”: the “return to an original situation which was disrupted and interrupted by printing and

<sup>3</sup> For example *Vom Holzschnitt zum Internet*; Stöber, *Mediengeschichte*.

<sup>4</sup> de Kerckhove, *Schriftgeburten*; Peters, *Speaking into the Air*; Hörisch, *Der Sinn und die Sinne*; *Handbuch der Mediengeschichte*; Zielinski, *Archäologie der Medien*; *Medien vor den Medien*.

universal literacy.”<sup>5</sup> The key words “return” and “interrupt” already show that there are quite heterogeneous models of historical progression involved here. Ultimately what matters is not so much this progression as the power of ahistorical analogies.<sup>6</sup> Medieval audiovisuality has been linked with modern multimodality, the hand of God with the data glove, manuscript pages with user interfaces.<sup>7</sup> This defamiliarizes our perspective on the present media age—as seen in the “Medieval Helpdesk.” But it also sacrifices the unwieldy strangeness of the past in favour of superficial references to the present or nostalgic retrospectives.

And yet the past has more to offer than a reservoir from which interpretations of the present can help themselves as they please. Studying the past can broaden the context in which the present observes itself. And it can offer a corrective to the self-perception of this present, its belief that it has authority over the past and at the same time sublates it in a uniform realm of perception. To counteract this belief, it is necessary to engage with the historical facts, facts that are no longer necessarily familiar, but have not yet become completely unfamiliar, facts that have not simply maintained their influence, but have not yet fully disappeared either. The written and pictorial practices of the Western Middle Ages, for example, should not be viewed as utterly mysterious from the point of view of modernity, despite all declarations that the age of the book or the age of the image is over. They should in any case not seem as mysterious as those prehistoric arrangements of stones, of which we still do not know whether they served religious, astronomical, or aesthetic purposes, or the interweaving of writing and ornament in Islamic architecture, which leaves the European observer uncertain where—or indeed whether—to look for meaning.

In contrast, the Western Middle Ages is still part—albeit a peripheral part—of our cultural knowledge. This is what makes it particularly suitable as an object of observation—not least the observation of media conditions *before* the development of media discourses. Such a discourse becomes tangible in the seventeenth century, for example, when theoretical, systematic, and encyclopedic works attempted to comprehend and classify the new medium of the newspaper. Their assessment of the benefits it provides is as follows: it conveys information, knowledge, and education, gives visibility, establishes a public sphere, facilitates communication, and helps with the exercise of power. It is a pragmatic medium, which at the same time transports a wide variety of sensations: “Da reise ich in Gedanken durch die weite Welt / ich schiffe über Meer / bin bey den See- und Landschlachten gegenwärtig / schaue zu / wie man die Flügel schwinget / auf einander feuer giebet / Gefangene hinweg führet / Stücke vernagelt / Minen sprengt und Beute machet / und dieses alles ohne einzige Gefahr / Mühe und Kosten” (I travel in thoughts through the wide world / I sail across the sea / am present at battles on land and sea / watch / armies beat their wings / open fire on one another /

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5 Flusser, *Kommunikologie*, 53; see also Flusser, “Die Wiederkunft des Mittelalters.”

6 For a critical view of such analogies see Spiegel, “Getting Medieval.”

7 Cf. Wenzel, *Mediengeschichte*.

lead prisoners away / spike cannons / blow up mines and seize booty / and all this without any danger / trouble and expense).<sup>8</sup>

Media discourses take on a distinct form in the course of the nineteenth century. News technology accelerates. New technologies are developed for writing and printing, recording and reproduction. It becomes more natural to assume a “reality of second-order observation.”<sup>9</sup> Just as the “medium” is now regarded as a neutral interface, a role that can be played by different entities, so, conversely, can different media forms be classed as belonging to the same category. It is in this sense that Friedrich Nietzsche, in his text *Ueber Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne* (1873), demonstrates the illusory nature of the idea that language or other forms of communication can reproduce reality or truth. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus* (1921), observes: “Die Grammophonplatte, der musikalische Gedanke, die Notenschrift, die Schallwellen, stehen alle in jener abbildenden internen Beziehung zu einander, die zwischen Sprache und Welt besteht. Ihnen allen ist der logische Bau gemeinsam” (“The gramophone record, the musical thought, the score, the waves of sound, all stand to one another in that pictorial internal relation, which holds between language and world. To all of them the logical structure is common”).<sup>10</sup> The statement reflects the proliferation of new technical media since the late nineteenth century. It is made in a context in which news and information technologies will soon be experimenting with the use of the plural “media.”<sup>11</sup> This is not simply referring to old phenomena with new terms. Instead it expresses a changed social situation. Modernity has acquired a new degree of awareness of its own conditions of communication. It sees media reflexivity as part of its own self-understanding.

This is the basis for that practical and theoretical development that is implied in the concept of the media society: the development toward such a dominance and diversification of the medial that—depending on the theoretical model used—it is not just the traditional media of communication, storage, and transfer that can be regarded as media, but all sorts of other forms: “a chair, a wheel, a mirror (McLuhan), a school class, a football, a waiting room (Flusser), the election system, the general strike, the street (Baudrillard), a horse, a dromedary, an elephant (Virilio), gramophone, film, typewriter (Kittler), money, power and influence (Parsons), art, faith and love (Luhmann).”<sup>12</sup> More recent additions are the frog (Rieger), or the four elements (Peters).

From this diversified situation, in which there is nothing that cannot become a medium, it is easy to project back into the past. Medieval forms of documentation such

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<sup>8</sup> Stieler, *Zeitungs Lust und Nutz*, 22 (1, 3).

<sup>9</sup> Luhmann, *Reality of the Mass Media*, 85. For the development of “modern” relations of observation in the nineteenth century see Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*.

<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 65 (4.014).

<sup>11</sup> For the dynamics of development before and after 1900, see Andriopoulos and Dotzler, 1929. *Schnittpunkte der Medialität; Medientheorie 1888–1933*.

<sup>12</sup> Roesler, “Medienphilosophie und Zeichentheorie,” 34. In terms of the classification of scientific fields, Posner, “Zur Systematik,” 293–98, distinguishes a biological, a physical, a technical, a socio-logical, a culture-related and a code-related concept of the media. For a comprehensive overview see *Medienwissenschaft*.



as the sermon or the broadsheet then become early “mass media,” printing becomes an information system, and a communication cycle in which “coding” and “programming” is undertaken.<sup>13</sup> This is, in itself, not especially productive. Nor is the opposite attitude: ignoring the fact that there were conventionalized *media* forms long before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and long before “media” became an established expression. The problem has been well known since the beginnings of media theory: how can we use categories with a specifically modern frame of reference to describe phenomena to which these categories are foreign? The only solution, probably, is to turn the potential anachronism into a productive heuristic instrument, to avoid “colonizing” the past with intrusive terminology. To do justice to the idiosyncrasy of earlier realities and their relationship to later history, taking a microhistorical approach to the inner logic of specific media forms, and not just a macrosociological approach to the “historical types of society” preceding the actual “media society” that has developed as a result of industrialization.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, the Middle Ages offer an opportunity to observe media phenomena that lasted a certain time and had some influence, but began as insecure and experimental in nature. We encounter processes of emergence, expansion, and development, where there are no clear distinctions between one phase and the next, and we find a mingling of practice and reflection that has not yet been discursively consolidated.<sup>15</sup> For example, pragmatic written culture is on the increase from the twelfth century onwards. Yet oral culture does not decline because of this, nor is the aura of writing diminished. No rivalry arises between the “arts” of the word and the image, nor is the body eliminated from communication.<sup>16</sup> Instead, this enables people to deal with media forms in more efficient and complex ways. Writing allows discipline, standardization, and consolidation. But it also opens up new dimensions for the depiction of orality, or for the interlinking of the auratic, the pragmatic, and the reflexive. Moreover, it is related to visual forms in various ways. Even in the early modern period, the presence of bodies and communication among people present in the same place continue to be of central importance.<sup>17</sup>

So what about the often-evoked media transformation? Can it actually be described as a transformation of media, or more as a transformation from unfixed media forms to clearly defined media? In 1993, in a pioneering work of media history on a theologian of the High Middle Ages, Hugh of St. Victor, Ivan Illich put forward a new perspective—focusing less on radical technological changes in the media (the introduction of the alphabet, the codex,

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**13** Giesecke, *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit*; for a critical view see Jan-Dirk Müller, “Überlegungen zu Michael Giesecke: Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit,” *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 18 (1993): 168–78; Schanze, “Der Buchdruck eine Medienrevolution?” For references to printing in media theory see Grampp, *Ins Universum technischer Reproduzierbarkeit*; for an overview of the early modern development of media see Würgl, *Medien in der frühen Neuzeit*.

**14** Saxer, *Mediengesellschaft*, 48.

**15** For a summary see Kiening, “Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive.”

**16** Cf. Kiening, *Zwischen Körper und Schrift*.

**17** Schlögl, *Anwesende und Abwesende*.

printing) than on a phase of restructuring, in which many intellectual, social, and technical elements coincide. What he observes, concentrating on the appearance of written texts and approaches to the book, is the emergence of a new concept of text: no longer bound to the materiality of what is written, but to a certain unity of thought, an intentional concept, independent of the form that is actually present in each case—in Niklas Luhmann's terms: a medium.

If we understand medium in this sense, we have to look to the diverse network of factors and parameters that play a part in mediation. What we traditionally refer to as media do not exist by nature. They arise from a practice in which things can be used, and phenomena perceived, either in one way or another. I can use a piece of fired clay as a thing, but I can also turn it into a medium, by putting signs on it or making it transport information, energies, or emotions in some other way. Certain modes of use of this kind have been conventionalized and standardized in culturally specific ways in the course of historical processes—to such an extent that it is almost possible to forget all the different things that can be done with an object we regard as a medium, or all the different ways a phenomenon we regard as medial can be considered. A book, for example, does not have to be used as a carrier of information, in which we turn the pages and read. It can also serve as an auratic object, in which the divine is supposedly present, or as a remedy, used for healing purposes, or as a means of protection, held over the head. It is important, then, to develop a broader awareness of the different ways things have historically been used and reflected on.

## Inner Logic

Scholars in the Middle Ages had only a partial knowledge of the extant classical texts about material forms of transmission. Plato's reflections on the status of writing (*Phaedrus*) or of signs in general (*Cratylus*) were not known in the Middle Ages, and the profound reflection on direct and indirect perception in the allegory of the cave (*The Republic*) was only available in Cicero's simplified version. The idea tested in the *Timaeus* of a third realm, between the realm of ideas and that of things, constituting a space of becoming, recording, or mediation (*chóra*), initially had next to no effect—unlike the related idea of the demiurge. What was influential was Aristotle's treatise on the soul (*De anima*), translated into Latin. Among other things, this text proposes a theory of perception and knowledge in which mediations play an important part. In contrast, Lucretius's subtle phenomenology of the transmission of sounds or images, undertaken in the framework of his atomistic natural philosophy (*De natura rerum*), was not rediscovered until the Renaissance. Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, or texts based on it in the medieval encyclopedias, were a source of all kinds of information, for example about materials, techniques, crafts, and arts. The main authority, however, when it came to the senses, perception, and the handing down of tradition was the biblical texts. In the Old Testament, communication with God takes place through listening and speaking. While seeing is problematized, writing and the written word play a somewhat marginal role; they feature most prominently in relation to the law given to the Israelites by God (Exodus, Deuteronomy) or in the context of the prophetic mission (Ezekiel). In the New

Testament, media forms such as sermons, letters, and epistles play a part—these then crystallize into an audio-vision of the unheard-of and the unspeakable in the final text, the book of Revelation.

Works such as these were able to inspire medieval scholars to think about the ideas, forms, and conventions of mediation and transfer. Theological texts deal with the Trinity, Christology or Mariology, liturgy, the sacraments, or figural typology. They revolve around the modalities of divine and human communication, and the relationship between archetypes and copies. Philosophical texts discuss the processes of mediation which take place during the act of seeing, and reflect on the specific nature and limitations of language and signs. Narrative texts, pictorial works, or maps stage moments of communication, transmission, and recording.

Although their theoretical potential is in some cases implicit rather than explicit, all these forms operate with models of mediation processes, or structural patterns. These, however, do not necessarily concern communication in the sense familiar to us.<sup>18</sup> This is more about questions of identity, representation, and exchange. How can communication within the Trinity, and the mediation between God, the world, and the human soul be conceived? How does the seen object relate to that which appears to the eye? Does the articulated word coincide with the *significatio*? Can signs be trusted? Can pictures be narrated? Who is able to act as a proxy for someone else, to represent him? Can a *mappa mundi* combine knowledge about salvation history, history, and geography in such a way that a completely meaningful world opens up when the map is read and viewed?

Modern reflection on the media is based on the idea that there are epistemological interfaces that can be occupied in different ways. Medieval thinkers, on the other hand, experimented with the diverse nuances of the imagery of transfer, without systematically relating these to one another. Messengers could take the form of angels, illustrating the relationship between transcendence and immanence, but they could also serve as personifications of the human senses, demonstrating the workings of perception.<sup>19</sup> The model of the messenger could also, however, be contrasted with the figure of the heir, who stands for both a transmission in space *and* a transfer in time.<sup>20</sup>

There was therefore no need for a standardized inventory of types of recording or communication based on shared formal features. The classifications that were developed from the twelfth century onwards for all existing and imaginable things were arranged according to models of similarity, conceived in ontological or genealogical, linguistic or rhetorical terms. What we refer to as media, on the other hand, would most likely have been seen by medieval intellectuals, following Augustine, as signs. In Book 2 of his work *De doctrina Christiana* (397/426), which was widely used as a handbook, Augustine had

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Modelle des Medialen*.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Gespräche—Boten—Briefe*; Merceron, *Le message et sa fiction*; *Engel und Boten*; Chabr, *Botenkommunikation*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Nicolaus de Cusa, *De pace fidei*, chap. 11, no. 33: "In haerede regni est proprie verbum regis vivum et liberum et illimitatum, in missivis nequaquam. [...] in verbo haeredis complicantur omnia verba nuntiorum et missivarum."

distinguished between natural and conventional signs. In the latter category he included those signs that serve the mutual mediation (*communicatio*) of human perceptions (*sensus*). These signs relate to both the sense of sight (gestures, facial expressions, and visual forms) and the sense of hearing (articulatory forms). The focus, however, is not so much on the relationship between the forms as on their connection to reality and truth. When pictures and statues are mentioned in the same breath as fables, clothing, and coins, this has to do with the following question: to what extent do these human institutions, inescapably linked with appearance and artifice (*instituta adumbrata*), still bear some resemblance to natural institutions, or in other words, do they still have a model in nature?<sup>21</sup>

In similar fashion, Hugh of St. Victor—a theologian influenced by Augustinian and Neoplatonic ideas, who produced another theory of knowledge of considerable importance for the Middle Ages, the *Didascalicon* (ca. 1128)—distinguishes between three different creative works: that of God, that of nature, and that of man, imitating nature.<sup>22</sup> The last category includes the “countless types of painting, weaving, sculpting and casting” (1:9). Later, however, in the context of the *artes mechanicae*, these appear under the heading “weapon-making arts” (*armatura*), before merchant shipping, agriculture, hunting, medicine, and theatrical art. Here a connection could be made back to the mimetic arts. But theatre is of interest only with regard to the question of why, given the early Christian condemnation of heathen plays, theatre is considered one of the permitted human activities (2:20–27). This shows how much a classification according to prescribed patterns dominates: the division of arts and sciences, the structure of university study, the anthropological origins of different activities. On the one hand, it is seen as typical of poets and philosophers that they throw very different “things into one” (*compilantes*) and “thus in a sense [make] a single picture out of a multitude of colours and shapes” (3:4; “quasi de multis coloribus et formis, unam picturam facere”). Yet on the other hand, the metaphorical bridge between writing and image leaves unspoken what point in the media system connects them.

Various forms can be linked together by way of their function: they play a similar role in the relationship between the earthly and the celestial. They are aids (*instrumenta*) or tools (*arma*), which can compensate for human perceptual deficits and expand the senses. In the thirteenth century, Bonaventure mentions models (*exemplaria*), reproductions (*exemplata*), shadows (*umbrae*), echoes (*resonantiae*), paintings (*picturae*), traces (*vestigia*), appearances (*simulacra*), and spectacles (*spectacula*). Their common feature is that they all have to do with sensory phenomena, but at the same time pay attention to the extrasensory dimension. They not only present references, but serve to mediate something that is inherently difficult to mediate: the logic of the divine creation. They are signs that lead to a signified (*per signa ad signata*)—which is recognizable and at the same time removed.<sup>23</sup> In other words, this is about material concretizations that can be

21 Meier-Oeser, *Spur des Zeichens*, 20–30.

22 Hugo von St. Viktor, *Didascalicon*.

23 Bonaventura, *Itinerarium*, 2:11.

perceived, but must be transcended. They are medial in character, but not in the sense that they mediate between two quantities. Rather, they represent complex figurations, linking “horizontal” and “vertical” forms of communication in the tension between once, now and then, here and there, available and unavailable.

As far as terminology is concerned, a medieval author would have been unlikely to use the expression *mediatio*, which belonged more to music theory or law, or the expression *medietas*, which referred to general forms of middle or mid-point. Nor would he have used the expression *medium*. For him this would have been more likely to refer to the middle element in logic or other middle elements: man as a *medium* between *utibilia* and *fruibilia*, the *auctoritates* as a *medium* between Old and New Testament, *natura* as a *medium* between *essentia* and *persona distincta*, *intellectus* as a *medium* between *natura* and *voluntas*, or *potentia generandi* as a *medium* between *absolutum* and *relatum*.<sup>24</sup> To characterize the specific mediation between times and spaces, other terms were available. For example, *figura*: the ambiguous designation for a device that can make truth (*veritas*) appear to the senses, without being more than a shadow (*umbra*) of this truth.<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas gives succinct expression to this idea with his observation that where truth prevails, that is, with Christ, the figure must retreat (“Veniente enim veritate, debet cessare figura”; *Summa theologiae* 3<sup>a</sup>, q. 61, a. 4, arg. 1). This does not invalidate the God-given existence of sacramental signs, but it does change their character: they no longer refer to what is still to come, but to what has already happened.

The same applies to church *officia*. In his *Rationale* (before 1286), in which he systematically discusses Christian ritual and the realm of the church, the French theologian Guillelmus Durandus speaks of the *officia*, the *res ac ornamenta*. He understands them as *exemplaria*, in other words as forms that present an image and are at the same time part of the archetype. They mean something (*significare*) and represent something (*figurare*); at the same time they themselves are salvific and filled with heavenly sweetness.<sup>26</sup> They are *signa* and *mysteria*, whereby even the salvific objects are dependent on the texts and images that accompany, legitimate, and authenticate them. Even though they partake of the divine, all material forms are also deficient, in that they are marked by the difference which separates the earthly from the celestial.<sup>27</sup>

## Abundance and Lack

This pair of opposites has been known since antiquity. According to Hippolytus of Rome, Heraclitus regarded the created world as its own designer and creator, and as the union of opposites: “God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and

<sup>24</sup> Examples from Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on the *Sentences*: *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*; cf. entries on *medium* in *Index thomisticus*: [www.corpusthomisticum.org/it/index.age](http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/it/index.age).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Figura*.

<sup>26</sup> Faupel-Dreys, *Vom rechten Gebrauch der Bilder*, 373–80 (translation of the prologue).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. for example Schwarz, *Visuelle Medien*, 25–64.

famine" (Fragment 67).<sup>28</sup> Plato has Socrates discuss the myth of the parents of Eros, Poros (resourcefulness) and Penia (poverty), whose qualities are united in the child, who is destined to be a mediator (*Symposium* 201d–4c). Cicero and other Stoicists assume an opposition between a modest and fulfilled life, and a worthless one (*frugalitas/nequitia*). It was the reshaping of these ideas by Augustine, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite that became critical for the Middle Ages. They connect the creative logic of the cosmos with the history of human salvation (and human disaster). In his early dialogue *De beata vita*, Augustine contrasts *plenitudo* with *egestas*, and relates this to the ontological opposition between being and not-being.<sup>29</sup> The Neoplatonic tradition defines this opposition as a fundamental one between the one and the many, the creator and the creature, the eternal and the temporal—whereby the principle of abundance or plenty (*abundantia, plenitudo*) is now no longer ascribed to the many, but, on the contrary, to the one—which, if it is to be a principle, must also contain within itself everything that emanates from it.<sup>30</sup>

This then leads to the need for levels of mediation and forms of participation which weaken the radical opposition between the one and the many. This coincides with central developments in Christian thinking. The reassessment of values in twelfth-century theology has particularly far-reaching consequences in this respect. As the human and above all suffering Christ takes centre stage, humans, in their physical-spiritual unity, are presented with a new opportunity to participate in the divine. Lack can now, on a higher level, be recoded into a form of abundance—or at least into its precondition. An ascetic life, a bare décor, a simple style, the return to basic archetypes: in all the medieval reform movements and efforts, these can be regarded as the prerequisite for revealing future plenitude in the here and now. In the context of the mendicant movement, poverty (*paupertas*) is not the expression of a structural deficit (*privatio*), but of a conscious decision to follow a spiritual orientation.<sup>31</sup> This orientation does not fundamentally eliminate the opposition between abundance and lack. But by cross-blending past, present, and future moments in time, it tests the possibilities of such an elimination.

A relatively late but apposite synthesis, in the *Compendium* of Nicholas of Cusa (1463/1464), presents the underlying logical pattern of the Christian-Neoplatonic dialectic of abundance and lack as follows. The one, because of its over-abundance, cannot remain by itself. It must bring forth the many out of itself. In this many, however, it cannot be in the same way it is in itself. It must translate itself into communicable forms, into things that are easily understood, and these must then be duplicated into signs, so that they can be perceived by the sensory capacity of humans (and animals). These signs may vary in character, and may be perceived by different senses. But they are always only

<sup>28</sup> Heraclitus, *Fragments*, 45.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Beierwaltes, *Regio beatitudinis*.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Halfwassen, *Der Aufstieg zum Einen*, 118–30; for the *fontalis plenitudo* (Hugh of St. Victor, Bonaventure) see Kvamme, *The fontalis plenitudo*.

<sup>31</sup> For *paupertas* see David Flood, "Armut. VI. Mittelalter," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 4 (1979): 88–98; *In propositio paupertatis*.



likenesses, incomplete by nature, so that the human arts (writing, for example) must assist them, and human reason must connect the isolated elements into a greater whole, thus proving itself to be the mirror of divine reason; a chain of mediation processes, then, all marked by difference, but able to form a bridge between divine powers of creation and human powers of cognition.

Medieval thinkers understand the highest religious entities—God, being, the one, the true, the good, salvation—as being spatially and temporarily out of reach, as entities that “transcend” the Aristotelian categories for the classification of the things that exist. But this does not mean that these *transcendentia*, as they have been called since the thirteenth century, are altogether inaccessible.<sup>32</sup> It is only for modernity that the transcendence of God becomes something that is, per se, unreachable from the immanent, for example from the world: it constitutes something else, an outside, that can only be observed in such a way as to “recreate” it on the inside.<sup>33</sup> In the Middle Ages, in contrast, the *transcendentia* extend into the realm of immanence. The theologians assume that God himself will ensure that his creation, the world, and especially humankind, will not fall into decline. This is why, they assume, he uses textual revelations, apparitions perceptible to the senses, and historical events to reveal to humanity, or more precisely, to humans who transcend their own deficiency, the possibility of understanding some part of the divine plan. These revelations, apparitions, and events are forms of divine self-communication toward humanity, and aspects of a work of salvation that presents itself as a paradoxical communication process: based on mediation, it both displays and sublates it. Mediation proves to be as necessary as it is provisional—necessary with regard to the conditions of worldly immanence, provisional with regard to the sublation of these conditions at the end of times.

One can understand this as a possible way to both retain and transcend the categorical difference between the finite and the infinite, creation and creator. “There is no proportion between finite and infinite” (“finiti ad infinitum nulla est proportio”)—this sentence, which goes back to Aristotle, has been quoted again and again since the era of Scholasticism. But it is not only aimed at humans, who understand the divine as beyond comparison. It is also used to refer to God, of whom it is assumed that he relates to the creation as to an entity that emanates from him but is infinitely different to him. It is in this sense that Thomas Aquinas, in the quaestiones *De veritate*, discusses whether God is able to recognize something outside himself. The initial hypothesis is that this is not possible: “The medium through which a thing is known ought to be proportionate to that which is known through it. But the divine essence is not proportionate to a creature, since it infinitely surpasses it, and there is no proportion between the infinite and the finite. Therefore, by knowing His own essence, God cannot know a creature” (q. 2, a. 3, arg. 4).<sup>34</sup>

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**32** For the broad medieval debates see Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*; Aertsen, *Medieval Philosophy as Transcendental Thought*.

**33** Luhmann, *A Systems Theory of Religion*.

**34** Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, 66–67.



Figure 1. Prophet dictates the prophecies inspired by Christ the Word; *Frowin-Bibel*, third quarter of twelfth century; Engelberg, Stiftsbibl., Cod. 3, fol. 189v. Used with permission.

The synthesis, however, leads beyond this proposition. Thomas now makes a distinction in the modus of proportionality, suggesting that things can be proportionate in two ways—either between themselves or through a shared reference to something else. The first option, *proportio* in the proper sense, cannot apply to the finite and the infinite, as these belong to different classes. The second, on the other hand, *proportionalitas*, is quite admissible, argues Thomas: just as infinite is generally related to infinite, so it can also be related to the *medium* through which it is recognized; in this sense, “there is nothing to prevent the divine essence (*essentia*) from being the medium (*medium*) by which a creature is known.”<sup>35</sup>

35 Thomas Aquinas, *Truth*, 73.



One can regard this as clever reasoning or pedantry. In either case, the question about the relationship between categorially unlike things, posed here in relation to God, highlights the problem that also arises for the relationship between the human and the divine: it is necessary to imagine a form of mediation which neither fundamentally negates the difference nor sublates it in a logically problematic mixture. The model of participation serves as a solution. Even in antiquity no one could imagine that transmission took place in an empty space, as a purely passive process: in the *Timaeus*, Plato experimented with the *chóra* as a simultaneously passive and active means of mediation. Aristotle, in his treatise *On the Soul* (418b/419a), which was also widely read in the Middle Ages, explained why it was not possible to see something if “the in-between” (*to metaxy*) was empty, and why it was not enough to assume a passive, transferring substance (light, ether). He argued that active entities were necessary: movement of the form on the one hand, memory, imagination and fantasy on the other, and these in turn had to interact.<sup>36</sup> In medieval theories of vision, the eye or the ray of vision then appears as a medium, which transports substances and creates contacts: “When the interior ray emerges from the eye, it mingles with the external light and extends to the opaque object. By its natural mobility, it is diffused over the surface of the object and assumes the object’s shape (*figura*) and color; thus informed and colored, the ray returns to the soul through the same apertures, carrying the shape and color of the object to the soul.”<sup>37</sup> This participative model of mediation is encountered in its most radical form in the context of Christology: Christ, it is argued, can be called a *mediator*, because a middle element has to have something of that which it mediates between.<sup>38</sup> The corresponding *communicatio*, according to this argument, was not a simple exchange, but a permeation: the two natures were united in the person of Christ, unmixed and undivided—in such a way that the one always had a share in the attributes of the other, in the sense of a *communicatio idiomatum*.<sup>39</sup>

This perfect “communication,” however, is denied to man. He represents both the pinnacle and the weak point of creation. His physical and spiritual unity reflect the universality of creation, and the mediatory office of the redeemer—but only as potential. Removed from the divine, man can perceive the perfect only as an ideal. Although he himself is God’s image, his quality as an image is marked by difference. Partaking of the divine through the Word incarnate, he must first regain access to this—for example through the inner word (*verbum cordis*), in which communication and reception of the divine pervade each other. Thus man operates in a realm of mediations, which both reveal and dissimulate the immediate aspect of the divine. Conversely, the difference between abundance and lack can be used to form a model of the divine communication

36 Cf. Alloa, *Das durchscheinende Bild*, chap. 2.

37 Lindberg, *Theories of Vision*, 91, with reference to William of Conches (twelfth century).

38 Thomas Aquinas, “Super I Epistolam B. Pauli ad Timotheum lectura,” cap. 2, lect. 1: “medium debet habere aliquid de utroque extremorum.”

39 Cf. Strzelczyk, *Communicatio idiomatum*; for the expression *communicatio* see Röckelein, *Kommunikation*, and Röckelein, *Reliquientranslationen*, 39f.; Lutz, *Schreiben, Bildung und Gespräch*.

process, in which mediation and immediacy are not differentiated. Here the sociological notion of the resonance model is helpful: a model that uses another sphere to assess what is relevant for its own sphere. Based on this model, the mediation between the divine and the human can in turn be conceived as a double movement: an emergence and return, in which the mediating entity is not a neutral third element, but is implied in the things between which it mediates; an ascent and descent, in which man has to transcend the mediations.

This then also affects the media with which man interacts. In the first instance the Holy Scripture, which is understood in the Middle Ages as, in a sense, the *medium certissimum* of knowledge of God—for the human mind, which regards it as inspired.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, the instruments of grace or salvation which have their roots in the New Testament (proclamation of the word, baptism, communion). Lastly, all the other forms derived from these. These allow the objective process of salvation, founded on the Father's plan, the work of Christ, and the influence of the Holy Spirit, to be made accessible to the individual and the community: in historical events, religious institutions, symbolic acts, and material phenomena. The latter include rituals and gestures, written texts, pictorial works and objects, or—in terms of the church as a physical space—stained glass windows, capitals, altars, baptismal fonts, communion vessels, crosses, candlesticks, books, robes, cloths etc. Alongside the knowledge and information they convey, all these things, with their various levels of redemptive power, can serve to mediate what is immediate, and to give visual form to the divine. All, however, are confronted with the tension that fundamentally characterizes not only the world and human existence, but also media forms: abundance and lack.

If media are conceived of as “extensions of man,” then their role is, in the first instance, to compensate for the deficits that are given to man by nature: he cannot fly, travel in time, or be in different places at the same time. Even on land, he moves rather slowly compared to other animals, and he is dependent on material and technical aids that supplement, extend, and expand the abilities of the human body. “Necessity is the mother of invention” (*mater artium necessitas*) has been a well-known saying since antiquity. These “inventions” were divided into different phases: in the first phase, the immediate necessities of life are procured (food, clothing, shelter etc.), the second sees the emergence of technologies and arts, in which man himself becomes a creative being—*paupertas omnium artium repertrix*.<sup>41</sup> Later authors such as Petrarch deduce from this that man has a specific ability to develop—and that he becomes the ruler of nature precisely by adapting the specific features nature has granted to each species.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Köpf, *Anfänge*, 236, with reference to Ulrich of Strasbourg, who speaks of the science that covers everything, “quae intellectus secundum statum viae capere potest, et hoc per medium certissimum. Hoc autem est sacra scriptura sola, inquantum est divinitus inspirata”; Ulrich von Straßburg, *De summo bono* 1, tr. 2, c. 1 ; 29, lines 54–56.

<sup>41</sup> For late antique ideas of cultural history see Moraux, *Aristotelismus*, 92ff.

<sup>42</sup> Petrarca, *Heilmittel*, 196; for the further use of the motif see Krays, “Moral Philosophy,” 308.



Figure 2. Loop diagram: Henry Suso, *Exemplar* (ca. 1490); Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibl., Cod. 710, fol. 106r. Used with permission.

Indeed, technologies and arts—including techniques of storage and transfer—not only remedy man's lack of basic survival skills but also relieve strain on the body, and give the mind space to develop. Once found, they open up new possibilities, new paths, new approaches, in short a potentially greater wealth of meaning. Hence the idea, still popular in contemporary sociology, that scarcity gave humans, as deficient beings, the impetus to develop and improve technologies and institutions, but also to create forms of privacy and inwardness. Human action, according to Arnold Gehlen, has been able to “gain independence from the original purpose, [in such a way] that the pressure of needs or the primary interest retreats into the background. The now *disburdened* behaviour allows space for an abundance of additional motives.”<sup>43</sup> New choices mean that the deficit gives way to a surplus; a surplus, however, which can be conceived—even without the evolutionary separation of motive and purpose—as a fundamental feature of communication. Communication, after all, includes not only planned, intended, and controlled transmissions, but also unplanned, spontaneous, emergent elements—though this can once again reveal the deficits of human processes of meaning creation.

In relation to media, this means that their history is—beyond the purely technological—a history of changing perspectives, of positive and negative, optimistic and pessimistic assessments. The celebration of media possibilities is accompanied by laments about their limitations and shortcomings. Plato denounces the tendency of writing to make communication stiff and lifeless (see chapter 4). Lucretius, Cicero, and Seneca discuss the Latin language, which they see as poor in comparison to the rich philosophical terminology of Greek (*egestas sermonis* or *verborum*).<sup>44</sup> Carolingian theologians characterize pictures as material-ephemeral objects which are imperfect, because they are created by human hand, and which try to represent something that cannot be perceived by the physical eye.<sup>45</sup> Late medieval monks such as the humanist-leaning Johannes Trithemius fear that printing will lead to a decline in writing culture. At the same time they dream of secret techniques which would allow people to communicate with one another in the shortest possible time, “without words, without books, and without a messenger” (*sine verbis, sine libris, et sine nuncio*).<sup>46</sup>

In modernity, the development of new forms of recording and transfer is still accompanied by the knowledge that even these will not cancel out the systemic limitations of communication. Heinrich von Kleist, in a letter to his sister Ulrike on February 5, 1801, regrets that it is not possible for him to really describe his innermost feelings to her; he lacks “a means of communication”; even language is not suitable for this as it cannot “paint the soul.”<sup>47</sup> In 1860, Friedrich Nietzsche wishes for a machine that could “impress

<sup>43</sup> Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spätkultur*, 33.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Fögen, “*Patrii sermonis egestas*”; for the survival of this idea in the Middle Ages see Hille-Coates, “Bibelsprachen—Heilige Sprachen.”

<sup>45</sup> Cf. most recently Mitalaité, *Philosophie et théologie*; Noble, *Images*, 158–243.

<sup>46</sup> For the first aspect see Herweg, “Wider die schwarze Kunst?”; for the secret techniques see Klein, *Am Anfang war das Wort*, 194 (quote from the *Steganographia* of 1500, printed Frankfurt 1606, 3:160).

<sup>47</sup> Kleist, *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* 2, no. 35.

our thoughts on some material, unspoken, unwritten"; for a short time he believed he had found this machine in the typewriter.<sup>48</sup>

Because they have a mediating character, media forms cannot be perfect. They show that which is intended to be seen as real. At the same time, however, they order the real, categorize it, draft it—and maintain a complicated relationship with it: depending on the perspective, on the being or the mediation, the referent or the referee, the signified or the signifier, they seem earlier or later, subordinate or predominant. At the same time, they are not simply added to the thing they refer to; they are at least partly identical with it. But only partly, which also means that they double the thing they refer to, and obscure it, by acting and functioning in its place. By simultaneously representing something and being something, media forms are both less and more than the thing they refer to. Because this is a characteristic of every communication, they bring forth the unforeseeable and the emergent. They are also, however, redundant, because they are differentiated from the thing that they make available. This can in turn raise doubts about whether that *which* mediates something actually corresponds to *what* it mediates.

This is particularly important for the communication of transcendence, which is based on the paradox that certain matters or phenomena are regarded as inaccessible, and yet there is constant communication about them. Or more concisely, that they evade all categories and yet function even in the most material of phenomena—at least in the context of medieval ideas of mediality. In them, materiality and immateriality form both an opposition and a connection: the most concrete materiality on the one hand, the most abstract immateriality on the other. The distance separating them, because Christian theology conceives transcendence as the negation of all categories, is matched by the closeness of their connection, because transcendence can only be made comprehensible through attributions. Thus even in places where pure materiality seems to pertain (in the *materia prima*), a potentiality is imagined, and even where pure spirit seems to prevail (in spiritual beings), the combination of potentiality and actuality results in hints of a *materia spiritualis*. The two poles are paradigmatically forced together in the doctrine of the two natures of Christ, who is both all Logos and all body.

The materiality of communication, which modernity, in the context of its own acceleration, has discovered as a not inherently meaningful condition of meaning construction processes,<sup>49</sup> seems to find its paradigm not so much in modernity as in the Middle Ages. Here people were only too aware that transmission and transfer are only made possible by the light that illuminates a stained glass window, or by the animal-skin parchment on which the text is written. At the same time, the primary materials—because they were part of the cosmos created by God—were seen as bearing meaning, were viewed as things (*res*), which, according to Augustine, constitute the first type of sign, the natural signs. A possible exception was the *materia prima*: here one could debate whether it should be thought of as completely formless, timeless, and insubstantial, or as the

48 Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Aufzeichnungen*, 447 (1862: Euphorion, chap. 1); cf. Eberwein, *Nietzsches Schreibkugel*; "Schreibkugel."

49 Cf. *Materialität der Kommunikation*; for the more recent studies on materiality see *Materiality*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.



substance and bearer of a formative principle. Even here, however, there does not seem to be any such thing as pure materiality, a condition of possibility of being and meaning which is free from space and time. All materiality seems to be, from the start, deeply embedded in meaningful contexts of action—an idea that returns in modernity: philosophical pragmatism and the phenomenological philosophy of life both call into question the opposition of matter and spirit, each in a different way. For example with the argument that wherever the materiality of matter becomes the object of attention, the material element has already been modified, influenced by a mode of perception that shapes matter with a view to possible human actions.

In concrete terms, this can be imagined as follows: signs are placed on a page of parchment, and this placement does not occur independent of the nature of the material. The quill writes differently on the flesh side than on the hair side, and the number of available sheets and the length of the lines can also affect the extent to which abbreviations are used. Yet the placement of the signs is not completely determined by materiality. It adapts to it, but also subjects it to its own purposes. Being guided by the material and making use of it go hand in hand. The medium obeys the material in which and with which it operates. But it also experiments with it. It semanticizes and semioticizes, auratizes and processualizes it. It subjects it to its own possibilities for ostentation and reflection, and negotiates it in the framework of discourses focusing on issues of materiality.

Fundamental distinctions can be made between matter and materiality, primary fact and overarching idea. Historically, however, they have repeatedly been linked in different ways. One can, on an experimental basis, take a phenomenological rather than hermeneutic approach to the primary effect qualities of a material-medial structure. Any more in-depth analysis, however, will have to include the level of meaning systems. The materiality of a medium is therefore always twofold: one part based on presence, the other on significance. Or to put it differently: on the one hand we have the current materiality of a given material form, on the other hand we have the potential or virtual materiality that accompanies this form, or is discussed or shown in it. The two dimensions cannot simply be merged or aligned: if processes of book production are mentioned in a text, or if a picture displays scenes where things are done with pictures, this does not mean that a medium is showing itself or its own materiality, as if in a mirror. Instead this has to do with a more fundamental reflexivity, which only ever reveals aspects, more or less distorted, of what the given media form “is.”<sup>50</sup>

Even the difference between a medium and a thing is, in this sense, a matter of perspective rather than ontology. In a pioneering study from the beginnings of modern media analysis, the psychologist Fritz Heider (1926) demonstrated this using the example of light and air. Heider’s argument is as follows: while a thing is an object of cognition, which possesses individuality, internal processes, and a natural resonance, the medium is a non-autonomous quantity, which has only external processes and a resonance that is imposed upon it. On the other hand, however, the medium is also what

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50 For metaization see *Metaisierung*; for media reflexivity see Möller, *Mediale Reflexivität*.

makes the thing perceptible in the first place. Thus one and the same thing, for example a glass, can be both a thing and a medium, or more precisely, can be regarded as both these things. Thing and medium thus remain interconnected: since the perception of a thing is only possible through the medium, there can be no thing outside of a medium. Conversely, there can be no medium without a thing, since it is only the combination of the two that reveals the difference between that which has an internal cause, and that which has an external cause. This applies not only to physical processes and material substrates, but to everything that can become an object of cognition. In this context, the medium is not a separate entity, standing alongside other groups of things that are. But nor does it constitute a pure function, which any thing could perform at will. It can be thought of as a category between substance and function, a category whose relationship to the thing can sometimes appear as a marked difference, but sometimes as identity—a difference when it comes to specific media functions such as storage or dissemination, functions which many things cannot perform; identity when the focus is on general mediating functions which do not require any specific form.

## Media Perspectives

If we pursue this idea further, it seems to make little sense to base assumptions on the understanding of mediality that prevails in modern media studies, journalism studies, or communication studies. According to one of the definitions often quoted in these disciplines, media are “complex, institutionalized systems around organized communication channels with specific capabilities.”<sup>51</sup> True, older types of material forms of mediation (book, image), anthropomorphic figures of transmission (human, messenger, angel, spirit), or symbolic formations (salvation, love, money) can be subsumed under this. What is meant, though, is primarily that type of media that has evolved in modernity: the press, radio, film, television, digital media, social media etc. They are the primary object of a media studies which, operating empirically and quantitatively, assumes that society is mediatized to the core. Historical cultural studies, on the other hand, is not simply interested in what is given, and in the operationalization of orders of description. It sees itself as a place of reflection about the conditions in which epistemic fields are constituted, and it regards the wide-ranging expansion of the concept of media not as a reason to impose restrictions, but as a starting point for reflection—about the historical and cultural conditions that bring forth “media” and structure the way we talk about them, and about the fundamental questions: what a medium is, what sort of metaphysical dimensions it has, how it influences human thinking and action, what transformations it has undergone in the course of history.

If we wanted to highlight just one of the transformations which are not on the level of technical developments, we might consider the relationship between the medium and the mediatized. There was much skepticism in the Middle Ages about the categorial difference between earthly means and the divine, which is immediate or non-mediable,

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51 For example Saxer, *Mediengesellschaft*, 52.

and about the danger of lifeless letters or deceptive images. Yet overall, media forms were sustained by epistemological optimism: it was believed that they could express or transmit essential things. They could reveal something of what transcends our temporal and spatial opportunities for experience. It was thought that they were *figurae* in the sense described above: full of promise and yet insufficient, *simultaneously* transparent and opaque. This simultaneity seems to have become questionable in the modern period. Here, on the one hand, skepticism prevails: language blocks our access to true being, pictures deceive our senses, even our perception of material objects is limited by our cognitive apparatus. On the other hand, more and more is being promised, particularly in connection with new media technologies: can the photograph or phonograph not make the dead so present—with their image or their voice—that they seem to be alive? Can the film not affect our consciousness with a directness that no older medium possessed?

Here the *figurae* seem to have become reversible images in the true sense of the term: inextricably linked, but mutually exclusive possibilities, as devised by gestalt psychology—duck or hare, young girl or old woman, faces or goblet, open book or folded card. In each view, the knowledge of the other possibility is present in the background. In the foreground, however, the dichotomous alternative dominates. In terms of media, then, there is either opacity or transparency. Either the media broaden our senses, by allowing us to participate in more and more phenomena which are, as such, removed from our physical here and now, or they inevitably block our access to the world and to reality: we see everything only through their filter, fractured, distorted, obscured.

True, actual practice is more complex. We know that it does not detract from the eventful nature of a live performance if we are aware of its media-facilitated or media-supported nature.<sup>52</sup> Nonetheless, dichotomous ideas are omnipresent, for example with regard to the role of the mass media or the digital media. On the level of judgment, for one thing: some see them as a realm of new possibilities, others as a loss of humanity; some see energy and promise, others fear impoverishment and atrophy. But also on the level of observation: according to a popular theorem, it is impossible to observe media as such. The argument is that they render themselves invisible during use, in order to provide efficient transfer and to create (an impression of) immediacy. According to this theorem then, they either work so well that they disappear, or malfunction and therefore become obtrusive.<sup>53</sup> Even everyday communication shows that this is not necessarily so. The transmission of content and attention to the manner of the transmission do not have to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, this is a constitutive feature of aesthetically charged communication: in oscillating between acts that create presence and those that encourage reflection, it paradoxically produces effects of immediacy *by* displaying mediality.<sup>54</sup> This applies to communication passed down through history in a different

52 Auslander, *Liveness*.

53 Cf. for example Groys, *Unter Verdacht*; Jäger, "Störung und Transparenz"; Mersch, *Medientheorien: Zur Einführung*; Krämer, *Medium, Bote, Übertragung; Paradoxalität des Medialen*.

54 Cf. Andree, *Archäologie der Medienwirkung*.



way again: as argued above, it is given to us in material structures which possess their own presence and dynamics. Yet these structures no longer bear anything but the traces of the actions in which they were embedded, which can now only be discovered by means of context. We encounter them as forms of communication which aimed to have an impact not only on their present, but also on the future. Various layers of time, imagined both from the point of view of the past and from that of the present, overlap here.

At the same time, with regard to past media structures, two modalities of observation coincide here: the self-observation of a historical society and the observation of that society by modern scholars. This means that the idea of the reversible figure for media processes requires further nuances. It would be tempting to describe the medieval relationship between materiality and transcendence as an oscillation, a “seeing of aspects” as conceived by Wittgenstein relating partly to the content (seeing of) and partly to the medium itself (seeing-as).<sup>55</sup> But this model, based on theories of perception or knowledge, would need to be developed further in regard of material structures and their complex temporalities. Then the traditionally two-dimensional reversible figure, a mere representation of three-dimensionality, would become a figure that actually incorporates the third and fourth dimensions: something like a palimpsest or a rhizome, consisting of several more or less transparent layers, so that structures and details, but also current, past, and future conditions might be perceived—some of them at a glance, others with a change in focus.<sup>56</sup>

This could correspond to the specific status of historical mediality, which is, at least in the Middle Ages, rooted in the given material forms, whose materiality is simultaneously displayed and transcended. Thus mediality can be considered to be historically linked with a seeing of aspects, which is highlighted by the specific focus of the study. If one assumes that media forms are not simply distinct entities, but flexible configurations which could always be merely material (submedial) things as well as abstract (supramedial) entities, then it is an obvious step—especially from a historical perspective—to make another assumption: that analyzing media forms and phenomena presumes a certain *attitude*, an interest in the way mediation and transfer occur, the nuances and facets of this process.

An aspect-oriented perspective of this kind is especially relevant for times and societies which have no explicit concept of media, but know a multitude of media forms and reflect on issues of mediality. In view of these forms and reflections, it does not seem reasonable to assume either that media are given or that they only exist due to attributions. Instead, it might prove more fruitful to look at what functions in specific situations and under specific circumstances as a media form—a form permitting the transmission of information or the transfer of knowledge, and implying simultaneously material and immaterial, concrete and abstract, spatial and temporal dimensions: once, now, and then; here and there. An approach like this will certainly not be unaffected by those modern conditions which define what is to be understood by “media.” It will,

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55 Cf. Lauer, “Anamorphotische Aspekte.”

56 Cf. Koschorke, *Wahrheit und Erfindung*, 368–83 for double conditioning.

however, be able to rid itself at least partly of the ideological burden related to these conditions—by following not a naïve hermeneutic but an archaeologically grounded cultural semiotics.

## Historical Mediology

It should have become clear by now that the present book does not follow macrohistorical assumptions about the evolution of humans and their media. It does not attempt to apply categories from media studies to older texts or pictures. Indeed, it does not primarily focus on media as they have been categorized by modern media and communication studies. There will be repeated mention, in the following chapters, of aspects of writing and phenomena of written culture. Yet writing is not understood here as a categorically fixed medium of storage, which—for example in terms of material, layout, or text structure—goes through processes of standardization and optimization, and eventually becomes more and more widely disseminated. Instead what is of interest here is the relationship between the inner and outer dimensions of writing, between writing as a principle and writing as an outward appearance, between what pieces of writing say, what they show, and what they are, and ultimately also the relationship between the other media forms that writing may reflect, and the media form constituted by writing itself. The aim is to consider the whole spectrum between material, performative, reflexive, and imaginative dimensions, and to use the examination of an apparently familiar medium to uncover a complex array of media facets, which is in turn relevant for the general understanding of mediality—in line with McLuhan's view that "any study of one medium helps us to understand all others."<sup>57</sup>

In keeping with this, several shifts in perspective are proposed in this book. Firstly, from *media* to *mediality*: attention should not be focused on labelling a particular form as a medium, but on what constitutes the mediatory character of a form, what happens with it, what potential lies in it, what energies it releases. Secondly, from an *ontological* to a *methodological* understanding of mediality: mediation is not understood as something for which a particular class of object has a special kind of responsibility, but as a combination of material and form, whose media dynamic cannot be discerned unless we consider it from a particular viewpoint. This viewpoint does not claim to make other perspectives obsolete, but to make their conditions more clearly visible. Thirdly, a shift from *historical change* to the relationship between *mediality* and *historicity*: focusing both on the proper-time strata of individual media forms, and on their sequence, which becomes history, the analysis can give up the fixation with technological determinants; it can also acquire a greater depth of focus, and can consider other kinds of processes in the history of mediality (such as those associated with the history of ideas). Fourthly and finally, a shift in the understanding of the era from *prior history* to *paradigm*: a non-technological approach to mediality in the Middle Ages can uncover a wide range of manifestations and historical references. Such an approach does not simply encounter a

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<sup>57</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 139.

culture steeped in transcendence, awaiting the demystifications of the modern era; a culture whose phenomena were either overtaken by later history, or experienced a subsequent revival. Instead it encounters a field which, while its (retrospectively constructed) definition as an epoch is questionable, contains diverse and complex structures (which have by no means been swept away by modernity), and which is therefore an ideal site for a fundamental examination of the historicity of the medial. After all, it is this same historicity that is itself undergoing massive change in our medially altered present: it is not that historical awareness is disappearing completely, but that the simultaneities of the non-simultaneous are unmistakably growing, thanks to media synchronization of things that are temporally and spatially disparate.

For such shifts in perspective, standard media studies tools relating to the established media and a modern model of communication are only of limited use as an aid to orientation. More helpful are approaches that attempt to grasp the principles underlying phenomena and processes of mediation without presupposing dual structures (consciousness/world, subject/object), between which the medium constitutes a third element.<sup>58</sup> This idea will always find itself faced with the logical difficulty of explaining how mediation is possible if it is not somehow contained in that which is to be mediated: of what nature can the in-between be, that it creates a connection between two entities that do not allow any direct connection? How can it be something other than either a mere mixture, which does not eliminate the problem of non-compatibility, or a super-structure which eliminates the need for mediation itself?

Medieval Scholasticism was already discussing this problem with regard to the relationship between body and soul: Philip the Chancellor argued in the early thirteenth century that if one imagined this relationship as being realized through an external *medium*, the problem arose that the *medium* would correspond to either the matter or the form or to a composite—yet each of these options was impossible. The solution is then to assume diverse forms, first, last, and middle forms, some of which are directly connected to the matter, some not at all, and some through a *medium*.<sup>59</sup> Philosophical pragmatism (John Dewey) also starts at this point but takes a different tack, arguing that stimulus and reaction, matter and consciousness, body and mind, or thinking and action should be thought of not as opposites, but as functionally connected, as in the model of an electric circuit. The *means* of cognition are then neither simply given nor brought forth by the mind. They are selected experimentally and constituted in a process in which perception affects the perceived and the perceived affects perception.<sup>60</sup>

This idea is modified and applied to media theory in the work of McLuhan. While he assumes that technological changes have an impact on all areas of human existence and the basic structures of society, this does not imply a deterministic view. Media do not simply determine being or consciousness. They are flexible infrastructural forms, instruments and actants, cores and shells, systems and environments, materialities and

58 Cf. also Borsò, "Materialität, Medialität und Immanenz."

59 Wicki, *Philosophie Philipps des Kanzlers*, 128–30.

60 For a summary see Suhr, *John Dewey zur Einführung*.

immaterialities, mediating between figure and background, in other words, between that which attracts attention and that which escapes attention.<sup>61</sup>

Niklas Luhmann gives this idea more precise form in system theory: just as there can be no third element between the system and its environment, so also the medium cannot be considered as a third element or as an in-between.<sup>62</sup> It is conceived as a loose coupling of elements that connect into strict couplings in concrete forms (for example, letters into words, characters into a text). It could be said that the medium is concretized in a form without being fully absorbed into it. Form, on the other hand, is not simply the particular as opposed to the universal, the real as opposed to the possible, the transient as opposed to the permanent. On the contrary, medium and form should be thought of as both connected in certain aspects and separate. On the one hand, there is a constant process in which what is loosely coupled becomes tightly coupled, and vice versa; on the other hand, the one is “contained” in the other (the distinction between medium and form as a form itself). Here mediality does not simply mean the principle of mediation and transfer. It represents an operative dimension in an observer-dependent process in which different entities are related to one another.<sup>63</sup>

Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory also does not focus on media as mediators between senders and receivers. It concentrates on the chains, networks, and circuits that exist between human and non-human, material, person, and institutional entities. The assumption is that there is a constant process of mediation taking place between these entities, but one which can hardly be understood as mediation in the traditional sense.<sup>64</sup> This coincides with Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism. She calls into question the extent to which a relationship of mediation prevails between materiality and semantics, and proposes instead that phenomena should be understood as ontologically inseparable and interconnected agencies. “Apparatuses” are then not simply instruments of observation, but arrangements which simultaneously produce phenomena *and* are part of them. More than mere mediating bodies or technical structures, they are mobile, interactive, material-discursive practices, which bring forth differences. They dynamically configure the world. They devise models for realizing and testing relations.

This is the same thing that, in other theoretical constellations, is ascribed to media forms. Except that as a rule—as suggested above—it is assumed that such media forms do not simply function, they act subliminally; they retain, for all their visibility, an invisibility, which is a constitutive element of their power to influence. In this sense, Marshall McLuhan (1964) links the “narcotic” effects of media with their “invisibility,” and establishes media history as a critique of media: while, according to McLuhan, it is one of the idiosyncrasies of media environments that they only reveal themselves once they

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61 For “figure”/“ground” see Gordon, *McLuhan*, 128–34.

62 Luhmann, *Social Systems*, chap. 2.

63 For the dimensions of Luhmann’s distinction see *Form und Medium*; cf. also Khurana, “Niklas Luhmann.”

64 Cf. Bruno Latours *Kollektive*.

have ceased to be topical, it is one of the tasks of “media studies” to make the invisible visible. This idea reappears in Dieter Mersch’s negative media theory, in a philosophy of language and signs: he argues that the mediality of a medium genuinely eludes observation; it is the blind spot that cannot actually be stated because its modality is that of self-revelation. This results in a special attentiveness to traces, cracks, and fissures in and on media phenomena, to possible manifestations of this self-revelation. The paradoxes of modern and contemporary visual art offer a rich field for such observations.<sup>65</sup>

What the concepts of mediation touched on here have in common is that they do not counterpose the world and its representation, the real and its construction, or nature and culture; nor do they regard media simply as given, conventionalized channels of communication. Their interest is in the processes in which concrete and abstract entities or a diverse range of “things” join together in new ways, even though they are considered to be incompatible in certain respects. Here the historical orientation point is usually the modern era, or the present day: the focus is on segments of society, characterized by functional differentiation, scientific foundations, or technological maximization. Even the proposal to conceive the modernity of the modern age as the—never altogether successful—attempt to establish an absolute historical break (Latour) refers only to modern “scientific revolutions.”

Thus the theories do not lack models of complex temporalities. In Luhmann’s work, for example, we find the idea that the media process is attached to memory in a specific way: the form, he argues, actualizes certain moments and ignores others, the medium postpones the actualization of other forms and preserves “the horizons of past and future.”<sup>66</sup> Yet there is a failure to relate the temporal structures to historical dynamics. Dewey directs the gaze from the recognition of what is past to action in the horizon of the future; perception, for him, has less to do with the identification of the familiar than with selection, anticipation, and prognosis. Luhmann does not deal with the question of what role conventions play in the alternation between medium and form; Latour does not discuss how the ongoing mediation processes are influenced by those that have already taken place; Barad does not mention the time index that accompanies the arrangement of an apparatus. Mersch uses historical examples primarily to show the paradox of the elusive emergence of mediality.

What remains important, however, is that media forms are defined by both temporal structures and historical dimensions, and it is not simply the case that one of these is their interior, and the other their exterior. Each form both contains something from the past and projects something that is to come, and thus their temporal structures are also historical ones. Shaped by what went before it, and focused on that which is to follow, every mediatory action is both structurally and logically diverse, and historically and semantically ambiguous. The Middle Ages, with their sense of the paradoxical structure of time and history, offer countless examples of this. Texts on salvation history, for example, fundamentally operate between different temporal stages and historical

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Mersch, “Medialität und Undarstellbarkeit”; Mersch, *Medientheorien: Zur Einführung*.

<sup>66</sup> Khurana, “Niklas Luhmann,” 107. For temporality and mediality from a sociological perspective see Beck, *Medien*.

phases with regard to events and their representation.<sup>67</sup> On the level of events, there are several pasts, which are themselves focused on the future, some of which has already arrived and some of which is still to come (Old Testament prophecies, New Testament fulfilment). They are described in relation to a present in which, anachronistically and syncretistically, other moments in time can be included, and to a future which also shows temporal stratifications (omens, end times, Judgment Day). These events become accessible in forms that reconfigure temporally disparate texts from the tradition (Bible, church fathers, original texts) in such a way that the present text can retain its validity even in future communication situations. These are complex interpenetrations of the stages of time, then—temporal, supra-temporal, and pan-temporal, historical and ahistorical moments. Thanks to these, the relationship between mediality and history cannot be reduced to a *sequence* of techniques, forms, or communicative practices. Instead we have to ask, in a general way, how something like history, understood as formed, meaning-filled time, can crystallize from the diversity of the temporal.

A traditional media history focuses primarily on those points where media undergo decisive technical or formal changes. Such a history is more interested in the macro than the micro dimension, more in a longitudinal than a cross-sectional approach, and more in the consequence of the forms than in their internal dynamics. Since technological processes are geared toward development, this kind of approach can rapidly acquire teleological tendencies. A possible alternative to this is media archaeology, which, though also focused on technology, does not examine historical change and longer-term processes, but historical constellations: epistemological discussions, high-profile practices, scientific developments. These constellations allow us to situate what was thought to have been a single medium within a network of historical circumstances, to reconstruct its conditions of possibility, its experiments with coding, storage, and transfer. This, in turn, can also cast light on the current media situation—either because certain forms of media were partially imagined and only later transformed into reality (imaginary media), or because they were tried out but were not destined to have a future (dead media).<sup>68</sup> The diversity and contingency of the historical seem to come into their own again here, while questionable macrohistorical mega-theories become expendable. But just as these theories sometimes continue to operate in the background, other problems also remain present: concentration on technical media detracts from a more precise understanding of the mediality of the different phenomena. The isolated observation of a particular constellation from the point of view of media postmodernism reduces history to individual connections between present and past. Given that the Middle Ages was a time of few outstanding technical developments, a whole millennium risks falling through the cracks.

If one wishes to take into account both the temporal and historical dimension of media forms and phenomena, it makes sense to combine the appeal of dense constellations

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. also Agamben, *Il tempo che resta*.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Zielinski, *Archäologie der Medien*; Huhtamo and Parikka, *Media Archaeology*; Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*; for a critical view see Mißfelder, “Endlich Klartext.”



with the reconstruction of historical processes. Such an approach can be defined, provisionally, as historical mediology—the term is linked with the *médiologie* which French sociologists and communicologists in the tradition of Régis Debray embarked on at the end of the 1970s.<sup>69</sup> Their interest, shaped by a critical attitude toward the epoch and society, lay in the question of how the efficacy of transmitted signs is determined by social, institutional, technical, and material factors. The main object of the analysis was meant to be the complex, not so much communicative but translative relationship between the different factors: a transfer in both spatial and temporal respects. This was then expected to lead to a new perspective on the way cultural phenomena emerge, change, and are transmitted, a perspective which was intended to counteract the obliviousness of classical media studies to time and history, and to make media visible as the historical conditions of possibility for meaning production.

And yet the historical depth of focus remained limited. As in the case of media archaeology, the usual starting point for mediological analyses was and still is the situation of the present, not primarily that of the mass media technologies, but that of an era shaped by electronic and digital media.<sup>70</sup> Historical mediology, in contrast, would have to combine methodological reflection on the principles of the medial with the specific tools used to describe historical materialities and past systems of meaning. It would have to consider both the historicity of the medial and the mediality of the historical,<sup>71</sup> and the interconnections between the two, which differ depending on whether we look at synchronic constellations, diachronic processes, or the relationship between past and present. Bearing this in mind, the objective of historical mediology can be defined as follows: (1) to analyze the concrete media forms in their temporally layered compositions and circumstances, their contexts and discourses, (2) to go beyond the realm of technologies and functions and include the realm of the imaginative, (3) to operate on both a cross-sectional and longitudinal level, both “above” and “below” the supposedly epoch-defining media changes, and (4) to reflect on the conditions in which media constellations are observed.

This can be done by considering situations where, for the first time, “a metamorphosis of things, symbolisms or technologies into media can be observed.”<sup>72</sup> Or constellations in which existing tools are picked up and viewed in a new light, varied and transformed, institutionalized and conventionalized. Or singular configurations which have had significant effects over a long period of time, and indeed have developed into models in the course of their reception.<sup>73</sup>

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**69** Cf. Debray, *Introduction à la médiologie; Mediologie als Methode*.

**70** Cf. *Handbuch der Mediologie*, and the program for “Orbis Mediologicus: The Project for Mediology at Pratt Institute” (New York City): <https://orbismediologicus.wordpress.com>. An exception for the eighteenth century is Koschorke, *Körperströme und Schriftverkehr*.

**71** Cf. *Medien der Geschichte*.

**72** Vogl, “Medien-Werden,” 122.

**73** Cf. Kiening and Beil, *Urszenen des Medialen*.

In each case, what is of interest here is processes. The concept of process presupposes a difference between various moments in time, which are not linked by causal determination. At the same time it implies rejection of the idea that objects can be considered in isolation from the time and place in which they are encountered. Processes have to do with the fact that “concrete selective events build upon one another temporally, connect with one another,”<sup>74</sup> without the sequence being either strictly necessary or entirely coincidental. What is affected is directionality, which does not have to be the same in macro- and microhistorical terms. How the role of the body in communication changes, how habits of reading or approaches to the transcendent change, this can be connected to macrohistorical sequences of events in the course of the expansion of writing or the introduction of printing. On close inspection, however, this connection dissolves into a plethora of possible connections. What emerges is not so much clear changes in structure, as complexity and confusion: the relationship between media forms becomes increasingly diverse, different forms assume different functions, their validity and their claims to validity become pluralized, etc.

Retracing all this would fill many volumes.<sup>75</sup> Even a history of individual media such as writing would only be possible from certain perspectives, for example the expansion of written culture, the changes undergone by forms of writing, the development of reflection on writing and imaginative treatments of writing. Each perspective would require a different set of tools. In view of this, the present attempt takes another route. The aim is to identify key variations of medieval mediality, related not primarily to social spaces or media types but to abstract key features, a specific pair of categories.<sup>76</sup> Abundance and lack—this certainly will not be able to cover all media phenomena encountered over a period of nearly a thousand years. Yet it is plain that, as long as Christian models of the interweaving of transcendence and immanence predominate, there will always be tension between a wealth of virtual possibilities surpassing anything that can be imagined and the always insufficient nature of the given. In this sense, abundance and lack, as medium-range categories, seem suitable for interlinking the discursive-thematic with the aesthetic-imaginative dimension. At the same time they make it possible to connect phenomena from different areas, phenomena that are of fundamental importance for the analysis of mediality.

The objects selected here are taken mainly from the reservoir of texts that have been handed down in written, and often literary, form. Such a restriction has the disadvantage that it does not really display the whole spectrum in which questions of mediation and transfer were dealt with. But it also has advantages. Literature has always been a place where “media-transgressive elements [are] used and reflected on,” and “a nuanced terminology and discussion of fundamental aesthetic-poetological questions”

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<sup>74</sup> Luhmann, *Social Systems*, 44.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. the series issued by the Zurich NCCR: Medienwandel—Medienwechsel—Medienwissen: Historische Perspektiven (just under forty volumes as of 2018).

<sup>76</sup> For media spaces and types see for example Faulstich's book of 1996, *Medien und Öffentlichkeiten im Mittelalter* (inadequate in many respects), or the edited volume *Medien der Kommunikation im Mittelalter*, or Kellermann, “Medialität im Mittelalter,” with their heterogeneous subject matter.



is established, which “also [had an impact on] other areas and arts in the course of the modern period.”<sup>77</sup> The medieval texts are also accompanied by specific accentuations and reflections. Furthermore, the vernacular texts in particular move between the discourses with considerable freedom. Situated in the borderland between clerical reflection and lay imagination, they neither allow the learned debate to dominate nor give free rein to literary fantasy. Instead they are simultaneously aimed at further-reaching effect and reflexive foundation. This makes it possible to pick out interfaces where the philosophical or theological discussion of aspects of mediation meets performative-medial practice. These points of intersection are analyzed in the light of specific aspects—in the order of the chapters: model, presence, word, writing, body, materiality, time-space, metonymy. This order is, like the structure of the individual chapters, aspect-oriented. It does not imply any strict logical categorization, but instead serves to illuminate the material in different respects. In the book as a whole, the individual perspectives converge in different ways: when a particular piece of writing is under discussion, questions of exemplariness, temporality, symbolism and corporeality are also evoked. This may serve to underline the close connection between the selected phenomena.

In the different chapters, the focus is often on individual, specifically condensed works, or particularly telling constellations. Yet the book as a whole, and the historical sequences (some longer, some shorter than others), lead beyond the singular. However central the position of microhistory is, and however seriously the available material tradition is taken, this is not intended to dominate the whole presentation. At all times, the focus is on the (possible) connection between what is apparent from individual structures of meaning and what lends itself to the formation of historical sequences. Given that this is a work of synthesis, it is often necessary to make use of existing research, including my own; this is mentioned rather than discussed at length. A balance is also necessary between detailed interpretation and the succinct presentation of significant examples. This will have been achieved if readers feel that the approach tested here could also be fruitfully adapted for other phenomena and areas.

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**77** Robert, *Einführung in die Intermedialität*, 28.

