# Genesis of the Media Concept

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The medium through which works of art continue to influence later ages is always
different from the one in which they affect their own age.

—WALTER BENJAMIN[1]

### 1. Mimesis and Medium

The word *media* hints at a rich philological history extending back to
the Latin *medius*, best exemplified in the familiar narrative topos of clas-
sical epic: *in medias res*. Yet the path by which this ancient word for "mid-
dle" came to serve as the collective noun for our most advanced
communication technologies is difficult to trace. The philological record
informs us that the substantive noun *medium* was rarely connected with
matters of communication before the later nineteenth century. The explo-
sive currency of this word in the communicative environment of moder-
nity has relegated the genesis of the media concept to a puzzling obscurity.
This essay is an attempt to give an account of this genesis within the longer
history of reflection on communication.

It is not my purpose, then, to enter into current debates in media theory
but to describe the philosophical preconditions of media discourse. I argue
that the concept of a medium of communication was absent but *wanted* for
the several centuries prior to its appearance, a lacuna in the philosophical
tradition that exerted a distinctive pressure, as if from the future, on early
efforts to theorize communication. These early efforts necessarily built on
the discourse of the arts, a concept that included not only "fine" arts such
as poetry and music but also the ancient arts of rhetoric, logic, and dialec-
tic. The emergence of the media concept in the later nineteenth century
was a response to the proliferation of new technical media—such as the
telegraph and phonograph—that could not be assimilated to the older
system of the arts. While I am only indirectly concerned in this essay with
the history of technical media as such, I set out from the observation that
the development of new technical media perplexed thereafter the relation

1. Walter Benjamin, "The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence
Later Ages," trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Selected Writings,* trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed.
Marcus Bullock et al., 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 1:235.

between the traditional arts and media of any kind. Let it be stipulated that older works of art can be transposed into later media, as Benjamin notes in my epigraph, an operation that recent media theorists call remediation.[2] The very fact of remediation, however, suggests that premodern arts are also, in the fully modern sense, media but that for some reason they did not need to be so called, at least not until the later nineteenth century. The emergence of new technical media thus seemed to reposition the traditional arts as ambiguously both media and precursors to the media—the aggregation of forms indicated by use of the definite article.[3]

In the whole of their former history, poetry, painting, music, and other so-called fine arts were not dominated by the concept of communication but by imitation or mimesis, defined—it would seem for all time—by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. In context a technical term, *mimesis* inaugurated an inexhaustible inquiry into the anthropological motives of *poiêsis* or making in general. In mapping the borders of his subject, Aristotle also refers briefly to an aspect of mimesis his translators consistently render as "me-

2.   Nearly all works written before the sixteenth century, we should remember, are transmitted in the remediated form of print, as well as (usually) translated into modern languages, arguably a form of remediation as well. For the concept of remediation, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999). The notion derives ultimately from Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; Corte Madera, Calif., 2003), p. 19: "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium." For a shrewd analysis of the new-media concept as a floating marker in relation to older media, see Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

3.   It will be evident that I write as a literary scholar whose primary concern is with literature, understood as an instance of what was formerly called an art. As a discourse of writing and of print, works of literature are also indisputably media. Yet literature seems to be less conspicuously marked by medial identity than other media, such as film, and that fact has tacitly supported the disciplinary division between literary and media studies (and by extension between cultural studies and communication studies). The repression of the medial identity of literature and other "fine arts" is rightly being questioned today. The aim of this questioning should be to give a better account of the relation between literature and later technical media without granting to literature the privilege of cultural seniority or to later media the palm of victorious successor. Those of us who teach literature will recognize in this formulation a cluster of problems touching upon everything from the use of media as a supplement to literary pedagogy (as if literature were not itself a media form) to the claims of the "digital humanities" to save literature from the consequences of its status as a low-tech medium.

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dia" or "medium." No Greek equivalent for this term appears in Aristotle's text; the most literal translation currently available gives us an English version of *Poetics* 1447a without any abstract term other than imitation itself: "But imitations differ from one another in three ways, for they differ either by being imitations in different things, of different things, or differently and not in the same way." The latter two phrases refer somewhat unproblematically to objects of representation (for Aristotle this means the types of persons imitated) and to what we would call the literary form or genre (the examples are epic and tragedy). But the first phrase—"in different things" [*hois*]—is not an obvious way of saying "medium," and Aristotle is forced to offer an elucidation in the form of a list: "colors and figures" (painting), "harmony and rhythm" (song), rhythm of movement (dance), and, finally, the telling of stories in metrical or nonmetrical speech (poetry).[4] Only with the help of these examples do the translators confidently give us *medium* or *media* for "in different things," as in Butcher: "[Imitations] differ . . . from one another in three respects—the medium, the objects, the manner or mode of imitation"; Halliwell: "mimesis in different media, of different objects, or in different modes"; or Heath: "different *media* of imitation, or different *objects*, or a different *mode*."[5] Yet Aristotle is very far from initiating media theory. After briefly commenting on the different media of imitation, he devotes the remainder of the *Poetics* to the other two subjects: the objects and modes of imitation. He sets the question of medium aside, *where it remained for two millennia.*

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    4.  Aristotle, *On Poetics*, trans. Seth Benardete and Michael Davis (South Bend, Ind., 2002), p. 3. Richard Janko gives a similar literal translation in his commentary on the *Poetics*: "Aristotle has no abstract nouns for these terms, but makes do with adverbs and adjectives, literally 'by representing either in other things, or other things, or otherwise.'" Janko pleads that "the abstracts are indispensable in translation" (Richard Janko, notes to Aristotle, *Poetics: With the "Tractatus Coislinianus," a Hypothetical Reconstruction of "Poetics II," and the Fragments of the "On Poets,"* trans. and ed. Janko [Indianapolis, 1987], p. 68). Gérard Genette remarks on the nontechnical prose of 1447a, "literally, the question 'in what?'"—which he elaborates as: "the sense of one's expressing oneself 'in gestures' or 'in words,' 'in Greek' or 'in English,' 'in prose' or 'in verse,' 'in pentameter' or 'in trimeter,' etc." (Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin [Berkeley, 1992], p. 12). Genette captures the uncertain reference of the passage, which might indicate many kinds of difference, though most translators have opted for the difference of media.
    5.  Aristotle, *The Poetics,* in S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art: With a Critical Text and Translation of "The Poetics,"* trans. Butcher (New York, 1951), p. 7; Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. and ed. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 29; and Aristotle, *Poetics,* trans. and ed. Malcolm Heath (Harmondsworth, 1996), p. 3. Aristotle's theory of mimesis grounds all later conceptions of representation, despite some important differences. For Aristotle, mimesis easily covered the instance of music because he understood music as a representation of human action. If our notion of mimesis as the representation of *reality* (as in Erich Auerbach) stumbles over forms such as music, it conversely does not presuppose a human object, thus opening mimesis onto non-Aristotelian domains.

The long silence in Western thought on the question of medium was broken in the early modern period for a reason that in retrospect begins to explain the silence itself.[6] It is much easier to see what a medium does—the possibilities inherent in the material form of an art—when the same expressive or communicative contents are transposed from one medium into another. Remediation makes the medium as such *visible*. The early modern period saw the first truly major practice of remediation with the invention of printing, which reproduced the content of manuscript writing at the same time that it opened up new possibilities for writing in the print medium. Still, the transposition of writing into print did not elicit at first a theoretical recognition of media as much as a reflection on the latency of print in the technology of writing itself. It was as though print were there, already, in the medium of writing. This is how Bacon understands print in the *New Organon*: "the technique of printing certainly contains nothing which is not open and almost obvious." Bacon explains that "men went without this magnificent invention (which does so much for the spread of learning) for so many centuries" because they somehow failed to notice that letters and ink might be used for inscription with a different instrument than the pen, namely "letter types" inked and pressed on paper, an ingenious form of endlessly reproducible writing.[7]

As we shall see, this peculiar latency is characteristic of discourse about media from the sixteenth to the later nineteenth centuries. Even if Bacon does not yet give the technical innovation of print the name of medium, something has become visible that before could not be seen. At the very least, the remediation of writing by print makes for a vastly more effective writing. Elsewhere in *The New Organon* Bacon argues that print, along with gunpowder and the compass, "changed the face and condition of things all over the globe."[8] That change proved to be crucial in bringing the

6.  Absence of comment on the concept of medium does not retard speculation on the individual arts during the later classical and medieval eras. Treatises on the individual arts abound, but it should be remembered that the ancient conception of *techné* does not correspond to the later conception of fine art. In educational treatises such as Martianus Capella's *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, the seven liberal arts are canonically identified as the famous trivium of grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric and the quadrivium of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, and harmony. Painting and other visual arts fell below the status mark of liberal and were often derogated to the level of mechanical arts, such as carpentry or masonry. The persistence of this distinction within the general field of arts or *technai* perhaps accounts for the latency of the media concept because technical media emerged from later versions of mechanical arts.

7.  Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 86–87.

8.  Ibid., p. 100.

understanding of print closer to the idea of a medium, to the threshold of concept formation.

## 2. Persuasion and Communication

*Condorcet.* Nearly two centuries after *The New Organon*, in 1795, Condorcet reflected on what Bacon saw as the global changes wrought by print in his *L'Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain.* In a document suffused with enthusiasm for enlightened thought, he celebrates printing above all other inventions of the modern world because it is destined to "unmask and dethrone" the tyranny of priests and kings:

> Men found themselves possessed of the means of communicating
> with people all over the world. A new sort of tribunal had come into
> existence in which less lively but deeper impressions were communi-
> cated; which no longer allowed the same tyrannical empire to be exer-
> cised over men's passions but ensured a more certain and more
> durable power over their minds; a situation in which the advantages
> are all on the side of truth, since what the art of communication loses
> in the power to seduce it gains in the power to enlighten.[9]

Condorcet implicitly contrasts printing with another art of communica-
tion based on face-to-face exchange: *rhetoric.* He sees print as undermin-
ing rhetoric's exploitation of fear and ignorance and thus its "power to
seduce." The art of printing, on the other hand, spreads the light of knowl-
edge "all over the world," magnifying its subversive effects. Condorcet
goes on to praise these triumphs of print media in the multiplicity of their
forms: "elementary books, dictionaries, works of reference containing a
host of facts, observations and experiments in which all proofs are devel-
oped and all doubts discussed."[10]

The absence of the word *medium* in Condorcet's framing account of the
revolutionary effects of printing scarcely limits the scope of the claims he
makes. But, like Bacon, Condorcet still relies on the term *art* to describe
these effects: the "art of communication." If printing is an art of commu-
nication, however, it is very unlike the ancient art of rhetoric. Printing was,
to be sure, still an art in Condorcet's time, in the special sense of being a
highly skilled craft or what was called a mechanical art. Printing transmits
what has already been composed by means of other liberal arts, such as
logic and rhetoric. Printing constitutes an art of communication in that

9. Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, trans. June Barraclough (1795; London, 1955), p. 100.
10. Ibid., p. 101.

higher sense only if we assert with Condorcet that precisely the technology of print makes the art of the orator unnecessary, presumably because writers who compose for the medium of print will be compelled to argue— or write—*differently*. The medium of print publication, in part creating a new public sphere for its productions, ensures that "all proofs are developed and all doubts discussed" and hence that no tyrannical cause prevails through the old techniques of verbal seduction. Or so goes the story Condorcet tells, a familiar story for the age: *ceci tuera cela!* The decline of formal rhetoric that followed hard upon the triumph of print is an event to which Condorcet is a witness and a prophet; the high-water mark of that dominant art of Western education was already visible to him.

It will be helpful to recall that rhetoric in antiquity assumed the primacy of *speech*, as the substance upon which this art was first and longest practiced. Even though rhetoric early on incorporated writing into its practice, the concept of speech retained preeminence in the definition of the art until the demise of formal rhetoric in the curricular reformations of the later nineteenth century.[11] The disappearance of rhetoric from the schools was the final result of an evolutionary change in norms of language-use proceeding too slowly at first to be noticed for its epochal significance; this change was nothing less than a reordering of the relations between speech and writing, a reordering in which writing—in the remediated form of print—would come increasingly to dominate the most important social venues of communication. This outcome was unquestionably influenced by the pressure of the print medium on the conceptualization of writing. But I do not argue in this paper for an outcome simply determined by the new technology. Rather, I propose to chart the reorientation of language toward the goal of communication by offering a series of philological annotations on a linked set of evolving terms: *persuasion, communication, means, medium, media, mediation, representation*. The method of annotation is intended to bring out the fact that the documents in my suppositional prehistory of media theory employ a philosophical lexicon inadequate to the development that presses on thought from its outside, from a history of technical instruments. The citations I have chosen to analyze are necessarily partial, but they are by no means arbitrary. They constitute exemplary moments in the history of an *absent* concept—the concept of a medium of communication.[12]

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11.  I have given an account of classical rhetoric's expulsion from the modern curriculum in a work in progress, *Literary Study in the Age of Professionalism*.

12.  On the methodology of the present essay, I suggest that my philological annotations are analogous to what we like to call now data points, a series of exempla in lieu of a hypothetically exhaustive history of media and mediation. My account aims rather for as much economy as

The first term in the sequence I annotate—*persuasion*—has an inaugural role to play by dropping out of the subsequent networks and their permutations. We might suppose today that the concept of communication is implied by the concept of persuasion, just as conversely our neorhetoricians believe that the motive of persuasion is hidden in every act of communication. But it would be more accurate to say with regard to the first hypothesis that the communication concept exists in the art of persuasion only as a possibility. As to the latter hypothesis, I will assume (without arguing this point further here) that rhetorical hermeneutics is inadequate to support a history of communication, despite its credit in much cultural studies.[13] In fact the communication concept emerged in early modernity as an explicit challenge to the system of rhetoric.[14] In antiquity language theory needed no concept of communication at all, and speech was regarded principally as a means to the end of persuasion, what Condorcet tendentiously named seduction. Rhetoric assumed that the speaker occupied a forensic position, in which his own thoughts and feelings were best kept to himself. Communication by contrast posited the transfer of the speaker's thoughts and feelings accurately to the mind of the auditor. The aim of communication could only be seen at all when reflected in the mirror of rhetoric's detractors, for whom every rhetorical utterance possibly concealed a lie. The contrary desire for a pure transfer of thought was voiced early in the history of rhetoric, most famously in Plato's *Gorgias* and intermittently down to the recession of formal rhetoric in the nineteenth century.[15] But the beginning of that end must be located in the seventeenth century, when discontent with rhetoric produced the first attempts to advance a different concept for the goal of speech, a concept we now know as communication.

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the subject permits, admitting always the possibility of other examples than the ones I have chosen.

13. For a discussion, see Alan G. Gross and William M. Keith, *Rhetorical Hermeneutics: Invention and Interpretation in the Age of Science* (Albany, N.Y., 1996).

14. See the invaluable account of Wilbur Samuel Howell, *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* (Princeton, N.J., 1971). Writing of Adam Smith's *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres,* first delivered at Glasgow in 1762–63, Howell observes that Smith's "system of rhetoric takes the position that persuasive discourse is the species, and communicative discourse the genus, in the classification of the functions of literature" (ibid., p. 549). Smith inaugurates a major shift in the conception of language-use toward the explicit acknowledgement of communication.

15. For the antirhetorical tradition, the construction of rhetorical speech is irremediably tainted by the possibility of lying. The field of semiotics can also be located in this eccentric relation to rhetoric, as Umberto Eco affirms when he calls semiotics a "theory of the lie" in *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, Ind., 1979), p. 6.

### 3. Means and Medium

*Bacon and Hobbes.* In order to understand early attempts to conceptualize communication (and subsequently the media concept), I return to Bacon, who struggles to find a new way of describing the technical means of communication. In a passage from *The Advancement of Learning*, in which Bacon considers the art of "expressing or transferring our knowledge to others," he skirts very near to the continent of communication, without quite deciding whether he has come upon an Indies or an America:

> For the organ of tradition, it is either Speech or Writing: for Aristotle saith well, 'Words are the images of cogitations, and letters are the images of words'; but yet it is not of necessity that cogitations be expressed by the medium of words. For whatsoever is capable of sufficient differences, and those perceptible by the sense, is in nature competent to express cogitations. And therefore we see in the commerce of barbarous people that understand not one another's language, and in the practice of divers that are dumb and deaf, that men's minds are expressed in gestures, though not exactly, yet to serve the turn. And we understand further that it is the use of China and the kingdoms of the high Levant to write in Characters Real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but Things or Notions; insomuch as countries and provinces, which understand not one another's language, can nevertheless read one another's writings, because the characters are accepted more generally than the languages do extend; and therefore they have a vast multitude of characters; as many, I suppose, as radical words.[16]

The phrase "organ of tradition" can be translated roughly into modern English as "instrument of transmission." Bacon is still thinking within the framework of arts (like Condorcet after him) and specifically of the subjects that constituted the curriculum of the Renaissance university. The "organ of tradition" does not refer here to an ordinary speech situation but to the school as transmitter of the arts. Yet the subject provokes Bacon into a wider reflection on the relation between language and thought (cogitation) than is warranted by the scholastic context of transmitting knowledge. He may appear to have crossed a certain threshold of conceptual innovation by offering the "medium of words" as an equivalent for the "organ of tradition," but the word *medium* here falls just short of that

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16. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning,* in *Francis Bacon,* ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford, 1996), p. 230.

crossing; it should properly be understood in Bacon's sentence as an *instrument* or *means* (a hammer is an instrument or means for building, but it is not, in the sense we are inquiring after, a medium). The antecedent term *image* points away from our concept of medium to another semantic complex, wherein the submerged conceptual cognate for *image* would be *imitation* rather than communication (the sense here is also close to *representation*). The word *medium* circulates in Bacon's day as a common variant of *means*. But the context of "transferring thoughts" also hints at a difference between means and medium. *Medium* hesitates at the threshold of that other sense so familiar to us, this by virtue of Bacon's assertion of a common function shared by words and gestures, two different means of expressing thoughts. This difference is analogous to the difference between poetry and painting, two arts in Bacon's time but not yet two media.

The further invocation of Chinese characters suggests that if Bacon is moving toward a conceptualization of the communicative function, it is precisely by moving *away* from speech in order to affirm the greater utility of writing for transferring thoughts, writing as a means of "communication"—the quotation marks here indicate anachronism—that seems to transcend (spoken) words. The "Characters Real" break free of speech while remaining a form of writing. Because these ideograms are intended to connect directly with thoughts, transcending differences between languages, they suggest that the communicative function of writing is perhaps best accomplished in nonalphabetic script. Because such writing does not represent a natural language, it might be said to constitute a wholly different (and possibly more effective) *medium* for transferring thoughts. But Bacon is not there yet; the concept of medium remains latent.

In *Leviathan*, Bacon's disciple takes a very different approach to theorizing speech, arising from his intention to elaborate an a priori psychology of human passions. Hobbes does not, like Bacon, generalize the purpose of speech on the basis of its practice in the art of rhetoric. Nor does he, like Bacon, celebrate the technical medium of print. On the contrary, he opens his discussion of speech in chapter 4 of *Leviathan* with an abrupt demotion of printing, which, "though ingenious, compared with the invention of Letters, is no great matter." Neither is Hobbes so impressed by "letters"; he goes on to declare that it is rather *speech* that is "the most noble and profitable invention of all other." This double derogation of print and letters sets up a remarkable repression of what Bacon so nearly uncovered:

> The generall use of Speech, is to transferre our Mentall Discourse,
> into Verbal; or the Trayne of our Thoughts, into a Trayne of Words;
> and that for two commodities; whereof one is, the Registring of the

Consequences of our Thoughts; which being apt to slip out of our memory, and put us to a new labour, may again be recalled, by such words as they were marked by. So that the first use of names, is to serve for *Markes,* or *Notes* of remembrance. Another is, when many use the same words, to signifie (by their connexion and order,) one to another, what they conceive, or think of each matter; and also what they desire, feare, or have any other passion for.[17]

For Hobbes, the primary use of language is for "remembrance" and for reasoning upon those observations we call to mind by means of words. What we recognize as the "communicative" function of speech is allowed, but almost as an afterthought. Hobbes is determined to bend speech to the service of his geometric method of argument, which proceeds by establishing fixed definitions and requires immense control over the chaos of language, with its inherited ambiguities and plural significations. The fantasized scene of Hobbesian definition takes place at a site withdrawn from social discourse, for the purpose of preserving cogitation from any admixture of "desire" and "feare." And yet the result of this withdrawal from the social scene of communication is oddly that writing reappears as the *trope* of speech; the "names" that serve as "*Markes*" and "*Notes*" gesture toward the diary or the commonplace book, even the ledger—but in the artificially asocial world of the single human speaking to himself.

When writing returns as literal fact, as it does in part 3, "Of a Christian Commonwealth," it returns as the problem of interpreting the Bible, the infinitely contested and mischievous book that Hobbes delivers wholly to the custody of the sovereign. So it will be in the Hobbesian commonwealth with all books, with all print. Writing and print are instruments (mediums) too dangerous to rest in private hands. Hobbes imagines a monopolization of writing correspondent to the state monopoly of violence. The control that Hobbes exercises over speech in theory, mastering words in Humpty-Dumpty fashion, can be figured in the commonwealth of letters by the sovereign's control over those letters; in this way Hobbes pays a powerful backhanded tribute to print. But he does not name his adversary as the very thing the reader holds in her hands.

If Bacon moves briskly in his text from speech to writing, Hobbes moves just as hurriedly in the opposite direction, narrowing his focus to speech only. And yet both Bacon and Hobbes are pressed into theorizing by the same unnamed idea looming over their conceptual struggles. This idea is not speech or even language, but something else: the idea of communica-

17. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (1651; Cambridge, 1991), p. 25.

tion. Hobbes acknowledges communication, but implicitly, by relegating the "transfer" of ideas to a secondary purpose of speech, conceived primarily (and defensively) as rational discourse with oneself. In the later seventeenth century, however, the term *communication* began to appear more frequently in philosophical discourse, as the name for the main purpose or end of speech. Unfortunately there is no way to capture this transition as a moment; we can only observe that the word's range of meaning changed during this period. On the evidence of the *OED,* its former most common senses invoked at base a scene of physical contact, the scenario in which one person hands over to another some object such as a gift or a parcel, a usage that survives in our notion of a "communicable" disease (the root derives from the Latin *munus*, "exchange," and is the radical for "remuneration").[18] The sense of physical contact is reinforced by the assumption of presence, which survives in certain exceptional current uses, as when we say that one room communicates with another. Speech, discourse, or face-to-face conversation was only one example of this close mode of presence or exchange, but by the later seventeenth century the sense of communication as speech or discourse was selected out as the primary sense, which ceased thereafter to imply the scene of immediate contact or presence and came contrarily to be associated with an action often involving distance in time and space.[19]

  *Locke and Wilkins.* The *OED* records the first use of the term *communication* in the primary sense of the "imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs)" as 1690. The plural noun *communications* is defined as "the science or process of conveying information, esp. by means of electronic or mechanical techniques," but this is obviously later.[20] The plural evokes what we call media—this word does not appear in the *OED* citation—by virtue of imputing distance to the scene of communication. The first example of the singular noun is cited from Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, one of many instances in that work. Although his is not in fact the first such use, Locke registers in his monumental text an important new qualifier of the term *communication*, its inherent link to sociability. He does not, like Hobbes, imagine speech as kind of private discourse for

18. *Oxford English Dictionary,* 2d ed., s.v. "medium."
19. The word *conversation* moves in a similar direction to communication, losing its more intimate range of meanings (including sexual intercourse) and specializing eventually within the field of communication.
20. Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 216, point out that the 1955 *OED* does not yet mention "'electronic or mechanical techniques.'"

reasoning upon things; the "Comfort, and Advantage of Society," he writes, is not "to be had without Communication of Thoughts."[21] Yet, like Hobbes, Locke emphasizes language as the means of communication, to the exclusion of technical media.

Located in a social rather than a physical matrix, communication for Locke defines the end of speech but also the precise instrumentality of words: "they [words] being immediately the Signs of Mens *Ideas*; and, by that means, the Instruments whereby Men communicate their Conceptions, and express to one another those Thoughts and Imaginations, they have within their Breasts" (*E,* p. 407). This definition labors to connect words on the one hand "immediately" with ideas and on the other hand mediately (as "means") with the aim of communication. Locke carefully maneuvers around the problem of the relation between speech and words by simply conflating speech with words (a questionable assumption for later linguistics). Everywhere in his discussion of words, Locke insists upon the "immediate" signifying relation between words and ideas, even as he allows the intermediacy of words as means to communicative ends. The *Essay* up to this point has been concerned wholly with ideas; when Locke turns to words in book 3 (from which I have been quoting), he does so only because he feels that he has established his principles of human understanding on the basis of ideas and *not* words.

We need not venture further into debate on the Lockean idea to advance the present argument. Suffice it to say that just as ideas for Locke are "nothing but bare Appearances or Perceptions in our Minds" (*E,* p. 384) and so absolutely distinct from things, in the same way words are further still from things. Locke's conventionalist semiotics (the term he invents in book 4, chapter 21; see *E,* p. 720), suggests that the chief mistake people make about words is to take them as signifying things.[22] Words are related

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21.  John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* ed. Peter H. Nidditch (1689; Oxford, 1990), p. 405; hereafter abbreviated *E.*

22.  Locke's semiotics is distinct from the science of signs to be found in premodern sciences, such as astrology, meteorology, and most importantly medicine, with its elaborate symptomatology. His linguistic conventionalism is in a line that can be traced to Aristotle, specifically to the opening of *De interpretatione* (also referenced by Bacon in the passage quoted above), trans. J. L. Ackrill, *The Complete Works of Aristotle,* trans. W. A. Pickard et al., ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 1:25: "Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds." This passage is often loosely cited as offering a theory of "communication," which in my view it does not. In addition to the fact that Aristotle asserts a naturally corresponding relation between "affections" and "things" (which is the relation that Locke attempts to clarify rather than assume), he is most interested in *De interpretatione* in how propositions can be true or false statements about the world. This is the concern he begins to address immediately after the famous paragraph quoted and in the remainder of this text: "Just as some thoughts in the soul are neither true nor false while some

not to things but to ideas; these ideas are plunged in books 1 and 2 into a kind of acid bath of analysis, a thoroughgoing clarification. For words there is no such hygienic recourse, and Locke's analysis of them is consequently oriented to explaining their irremediable defects and the historical consequences of those defects: "the greatest part of Disputes were more about the signification of Words, than a real difference in the Conception of Things" (*E,* pp. 484–85). Notoriously, Locke concedes that he would have preferred to omit consideration of words altogether from the *Essay,* but such a demurral would have reduced his book to an idealizing fragment. In the same paragraph in which he offers this confession, Locke also advances a conception of words that exposes the fundamental reason for their "imperfection" and vulnerability to "abuse":

> I must confess then, that when I first began this Discourse of the Understanding, and a good while after, I had not the least Thought, that any Consideration of Words was at all necessary to it. But when having passed over the Original and Composition of our Ideas, I began to examine the Extent and Certainty of our Knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with Words, that unless their force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently concerning Knowledge: which being conversant about Truth, had constantly to do with Propositions, And though it terminated in Things, yet it was for the most part so much by the intervention of Words, that they seem'd scarce separable from our general Knowledge. At least they interpose themselves so much between our Understandings, and the Truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the *Medium* through which visible Objects pass, their Obscurity and Disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our Eyes, and impose upon our Understandings. . . . But I am apt to imagine, that were the imperfections of Language, as the Instrument of Knowledge, more thoroughly weighed, a great many of

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are necessarily one or the other, so also with spoken sounds" (ibid.). As usual in antiquity, the interest is in the adequacy of language to the world, or the "truth," rather than the success or failure of communication. The one conspicuous exception (that proves the rule) is Augustine, who, as Tzvetan Todorov notes, *Theories of the Symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, N.Y., 1977), p. 36, exhibits an "insistence on the communicative dimension" of language that is new in late antiquity. Augustine's conception of communication is stated most explicitly in *On Christian Doctrine,* quoted by Todorov: "Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign" (ibid., p. 41). One has to jump forward to the eighteenth century and the decline of rhetoric in order to see the development of this conception.

the Controversies that make such a noise in the World, would of themselves cease; and the way to Knowledge, and, perhaps, Peace too, lie a great deal opener than it does. [*E,* p. 489]

Locke's desire to omit consideration of words altogether from the *Essay* betrays a powerfully idealizing will to remove the "imperfections of Language" that prevent us from achieving a world in which knowledge and peace prevail. Today we are long past crediting the realism of that wish, however impressive this resounding chord of Enlightenment remains. But the wish fathers an interesting thought: the medium makes communication possible and also possible to fail. The convergence of means and medium resolves an ambiguity of early modern thought and partially detaches the concept of medium from the older concept of art—though at this point the term *medium* is still more a figure of speech than a term in the philosophical lexicon. In any case, by means of the figure language can be distanced from the art of rhetoric. Or, rather, Locke establishes here a hypothetical distance; elsewhere he expresses a more radical antipathy toward language, the "cheat" of words.

The desire for an immediate transfer of thoughts and feelings, inasmuch as it is counterfactual, is the evidence of a recurrent anxiety that troubles the development of communication theory; we shall see it again. For Locke, signs exist at all only by reason of a default condition of communication: "For since the Things, the Mind contemplates, are none of them, besides it self, present to the Understanding 'tis necessary that something else, as a Sign or Representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it: And these are *Ideas.* And because the Scene of *Ideas* that makes one Man's Thoughts, cannot be laid open to the immediate view of another, nor laid up any where but in the Memory, a no very sure Repository: Therefore to communicate our Thoughts to one another, as well as record them for our own use, Signs of our *Ideas* are also necessary" (*E,* pp. 720–21). Communication by signs compensates for the absolute distance between one mind and another. That distance, which is not exactly physical, is nonetheless conflated in the history of thinking about communication with the physical distance between bodies in space and the exigency of "transferring" thought. Every communication is in that sense a telecommunication; conversely, long distance communication can stand as a figure for the inherent difficulty of communication.

In the assertion that words function like a "*Medium,*" Locke rationalizes his meliorist view of language; he offers no more than a modest set of remedies for the abuse of words, based on the principle that we should adhere as closely as possible to common significations. The recourse to the

standard of common usage is like an anchor holding signification to the smallest range of drift, but at the cost of conceding the inaccessible depth at which the anchor contacts its ground.[23] Locke's resignation to these limits explains why he rejected the attempts of the universal language theorists to fix signification permanently by orienting it to the axis of words and things, so many words for so many things.[24] I propose now temporarily to reverse the chronology of my exposition in order to consider several moments in the work of John Wilkins, the most notable of the universal language theorists in England. Looking back from the less innocent perspective of Locke, we can see that Wilkins's work belongs very much to a Baconian milieu of speculative optimism. Yet it is also, I suggest, prescient, more forward looking than Locke, and it needs to be situated on a different historical timeline than the monumental philosophical texts touched upon thus far. That other timeline charts the history of technology or, more precisely, *communications technology*. These two timelines are non-coincident.

Decades before Locke's *Essay*, Wilkins employed the communication concept in a recognizably modern sense, most famously in *An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language*, published in 1668. To say this is not so much to credit Wilkins with originary distinction but rather to acknowledge that the universal language projects were nothing other than attempts to grasp the idea of communication; these projects already approached language as a medium of communication, while falling short of formulating a coherent conceptual object. In *Essay towards a Real Character*, Wilkins takes as his point of departure the perception that distinctions between the kinds of communication are based in distinctions between the sensory organs: "The *External Expression* of these Mental notions, whereby men communicate their thoughts to one another, is either to the *Ear*, or to the *Eye*."[25] The real character, though it can be spoken, is chiefly a written language for the eye. The conspicuous visual appearance of the ideographic script effectively foregrounds writing as a material me-

23. George Berkeley sees this weakness in Locke's theory and worries it in his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, in which he mounts a frontal assault on Locke's distinction between ideas and words, and on the primacy of communication as the end of speech. See George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* ed. Jonathan Dancy (1710; New York, 1998).

24. On this point, see Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (Minneapolis, 1982), p. 72. I allude here also to Thomas Sprat, *History of the Royal Society,* ed. Jackson C. Cope and Harold Whitmore Jones (1667; St. Louis, 1958), which leans implicitly on universal language theory.

25. John Wilkins, *An Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (1668; Bristol, 2002), p. 20.

dium. If spoken words can also be said to constitute such a medium, recognition of this fact does not have quite the same effect of foregrounding the material. The visibility of writing and its technical paraphernalia account for the perception of its materiality, its translation of speech into visible signs, ink, and paper. This difference is what we mean by technology. Writing is a technology, but speech is not. This difference is muddled, as linguists tell us, by alphabetic script, which permits us sometimes to forget that writing is a technology. But Wilkins's real character famously bypasses alphabetic script; his ideographic writing was intended to free writing from the purpose only of representing spoken words and so enable the real character to establish an unambiguous and permanently fixed relation between symbols and ideas, on the one side, and things, on the other. Locke saw that this was an error, but it is worth specifying what kind of error. Today we would say that Wilkins hoped to correct the communicative deficiency of language by means of a technological fix. This recourse, which has the same sort of charm as much science fiction, also has something of that genre's capacity to leap beyond conceptual safe ground for something new and strange.

Granting *Essay towards a Real Character* its moment of fame and conceding also its philosophical failure—its logical failings and inconsistencies are legion—I pursue further the link between medium and technology by annotating an earlier fabulation of Wilkins, entitled *Mercury: Or the Secret and Swift Messenger* (1641). This work is even closer than *Essay towards a Real Character* to Bacon in its investment in technology and in its science-fictional resonance. The subject of *Mercury* is announced in the subtitle: *Shewing, How a man may with Privacy and Speed communicate his Thoughts to a Friend at any distance;* the subject, in other words, is communications technology.[26] Wilkins of course did not have this compound term at hand; instead, he gives his subject the name of the messenger god, Mercury, who will be remembered thereafter in just this connection, as a "logo" of communications technology. The treatise purports to describe current and possible means of secret and speedy communications at a distance, with the first half of the book devoted to secrecy, the latter half to speed. The question of the connection between secrecy and speed is puzzling, but partially illumined by the third term, *distance*. The purpose of secret communication is to transmit a message that will be unreadable to a third party in the event of interception along the way. The context here is

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26.  See Wilkins, *Mercury: Or the Secret and Swift Messenger* (1641; London, 1694); hereafter abbreviated *M*.

manifestly political, and the aims of espionage are invoked throughout the treatise.

The requisite of speed also responds to the problem of communication at a distance, which again can have urgent political contexts, but not exclusively. Wilkins remarks that the "invention of Letters" allows us to "discourse with them that are remote from us, not only by the distance of many miles, but also of many Ages." He understands writing as a technology for overcoming distance, both spatial and temporal, but a technology that might be improved in the former instance especially. It remains for us to explain why such improvement is premised in all circumstances, political or otherwise, on the *fusion* of secrecy and speed, which Wilkins insists throughout his treatise "may be joyned together in the conveyance of any message" (*M,* pp. 4, 131).

Interest in the "art of secret information" or code among Renaissance writers is common—Bacon gave this subject an important moment in *The Advancement of Learning*—but Wilkins sees a much wider use for code in the context of communication. Inasmuch as coded writing sets out to frustrate legibility, it produces intentionally the very effect that for Locke inheres in the "cheat" of words, their imperfection. Locke's theory reveals a defect in language itself, whether spoken or written; but Wilkins is in a way not interested in words at all. He is interested rather in what technical devices exist or might be invented to frustrate immediate legibility without failing ultimately to communicate to a select addressee. The strategy of his technologism is to isolate the material medium itself—pen, ink, and paper—from the message. The most basic coding effect is thus one in which the words disappear and only the medium appears: "A man may likewise write secretly with a raw Egg, the letters of which being thoroughly dried, let the whole paper be blacked over with Ink, that it may appear without any inscription, and when this Ink is also well dried, if you do afterwards gently scrape it over with a Knife, it will fall off from those places, where before the words were written" (*M,* p. 42). Now Locke is surely the more sophisticated theorist in suggesting that all language is in a way "blacked over" by reason of its inherent inadequacy to the mind's ideas. But does this more sophisticated conception of language as medium not gain its insight by reducing the medium to a metaphor of communicative deficiency? Wilkins sees the medium rather as a material technology. The difference between these two conceptions of medium persists, as we shall see, well into our own time.

As with secrecy, the objective of speed brackets the content of the message and asks only that we consider the medium. In the chapters on speed, Wilkins considers some improbable technologies—the communication of

sound through pipes, for example—but settles on two more plausible technical possibilities: the first is the transmission of very loud sounds over long distances; the second is the transmission of messages by the use of bright light. Unfortunately, in both cases the material means is ill-suited for the transmission of natural language, as also for the transmission of alphabetic script. Wilkins proposes, however, that the success of transmission can be ensured by the use of coding, which relies on the most minimal differences between sounds or between flashes of light to produce the effect of articulation; finally only two marks of difference are necessary to send any message. Wilkins devises here something like a precursor to Morse code or what we would call binarization: "It is more convenient indeed, that these differences should be of as great variety as the letters of the Alphabet; but it is sufficient if they be but twofold, because two alone may, with somewhat more labour and time, be well enough contrived to express all the rest" (*M,* p. 132). With two different sounds or light flashes, every letter can be assigned a binary code, and communication at great distance and speed can be accomplished.

The point to note here is not so much the anticipation of binary code but that Wilkins's communication at a great distance is possible only by recourse to the same device—code—that is otherwise the means to *frustrate* communication. Putting Locke and Wilkins together, we see that whether communication fails (Locke) or is deliberately frustrated (Wilkins), the effect is to bring the medium into greater visibility. The difference between Locke and Wilkins, however, is reinstated at another theoretical level because it makes a difference precisely where one locates the operation of the medium. For Locke, it would be correct to say that *words are the medium of thought*, whereas for Wilkins, one must say that *writing is the medium of speech*. Wilkins locates the operation of the medium in the *technical means*, making us see that we might even write with sound or with light. The difference between language as medium (of thought) and writing as medium (of speech) produces a certain philosophical confusion, an unstable or mutually blind relation between mediation as an abstract, even logical process and medium as material technology. This confusion, as we shall see, recurs in the later history of communication theory.

*Campbell, Mill, Mallarmé.* A version of the confusion is evident in the two competing theories of communication circulating in the eighteenth century and after. The Lockean version—words as medium of thought—provides a philosophical basis for a new canon of language use, a *stylistic* norm applicable indifferently to speech and writing. This is the familiar

notion of *clarity*, that language should always be transparent to meaning.[27] The stylistic norm is the nervous tribute of communication theory to the medium concept, still hovering between a metaphor and a literal nomination. Here is an exemplary passage from George Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), which claims to recycle the classical ideal of perspicuity drawn from Quintilian but is really concerned to establish a post-Lockean stylistic norm:

> Perspicuity originally and properly implies *transparency,* such as may be ascribed to air, glass, water, or any other medium, through which material objects are viewed. From this original and proper sense it hath been metaphorically applied to language, this being, as it were, the medium, through which we perceive the notions and sentiments of a speaker. Now, in corporeal things, if the medium through which we look at any object be perfectly transparent, our whole attention is fixed on the object; we are scarcely sensible that there is a medium which intervenes, and can hardly be said to perceive it. But if there be any flaw in the medium, if we see through it but dimly, if the object be imperfectly represented, or if we know it to be misrepresented, our attention is immediately taken off the object, to the medium.[28]

Perspicuity as the chief rule of style is everywhere asserted in the rhetorical and belletristic handbooks of the period. The norm of clarity is extraordinarily important as a literary historical event and leaves virtually nothing in the realm of literary culture untouched. Because Campbell's presentation of perspicuity brings in a little more theory than is requisite for the purpose of recycling Quintilian, it permits us to appreciate the real complexity of the concept. By insisting once again on the metaphoric status of the medium, Campbell rehearses Locke's desire for words that are transparent to ideas. The failure of communication brings the medium into an unwanted visibility or, in Campbell's terms, draws our "attention" to it. But let us imagine, for the sake of argument, a hypothetically converse (or perverse) desire, the desire *not* to communicate. We know that this desire is what motivates code, as in Wilkins's account of communication; can it also motivate literary composition or *writing?* The fact that we already know the answer to this question will allow me to accelerate my account at this point and to allow two rather unlike figures, John Stuart Mill and Stéphane Mallarmé, to annotate the counterprinciple to clarity, also descending from these early struggles with the notion of communication.

27. For an account of the norm of clarity, see my "The Memo and Modernity," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (Autumn 2004): 108–32.
28. George Campbell, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776; Delmar, N.Y., 1841), p. 217.

Mill's attempt to define poetry in "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," first published in the *Monthly Repository* of 1833, is famous for a certain aphorism loosely identified with the period concept of romanticism. Mill sets out to define poetry initially by comparing it with oratory on the basis of their common identity as forms of expression operating "through an impassioned medium," that is, language marked by a "colouring of joy, or grief, or pity, or affection, or admiration," among other strong emotions. But this assertion demands a more strenuous effort to distinguish between poetry and eloquence:

> Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *over*heard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude. . . . All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy.[29]

These familiar words have since floated free of their context and circulate as a topos of literary culture, a notion of poetry that can scarcely be found much before Mill's time but dominates criticism after it. The poet here is granted the license to ignore the injunction to communicate, a freedom that has major consequences for the *stylistic* norms governing the poetic mode of discourse, and brings that mode into sharp distinction from the philosophical and, later, scientific. If Mill's statement has any cogency, the rule of clarity is abrogated for poetry. We might regard the language of poetry after Mill (or romanticism) as like a code, a technique of writing that deliberately confounds the reader, that retards comprehension by provoking a hermeneutic exercise of no small complexity or duration. But it would be premature to impute anything more than this, if even this, to Mill, who wants only to establish the principle that true poetry must be written in a state of mind in which communication is disregarded.

Disregard for communication results in a thickening of the medium, a darkening of its substance even as attention is drawn to it. This counterprinciple to Locke is familiar in many versions—including those of critical hermeneutics and communications theory—and scarcely needs defense. It has been canonized repeatedly, but I will cite here as a representative anecdote Mallarmé's famous exchange with Degas on poetic composition. The painter took up poetry late in life and complained to his friend that

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29. John Stuart Mill, "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," *Dissertations and Discussions, Political, Philosophical, and Historical*, 2 vols. (1859; New York, 1973), 1:71.

although he had many ideas for poems, he had difficulty putting these ideas into words. To which Mallarmé replied that "you can't make a poem with ideas . . . you make it with words."[30] Taking the point of this remark, which entails a "modern" conception of literary language instanced by Mallarmé's own poetry, we might still want to say that it is Locke who establishes the philosophical basis of communication theory, upon which the counterprinciple of medium depends asymmetrically. Locke's specification of the medium as a figure for the function or dysfunction of language (the use or abuse of words) posits as the ordinary condition of communication the possibility of its failure, that is, of having to try again with other words. It would be difficult to imagine speaking without being able to revise one's speech, to try to put one's thoughts into more accurate or better language. The difference between what one means and what one says defines the mediation of words and sustains the enabling fiction that ideas exist. Or, to put this another way, the statement "no, that is not what I meant" is the necessary warrant for credibility in communication, even allowing that once spoken or once written, words acquire the darkness of the medium, which properly draws attention to its opacity.[31]

## 4. Medium and Mediation

Looking back over these glosses on the term *medium*, the reader will have noted that the concept of mediation has only just been acknowledged. The process of mediation would seem to be everywhere implied by the operation of a technical medium, and yet there are few instances before the twentieth century in which a process of mediation is extrapolated from the medium. On the evidence of the *OED,* the word *mediation* was for the most part used with reference to agents or actions involving intercession between alienated parties, as in—the grandest example—the "mediation" of Christ as Redeemer.[32] The most common use of the term *mediation* today is not unrelated to this theological sense, referring largely to the area of conflict resolution (a keyword search on *mediation* with any search engine confirms this point). This most common use of the term gives us an important clue about the social investment underlying the abstract sense we find in

30. Quoted in Paul Valéry, *Degas Manet Morisot,* trans. David Paul (New York, 1972), p. 62.
31. If I insist here on Locke's crucial role in the history of communication theory, I must also issue a caution with regard to the Lockean idea, which Locke surely did not intend to orient toward the scene of communication. Nor does he intend to reduce the idea to thinking in advance of speaking. But the descent of the idea into common usage converges upon the sense of premonitory inarticulation, of being about to speak, that warrants the self-revision of speech, and without which communication is, so to speak, unthinkable.
32. For the locus classicus, see Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York, 1950), 9.15, pp. 293–94.

communication theory. If we think of mediation as a process whereby two different realms, persons, objects, or terms are brought into relation, the necessity for mediation implies that these realms, persons, objects, or terms resist a direct relation and perhaps have come into conflict.

The sense of mediation as an abstract process is given in the *OED,* definition 2.a: "Agency or action as an intermediary; the state or fact of serving as an intermediate agent, a means of action, or a medium of transmission; instrumentality." The basis for abstraction in this definition is the shift of focus from "agent" to "agency," that is, to an impersonal process. This allows for any number of objects or actions to occupy the "third" position of mediation. Two of the examples cited by the editors give the range of possibilities: Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (1391): "By mediacioun of this litel tretys, I purpose to teche a certain nombre of conclusions"; Henry Lawrence, *Of Communion & Warre with Angels* (1646): "The understanding receives things by the mediation, first of externall sences, then of the fancy."[33] It might seem evident from our current "media" perspective that the use of the word *mediation* in the example from Chaucer must have been the more seminal; but that was not the case. (This would confirm, however, my earlier observation that the idea of communication is very late.) The sentence from the work by Lawrence reflects the more common usage until well into the twentieth century, suggesting that the *mediation* concept was most useful in constructing a picture of the mind in its relation to the world. This range of meaning points to psychology, to which the editors of the dictionary devote a subsection, b.: "The interposition of stages or process between stimulus and result, or intention and realization." The philological evidence thus turns up an anomaly: the idea of a medium seems to require a process of mediation; yet this process was rarely associated with the sort of medium instanced by Chaucer's "litel tretys."

*Hegel and Peirce.* The concept of mediation names a process rather than an object, a distinction that partially illuminates the mutual nonrecognition of mediation and media. In the philosophy of Hegel, mediation debuts as a concept of the first order of importance, but without privileged reference to communication. The term *mediation* and the problem of communication do not seem to have been brought together in any system-

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33. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford, 1976), p. 170, also picks out these two quotations from the *OED*'s list. It would be difficult to say, without considerable further research, just how common these uses are. My own experience reading in the early modern period suggests that the use of mediation in theological or political contexts is most common, and that the use of mediation in connection with books, either manuscript or print, is rare.

atic way until the later nineteenth century, with the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, and then only intermittently thereafter. Communications theory is eager now to extrapolate a general process of mediation from the operation of technical media, but the philosophical tradition put the term for process in every way *first*; if the medium of communication appears at all in this tradition, it appears as one instance of a more universal process of mediation supposed to govern relations among different terms of thought or domains of reality. This formulation would describe the use of mediation in Hegel.

The English word *mediation* has a near equivalent in the German *Vermittlung*, a key term for Hegel. In his corpus, mediation belongs to a dialectic of relations, by which concepts such as subject and object, or mind and world, are assigned roles in a system. In the most general sense, the principle of mediation denies the possibility of an immediate *(unmittelbar)* relation between subject and object, or the immediacy of any knowledge whatsoever.[34] Within the limits of this essay, it will be possible to improve only slightly upon this description by acknowledging that Hegel's use of *Vermittlung* is subtly inclusive of the other senses noted above, theological and disputational, belonging both to the English term and its German cousin. Hegel's insistence on mediated relations thus points toward reconciliatory moments along the trajectory of his peculiar self-generating dialectic.[35] At this point we may set aside the larger agenda of Hegel's idealist system in order to aim at another target. The concept of mediation expresses an evolving understanding of the world (or human society) as too complex to be grasped or perceived whole (that is immediately), even if such a totality is theoretically conceivable. It becomes possible then to present mediatory agencies as *necessarily* characteristic of society—a generative thought that enables later social theory to develop the idea of mediated relations by contrast to simpler notions of causality.

The question of totality troubles Raymond Williams's discussion of mediation in *Keywords* and in *Marxism and Literature*, to date the most synthetic accounts available (if also very brief). I will return to his reservations about the concept of mediation at the end of my essay, but for the

34. See the famous assertion in G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (1812; New York, 1969), p. 68: "There is nothing, nothing in heaven or in nature or mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation." The universal scope of mediation in Hegel's theory ensures the importance of the notion of mediation in later versions of Hegelianism, however diluted the dialectic becomes. Hegel's insistence on mediation is perhaps equaled only in René Girard's theory of "mimetic desire," which grounds a notion of desire in a scenario of mediation.

35. Hegel's dialectic of mediation is of course distinguished by the fact that it does not start with two terms but only one, as in his unfolding of *being* in the terms *nothing* and *becoming*.

present it will be necessary to press further with a consideration of the anomaly noted above, the apparent lack of relation between *medium* and *mediation* in the philological record. This problem, in my view, is crucial to our understanding of the way in which the concept of mediation as a process seems to come in and out of philosophical and social theory without establishing until very late a special relation to the field of communication.[36] The philological evidence suggests that concern with communication continues to be expressed, often still metaphorically, by use of the term *medium*. On the other hand, the concept of mediation as it appears in Hegel and is taken up in the tradition of Marxist and sociological theory posits this concept in connection with more universal contexts than those of communication. For Hegel, mediation concerns nothing less than the question of *being;* for Marx, the question of *labor* (the mediation of mankind and nature). The communicative relation seems to lie below the radar of thinking about mediation until later. As we shall see, the extrapolation of a process of mediation from the fact of a particular communicative medium (speech, writing, print) depended not on the incorporation of the concept of medium into a more general conceptual framework but the reverse, a reduction of the social totality to communication as its representative instance.

    A version of that reduction characterizes the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, who elaborates the first full-scale theory of a specifically *semiotic* mediation. Peirce's typology of signs is notoriously complex, but I will emphasize only one small feature of that typology, setting out from a standard definition of the sign in Peirce: "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea."[37] What Peirce calls the interpretant is actually another sign (not a signified), the function of which is to interpret the first sign; the interpretant then becomes a representamen for another interpretant. Um-

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36.    A significant exception is Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, trans. and ed. Andrew Bowie (Cambridge, 1998), p. 7, in which he defines speech as *"the mediation [Vermittlung] of the communal nature of thought,"* and also "mediation of thought for the individual." Schleiermacher consistently sets hermeneutics in the larger context of communication, but does not pursue further elaboration of the mediation concept. For a later moment in this hermeneutic tradition, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2d ed. (London, 1989), pp. 383–405.

37.    Charles Sanders Peirce, *Elements of Logic,* in *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 8 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960–66), 2:135.

berto Eco observes in his discussion of Peirce that this formulation inaugurates an endless series or *"unlimited semiosis."*[38] The infinite replication of the sign permits the model to incorporate virtually all other discourses of knowledge by way of translation into semiotic terms: "All this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs."[39] Peirce's ambitious claim for a concept with formerly so narrow a role to play in philosophical reflection interrupts the conversation in philosophy by violently displacing traditional philosophical questions into the domain of the semiotic (a displacement that is without precursor but is perhaps paralleled in the work of Gottlob Frege). Peirce's implicit reduction of philosophical system or notions of totality—the world or human society—to the instance of symbolic exchange is a strategic gambit of considerable symptomatic importance and quite outweighs the actual influence of Peirce in the twentieth century.[40] The desire to generalize social theory from the instance of communication, language, or writing is recurrently a feature of twentieth-century thought, propelling the development of structuralism (Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and others), poststructuralism (Derrida), systems theory (Gregory Bateson, Niklas Luhmann, and Jürgen Habermas), communication studies (Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong), and information theory (Norbert Weiner, Dietmar Wolfram, and others).

The use of the term *representamen* for the manifestation of the sign confirms that Peirce is thinking of the sign primarily as a certain kind of representation. But it is not sufficient merely to say that an object is represented by the representamen. Peirce speaks of the object in two senses. In a formulation that sounds reminiscent of Locke, he posits first an immediate object as what is given in the sign, in much the same way that ideas are immediately present to the mind in Locke's system. In the second place, however, when he speaks of the object as a thing in the world, he describes it as *mediate* (we would say *mediated*).[41] To say that representation is a means by which objects in the world are mediated indicates that the con-

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38. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 68.

39. Peirce, *Pragmatism and Pragmaticism,* in *Collected Papers,* 5:302.

40. For a discussion of Peirce's theory in its more global implications, see Richard J. Parmentier, "Signs' Place *in Medias Res:* Peirce's Concept of Semiotic Mediation," in *Semiotic Mediation: Sociocultural and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Mertz and Parmentier (Orlando, Fla., 1985), pp. 23–48. Parmentier notes that Peirce was relatively uninterested in the physical medium of communication, a point of significant difference with most twentieth-century communications theory; see ibid., p. 33.

41. See Peirce, letter to Victoria Lady Welby, 23 Dec. 1908, *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby,* ed. C. S. Hardwick and James Cook (Bloomington, Ind., 1977), p. 73.

cept of representation is inadequate in itself to describe the effect of its own operation. When Peirce brings the process of semiotic mediation forward in his work, he complicates the concept of representation, including his own use of it. The emergence of this complication has the potential to deflect philosophical reflection on works of art from its immemorial fixation on representation or mimesis, an orientation shared with the theory of signification.

If it has always seemed intuitively correct to say that the sign represents thought, the sense in which a work such as the *Iliad* analogously represents heroic action discovers the inadequacy of that notion from a Peircean perspective. Mediation points to a hidden complexity of the representational process, which often goes quite beyond the announced object of representation. This is why whatever is mediated by Homer's epics need not be restricted to heroic action but can include many other aspects of Greek culture, a potentiality scholars have attempted to grasp by invoking the cultic or encyclopedic aspects of the Homeric epics. Further, these poems mediate aspects of Greek culture differently for the Greeks and for us. If cultural mediation operates in this case as in so many others through the strategy of representation, that concept fails to capture the complexity of the very process for which its name stood for so long.

### 5. Mediation and Representation

The difference between a poem and a painting was formerly understood within the system of the fine arts.[42] But the distinction between poetry and painting looks very different when reconceived as the distinction between media (print and plastic art). The status of representation too is altered in relation to the category of medium, which directs our attention first to the material and formal qualities of different kinds of cultural expression and only second to the object of representation. The full significance of the medium as such is always difficult to see in advance of remediation, as with the remediation of writing by print or painting by photography. The pro-

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42.   For an account, see Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J., 1970). This system is itself modern, replacing the older scheme of the mechanical and liberal arts based on the concept of *techné* with the scheme of the fine arts based on an aesthetic conception of art that henceforth excluded all mechanical arts as well as former liberal arts such as logic and rhetoric. From the perspective of the *longue durée*, the system of the fine arts looks transitional, ushering in (as in Lessing's *Laokoön*) a stricter distinction between the arts—a poem is *not* like a picture—than characterized the happily multimedia productions of premodern culture. The sorting out of the arts in turn prepares the ground for the new media system, which is marked by the deliberate manipulation of multimedial effects. For a superb study of the transition to the fine arts, see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York, 1965), pp. 163–227.

liferation of remediation by the later nineteenth century demanded nothing less than a new philosophical framework for understanding media as such in contradistinction to the work of art conceived within the dominant frame of mimesis. This new framework was provided by the idea of communication, which encloses all forms of media now, whether defined as art (painting) or nonart (informational genres, newspapers, and so on) or something in between (photography).[43] The system of the fine arts yielded to a new system, the media.

The proliferation of new media stimulated the rapid development of communication theory, a subject too large to address here except in summary fashion by means of another set of philological annotations. On the evidence of the word *medium* itself, we can conclude that its new visibility confirmed its utility in connection with new occasions and instruments of communication. The *OED* is rich in new citations of *medium* in the later nineteenth century. Of these I will isolate three significant new uses, taking the first two together: (1) "Any of the varieties of painting or drawing as determined by the material or technique used"; and (2) "A channel of mass communication, as newspapers, radio, television etc." In the first definition, the term *medium* is used to produce a finer discrimination of the material properties of particular arts, such as the distinction between oil and watercolor. In the second definition, new information or communication media are identified that never acquire the status of arts. *Media* then names a domain of cultural production that assimilates the traditional fine arts to the larger category of what later comes to be known as mass communication. Some of these "popular" forms are fated to be derogated for their false resemblance to art. This problematic is of course entirely familiar in the discourse of modernism and in part constitutes that discourse, with consequences too familiar to rehearse and too complex to adjudicate.

The most surprising common use of the word *medium* in the period, however, is (3) "a person believed to be in contact with the spirits of the dead and to communicate between the living and the dead." The puzzle of nineteenth-century spiritualism, which we need only acknowledge briefly here, has been greatly illuminated by historians of technology, who have shown convincingly that such spiritualism is a shadow cast by communi-

43. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), p. 227, reminds us that "much futile thought had been devoted to the question of whether photography is an art." Benjamin's conceptualization of the auratic distinction that formerly supported the cultic reception of art gives us the first great theorization of technical media, now illuminated by the flickering light of film, photography's medial successor. The resolution of photography's status as an art (along with film) helped to propel the reorganization of the arts around the media concept: print, visual, plastic arts, and so on.

cations technology itself, a nice joke of history underscored by the tenacity with which the spiritualists sought to use media technology to capture the voices and images of the dead.[44] In our history of concept formation, the prevalence of the spiritual medium marks a transition from the notion of communication premised on face-to-face exchange to one premised on distance; both spatial ratios are embodied in the figure of the spiritual medium, who mediated communications with the most distant of all realms, Hamlet's "undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns."

If communication technology established a relation to spiritualism in the nineteenth century, it served as the basis for a new profession in the twentieth, public relations or advertising. The pioneers in this field were highly sensitive to the diversity and specificity of media. I recall here the most important of these new media professionals, Edward L. Bernays, who baptized the field in his seminal study, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, defining precisely its arena of operation. Of the "public relations counsel," Bernays writes that this figure's "advice is given not only on actions which take place, but also on the use of mediums which bring these actions to the public it is desired to reach, no matter whether these mediums be the printed, the spoken or the visualized word—that is, advertising, lectures, the stage, the pulpit, the newspaper, the photograph, the wireless, the mail or any other form of thought communication."[45] Bernays refers to *mediums*, but, as we know, the plural form was standardized as *media*, most powerfully thereafter linked to the definite article: the media. With the dissemination of that term, we disembark on the new continent Bacon glimpsed in his *The Advancement of Learning*. The latency of the media concept is superseded by the era of its ubiquity.

*Saussure and Jakobson.* The emergence of these new terms and new professional (or, in the case of the spiritualists, quasi-professional) fields suggests a context for understanding the twentieth-century project of reconceptualizing the process of signification within a theory of communi-

44. For a discussion of the connection between spiritualism and ideas about communication, see John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, 1999), pp. 89–108, and Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, N.C., 2000). The survival of spiritualism in this cultural form is also a survival of a dualist ontology of substances; body and soul were typically described as mediated by a third term (or substance), *spirit*.

45. Edward L. Bernays, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (New York, 1923), p. 14. Bernays might profitably be paired with Norbert Weiner, who baptizes the "entire field of control and communication theory" famously as cybernetics, from the Greek for *steersman* (Norbert Weiner, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* [Cambridge, Mass., 1948], p. 19).

cation. The drive to produce such a theory was in part the result of the immanent development of linguistics as a discipline; but that discipline also gestured toward a possible new science—semiology—whose scope was greater than that of linguistics and included the study of all forms of communication. Still, Saussure and most twentieth-century linguists continued to insist that communication is best understood with reference to the scenario of one person speaking to another. Predictably, the exclusion of writing and of new, "mediated" forms of speech—telegraphic, phonographic, and so on—undermined the model over the long term, with perhaps fatal results for structuralist and other versions of the language paradigm. The clamor of mass communications was already too great by the beginning of the century to be shut out by linguistic theory. Two brief annotations of Saussure and Jakobson will confirm the failure of much theory to address technically mediated communication even in the process of conceptualizing language.

   It has not escaped anyone's notice that linguistics turned increasingly in the twentieth century to the scene of communication and to the task of modeling this scene. Saussure's inaugural *Course in General Linguistics* depicts communication in its starkest form, as two talking heads whose mouths, ears, and brains are linked together by lines composed of dots and dashes. However firmly this picture insists on the speech scenario, its slackly suspended lines hint at the telegraph or the telephone, a visual pun that Saussure probably did not intend. Does this picture acknowledge, if only unwittingly, the fact of new mediums? Saussure is expressly worried rather about that old medium, writing, which he firmly grasps and just as firmly excludes under the category of representation: "The sole reason for the existence of the latter [writing] is to represent the former [speech]."[46] This entirely conventional derogation spells trouble of the sort with which we are all too familiar from the later critique of Derrida; but that is not the problem to which I am pointing.[47] The question raised by Saussure's ex-

46. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris, ed. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger (1972; Chicago, 1986), p. 24; hereafter abbreviated *CGL*. In context, Saussure is arguing for a distinction between value and meaning in order to discount the "nomenclature" view of language. I am ignoring most of Saussure's programmatic agenda in order to isolate the pressure of emergent technical media on the language of his text.
47. Derrida's critique of Saussure in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 29–55, retains its primal deconstructive force, subordinated to a philosophical agenda that is only tangentially relevant, however, to the concern of this essay. In making the case for writing, Derrida wants to claim that all language is, in the special sense of his argument, writing, whereas I would like to hold on to the specificity of writing as a medium, different from other media and possessing a peculiar set of effects by virtue of that difference. For a vigorous argument on behalf of writing (or "vulgar" writing, in theory's sense) as a mode

clusion is rather why signification requires more than just representational tokens in order to succeed.

Elsewhere Saussure invokes the conventional, Lockean thesis—"The value of a word is mainly or primarily thought of in terms of its capacity for representing a certain idea" (*CGL,* p. 112)—in order to refute it. His theory of the signifier and signified as a composite articulation asserts to the contrary an indissoluble or constitutive link between these two elements of the sign. The articulating function is different from representation and is expressed in Saussure's analysis by a series of figures: the action of wind producing waves on water, scissors cutting through the recto and verso of paper, and the coin as medium of exchange. Without attempting to explicate these figures individually, we can register the extent to which an unstated concept of medium governs the figures, a small troop of medial metaphors conscripted to fend off the model of representation: "If words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case" (*CGL,* pp. 114–15). Representation is relegated rather to writing, as the medium that is supposed to do *no more* than give us tokens for spoken words.

We need not draw any larger philosophical conclusions from this annotation, which offers only to describe the philological context for modeling linguistic communication. Two very different formulations are contending for dominance here: (1) language represents thought; and (2) language mediates thought. The second, however, is only tacit in Saussure. His theory of signification rejects a representational relation between words and concepts in favor of a looser relational concept, one that is closer in the end to mediation, though this concept never comes out from behind the figures Saussure uses. In the following half-century, the conceptual architecture built on the higher ground of mediation reaches a great height; we need only ascend a few stories to get a view of the surrounding terrain, which brings the arguments of Benjamin Whorf, Edward Sapir, Lev Vygotsky, and Ludwig Wittgenstein into view. Reality itself can be described for these theorists as mediated by language (that is, more than just represented). The hypothesis of language as medium is no longer just a way of pointing to the distorting effect of words, in Locke's sense, but of evoking the world making of semiotic mediation. This thesis goes far beyond what can be inferred from the scenario of the talking

of communication superior to speech itself, see Harris, *Rethinking Writing* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000).

heads. The proliferation of communication media in the social environment suggests that communication can no longer be modeled as the representation of silent thought by spoken word.

The more rigorous the analysis of communication, the more likely it is that a process of mediation will come to the fore. Jakobson's later model is exemplary in this respect. In his well-known and influential essay "Linguistics and Poetics," Jakobson analyzes the scene of communication into six constituents, the two poles of *addresser* and *addressee* and four intermediate terms: *context*, *message*, *contact*, and *code*. Of these, the contact isolates the medium as such, probably with some indebtedness to the new information theory of Claude Shannon, who introduced the notion of the channel that Jakobson invokes in his definition of contact: "a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication."[48] Although this physical channel includes the medium of speech in face-to-face exchange, the physicality of the channel is best evinced by technological devices of communication, which are prone to obvious physical (mechanical or electronic) failure. When Jakobson describes the communication function specific to contact—he calls this the phatic function—he evokes the vicissitudes of telephonic communication: "Hello, do you hear me?" The phatic utterance supposedly has no other content than a query about the success or failure of the channel, but behind the apparent semantic poverty of the phatic utterance looms the entire problematic of mediation as the extrapolation of a communicative process from the physical medium.

The purpose of Jakobson's elaborate model is to give an account of the poetic function, which he defines as a "set toward the MESSAGE as such." The "message" does not name a content but rather the sounds and words of which the message is composed; the "set toward the MESSAGE" is a use

48. Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," *Selected Writings,* ed. Stephen Rudy, 6 vols. (The Hague, 1981), 3:21–22. The essay was first delivered as a lecture in 1958. Claude E. Shannon published "The Mathematical Theory of Communication" in 1948. It was republished as Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana, Ill., 1963). Most of our current notions about the mechanics of communication can be found in Shannon's work, including the analysis of the channel. For an important comment on the relation between Shannon and Jakobson, see Lydia H. Liu, "iSpace: Printed English after Joyce, Shannon, and Derrida," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006): 517. Liu also reminds us of Shannon's use of Printed English as the basis for his mathematical analysis of the concepts such as redundancy in communication. Shannon reduces the twenty-six letters of the alphabet (plus one space) to bits of information, in which the semantic content is subordinated to the analysis of transmission, in effect recasting Printed English as a code (like many of his peers, Shannon worked on code breaking during the war). Jakobson's absorption of Shannon's terms introduces elements of information theory into the formative statements of structuralism.

of language "promoting the palpability of signs, deepen[ing] the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects."⁴⁹ By directing attention to the words of the message, as opposed to its "meaning," poetic function asserts the special quality of poetic language; however, this quality is not restricted to poetry. Jakobson immediately names as poetic many other uses of language, most famously the campaign slogan, I Like Ike.⁵⁰ The slide here from poetry to advertising suggests that a concern with media is more than just implicit in the structure of Jakobson's model. The poetic function introduces a kind of melodious noise into the channel of communication, heightening consciousness of the channel as such and so distancing the message from the object or referent. In the case of the slogan cited, the pleasant concatenation of syllables allows us to admire the words without endorsing the candidate.

It would be hard to deny that the "set toward the MESSAGE" confuses contact and message; the same string of sounds constitutes both the channel and the reflexivity of the message. In proposing his formula Jakobson comes interestingly close to the nearly contemporary, and more famous, formula of McLuhan, "the medium is the message." The latency of the media concept in Jakobson throws McLuhan into high contrast as the popularizer of that concept; but perhaps this contrast is best understood as a repetition of the difference between Locke and Wilkins (this time to the advantage of the technophile). If McLuhan seems less theoretically sophisticated alongside Jakobson, his famous slogan nonetheless has the effect of pointing up the limits of Jakobson's obsession with the phonemic manifestation of reflexivity. Jakobson's preference for sound pattern oddly deemphasizes the mediation of poetic speech by writing—a channel of communication overlaying (or remediating) the medium of speech. Whatever Jakobson asserts about the possibility of making the speech channel palpable must also be true of writing; much poetry depends on that fact.⁵¹ Despite the emphasis on sound, Jakobson's model of communication does not theoretically exclude other vectors of mediation, such as the mediation of speech by writing, or the mediation of writing by print, and so on. In any of these contexts the medium can be disturbed or manipulated in such a way as to heighten its reflexivity, resulting either in noise or poetry. The semantic poverty of the phatic utterance is thus the verso of the semantic fullness we find in the poetic.

In other scenes of theory, the archaistic term *poetic* can be replaced by

49. Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," p. 25.
50. See ibid., p. 26.
51. It seems doubtful, for example, that the example of I Like Ike would work as well in the phonemically identical case of I Like Eyck.

*literariness* or *writing*. Whatever name is invoked for this function, its purpose is to interrupt the referential or representational function. Theory likes to say that this interruption belongs inherently to language, but the concept of channel commands a far larger domain. The language paradigm, to which Jakobson made so crucial a contribution and which still dominates the cultural disciplines, fails to grasp communication as its underlying problematic and so misses the chance to gather the poetic, the literary, and writing itself within the larger theoretical enclosure of the media concept. This thesis, unfortunately, can only be offered as an assertion, awaiting fuller demonstration in some other context. It remains for us to consider in this essay some implications of the challenge posed to the dominant notion of representation by the media concept—if it is indeed the case that what was set aside by Aristotle millennia ago has now thrust itself into the foreground of culture.

## 6. Representation and Media

The fact of media proliferation suffers from no lack of interest among scholars. As with much theory concerned with technological change, early responses to new media tended to be written in the manner of prophecy and, worse, to lapse into technological determinism.[52] A more sober reflection on media will necessarily refrain from imputing determinism to the mere fact of a technical means of communication; that is to say, mediation cannot be reduced to an effect of technical media. Let us recall that Marx famously reflected on new media in the interrogatory mood: "What becomes of Fama alongside Printing House Square?"[53] We are still learning

52. One might mention Friedrich Kittler in this context, though not because his work is by any conceivable measure naïve. Kittler fuses several current strains of postmodernism with a version of technological determinism, by way of the materialism shared by both. On the issue of millennialist accounts of computer technology, I observe that a note of caution is beginning to mute the trumpets of the technophiles. Recent commentators such as Lev Manovich, for example, have been careful to eschew the more apocalyptic McLuhanite style. And yet even Manovich cannot resist asserting that: "This new revolution is arguably more profound than the previous ones [he refers here to the printing press], and we are just beginning to register its initial effects" (Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* [Cambridge, Mass., 2001], p. 19). Perhaps, but there is a reservation worth inserting here in response to the implicit diminution of earlier technologies, many of which (telecommunication, rapid transit) were world transforming in a way the computer has not begun to match. Certainly we have not seen any social transformation that can be linked to the computer comparable in magnitude to the Protestant Reformation, which depended crucially on print media. Of course this is not to say that transformations on this scale will never occur. But the cultural effects of digitization loom so large to us today because we see them against the background of technologies that have been thoroughly naturalized, as integrated into the lifeworld as the ground beneath our feet.

53. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (1953; New York, 1973), p. 110.

what questions to ask of technical mediation. There is no question, how-
ever, that changes in the modes of social mediation can be inferred from
the operation of technical media and that reflection on this fact has deep-
ened the theory of mediation and of society. The work of John B. Thomp-
son can be cited in this context, especially his mapping of the types of
mediated interaction in modernity.⁵⁴ This work dovetails a higher level of
abstraction with that of Anthony Giddens, Manuel Castells, Luhmann,
Habermas, and others working in the fields of systems, media, and infor-
mation theory. Given the importance of this work—it is nothing less than
a new instauration of sociology—it is a puzzling fact that the concept of
mediation remains undertheorized in the study of culture and only tenu-
ously integrated into the study of media. In retrospect it would seem that
the disciplinary division between media and communication studies, on
the one hand, and the cultural disciplines, on the other, has had the un-
fortunate effect of inhibiting the development of a general sociology of
culture on the basis of communication and the correlative processes of
mediation.⁵⁵

    54.  See John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*
(Stanford, Calif., 1995). Thompson gives an account of three types of interaction: (1) face-to-
face; (2) mediated interaction; and (3) mediated quasi-interaction. The second refers to
interactions such as telephonic, mail, email, and so on. The third refers to more one-sided
seeming interactions initiated by media forms that require no direct response to the maker of
the content. These would include novels, most television and film, and many other forms of
entertainment, high or low.
    55.  Habermas's theory of communicative action is promising for its attempt to coordinate
a theory of the media with the mediating function of social phenomena such as money and
power, which Habermas calls "steering media" *(Steuerungsmedien)* (Habermas, *The Theory of
Communicative Action,* trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols. [Boston, 1987], 2:390). Habermas's
theory builds on Parsons's generalization of money as the medium of exchange, a theory that
already incorporated a cybernetic framework for understanding social systems and is echoed
precisely in Habermas's use of the term *steering.* Habermas's attempt to integrate the work of
art, however, into the theory of communicative action under the category of the "expressive"
seems to me less successful, and this problem has unfortunately impeded recognition of the
theory's potential to shift the emphasis of social theory generally to mediation. If the
conceptualization of art in Habermas's work seems unequal in gravity to the argumentative
motive of communicative action, perhaps this reflects more a bias of his intellectual formation
than a necessary implication of his theory. For an exemplary struggle with this problem, see
Habermas, "On the Distinction between Poetic and Communicative Uses of Language," *On the
Pragmatics of Communication*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence, ed. Maeve Cook (Cambridge,
1998), pp. 383–402. This brief consideration of Habermas can be supplemented with an equally
brief recognition of the importance of Luhmann's theory of art as a "special system of social
communication," in *Art as a Social System*, trans. Eva M. Knodt (Stanford, Calif., 2000), p. 128.
Luhmann's otherwise extraordinary work advances an idiosyncratic conception of medium,
grounded usually in the domain of perception (the visual or aural), or sometimes in "language
as a medium of fixation for intuition" (ibid., p. 116). What we call a technical medium is closer
to what he calls form, although his examples here are sculpture, painting, poetry, music—the
traditional fine arts. The emphasis on the phenomenal or intuitional medium on the one hand

*Williams.* The tradition of philosophical and social theory descending from Hegel posited a concept of mediation in reference to nothing less than the totality of things, a level of generality that need not be reproduced in this argument but can be scaled down to the (barely) manageable level of society. Within this smaller totality different domains are said to be experienced not directly but in mediated fashion. The form of these mediations is difficult to discern, but Raymond Williams is surely right that the base-superstructure model of classical Marxism functioned as an early theory of mediation, more or less indebted to Hegel, but carrying forward a revisionist version of his dialectic. By superstructure, Marx usually meant the political and legal apparatus, but superstructure would now have to include the domain of the cultural, which most social theory considers of immense importance in modernity. With the further development of cultural theory, the base-superstructure model has itself been displaced by efforts to model the relation of culture to the two domains of the political and the economic. For us, this three-starred constellation *defines* the question of mediation, as in Fredric Jameson's assertion that "everything is mediated by culture."[56]

In his invaluable account of the mediation concept, Williams observes that its emergence responded to uneasiness with the relegation of culture to mere reflection of the economic or political domains. I consider reflection in this context to be another version of the ancient topos of representation, both simpler and more complex than classical mimesis (simpler because the metaphor of reflection reduces the cultural work to a passive role, more complex because the object of reflection is potentially the social totality). Williams argues that the "social and mate-

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is joined to an exclusive focus on the fine arts on the other. Caught somewhere in between, the materiality of media (our question of the medium as such) is relegated to the environment of the art system. Luhmann's focus on the artwork as such presupposes the scheme of the fine arts and postpones, at least theoretically, examination of the system of media. We find that discussion in *The Reality of the Mass Media*, trans. Kathleen Cross (Stanford, Calif., 2000), where the concept of media is dissociated from the system of the arts.

56.   Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Signatures of the Visible* (New York, 1992), p. 29. The full sentence from Jameson possibly reassimilates mediation to representation: "If we follow Debord's argument about the omnipresence and the omnipotence of the image in consumer capitalism today, then if anything the priorities of the real become reversed, and everything is mediated by culture, to the point where even the political and the ideological 'levels' have initially to be disentangled from their primary mode of representation which is cultural." But compare the less ambiguous statement of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford, Calif., 2002), p. 99: "The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry."

rial character of artistic activity" was "suppressed" in reflection theory and that it "was at this point that the idea of reflection was challenged by the idea of 'mediation.'"[57] This account seems plausible, although it is difficult to pin names and dates to it. If Williams credits mediation theory with a less alienated grasp of culture, he is reluctant in the end to see mediation as a successful remedy for the deficiency of the reflection concept, largely because mediation assumes "separate and pre-existent areas or orders of reality, between which the mediating process occurs whether independently or as determined by their prior natures" (*ML,* p. 99). Putting the problem in this way, Williams finds that mediation can be hard to distinguish from the kind of reflection critical theory wants to expose as ideological distortion. Indeed, representation has been easily incorporated into many versions of media theory in preference to mediation, precisely in order to sustain the project of ideology critique.[58] For Williams, if mediation cannot be shown to operate *positively* to draw social divisions together, as opposed to merely confirming their separation, then he is inclined to conclude that mediation "seems little more than a sophisticated notion of reflection" (*ML,* p. 99). But perhaps he asks too much of mediation here on behalf of a demand on culture to accomplish restorative ends.

It is not difficult to see what limits the usefulness of the mediation concept, even in the context of studying the media. It is always possible to collapse the mediations performed by the media back into representations, which become vulnerable at once to ideological critique. This has been the perennial strategy of cultural criticism, and the reassertion of that mode of criticism in recent years has in effect *set aside* mediation even as the study of media has intensified. But what is mediation anyway, if it is something more or other than a species of representation, as Williams feared?

57. Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), p. 97; hereafter abbreviated *ML*.

58. Williams remains wary of the concepts of mediation and medium. In his essay, "Means of Communication as Means of Production," he takes a harder Marxist line on this issue, arguing that "in the modern socioeconomic process, the real activities and relations of men are hidden behind a reified form, a reified mode, a 'modern medium'" (Williams, "Means of Communication as Means of Production," *Problems in Materialism and Culture* [London, 1980], p. 62). Such a view seems to favor construing medium as a mode of distorted representation. In a similar way, the concept of representation has come back to dominate cultural analysis more than ever; the challenge to representation by the concept of mediation may be said thus far to have failed. It is of some symptomatic significance, for example, that the name of the flagship journal of New Historicism is *Representations*. The journal catapulted the concept of representation back to the top of the theoretical lexicon by advancing a more sophisticated analysis of representation than was formerly adduced from studies of the realist novel. Notwithstanding this advance, there remains a perceptible yearning in the cultural disciplines today for a simpler mode of interpretation that would allow the social to be read off directly from persons, places, objects, or events in texts.

   Let us refrain from the temptation to make this question disappear by resorting to the high theoretical move of reducing mediation to the process of signification, conceived yet again as the undoing of representation or reference. Grasping the nature of mediation depends in my view rather on affirming the communicative function in social relations, that is, the *possibility* of communication. The assertion of the possible rejects its alternative, the actual, in recognition of the inherent difficulty of communication and the diversity of its strategies and modes. The proper theoretical context for conceptualizing mediation is therefore the process of communication. In that context, the enabling condition of mediation is the interposition of *distance* (spatial, temporal, or even notional) between the terminal poles of the communication process (these can be persons but also now machines, even persons and machines).[59] Distanciation is another way of looking at the operation of *transmission* (what Bacon called tradition, but meaning now something much more inclusive than he imagined). The notion of interpolated distance should not be understood, then, as identical to *absence* or to a term in the philosophical antinomy of presence and absence. Distanciation creates the possibility of media, which become both means and ends in themselves—not the default substitute for an absent object.[60] If this were not the case, we would be unable to explain the pleasure of talking on the telephone, reading novels, or even accumulating money as the medium of exchange. Pleasure in mediation may have grown out of the need to relieve the anxiety attached to the dispersion of persons in social space, but this pleasure now spurs the creation of new media where there is no compelling social necessity for their existence.

   59.  This argument can be related to Anthony Giddens's conception of "time-space distanciation" in *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, Calif., 1990), p. 37. Although Giddens identifies distanciation as a particular feature of modernity, he invokes the ancient technology of writing as the precursor to later technologies of distanciation.
   60.  Distanciation, it should be underscored, is not the same thing as distance. An example: in the climactic scene of Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, Captain Wentworth writes a letter to Anne Elliot while she sits only a few feet away. This is what we mean by distanciation *in the first instance*. The captain is responding to Anne even as she is speaking, just as her words communicate indirectly (mediately) with him through a quasi-coded discussion of the novel and of female authorship. The resolution of their formerly failed communication assumes the *possibility* of communication, which in turn depends on the strategic recourse to the mediated form of the letter. This little exemplum must serve in lieu of further theoretical elaboration, with the addition of one promissory note: the concept of communication here adumbrated need not reinstate a sender-receiver model of communication, to which a dubious intentionalism often adheres. Much communication, for example, transmits messages already composed by another, even by the long dead, but transmission is no less an act of communication for lacking any *apparent* intention other than passing on the message of another. The media concept already supersedes the identity concepts of sender and receiver, as media theorists have long been telling us in connection with remediation.

*Adorno and Benjamin.* The introduction of the theme of pleasure will perhaps seem surprising, but the point I am making can be confirmed fairly simply by noting that certain mediated interactions—emailing or text messaging, for example—seem preferable at moments to face-to-face encounters (as when we email the coworker in the next room). These examples of mediated communication are far less grand than even the most modest works of art but operate on the same basis, which is a social investment in the medium itself. This investment may or may not be based on representation (novels are instances of representation, but emails are not). At a higher level of abstraction, culture as a mediation of the economic and political domains of society engages the same investment in distanciation. To conclude this line of analysis and this essay, I will comment briefly on an exchange between Adorno and Benjamin on the subject of the latter's study of Charles Baudelaire, part of which was submitted to the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1938. Adorno initially rejected Benjamin's submission, for reasons entirely instructive with respect to the relation between mediation and representation.

In the section of the work to which Adorno objected most strongly, Benjamin drew a connection between the imposition of a wine tax on the citizens of Paris in the years 1849 and 1850 and the composition of Baudelaire's poems thematizing wine and intoxication.[61] The larger movement of Benjamin's argument can be bracketed in order to consider Adorno's vehement response: "Let me express myself in as simple and Hegelian manner as possible. Unless I am very much mistaken, your dialectic is lacking in one thing: mediation." Adorno objected to the "direct inference from the duty on wine to L'Ame du vin" and argued contrarily that "the materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*." And there is more. Adorno does not shrink from giving a name to the error into which Benjamin has fallen: "To express this another way: the theological motif of calling things by their names tends to switch into the wide-eyed presentation of mere facts. If one wanted to put it rather drastically, one could say that your study is located at the crossroads of magic and positivism. This spot is bewitched. Only theory could break this spell."[62] Benjamin's study provoked Adorno to articulate what remains for us perhaps the most invaluable clarification of

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61. For the relevant pages, see Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, trans. Zohn (London, 1973), pp. 17–20.

62. Adorno, letter to Benjamin, 10 Nov. 1938, in Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940,* trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), pp. 282, 283. Following Hegel, Adorno insisted that mediation inheres in the work itself and not in a third term.

the mediation concept. Failure to acknowledge mediation in cultural analysis precipitates a theoretical regression into positivism, made all the worse by the implication of a "magical" causality in the social domain—as though the wine duty really somehow explained Baudelaire's wine poems.

Adorno's statement adumbrates a very useful critique *avant la lettre* of much contemporary cultural criticism, which proceeds by just such an appeal to fact, often overlaid with political claims for interpretation exceeding the scope of the evidence. This is a problem endemic to criticism of the present day, for which Adorno's words might serve as a warning and corrective. And yet we might raise a question in reading this critique about whether it is really fair to Benjamin's work. In his reply to Adorno, Benjamin contends that the "wide-eyed presentation of mere facts" is nothing but the "philological attitude" and that his discussion of the wine tax was merely an attempt to establish a context for further interpretation of Baudelaire's poems, "just as we would also have to do in interpreting an ancient classical author."[63] Benjamin perhaps rightly senses that "mediation through the total social process"—for Adorno this means that interpretation must be based ultimately on an analysis of the commodity form— would short-circuit his project, which does not really assert the equation of a contextual fact such as the wine tax with the meaning of the wine poems.[64] On the contrary, Benjamin is intensely interested in the poetic form itself, a generic type of the medium of writing, and he positions this generic mediation between the "philological" gloss on the wine tax and the thematic of intoxication in Baudelaire's poems. Whatever a critic today may think of Benjamin's reading of these poems, this reading is not without a careful consideration of mediation.

What, then, is the point at issue between Adorno and Benjamin? Adorno gives us a theory of mediation that is proof against positivism, but seems to be lacking in consideration of the multiple levels and forms of *media* operating in the process of mediation. His principle of mediation seems regardless (at least here) of media. The theoretical problem emerging from this exchange, then, is how to relate the theory of mediation to the fact of media. The possible integration of technical media into the larger chain of multiple and diverse types of mediation can be represented in diagrammatic terms very roughly as follows, moving out from the individual cultural work through its successive mediations to the "social totality":

63. Benjamin, letter to Adorno, 9 Dec. 1938, in Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence*, p. 292; hereafter abbreviated "L."
64. For an analogous struggle with the temptation of totalizing "too quickly," see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1963), p. 45.

individual work] biographical oeuvre] genre] discourse] medium] social context] social totality

Or, to give (again a rough) sense of the content of the categories:

wine poems] Baudelaire] lyric] poetry/literature] writing/print] Paris, 1849] 19c capitalism

No doubt much more needs to be said about how the intermediate categories operate as mediations of the individual work and, conversely, how the work itself functions to mediate social relations in the course of its dissemination.[65] In any case it will not do to read the wine poems as representing, in however distorted a mirror, the event of the wine tax or even a set of socioeconomic conditions of which the wine tax is the symptom. What is involved is mediation.

If Aristotle identified the medium as an aspect of representation, Benjamin (and differently, Adorno) implicitly subordinate representation as a strategy of mediation, a gesture that was forward-looking, though lacking the full theoretical elaboration needed to ground the cultural disciplines today. Even absent that elaboration, the rule of representation over cultural theory might finally be abrogated in favor of the more inclusive principle of mediation. The subject Aristotle set aside two millennia ago has returned as the name of a new phase of culture and as the annunciator of new disciplines. This analysis enables us to state clearly the dilemma of the cultural disciplines founded on the older scheme of the fine arts; these disciplines manifest a falsely residual character because they remain theoretically unintegrated into the system of the media.[66] If a new instauration

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65.  In the diagram (for the moment, no more than a back-of-the-envelope sketch), the terms *poetry* and *literature* name discourses, *writing* and *print* name media; but this distinction is offered only to demarcate the "technical" aspect of media, as poetry and literature cannot appear except embodied in technical media or remediated. Although remediation is not limited to new media, it is a conspicuous resource of twentieth-century media, as instanced by the translation of novel into film and many other examples. The larger point of my argument, however, is that mediation is not confined to new or technical media at all and that this process must be conceived flexibly enough to include genres and discourses as well as modes such as representation and narration, which are transmedial with respect to technical media. Readers will also note that I have eschewed the concept of new media as defined by special relation to the visual. In my account, the genesis of the media concept is the result of the visibility of the media and not of visual media. Hence I have a reservation about the definition of new media offered by Manovich, for whom new media is the union of computational technology with imaging technology. For a critique of Manovich, see Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), pp. 32–46.

66.  The relative exhaustion of the dominant paradigm of representation—its fixation as a late version of ideology critique—has been evident in the cultural disciplines for some time and possibly accounts for their longing glance toward media studies as a way of moving beyond the usual order of business. The extent of this discontent was attested in the proceedings of the *Critical Inquiry* symposium of 2003 on the state of the cultural disciplines and foregrounded in W. J. T. Mitchell's introduction, "Medium Theory: Preface to the 2003 *Critical Inquiry*

of the cultural disciplines is to be attempted, it is all the more necessary that scholars of culture strongly resist relegating the traditional arts to the sphere of antiquated technologies, the tacit assumption in the losing competition between literature and the new media. Moreover, scholars of a traditional art such as literature must take equally seriously both the mediation of literature by technologies such as print—as they already do in the context of book history—and the long-durational forms of writing, such as genre. No cultural work comes to us except through such multiple categorical mediations, never simply reducible to the effects of technical media. For this reason, a new instauration of the cultural disciplines depends on the integration of the media concept into a general theory of mediation.

Still, for the time being it is the technical media that press upon us most urgently the need for a theoretical instauration, and it is the operation of such media that troubles the exchange between Benjamin and Adorno. The subtext of media surfaces tellingly with reference to the difference remarked by Benjamin between Adorno's work on jazz and his own work on film: "In my own essay ['The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'] I attempted to articulate the positive moments as clearly as you have articulated the negative ones" ("L," p. 295).[67] This puts the difference between Adorno and Benjamin simply and shrewdly. Several paragraphs earlier, Benjamin reflects unhappily on the fact that his work on Baudelaire seems doomed to circulate only as a private correspondence. Benjamin's monograph becomes by default a letter to Adorno. His disappointment with Adorno's decision occasions this further reflection on the medium of print: "the printed form allows the author a certain detach-

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Symposium," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 324–35. See also Miriam Hansen's contribution to the symposium, "Why Media Aesthetics?" pp. 391–95. In practical, institutional terms my argument suggests that the exclusion of literature from the disciplinary formation of media studies was a mistake, damaging both to media studies and literary studies. The same point can be made concerning the relation between the cultural disciplines and communication studies. Undoing this institutional segregation in fact as well as theory will likely prove difficult, but the vitality of both sets of disciplines depends on it.

67. Elsewhere in the correspondence, Benjamin is an amused observer of the vicissitudes of technically mediated communication: "I took the liberty to recommend you [Adorno] to the Brooklyn Institute, without finding out first whether you cared to lecture. By some odd confusion, the letter was first sent to the Rhode Island Museum, because the people at the NY Museum of Modern Art mistook your name for that of A. Dorner (over the telephone! you see what machine reception does to sound and especially to nuances in names)" (Benjamin, letter to Adorno, 10 Aug. 1938, in Adorno and Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence,* p. 269). The light tone of the anecdote in this letter is not unrelated to a serious theoretical point, explicated in Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *Illuminations,* p. 87: "What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing."

ment from his work, something that is of incomparable value. And then, if it appeared in printed form, the text could become a subject of discussion, and no matter how inadequate the discussion partners may be over here, this would compensate me somewhat for the isolation in which I am work-ing" ("L," p. 293). Benjamin is reminding Adorno that he is writing *for print* and that Adorno's decision to reject the publication of the manu-script is in some sense a failure to acknowledge the medium of his com-munication. Just for a moment Benjamin sounds rather like Condorcet on the superiority of print, but he has the misfortune to be addressing the future coauthor of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this plangent ex-change, the question of mediation and its relation to media emerges but fails to be resolved, which has been more or less the story of this relation since. In an essay written years after the exchange on the Baudelaire monograph Adorno reflected on the difficult reception history of his friend's work. One sentence from that essay might serve as a postscript for Adorno's own struggle with Benjamin's insight into the media concept: "Misunderstandings are the me-dium in which the noncommunicable is communicated."[68]

68. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge. Mass. 1967), p. 232. In annotating the exchange between Adorno and Benjamin I have, no doubt unfairly, cast them in the allegorical roles of standing in for mediation and media respectively. A more conscientious reading would complicate this allegory, which I leave standing for the sake of economy. Adorno's attention to the minute particulars of media is easy to retrieve from his oeuvre; I cite here one example, the essay on "Punctuation Marks," an exquisite meditation on the material form of writing, in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, 2 vols. (New York, 1991), 1:91–97.