

Philosophy of Media – Is the Message

Abstract:

The theoretical position dealing with the significance of the mediator in the cognition process partially enters the area of epistemology. By both striving to reach the essence of what is thought about and eliminating everything that belongs to the mediator in the cognition process, this position is also in part a kind of “expanded hermeneutics”. Finally, by studying the advancement of the knowledge on the mediation of knowledge itself and the advancement of the experience within the context of the medium of mediation, this position is also a kind of phenomenology.

The philosophy of the media encompasses the theoretical, the practical and the poetical, but strives not to be determined by the image, grammar, concept, context, performance, performance psychology, or technology – it rather wants to simultaneously preserve and overcome all these things within itself.

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This work primarily focuses on the necessity of deeper thinking regarding the concept of *medium*. In accordance with this, the work suggests the expansion of

meaning of this concept (based on McLuhan's stands). This kind of approach means to show that it is precisely that which refers to the media/mediation/mediary – is the key to understanding each philosophical, theological and artistic as well as scientific approach.

The aim of this work is to show the media specific philosophical thought throughout history. The weight of this text lies on the fact that it is precisely within philosophy of media that all the efforts of contemporary philosophical approaches are collected and, more or less, most of the contemporary philosophical efforts realized – basically, it questions the issues of mediation of media, opinions, knowledge and philosophy *per se*.

2.

Philosophy is more than any individual philosophy. The *media* are more than that which occupies us today, which we call 'the mass media'. Philosophy tries to epitomize its time through thoughts. The media serve as intermediaries by means of multimedia. Contemporary intermediation of the mass media also enables us to understand the influences of media on philosophy itself.

When we speak about the relationship between philosophy and the media we are first of all talking about two research directions. The first one is the direction of enquiring: what sort of benefits does philosophy get by considering contemporary mass media and then the media in general. The second one: does considering the media reveal a new consciousness about the neglected influences of technologies and the media on the formation of philosophical approaches throughout various periods of time.

As a self-conscious, mature thought, philosophy keeps seeking information about itself again and again. The issue of the media and media intermediation will prove to be a fruitful context of self-questioning of philosophy itself.

Hegel said that Man is the medium of activity of the Spirit. Light is a phenomenon by which McLuhan explained in the most basic way the often quoted and rarely understood thesis: *The Media is the Message*. The medium of language developed in different ways in different civilizations. The medium of language also significantly participated in the creation of differences of those civilizations.

The ritual dance was the medium of union with God, His creatures and His nature. Ancient poets used to be vehicles of the muses. The prophet from Delphi was the vehicle of ancient gods. By alienating into the other and returning to ourselves, our idea (the idea to which we belong) is mediated by the other.

Each medium, as Harold Innis¹ pointed out, formed its market. It helped kings to increase their power, just like hieroglyphs helped Egyptian rulers to become im-

¹ Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communications. With a New Introduction by Marshall McLuhan*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1964. "Alexandria broke the link between science and philosophy. The library was an imperial instrument to offset the influence of Egyptian priesthood." (Ibid., p. 10.)

mortal. Ruling over people was greatly facilitated by the use of symbols (pictures or phonetic writing).

The dragon fire has been replaced by dragon's teeth. They were made by scribes who used to be slaves.

The fact that letter experts (literate people) were slaves who used writing to serve their masters holds some of the fate of the people of letters: either they will serve or they will be condemned to be each other's market (once again within the tutorship of masters)

However when the clay board transformed into a digital one, people of the new media started participating in the distribution of social power. This, however, was no longer a question of literacy but rather a question of being informed about the virtual worlds which include the knowledge of all media, which pour into one great big digital ocean.

We have come a long way from pedestrian paths of *languages and mythical stories* to light cables, sofas for pedestrians in the shape of wheelchairs, multimedia messages in the form of dreams and a language in which tectonic changes occur.

The question of language, image, cognition, the ontological level of question, epistemology, history of philosophy, all these are questions basically dealing with media mediation and they are impossible to answer if one does not answer them all at the same time. One answers them all at the level of philosophy of media as a contemporary, appearing, self-critical and self-conscious philosophy which:

- returns to its beginnings;
- reinterprets history;
- releases elements of the highest quality from tradition and delivers them to the future.

It is no wonder that only a little love and a little wisdom is left over in the love towards wisdom. Recently condemned to take small steps, impoverished of the fields taken over by sciences, religions and arts – philosophy of media nowadays is announced as a love towards understanding the mediation on the path towards wisdom.

The message of film almost intravenously enters us unlike the path which the philosophers paved (from the senses to the mind). Experience nowadays is, for the most part, virtual. Human history will soon not be able to be compared to more interesting histories of film, sports or the music industry. The Internet is a channel or, more specifically, a communication labyrinth.

The uncertainty of the definition of the concept 'medium' can be resolved if we determine it as *a terminus medius of all mediation*. This enables us not only to take a pailful of water from the spring but also to envision the entire stream. Mediations can be natural, technical or naturally-technical (given, created, combined).

Philosophical metaphors and analogies are often determined by predominant technologies of their time. Therefore Plato wonders whether one needs to know how to drive a wagon team in order to know how to write about it. The world, according to Heraclites, has been and will always be an eternal flame. Yet not until our time has

the significance of the surroundings, the medium and the mediation been questioned with the necessary depth and gravity.

Why is it that we say that television is a medium and we hesitate when it comes to light?²

Air intermediates vibration and without its mediation we might not be able to hear it.

The leaves and branches are mediums for interpreting the dance of wind and the surface of lake is the medium for interpreting the dance of rain. A child is a medium which unites the love of a mother and a father. There would be nothing in our thoughts except emptiness without the other and the mediation medium.

Things can simultaneously be the means and the medium, and the communication channel as well as the code. The human language will probably be recognized as the universal mediator of the media (the media medium), a means of the means, a communication channel used by other channels.

The way that the thought of the thought, according to Aristotle, was supernatural, is the same way the language communication which contains the linguistic essence of all languages also becomes supernatural.

Can a thought encompass the essence, the being, that which exists? Can something for itself be identical to itself? How close to the truth can we get by merely observing the shadows? Do Aristotle's theories truly echo ancient grammar?

One of the levels of questions is formally – legal. It will take many years until philosophy of media formally and legally finds its place at the universities.³ The second level is obviousness. McLuhan, Benjamin, Baudrillard contributed to that level and proved that the opinion is slowly but surely being structured according to the basic issues of philosophy of media.

3.

One of the most famous and most quoted points in the history of philosophical thought is Plato's comparison of human knowledge to shadows, namely the criticism of the orientation of human opinion on the study of shadows. The tale of the cave, told in a literary language is a metaphor which at the same time proves that we venture towards the depths of understanding through the shadows of that which appears.

² "If the student of media will but meditate on the power of this medium of electric light to transform every structure of time and space and work and society that it penetrates or contacts, he will have the key to the form of the power that is in all media to reshape any lives that they touch." Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1964, p. 52.

³ "Media psychology, media sociology, media education, media law and media economics have long since been part of the professional research and teaching standard in both their respective native disciplines and in the transdisciplinary cluster of subjects formed by culture, media and communications studies. But, as Hegel already knew, the philosophical owl of Minerva 'spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.' (Hegel 1952, 13) A systematically developed media philosophy has until now remained a desideratum for research." Mike Sandbothe, *Pragmatic Media Philosophy. Foundations of a New Discipline in the Internet Age*, <http://www.sandbothe.net/pmp.pdf>, p. 3.

The progress of knowledge is inseparable from critical analysis of the phenomenal through which the thought liberates itself, but also creates the essential.⁴

Plato has permanently placed the idea as a medium of cleansing knowledge between us and things around us, a landmark for opinion and the ideal of our reflective efforts. It is up to philosophy of media to discover to what extent Plato's medium, *the Idea*, has directed the efforts of human reflection in the right direction.

Plato's resistance towards the poetic as a medium of the muses is resistance towards the medium of the poem, the new medium which it discovers, finds and proves to itself by itself. It is a prosaic sentence from which one could request proof and credibility. The question of the relationship of poetic and fictional truth, the relationship of seductive muses and reason – is the question of through which medium we could better understand the world in which we live.

Plato was, among other things, a philosopher of the media. If he were alive today, he would probably be dealing with the idea of the possibility of survival of truth in the contemporary environment of seductive mass media.

At the time of their creation, did people read or look at the hieroglyphs? When trying to read them today, by using contemporary habits, we often read them in the wrong direction (from the top downwards). However, are we also wrong in the way we absorb them and mediate them?

We often comprehend today's charts by looking at them. We often understand their message without translating their messages into words.

The medium of the language of images is metaphoric, instant, and simultaneous and is not only the medium of human communication of the past. It is a part of our possibilities which has once again come to life in the plethora of contemporary traffic, computer or advertising hieroglyphs.

Questions of philosophy of media are: what are the possibilities of receiving such a system of symbols; how different is the experience of the phonetic highway (is it better or worse); and which one of these language mediums is more efficient at transmitting the network of experience to the network of human reception.

Each human cognition is the result of a kind of odyssey. We enter the world of appearance, we select, we free ourselves from that which is not important, and we find or create that which matters. We encounter seductive harmonies of muses on that road, who want to seduce us or forever emerge us into the mythical unity with the world.

⁴“Government propaganda, image-making and news management are at the heart of influences on the media reality external to the news system. Terrorist groups too are proficient at making use of news factors to make themselves a part of the media reality. Simply covering the news means consciously or unconsciously creating a reality by using a common set of news factors to package what is going on in the world. We can take some comfort in the fact that what the media bring us must be, at least in part, a reflection of what is happening in the world around us. But those reflections are no more reality than are the shadows cast on the wall of Plato's cave. What is perhaps most disturbing is the lack of fidelity between the world outside and the pictures that the news media help us to form in our heads.” Allan Thompson, “The News Media and International Relations: Experience and the Media Reality”, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1988, p. 48.

Like Odysseus, we also have a goal. Therefore we bound ourselves with chains of categories, alarm weights of reason, scepticism, irony and criticism.

We have chosen the medium of the fictional sentence because of our goal. We have countered the mythical whole with a mosaic of stones made of symbols which lead in their own direction. We have countered the whole being with the being of roles. We more often achieve our goal. At the same time the human goals become more and more questionable.⁵

What philosophy of media wants to do is to reveal that which is seductive in the fictional text, the philosophical discourse, each orientation which has its clear goal, including its own. A part of this effort is directed at understanding Hegel's idea which claims that the goal is a carcass which leaves tendency behind.

4.

What lies in the foundations of the notion that Man is the medium of action of the spirit? What results from Hegel's insight that the medium of knowledge is not nor can be something passive? If an artist is the medium of the divine, what are the consequences of such an idea regarding the understanding that which refers to the media/mediation/mediary mediation? Are the echoes of Greek muses found in Hegel's media mediation and how much has this position been abandoned with the stand that in contemporary art the artist mediates his own individual self?

If art in one of its segments was a medium for religious representation, how much has its role been forgotten when transferring to more contemporary roles? Does Hegel's image of reading the morning papers herald the metaphorical depth of philosophy of media which has become aware of the dimension of mediation as key factor in the shaping of all relationship dimensions towards the given, including the single linear conceptual dimension?

What does Hegel's rational completion of the concept 'the mediary' tell us in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*? The same way that there is no regal path leading into philosophy, according to Hegel, there is no passive cognition which could reach Man through some medium. Hegel says in the introduction to *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* that if we were to present the cognition to ourselves as a medium and if we were to think that we should know this medium, its laws, the breaking in two of the ray – this would not, Hegel believes, be of any use to us because "understanding is not the breaking in two of the ray but the ray itself".⁶

⁵ In the film *The French Connection*, Gene Hackman described the difference between an amateur and professional. An amateur thinks and thinks and thinks, and then he kills. A professional kills first and then he thinks. A contemporary scientist is today playing a role of a professional who accomplishes a given task; he is calm being convinced that he has scientific (verbal) explanation for everything, that he can call on freedom, autonomy, integrity...

⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Fenomenologija duha (The Phenomenology of the Spirit)*, Grafički zavod Hrvatske, Zagreb 1955, p. 46.

Cognition, Hegel believes, is not a passive medium and if it were passive for us, it would still produce the kind of result which is determined by the medium through which we receive it. Cognition is both – the breaking in two of the ray and the ray itself and also the means that breaks the ray in two.

What Hegel meant to say is that cognition can be brought down to tools, namely the medium.⁷ Just as Man, according to Hegel, is the medium of the activity of the Spirit, so is cognition identical to the medium, i.e. the ray, whether or not it refracts. The misconception, of which Hegel speaks, that we can reach the truth through some medium or in some medium, that is the absolute, is still present today despite Hegel's warnings.

The contemporary mass media break the rays of cognition in two and proclaim them to be the truth. Hegel's truths – the truth as a whole, the advancement of cognition, the self-movement of the concept, the expression of the inner necessity of thought and the inability to take or give the truth as if it were a piece of money – have been confirmed in the worst possible way. Contemporary mass media offer us the entire truth as a lie; they shape our concepts, fill in the blanks of non-existent experience and offer solutions in the shape of installed units.

Because “the path towards science is already science” and the subject is the same as movement⁸ – in each moment we find ourselves at one point of a slackened arrow. Hegel found the concept of the medium interesting to describe the process of cognition, dialectics of cognition, and the advancement of cognition. The strength is therefore “the medium of developed substances”, but individuality is not a medium but rather “the reality of the general”. The neutral person of deduction, *the terminus medius*, is a symbol of the rich process of advancement of cognition according to which phenomenology is a kind of mediology.

A significant movement towards understanding the relationship between philosophy and a deeper and widely understood concept of the medium is introduced by Cassirer, by understanding Kant's inversion as a possibility that the priority of the function over the subject from the field of cognition spreads onto myth, religion and art. Simply put: myth, religion and art along with cognition make up the world in which we live. In fact, each human activity leaves a trace on it. This brings up the need to abandon analysis of “the pure form of cognition” and to broaden that research on to a wider area of culture. The world is not merely a world of pure impressions but rather a product of language, science, myths, religion, art, i.e. a world of “spiritual expression”.

Searching for a medium which joins these spiritual forms, without interfering with their individuality, Cassirer comes up with symbols. That which appears, the ephemeral, that which at first seems incidental, is apart of a system of intermediation without which every whole is empty. Myth, religion, art each have their own symbols

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p. 65.

which have spiritual meaning regardless of the advancement of the concept, which is cognition.

Cassirer believes that it will be shown that only the phenomenal, therefore contingent, can be contributed to cognition, that is, that the essence without these cognitive forms is an abstraction. Symbol is a medium which enables that which Leibniz announced as “an expression of many in one”. *Multorum in uno expressio*.

Individual consciousness holds the whole within itself, just like “the inner language form” enables the language, just like each individual symbol of myth, religion or art contains their own whole within themselves.

Philosophy has always relied on the language medium. It found validity in the grammar structure of sentence which it suggested to be used as laws of thought, that is, objective laws of everything that exists. By doing that, it acknowledged the language medium and at the same time negated the completeness of that medium.

Art always gave itself to philosophy as a partner in the understanding of the world. The scopes of art have been implanted into philosophical systems, where forms of dialogue or stories were used, yet art has always been left at the sidelines and was actually thought of as a lower form of cognition.

Myth and religion used symbols that philosophy could not implement into its grammatical and logical edifice. Only the discovery of the constant production of the existing world revealed the meaning of each symbol for shaping the truth as a whole, namely the importance of each medium.

The unit, in fact, has no grammatically logical shape; it does not belong to any science. All the symbols of the world are media for shaping that unit. We are only through mediation; we are only through the mediation of the media.

5.

Everything that exists we form creatively; we shape and produce and mediate with our symbols. As a medium of the activity of the Spirit, in the beginning Man lived in a mythical unit with that which exists. The medium of the letter took him down the path of logic and the rational system as the only criterion of the truth.

The self-liberating thought takes into consideration the significance of each mediation and each mediation medium. The middle part of the conclusion merely heralded the middle and most important of the common existence of Man and always and only his world.

The medium is not only the *terminus medius* nor is the media merely that which is nowadays known as contemporary mass media. The medium is the interspace in which our destiny unfolds. Each edifice of concepts is a lie which lives on the back of authority or fear.

Philosophy of media can be an openness of opinion towards the creation of one kind of cognition which holds symbols, thoughts, faith and even the inexpressibility of the myth, art, science, as well as religion, including all those cognitions which spring to life amidst all the levels of human culture.

6.

Nowadays ethical issues mainly deal with the field of media mediation. Ethics and the media, seduction, manipulation, the birth and death of emotions within advertising industry, the media cited as a determining reason of human will, the unawareness of programming principles... these are all elements of the ethical-media dimension. During the time of production of the public into mass, that is, the time of the mass media, questions of ethics obtain their very important media dimension.

The foundation of ethics with regard to the subjective will (principle), and desire for it to become the general law, could nowadays be scenically compared to charging battle tanks with twigs.

The question of culture has in a similar way become a question of media culture, and democracy has developed in the direction of media democracy, i.e. mediocrity. The idea that tries to encompass the reality, which has been shaped by the mass media, by means of ancient concepts is like a pedestrian who has set off towards the moon on foot.

The means of communication impose their forms of communication. Experience is served to us in nicely designed (film, documentaries or trash-reality shows) forms. The education system acts out the process of education – education itself has been taken over by the media experts hired by the advertising industry.

The faith, which the hierarchies of all religions developed for centuries but also stole from their believers, today lives through trust in the preachers from the big screen or television. If a spectacle is the only thing that can make us feel vivacious and interested, then we are dealing with a new rule of the majority, then we must think within the concepts of the mass psychology of the spectacle.

We have always been able to consider reality only as a world of symbols which we have developed through art, religion and philosophy. The mass media nowadays offer us ready words and images, forms, stereotypes, ways of behaviour, the media etiquette. The machines have imposed massively reproduced images/texts upon us as an invitation to adapt to the world of the machines, a world in which we ourselves will primarily experience ourselves as machines.

Computer games, approved by the ministries of this or that country, teach our children that problems we face in life can be solved with – violence. The passion of game, the killing, the score, the passion of winning, the passion of losing personal issues while destroying the other (witness) is a paradigm of raising new generations of zombies.

In order to get erotic shots, we need to go back to old films or read once again some books we hold dear to us. The mass media offer us tons of multiplied naked bodies that are killing that which they are trying to produce – the eroticity of the moment.⁹

⁹The Wall in Berlin was not high in order to reach the sky. Into the countries behind the steel curtain the satellites were "throwing over that wall" female bodies without curtains, pure sex that had nothing to do with freedom, but was still called free sex, pictures of wealth in the West, without explanation that this

Starving artists make works of art for shop windows or parties. Tradesmen turn those works of art into brand names; they give them value and therefore make them interesting for the collector's consciousness.

Instead of understanding the influence of the mass media on the fate of contemporary Man of the media mass – we nowadays try to make Man media literate, teach him techniques of inclusion into the production of spectacular media lie. Plato's ancient curse is being realized: The media literate people are more capable of forgetting than the media illiterate ones.

Ideology rides again. With the speed of 24/25 images per second.

Literature

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only a nice and wealthy side of the West which also has its other side. After the wall was removed, everything seemed to remain the same. The wealth stayed where it was. Glamour moved around where it used to be. Only the viewers had more freedom to listen and watch media. They showed us only one side of the West, and brought the other side. Lucky were only those who belonged to the structures of government or intelligence services.

SEAD ALIĆ

Filozofija medija – je poruka

Mišljenje koje ukazuje na značenje posrednika u procesu spoznaje jednim svojim dijelom ulazi u područje gnoseologije. Probijajući se do biti promišljanoga, te odstranjujući ono što pripada posrednicima u procesu spoznaje, ovo je mišljenje dijelom i svojevrsna »proširena hermeneutika«. Proučavajući napredovanje spoznaje o posredovanosti same spoznaje, te napredovanje iskustva u kontekstu medija posredovanja, ovo je mišljenje i svojevrsna fenomenologija.

Sabirući u sebi teorijsko, praktičko i poetičko, filozofija medija želi biti mišljenje koje nije određeno slikom, gramatikom, pojmom, kontekstom, *performanceom*, psihologijom nastupa, tehnologijom – ali sve to želi imati u sebi sačuvano i nadvladano.

Transmisija znanja više nije samo stvar riječi. Nakon lingvističkog obrata i ikoničkog obrata, sve smo bliže shvaćanju da je i jednom i drugom obratu u osnovi bio medijski obrat.