The book series Recursions: Theories of Media, Materiality, and Cultural Techniques provides a platform for cutting-edge research in the field of media culture studies with a particular focus on the cultural impact of media technology and the materialities of communication. The series aims to be an internationally significant and exciting opening into emerging ideas in media theory ranging from media materialism and hardware-oriented studies to ecology, the post-human, the study of cultural techniques, and recent contributions to media archaeology. The series revolves around key themes:

- The material underpinning of media theory
- New advances in media archaeology and media philosophy
- Studies in cultural techniques

These themes resonate with some of the most interesting debates in international media studies, where non-representational thought, the technicity of knowledge formations and new materialities expressed through biological and technological developments are changing the vocabularies of cultural theory. The series is also interested in the mediatic conditions of such theoretical ideas and developing them as media theory.

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Medium, Messenger, Transmission

An Approach to Media Philosophy

Sybille Krämer

Amsterdam University Press
Recursions: Editors’ Introduction

*Recursions: Theories of Media, Materiality and Cultural Techniques* is a book series about media theory. But instead of dealing with theory in its most classical sense of *theoria* as something separate from practice that looks at objects and phenomena from a distance, we want to promote a more situated understanding of theory. Theory, too, is a practice and it has an address: it unfolds in specific situations, historical contexts and geographical places. As this book series demonstrates, theory can emerge from historical sources and speculations still closely attached to material details.

We therefore speak of the recursive nature of theory: It is composed of concepts that cut across the social and aesthetic reality of technological culture, and that are picked up and reprocessed by other means, including the many media techniques featured in this book series. The recursive loops of theory and practice fold and define each other. The genealogies of media theory, in turn, unfold in recursive variations that open up new questions, agendas, methodologies, which transform many of the humanities topics into media theory.

The *Recursions* series revolves around the material and hardware understanding of media as well as media archaeology – a body of work that addresses the contingent historical trajectories of modern media technologies as well their technological condition. But we are also interested in addressing the wider field of cultural techniques. The notion of cultural techniques serves to conceptualize how human and nonhuman agencies interact in historical settings as well as to expand the notion of media to include the many techniques and technologies of knowledge and aesthetics. This expansive – and yet theoretically rigorous – sense of understanding media is also of great use when considering the relations to biology and other sciences that deal with life and the living; another field where media studies has been able to operate in ways that fruitfully overlap with social studies of science and technology (STS).

Overall, the themes emerging from the *Recursions* book series resonate with some of the most interesting debates in international media studies, including issues of non-representational thought, the technicity of knowledge formations, and the dimensions of materialities expressed through biological and technological developments that are changing the vocabularies of cultural theory. We are interested in the mediatic conditions of such theoretical ideas and developing them as new forms of media theory.
Over the last twenty years, and following in the footsteps of such media theorists as Marshall McLuhan, Friedrich Kittler, Vilem Flusser and others, a series of scholars working in Germany, the United States, Canada and other countries have turned assumptions concerning communication on their head by shifting the focus of research from communication to media. The strong – and at times polemical – focus on technological aspects (frequently referred to as the ‘materialities of communication’) has since given way to a more nuanced approach evident in appellations such as ‘media archaeology’ and ‘media ecology’. These scholars have produced an important series of works on such diverse topics as computer games, media of education and individuation, the epistemology of filing cabinets, or the media theories underlying the nascent discipline of anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century, thereby opening up an entirely new field of research which reframes our understanding of media culture and the relationship between media, culture, politics, and society. In other words, these approaches are distinguished by the emphasis on the materiality of media practices as well as the long historical perspectives they offer.

A major part of the influences of recent years of media theory, including fields such as software and platform studies, digital forensics and media ecology, has been a conjunction of German media theory with other European and trans-Atlantic influences. The brand name of ‘German media theory’ commonly associated with, though not restricted to, the work of Friedrich Kittler – is a helpful label when trying to attempt to identify a lot of the theoretical themes the book series addresses. However, we want to argue for a more international take that takes into account the hyphenated nature of such influences and to continue those in refreshing ways that do not just reproduce existing theory formations. We also want to challenge them, which, once again, refers to the core meaning of recursions: variation with a difference.

Jussi Parikka, Anna Tuschling & Geoffrey Winthrop-Young
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Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously argued that the purpose of media studies was to make visible that which normally remains invisible – namely, the effects of media technologies rather than the messages they convey. When he originally proposed this idea in the 1960s McLuhan was widely celebrated as the great prophet of the media age, but in the decades that followed his work gradually fell into disregard. In the 1970s, for example, Raymond Williams claimed that McLuhan's ideas were ‘ludicrous’ and Hans Magnus Enzensberger dismissed him as a ‘charlatan’ who was ‘incapable of any theoretical construction’ and who wrote with ‘provocative idiocy’. This tacit dismissal of McLuhan’s ideas was largely accepted until the late twentieth century, when there was renewed interest in his work among several German media theorists, such as Friedrich Kittler and Norbert Bolz. Unlike the critics associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, who primarily focused on the content of media texts and the interpretive work performed by media audiences, these theorists applied epistemological and philosophical questions to the study of media, which was largely inspired by McLuhan’s famous claim that ‘the medium is the message’. Kittler even argued that ‘[w]ithout this formula...media studies itself would not exist as such in isolation or with any methodological clarity’. Kittler’s emphasis on the technical aspects of media gradually became fashionable in intellectual circles, and it is now widely known as ‘German media theory’. Some of the concepts and ideas that are common to both Canadian and German media theory include their focus on the materiality of communication, the notion of media as prosthetic technologies or ‘extensions of man’, the concept of media ecology, the impact of media technologies on the formation of subjectivity as well as the military applications of media technologies. Although German media theory has often been criticized for ignoring questions of content and reception and for promoting a kind of technological determinism (as was McLuhan and other critics associated with the Toronto School of Communication Theory), it has also been described as one of Germany’s most significant intellectual exports, and despite these criticisms the technical aspects of media have once again become a central issue in the humanities.
Sybille Krämer is rarely mentioned in these discussions, as her work is not widely known outside of Germany and it does not share the technical emphasis that is widely seen as the hallmark of German media theory. Nevertheless, her early work primarily focused on developing a philosophy of technology and theorizing the function of the computer as a medium. Krämer received a Ph.D. in philosophy at the Philipp University of Marburg in 1980, and her doctoral thesis, *Technik, Gesellschaft und Natur: Versuch über ihren Zusammenhang* (*Technology, Society and Nature: An Attempt to Explain their Relationship*), outlined her earliest reflections on technology. Beginning in 1984 she was also part of the ‘Mensch und Technik’ (Humans and Technology) work group as well as the ‘Artificial Intelligence’ commission of the Verein Deutscher Ingenieure (Society of German Engineers) in Düsseldorf. In 1988 she published her second book, *Symbolische Maschinen: Die Idee der Formalisierung in geschichtlichem Abriss* (*Symbolic Machines: A Historical Abstract on the Concept of Formalization*), which investigated the use of formalization, calculization, and mechanization in mathematics. Krämer introduced the terms ‘symbolic machines’ and ‘operational scripts’ to refer to mathematical equations, as these equations are not readable texts but rather executable processes. If concrete numerals are replaced by letters, for example, it is possible to calculate using signs in a fundamentally more abstract manner. The introduction of algebra thus made it possible to use new signs for new operations, such as the introduction of differential calculus, which made it possible to work with infinitesimally small values. This book effectively expanded Krämer’s understanding of technology by arguing that all mathematical equations are essentially mechanical operations. In other words, Krämer did not attempt to provide a history of the computer or even to suggest that the machine should be understood as a manufactured object; rather, she suggested that the concept of the machine was a result of the mediating function of symbols or the process of ‘formalization’. *Symbolische Maschinen* thus signaled a shift from the study of technological history to the study of intellectual history and from the concept of technical operations to the concept of symbolic operations.

In 1989 Krämer became professor of theoretical philosophy at the Institute of Philosophy at the Free University of Berlin, and in 1991 she published her habilitation treatise *Berechenbare Vernunft: Kalkül und Rationalismus im 17. Jahrhundert* (*Computable Reason: Calculation and Rationalism in the 17th Century*). This book represented an extension of the argument presented in her previous book by elaborating on the history of the idea of computation, and it similarly focused on operations rather than technologies. *Berechenbare Vernunft* can thus be seen as part of a similar
shift away from the technological a priori that shapes or determines medial processes to the question of ‘mediality’ itself as a topic of philosophical inquiry. Kramer’s divergence from the dominant trends in German media theory at this time was made particularly apparent in her contribution to the 1998 anthology *Medien, Computer, Realität: Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen und Neue Medien* (*Media, Computer, Reality: Perceptions of Reality and New Media*), in which she articulated a very different concept of media: ‘We do not hear vibrations in the atmosphere but rather the sound of a bell; we do not read letters but rather a story.’ In other words, the medium is supposed to be inaudible and invisible, and it only becomes apparent when it is not functioning properly.


> Not only is language dematerialized, but also the speakers themselves. Vocality as a trace of the body in speech is not a significant attribute for language, just as the embodiment of speakers is not a constitutive phenomenon for their linguisticality… Just as the vocal, written, gestural, and technical embodiments of language are marginal for language itself, so too do the bodies of speakers – the physical precondition of their speech – remain hidden.

Krämer added, however, that language is always already embodied, and this embodiment takes two different forms. On the one hand, ‘language itself provides access to a material exteriority in the form of voice, writing, gesture, etc. And this materiality of language is not marginal, but rather a basic fact.’ In other words, language only exists as language through the mediation of an intervening medium, whether it be speech, writing, or gestures, and therefore it is closely linked to the bodies of language users. *Sprache, Sprechakt, Kommunikation* thus not only employed speech acts in order to show that media are never entirely transparent, but it also shifted the discussion of mediality from technical operations to interpersonal communication as well.

This argument has been most fully developed in Krämer’s 2008 book *Medium, Bote, Übertragung: Kleine Metaphysik der Medialität* (*Medium, Messenger, Transmission: A Small Metaphysics of Mediality*), which is her first book to be translated into English. Krämer’s primary argument is that in order to understand media we must go beyond the technical apparatus and
understand the relations of mediality upon which the apparatus depends. Krämer also argues that all forms of communication are actually acts of transmission and that all media should therefore be understood as transmission media. The confluence of these two ideas results in a philosophy of media that defies much of the conventional wisdom about communication, which is commonly understood as dialogue, understanding, self-expression, etc.

Krämer explains this distinction in her prologue to the book, in which she describes two competing approaches to media philosophy. She refers to the first approach as the ‘technical’ or ‘postal’ principle, which is based on the notion that all communication requires an intervening medium, yet communication is only successful when this medium fades into the background and remains unobtrusive. According to the ‘postal’ principle, in other words, communication is asymmetrical and unidirectional and the medium represents a necessary precondition for the possibility of communication, as it facilitates the connection between the sender and the receiver. This is essentially the technical transmission model of communication developed by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, and the phenomenon of ‘information entropy’ occurs when the medium becomes a ‘disruptive third’ through the generation of noise or interference. Krämer refers to the second approach as the ‘personal’ or ‘erotic’ principle, which is based on the notion of communication as social interaction or dialogue, whose goal is social interaction, understanding, and community. According to the ‘erotic’ principle, communication is a symmetrical and reciprocal process and the aim of communication is not connection but unification through direct and unmediated access. In other words, communication allows speakers to transform heterogeneity into homogeneity and difference into identity, thereby achieving a kind of ‘single voice’ or consensus that represents the fusion of separate halves. This is essentially the personal understanding model of communication developed by Jürgen Habermas, and it implies that the presence of any intervening medium constitutes a form of disturbance since the unification of these disjointed fractions depends on the annihilation of the intervening space. These two approaches thus represent two contradictory trends in media theory, and Krämer explicitly argues that ‘the concern of this book is...to rehabilitate the postal principle and thus the transmission model of communication’, as ‘most community-building and culture-founding forms of communication precisely do not follow the standards of dialogical communication’. In short, media are essential tools for bridging distance and difference, and they thus represent a necessary precondition for the possibility of culture and community, yet they also
preserve this distance or difference, as the presence of an intervening medium implies the existence of an intervening space that precludes any possibility of unification. In other words, mediality represents the negotiation of radical alterity rather than the formation of a consensus reality.

Krämer explains this argument by providing a comprehensive overview of various philosophical theories of transmission, including Walter Benjamin's theory of translation as the revelation of an unbridgeable gap between languages, Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of community as founded on a basic divide that constitutes our very essence as communal beings, Michel Serres' notion of communication as an attempt to establish a bridge between worlds that always remain distinct and unbridgeable, Régis Debray's theory that immaterial ideas are only transmissible when they are embodied in material objects, and John Durham Peters' theory of communication as non-reciprocal, non-dialogical dissemination, which is based on a fundamental separation or difference. The idea of communication as dialogue is problematic for each of these thinkers in their own way, and Krämer is able to draw a series of preliminary conclusions from these theories:

(i) A philosophy of mediality can only begin by recognizing that there is an unbridgeable distance between the sender and the receiver – a distance that can never be overcome.

(ii) The medium occupies the intervening space between the sender and the receiver, and it is able to facilitate their connection while still maintaining the distance that separates them.

(iii) All forms of communication are reducible to acts of (non-reciprocal) transmission between the sender and the receiver, as unification and dialogue remain impossible.

(iv) Transmission is an embodied, material process, yet it is frequently understood as disembodied, as the medium is supposed to be invisible through its (noise-free) usage.

Krämer illustrates these ideas using the figure of the messenger as a key metaphor for all medial processes. The figure of the messenger provides an ideal illustration of the function of transmission for three reasons:

(i) As with the classic sender-receiver model of communication, the concept of transmission presupposes the existence of a divide or difference between heterogeneous worlds, and the function of the messenger is to mediate between these worlds while simultaneously preserving the distance that separates them.
(2) The messenger is able to establish this connection between heterogeneous worlds by making something perceptible, thereby embodying the immaterial in a material form. As a representative of his employer, for example, the messenger’s body becomes an extension of his employer’s body. The messenger thus transforms his employer’s absence into a form of presence, which shows how all transmissions function as forms of display.

(3) The embodiment of the message is only made possible through the disembodiment of the messenger, as the messenger must relinquish his own autonomy and agency in order to become invisible and imperceptible. In other words, the messenger disappears behind the content of his message, which makes the process of mediation appear to be direct and unmediated. This idea is most vividly illustrated in the trope of the dying messenger, who expires at the very moment his message is delivered.

According to Krämer, every form of mediality illustrates these aspects of the messenger model. For example, films are not supposed to be perceived as celluloid strips but rather as moving pictures, and the presence of the material strip only becomes apparent when the transmission is disrupted, such as when it jams in the projector. In the same way, the messenger is also supposed to remain transparent in order to facilitate the transmission of his message.

The implications of this theory are fourfold:

(1) All forms of communication are actually forms of transmission, which are always unidirectional and non-dialogical. In other words, communication is a form of dissemination rather than dialogue, and it is directly opposed to the ‘personal’ principle of communication, which is based on the concept of understanding, dialogue, consensus, etc.
(2) The medium embodies the message through its own disembodiment, and therefore transmission depends on the separation of text and texture, sense and form, signal and noise.
(3) The medium is heteronomous, as it speaks with a voice that is not its own and therefore it is not responsible for the content of the message it transmits. The messenger model is thus directed against hermeneutics and points to a subject-free theory of communication that challenges the notion of media as autonomous agents or as the cause of cultural-historical dynamics (i.e. Kittler’s famous dictum that ‘media determine our situation’).
(4) The invisibility of the messenger enables its function as a transmitter to be easily replaced by non-human entities, which suggests that the technical transmission model of communication can be used to explain the function of interpersonal communication and vice versa.

*Medium, Bote, Übertragung* thus moves beyond the history of technology and the study of technical operations and focuses instead on the ways in which the phenomenon of mediality shapes our understanding of the world around us. In other words, mediality is fundamentally productive because it represents the basis of all forms of social and material systems of exchange.

Krämer explains this argument in more detail by examining a diverse range of transmission events, including angelic visitations, the spread of infectious diseases, circulation of money, the translation of languages, psychoanalytic transference, the act of bearing witness, and even the development of cartography. Angels illustrate the concept of mediality because their embodied manifestations facilitate communication with God while at the same time implying the impossibility of direct communication between heaven and earth. The connection between God and humans thus remains unidirectional, and it is only achieved through the process of embodiment, as angels can only communicate with humans in so far as they themselves also assume human form. Viral infections also depend on physical contact between two heterogeneous entities, and they similarly illustrate the unidirectionality of transmission, as they are one-sided and non-reciprocal. Money also represents the transfer of ownership between sender and receiver, which is only possible through the establishment of an equivalent relationship between heterogeneous goods. Money thus enables the desubstantialization of goods, which makes ownership objectifiable. Translators also bridge the differences between languages by making these differences visible, yet they also maintain the divide separating languages by preserving different connotations. Psychoanalysts similarly function as media during the process of transference, as they serve to represent primary attachment figures from their patients’ past, thereby enabling the transmission of feelings from their patients’ unconscious minds. While analysts make these feelings perceptible to the patient’s conscious minds, they must not respond to them emotionally. Psychoanalysis represents a dialogue not between the patient and the analyst (which is implied by the notion of the ‘talking cure’), but rather between the patient’s unconscious and conscious mind, and the analyst is only able to facilitate the transfer of unconscious emotions by remaining neutral and withdrawn. The act of bearing witness also presupposes a gap between the witnesses, who have
perceived a past event, and their listeners, who were not able to perceive the event for themselves. Like messengers, witnesses are able to make this event perceptible to their listeners through the process of transmission, which depends on their presumed neutrality and impartiality. In other words, witnesses are ‘data collection and retrieval instruments’, and they are expected to withhold their own opinions and judgments from their testimony. Krämer describes martyrdom as the most extreme form of witnessing, as witnesses are considered to be most trustworthy when they are prepared to die, and the suffering of their bodies thus serves to guarantee the truth of their testimony (much like the dying messenger). Krämer’s final case study focuses on the use of maps, which similarly function as media by making perceptible something that is invisible to the eye. Like an incorruptible messenger, maps are also supposed to serve as a transparent window onto the world. In order for maps to facilitate transmission, in other words, users ‘must remain blind’ to their distortions. Krämer thus concludes that ‘cartographic distortion is a condition of possibility of representation’ and ‘transparency and opacity are two distinguishable dimensions of maps that require and include one another’. Krämer thereby rejects the debate between maps as neutral visualizations of reality and maps as cultural constructions that shape our perceptions of reality by suggesting that there is no point in fighting over the truth of maps; instead, it is more important to understand how maps mediate our perception of the world by obscuring their inherent inaccuracies. More than any of her other case studies, this chapter most clearly illustrates the significance of traces, which reveal that the medium itself is never completely transparent or neutral. By making users aware of the map itself, in other words, cartographic distortions preclude the possibility of transparency, yet the illusion of transparency remains a necessary precondition for the possibility of transmission, as users must perceive the map as an accurate representation of reality in order to be able to orient themselves in space.

According to Krämer, all of these various forms of transmission – angels, viruses, money, translators, psychoanalysts, witnesses, and maps – can be seen as media in the sense that they simultaneously bridge and maintain differences between heterogeneous worlds. The messenger model thus depends on the basic insight that a community of different individuals is founded on the distance that separates them, which precludes the possibility of unification or intersubjectivity, and all attempts at communication are actually acts of transmission, as communication is fundamentally unidirectional, asymmetrical, and non-reciprocal. This theory also implies that the technical transmission model of communication is no longer unique
to mass media; rather, it is an inherent dimension of all forms of human communication – a point that is emphasized throughout Krämer's book, as she repeatedly focuses on interpersonal rather than technical forms of communication. The emphasis of the messenger model thus allows for a media theory based on processes and thirdness rather than the technical apparatus.

In her conclusion, Krämer acknowledges that the figure of the messenger is also fundamentally ambivalent, as ‘every messenger acts as a reversible figure: the angel becomes the devil, the mediator becomes the schemer, the circulation of money develops into greed and avarice, etc.’ In other words, the danger always exists that the medium might introduce a degree of noise or interference into the act of transmission by making his presence felt instead of remaining neutral and transparent, such as when the devil attempts to manipulate listeners, when the psychoanalyst falls in love with his patient, or when the user of a map becomes aware that it is presenting a distorted image of reality. Ambivalence is therefore inherent in the role of the messenger, and it is reflected in the form of the trace, which exposes the mediating function of the messenger by making his participation perceptible and revealing the possibility that the messenger might also represent a sovereign being with his own individual autonomy and agency.

While Krämer’s messenger model may appear somewhat esoteric to readers who are unfamiliar with her previous work – and particularly to English-language media scholars who are more familiar with the technical emphasis of most German media theory – it provides several insights that are potentially valuable for contemporary media studies. In particular, it outlines a general theory of transmission that does not distinguish between technical and interpersonal communication or between technological and human agents. It thus expands our understanding of the concept and function of media as active agents in all systems of social and material exchange, which offers exciting new possibilities for other interdisciplinary approaches to the study of media and communication. Krämer’s conflation of technical and interpersonal communication also allows her to avoid the pitfalls of technological determinism, as it does not grant undue power to the technical apparatus, while still recognizing the importance of the materiality of communication or the interface between the medium and the senses. Krämer thus emphasizes the notion that communication is dependent on embodiment, yet at the same time it she also preserves the idea of communication as non-dialogical and non-reciprocal, thus acknowledging the active role of the receiver, who does not necessarily interpret messages
in the way they were intended by the sender (i.e. Stuart Hall’s ‘encoding-decoding’ model of communication). Krämer’s messenger model thus offers an alternative to McLuhan-style media theory, which focuses primarily on the impact of media technologies, and the Birmingham School approach to media studies, which focuses primarily on content and reception. Within a German context, one could also say that it carves out an original space in contrast to Kittler’s emphasis on the technical aspects of media and Habermas’ emphasis on the dialogic aspects of communication.

By reinforcing the function of perception and mediality as opposed to that of technology and content, Krämer’s book occupies a key position in contemporary debates concerning the future of media studies in Germany and it represents a significant contribution to a growing body of work that challenges dominant trends in German media theory, such as the work of Hans-Dieter Huber, Dieter Mersch, Matthias Vogel and Lambert Wiesing. The fact that some of these names may be unfamiliar to English-language media scholars clearly shows that we need to expand our understanding of media theory in Germany and the wide range of approaches that this field of study encompasses. This edition will hopefully encourage increased international visibility for these alternative approaches, many of which have not yet been translated into English.
Prologue

Transmission and/or Understanding? On the ‘Postal’ and ‘Erotic’ Principles of Communication

Two Preliminaries and a Problem

How can the meaning of media be thought about in such a way that we acquire an understanding of our relationship to both the world and to ourselves? How can a concept of the medium be developed that encompasses our experiences using media? How can we determine what media ‘are’ in a way that embraces both generally accepted (voice, writing) and newer forms of media (computer, Internet)? How can media be conceptualized in a way that enables not only a reformulation of traditional philosophical questions but also a new conception of philosophy? Assuming first of all that one media concept could actually address all of these various questions, wouldn’t this concept remain so abstract and general (in a bad sense), wouldn’t it turn out so bare and tenuous, that it would say nothing and therefore not provide any answer at all?

As in most cases, it depends on the attempt. And in order to let the cat out of the bag immediately let me state that this attempt will address the question ‘What is a medium?’ in the context of the idea of the errand. The messenger thus represents a primal scene of media transmission. You could even say that the messenger represents the force behind these reflections on media, and my claim is that this relationship – measured against the present state of the debate over media – provides a new perspective on the phenomenon and concept of media.

Isn’t this a strange or downright outlandish effort? The messenger appears to be a relic of an epoch when the technical support of long-distance communication was not available, and it became obsolete with the development of the postal service or at the very least with the invention of the radio, the telegraph, and the telephone – not to mention the computer. What could the archaic institution of the messenger offer to modern media theory, whose reflections and explanations must address more advanced media? This provocative impression, which is often evoked by references to the messenger, is further reinforced by two associated preliminaries and an intruding problem:

(i) First Preliminary: ‘There is always an outside of media.’ Messengers are heteronomous. The messenger perspective thus challenges attempts to conventionalize media as autonomous sovereign agents or the solitary
causes of cultural-historical dynamics, and it contradicts the conception of media as a foundational a priori in the sense of a ‘medial turn’.

(ii) *Second Preliminary*: ‘The bulk of our communication is not dialogical.’ Messengers are necessary when there is no unmediated interaction between sender and receiver; in other words, when communication *lacks reciprocity* and is precisely not a dialogue. The errand is – to start with – a unidirectional, asymmetrical situation. In the messenger perspective, therefore, reflecting on media means at the same time challenging to a certain extent the fundamental dialogical orientation of the philosophical concept of communication.

(iii) *The Problem*: ‘Can transmission be creative?’ Messengers transmit what is given to them. They are supposed to pass their messages along across space and time with the least distortion possible, and they should by no means change them. How then can our understanding of the phenomenon of transmission ever take into account the creative impulse, which is commonly associated with communication? Yet even computer-mediated communication is not a matter of data transmission but rather data *processing*, and it thus concerns not the conservation of order but rather its transformation. The rehabilitation of transmission will therefore only be compelling when it incorporates the innovative dimension of transmission and reconstructs the creativity of mediation.

It is therefore no small task to explain and substantiate a media theory of the messenger. This perspective forces us to question previously trusted philosophical assumptions, and it once again problematizes what now seems natural or self-evident.

To reflect on media philosophically therefore does not mean seeing media as more or less a seamless continuation of a philosophical tradition. In order to understand how our reflections on media require a willingness to question our own self-evident and trusted assumptions and thereby see them in a new light, I will now provide an introductory sketch using the example of ‘communication’.

The Postal and Erotic Concepts of Communication

Hardly any other word has experienced such a rhizome-like diffusion in our everyday language and our disciplinary vocabularies as the word ‘communication’. Communication even functions as a central perspectival vanishing point in our conceptual image of ourselves at the end of the twentieth century: practically everything that affects our civilized self-understanding can somehow be structured and described with the help of this word. There is ‘communicative action’, which complements the goal-directed utilitarian
considerations of instrumental action that constitute an ethos oriented towards self-understanding; there is the description – sometimes even conceptualized as a priori – of language as a medium of communication, which reduces perception, experience, and recognition to the structures of linguisticality; there is the labelling of problems as ‘communication problems’, the difficulties of which are neutralized and casually associated with the promise of feasibility; there is ‘man-machine communication’, which signals that the scope and limits of information technologies constitute a key phenomenon of contemporary civilization and which moreover shows that communication is not limited to the interpersonal realm; there is the vision of a globalization that conceptualizes communication as a world-spanning network; and finally we should not forget the laconic assertion that one cannot not communicate.

It would be easy to continue this list. Considering the ubiquity of the word ‘communication’ and the range of its possible uses, it is no surprise that critics are increasingly critical of this concept. Botho Strauß dismisses the word ‘communicate’ as the ‘non-word of the age’ and characterizes it as a ‘garbage disposal word’. Uwe Pörksen remains somewhat more objective in his description of ‘communication’ as an ‘amoeba-word’ (or also ‘plastic word’): it conceals its metaphorical character, enters the everyday after passing through the mathematized sciences and is then used both unhistorically and imprecisely as the minimal code of industrial society: ‘Communication’ is deployed like a ‘Lego brick’, which is arbitrarily combinable and practically envelops our entire living space in its word net.

Nevertheless, the imprecision that Pörksen attributes to the word ‘communication’ conceals an obvious tension and divide that is characteristic of the contemporary usage of the word ‘communication’: in the present discourse the word leads a conceptual double life. It appears in two mutually opposed contexts, which I will refer to as the ‘technical transmission model’ and the ‘personal understanding model’ of communication. The technical transmission model is elaborated in the communication theory developed by Shannon and Weaver, who studied the technization of information flows, from information transmission to data processing. The output problem in the technical transmission model consists of the spatial and temporal distance between the sender and the receiver. Both the sender and the receiver are considered instances, which could be human beings or objective nature, that form the beginning and end points of a linear chain that consists of essential interlinks either in the form of a medium (a channel) or an external disturbance. What happens along this chain is the relaying of signals or data; in other words, the transmission of uninterpreted entities.
The process of data transmission is thus physically specifiable and mathematically operationalizable. The transmission is considered successful when something material is transported from one side (the sender) to the other side (the receiver); there is no such thing as immaterial signals. The basic problem of communication thus consists in keeping signal structures stable in the face of the erosion of this order through external disturbances. The technical connection is successful, in other words, when it keeps the ‘disruptive third’ away from the transmission event that occurs between the sender and the receiver.

The approach of the personal understanding model, whose design is embodied in Jürgen Habermas’s communication theory, is entirely different. Here communication is considered an interaction between people, which is dependent on mutual understanding with the help of symbols that convey meaning – preferably a language. Communication thus becomes an expression of human being-in-the-world. The output problem consists in the heterogeneity of people and thus in the question of how intersubjectivity is possible at all under the conditions of individuality. Communication thus represents the basic process that enables coordinated action, which results in the formation of community. It is conceived as a reciprocal process of social interaction. Intersubjectivity is made possible through dialogue, which is presented as the primal scene and established norm of communication, and the goal of dialogue is understanding. Unlike the technical approach, the performance of communication consists not only in establishing a connection across distance, but also in fostering agreement and creating a unified society whose goal is precisely to overcome distance and difference. When dialogical communication is successful, those who communicate with one another in a sense become ‘one’; if the goal of understanding has been achieved, then it is as if they are speaking with one voice.

While communication-as-understanding is conceived as a symmetrical and reciprocal process, communication-as-transmission is conceived as asymmetrical and unidirectional. Transmission is precisely not dialogical: the goal of technical communication is emission or dissemination, not dialogue. We can thus clearly distinguish between the personal principle of understanding and the postal principle of transmission.

The postal principle presents communication as the production of connections between spatially distant physical instances. On the other hand, the dialogical principle presents communication as the synchronization and standardization of formerly divergent conditions among individuals. We could thus say that there is a latent erotic dimension to the telos of this personal perspective (i.e. the merging of people who were separated from
one another). In order to emphasize the differences between these two notions of communication in an intentionally ironic way, we could even refer to them as the ‘postal’ and ‘erotic’ concepts of communication.

Both of these concepts presume a distance that can also be described as a qualitative difference: difference constitutes one – if not the – universal precondition of communication. According to the postal principle this difference lies between the sender and the receiver, and it is generated through the spatial and temporal distance between them. According to the erotic principle it is the difference between individuals with their heterogeneous and initially impenetrable inner worlds. In each of these cases, however, communication provides an answer to the problem of how to bridge distances. These concepts thus represent different strategies for dealing with distance and difference. The technical concept of communication bridges distance without annihilating it; indeed, it is precisely through and in the successful transmission that the sense of being distant from one another is stabilized and reinforced. The goal of the personal concept of communication, on the other hand, is to overcome and abolish distance and mutual inaccessibility. It thus presumes the existence of difference without endorsing or stabilizing it; instead, it attempts to transform the different into the identical, which is actually divided among the participants and becomes something ‘communal’.

When we ask which role media are assigned to play in each of these different approaches, there will obviously be various answers. For the transmission model, media are indispensable; they occupy the position between the sender and the receiver, and without them it would not be possible at all for the sender to ‘post’ something that would reach the receiver. The medium neither annihilates the distance between the sender and the receiver nor enables any unmediated ‘contact’ between them; rather, it establishes a connection despite and in the distance that separates them. For the understanding model, on the other hand, media are peripheral and negligible vehicles that provide undistorted and unmediated access to something that they themselves are not, much like transparent window panes. Because the dialogical relationship results in the annihilation of distance and the direct experience of reciprocal understanding, which happens precisely when two individuals in their own inner worlds agree and ‘merge’, there is no more space for a mediator or a medium.

Just as media are seen as indispensable for the postal aspect of communication because they make mediation itself possible, they are also seen as detrimental to the immediacy of the dialogical. While transmission media are designed to minimize disturbances, media themselves cause
disturbances in dialogical situations. The elusiveness of the voice thus meets the ephemeral status of communication media; and conversely: the more the materiality of the medium is shown to be technical, opaque, and compact, the more the notion of communication understood as dialogue (which is then still possible) appears distorted.

This description of the confrontation between the technical/postal and the personal/erotic approaches to communication is obviously exaggerated. Using names like Shannon and Habermas as a form of shorthand to invoke these theoretical approaches also clearly lacks the reflexive subtlety that would somehow do justice to the ingenuity and the potential compatibility of these approaches. However, this was not the reason for sketching out these radicalized positions for the purposes of a prologue. The opposing models and meanings of communication that have been emphasized in this outline are intended to show why the use of a messenger perspective demands at the same time the surrendering of convictions and attitudes that are commonly taken for granted. From the point of view of a philosophically substantial concept of communication, there is no question that dialogue and mutual understanding are more worthy of description and explanation than the phenomenon of transmission and the one-sided sending of signals. As a theoretical framework for the description and explanation of what happens when people communicate with one another, the postal principle of technical communication appears utterly inadequate. To express this in a more exaggerated way, one might say that the letter carrier cannot possibly provide a figure worthy of explanation for a philosophically sophisticated theory of communication.

The concern of this book is not to elevate the status of the letter carrier, but rather to rehabilitate the postal principle and thus the transmission model of communication. In contrast to the privileging of dialogue as the unalterable essence of communication and the privileging of reciprocity as the primary structural principle and emancipatory norm of communication, the following reflections on mediality are inspired by the insight that most community-building and culture-founding forms of communication precisely do not follow the standards of dialogical communication. The ‘erotic’ communication in the speech act of confluent differentiality is indeed one possibility, but interpreting it as the ideal or merely the general form of communication constitutes a form of Romanticism.

From Communication to Perception?
And yet this is not a book about communication, as it debates the question of ‘What is a medium?’ in terms of transmission processes. By introducing
the figure of the messenger as the primal scene of media, it indeed appears that from the very beginning I have set a course for a communication-centric mediation; the unidirectionality and asymmetry of the transmission process, which culminates in the messenger figure, also raise the question of whether media-theoretical mediations concern not the categories of communication and understanding, but rather those of ‘making perceptible’ (Wahrnehmbarmachen) and ‘making appear’ (Erscheinenlassen). Can the gimmick of the messenger perspective thus lie in a shift from communication to perception? In this light, the non-dialogical – if this can be conceived as an attribute of perception – to a certain extent loses its potential for irritation. The conventional view being challenged here is the categorical and categorial separation between ‘communication’ and ‘perception’, according to which the definitive foundation of sociality is a communality made possible through communication, not perception. Could a goal of this media reflection thus lie in problematizing not only the philosophical preoccupation with understanding-oriented, reciprocal, ‘media-free’ communication, but also the marginalization of perception that this preoccupation necessarily implies? Could the ‘rehabilitation of the postal principle’ thus also rehabilitate the community-building and culture-founding functions of perception and the ‘making perceptible’?

Questions upon questions. Before beginning to look for answers, however, I will first reveal my method, which is inspired by a ‘metaphysical gesture’ that is in need of explanation.
Methodological Considerations

Is a Metaphysics of Mediality Possible?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**On the Difference Between Signs and Media**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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