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Materialism and Metaphysics

McLuhan between Innis and Teilhard de Chardin.

translated by Michael Barchet

1 McLuhan

Strictly speaking, my paper shall neither attempt a re-reading nor a novel interpretation of McLuhan. What I am rather interested in, however, is the specific direction media discourse took with McLuhan – especially since this direction is still vivid in our days. Although my paper starts with McLuhan, it actually takes the opposite way from the present back to McLuhan.

Let me begin with an irritation. It has caught the attention of many, who have read McLuhan more carefully, and there are countless rather astonished comments: While *Understanding Media* in 1964 presents a point of view that is relaxed, easy going, ironic and utterly sympathetic with the media in a manner very much of this world, and also refuses for the most part to apply moral considerations, McLuhan's first book about media, *The Mechanical Bride* made its points in 1951 by an explicitly judgemental, moral *critique* of the media.¹ His second book made McLuhan more famous than *The Mechanical Bride* could have ever done, and this was certainly well deserved. Undoubtedly, the new media-friendly attitude must be seen as an achievement and the renunciation of moral considerations may well have made possible a new kind of neutral description.

Yet what happened between the two books? How did this switch of positions come to pass, this drastic change of attitude? In his biography², Marchand notes a turning point in 1953 – years before the National Association of Educational Broadcasters (NAEB) commissioned McLuhan to conduct the research that would be the basis of *Understanding Media*.³

Marchand offers a biographical explanation: McLuhan encountered the books by Harold Innis, who had approached the subject of media from the very worldly aspect of economics. McLuhan was fascinated; he adopted the area of technology and Innis' more structural

¹ McLuhan, Marshall: *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*. New York 1964; McLuhan, Marshall: *The Mechanical Bride. Folklore of Industrial Man*. New York 1951.

² Marchand, Philip: *Marshall McLuhan. The Medium and the Messenger*. New York 1989.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 136ff. "That article ['Culture Without Literacy', Dec. 1953] [...] did mark a turning point, in which McLuhan positively exulted in the lack of moral 'tone' now manifest in his work." (*ibid.*, p. 121).

approach.⁴ Ever since, it is Innis, who represents the explicitly materialist strand in the universe of McLuhan's thinking.

In addition, Marchand also detects solid reasons of career management. McLuhan recognized the opportunities offered by media as a subject of interrogation – perhaps more promising a field than the study of literature, his original discipline. It seemed to offer a chance to proceed from literary scholarship to a broader analysis of culture as well as an escape from the threat of academic marginalization McLuhan faced at this point of his life.⁵

Yet we also know – and the history of reading McLuhan has repeated it to the point of cliché – that the man was a catholic. A stout and deeply devoted catholic even; following his conversion in 1937 for the rest of his life.⁶ Marchand reports that McLuhan made his children say the rosary on a daily basis, a deed they did not greet with real enthusiasm. Colleagues and friends reported similar irritation by McLuhan's habit of saying grace at the dinner table. As far as his private attitude was concerned, he was all for upholding traditional virtues – a homophobe⁷, a defender of traditional gender roles, a programmatic “hero of the family.”⁸ Politically, he was a conservative – up to the point of scattered remarks which, as Marchand points out, manage to praise certain merits of fascism.⁹

Popular understanding casts McLuhan as the ultimate Modernist. His image as innovator, as media's darling, as pop star and dandy – and he certainly was all of that – is in obvious dissonance with these biographical facts. For the McLuhan we see as the beginning of contemporary media theory, the *Mechanical Bride* and Catholicism are mostly recognized as rather marginal oddities.

2 Teilhard

My impression is that they may well be odd but far from marginal. Surely, *Understanding Media* sticks on its surface strictly to worldly matters and shows little of McLuhan's metaphysical passions. The work itself, however, exhibits its catholic leanings after all; most clearly in its relation to Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard, a French Jesuite clergyman who was

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111ff

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44ff., 155.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39f., 66, 109.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.62f., 78.

⁹ „In one of his 1934 articles, entitled ‘Tomorrow and Tomorrow?’ McLuhan characterized the modern world as hopelessly sunk in corruption [...]. The contemporary political movement he mentioned with some guarded approval was fascism; aware of their numerous errors, he nonetheless approved of the Fascist's diagnosis of the ills of the modern world. The Fascists, in urging a return to heroic enterprises, in rejecting the dull, ‘emasculating’ utopias of socialism as well as the rapacious appetites of capitalism, seemed to him to be on the right track.” (Marchand, *op. cit.*, p. 27.) Marchand refers to an article the 21-year old McLuhan had written for the *Manitoban*, the University of Iowa's Student Newspaper. From 1951, Marchand reports: „Innis [...] had, in some measure, also been influenced by McLuhan, despite his initial abhorrence of McLuhan's conservatism. (Innis was a classical liberal who could hardly abide McLuhan's support of such figures as General Franco.)” (*ibid.*, p. 114; see also: p. 144f.) Yet McLuhan did not share any anti-Semite sentiments, however (*ibid.*, p. 74).

something of a pariah within the religious establishment of his days, designed in 1940 a Christian teleological apotheosis.¹⁰ He had observed an accelerated growth of global networks. This concerned the increase of traffic and ever more extensive mechanization on the material level, yet most of all – and most important to Teilhard – it also affected the realm of spirit and spirituality. The term he coined in this context is the ‘noosphere’¹¹ – the globe entwined in an ever denser fabric of interrelations, which Teilhard takes to the conclusion of his book: an ultimate and universal integration – a final apotheosis, the Omega Point.¹²

Although McLuhan’s references to Teilhard are rather distanced and ironic,¹³ the ‘noosphere’ leaves conspicuous traces in *Understanding Media*. There is little doubt that the ‘Global Village’ is a fantasy of unification as well. A fantasy of proximity overcoming geography, which reaches well into the terrain of the chosen metaphor as a promise of restoration.

McLuhan passes the burden of restoration on to the ‘electronic media.’ He celebrates them as a force of unification which he – and this is crucial – explicitly posits against the fractures and disintegration of modernity.¹⁴ Against the division of labour and narrow-minded specialization, which he looked at with particular contempt, against geography, yet also against the dissecting powers of analysis and rational thought, tied to the medium of writing and the delay between writing and reading.¹⁵

In this trope of unification, McLuhan directly follows Teilhard, although there are differences in style and the manner of argumentation. What is clearly a version of the *Pentecostal Miracle* for Teilhard, is transferred to secular grounds by McLuhan by making it save for modern consumption. This may well raise the question, if Pentecostal Miracles really lend themselves at all to productive and authentic secularisation.

¹⁰ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre: *Der Mensch im Kosmos*. München 1994 (Orig: *Le phénomène humain*, 1955; written in 1940; engl. Translation: *The Phenomenon of Man*, 1959); all further references are to the German Edition.

¹¹ Teilhard, pp. 163ff., 181ff., 193ff., 243ff.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 249ff., 264ff., 194.

¹³ “People of literary and critical bias find the shrill vehemence of de Chardin as disconcerting as his uncritical enthusiasm for the cosmic membrane that has been snapped round the globe by the electric dilation of our various senses. This externalization of our senses creates what de Chardin calls the “noosphere” or a technological brain for the world. Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian library the world has become a Computer, an electronic brain, exactly as in an infantile piece of science fiction.” McLuhan, Marshal. *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto, 1962, p. 44. About Teilhard de Chardin and McLuhan see also: Winkler, Hartmut: *Docuverse. Zur Medientheorie der Computer*. München 1994, p. 64ff.

¹⁴ “After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding.” The first sentence of *Understanding Media*. *Op.cit.*, p.19.

“In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control...,” *ibid.*, p.23. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* McLuhan quotes Shakespeare: “’Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone,” (*op.cit.*, p. 21).

¹⁵ The relevant passages are well known: “Today, the action and the reaction occur almost at the same time. We actually live mythically and integrally [...] In the electric age, when our central nervous system is technologically extended to involve us in the whole of mankind.” *Understanding Media*, p.20. “...then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?,” *ibid.*, p.67.

3 The Metaphysics of Communication

It was Brianke Chang, who brilliantly analysed the profoundly metaphysical leanings embedded in the exaggerated hopes and expectations drawn by mediated ‘communication’ and the notion of communication itself, as they figure in many theories of media.¹⁶ The same contemporary theories which follow McLuhan’s gestures of enlightened amorality, which would refuse Habermas’ contra-factual insistence on consensus with a sneer and favour ‘post-humanist’ theories of technology – the same theories spotlight nothing but THE MEDIUM at the well-lit centre of their attention.

The concept of a ‘medial apriori’ takes the stage to determine everything that can be recognized as social reality as a product of media; even if this is meant as a ‘historical apriori’, we are witnessing the metaphysical bull being taken squarely by its horns.¹⁷ Media theory has found the Archimedean point, a perspective that allows at last the re- and deconstructing of ‘knowledge.’¹⁸ This is all the more persuasive, if the course of argumentation remains – at least on the surface – entirely on materialist grounds.

In its universal claims, the ‘apriori’ can only remind of the Teilhardian noosphere. However – as long as such crucial issues like media’s relation to other social systems remain unraised – the relation to extra-medial technology, to economy and to extra-medial practices –, I am tempted to call it an exaggeration. By the way: Innis had tried – on the trajectory of materialism – to shed light precisely on such relations.

4 McLuhan – A Subtotal

Yet – how does McLuhan figure in the history of reading McLuhan? Can we really hold him responsible for contemporary author’s choices of particular ways and means of analyzing media? Well – of course not!

My point is rather meant analytically. I think that McLuhan precisely marks a point of *dissociation* where everything that does not stand up to a somewhat superficial materialistic understanding of media is being split off. If McLuhan can be characterized by the division into a cool-enlightened mode of theory to dominate the surfaces of the texts on one hand and a private religiousness, which is private precisely because it is not represented in any direct way on the other, those two polarities have later been dissociated entirely.

¹⁶ Chang, Brianke G.: *Deconstructing Communication. Representation, Subject, and Economies of Exchange*. Minneapolis/London 1996.

¹⁷ Ebeling has shown that the notion of technical apriori has gained its apparent evidenciary clout only via manifold displacements; 20 years after its inception, its epistemological status still is thoroughly unsettled; comp.: Ebeling, Knut: „Das technische Apriori,“ in: Engell, Lorenz; Siegert, Bernhard; Vogl, Joseph (eds.): *Kulturgeschichte als Mediengeschichte (oder vice versa?)*. Weimar 2006, p. 11-22; see also: Winthrop-Young, Geoffrey: *Friedrich Kittler zur Einführung*. Hamburg 2005, p. 76ff.

¹⁸ Ebeling, *op. cit.*, p. 18ff.

As I see it, McLuhan marks the spot where metaphysical content moves below the threshold of attention and beneath a surface of cool enlightenment. Or, if we take it the other way around: This very surface provides a structural cover, which may well allow metaphysics to work unobserved.

5 Hagen, for instance

How does media theory deal with its heritage of metaphysics and irrationalism? I would like to focus on an example at this point, and somewhat arbitrarily, I single out an instance from German theory: the work of Wolfgang Hagen, which has frequently interrogated those realms of technical media at odds with the rational.¹⁹ Hagen centres on Spiritism. Surely, the very notion of ‘the medium’ has strong roots in Spiritism;²⁰ beyond that, however, Hagen demonstrates convincingly that there are also connections in subject matter. Spiritist séances were of course always concerned with mediation. To get in touch with the dead, you need a specific and very powerful kind of telecommunication; a communication tool which even transgresses the boundaries of death and finitude. Telepathy and Telekinesis share their logic and prefixes with Telegraphy. Photographs of auras and ghosts explicitly use media technologies of verification.²¹ In all these contexts, Hagen traces the tropes of discourses about electricity and he is able to map a considerable amount of overlap with the reflexion on technical media. All this is a well established and plausible consensus, even on an international scale, if we consider the work of Sconce for instance.²²

Quite specific, however, seems to me the way the story is brought to its end. For Hagen it is all but unquestionable that Spiritism can mean nothing but misunderstood electricity.²³ Irrational discourse arises in areas where rational explanations – and this is to mean scientifically grounded explanations – are not yet available.²⁴ Always already we are looking

¹⁹ Hagen, Wolfgang: „Der Okkultismus der Avantgarde um 1900,“ in: Schade, Siegrid; Tholen, Georg Christoph (eds.): *Konfigurationen. Zwischen Kunst und Medien*. München 1999, pp. 338-357;
- same: „Zur medialen Genealogie der Elektrizität,“ in: Maresch, Rudolf; Werber, Nils (eds.): *Kommunikation, Medien, Macht*. Frankfurt, 1999, pp. 133-173;
- same: *Radio Schreiber. Der ‚moderne Spiritismus‘ und die Sprache der Medien*. Weimar 2001.

²⁰ Hagen, *Radio Schreiber*, *op. cit.*, p. 99; see also: Hoffmann, Stefan: *Geschichte des Medienbegriffs*. Hamburg 2002, p. 108ff.

²¹ Hagen, „Der Okkultismus..“ *op. cit.*, p. 348.

²² Sconce, Jeffrey: *Hunted Media. Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Durham/London 2000.

²³ „The discursive genealogy of what is called 19th century occultism is deeply grounded in a thoroughly enigmatic question that remained unanswered for more than a century. For the late 18th century and almost all of the 19th century the question concerning the Being, the Kind and the Entity of Galvanism itself was unresolvable and unresolved; thus leaving unanswered the quest for an ontology of electricity, gravitation and nature. (Hagen, „Der Okkultismus..“ *op.cit.*, p.340.

²⁴ „Concerning the evolution of modern physics (i.e. Crook’s tubes) there a more than mere props adopted from occultism. Crucial parts of the deep structure of modern sciences, – non-euclidian geometry, the infusion of physics with mathematics, the theory of relativity, quantum theory, the theory of the unconscious, linguistics – all these had to evolve or were differentiated as *necessary counterconcepts*, passing through irrational occultist notions. Thus the theory of relativity for instance, is most centrally characterized as *mathematically finishing off* all preceding propositions concerning the existence of the Ethereal. (*ibid.*, p. 354 – emphasis added by H.W.)

at *pre-history*. By sheer implication, the background of this pre-history stages rationality – and the rationality of technology in particular – in the shining and utterly untainted limelight of reason.

It is precisely at this point, where the account turns against its own premises of objectivity and becomes affirmative. It enrolls at the service of present times and of technology. Even more crucial it also serves technology's arguably most central ideological core: the well established notion that technology and rationality are strongly tied together – something of a bundle of logics and matter, if you forgive me the parody. Shocked by the irrationality of Spiritism, the study of culture seeks protection under the strong and reliable wings of science.

Perhaps an adverse hypothesis would be feasible: What if the metaphysical heritage has been *incorporated* into technology; such as an ecologically brutal Chemistry of Chlorine to continue the Alchemist fantasies of omnipotence, or genetic engineering that resumes the male fantasies of excluding women from reproduction. The explanations I have sketched must miss these kinds of issues. They obstruct and make impossible a critique of technology itself and they forfeit the option to reach beyond the alliance of sciences and technology – powerful and saturated with power as it is.

6 The Heritage of Dissociation

Surely, Hagens negotiations with Spiritism are only but one example. What I am tempted to call the heritage of McLuhanite dissociation reaches much further, indeed. For a long time, German discourse about media acted as if it had to defend itself against some universal charge of being metaphysical.

Focused on the “materiality of communication” more and more issues, more and more problems were discarded. Despite a great variety of approaches that seems to suggest the opposite, the field was increasingly coated with a finely woven fabric of taboos.

Moral considerations were among the first to be split off and McLuhan himself had started it. The autonomous ‘media ethics’ that emerged, was left with a somewhat condescending smile to pedagogy. Or it was distilled to a form of precious irony, allowing the warning voice of cultural critique without any damage (or consequence) for a thoroughly affirmative surface. Yet another mode, McLuhan pioneered.

The second elements to be dissociated, were the Subject and the Social. In as much as the Subject had shouldered the burden of succession to the departed creator-god, the philosophical critique of the Subject had mercilessly demolished this conceit. Following this path, Media Studies banished the Subject and ‘human beings’ from media discourse as well. In terms of Social Studies nothing but system's theory was held to be even remotely adequate; the method of choice amongst the sociologists, since it argues in a manner so seamlessly compatible with media while the cool elegance of its post-humanist stance is unsurpassable.

A third instance was the dissociation of meaning and the symbolic dimension of media. The fact that media history leaves language behind and moves on to foreground ever more

advanced technologies from the audiovisual through computers, seemed to converge with the poststructuralist critique of language. It had been Derrida, after all, who suspected even the signified to be a product of metaphysics. McLuhan was read as a device of distancing from content; formal languages were greeted as spaces, which find their clue precisely in the evacuation of meaning.

As an effect, the definition of media shifted from the operation of symbols to the factual power of networks and the compulsion to connect. In the notion of “structural coupling” this crude determinism came to its end.

My point is that more and more was drawn into the maelstrom of a rhetoric of reassurance to stay on the terrain of worldly-material evidence. If the humanities as well as Social Studies still knew that they were in the business of interpretation, media studies – especially media archaeology – ran with the claim of conspicuous hard facts.

7 The Metaphysical Character of Media Studies

Once all these dissociations were completed, the remaining core itself exhibited many features of metaphysics. Frequent ritual conjurations – such as “Turing, the young engineer,”²⁵ are little more than a symptom.

Central to the metaphysics of media, however, was the very construct of the ‘*medial apriori*’. In good faith with McLuhan’s work, it was obligatory to comprehend media primarily as the cause for effects whose implications were to be studied in social space. To *invert* the direction of the interrogation seemed to be systematically blocked. So several questions stayed out of scope: How do the media themselves come into the world? Could media technology perhaps look entirely different? Why are certain media accepted and others aren’t? How do media interact with their practices of usage and what kind of wish-fulfilment is embedded in media structures?

And it was no accident that technology moved to the centre of the *historical* medial apriori. In terms of material, nothing seemed more certain than hardware even if it proved to be quite recalcitrant once it was subjected to specific theoretical treatment. And so there finally was a solid basis to stage a thorough critique of the humanities. Precisely in those realms where the humanities were floating, media studies always already seemed on firm ground.

Yet this brand of media studies all too easily walked into the trap of technology’s most central claim: that proposition and evidence, description and described, model and verification are converging at the one and only point of technology’s striking evidence of functionality. Consider the alternative: It would mean to sever the cycles of mutual reassurance that fuse

²⁵ Or – as a variant: “A young officer of the French engineering corps called Auguste Fresnel [...]” Hagen, ” Zur medialen Genealogie...,” *op.cit*, p. 134.

science and technology and to elaborate on the curtailments written into the logics of functionality.

This mix of materialist worldliness and media metaphysics seems to characterize a specific state of media discourse: A disguised metaphysics of media, camouflaged and cloaked in the garments of secularisation.

This has deeply structured Media Studies' field of inquiry. Most crucial in this respect is the disastrous dissociation of approaches focussing on technology from those called 'anthropological'. By virtue of naming alone, the latter seemed hopelessly awash in that terrain of "humanism" that had just been superseded so successfully. Compared to the "hard and solid" approaches, it had to look disparate, fragile and debatable. Summing up, it seems to me that it was a profoundly *curtailed rationality* fuelling this brand of media materialism.

McLuhan – as I mentioned before – cannot be held responsible for any of this. In his work we can merely see the point of dissociation, where inclusion to or exclusion from discourse is decided and where the 'irrational' side of media disappears below the threshold. Yet – as all things repressed are likely to do – it did return, and *haunted* Media Studies.²⁶

8 Conclusions

Allow me to cheer up this somewhat gloomy scenario by the announcement that my narrative has a happy end. Thus, German media discourse meanwhile has moved into a mode of self-correction. The concept of "Cultural Techniques," in particular, which was developed at Berlin and increasingly shows its productivity by bridging the demarcations of rivalling schools of thought²⁷ does indeed break new ground; most of all by explicitly and programmatically reintegrating the dimension of practices.²⁸

²⁶ Thus from "haunted media" to "haunted media discourse"?

²⁷ Krämer, Sybille; Bredekamp, Horst: „Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik. Wider die Diskursivierung der Kultur,“ in: Krämer et al. (eds.): *Bild – Schrift – Zahl*. München 2003, pp. 11-22; Siegert, Bernhard: „Was sind Kulturtechniken? Beschreibung des Lehr- und Fachgebietes.“ www.uni-weimar.de/medien/kulturtechniken/kultek.html, Access Date: 4 Feb. 07; Macho, Thomas: „Zeit und Zahl. Kalender- und Zeitrechnung als Kulturtechniken,“ in: Krämer/ Bredekamp (eds.), *Bild – Schrift – Zahl*, *op. cit.* pp. 179-192.

²⁸ “Cultural techniques are (1) operational procedures to handle things and symbols, which are based (2) on the dissociation of implicit ‘know how’ from explicit ‘know that’. They may thus (3) be understood as a bodily habitualized and routinized knowledge, which is applied in fluid practices of the everyday, yet also (4) can deliver the aesthetic, material-technical basis for scientific innovation and new theoretical objects. The media innovations (5) tied to the change of cultural techniques are situated in interrelations of writing, image, sound and number, which (6) offer new conceptual spaces for perception, communication and cognition. These conceptual spaces (7) emerge where the margins of disciplines become permeable and enable the observation of phenomena and circumstances, whose profiles refuse to adhere to the boundaries of disciplinary sciences.” Krämer/Bredekamp, “Kultur und Technik,” *op. cit.*, p. 18.

We may characterize the methodological approach in the area of cultural technique by stressing the aspect of *practice* in the design of the historical analysis of media: media can be described as cultural techniques, if the practices can be reconstructed they are embedded in, which configure them or which are constitutively created by them.” Siegert, “Was sind Kulturtechniken,“ *op. cit.* (emphasis in the original).

Extending the understanding of technology beyond the notion of hardware and an awareness also of body techniques productively retrieve the ancient meaning of *téchne*. It seems to me that a new sense of the *operational* can be credited for many of these changes; and surely Sybille Krämer's work has been important.²⁹ A decisive stimulus for thought may well be derived from the fact that computers *process*. Schüttpelz has shown that the focus of attention has shifted from the objectified-reified to the operational, and from noun to verb.³⁰ It seems to me that this shift enabled other types of agency to be acceptable also.

Yet at the same time many issues arise that seemed to be dealt with once and for all. Such as the difference between media technologies and extra-medial techniques, which also raises questions of demarcation between the sphere of media and other social spheres.³¹ Furthermore there is the issue of an adequate description of the symbol³² and finally – brace yourself – the question of human beings – hopefully not asked as a question of “mankind.” From the perspective of practices this surely cannot mean the triumphant return of the Subject, yet it certainly prohibits its treatment as a mere addendum.

The death knell rings out for medial apriori as well as for the illusionism of materialist media archaeology. Instead of hastily staging grand schemes of media materialism, the task at hand is a better understanding of the relations between materialism/rationality and of the forces on the opposite side.

In terms of method, the argument here returns to the Dialectics of Enlightenment³³ – not to the notorious chapter on culture industry but to its philosophical framework. It may thus be worth to recall that enlightenment is not as such the opposite of mythical-metaphysical world views. Enlightenment, as Horkheimer/Adorno remind us, is always in danger of falling too

²⁹ Krämer, Sybille: „Operative Schriften als Geistestechnik. Zur Vorgeschichte der Informatik,“ in: Scheffe, Peter; Hastedt, Heiner; Dittrich Yvonne (eds.), *Informatik und Philosophie*, Mannheim 1993, pp. 69-84; - same: „Kalküle als Repräsentationen. Zur Genese des operativen Symbolgebrauches in der Neuzeit,“ in: Rheinberger, Hans-Jörg; Hagner, Michael; Währing-Schmidt, Bettina (eds.), *Räume des Wissens: Repräsentation, Codierung, Spur*. Berlin 1997, pp. 112-122.

- same: „Operationsraum Schrift. Ein Perspektivenwechsel im Schriftverständnis,“ in: Grube, Gernot; Kogge, Werner; Krämer, Sybille (eds.): *Schrift. Kulturtechnik zwischen Auge, Hand und Maschine*, München 2005, pp. 13-32.

- same: „Zur Sichtbarkeit der Schrift oder: Die Visualisierung des Unsichtbaren in der operativen Schrift. Zehn Thesen,“ in: Strätling, Susanne; Witte, Georg (eds.): *Die Sichtbarkeit der Schrift*. München 2005, pp. 75-84.

³⁰ Schüttpelz, Erhard: „Die medienanthropologische Kehre der Kulturtechniken,“ in: Engell/Siegert/Vogl (eds.), *Kulturgeschichte als Mediengeschichte, op. cit.*, p. 87. If the notion of cultural technique should be made synonymous to the understanding which media anthropology applies to this term is debatable. My own proposition in this realm favors another mode of relating technologically oriented and anthropological media theories. Comp.: Winkler, Harmut: *Diskursökonomie. Versuch über die innere Ökonomie der Medien*. Frankfurt am Main 2004, pp. 110-130.

³¹ “The term cultural techniques by no means includes all techniques practiced in a given culture. Yet – how to draw the line between techniques which are used by a culture to comprehend itself – that is cultural techniques in a more narrow sense – and techniques like agriculture, nutrition, the keeping of supplies, economy and sports?” Kassung, Christian; Macho, Thomas: n.t., *unpublished manuscript*; c.f. Schüttpelz, “Die medienanthropologische Kehre...,” *op. cit.*, p. 88.

³² “Cultural techniques are different from all other techniques by virtue of their potential self-reflexivity. [...] [cultural techniques] do symbolic work.” *Ibid.*

³³ Horkheimer, Max; Adorno, Theodor W.: *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente. Ges. Schriften 3*, Frankfurt a. M. 1981 (orig. written in 1944). Engl. transl.: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York 1972.

short in its reach and thus may fail to comprehend what must be comprehended. The only remedy is enlightenments scrutiny of its own doings to discover the remnants of metaphysics even if that means to question its very own working solutions and a critique of the shortfalls of instrumental reason.

According to Horkheimer/Adorno, the project of a materialist explanation of the world needs self-control if it is to avoid the danger of blindly falling into an unwanted alliance with its object of description. A position that accepts nothing but enlightenment, as I have tried to sketch it in my talk, does not fulfil this condition.

In addition, Media Studies will not be able to avoid the critique of media for very much longer. Normative affirmation and an equation of affirmation with description are no longer viable. Surely there are other options for Media Studies but acting in accordance with the existing structures of media.

“Intelligent idealism” Comolli, a French media materialist, once wrote, “is more intelligent than stupid materialism”.³⁴ For a Media Studies interested in an enlightened materialist approach of the kind Comolli practices, this may well be quite demanding a program.

³⁴ Comolli, Jean-Louis: “Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field (Part 1.2).” in: Browne, Nick (ed.): *Cahiers du Cinéma. 1969-1972. The Politics of Representation*. Cambridge (Mass.) 1990, p. 236 (Orig. French: 1971).