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Repetition, material persistence, and the remarkable role of signs

Mosaic piece for a semiotic 2.0

1. Intro

Phenomena of repetition are omnipresent in the media,[1] and much has been written on the subject; one would hardly think that it is possible to say anything new about this.

But – astonishingly as it is – that is the case. I maintain that, overall, we only have a very vague picture of what repetition is actually about; and my text aims to provide a little more clarity here. So, what is the problem?

Repetition – think of rites, conventions, or habit – enables cultures to stabilize over long periods of time; *repetition is a technique of cultural continuity*; this has been argued particularly by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, and I have cited this in several of my texts.

And Assmann mentions monumentalization as a second technique of cultural continuity, because there is no doubt that cultures also stabilize themselves through material things. Buildings, monuments, objects, hardware, writings, and storage devices can easily outlast long periods of time; they are *stable* thanks to the inertia and persistence of the material.

But how can two such different cultural techniques take on the same function? This is the question that I will focus on in the first part of my text. *What is the relationship between repetition and material persistence?*

Is repetition, more than monumentalization, linked to human practices and actions? And thus, closer to the 'pragmatic turn' that some scholars in media studies advocate? Repetition has been discussed intensively, especially in the context of the performativity debate; if the focus there is primarily on the openness of processes, i.e. the possibility of *change* – how can repetition be a technique of cultural stabilization then?

More generally, what is the relationship between material persistence, repetition, and change? Cultural stability and change? Or finally, even more generally: What is the relationship between persistence/repetition and the axis of *time*? I think we should at least have a rough idea of all this, to be able to deal adequately with empirical repetition processes within the media.

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[1] The printing press is a technology of repetition, as are photography, film, radio, television, computers, and the Internet; Benjamin's 'mechanical reproducibility' underlies almost all contemporary media. If we go back further in history, the phenomena of repetition include rituals that are repeated in certain rhythms – Christmas Eve, for example; series and seriality are based on repetition; genres, aesthetic forms and conventions are formed in repetition processes; rules, standards, programs and protocols force practices into repetition cycles; algorithms operate with loops and recursion.

The actual yield of my consideration, however, will only become clear in the second part of my text: The reflections on repetition will lead me onto the terrain of *semiotics* and to one of the most difficult questions that arise in the field of media: the question of what – for God's sake – is the role of 'signs.'

And here, I maintain, my text actually has a discovery to offer. Within semiotics, both repetition and material persistence are discussed as well; repetition in the context of sign practices (the use of signs), material persistence regarding the material hardness of signifiers. But in semiotics, too, it is unclear how their relationship should be conceived. This is precarious for media studies because media studies – of course – always must deal with both; and a meaningful concept of media, I think, can only be grasped if it is possible to relate the material signifiers and the practical handling of them – the media practices –, and to show the cultural rules that connect them.

The text follows on from the semiotic considerations I made in my book 'Aehnlichkeit' [Similarity][3] and it will elaborate some points more clearly than was possible there. However, the text requires some patience because, as I said, the actual argument will only become clear in section 23 (from p. //11) or 30 (from p. //17). I will begin with material persistence.

I. Material Persistence

2. Things

We attribute the natural property of persistence to certain things: stones, mountains, buildings, things, objects. We only call a 'thing' what is still there with some certainty when we wake up in the morning. Other things are meant to endure (e.g. institutions), still others must obviously be cared for in order for them to endure (this applies to traditions, for example); physical life can only be maintained through work...

We would associate the persistence of things with *space* rather than time. Everything that is material takes up space; and we would probably think that the attachment to materiality and space alone provides stability in time.

Storage media, for example, exist exclusively in material form; while it has been possible to transfer and process media content "immaterially,"[4] storage devices remain bound to the three-dimensional, extended world of things. Storage seeks an alliance with the inertia of matter.[5]

And even more generally: without materially stable things in our environment, we would lose all orientation; so, if the praxeological approaches of media studies bring all the questions of the discipline down to practices or processes, this is certainly counter-intuitive. *"As its correlate, the concept of change demands that of persistence."*[6]

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[3] W., H.: Ähnlichkeit [Similarity]. Berlin: Kadmos 2021; the book is in German, but I translated six chapters: https://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/Winkler--Similarity.pdf.

[4] Doubts about the thesis of 'immateriality' are more than appropriate and, to quote Flusser: "This essay aspires to clear away the distorted concept of the 'immaterial.'" (Flusser, Vilem: Form and Material [1991]. In: Fl., V.: The Shape of Things. London: Reaktion Books 2012, pp. 22-29, here: p. 22).

[5] See: W., H.: Prozessieren. Die dritte, vernachlässigte Medienfunktion [Processing – The third and neglected media function]. Paderborn: Fink 2015, pp. 166, 176, https://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/Winkler--Prozessieren.pdf.

[6] Schischkoff, Georgi: Philosophisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie [Veränderung]. Stuttgart: Kröner 1982, p. 723 (transl. and emph. H. W.).

3. Erosion/Entropy

And a certain degree of change is always already contained in all ideas of stability. So, it is certain that time also passes on mountains; and of course, change also occurs on rocks/mountains, e.g. through erosion. The only difference is that the process is much slower, and so slow that we perceive it – in most frames of reference – as stasis. And even storage media only have a certain period of time within which they are reliable; quite in tension with their actual purpose of preserving what is stored.

So, is it all about different speeds of change? Processes with different dynamics? Or about different perspectives? In the same way that geology and pal

eontology only register very long-term changes? Is it about scale? A stone has come loose and rolled into the valley, but the mountain is still there? The building is gone, but the city is still there? Or is it about interests, objectives, or values? Do we want, desire and welcome change in certain cases and stability in others?

4. Differences in Materials

Why is it hard materials, mountains, and stones that we associate with duration? Limestone is a former seabed, which means it is the product of life, or at least matter that has passed through organisms in many cycles. However, this does not apply to granite. And limestone, too, is not current life, but former life, and is now sunken and dead.

But as I said: Erosion also occurs on stones. What is the relationship between entropy and erosion? Is erosion the epitome of entropy?
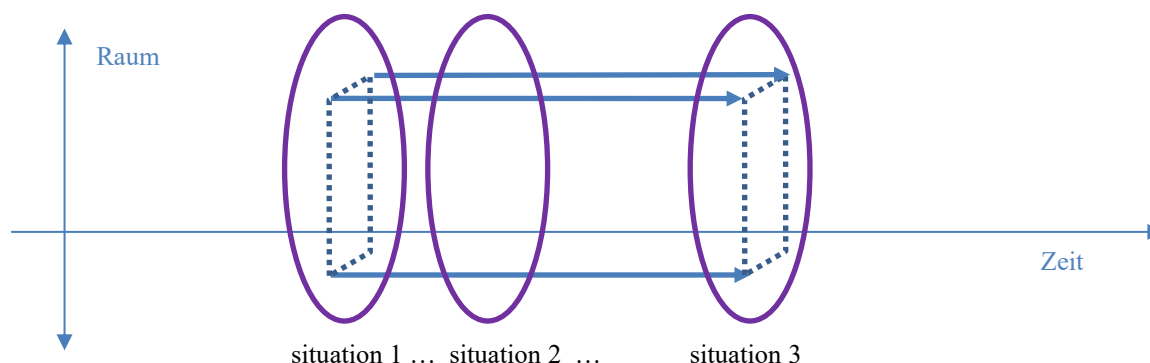
5. Extension

Schematized, one can say that all things have a spatial and a temporal extension.[7] and connected with this: Things come into being in order to persist for a while and then pass away again.

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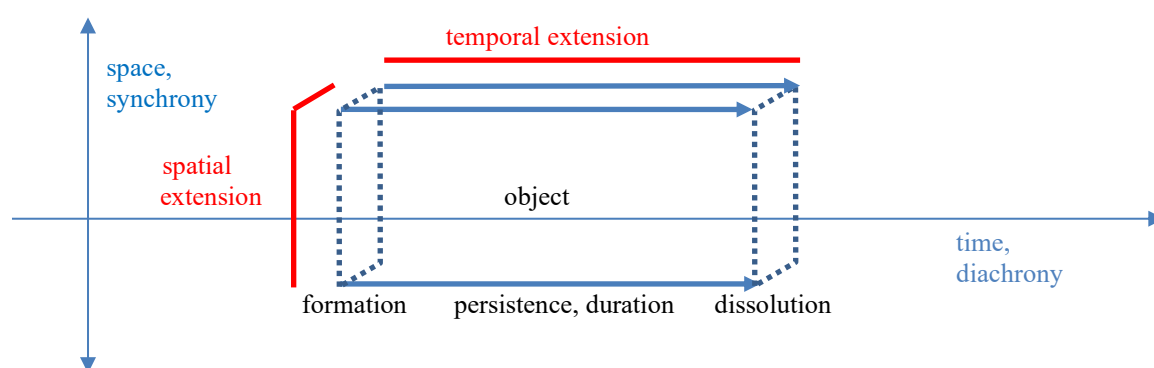
[7] I take this idea from a book on fashion that describes fashion – very plausibly – as an oscillation of stabilization and destabilization or dissolution processes (Kamneva-Wortmann, Anna: Modenetze – Modeschwärme. Kleidungskulturen ohne zentrale Akteure. Bielefeld: Transcript 2023, pp. 48ff.).

The argument has the advantage of treating space and time in the same way; space is understood as extension, time as space of time, as duration. And changes in quantities or density can also be grasped reasonably well with a view to extension.[8]

However, something else is decisive for the continuation of my argument. Material permanence and temporal extension mean that the material thing, object, or element (stable and largely 'identical' with itself) *is passed through different situations*.



situation 1 … situation 2 …   situation 3

And certainly, attention should not be focused exclusively on extension, because there are also types of stability or change that have little or nothing to do with spatial or temporal extension, but rather concern qualities.

II. Change

6. Measure of Change, Transformation Distance

If material persistence and repetition are mechanisms of stabilization, then this is contrasted with *change*. And if we want to include qualitative changes as well as extension, it seems sensible to set aside the dimension of space for the time being. It would be important to be able to distinguish between different types and measures of change. For this purpose, the concept of 'transformation distance' can be adopted from geometry and computer science.[9] In cases of strong change the transformation distance is large, in cases of small change it is small. Stasis or stagnation would be a special case with a transformation distance of "zero."


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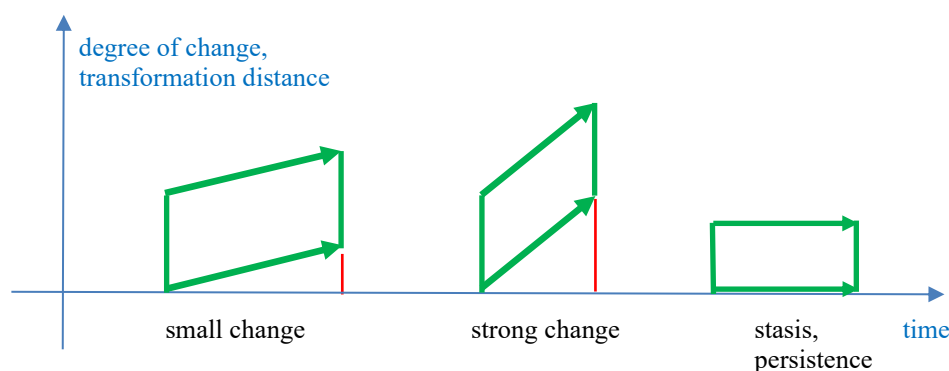
[8] It is important for me to note that when I speak of extension here, I am referring to the spatio-temporal extension of a single object; in other contexts, it has also been understood as the distribution/dissemination of a larger number of objects in space or time...

[9] I also owe this suggestion to Kamneva-Wortmann, Modenetze, op. cit. pp. 188ff.

7. Work

The graphic suggests that change is associated with effort. Change has an economic side. And depending on the direction of the vector, a distinction could be made as to whether the change requires effort ('work') or whether it takes place almost automatically (entropy):
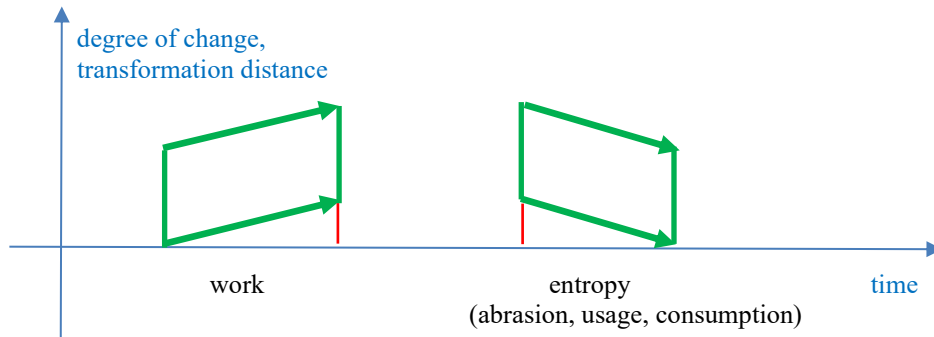
8. Special Case: Stasis

In the concrete, however, the graphic is not very intuitive. It is more intuitive to imagine that as soon as you let go of things, they exist quasi-autonomously in time. If you place the time axis vertically, the illustration appears somewhat more plausible: the stabilized object (identical to itself) then falls through time like a stone.
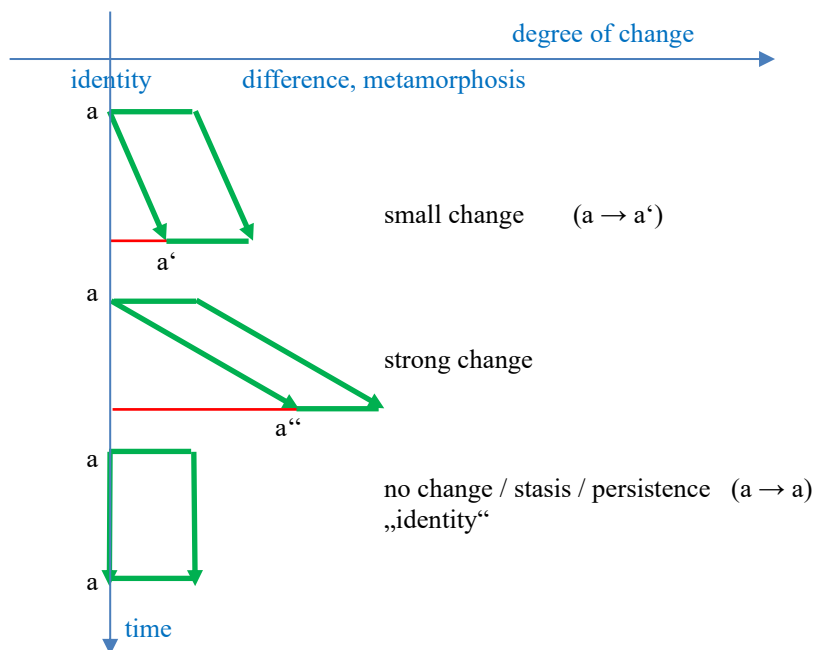
9. Identity and Difference

The keyword 'identity' has just been mentioned. What I call stillness or stasis here is a pragmatic variant of 'identity.' Change, conversely, is associated with the counter-concept of difference.

10. In the Background: Plato and Heraclitus

In the history of philosophy, both perspectives were already generalized, radicalized, and related to metaphysical questions in antiquity: While Heraclitus said: Panta rei, everything changes, everything is in motion, Plato's sphere of ideas stands for an everlasting stability: In the world we live in, everything may change, in the sphere of ideas nothing changes; ontology wants to name what is stable, what remains.

But I am – of course – not concerned with metaphysics, but with the cultural techniques that ensure stability or change. If time is associated with change, then stasis would be, as I said, a special case. The negation of time, so to speak; or a counterforce that opposes time, the attempt to actively prevent time as change.

This leads to the question of what is primary: change or stasis; or which forces act in which direction.

11. Work_2

The first position here would be the aforementioned work. Every idea of work assumes that the inertia of things is primary, and that only work (effort) overcomes this inertia.

And work is bound to repetition, work must constantly renew itself, precisely because it resists entropy. Is that also a kind of duration? Sisyphus? Tragic duration?
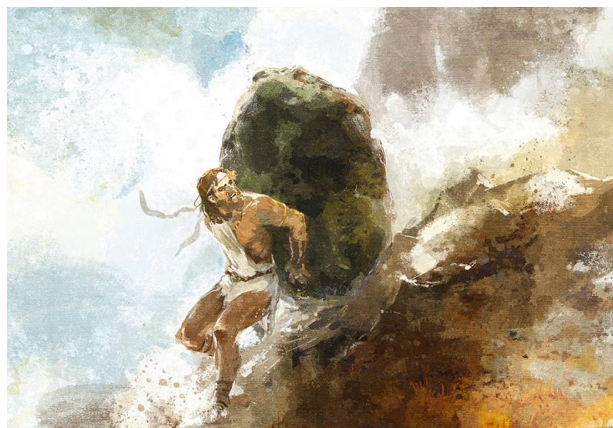
12. Living and Dead

And the argument of inertia corresponds to a traditional rhetoric of living and dead: Labor, for example, is understood by Marx as 'living labor,' which he contrasts with objects being 'dead things' (and capital as 'dead labor').[10] The transition itself is understood as mortification, and writing has often been understood as mortified speech.

It is interesting that life and work are highly correlated here. And conversely, this corresponds to the idea of entropy: Everything living supports itself (through effort/work) from the ground for a while, only to eventually – inevitably – fall back there. If we take this seriously, death would always be the winner; the vertical line in the diagram would be self-evident; the actual duration would be death.

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[10] Marx, Karl; Engels, Friedrich: Capital. A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1 [1867]. NY: Kerr 1906, p. 217.

13. Counter-Position: Does Immobilization also Involve Work?

The counter-position arises when one realizes that even stabilization often requires activity, i.e. work. Thus, writing is a technique for actively depositing something in order to preserve it; musealization, preservation and care are (conservative) activities...

These meet the resistance of the material again, e.g. when a form is imposed on the material in the process of storage; and entropy could also be understood as a negative 'work' that abrades the material and form of what has once been stored. In any case, the vector in my graphic would not fall vertically on its own but would be pushed into the vertical.

14. Intermediate Total

So, what is primary: Change or stasis? Is Heraclitus – ultimately – right, or Plato? How does change come about, how does stasis occur? Does the question I started with not always imply that movement and change are primary? Or in economic terms: What happens by itself and what requires the use of labor/power?

And finally: What would a real symmetry look like in which stasis and change would actually have equal weight? Does such a symmetry contradict my initial question, which relates both change and stasis to the axis of time? Is this the point where space comes into play again?

III. Repetition and Similarity

15. Repetition

Let us now return to the actual topic, repetition. At first glance, Repetition seems to function in a fundamentally different way than monumentalization: Where the monument materially persists and, whatever happens in parallel, is *continuously present*, what is repeated only returns after a certain period of time. And that means it is *just not there* in the phase between the repetitions. Monumentalization, one could say in short, means continuity, repetition implies interruption.
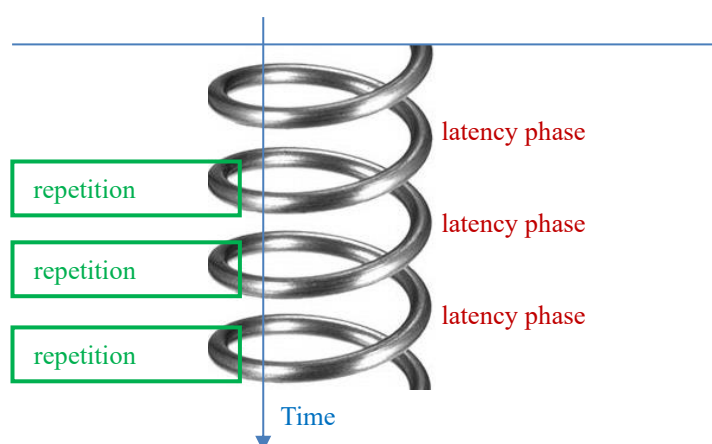
The second difference is related to this: In the case of monumentalization, it is always a matter of a single object that survives time (identical with itself). For repetition, however, this does not apply at all; the individual repetitions may be *similar* to each other; and they must be similar in order for it to be a repetition at all. What is undeniable, however, and Derrida, in particular, has always insisted on this, is that repetition links *two* objects or events, objects that are distinct, i.e. by no means 'identical.' So, when we speak of 'identical' repetition, this is a pragmatic abbreviation or misses the point.

16. Similarity

And further: If the repetition connects 'similar' and not identical objects or events with each other – what does 'similar' mean? Especially in contrast to identity?

Similarity, I think, exists in two forms: as a succession along the axis of time (as repetition), and as a juxtaposition of similar things in space. And what has just been said about repetition also applies to this second type of similarity: Here, too, it is not about one thing, but always about several things; and these similar things are – like islands in the sea – separated from one another by heterogeneous material (by material that is not similar to them).[11] Similarity has the property that it unites things across the abyss of this separation.


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IV. The Agency that Preserves the Pattern

17. Continuity?

But how can this be? Why is repetition a cultural technique of cultural continuity; how can repetition create continuity if it is discontinuous?

The first answer is relatively simple; for repetition to take place, there must be an agency that preserves what is to be repeated until the next repetition. In the case of rituals – Christmas, for example – it is human memory that performs this function; in the time between repetitions, the memory must maintain the pattern that the ritual follows.
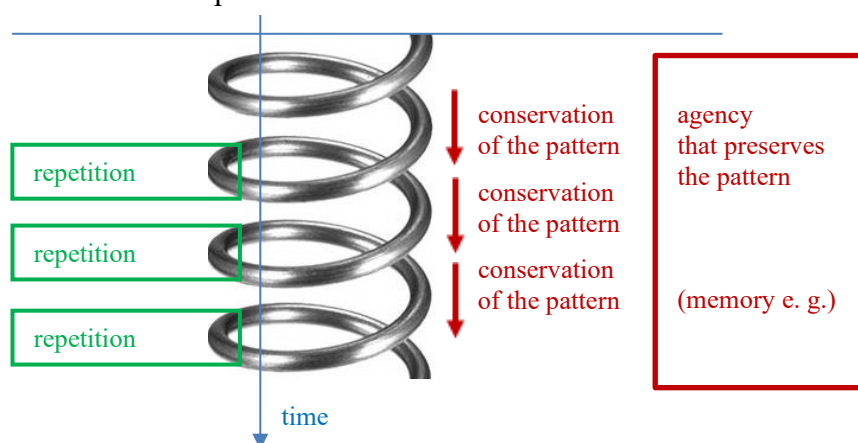
And as fragile as human memory may be, it undoubtedly functions in a 'monumental' way between repetitions. Nevertheless, memory is certainly a special 'storage device,' on the one hand because it is fragile, and on the other because, although it is materialized, it is not inter-subjectively accessible like other monuments in external space.

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[11] I have elaborated on this connection in my book Ähnlichkeit, op. cit., pp. 63-80.

[12] The graphic is also taken from my book (ibid., p. 69).

18. Manifest and Latent

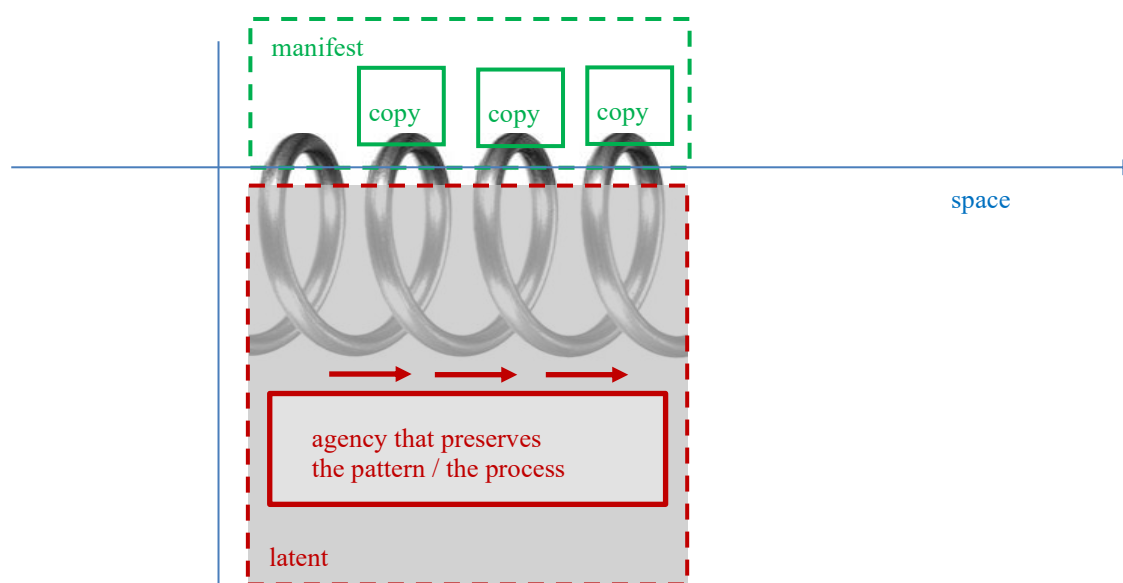It is interesting to note that on the surface of the discourse, only the repetition itself is initially observable; the agency that maintains the pattern from repetition to repetition remains *latent* in many cases – even though it is obviously functionally necessary.
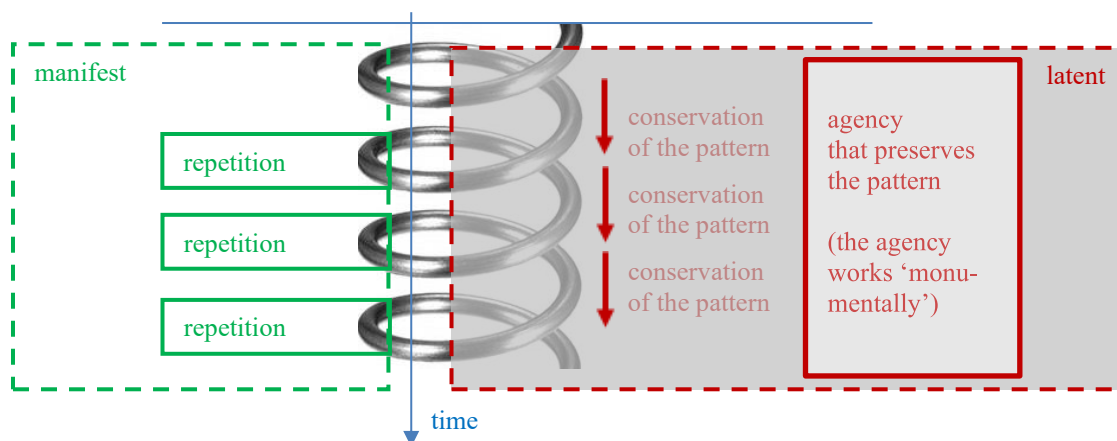
And for the similarity, the juxtaposition in space, e.g. the copy, the same applies:

Here it is initially only the copies that are visible on the surface of the discourses; however, these are connected to each other in a subliminal way – precisely through the agency or the process of reproduction.

19. What Agencies are There?

But is the agency really hidden in all cases? This is true for memory, which I mentioned as an example; human memory is considered notoriously inaccessible/opaque; and even more so for collective memory, which – my example was Christmas – is distributed among a large number of individual memories.

However, this does not apply to other such agencies. In the case of book printing, for example, everyone knows that there is a publisher in the background; and similarly in the case of analog photography, where all copies go back to a common negative. And again, similar to television that transmits a signal from a central location which the distributed receivers then reproduce

simultaneously. In all these cases, it is clear that a central authority in the background (an institution supported by certain media technologies) ensures that the copies or repetitions are identical.

(Even in these cases, however, the question of the 'agency' does not seem pointless: The step from the visible media product to the institution/organization behind it and to media technology, i.e. from content to medium, is exactly the one that – "the medium is the message" – constitutes the field of media studies).

Institutions would therefore be a very visible type of such 'agency.' With regard to repetition, however, this case is rather less interesting: The institution in the background is the controller and, unlike repetition itself, it functions continuously and monumentally. Here, material persistence has won.

20. Latency

In other cases, however, the agency is, as I said, inaccessible/latent; and this alternative seems much more interesting to me: At times only the instantiations, only the repetitions are accessible. A good example is conventional behavior. Here, only the behavior, only the individual incidents can be observed. Recognizing a series of repetitions in these incidents is already an achievement of the observation itself. And only the observer can – in a second step – infer from the repetitions that a convention obviously exists behind the repetitions. And what is more: In many cases it will remain doubtful/disputed whether the convention in question is existing behind the repetitions at all.

A second example would be scientific research, for example in biology, which collects and systematically compares specimens in order to deduce certain rules, e.g. of heredity, from the specimens. There may be an authority – nature and its 'laws' – in the background, but it is not directly accessible.

21. Observation

And immediately things become even more complicated: With observation, another, a third agency comes into play. And this agency, the observer, once again functions materially/monumentally. If we include the observer, it seems necessary to change the scheme once again:
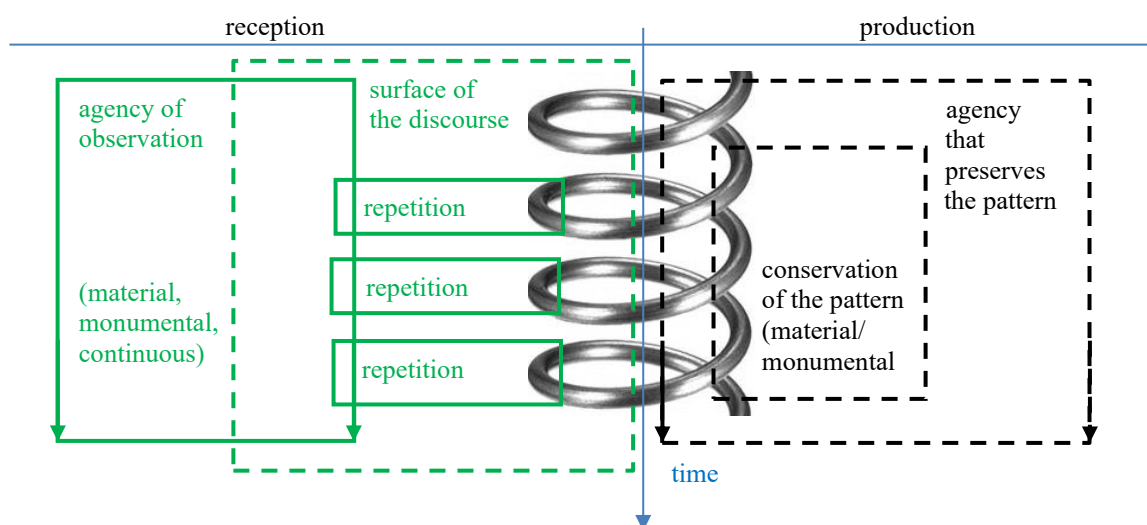
22. Intermediate Total

In any case, it seems sensible to distinguish – systematically and always – between two spheres, each of which follows a different logic: Observable repetition itself is a phenomenon on the surface of discourse. It is discontinuous. At the same time, however, repetition is functionally dependent on an instance that preserves the pattern and/or observes the repetition. And this instance functions according to the monument in a material-continuous way.

And there seem to be different such agencies: Habits and rituals function differently from institutions, technical implementations, standards, programs, or procedures. All are differently visible, differently firmly institutionalized, and differently 'monumental.' What they all have in common is that they do their work in the background.

V. Characteristics

23. What Bridges the Abyss? What is Passed from Repetition to Repetition?

My question was how repetition, if it is discontinuous, can create continuity; and first I referred to the instances that preserve the patterns. But the problem is by no means solved, for one can also regard the repetition itself, i.e. what appears on the surface of the discourse, in order to then ask *what* is actually repeated, what the content of the repetition is:

In the case of the monument, it is the material object itself that outlasts time and that, identical with itself, is 'passed through' from situation to situation. In the case of repetition, however, this is obviously different. So, if it is not the material object – what then connects the different instantiations? What is passed from situation to situation?
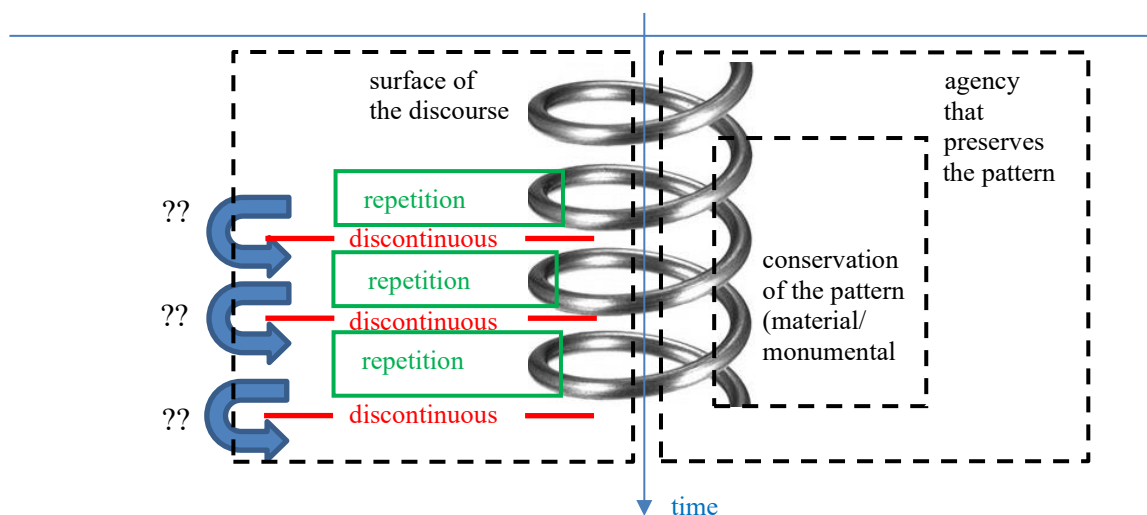
The key, I think, lies in the concept of similarity. Repetition, as I said, is a case not of identity but of similarity; when something is repeated, the repetitions are similar to each other.

And when things resemble each other, they are neither completely identical nor completely different; there will always be both similarities and differences. And this means an important leap, because similarity forces us to think about these characteristics (similarities and differences).

Similarity, one must conclude, discards the things themselves and splits them into characteristics or features.

So, if something is 'passed through' from situation to situation in the process of repetition, then it is not the material objects themselves, but certain of their characteristics, namely those that are common to these situations. And the same applies to the juxtaposition of similar things in space. Since here too we are not dealing with one, but with several material objects, these are also only connected by the characteristics that they have in common.

This is probably the most important difference that separates material persistence and repetition. A table may provide an overview:

1. time			
	1.1	monumentalization, persistence, duration, identity (things, storage, monuments) [temporal extension of the single object]	same material object, and characteristics/form constant
	1.2	repetition [succession of objects or events]	different objects

(for row 1.2 the right cells are:) different objects | some of the characteristics constant

2. space			
	2.1	identity [spacial extension of the single object]	same material object, and characteristics/form constant
	2.2	similarity [juxtaposition in space]	different objects

(for row 2.2 the right cells are:) different objects | some of the characteristics constant

If we include repetition, then what we understand by stability or duration changes. Either the material object stands for duration; the object appears 'glued' with its characteristics; here philosophy speaks of 'hylemorphism.' This would be the case of things, memories, monuments. Or – in the case of repetition and similarity: – the objects change and only the characteristics remain constant.

And what is more: While in the first case it is precisely the materiality, the thingness itself, that ensures the 'identity,' the constancy of the characteristics, in the second case this material basis seems to be missing. But how can this be? And what does this mean for the initial question of stability and change?

24. Two Spaces

In any case, a distinction must be made between two spaces, the internal space of the individual object and the space between the objects. The internal space is about material identity. The persistence of the object is its temporal extension, and its consumption of space is its spatial extension.

In the space between the objects, on the other hand, attention must be focused on the characteristics: On the time axis it is about repetition, in the spatial juxtaposition about similarity; in both cases the objects are only related to each other on the level of the characteristics.
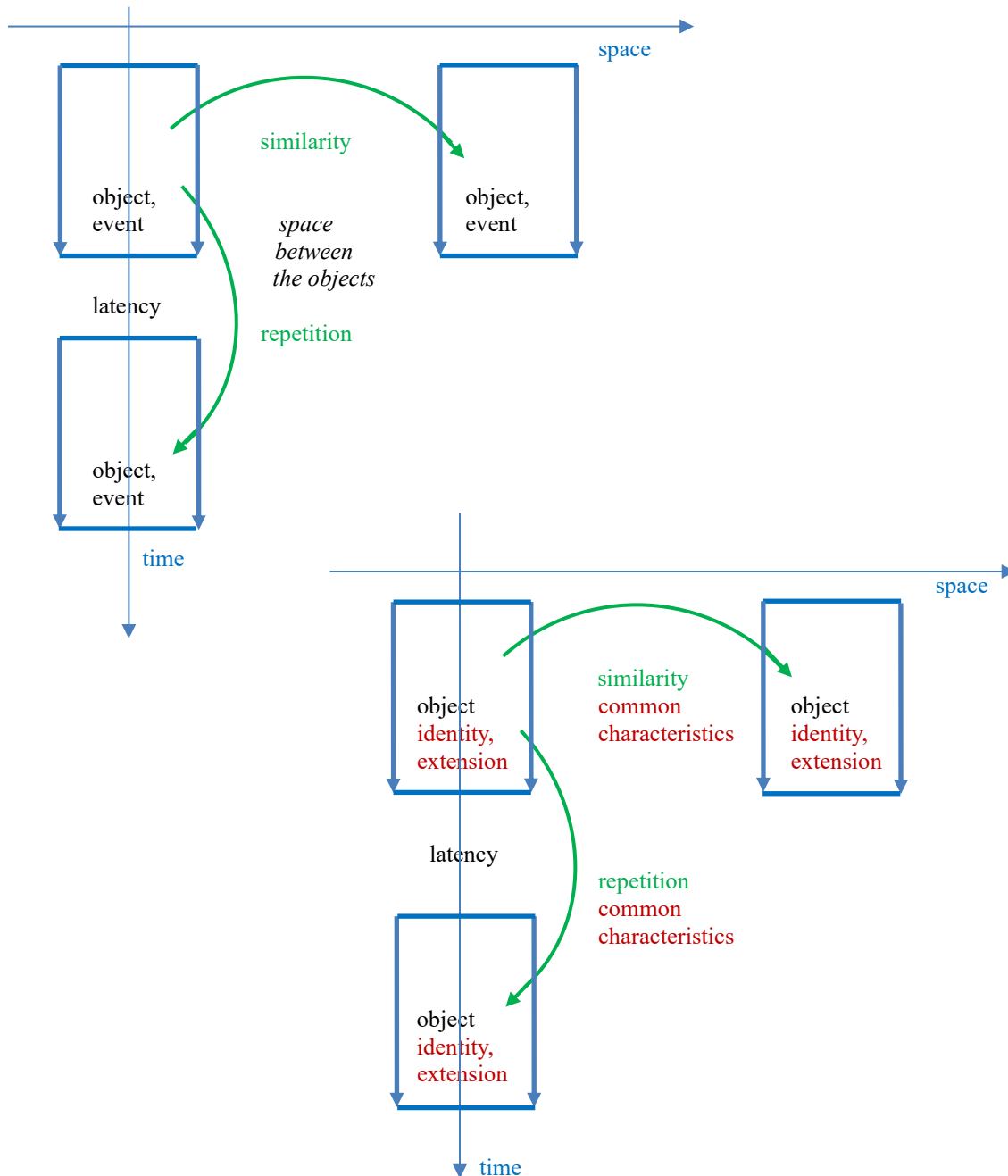
Is it simply a matter of two levels of observation? Or does it depend on what we call an object?

25. Characteristics, Material, and Form

And even more generally: What is the status of 'characteristics' – in relation to my initial question about the relationship between stasis and change? And, if I spoke above of form and change of form: What is the status of 'form'?

Provisionally, I would like to call the totality of all those characteristics that are kept constant with a changing object the 'form.'

At this point, my consideration touches on the venerable questions that have been discussed in philosophy as the relationship between ὕλη and μορφή (matter and form).[13] Here too, however, I would like to remain beyond philosophical questions. I am more interested in practical matters: Is it the material that preserves the form, or do we measure by the preservation of the form that something has been preserved and what has been preserved?

These questions concern both the world of things and the media; and centrally also the concept of 'information;' Flusser thus drafts a concept of form and 'information' that effortlessly encompasses both spheres:

> "[D]esign is one of the methods of giving form to matter […]. What is at issue is the concept of in-formation. In other words, imposing forms on materials. This has been apparent since the Industrial Revolution. A steel tool in a press is a form, and it in-forms the flood of glass or plastic flowing past it into bottles or ashtrays."[14]

I will come back to the parallel between media mechanisms and industrial production.

26. Intermediate Total: Monumentalization and Similarity/Repetition

Let us note that there are obviously two types of stabilization, of which only the first, monumentalization, binds the constancy of the characteristics (the form) to the materiality of the objects.

The second, stabilization through repetition and/or similarity, however, and this connects my reflections to everyday questions of media studies, is also quite familiar as a storage technique: the book universe, for example, relies on redundancy; on the safeguarding of content through the multiplicity of spatially distributed copies, i.e. multiple storage at different locations. And more recently – and quite amazingly – *blockchain* has also been using the same technology. Here, too, the integrity of the data is ensured by storing it in multiple redundant and spatially distributed locations.

27. Change in Characteristics

I would now like to return to change and transformation, which form the antithesis of persistence. The first, simplest case is that the change occurs in a single object. The best way to determine that something has changed, i.e. that there is a difference between before and after, is the restriction of perspective to a single object.

And now it is noticeable that the change concerns exactly those 'characteristics' that were just mentioned. If the object changes qualitatively, this means that its properties or characteristics change. In media theory, this is linked to the concept of *processing*. 'Processing' is the term used to describe both the development of a film in a laboratory and the calculation of statistics by a computer, as well as, outside the media, industrial processes such as the production of apple juice in a factory.

I have suggested that processing should be understood as 'change through intervention.'[15] And 'intervention' means exactly this: That the object remains constant – in whatever way – while its properties or characteristics change.

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[13] Ritter, Joachim (Hg.): Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie [Form und Materie (Stoff)], Bd. 2, Darmstadt: WBG 1972, pp. 977-1030.

[14] Flusser, Form and material, op. cit., p. 22, 28.

[15] Winkler, Prozessieren, op. cit., pp. 17ff.

28. Three Types

This results in a surprising order that links seemingly disparate questions – questions that are discussed completely separately in media studies – with one another: If (1.) the material object and its characteristics remain constant, it is a matter of storage, of material persistence. If (2.) the object remains constant and the characteristics change, it is a matter of processing; if (3.) the object changes and certain characteristics remain the same, we are in the field of similarity and repetition.

(I exclude the case in which both the object and the characteristics change; it may stand for the unordered surface of the heterogeneous, i.e. for the 'sea' that separates the 'islands' of similarity in my diagram above).

Provisionally, I would also like to summarize this in a table:

		characteristics	
		constant	change
mat. object	constant	storage, material persistence	processing, change through intervention
	Changes	repetition (time), similarity (space)	(chaos, noise, the 'sea' between the islands)

29. Media History

So, it does indeed seem to make a difference whether the persistence or the change concerns the object itself or its characteristics. And that my reasoning is not simply idle can again be shown by media-historical examples.

The letter, for example, is 'monumental' even though it is sent, i.e. changes its location, because it is its concrete materiality that ensures the constancy of its characteristics (its form). This is different in the case of telegrams and e-mails. The telegram has detached itself from any material body; it consists of a certain sequence of characters that is recoded several times along the way and changes its respective carrier.[16] What is transmitted is only a bundle of characteristics, only 'form.'[17]

A second media-historical example, already discussed in relation to book printing, is provided by mechanical reproduction and the copy. Benjamin's famous text reflects the shock of the emergence of reproduction media such as film and radio, which no longer depended on a conventional material original. Mechanical reproduction and copying are an extreme case of intentional similarity as a spatial juxtaposition: All copies should be as 'identical' as possible in terms of their characteristics/form,[18] but they do not share a 'body'...

Obviously, the materiality of objects has lost the privilege of being the guardian and preserver of form. But what does this mean? In particular for the relationship between materiality and characteristics/form? If, with telegraphy, the media function of transmission has made the leap

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[16] See: Hickethier, Knut: Einführung in die Medienwissenschaft. Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler 2003, pp. 77f.

[17] The thesis of 'immaterialization,' as I said, captures this property. However, the thesis must remain completely helpless as long as it cannot describe what features, what form, and/or even what 'signs' are...

[18] ...'identical' again limited to the pragmatic sense of the word...

into 'immateriality,' while that of storage is still chained to material objects because memories are necessarily material storage devices – why is this so? And what does this say about my initial question about 'persistence'?

VI. A Grin without a Cat

> "'Well! I've often seen a cat without a grin,' thought Alice; 'but a grin without a cat! It's the most curious thing I ever saw in all my life!'" (Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland[19])

30. Signs

In the course of my argumentation, attention has shifted from the objects to their characteristics. In the case of repetition and similarity, they are what bridges the abyss between the various individual objects; they create their own kind of continuity; the characteristics have proved to be as stable as the material things/objects.

And there is an astonishing consequence to be drawn from this: *Quite obviously* – and this is the main result of my consideration – *it is possible to detach the characteristics from the things/objects*.

And not only analytically, because without recourse to the characteristics the functioning of repetition and similarity cannot be explained, but also in concrete terms: Characteristics and form have (like the grin of Carroll's cat?) emancipated themselves from the objects and begun a life of their own. But how can this be if, unlike the objects, they have no 'body'?

And now I come to the decisive point at which my reflection shifts to the terrain of *semiotics*:

My assertion is that media and signs generally have the property of separating characteristics/ form from material things.

I see that this requires an explanation. Media do not work with the three-dimensional things themselves, but with symbolic material, with schemes, signs, or representations.[20] Schemata, signs – or words, if we choose language as an example – do not denote a single thing, but always groups or classes of things. They are more abstract than the things they describe. And the basis is again similarity and repetition: Schemata are formed in repetition; and what resembles/ repeats itself and shares certain characteristics is summarized in a schema, a group or class.

If signs have 'meaning,' this means that they organize a certain section of our knowledge of the world. The word 'garden chair,' for example, is associated with a whole bundle of characteristics within the language community; to know the meaning of a word, to understand the word, means to know these characteristics. Even if language users seldom realize this, language has made things obsolete and replaced them with the knowledge of these bundles of characteristics. Media and signs abstract and schematize; they administer exactly (and nothing other than) the detached characteristics – the form. *Signs*, one could say, *distill from things what form is in them.*[21]

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[19] Carroll, Lewis: Alice in Wonderland [1865]. London: Harper 2000, p. 77.

[20] Our perceptual apparatus already forms schemata and is dependent on schemata for its functioning; I have described the connection between perception, schema formation and the formation of signs in my book 'Ähnlichkeit' (op. cit., pp. 41-58, 133-194, 273-290).

[21] See: Winkler, Ähnlichkeit, op. cit., p. 257, pp. 241-266.

It can be said that signs parasitize on the infinite stream of practices and discourses: The special feature and the special achievement of signs is that they are able to observe and record repetition; characteristics are extracted from an infinite number of repetitions, these are condensed into bundles and – as a schema – made permanent.

For the context pursued here, this means that the leap from things to signs, that every use of signs, means that the characteristics emancipate themselves. The decisive factor is this detachability itself.

VII. Rematerialization

31. Signifiers

In addition to the question of repetition and material persistence, signs have a second astonishment to offer: Mankind has developed the incredible technique of deposit/laying down that which has been detached in special things that are highly typified from the outset, in material signs, the signifiers.

Signs stand for a double movement: In a first step of abstraction or typification, the form is detached from the material (giving it an enigmatic 'immaterial' status) and a schema is created; only to be rematerialized again in a second step – in the signifiers.

With the signifiers, one could say, mankind has given the grin a cat again.

If you also want to put this into a diagram, the result is:

	manifest, material (cat)		latent (grin)	
empirical reality	amorphous field of perception, unstructured mass of things	experience, **repetition**, comparison, similarity, typifying		**schemata**, concepts, characteristics, form
signs	signifiers highly typified, recognizable, particularly clearly structured according to identity and difference	stylization, typification according to identity and difference		

This corresponds, and this is of course no coincidence, to the established semiotic scheme that understands the sign as a triangular relationship between signifier, signified and referent:

referent

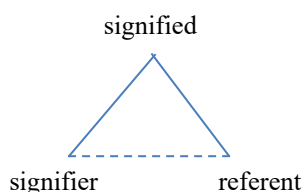signified [22] [23]

signifier
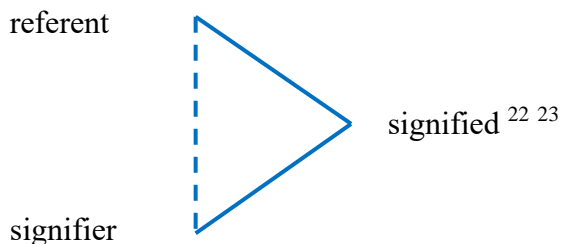
If my text asks in what way material persistence, change and repetition are systematically connected, then the center of the question has shifted again. For once rematerialized, signs participate in everything that has played a role in my previous argument: They stand (1.) for the transition from individual things to schemata and concepts, to characteristics and form; and thus (2.) for a typification process that presupposes repetition, i.e. comparison, experience, and memory. And finally, as material signs (as signifiers) they (3.) lean back into the world of things, whereby they participate in their materiality and their persistence.

32. Stylization, Abstraction, and Typification of the Signifiers Themselves

Signs are special things. As material signifiers they coexist – side by side – with other things; and at the same time they are genuinely different from them: As a result of typification processes, they bear their stamp, insofar as they themselves are typified, reduced and abstracted in an extreme way; for the signifiers, material is selected that is particularly recognizable – think of the black and white of writing – and in which identity/recognizability and differences can be inscribed with particular clarity. With the result that signifiers, unlike other things, can actually be repeated 'identically' and not just similarly.

Signs thus stand for a special type of duration. They combine both material persistence (monumentalization) and repetition, precisely because they are the result of repetition processes.

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[22] In the literature, the triangle is usually shown rotated by 90 degrees, and also mirrored:

signified

signifier   referent

The difference is not insignificant: The classical form assumes the existence of material signs (signifiers) and aims to explain how these come to refer to the world via signifieds (cf. Ogden, Charles K.; Richards, I. A.: The Meaning of Meaning [1923]. NY: Harcourt 1945, p. 11). My approach reverses this and assumes a material world (as a sphere of referents) that is schematized (through which signifieds are created) in order to then be rematerialized (signifiers).

[23] And there is a second, important difference; in the traditional model, the signified remains completely vague (lexicons speak diffusely of 'the meaning,' Ogden/Richards of 'thought'); and this was the reason why materialist theories rejected the signified and focused solely on the material signifiers. If the signified is derived via schema theory, however, this problem disappears, because the formation of signifieds and schemas is now understood as a material process and attributed to material chains of repetition.

VIII. Final Consideration: Repetition, Monumentalization, Change

33. Concepts of Theory

What is the result of my considerations? On the one hand, I think it is the task of theory to constantly review the concepts with which it works and to reveal systematic connections between concepts that have hitherto been isolated from one another. Media studies in particular has the problem that the majority of the terms it uses are only very inadequately defined. In many cases, everyday concepts are adopted, and one relies on the fact that language always already knows what the different terms mean: Storage techniques seem to be 'something quite different' from mechanical reproduction or copying; repetition is, of course, different from similarity; schemata are 'qualitatively' separate from sign and form. And indeed, it would be culpable to put all this into one and to go back behind qualitative distinctions that language makes in a generalizing/dedifferentiating way.

Nevertheless, it makes sense to ask in what way the concepts are connected. And it seems to me that this can only be clarified if models are developed that show or claim such correlations in order to make them visible, testable, or debatable. And since we are talking about models, I accept a certain schematism that this entails. So, let's look at some of the connections.

34. Material Persistence

My consideration, I think, has shown that repetition is embedded in a whole network of related concepts. First it is related to material persistence, whose function of ensuring cultural continuity it shares, but from which it differs structurally in that it is not chained to the individual object but has its place between the objects or events. Repetition is discontinuous; between the individual instantiations there are phases in which the repetition remains latent.

Material persistence thus becomes a kind of special case. While storage media, as mentioned, seek an alliance with the 'natural' persistence of matter, this does not apply to repetition; or only if one asks about the agencies that guarantee repetition. An example was memory, which, however limited and unreliable, 'monumentally' survives the latency phases between repetitions. However, it has been shown that not in every case of repetition can these instances be named immediately.

Only the repetitions themselves appear on the surface of the discourses. And these are, as already mentioned, discontinuous; separated from each other by a latency phase.

35. Change / Displacement

The systematic counterpart to material persistence is change; it forms the second reference, and repetition naturally also has a share in it. It is easy to lose sight of this if, guided by Assmann, one considers repetition as a technique of cultural continuation. But didn't Butler's theory of performativity, for example, link far-reaching political claims to the successive shifts that occur in repetition? And didn't post-structuralism – more generally – understand repetition as unforeseeably open to the future?

My reconstruction, I admit, tends to follow the Assmannian path. In fact, however, I think that the post-structuralists have paid too little attention to the concrete mechanisms that characterize the repetition, with the result that they overestimate the dynamic moment. Neither the binding

to institutions is taken into account,[24] i.e. the question of which agencies save the patterns over the latency phase; nor – more generally – the genuinely retro-referential, conservative moment that makes the repetition a repetition in the first place.

Repetition, I really think, is conservative above all else. And systematically reconstructing the overwhelming power of conventions, for example, may call them into question more effectively and possibly serve an open future more than the repeated asseveration that repetition always contains displacement, difference, and development.

But of course, this is the case. In the terms I propose here, the problem might be reformulated as a tension between those characteristics that remain constant in the repetition (for the repetition to be one at all) and those that change; either because they vary with the context without damaging the pattern of repetition, or by shifting the repetition itself in a particular direction. And then this shift could possibly be related back to transformation distance and to 'work'...

36. Characteristics

But the main point of my text, I think, is a different one; namely the fact that repetition says goodbye to the object and forces attention to switch to the level of characteristics.[25] Only where the identity of the object ends, and with it the material persistence, does the space of repetition begin. And it is precisely at this point that the change of level to the characteristics takes place.

Repetition functions discontinuously and yet has the power to bridge the latency phases and establish a new stability or continuity at the level of the characteristics. (And media studies, I think, has the task of showing which specific cultural and media techniques make this possible).

Objects are connected to one another through repetition and similarity, through the network of their common characteristics. And they do so behind their backs, so to speak, because the characteristics, unlike the objects themselves, are not openly visible. It is only in the comparison, in the observation of repetition and similarity, that they emerge at all, that they become perceptible; and this, I think, gives repetition its special position.

Repetition, I said, is a process, and that means it is bound to time. This does not apply to the network of characteristics that it reveals or establishes – and this is remarkable. This network may also change successively, take language change for example, but above all it is static, a structure. At the level of characteristics, one could say, a second-order stability emerges; a stability that – and this is the point I am writing about here – competes with the obvious, material persistence.

37. Form

And striking, I think, is the spectacle of the transformation itself, the transformation of material objects/content into *form*.

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[24] …which definitely plays a role in the linguistic theory of speech acts that is used…

[25] I first discussed this change in 1989 on the completely different terrain of metaphor theory (W., H.: Metaphor, Kontext, Diskurs, System. In: KodikasCode. Ars Semeiotika. An International Journal of Semiotics. Vol. 12, No. 112, 1989, pp. 21-40,
https://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/Winkler--Metapher,-Kontext,-Diskurs,-System.pdf,
in English: https://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/Winkler--Metaphor-context-discourse-system.pdf).

38. Signs

And finally: the signs. Signs arise – if my reconstruction is plausible in any way – exactly where the change in question takes place: Since signs do not record the things themselves but their characteristics, they always presuppose repetition (and the transformation of repetition into form). Signs do not represent objects, but rather bundles of characteristics in the long term.

If we take the example of language again, it is words that represent these bundles of characteristics (schemata or abstracts). In the case of oral cultures, the words – in terms of media technology – appear to be distributed across two aggregate states: There are the acoustic signifiers on the surface of the discourse, which trail off in an ephemeral way; and secondly, there is the storage medium of the distributed human memories, which stores the representations – however precariously – in a material/monumental way.

In the case of writing – and this is where the re-materialization actually becomes clear – the transient sounds have been replaced by tangible-material signifiers. As a result, these now persist materially in parallel to the memories, in interdependence and in competition with them.

With rematerialization, the signifiers have become things and take their place side by side with the things they describe. The fact that they function quite differently from them is thus obscured. This leads to problems in media studies: On the one hand, one believes that one can restrict oneself to the signifiers – 'the materiality of communication'[26] – and say goodbye to the signified 'materialistically;' and then it must become a complete mystery how it is possible for the signifiers to refer to the materially parallel existing things after all.[27]

The mediating link, however, is repetition. Signs are special things, above all because they always already presuppose, always already contain within themselves, the repetition that must first occur in things. Signs encompass (unlike the things they denote) many repetitions, many things.

The actual long-term memory is the sign, as a recorded form.

39. Stylization and Typification

Repetition, I said, ensures stylization and typification. Schemata/signs differ more conspicuously than the things they describe.

Repetition drives things together into groups like a herding dog drives sheep. Stylization and typification accentuate – and over-accentuate – the similarity within the group (up to the illusion of 'identity') and the differences between the groups. In this respect, too, 'structure' is created here. And structure, that is my point again, is more stable than the source material from which it is a deduction.

40. Repetition of the Sign Itself

The sign contains the repetition, and it is itself – in its entire constitution – designed to be repeated. Signifiers, as already mentioned, are chosen in such a way that they are particularly recognizable.

Not only is the content typified and stylized on its way via repetition to becoming a sign, but the signifiers themselves reflect this. And again, it is treacherous that this appears to be com-

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[26] See: Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich; Pfeiffer, K. Ludwig (Hg.): Materialität der Kommunikation. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1988.

[27] ...and as a result – a clever solution – it was simply denied that the signs have any reference to the world at all.

pletely self-evident. It is part of our everyday definition of signs/signifiers that they can be repeated any number of times and that they remain 'identical' to themselves – like coins in circulation.

This is probably the ultimate form of stability. As far as the functioning of signs is concerned, a fact, and at the same time – of course – illusionary; an illusionary reification, similar to what Marx describes as the fetish of the commodity.

In the case of the commodity fetish, it is the indisputable thingness of things that obscures the view of the social process of their production; in the case of signs, it is the solidity of the signifiers that obscures the processes of repetition and typification, and the fact that it is they who bear the sign.

41. Conclusion

The secret of repetition is this cascade: the fact that repetition (1.) protocols/schematizes/ abstracts what is repeated and condenses it into schemata/types; then (2.) encapsulates and reifies it in sign form; and finally (3.) makes it – schematized, typified and encapsulated – repeatable again.