

## &lt;ct&gt;Enlightening Mediation&lt;/ct&gt;

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## &lt;a&gt;Persuasion and Communication&lt;/a&gt;

The essays in this volume engage the event of Enlightenment on the terrain of its *mediation*, a term closely allied to notions of *transmission* or *dissemination* but invoking the material forms of these processes, especially print. The concept of mediation also implies a certain challenge to the figure of speech enshrined in the concept of Enlightenment insofar as any medium can diffuse or darken what it is intended to transmit. For twentieth-century physics, light apparently travels without benefit of a medium, but it was not so for the natural philosophers of early modernity, who supposed that light needed a medium, however imperceptible. If that “ethereal” element was not the air itself, it was like air, a substance more attenuated than glass or water, but like them dispersing and dimming what it also propagates. Inasmuch as the figure of enlightenment brings in the notion of medium, it perhaps also risks the dual effect of mediation. In this essay I propose to consider moments in the philological history of the terms *medium* and *mediation*, but not in order to batter the advocates of Enlightenment once again into a state of abject deconstruction. These figures were on the whole very aware of what was to be gained by strategic use of the print medium, and they tended to regard the new means of disseminating knowledge as an unqualified good.

*Condorcet*. In his *L’Esquisse d’un tableau historique des progrès de l’esprit humain* (*Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*) of 1795, Nicolas de Condorcet celebrates the advent of print above all other inventions of the modern world, destined to “unmask and dethrone” the tyranny of priests and kings:

<ext>Men found themselves possessed of the means of communicating with people all over the world. A new sort of tribunal had come into existence in which less lively but deeper impressions were communicated; which no longer allowed the same tyrannical empire to be exercised over men’s passions but ensured a more certain and more durable power over their minds; a situation in which the advantages are all on the side of truth,

since what the art of communication loses in the power to seduce it gains in the power to enlighten. (Condorcet 1955, 100)

Condorcet seems here to be thinking of printing by contrast to the immemorial art of face-to-face communication, *rhetoric*. He sees the medium of print as undermining the “power to seduce,” that art of persuasion upon which the hierarchy of persons often depended. By contrast the art of printing spreads the light of knowledge “all over the world,” magnifying its brilliance and subversive effects. Condorcet goes on to praise these mediations in their multiple material forms: “[E]lementary books, dictionaries, works of reference containing a host of facts, observations and experiments in which all proofs are developed and all doubts discussed” (Condorcet 1955, 101). The absence of the modern sense of *medium* in his framing account of the revolutionary effects of printing scarcely limits the scope of the claims he makes. Condorcet settles upon the term *art*: the “art of communication.” The waffling between “means” and “art” is transitional, perhaps even a little belated. If printing is an art of communication, it is very unlike the art of rhetoric. Printing was, to be sure, still an art in Condorcet’s time, in the sense of being a highly skilled craft, but printing disseminates what is already written. It constitutes an art of communication only if we assert with Condorcet that precisely the *technology* of print somehow makes the art of the orator unnecessary, presumably because writers who compose for the medium of print will be compelled to argue (or write) *differently*. The medium itself ensures that “all proofs are developed and all doubts are discussed,” and hence that no cause prevails through the old techniques of verbal seduction. The decline of formal rhetoric that results (in part) from writing for print is an event to which Condorcet is here a witness and a prophet; the high-water mark of the dominant art of Western education was already visible to him.

It will be helpful to recall that rhetoric entailed an ancient assumption about the primacy of *speech*, as the substance upon which this art was first and longest practiced. Even though rhetoric had long incorporated writing into its art, the concept of speech retained preeminence as the ground of practice until the final demise of rhetoric in the curricular revolutions of the later nineteenth century. The demise was the result of an evolutionary change in language proceeding too slowly at first to be noticed for its epochal consequences; this tendency was nothing less than a rearrangement of the

relations between speech and writing, in which writing would come increasingly to dominate the most important social venues. This reordering of language practice was unquestionably related to the pressure of the print medium on the conceptualization of writing; but I do not argue in this paper for an outcome simply determined by this new technology. Rather, I propose to index the deep shift by annotating several responses to the pressure of the “medium.” These responses (of which Condorcet’s is one) adumbrate a narrative with four phases, both successive and overlapping:

1. A new conception of language use emerges that is oriented toward the goal of *communication* rather than *persuasion*.<sup>1</sup>
2. The uses of *medium* converge with the concept of communication to yield the concept of a *medium of communication*.
3. The concept of medium is *pluralized* in the grammatical form of “media,” which are recognized as a dominant feature of modernity.
4. The concept of *mediation*—implicit in the concept of medium but autonomously developed in social theory as a high-order abstraction for understanding relations among social domains—comes to be understood as a process arising from the proliferation of media.

This is the narrative, in brief, I propose to relate, by way of offering philological annotations for a linked series of evolving terms: *persuasion*, *communication*, *means*, *medium*, *media*, and *mediation*.

The first of these terms—persuasion—has an inaugural role to play by *dropping out* of the subsequent networks and their permutations. We feel today that the concept of communication is somehow implied by the concept of persuasion, just as conversely our neorhetoricians believe that the motive of persuasion is hidden in every act of communication. But it would be more accurate to say with regard to the first hypothesis that the communication concept exists in the art of persuasion only as a semantic possibility. As to the latter hypothesis, I will assume (without arguing this point further

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<sup>1</sup> Howell 1971, 548–549, argues that Adam Smith’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (written in 1748–1749, but not published until the twentieth century) systematizes a turn in British rhetoric from persuasion to communication.

here) that rhetoricism is a totalizing and highly suspect theory of language use. It will be necessary to reject this totalization in order to set out accurately the genealogy of the communication concept, which emerges in early modernity as a challenge to the motive of rhetoric. In the premodern world, language theory needed no concept of communication, and speech was regarded most importantly as a *means* to the end of persuasion, what Condorcet tendentiously called “seduction.” This end lay at a tangent to that of communication, which posited the transfer of the speaker’s thoughts and feelings accurately to the mind of the auditor. By contrast, rhetoric supposed that the speaker typically occupied a “forensic” position, in which his own thoughts and feelings were best kept to himself. According to rhetoric’s detractors, every rhetorical utterance possibly concealed a lie; in the absence of an elaborated theory of communication, the desire for a pure transfer of thought can best be heard in antiquity in the anti-Sophistic chorus that descends from Plato down to the recession of formal rhetoric in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> That chorus became very loud in the seventeenth century, resulting in an urgent attempt to advance another term for the goal of speech.

<a>Means and Medium</a>

*Bacon.* In order to understand this transition in philological terms, I would like to call Francis Bacon to the bar as the first witness to the missing term. In this passage from *Of the Proficiencie and Advancement of Learning*, in which Bacon considers the art of “transferring or expressing our knowledge to others,” he skirts very near to the continent of communication, without quite deciding whether he has come upon an Indies or an America:

<ext>For the organ of tradition, it is either Speech or Writing: for Aristotle saith well, “Words are the images of cogitations, and letters are the images of words”; but yet it is not of necessity that cogitations be expressed by the medium of words. For whatsoever is capable of sufficient differences, and

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<sup>2</sup> The construction of rhetorical speech as irremediably tainted by the possibility of lying is very much an antirhetorical position. It is also the “semiotic” view, as Umberto Eco affirms without moralization when he calls semiotics a “theory of the lie” in Eco 1979, 6–8.

those perceptible by the sense, is in nature competent to express cogitations. And therefore we see in the commerce of barbarous people that understand not one another's language, and in the practice of divers that are dumb and deaf, that men's minds are expressed in gestures, though not exactly, yet to serve the turn. And we understand further that it is the use of China and the kingdoms of the high Levant to write in Characters Real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but Things or Notions; insomuch as countries and provinces, which understand not one another's language, can nevertheless read one another's writings, because the characters are accepted more generally than the languages do extend; and therefore they have a vast multitude of characters; as many, I suppose, as radical words. (Bacon 1996, 230)

The phrase “organ of tradition” can be translated approximately into modern English as “instrument of transmission.” Bacon is still thinking within the framework of “arts” (like Condorcet after him), the subjects that constituted the curriculum of the premodern university. The “organ of tradition” does not refer here to an ordinary speech situation but to the formality of school techniques. Yet Bacon's elaboration of the phrase lurches suddenly into a more general reflection on the relation between language and thought (cogitation) than is warranted by the Scholastic context of transmitting knowledge. Bacon may appear to have crossed a certain threshold of conceptual innovation by offering the “medium of words” as an equivalent for “organ of tradition”; but the word *medium* here falls just short of that crossing; it should properly be understood in Bacon's sentence as an *instrument* or *means* (a hammer is an instrument or means for building, but it is not in the sense we are inquiring after a medium). The antecedent term *image* points away from our concept of medium to another semantic complex, wherein the submerged conceptual cognate for “image” would be *imitation* rather than communication (the sense here is also close to *representation*, which has a role to play later in this story). The word *medium* circulates in Bacon's day as a common variant of *means*. But drawing the term *medium* into the context of “transferring thoughts” puzzles the difference between means and medium. *Medium* hesitates at the threshold of that other familiar sense by virtue of Bacon's assertion of a commonality of function between words and gestures as two

different means of expressing thoughts. This difference is rather like the difference between poetry and painting, two “arts” in Bacon’s time but not yet two “media.”

The further invocation of Chinese characters suggests that if Bacon is moving toward a conceptualization of the communicative function, it is precisely by moving *away* from the element of speech in order to affirm the greater utility of writing for transferring thoughts, writing as a means of “communication”—the quotation marks here indicate anachronism—that seems to transcend (spoken) words. The “Characters Real” break free of speech while remaining a form of writing. Because these ideograms are intended to connect directly with thoughts, transcending differences between languages, they suggest that the communicative function of writing is perhaps best accomplished in nonalphabetic script. Because such writing does not represent speech, it might be said to constitute a wholly different (and possibly more effective) *medium* for transferring thoughts. But Bacon is not there yet.

*Hobbes*. In *Leviathan*, Bacon’s disciple takes a very different approach to theorizing speech, reflecting his intention to develop an a priori psychology of human passions and entailing the thought experiment of imagining a bare humanity. Hobbes does not, like Bacon, generalize the purpose of speech on the basis of its practice as an art of rhetoric. Nor does he, like Bacon, celebrate the technical medium of print. On the contrary, he opens his discussion of speech in chapter 4 of *Leviathan* with an abrupt demotion of Printing, which “though ingenious, compared with the invention of Letters, is no great matter.” Neither is Hobbes so impressed by “letters”; he goes on to declare that speech is “the most noble and profitable invention of all other.” This double derogation of print and letters inaugurates a remarkable repression of what Bacon so nearly uncovered:

The general use of Speech, is to transferre our Mentall Discourse, into Verbal; or the Trayne of our Thoughts, into a Trayne of Words; and that for two commodities; whereof one is, the Registering of the Consequences of our Thoughts; which being apt to slip out of our memory, and put us to a new labour, may again be recalled, by such words as they were marked by. So that the first use of names, is to serve for Markes, or Notes of remembrance. Another is when many use the same

words, to signifie (by their connexion and order,) one to another, what they conceive, or think of each matter; and also what they desire, feare, or have any other passion for. (Hobbes 1991, 25)

For Hobbes, the primary use of language is for “remembrance,” and for reasoning upon those observations we call to mind by means of words. What we recognize as the “communicative” function of speech is allowed, but almost as an afterthought. Hobbes is determined to bend speech to the service of his geometric method of argument, which proceeds by establishing fixed definitions and requires immense control over the chaos of language, with its inherited ambiguities and plurisignifications. The fantasized scene of Hobbesian definition takes place at a site withdrawn from social discourse, for the purpose of preserving cogitation from any admixture of “desire” and “feare.” And yet the result of this withdrawal from the social scene of communication is oddly that writing reappears as the *trope* of speech; the “names” that serve as “Markes” and “Notes” gesture toward the diary or the commonplace book, even the ledger—but in the artificially asocial world of the single human speaking to himself.

When writing returns as literal fact, as it does in part 3, “Of a Christian Commonwealth,” it returns as the problem of interpreting the bible, the infinitely contested and mischievous book that Hobbes remands to the custody of the sovereign. So it will be in the Hobbesian commonwealth with all books, with all print. Writing and print are instruments (mediums) too dangerous to rest in private hands. Hobbes imagines a monopolization of the medium of writing correspondent to the state monopoly of violence. The control that Hobbes exercises over speech in theory, mastering words in Humpty-Dumpty fashion, can be figured in the commonwealth of letters by the sovereign’s control over those letters; in this way Hobbes pays a powerful backhand tribute to print. But Hobbes does not name his adversary as the very thing the reader holds in her hands. Once again, we make a note here, a philological annotation, on a network of words in shifting interrelation, unsettled and unsettling themselves in advance of some later moment of explicitation.

*Locke.* If Bacon moves briskly in his text from speech to writing, Hobbes moves just as quickly in the opposite direction, narrowing his focus to speech only. And yet both Bacon and Hobbes are pressured into theorizing by the same unnamed idea looming over

their conceptual struggles. This idea is not speech or even language, but something else: the idea of communication. Having no recourse to this concept, Bacon was unable to assign speech, writing, gesture, or the “real Character” to one larger category or genus to which all belonged. Hobbes acknowledges communication, but implicitly, by relegating the “transfer” of ideas to a secondary purpose of speech, conceived primarily (and defensively) as rational discourse with oneself. In the later seventeenth century, however, the term *communication* began to appear more frequently in theoretical discourse, as the name for the main purpose or end of speech. Unfortunately there is no way to capture this transition as a moment; we can only observe that the word’s range of meaning changed during this period. On the evidence of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, its former common senses invoked at base a scene of physical contact, the scenario in which a person hands over to another person some object such as a gift or a parcel, a usage that survives (ironically) in our notion of a “communicable” disease (the root derives from *L. munus*, exchange, and is the radical for “remuneration”). In premodern English the base meaning of *communication* is exemplified with particular vividness by the liturgical rite of Holy Communion. The sense of physical contact is reinforced by an emphasis on presence, which survives in certain exceptional current uses, as when we say that one room “communicates” with another. Speech, discourse, or conversation was only *one* example of this close (face-to-face) mode of presence or exchange, but by the later seventeenth century the sense of communication as speech or discourse was selected out as the *primary* sense, which ceased thereafter to imply the scene of immediate contact or presence and came contrarily to be associated with an action often involving distance in time and space.

The *OED* records the first use of the term *communication* in the primary sense of the “imparting, conveying, or exchange of ideas, knowledge, information, etc. (whether by speech, writing, or signs)” as 1690. The plural noun *communications* is defined as “the science or process of conveying information, esp. by means of electronic or mechanical techniques”—but this is obviously later. The plural invokes the fact of “media” (though not the word) and hence imputes distance to the modern scene of communication. The first example of the singular noun is cited from Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, from one of many instances in that work. Although this is not in fact the



first such use, Locke registers in his monumental text an important qualifier of the term *communication*, its inherent link to sociability. He does not, like Hobbes, imagine speech as kind of private language for reasoning upon things; the “Comfort, and Advantage of Society,” he writes, is “not to be had without Communication of Thoughts” (Locke 1990, 405).

Located in a social rather than a physical matrix, communication for Locke defines the end of speech but also the precise instrumentality of words: “[T]hey [words] being immediately the Signs of Mens *Ideas*; and, by that means, the Instruments whereby Men communicate their Conceptions, and express to one another those Thoughts and Imaginations, they have within their Breasts” (Locke 1990, 407). This definition labors to connect words on the one hand “immediately” with ideas, and on the other hand mediately (as “means”) with the aim of communication. Locke carefully maneuvers around the problem of the relation between speech and words by simply conflating speech with words (a questionable assumption for later linguistics). Everywhere in his discussion of words, Locke insists upon the “immediate” signifying relation between words and ideas, even as he allows the intermediacy of words as means to communicative ends. The *Essay* up to this point has been concerned wholly with ideas; when Locke turns to words in book 3 (from which I have been quoting), he does so only because he feels that he has established his principles of human understanding on the basis of ideas and *not* words.

We need not venture into the scholarship on the subject of the Lockean idea to advance the present argument. Suffice it to say that just as ideas for Locke, “being nothing but bare Appearances or Perceptions in our Minds,” are absolutely distinct from things, so are words. Locke’s conventionalist “semiotics” (the term he invents in book 3, chapter 21), means that the chief mistake people make about words is to take them as signifying things.<sup>3</sup> Words are related not to things but to ideas; these ideas are plunged in

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<sup>3</sup> Locke’s conventionalism is in a line that linguists trace to Aristotle, in the opening of the *De Interpretatione* (also referenced by Bacon in the passage quoted above): “Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken

books 1 and 2 into a kind of cleansing bath of analysis, a thoroughgoing clarification. For words there is no such definitive clarification, and Locke's analysis of them is consequently oriented to explaining their irremediable defects, the historical result of which, he writes, was that "the greatest part of Disputes were more about the signification of Words, than a real difference in the Conception of Things" (Locke 1990, 485). Notoriously, Locke says that he would have preferred to omit consideration of words altogether from the *Essay*, but such a demurrer would have reduced his book to an idealizing fragment. In the same paragraph in which he offers his rueful confession, Locke also offers a conception of words that exposes the fundamental reason for their "imperfection" and vulnerability to "abuse":

I must confess then, that when I first began this Discourse of the Understanding, and a good while after, I had not the least Thought, that any Consideration of Words was at all necessary to it. But having passed over the Original and Composition of our Ideas, I began to examine the Extent and Certainty of our Knowledge, I found it had so near a connexion with Words, that unless their force and manner of Signification were first well observed, there could be very little said clearly and pertinently

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sounds" (Aristotle 1984, 1: 25). This passage is often loosely cited as representing a theory of "communication," which it seems to me it does not. In addition to the fact that Aristotle asserts a naturally corresponding relation between "affections" and "things," which is the relation that Locke attempts to clarify rather than assume, he is most interested in the *De Interpretatione* with determining how propositions (not words) can be true or false statements about the world. This is the concern he begins to address immediately after the famous paragraph and in the remainder of this text: "Just as some thoughts in the soul are neither true nor false while some are necessarily one or the other, so also with spoken sounds." As usual in antiquity, the interest is in the adequacy of language to the world, or the "truth," with the success or failure of communication a secondary consideration. Nevertheless conventionalism such as Locke defines it (i.e., differently from Aristotle) lays the groundwork for the elaboration of the communication function in modern discourse.

concerning Knowledge: which being conversant about Truth, had constantly to do with Propositions, And though it terminated in Things, yet it was for the most part so much by the intervention of Words, that they seem'd scarce separable from our general Knowledge. At least they interpose themselves so much between our Understandings, and the Truth, which it would contemplate and apprehend, that like the *Medium* through which visible Objects pass, their Obscurity and Disorder does not seldom cast a mist before our Eyes, and impose upon our Understandings. . . . But I am apt to imagine, that were the imperfections of Language, as the Instrument of Knowledge, more thoroughly weighed, a great many of the Controversies that make such a noise in the World, would of themselves cease; and the way to Knowledge, and perhaps, Peace too, lie a great deal opener than it does. (Locke 1990, 489)

Locke's desire not to deal with words in the *Essay* yields to an even stronger counterfactual wish, wholly to remove the "imperfections of language" that lie between us and a world in which knowledge and peace can prevail. Today we are long past crediting the realism of either wish, however impressive this resounding chord of Enlightenment remains. But for Locke, the wish fathers an interesting thought: the means also lie *in the way*, the medium makes communication possible and makes it fail. The convergence of means and medium closes a circle. If in the *Leviathan* Hobbes repressed the material medium, the book itself, Locke expresses in the *Essay* a more radical antipathy toward language, the "cheat" of words; at the deepest level, then, Locke is expressing a desire to communicate without words, by means of an immediate transfer of ideas. This desire for the direct transfer of thoughts and feelings, inasmuch as it is counterfactual, is the evidence of a recurrent anxiety that troubles the development of communication theory; we shall see it again. For Locke, signs exist by a kind of default condition, the inaccessible immediacy of ideas to the mind:

For since the Things, the Mind contemplates, are none of them, besides it self, present to the Understanding 'tis necessary that something else, as a Sign or Representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it: And these are *Ideas*. And because the Scene of *Ideas* that makes one Man's Thoughts, cannot be

laid open to the immediate view of another, nor laid up any where but in the Memory, a no very sure Repository: Therefore to communicate our Thoughts to one another, as well as record them for our own use, Signs of our Ideas are also necessary. (Locke 1990, 721)

Communication by signs (words) compensates for the absolute (because unmeasurable) distance between one mind and another. That distance, which is not exactly physical, is nonetheless conflated in the history of communication theory with the physical distance between bodies in space. Every communication can be seen as a telecommunication, and conversely long-distance communication as a figure for the inherent difficulty of communication.

*Wilkins*. In the assertion that words function “like a *Medium*,” Locke gives a reason for his meliorist view of language, his inability to offer more than a modest set of remedies for the abuse of words, based on the principle that we should adhere as closely as possible to common significations. The recourse to the standard of common usage is like an anchor holding signification to the smallest range of drift, but at the cost of conceding the inaccessible depth at which the anchor contacts its ground. Locke’s resignation to these limits explains why he rejected the attempts of the universal language theorists to fix signification permanently by orienting it to the axis of words and things, so many words for so many things.<sup>4</sup> I propose now temporarily to reverse the chronology of my exposition in order to consider several moments in the work of John Wilkins, the most notable of the universal language theorists in England. Looking back from the perspective of Locke, it is evident that Wilkins’s work belongs to a Baconian milieu of speculative optimism. Yet it is also, I will suggest, prescient, more forward-looking than Locke, and needs to be situated on a different historical time line than the monumental philosophical texts touched upon thus far. That other time line charts the history of technology, or more precisely, *communications technology*. These two time lines are noncoincident.

Decades before Locke’s *Essay*, Wilkins employed the communication concept in a surprisingly modern sense, most famously in the *Essay towards a Real Character and*

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Aarsleff 1982, 72.

*Philosophical Language*, published in 1668. To say this is not so much to credit Wilkins with originary distinction but rather to acknowledge that the universal language projects were nothing other than attempts to grasp the idea of communication; these projects already approached language as a medium of communication, while symptomatically falling short of formulating a coherent conceptual object. In the *Real Character*, Wilkins takes as his point of departure the perception that distinctions between kinds of communication are based in distinctions between the sensory organs: “The *External Expression* of these Mental notions, whereby men communicate their thoughts to one another, is either to the *Ear*, or to the *Eye*” (Wilkins 2002, 20). The real character, though it can be spoken, is chiefly a written language, for the eye. The conspicuous visual appearance of the ideographic script effectively foregrounds writing as a material medium. If spoken words can also be said to constitute such a medium, recognition of this fact does not have quite the same effect of foregrounding the material. The difference here may be rendered null, perhaps, by insisting that air is the physical medium of speech—this would be correct, but the visibility of writing and its technical paraphernalia account for the perception of its materiality, its translation of speech into visible signs, ink, and paper. This difference is what we mean by “technology.” Writing is a technology, but speech is not. This difference is muddled, as linguists tell us, by alphabetic script, which permits us sometimes to forget that writing is a technology. But Wilkins’s real character famously bypasses alphabetic script; his ideographic writing was intended to free writing from the purpose of representing spoken words and so enable the real character to establish an unambiguous and permanently fixed relation between symbols and ideas on the one side, and things on the other. Locke saw that this was an error, but it is worth specifying what kind of error. Today we would say that Wilkins hoped to correct the communicative deficiency of language by means of a “technological fix.” This recourse, which has the same sort of charm as much science fiction, also has something of that genre’s capacity to leap beyond conceptual safe ground for something new and strange.

Granting the *Essay towards a Real Character* its moment of fame and conceding its philosophical failure—its logical failings and inconsistencies are legion—I will pursue here the link between medium and technology by annotating an earlier fabulation of

Wilkins, entitled *Mercury, the Secret and Swift Messenger*, published in 1641. This work is even closer than the *Real Character* to Bacon in its interest in technology and in its science-fictional resonance. The subject of *Mercury* is announced in the subtitle: *Shewing, How a man may with Privacy and Speed communicate his Thoughts to a Friend at any distance*—the subject, in other words, is communications technology (Wilkins 1694, 2). Wilkins of course did not have this compound term at hand; instead, he gives his subject the name of a god, Mercury, who will be remembered thereafter in just this connection. The treatise purports to describe current and possible means of secret and speedy communications at a distance, with the first half of the book devoted to secrecy, the latter half to speed. The question of the connection between secrecy and speed is puzzling, but partially illuminated by the third term, *distance*. The premise of secret communication is that a message transmitted to an absent party must be made unreadable in the event of interception along the way. The context here is manifestly political, and the aims of espionage as statecraft are invoked throughout the treatise. The subject of speed also responds (more obviously) to the problem of communication at a distance, which again can have urgent political contexts, but not exclusively. Wilkins remarks that the “invention of Letters” allows us to “discourse with them that are remote from us, not only by the distance of many miles, but also of many Ages” (Wilkins 1694, 4). He understands writing as a technology for overcoming distance, both spatial and temporal, but a technology that might be improved in the former instance especially. It remains for us to explain why such improvement is premised in all circumstances, political or otherwise, on the *fusion* of secrecy and speed, which Wilkins insists throughout his treatise “may be joined together in the conveyance of any message” (Wilkins 1694, 131).

Interest in the “art of secret information” or *code* among Renaissance writers is common—Bacon gave this subject an important moment in *The Advancement of Learning*—but Wilkins sees a much wider use for code in the context of communication. Inasmuch as coded writing sets out to frustrate legibility, it produces intentionally the very effect that for Locke inheres in the “cheat” of words, their imperfection. Locke’s theory reveals a defect in language itself, whether spoken or written; but Wilkins is in a way not interested in words at all—that is, in what they *mean*. He is interested rather in what technical devices exist or might be invented to frustrate immediate legibility without

failing ultimately to communicate to a select addressee. The effect of his technologism is to isolate the material medium itself—pen, ink, and paper—dissevered from the message. The most basic coding effect is thus one in which the words disappear and only the medium appears: “A man may likewise write secretly with a raw Egg, the letters of which being thoroughly dried, let the whole paper be blacked over with Ink, that it may appear without any inscription, and when this Ink is also well dried, if you do afterward gently scrape it over with a Knife, it will fall off from those places, where before the words were written” (Wilkins 1694, 42). Now Locke is surely the more sophisticated theorist in suggesting that all language is in a way “blacked over” by reason of its inherent inadequacy to the mind’s ideas. But does this more sophisticated conception of language as medium not gain its insight by reducing the medium to a metaphor?

At the hinge of *Mercury*, between the chapters on secrecy and the chapters on speed, Wilkins offers a prospect of his later treatise on the real character, suggesting that the same code that frustrates communication might also be used to universalize it. In the *Essay towards a Real Character*, the principle of code is employed to rectify the innate deficiency of languages, the ambiguity of words in the natural languages; and it would not be inaccurate to say that the vast apparatus of the real character is in fact a code, whose key is happily supplied to everyone. The real character is a universal language, transcending the differences of natural languages. But the unfortunate reality of the real character is that it does just what code does, namely, translate natural language into artificial language. The code, once decoded, sends us back not to things but to some version of a natural language, with all its imperfections, as Locke understood.

If the real character was a dead end, the resolute technologism of *Mercury* opens onto a more hopeful scenario. After his brief excursus on the real character in chapter 13 of *Mercury*, Wilkins goes on to take up the subject of speed. He insists as always that secrecy and speed “may be joined together in the conveyance of the message,” but again, why should that be? The first clue is that, as with secrecy, the aim of speed brackets the content of the message and asks only that we consider the medium. Wilkins rehearses some improbable technologies—the communication of sound through pipes, for example—but settles on two more plausible technical possibilities: the first is the transmission of very loud sounds over long distances, the second is the transmission of

messages by the use of bright light. Unfortunately, in both cases the material means is ill suited for the transmission of natural language and even for the transmission of alphabetic script. Wilkins proposes, however, that the reliability of transmission can be ensured by the use of coding, which relies on the most minimal differences between sounds or between flashes of light to produce the effect of articulation; finally, only two marks of difference are necessary to send any message. Wilkins devises here something like a precursor to Morse code, or what we would call “digitization”: “It is more convenient indeed, that these differences should be of as great variety as the letters of the Alphabet; but it is sufficient if they be but twofold, because two alone may, with somewhat more labour and time, be well enough contrived to express all the rest” (Wilkins 1694, 132). With two different sounds or light flashes, every letter can be assigned a digital code, and communication at great distance and speed can be accomplished.

The point here is not so much to note the anticipation of the digital principle but to observe that Wilkins’s communication at great distance is possible only by recourse to the same device—code—that is otherwise the means to *frustrate* communication. Putting Locke and Wilkins together, we see that whether communication fails (Locke) or is deliberately frustrated (Wilkins), the effect is to bring the medium into greater visibility. The difference between Locke and Wilkins, however, is reinstated at another theoretical level, because it does make a difference precisely where one locates the operation of the medium. For Locke, it would be correct to say that *words are the medium of thought*, whereas for Wilkins, one must say that *writing is the medium of speech*. Wilkins locates the operation of the medium in the *technical means*, making us see that we might even write with sound or with light. The “medium” is located in the middle position, wherever that happens to be. The difference between language as medium (of thought) and writing as medium (of speech) produces a certain philosophical confusion, which turns around the conceptualization of the medium in relation to a physical instrument.

*Campbell and Mill*. The confusion is evident in what follows historically from these two versions of communication. The Lockean version—language as medium of thought—provides a philosophical basis for a canon of language use, a *stylistic* norm applicable both to speech and writing. This is the familiar notion of “clarity,” which seeks



to make language as transparent as possible. The stylistic norm is the nervous tribute of communication theory to the medium concept, still hovering between a metaphor and a literal nomination. Here is an exemplary passage from George Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776), which claims to recycle the classical ideal of perspicuity drawn from Quintilian but is really concerned to establish a post-Lockean stylistic norm:

Perspicuity originally and properly implies transparency, such as may be ascribed to air, glass, water, or any other medium, through which material objects are viewed. From this original and proper sense it hath been metaphorically applied to language, this being, as it were, the medium, through which we perceive the notions and sentiments of a speaker. Now, in corporeal things, if the medium through which we look at any object be perfectly transparent, our whole attention is fixed on the object; we are scarcely sensible that there is a medium which intervenes, and can hardly be said to perceive it. But if there be any flaw in the medium, if we see through it dimly, if the object be imperfectly represented, or if we know it to be misrepresented, our attention is immediately taken off the object to the medium.

Perspicuity as the chief rule of style is everywhere asserted in the rhetorical and belletristic handbooks of the period. The norm of clarity is extraordinarily important as a literary historical event and leaves virtually nothing in the realm of literary culture untouched. Because Campbell's presentation of perspicuity brings in a little more theory than is requisite for the purpose of recycling Quintilian, it permits us to appreciate the true complexity of this concept. By asserting once again the metaphoric status of the medium, Campbell rehearses Locke's desire for words that are simply transparent to ideas. Any failure of communication brings the medium into an unwanted visibility, or in Campbell's terms draws our "attention" to it. But let us imagine, for the sake of argument, a hypothetically converse (or perverse) desire, the desire *not* to communicate. We know that this desire is what motivates code, as in Wilkins's account of communication; can it also motivate literary composition or *writing*? The fact that we already know the answer to this question will allow me to accelerate my account at this

point, and to allow two rather unlike figures, John Stuart Mill and Stephane Mallarmé, to conclude this line of inquiry into the medium concept.

Mill's attempt to define poetry in "Thoughts on Poetry and Its Varieties," first published in the *Monthly Repository* of 1833, is famous for a certain aphorism loosely identified with the period concept of Romanticism. Mill sets out to define poetry initially by comparing it with oratory on the basis of their common identity as forms of expression operating "through an impassioned medium," or language marked by a "colouring of joy, or grief, or pity, or affection, or admiration," among other strong emotions. But this assertion demands a more strenuous effort to distinguish between poetry and eloquence:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude. . . . All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy. (Mill 1973, 70–71)

These familiar words have since floated free of their context, and circulate as a topos of literary culture, a notion of poetry that can scarcely be found much before Mill's time but dominates criticism after it. The poet here is granted the license to ignore the injunction to communicate, and this must have consequences for the *stylistic* norms governing the poetic mode of discourse. Most important, the rule of clarity is implicitly abrogated if Mill's characterization has any accuracy. We may then regard the language of poetry as like a code, a technique of writing that deliberately confounds the reader, that retards comprehension by provoking a hermeneutic exercise of no small complexity or duration. But it would be premature to impute anything more than this, if even this, to Mill, who only wants to establish the principle that true poetry must be written in a state of mind in which communication is disregarded. But the disregard for communication makes possible what we might call a "thickening" of the medium, a darkening of its material substance even as attention is drawn to it. This counter-principle to Locke is familiar to us now in many versions—including those of critical hermeneutics and communications theory.

### <a>Medium and Mediation</a>

Looking back over these glosses on the term *medium*, the reader will have noted that the concept of mediation makes as yet no significant appearance. The process of mediation would seem to be everywhere implied by the function of the medium, and yet there are few instances before the twentieth century in which a process of *mediation* is extrapolated from the term *medium*. On the evidence of the *OED*, the word *mediation* was for the most part used with reference to agents or actions involving intercession between alienated parties, as in—the grandest example—the “mediation” of Christ as Redeemer. The most common use of the term *mediation* today is not unrelated to this theological sense, referring largely to the area of dispute resolution. The most common use of the term gives us an important clue about the social investment underlying the more abstract sense we find in communication theory. If we think of mediation as a process whereby two different realms, persons, objects, or terms are brought into relation, the very necessity for this process implies that these realms, persons, objects or terms resist a direct relation and perhaps have come into conflict.

The sense of mediation as an abstract process is given in the *OED*, definition 2.a: “Agency or action as an intermediary; the state or fact of serving as an intermediate agent, a means of action, or a medium of transmission; instrumentality.” The basis for abstraction in this definition is the shift of focus from “agent” to “agency,” that is, to an impersonal process. This allows for any number of objects or actions to occupy the “third” position of mediation. Two of the examples cited by the editors give the range of possibilities: The first, from Chaucer’s *Treatise on the Astrolabe* (1391): “By mediacioun of this litel tretys, I purpose to teche the a certain nombre of conclusions”; and the second, from H[enry] Lawrence, *Of Communion & Warre with Angels* (1646): “The understanding receives things by the mediation, first of externall senses, then of the fancy.”<sup>5</sup> It might seem evident from our current “media” perspective that the use of the

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<sup>5</sup> Williams 1976, 204, also picks out these two quotations from the *OED*’s list. It would be difficult to say, without considerable further research, just how common these uses are. On the basis of my own reading in the early modern period, my guess is that the

word *mediation* in the example from Chaucer must have been the more seminal; yet that was not the case. (This would confirm, however, our earlier observation, that the idea of communication is very late.) The sentence from the work by Lawrence reflects the more common usage until well into the twentieth century, suggesting that the *mediation* concept was most useful in constructing a picture of the mind in its relation to the world. This range of meaning points to psychology, to which the editors of the dictionary devote subsection b: “The interposition of stages or process between stimulus and result, or intention and realization.” The philological evidence thus turns up an anomaly: the idea of a medium seems to require a process of mediation; yet this process was rarely associated with the sort of medium instanced by Chaucer’s “litel tretys.”

*Hegel and Peirce.* We have been tracking the uses of *medium* and *mediation* by annotating appearances of these terms mainly in philosophical texts, because the concepts in question are highly abstract and tend to be employed and elaborated in complex philosophical arguments. This is especially so with the concept of mediation, which names a process rather than an object. In the philosophy of Hegel, mediation debuts as a concept of the first order of importance, but without reference necessarily to communication. The term *mediation* and the problem of communication do not seem to have been brought together in any systematic way until the later nineteenth century, with the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, and then only intermittently thereafter. Communications theory is disposed now to extrapolate a process of mediation from the operation of particular media, but the older philosophical tradition put the term for process *first*; if the medium of communication appears at all in this tradition, it appears as one instance of a more universal process of mediation supposed to govern relations among different terms of thought or domains of reality. This formulation would describe the use of mediation in Hegel.

The English word *mediation* has a near equivalent in the German word *Vermittlung*, which is a key term for Hegel. In his corpus, mediation belongs to a logic or dialectic of relations, by which concepts such as subject and object, or mind and world,

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sense of mediation in the theological and political contexts are vastly more common, and that the connection of mediation with books, either manuscript or print, is rare.

are assigned roles in his system. In the most general sense, the principle of mediation denies the possibility of an “immediate” (*unmittelbar*) relation between subject and object, or the immediacy of any knowledge whatsoever.<sup>6</sup> It will be possible within the limits of this essay to improve only slightly upon this description by acknowledging that Hegel’s use of *Vermittlung* is subtly inclusive of the other senses noted above, theological and disputational, which belong to both the English term and its German cognate. Hegel’s dialectic of mediated relations thus points toward reconciliatory moments along the trajectory of Hegel’s peculiar self-generating dialectic.<sup>7</sup> We may set aside at this point the goals of Hegel’s idealist system in order to aim at another target: the concept of mediation expresses an evolving understanding of the world (or human society) as too complex to be grasped or perceived whole (that is, immediately), even if such a totality is theoretically conceivable. It becomes possible then to present mediatory agencies as *necessarily* characteristic of society—a generative thought that enables later social theory to develop the idea of mediated relations by contrast to simpler notions of causality.

I will return to Raymond Williams’s reservations about the concept of mediation at the end of my essay, but for the present it will be necessary to press further with a consideration of the anomaly noted above, the apparent lack of relation between *medium* and *mediation* in the philological record. This problem, in my view, is crucial to our understanding of the way in which the concept of mediation as a process seems to come in and out of philosophical and social theory, without establishing a home in a field of communication.<sup>8</sup> The philological evidence suggests that concern with communication

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<sup>6</sup> See the important comment in Hegel 1969, 68: “there is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation.” The theme of mediation figures largely in the *Science of Logic*.

<sup>7</sup> Hegel’s dialectic of mediation is peculiar in that it does not start with two terms but only one, as in his unfolding of *being* in the terms *nothing* and *becoming*.

<sup>8</sup> A significant exception is Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism*, which defines speech as “the mediation [*Vermittlung*] of the communal nature of thought,” and also “mediation of thought for the individual” (Schleiermacher 1998, 7). Schleiermacher

continues to be expressed, often still metaphorically, by use of the term *medium*. On the other hand, the concept of mediation, as it appears in Hegel and is taken up in the tradition of Marxist and sociological theory, posits this concept in connection with more universal contexts than those of communication. For Hegel, mediation concerns nothing less than the question of *being*; for Marx the question of *labor* (as the mediation of mankind and nature). The communicative relation seems to lie below the radar of thinking about mediation until later. As we shall see, the extrapolation of a process of mediation from the fact of a particular communicative medium (language or writing) depended not on the incorporation of the concept of medium into a more general conceptual framework but the reverse, a reduction of the social totality to communication as its representative instance.

A version of that reduction characterizes the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, who elaborates the first full-scale theory of a specifically *semiotic* mediation. Peirce's typology of signs is notoriously complex, but I will emphasize only one small feature of that typology, setting out first a typical definition of the sign given in Peirce's oeuvre: "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea" (Peirce 1931–1935, 1958, 2, [parpa](#). 228. What Peirce calls the interpretant is actually another sign (not a signified), the function of which is to interpret the first sign; the interpretant then becomes a representamen for another interpretant. Umberto Eco observes in his discussion of Peirce that this formulation inaugurates an endless series or "endless semiosis" (Eco 1979, 68). The infinitude of the structure of the sign permits the model to incorporate virtually all other discourses of knowledge by way of translation into semiotic terms: "The entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (Peirce 1931–1935; 1958, 5: 448). Peirce's ambitious claim for a concept with formerly so narrow a

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consistently sets hermeneutics in the larger context of communication but does not pursue further elaboration of the mediation concept.

role to play in philosophical reflection interrupts the conversation in philosophy by violently displacing traditional philosophical questions into the domain of the semiotic (a displacement that is without precursor but is paralleled in the work of Frege). Peirce's implicit reduction of philosophical system or notions of totality—the world or human society—to the instance of symbolic exchange is a strategic gambit of considerable symptomatic importance and quite outweighs the actual influence of Peirce in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> The desire to generalize social theory from the instance of communication, language, or writing is recurrently a feature of twentieth-century thought, propelling the development of structuralism (Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss et al.), poststructuralism (Derrida), systems theory (Bateson, Luhman, and Habermas), communication studies (Innis, McLuhan, Ong), and information theory (Weiner, Wolfram et al).

In this context, Peirce's conception of mediation is of undoubted historical importance. The use of the term *representamen* for the manifestation of the sign confirms that Peirce is thinking of the sign primarily as a certain kind of representation. But it is not sufficient merely to say that an object is “represented” by the representamen. Peirce speaks of the object in two senses: In a formulation that sounds reminiscent of Locke, he posits first an “immediate” object as what is given in the sign, in much the same way that ideas are immediately present to the mind in Locke's system. In the second place, however, when he speaks of the object as a thing in the world, he describes it as *mediate* (we would say *mediated*). To say that representation is a means by which objects in the world are *mediated* indicates that the concept of representation is inadequate of itself to describe the effect of its own operation. When Peirce brings the process of semiotic mediation forward in his work, he complicates the concept of representation, including his own invocation of it.

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<sup>9</sup> For an interesting discussion of Peirce's theory in its more global implications, see Parmentier 1985, 23–48. Parmentier notes that Peirce was relatively uninterested in the physical medium of communication, a point of significant difference with twentieth-century communications theory (Parmentier 1985, 33).

The emergence of this complication testifies to the dominance of representation in Western thought. From Aristotle onward, representation names the process of signification but also a species of prestigious cultural works. If it always seemed proper to say that the sign “represents” thought, the sense in which the *Iliad* (for example) represents heroic action discovers the insufficiency of that concept from a Peircean perspective. The notion of mediation points to a hidden complexity of the representational process. Whatever is mediated by Homer’s poem may not be only or primarily heroic action, but other, myriad aspects of Greek culture the representational status of which is not equivalent to that of the figure of Achilles or the event of the Trojan War. These other elements of “context” raise a question about the adequacy of the concept of representation to capture the complexity of the very process for which its name stood for so long.

#### <a>Mediation and Representation</a>

This complexity is at once apparent if we were to consider the difference between the depiction of the same subject in an epic poem and in a painting. The difference is first of all a matter of the medium, in which scholars of course always been interested, even if they do not always bear this difference in mind *comparatively*. It has always been easier to settle comfortably within the horizon of a single medium and to direct one’s attention thence to what the work represents. The preference for the representational schema, which in the Western tradition extends to works of art generally, can be traced all the way back to Aristotle, who identified his subject in the *Poetics* as the “art of representation” (mimesis), setting aside in the same passage the question of “in what” form a representation is transmitted. The Greek phrase here is translated as “means,” or sometimes “medium,” even though there is no equivalent term in the Greek text.<sup>10</sup> *The*

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<sup>10</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics* 1447a, where he writes that the modes of imitation “differ from one another in three ways, either in their means, or in their objects, or in the manner of their imitations.” The translation is from Aristotle 1984, 2: 2316. Other translators (e.g., S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* [New York: Dover Publications, 1951], 7), give “medium” here for “means.” Gérard Genette, *The Architexte: An Introduction*, explicates this phrase as meaning “literally ‘in what?’”—meaning “the



*question of medium was set aside for two millennia.* We can hypothesize that it was only the proliferation of *mediums* in the twentieth century, and the fierce competition among them, that forced the fact of medium into full visibility and solicited a new conceptual analysis of medium in the form of communication theory.

The claim that the proliferation of new media is the context for the development of communication theory is large enough to require a separate essay, though the argument is certainly familiar. It will have to suffice here to recollect some of the philological evidence that attests to a mutation in the medium concept. The *OED* is especially rich in its citations, which suddenly multiply from the later nineteenth century on. These include *medium* as (1): “Any of the varieties of painting or drawing as determined by the material or technique used,” and (2): “A channel of mass communication, as newspapers, radio, television etc.” Increasingly the term *media* is used to name what were formerly called *arts*; in addition, new information or communication media are identified that do not rise to the status of arts.<sup>11</sup>

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sense of one’s expressing oneself ‘in gestures’ or ‘in words,’ ‘in Greek’ or ‘in English,’ ‘in prose’ or ‘in verse,’ ‘in pentameter or ‘in trimeter,’ etc.” (Genette 1992, 12). Aristotle dimly grasps “medium” here, but as inclusive of both what we would call medium and other aspects of language use, such as form or genre. The *Poetics* is concerned after this passage entirely with “objects” and “manners” of imitation; the question of means/medium is dropped altogether. For more extensive commentary on this passage of the *Poetics*, see the edition of Aristotle 1987, 68.

<sup>11</sup> The most surprising common use of the word *medium* in the period, however, is (3): “A person believed to be in contact with the spirits of the dead and to communicate between the living and the dead.” The puzzle of nineteenth-century spiritualism, which we need only acknowledge briefly here, has been greatly illuminated by historians of technology, who have shown convincingly that such spiritualism is a shadow cast by communications technology itself, a wonderful joke of history confirmed by the tenacity with which the spiritualists sought to use modern technology to capture the voices and images of the dead. For a good discussion of the connection between spiritualism and ideas about communication, see Peters 1999, 89–108.

To carry this enumeration forward into the twentieth century, I would cite finally the emergence of the new profession of public relations or advertising, which completes the modernization of the media concept. For obvious reasons, the pioneers in this field were highly sensitive to the diversity and specificity of media, and one must look to these figures for the first analyses of subjects later taken up by communications studies. We can do no better than to cite here the figure of Edward L. Bernays, who baptized the new field in his seminal study, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, and described its arena of operation: “His [the public relations advisor’s] advice is given not only on actions which take place, but also on the use of the mediums which bring these actions to the public it is desired to reach, no matter whether these mediums be the printed, the spoken or the visualized word—that is, advertising, lectures, the stage, the pulpit, the newspaper, the photograph, the wireless, the mail or any other form of thought communication” (Bernays 1923, 14). It was only necessary thereafter to standardize the plural form of medium with the Latinizing *media* in order to disembark on the new continent Bacon glimpsed in his *Advancement of Learning*.

*Saussure and Jakobson.* The proliferation of new meanings and professional fields provides a context for understanding the twentieth-century project of reconceiving the process of signification within a model of communication. The drive to produce such a model was in part the result of the immanent development of linguistics as a discipline; but that discipline also gestured toward a discourse—semiotics—whose scope was greater than that of linguistics and included potentially the study of all forms of communication. Still, Saussure and most twentieth-century linguists continued to insist that the model of communication should be grounded in the scenario of one person speaking to another. Predictably, the exclusion of writing and of new, “mediated” forms of speech—telegraphic, phonographic, and so on—undermined the model over the long term, with the manifold results much later twentieth-century theory has given itself to analyzing. The clamor of mass communications was already too great to be successfully contained by linguistic theory. Two brief annotations of Saussure and Jakobson will suggest the failure of theory to exclude these modes of communication even in the process of conceptualizing communication.

It has not escaped anyone's notice that linguistics turned increasingly in the twentieth century to the scene of communication and to the task of modeling this scene. Saussure's inaugural *Course in General Linguistics* depicts communication in its starkest form, as two talking heads whose mouths, ears, and brains are linked together by two dotted lines. However firmly this picture insists on the speech scenario, its slackly suspended lines hint at the telegraph or the telephone, a visual pun that Saussure surely did not intend. Does this picture acknowledge, if only unwittingly, the fact of new mediums? Saussure is of course openly worried about that old medium, writing, which he firmly grasps and just as firmly excludes under the category of representation: "The sole reason for the existence of the latter [writing] is to represent the former [speech]" (Saussure 1973, 24). This entirely conventional description spells trouble of the sort with which we are all too familiar from the later critique of Derrida; but that is not the problem to which I am pointing.<sup>12</sup> The question raised by Saussure's exclusion is rather why signification requires more than just representational tokens in order to operate.

Elsewhere Saussure tells us, "The value of a word is mainly or primarily thought of in terms of its capacity for representing a certain idea" (Saussure 1973, 112). This sentence states the proposition to be refuted, namely, the most familiar model of signification: "language represents thought." Saussure is unhappy with such an *antithetical* distinction between language and thought, however, and his theory of the signifier and signified as a composite "articulation" asserts an indissoluble or constitutive "link" between these two elements of the sign. The articulating function is different from representation and is expressed in Saussure's analysis by a series of figures: the action of wind producing waves on water, cutting the recto and verso of a folio, and the coin as medium of exchange. Without attempting to explicate these figures individually, we can

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<sup>12</sup> Derrida's objections to Saussure in *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1974, 29–55) retains its primal deconstructive force, subordinated however to a philosophical agenda that is irrelevant to the concern of this essay. In making the case for writing, Derrida of course wants to claim that all language is, in the special sense of his argument, writing, whereas what I would like to remind us of is the fact of writing as a medium, different from other media and possessing its peculiar effectivity by virtue of that difference.

register the extent to which an unstated concept of the *medium* governs the figures, a small troop of medial metaphors conscripted to fend off the model of representation: “If words had the job of representing concepts fixed in advance, one would be able to find exact equivalents for them as between one language and another. But this is not the case” (Saussure 1973, 114–115). Representation is happily relegated to writing, as the medium that is supposed to do *no more* than give us tokens for spoken words.

We need not draw any philosophical conclusions from this analysis, which attempts only to describe the philological context for modeling linguistic communication. In context, two very different formulations are contending for dominance: (1) “Language represents thought”; and (2) “Language mediates thought”—the second, however, only tacit in Saussure. His theory of signification rejects a *representational* relation between words and concepts in favor of a looser relational concept, one that is closer in the end to mediation, though this concept never comes out from behind the figures Saussure uses. In the following half century, the conceptual architecture built on the higher ground of mediation reaches a great height; we need only ascend a few stories to get a view of the surrounding terrain, which brings the arguments of Whorf, Sapir, Vygotsky, and Wittgenstein into view. Reality itself can be described for these theorists as mediated by language. The hypothesis of language as medium is no longer just a way of pointing to the distorting effect of words, in Locke’s sense, but of evoking the world making of semiotic mediation. This thesis goes far beyond what can be inferred from the scenario of the talking heads. The proliferation of communication media in the social environment suggests that communication can no longer be modeled as the representation of silent thought by spoken word.

The more rigorous the analysis of communication, the more likely it is that a process of mediation will come to the fore. Jakobson’s much later model is exemplary in this respect. In his extremely well-known and influential essay, “Linguistics and Poetics,” Jakobson analyzes the scene of communication into six constituents, the two poles of *addresser* and *addressee* and four intermediate terms: *context*, *message*, *contact*, and *code*. Of these, the “contact” isolates the medium as such, without apology, and possibly with some awareness of the new information theory of Claude Shannon and others who disseminated the notion of “channel” that Jacobson invokes in his definition of contact:

“a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication” (Jakobson 1981, 27–29).<sup>13</sup> Although this physical channel of course includes the medium of speech in face-to-face exchange, the physicality of the channel is best evinced by technological devices of communication, which are prone to obvious physical (mechanical or electronic) failure. When Jakobson describes the communication “function” specific to contact, which he calls “phatic,” he evokes the vicissitudes of telephonic communication: “Hello, do you hear me?” It is difficult to know what other *content* phatic utterance can have than a query about the failure of the channel; but behind the apparent semantic poverty of this utterance lies the entire problematic of mediation as the extrapolation of a social/communicative process from the physical medium.

The purpose of Jakobson’s model is ultimately to give an account of the poetic function, which he defines as a “set toward the MESSAGE as such.” The “message” does not name a content so much as the words of which the message is composed; the “set toward the message” is thus a use of language that “promotes the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects” (Jakobson 1981, 25). By directing attention to the words of the message, as opposed to its “meaning,” poetic function implies the special quality of poetic language, although this quality is not restricted to poetry. Jakobson immediately attributes the quality of the poetic to many other uses of language, most famously the campaign slogan, “I like Ike.” The slide here from poem to advertising suggests that a concern with media was more than implicit in the structure of Jakobson’s model. The poetic function introduces a kind of melodious noise into the channel of communication, which heightens consciousness of the channel as such, and so distances the message from the “object” or referent. In the case of the

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<sup>13</sup> The essay was first delivered in 1958 and published in 1960. Claude E. Shannon published “The Mathematical Theory of Communication” in 1948. It was republished as a book, Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Shannon and Weaver 1963). Most of our current notions about the mechanics of communication can be found in Shannon’s work, including of course the analysis of the “channel.”

slogan cited, the pleasant concatenation of syllables allows us to admire the words without endorsing the candidate.

It would be hard to deny that the “set toward the message” effectively fuses contact and message; the same words constitute both the channel and the self-reflexive message. Jakobson is typically drawn to the phonemic manifestation of such self-reflexivity, but his preference for sound pattern allows him to overlook the mediation of poetic speech by writing as a channel of communication overlaying (or remediating) the medium of speech. Whatever Jakobson asserts with regard to the possibility of making the verbal channel “palpable,” the same is true of writing; and much poetry depends on that fact. Despite the emphasis on sound, Jakobson’s model of communication does not theoretically exclude levels of mediation, such as the mediation of speech by writing, the mediation of writing by print, and so on. At any of these levels, the medium can be disturbed or manipulated in such a way as to heighten its self-reflexivity, resulting either in noise or poetry. The semantic poverty of the phatic utterance is thus the converse of the semantic fullness of the poetic.

In other scenes of theory, the archaistic term *poetic* is replaced by *literariness*, or even *writing*. In all of these venues, the “referential” or representational function is interrupted by something that theory likes to say belongs essentially to *language*. But the language paradigm, to which Jakobson made so crucial a contribution and which still dominates the cultural disciplines, fails to grasp communication as an underlying problematic, and so loses the opportunity to see the poetic, the literary, or writing, as media. This thesis, unfortunately, can only be offered as an assertion, awaiting demonstration in some other context. It remains for us to consider in this essay some implications of the challenge posed to representation by the notion of mediation—if it is indeed the case that what was set aside by Aristotle millennia ago has now thrust itself into the foreground of culture.

<a>Mediation and Media</a>

The fact of media proliferation suffers from no lack of interest among scholars. As with much theory concerned with technological change, early efforts tend to be written in the

manner of prophecy, and worse, exhibit a tendency to ratify technological determinism.<sup>14</sup> A more sober reflection on the question of mediation will resist imputing determinism to the mere fact of a technical means. There is no question, however, that a process of mediation can be extrapolated from the operation of media, and that this extrapolation has deepened the theory of media and of society. The work of John B. Thompson can be cited in this context, specifically his mapping of the types of “mediated interaction” in modernity.<sup>15</sup> This work dovetails at a higher level with that of Anthony Giddens, Manuel Castells, and others working in the general fields of media and information theory. Granted the distinction of this work, it is a puzzling fact that the concept of mediation remains undertheorized, especially within the cultural disciplines.

*Williams.* In his invaluable account of the mediation concept, Raymond Williams observes that its emergence responded to uneasiness with the relegation of culture to mere “reflection” of the economic or political domains. I shall consider “reflection” in this context to be a version of the ancient topos of representation, in certain respects both simpler and more complex than classical mimesis (simpler because the metaphor of reflection reduces the cultural work to a passive role implied by the metaphor of reflection, more complex because the object of reflection is potentially the social totality). Williams argues that the “social and material character of artistic activity” was “suppressed” in reflection theory, and that “[i]t was at this point that the idea of reflection was challenged by the idea of mediation” (Williams 1977, 97). This account seems

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<sup>14</sup> One might mention Friedrich Kittler in this context, not because his work is by any conceivable measure naïve, but rather because he succeeds in grafting a sophisticated postmodernism onto the premise of technological determinism by way of a certain version of materialism shared by both.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson 1995. Thompson gives an account of three types of interaction, (1) face-to-face, (2) mediated interaction, and (3) mediated quasi-interaction. The second refers to interactions such as telephonic, mail, email etc. The third refers to more one-sided seeming interactions initiated by media forms that require no direct response to the maker of the content. These would include novels, most television and film, and many other forms of “entertainment,” high or low.

plausible, although it is difficult to pin names and dates to it. Although Williams credits mediation theory with a less “alienated” grasp of culture, he is reluctant in the end to see mediation as a successful remedy for the deficiency of the reflection concept, largely because mediation assumes “separate and preexistent areas or orders of reality, between which the mediating process occurs whether independently or as determined by their prior natures” (Williams 1977, 99). Putting the problem in this way, a mediation can be hard to distinguish from the kind of reflection critical theory likes to expose as ideological distortion. Indeed, representation has been easily incorporated into many versions of media theory in preference to mediation, in order more easily to sustain the project of ideology critique.<sup>16</sup> For Williams, if mediation cannot be shown to operate *positively* to draw social divisions together, as opposed to merely confirming their separation, then he is inclined to conclude that mediation “seems little more than a sophisticated notion of reflection.”

It is not too difficult to see what diminishes the usefulness of the mediation concept, even in the context of studying the “media.” It is always possible to collapse the mediations performed by the media back into representations, which become vulnerable at once to exposure as ideological distortions. This has been the perennial strategy of cultural critique, and its reassertion in recent years has in effect *set aside* mediation once again even as the study of media has intensified. But what is mediation anyway, if it is something more or other than a species of representation, as Williams feared? Let us refrain from the temptation to make this question disappear by resorting to the High Theoretical move of dropping down to the process of signification, conceived as the undoing of representation (or reference). Grasping the nature of mediation depends in my view rather on affirming the communicative function in social relations, that is, the *possibility* of communication. The indispensable condition of mediation is the

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<sup>16</sup> With the recession of High Theory, the concept of representation has come to dominate cultural analysis once again, and the challenge to representation by the concept of mediation may be said thus far to have failed. One might cite here the flagship journal of New Historicism, *Representations*, which symptomatically catapulted the concept of representation back to the top of theoretical argot.



interposition of *distance* (spatial or temporal) between the terminal poles of the communication process (these are persons but also now machines). This distancing is another way of looking at the operation of *transmission* (what Bacon called “tradition,” but meaning now something much more inclusive than he imagined). The notion of distance should not be mistaken, then, as an equivalent term for *absence*, or as a pole in the philosophical antinomy of presence and absence. Distance creates the possibility of media, which become desirable for themselves and not as the default substitute for an absent object. If this were not the case, we would not be able to explain the pleasure of reading novels, seeing films, or for that matter, accumulating money, the medium of exchange. This pleasure may have been produced at first as the byproduct of the sense of urgency driving the formation of media in response to the real differentiation and dispersion of social locations, but arguably this pleasure has become an end in itself, spurring the creation of new media where there is no compelling social necessity for their existence.

The introduction of the theme of pleasure at the end of this essay will perhaps seem surprising, but the point I am making can be confirmed fairly simply by noting that certain “mediated” interactions—e-mailing or text-messaging, for example—have come to seem preferable to face-to-face encounters (as in the notorious occurrence of e-mailing the coworker in the next room). These examples of mediated communication are far less grand than the grandest works of culture but operate on the same basis. At another level of abstraction, the question of culture as a “mediation” for the economic and political domains of society poses the same question. The tactical problem that emerges from the multiple levels and forms of *media* operating in the process of mediation is how to join the theory of mediation to the fact of media, without reduction of the former to the latter or displacement of the latter by the former. The more layers of mediation, the more tempting it is either to overleap them, to make links of a “representational” sort, or to attend only to those connected with *technical* media, as opposed to, say, genres or discourses that are just as much mediations as print or film. It has been difficult, that is, to grasp the fact of mediation in light of habitual turns to representation and without the help provided by the presence of a technical medium. As a result, the question of mediation and its relation to media remains to be resolved.