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Media After the "Medial *A Priori*"

Sybille Krämer's ostensible aim in her recently translated book, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, is to rehabilitate the out-of-fashion concept of "transmission" in media studies. By doing so, this book attempts to develop an avowedly-metaphysical answer to media studies' fundamental question, "what is a medium"? (24) We might situate Krämer's approach to media in this book by citing the touchstones and antagonists she invokes in its prologue: Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver's conception of information, positioned as transmission's avatars, which she pits against Jürgen Habermas's dialogical conception of communication. But Krämer's "media philosophy" emerges just as crucially from a critique of what has come to be known – in the Anglophone world at least – as "German Media Theory". Perhaps this book's most striking goal is to displace the foundational *autonomy* that media is often granted under the auspices of this term.

As what Geoffrey Winthrop-Young calls an "observer construct", "German Media Theory" probably never accorded with the facts of *Medienwissenschaft* on the ground (2011: 15). This term nevertheless developed a certain utility for Anglophone scholars. German Media Theory has ossified into a theoretical formation – more crassly, a "brand" (Horn, 2007: 29) – that connotes a set of theoretical tenets. These include an emphasis on the materiality of media; close attention to media artefacts; or post-Foucauldian, genealogical approach to media history. In the past few years, though, a series of newly-translated collections and monographs have exposed Anglophone readers to the alternate theoretical positions that have been brewing in Germany since its canonical works of media theory were first translated. These include, most notably,

the "media archaeology" approach advocated by Jussi Parikka, in English, or Wolfgang Ernst, in translation, or the concept of "cultural techniques" developed by theorists like Bernhard Siegert and Krämer herself. What unites these distinct, recently-translated works is that they *don't* conform to our usual (mis)conceptions of "German Media Theory". In the case of *Medium, Messenger, Transmission*, we are presented with an approach to media that Krämer and other commentators refer to as "media philosophy" (Winthrop-Young, 2013: 14). Like Siegert's "cultural techniques" approach, Krämer's version of "media philosophy" advocates a turn away from the *media apparatus*. Where "cultural techniques" focuses on the media techniques – like writing, numbers, and so on – that are *formalised by* media apparatuses, what "media philosophy" advocates is an engagement with the mediatic *process*, broadly construed. Krämer calls this "mediality".

One of the basic claims of *Medium, Messenger, Transmission* is that mediality should be understood as nothing less than "an elementary dimension of human life and culture" (75). The figure that incarnates this claim is the *topos* of the messenger. The messenger is also the agent of the book's more fundamental metaphysical claim: that we ought to understand media *as that which disappears in the act of making a message appear for its receiver* (85). The implications of this claim are wide-ranging. At first blush, this interplay between appearing and disappearing seems to suggest a Heideggerian conception of media as "ready to hand": the idea that media only become obstinately present when they *aren't* working properly. But Krämer's media philosophy isn't concerned with either the media apparatus or the question of whether or not it is present to us. What she proposes, rather, is a that media should be understood using a "representational vocabulary" (206). The touchstone she uses to develop this vocabulary, and the basis for her avowed turn to a *metaphysics of media*, is Plato. Using the key terms "making perceptible" (*Wahrnehmbarmachen*) and "making appear" (*Erscheinenlassen*) (25), Krämer argues not only that media aren't apparent when they're working, but that media must be understood as functioning *behind* the layer of what is perceptible; that is, their *message*. Accordingly, Krämer argues that we ought to re-evaluate the status of the "message" in media studies. The *topos* of the messenger provides us, she argues, with the means to theorise media differently. One of her

refrains – which also sloganizes the book's key argument – is the phrase, "*there is always an outside of media*" (35). The point of this slogan is to claim that media are not autonomous or generative but *heteronomous*, or directed from the outside. *Medium, Messenger, Transmission* hews against the grain of contemporary media theory. It orchestrates media's disappearing act: media recede in use, Krämer argues, because what matters is not *media* per se but the relations that emerge *with* and *through* mediation. The figure of the messenger that dies as its message is delivered distributes the logic of mediality *through culture*.

The claim that "there is always an outside of media" is at the centre of the book's argument. It also marks Krämer's most distinct departure from "German Media Theory". In the Anglophone context, one of the most powerful features that has come to be associated with "German Media Theory" is the idea of the "medial *a priori*", or the idea that media constitute and influence the conditions of human sensing and knowing (Horn, 2007: 29). Krämer's proposal that we draw on a *Platonic* metaphysics to conceptualise media is an explicit critique of the "medial *a priori*" and its purportedly "Kantian" associations with "inquiring into the conditions of possibility of something" (30). The implications of this critique are outlined in a dense, crucial passage in the early part of the book. If, as Krämer suggests, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of the secondarity of writing is read as the application of "media criticism to language criticism", this "recursive self-usage" of "the condition of the possibility of" is *collapsed into itself* and rendered untenable. This collapse, moreover, forecloses our ability to single out or empower "*one* phenomenal domain" – media, say – "as a prior matrix of our being-in-the-world" (29). Critiquing the medial *a priori* is not distinct to Krämer or to the "media philosophy" position that she advocates. Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan argues that Siegert's conception of "cultural techniques", which focuses on the material processes that *precede* media, can be interpreted as an attempt to theorise the material "*a priori* of the *a priori*" (2013: 67). But in English, at least, the critique of the "medial *a priori*" that Krämer proposes from *within* the German *Medienwissenschaft* legacy reads as quite novel. By encouraging us to inquire into *mediality*, Krämer extends an engaged, highly theoretical mode of media analysis from the media apparatus to processes and

relations. Or: to what we might think culture *is* when it's not preceded *by* media but grasped mediately, *in* and *through* mediation.

One of the curious things about *Medium, Messenger, Transmission* that bears remarking upon is its undeniable sense of provisionality. The very structure of the book seems to reflect the novelty – and the anticipated contentiousness – of her approach to media. Rather than organising this book as a typical monograph, Krämer presents us with a varied set of materials broken down in to sections of varying lengths. The first is an introduction that stakes out an avowedly metaphysical claim about the medium. This is followed by readings of five theorists – Walter Benjamin, Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel Serres, Régis Debray, and John Durham Peters – that are used, in unusual and partisan ways, to extract attributes of a "messenger *topos*". Using a series of atypical examples of *transmissional* processes – such as angels, money, witnessing, and psychoanalysis – Krämer then demonstrates how the figure of the messenger and the process of transmission operate in media and as mediation. Finally, Krämer conducts a case study of techniques of mapping that applies the principles she has extracted from the previous sections. Taken individually, some of these sections are stronger than others. Krämer's readings of money or viruses, for instance, add little to the source material – Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Michel Serres, respectively – that informs them. Taken together, though, these sections can be read as something like a dossier for Krämer's alternate theory of media. Though unusual, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission's* provisionality also demonstrates an idiosyncratic reflexive understanding of how our theories of media are, themselves, mediated. These materials come imparted with a sense that they might be used to isolate and to theorise media theory itself.

Is Krämer's alternate approach to media useful? Her lone case study on mapping techniques provides a good example of how her concept of mediality might be applied in media studies. This chapter shares many affinities with the "cultural techniques" approach to media. But where "cultural techniques" engages with the *material* processes that precede discrete media, Krämer's approach conceives of techniques – in this book and in other translated works – as what she calls "epistemic things" (200). In other words, she engages techniques as abstract, rather than materialised,

processes. By *revealing* something about a territory that is inaccessible to the senses, techniques of mapping abstract *from* territory, rendering abstractions *present* to be acted upon. The map that works recedes in order to make an abstraction of space manipulable. This conception of media's utility comes from its emphasis on the reality of abstractions. It shares this emphasis with some contemporary, accelerationist discussions of capitalism. Rather than affirming that macro-level abstractions *do* exist to make macro-level analyses, it provides us with a means – a *technique* – of engaging with processes of abstraction at smaller scales. Crucially, it provides us with both a rigorous conception of abstraction as a *medial process* and with a set of conceptual tools that can be used to engage with it.

Krämer's approach isn't immune to criticism. She's unafraid, for instance, to use the relationship between appearing and disappearing to conceive of mediation in logical – abstract, or more troublingly, trans-historical – terms. In her case study of maps, for instance, she argues that if the practical use of maps requires the user to "remain blind" to its "inherent distortions", to critically *analyse* maps using a media philosophy approach we must "render the user's approach inoperative" by applying something like "a Husserlian *'epoché'*" (209). Claims like these expose her work to recent critiques that "German Media Theory" is not attentive enough to social dynamics or to cultural politics (Geoghagen, 2013). Whilst Krämer argues that media ought not to be seen as autonomous instruments, her conception of techniques prompts the question, should media's abstract processes be autonomised if the cost of doing so is the user's exclusion?

The political critique of this kind of abstracting media studies shouldn't be underemphasised. Nevertheless, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission's* alternate metaphysics of media should be read as a timely expansion of what we mean by "German Media Theory". By breaking with some of the theoretical tenets that have come to be associated with this term, this book succeeds in producing a clutch of useful concepts that can be used as the basis of a deep engagement with the relationship between media and culture. Krämer's version of what comes after the "medial *a priori*" is not a more granular empiricism, but a conception of *mediality* that

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acknowledges that "there's always an outside to media". Her concepts might seem detached from history. They're also, arguably, of crucial importance for engaging with those *media-techniques of abstraction* that supervene on media's outside: that is, on history, experience or culture.

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