RESONANCES OF DESIRE
A METAPHORICAL APPROACH
TO MEDIA THEORY AND BEYOND

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ABSTRACT

In current discourse, when speak of a »medium« we usually refer to mass media. However, in this paper, I will propose a broader understanding of the term which actually reconnects to the ancient Greek notion: the »medium« as a material condition which is necessary for any kind of perception. At the same time, a more specific, »reflexive« concept also of mass media is suggested. In this approach, media are not mere transmitters of information nor are they (primarily) vehicles for the manipulation of the masses. Their actual message is a message about our desires which they amplify and »reflect« (and thus make accessible to us) by means of aesthetic resonance. Any object may work as this kind of medium (for us). But it is important to note: not the media is the message, we and our desires are the message which can be received through the »reflection« of the medium.

This concept of the medium is developed in reference to the example of spiritualist mediums, more specifically the Fox sisters who were the most famous mediums of their time, but who, at the end of their career, admitted that everything was a big swindle: they did not receive messages from the dead in the séances they hosted, but self-created them. This example is taken as a heuristic metaphor for a new approach to media theory. In exploring and retransferring the »image« of the spiritualist medium to the concept of (mass) media a reflexive and constructivist view of the medium is carved out that is finally critically investigated regarding if it can be the basis of a meaningful extension of the general model.

Keywords: media, theory, desire, objects, aesthetics, resonance, reflexivity

MEDIA »TERMINOLOGY«: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE TERM

The medium as a term is of Latin origin and literally meant the middle. However, from the time of the enlightenment till today we can observe a drastic change in meaning. In his most interesting empirical research – relying on the analysis of historical dictionaries – Stefan Hoffmann (2002) revealed

that by the beginning of the 20th century there were at least six distinct fields of meaning present: 1. the medium as the average, 2. as the half, 3. as a means, 4. as intermediate, 5. as form of the »genus verbi« and 6. as a person who conveys spiritual messages. While in 18th century dictionaries the first three meanings dominated (which are very close to the original meaning), starting from the late 19th century one can clearly observe a shift towards the last three fields (see ibid.: pp. 25ff.).

However, form the point of view of intellectual history, another shift is much more important: the shift from the material to the immaterial medium. The »classical« concept that any perception relies on a material medium can be traced back to Aristotle (1994 [ca. 350 B.C.E.]) who remarks in regard of vision: »[…] it is indispensable that there be something in between – if there were nothing […] we should see nothing at all.« *(On the Soul:* Book II, Part 7) The same applies to the other senses – there must always be a medium. Thus, according to this view (which dominated perception theories till the early modern times), empty space is impossible since it would block perception. That is why the idea of »aether« was created in antiquity. It built the – hypothetical – substance filling the emptiness of space so that, for example, the light of the stars can get through to us (see again Hoffmann 2002: pp. 34ff.). Paradoxically, the »objective« empiricism of modern science finally dematerialized the medium. Since the victory of »field theory« in the 19th century we do no more believe in the necessity of a material medium for signal transmission (see ibid.: pp. 124ff.). Empty space replaced the aether – and the medium was »emptied« accordingly.

This is were the circle closes and we are redirected to the spiritualist medium which exactly during this time of accelerated scientific achievements became a popular phenomenon. The spiritualist medium is the (nonetheless »embodied«) channel through which the »field forces« of another, a dematerialised world of »spirits« reaches us – and it thus actually resembles a radio set or satellite receiver which transforms invisible (electromagnetic) radiation into perceivable signals. What is more, mass media, especially newspapers, had a large impact on the popularity of spiritualist mediums so that there is in fact no real contradiction between the growth of spiritism and the modern media system which relies on science and technology (see also Schüttpelz 2012).

However, our modern concept of the medium, which is so much focussed on communication and mass media, anyway just emerged during the 1940ies (in the course of their world-wide spread). In the following, many (mass) media theories were developed, and they fluctuate between technocentrism

(McLuhan 1964 or Baudry 1974) and anthropocentrism (Lischka 1997), object orientation (Kittler 1985) and symbol orientation (Flusser 1993), functionalism (Luhmann 1996) und critique (Chomsky 1997), descriptive realism (Lazarsfeld 1940) and the post-structural distopia of the hyperreal (Baudrillard 1994 [1981]). One could go on and list more oppositions and names. But – in this »crowded« field of discourse – how to find a new entry point that opens up new perspectives?

THE SPIRITUALIST MEDIUM AS A HEURISTIC METAPHOR FOR A NEW GENERAL MEDIA CONCEPT

In my opinion, metaphorical thought may provide those kind of (remote) entry points. The creativity of the metaphor has been exposed many times (see e.g. Ricœur (1978 [1975]). However, hardly any of the numerous theorists of the metaphor has revealed the true source of this creative element. Probably, the reason for this is that – in spite of the fact that the metaphor is by definition a deviation from context logics – a »good« metaphor is believed to represent the greatest possible analogy to the expression/idea which it substitutes. But from a »logical« point of view the metaphor can only be a creative impulse (and that means an impulse which generates new sense) where its imagery departs from analogy. Only by retransferring this difference to the initial idea new ideas may appear. This assumption is the basis of the »imaginative« heuristic method which will be applied here and which consists of three steps: An initial metaphor represents the starting point, it transfers an abstract initial idea into a figurative vision *(figurative transfer)*. In the following, the initial metaphor is further and further explored and extended *(condensation)* and finally reflected back to the initial idea *(transcending retransfer)*. Since exactly where the metaphor and its retransfer lead to »wrong« ways it may »surpass« the initial thought also meaningfully – if there is a critical reflection of the new »insights« (see also Jain 2002).

In the case of media, the initial metaphor (for an »imaginative« heuristic) is more or less obvious: The spiritualist medium shall serve us as a metaphor for the mass medium. The medium as a metaphor for the medium is not tautological, since even though the terms are identical the general meanings seem quite different – so that some might rather question that this is a good point of beginning. But let us commit to this experiment and look at the example of Margaret and Kate Fox. The two sisters were the most famous

mediums of the 19th century – which, for good reason, can be called the century of spiritism. Their history as mediums reads like a crime novel, or, a horror story. And their »medial« skills must have been enormous, especially their skill to attract coverage of the mass media of their time. Everything started in March 1848. The adolescent sisters excitedly reported of mysterious rappings they heard at their family home in Hydesville (in the U.S. state of New York). First, the news just spread in the neighbourhood, but soon even national and international newspapers reported on the unbelievable events at the Fox domicile: the spirit of a murderer, which was said to be buried in the basement of the house, allegedly communicated with the two sisters via a rap code.

This »ghost« not only revealed most exiting news such as the (well-known) age of the Fox sisters but also disclosed details on his murderous deed. Wondrously, from now on the sisters heard wherever they were rappings of spirits which thus seemed to be a universal language of the (un)dead. Their »unreal« skills were the basis of a fast career which lead Margaret and Kate (via numerous provincial towns) finally to New York City were they held séances with all kinds of celebrities of the time. The enormous success caused legions of (male and female) imitators. Spiritism – the dialogue with the dead via a (spiritualist) medium – became a big fashion and spread world-wide, and it is well justified to say that the Fox sisters probably had a large share in the success of the movement. One thing, however, is for sure: they were among the first professional mediums and successfully converted their »gift« into a business. (On the life of the Fox sisters see e.g. Weisberg 2004)

But Kate and Margaret Fox were, of course, not the inventors of spiritism and ritual evocation. Already in prehistoric times it was the task of shamans to communicate with the elementals and the spirit world. The first historic text documents on ancestral rituals that quite resemble modern spiritistic practice origin from China and date from around 3000 B.C.E.: In order to get into the right mood the medium – usually a grandchild of the decendant – had to fast and meditate for days. Then, during the rituals, food and alcohol were taken which surely did not fail to have the desired effect. And also in the Old Testament there are passages that suggest that, in biblic times, it was common in the Mediterranean area to use the service of a medium to communicate with the dead. (See Paper 2013)

Obviously, the invocation of the spirits of the dead through a medium has a long tradition and history. But what is the specific element of the situation of the 19th century when Margaret and Kate Fox entered the scene of spiritism?

– Well, spiritualist mediums were for the first time monitored by mass media, they evoked public interest and echo. What previously exclusively had served private or ritual purposes became an element of public discourse and, first and foremost, entertainment. In the course of that popularisation a new profession emerged that offered an opportunity and attractive income primarily for women of the lower classes. It is true: available data show an almost equal gender ratio. And most spiritualist mediums had a rather small income. What is more, the general reputation of the mediums in prudish Victorian society was doubtful as – not completely wrongly – they were hold to lack »morals« and live a promiscuous life. But, in spite or maybe even because of that, especially for women from poor backgrounds the profession of the spiritualist medium represented one of very few possibilities for success and emancipation. (See Laurence Moore 1975)

Aside from these »technical« and socio-economic components there is, however, still another, more global historic aspect that might explain the boom of spiritism triggered by the Fox sisters: The 19th century was character-ised by a largely undaunted faith in progress. It was the time of big inventions that would change the world forever: the railway, the steamship, the telegraph, the telephone, electric light, photography, motion pictures. We could go on. But exactly the »miracles« of science and technology seemed to »disen-chant« the world – as one could express it borrowing from Max Weber (1995 [1919]). Because behind those »miracles« a cold rationality was at work that set about penetrating the last secrets – and thus render them trivial. Hence, along with scientification and technisation, a longing for the mystical and the obscure arose. But, at the same time, the new mysticism had to be integrated into the rational order. Even the spirits had to materialise, had to become »sensible« and give evidence on their existence – for example by answering more or less meaningful questions via rappings in a séance. Exactly this bizarre mixture, the simultaneous addressing of both desires – the desire for evidence and the desire for mystery – might explain why spiritism was so successful in this historical setting.

By the way: In 1888 the Fox sisters, who meanwhile were troubled by alcoholism and financial problems, confessed that all had been a big scam: They themselves had produced the rappings (reportedly incited by their older sister Leah who had been their manager for a long time but not anymore): »The rappings are simply the result of a perfect control on the muscles of the leg below the knee […] No one suspected us of any trick because we were such young children.« (Margaret Fox in *The New York World* from

October 21st 1888, quoted according to Weisberg 2002: p. 243). Was that confession the end of spiritism? – Not at all. For one, Margaret revoked her interview statements (which had been rewarded with a high remuneration) one year later – and the spiritualist movement was more than ready to take it as a return to truth. And then, of course, the deeper reasons for the flourishing of spiritism were not eliminated along with the confessions of Margaret and Kate. The desire for the truth of the improbable was seemingly much stronger than the outrage on the outrageousness of the probable truth.

REFLEXIVE RETRANSFERS: THE (NEW) MEANING OF THE »MEDIUM«

What does this example tell us beyond the actual case (as fascinating as the story of the Fox sisters might be in itself)? – According to the suggested method of a metaphor-based heuristic the substantiated and condensed elements of the »image« of the spiritualist medium will now be (critically) retransferred to the general understanding of media in order to obtain new perspectives.

MESSAGES WITHOUT SOURCE: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

The standard model of communication assumes that communication is a process where messages are interchanged between a sender/emisor and a receiver/destination (and vice versa). The transmission of the message(s) is realised through a media channel, and therefore it is necessary to encode the message so that it can pass the channel. In this process, failures and interferences may occur on the level of encoding, transmission and the final decoding of the message (see Shannon 1948).

How does it change our view on (medial) communication if we retransfer the metaphor of the spiritualist medium to this model? – Well, already in the mathematical and technological communication model (as proposed by Shannon) there seems to be a hidden »spirituality« at work when we look at the wording. For example, one could well impute the sender a »sense of mission«. The role of the medium in this (trans)mission is that of a (prophetic) revelator. The receiver is ready to receive. But to receive also means to give birth. And if we now take the image of the spiritualist medium serious – and are not ready to believe in the reality of a spirit world – that means: There is actually just the receiver that delivers and the medium which assures the

delivery of the receiver by resonating the existing desires. Thus, the message is created in the interaction between the medium and the receiver. That can be called a constructivist concept of communication. And it is indeed a very interesting perspective: The medium as an obstetrician of the message that the receiver is (probably unwillingly) expecting – media practice as aesthetic maieutics.

However, that is a »materialist« (i.e. object-mediated) constructivism which is not to be confused with the constructivism of the (media) systems theory of Luhmann. Materialist constructivism is based on the »real« subject with its social and corporal determinations, it considers both material (object) conditions and social reifications. In sharp contrast, the constructivism of systems theory disposes of any material conditions by deferring media technology as well as the subject(s) to the system environment. In the end, the underlying concept there is just the expression of an adoption to the (language) conventions of general (Luhmannian) systems theory: the media system is one of many subsystems which, in the world of systems theory, principally all work the same way: they constitute themselves by communicative self-reference. Specific to the respective subsystem is just the (binary) code that delimits it from its environment. In the case of the media system, according to Luhmann (2000 [1996]: p. 17), it is the code information/non-information. Anywhere where that differentiation is applied is within the media system. Technologies are a (necessary) condition, but they are different from media: »[…] the technology of dissemination plays the same kind of role as that played by the medium [!] of money in the differentiation of the economy: it merely constitutes a medium [!] which makes formations of forms possible. These formations in turn, unlike the medium itself, constitute the communicative operations which enable the differentiation and operational closure of the system.« (Ibid.: p. 2)

It is not only revealing that Luhmann draws an analogy between media technology and money (which he calls a medium while media technology is not part of the media system). The dematerialisation of media by systems theory is (by necessity) the result of its »autopoietic« theory production which, in operational closure, yields the same claims no matter what the topic is. The »material« condition of the media system is not denied – it is simply not of interest as it cannot be formulated in the language of systems theory. However, in the image of the spiritualist medium the »embodification« is a crucial aspect that, to a certain extent, leads back to the Aristotelian concept of the medium: it can only fulfil its function by materialising the invisible

and by giving a voice to the immaterial spirits. And – in critical reflection – this seems to be true also for mass media. Since would they not solidify our desire they could not create resonances to it. But it is important to note: they do not pronounce the words of the spirits. The transmitted contents of mass media are secondary, most relevant is their mediation of our desire.

RESONANCES OF DESIRE: AESTHETIC COMMUNICATION AND »SENSIBILITY«

We may conclude: The central feature of the medium is its ability to create resonance. The medium »mirrors« and amplifies our (manifest and latent) desires – and thus makes them accessible (i.e. reflectable) to us. But how do media actually achieve at building up resonance? – Let us once more get back to the image of the spiritualist medium. If one is not ready to believe in supernatural powers it is clear that the medium must possess the skill to »sense« and reinforce what we desire to hear. In the context of the séance it is usually a general desire for the mystical or a redemption from personal guilt. The medium »concentrates« these desires by addressing them: the medium voices latent desire. But the medium has to be sensitive *and* sensible. On the one hand, it must precisely guess what the client counterpart wants to hear. On the other hand, it needs to avoid to reveal the full truth – which could be embarrassing or, for other reasons, unpleasant. At the same time, this sensitiveness (which usually is a female attribute) must be translated into sensuality. That which manifests in language during the séance is therefore just one part of the message of the medium. Equally important are the sensory stimuli: the sound of the voice, the atmosphere in the room, the illumination, etc.

In a similar way, mass media must sense the desires of their recipients (and for this task they like to make use of »scientific« methods like »market research«). Without this sensitiveness all their efforts go fail as they miss to »touch« the recipients (and their desires) – and, therefore, no message can be delivered. These desires can be either *collective*, like the desire for a »bogeyman« in order to create identity through distinction (if positive elements for social cohesion are lacking). Or it might be an *individual* desire, like the lust for the loss of affective control that is satisfied by watching a TV soap. Anyway, it is important to note: also in the world of mass media it is not (only) the news content or the plot which produces satisfaction (of the specific desire) but how it is »translated« into sensuality. Colouring, light, scenography,

accessories etc. are therefore no minor matter but highly relevant aesthetic elements for the amplification of desire. The media may fulfil their task the better the more intensive and multiplex sensual experiences they provide. In the séance all our senses are stimulated: sounds, light effects, delicate touches – all work together to increase the experience. And accordingly it is true: *The higher the aesthetic density of (mass) media the more effective they are.*

However, the feeling of belonging to a (powerful) community is of equal importance as the field of aesthetics. In the context of the séance, presence is most relevant. Not only must the spirits give proof of their actual existence by rappings. The joint efforts of a group of participants are necessary to create a »magic power« that forces the spirits to emerge and to »talk« through the medium. The attendees are the witnesses of these »manifestations«. Thus, evocation in the séance is not at all »immaterial«, but corporal presence is crucial for its success. In this regard, on the one hand, the procedure of the séance guarantees excitement since the dark atmosphere, the strange setting and the magic play with the mystifying create a nervous rapture of the audience while the medium falls into trance, loses control on its movements and, maybe, even talks in alien voices. On the other hand, ritual elements (with their defined sequence) provide a firm setting: the spectacle follows an exact schedule, and even the spirits must commit to the precise choreography.

Correspondingly, the »social«, community forming aspect is also an important reinforcing component of mass media presentation. Although, in this case, the community is less tangible: »virtual« communities substitute and supplement concrete presence. Those communities are, for example, created by identification (with a hero, a nation, etc.) through narrative means. But already common simultaneous experience generates a feeling of community. Thus, it is not by chance that already the term »communication« points to community. Caused by a proliferation of media channels and the individualisation of media usage (which was made possible by new network technologies) we can, however, currently observe a diversion and diffusion of the audience (see also Kerckhove 1996) which could indeed cause problems for the media system. Since in »community« (even if it is virtual) the »magic« of the moment is increased. On a trivial level this can be exemplified with the »infectious« effect of the laughter of others – which in comedy programmes is therefore often (insufficiently) substituted by the playback of laugh tracks. However, from this practice we may learn: *the medium unfolds its full potential in the community of experience.*

THE DUBIOUS CHARACTER OF THE MEDIUM

For me, the most memorable impression of a spiritualist medium is given with the figure of Tangina Barrons from Steven Spielberg's movie »Poltergeist«. This little woman with big glasses, flowered dress and a strange voice … is a media created image of a medium, for sure, but it is not necessarily illusive but a medially condensed representation. And in this special case it is indeed a double encoded image: On the one side, Tangina Barrons is an indispensable assistant who mediates between this and the »other« world. Then again, like any medium, Barrons appears as a dubious, sinister persona as she partially belongs to the spirit world. This scary side is, in her case, even emphasized by irritating elements like her whispering voice or the eyes that are at the same time covered and accented by (shaded) glasses. In this depiction Barrons becomes the vicarious personification of the threatening of our modern order by a sphere that cannot be rationally explained. And also mass media can be seen to belong to this sphere. Not only do the news that they spread often create feelings of discomfort and fear, but the more technology advances it becomes incomprehensible. The media seem to take a life of their own while they are achieving the impossible: they overcome space and time. *It is a technological haunting.*

The generally doubtful character of the medium is even enforced when looking back to the story of the Fox sisters. Considering their »humbug« we are always provoked to ask ourselves: Is the medium not just producing everything? Even if we principally believe in the reality of the spirit world (and medial access to it) – in the specific case it still can be trickery, a skilfully staged illusion. In the case of the spiritualist medium we thus are confronted with twofold doubts: Does the other-worldly sphere even exist to which the medium promises to »mediate«? And if so: do the spirits really talk to us via the medium or is it a »false« medium? In some mass media theories the concept of manipulation relies on similar doubts of the truthfulness of media »reality«: it is assumed that the media try to make us believe in certain views that serve specific political or economic interests (see e.g. Chomsky 1997). Boris Groys (2000), however, identifies a much further reaching level of distrust. The surface of media reality points to a hidden submedial space which nurtures our suspicion that there is a – likewise – hidden creator of the media surface (see ibid.: p. 49). That is why media theory is always to an extent suspicion theory: »The real hero of medial culture is the private detective who

permanently seeks for new evidence that confirms his suspicions.« (Ibid.: p. 226 [own translation])

But even if we leave aside those kind of fundamental concerns: Doesn't the medium – by its personality and individual qualities – always add something of its own to the messages? Even more important: does it tell us the full truth? Maybe, it can itself just receive only part of the messages that the spirits send. And do its words mean to us the same? Transferred to the field of mass media, we obviously have to deal with some general problems of communication and information transmission: problems of reception, decoding, distortion, filtering and interpretation, etc. (see also Wolf 1974).

On the other hand, we are more than ready to believe the medium as it tells us what we like to hear. That is not only valid for the spiritualist medium but for any medium: the medium charges us with its truths – and lies (which, in fact, are our truths and lies). That is why we accept its uncanniness and we follow its often delusional ideas: conspiracy theories, war propaganda, business news. The media betray us, but in the first place we betray ourselves. *We hear and see what we like to hear and see.*

In order to »cultivate« (appropriate) doubt in media images (and sounds) we hence need to develop self-doubt. Self-doubt has an infectious impact on the medium: The more I doubt myself (and my perception) the more I start to doubt media. But the medium seeks to prevent any doubts by a presentation which tries to aesthetically assure the truth and »reality« of its stagings. I shall trust my senses – and the medium delivers the »obvious« proofs: Don't we hear the rappings of the spirits? Isn't the table hovering over the ground as if carried by an invisible hand. Don't we see the images of ethnic cleansing which justify military action? Don't we hear the voice of the terrorist who calls for holy war? *The media create a fiction of authenticity that relies on a »flattened« reality in which any disturbing element is eliminated.*

According to Baudrillard (1994 [1981]) we are faced with a »hyperreality« of the media surface – which exactly serves the prevention of fundamental doubts (which are the result of the uncanniness of the medium). Also the media actors take account of these requirements by »emptying« their acts as far as to the point where the symbolic aspect dominates over the meaning (see also Meyer 1992). Cleared from all contradictions and »pollution« the media images and messages deflect all questionings. However, this »purification« also weakens the impact as in the process of (necessary) flattening resonances are eliminated as well. Our desire is »dirty«. A smoothed and filtered desire relates to »real« desire like a brand-new Barbie doll to our

shabby favourite plushy: boredom against love. *The effort of flattening undermines itself.*
How can the medium compensate that fatal dialectics of credibility? In the context of the séance, it is, for one, the social element of »conspiratorial« community. The whole round of participants becomes a witness of the happenings. The truth of the experienced events is mutually assured. Additionally, the element of sensual experience is another strong factor for the building of trust. We trust in what we witness with our own eyes and ears (even if that is wrongly so). And this »aesthetic« way of building trust works in a similar manner in modern mass media: their images suggest authenticity. Their news proclaim truth through the mouth of the speaker. The media fulfil – in spite of the latent element of suspicion – our desire for the real and the true by aesthetic mediation.

DIFFERENTIATIONS

Aesthetic communication (of desire) may take different forms (of resonance) in different kinds of media: *Communication media* create resonance to the desire for exchange, for an opening to the other. This very fundamental human desire to overcome isolation can i.a. be addressed and amplified by technological media. Today, we like to call those kind of media »social media« and we usually have in mind networking platforms that rely on Internet technology. Older but still relevant forms of communication media are language, letters, (mobile) phones, etc. All these communication media rely on the hermeneutic fiction that we can understand each other so that we, in the process of communication, exchange messages that we think we can make sense of. From a »practical« point of view, however, the mutual amplification of the (latent and manifest) will for unification by means of aesthetic resonance seems a much more important aspect than (impossible) understanding – as it pushes and ties the us together.
Information media are (material) »carriers« of knowledge and offer access to information (via specific interfaces). They thus potentially create resonances to our »will to knowledge« (Foucault). The will to knowledge results from the desire to be in control (by means of knowledge). In order to be able to create corresponding resonance information media should feature certain qualities: On the one hand, they must make knowledge »conservable«. Therefore, information, i.e. »formed« knowledge, is materially »informed«

so that the ephemerality of thought is undermined by material persistence. For a long time script on clay tablets and paper has been the most important information storage medium. Later on, recording technologies like (analog) photography, film and tape complemented script. Today, digital storage (on material carriers such as hard disks, flash memory or optical media) allow for a much more diverse and comprehensive information provision, and also access has speeded up immensely. And (ease of) access is exactly the other quality information media must feature, since information which is there but cannot be accessed is in fact irrelevant for the one who »desires« it. Ease of access is therefore a crucial quality for any information media – in order to address and amplify our will for knowledge (respectively the desire for control).

Entertainment media seem to be contradictory to that desire so that one thus could »locate« their resonance in the »will for ignorance«. This will for ignorance correspondingly originates from the desire for the loss of control. However, in most cases, the loss of control happens in a framework of »repressive desublimation« (Marcuse 1964), i.e. we sacrifice our resistance against that which suppresses our desire because we are allowed to satisfy an element of it that is not endangering system stability. Entertainment media and their aesthetic appeal exactly serve this task. On the narrative level, entertainment media create resonance by building upon existing values and by addressing the desire for unambiguity: the battle between good and evil in which finally the good will triumph – from the »Bible« to »Terminator« always the same story. By the combination of aesthetic stimulation and narrative simplification entertainment media create a highly welcome distraction from a reality that restricts desire and overwhelms by its complexity. But thus, there is also plenty of resonance to social control – which »naturally« conflicts with our desire.

Following a more conventional approach, communication, information and entertainment media are »expressions« of an instrumental understanding. Simply put: they serve the tasks of communication, information and entertainment. And as mass media in a post-industrial society they are based on (advanced) technology. However, as one may expect, I would like to contrast this functional and technological understanding with a *reflexive* concept of media which is founded on aesthetics, i.e. the sensual qualities and the capacities of resonance (with individual and collective desire) are the core elements. Accordingly, media functions like communication, information and entertainment can only be secondary. What the medium primarily

produces is the disclosure of desire. That is the actual message. And the possibility of (self-)perception within that mediation is the reflexive element here: the media are always directed towards us, since we send the message of our desire to them and they reflect and amplify our desire (by means of aesthetic resonance). *The medium is – potentially – always a medium of (self-)recognition.*

GENERALISATIONS

But, of course, one can and should pose the question whether these perspectives resulting from the re-transfers of the metaphor of the spiritualist medium really make sense in respect of an extension of the general media concept. So, what is the relevant outcome of the effort of a metaphorical approach to media? – At first, it is important to admit that specific moments that are characteristic for modern mass media cannot be captured (well) from the aesthetic angle that was taken here. That is especially true for the entanglements of the media system with political and economic interests, since (and that is another point that may be seen critically) the media, in the presented view, are just resonators of our desire and do not transmit (external) messages. This media understanding is potentially highly relevant – if we are ready to take it serious. But, in spite of their uncanniness, media are, according to this position, simply not suitable for a manipulation of the masses. They just reveal what the masses ask for, and the message is created by the (subjective) reflection of medial resonance. There is no original message and thus »mediation« in the conventional meaning does not occur.

That blind spot is, however, at the same time an element which can sharpen and extend our media concept. Focussing on our desire(s), »aesthetic reflection« foregrounds that which media mean *to us* – and which is otherwise often overlaid by the stressing of systemic functions (well, but then, maybe, the communication of desire exactly is the systemic function of media). And turning to the media themselves and their (necessary) qualities we are also pointed to underexposed or even denied characteristics. For example, a common accuse to new media like computer games is overstimulation and, in the case of ego shooters, the glorification of violence. Viewed from the perspective of aesthetic resonance those media simply address our desire for »sensation« (and we better ask ourselves: why is it so that we desire this kind of sensation?). The medium itself is »sensitive« in recognizing and revealing

this desire – by means of aesthetics. And that means: it is and stays material. Even if medial experience is merely virtual and even though many observers equate digitalisation with dematerialisation, aesthetic resonance relies on corporeality. The medium can only create resonance by making our desires sensual – and that is: material.

Concluding, it may be noted that in the field of media the applied »imaginative« heuristic indeed leads to some interesting additional »insights«. Of course, further exploration of the concept of aesthetic resonance and an empirical underpinning are desirable. But from a general point of view a metaphorical approach seems to be promising for both theory building and research (see again Jain 2002). One may even claim: Because of its aesthetic fundament the metaphor is itself a (potentially reflexive) medium in the sense of the media concept developed here. But, from the perspective of aesthetic resonance, not only metaphors may work as media. The term, which currently is so much focussed on the mass media system, should thus be liberated from its discursive restrictions: The medium is a body (of resonance). And, likewise: any »body«, any object may become a medium – when it »talks« to our senses and thus reflects our desires. Media are ubiquitous. *The world is a medium.*

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INFORMATION SHEET

Author(s):   Anil K. Jain
Title: Resonances of Desire
Subtitle: A Metaphorical Approach to Media Theory and Beyond
Year of Origin: 2016
Version/Last Updated: 30/03/2022
Original Download-Link: http://www.power-xs.net/jain/pub/resonances_of_desire.pdf
First Print Publishing in: —

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