

Questioning (Deep) Mediatization: A Historical and Anthropological Critique

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The mediatization thesis maintains that media technologies, beginning with print, have profoundly changed human experience. One of its major claims is that media have allowed a new “disembedding,” or “distanciation,” from the here and now, in a process which now culminates as a so-called deep mediatization. Relying on cultural history and anthropology, this article questions this claim. It contends that mediatization theory is premised on a modern/naturalist, human-centered view of the world as a homogeneous physical nature, dominated by human beings who must resort to technologies to communicate at a distance. This outlook disregards ancient and/or peripheral non-Western ontologies, and cultural practices such as correspondence, theater, religion, and human language itself, which have long enabled rich forms of distanciation. Such neglected ontologies and practices now combine with modern technology, and could be fruitfully incorporated into mediatization research, both historical and contemporary.

Keywords: presence, distanciation, longue durée, ontology, cultural history, anthropological history

The concept of mediatization has gained much sway in media studies (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Hepp & Krotz, 2014; Lundby, 2014). At issue is a process of change in human societies brought about by the increasingly variegated and entangled roles of communication technologies in our daily lives. In the digital age, this process is thought to have reached a new stage that Couldry and Hepp (2017) called *deep mediatization* (p. 7).

This article questions the historical and anthropological analysis that undergirds the study of mediatization. In communication studies, we often face radical claims concerning the newness of the present, while the past is rarely given serious consideration, and mostly in an implicit manner (Pickering, 2015). In the case of mediatization, a homogeneous past is characterized negatively as either non- or less mediatized, a past in which people communicated with one another at a distance, but ineffectually on

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account of slow and poor communication tools. By contrast with a non or less-mediatized past prioritizing face-to-face interaction, humans are supposed to conduct much of their present, digitized life, through media and thereby detach themselves from their immediate surroundings, a separation which involve three interrelated domains, according to Hepp (2020): time, space, and context. Furthermore, in times of deep mediatization, various media are becoming more and more intertwined. In much contemporary media research, such a major change is regarded as almost self-evident, under various monikers, besides deep mediatization—for example, *intensive media* (Lash, 2007), *pervasive media* (Coleman, 2011), or *polymedia* (Madianou & Miller, 2013).

Diachronic research on mediatization is mainly limited to the 20th century, starting with the advent of electronic media. After surveying several leading journals, Deacon and Stanyer (2014) conclude that “much mediatization research depends on a presumption rather than a demonstration of historical change, projecting backwards from contemporary case studies rather than carefully designed temporal comparisons” (p. 1038). Major works on mediatization since published (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020; Hepp & Krotz, 2014; Lundby, 2014) confirmed the accuracy of this observation.

Our critique of the above-described historical perspective underlying the mediatization thesis is set out in three stages. First, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the (deep) mediatization thesis and its historical implications. In this connection, we identify the supposed inceptions of mediatization and deep mediatization and the associated chronological framework. Second, we challenge this framework, resorting to various approaches, “cultural techniques,” cultural and art history, and finally, anthropology: This helps us to question the key opposition between direct/nonmediatized interactions and mediatized experiences. We contend that such a view is linked to a modern ontology born in the West, and cannot be generalized to all cultures: Human collectives have experienced presence and absence in a plurality of ways and through various practices other than communication technologies. We conceive of mediatization as just one way of distancing ourselves from the here and now, or what we term here, following Giddens (1990) “time-space distancing” (p. 14). Third, we discuss practices that media history ignores or mention only in passing: theater, correspondence, transportation, religion (in a broad sense), visual representations (before photography) and language. We show that, during different historical periods, long before the rise of electronic media, and across different geographic locations, all these practices “mediatized” human agents, and that they continue to do so, often combining with communication technologies.

The Notion of (Deep) Mediatization

Some studies have provided a comprehensive review of the various meanings of mediatization (e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2013; Livingstone, 2009; Lundby, 2014). Couldry and Hepp (2013) identified two traditions of mediatization research. The institutional approach focuses on the rise of specialized institutions (Hjarvard, 2005) that resort to media technologies to impose their power (or *logic*; Altheide & Snow, 1979) on other aspects of society. This approach which emphasizes, inter alia, a new power gained through harvesting and exploiting personal data at a distance (Hepp, 2020), is not at the center of our discussion. We focus on the second, social-constructivist perspective, which is based on the experience of media users. This view is crucial to the premise of the deep mediatization thesis concerning “an experience *everybody is acquainted with in his or her everyday life*” whereby “technological

communication media saturate more and more social domains which are drastically transformed at the same time" (emphasis added; Hepp, 2020, p. 3). In general, increased "time-space distanciation" (Hjarvard, 2014, p. 210) is considered as a major trait in the history of mediatization.

Histories of mediatization rely, either implicitly or—more rarely—explicitly, on a periodization in terms of stages of mediatization growth. What mediatization researchers share is the idea that humans moved from face-to-face (i.e., "direct") to mediated communication, starting with the book, and increasingly ever since. Even the theorist (Krotz, 2007) who proposes the broadest view of mediatization as a "major historical meta-process" suggests that humankind started from face-to-face communication, then moved to "mediated interpersonal" communication (the letter, but mainly the phone and email), then "communication with media" (printed book, television), and finally "interactive communication" through computers systems (p. 259).

The most developed periodization is advanced by Couldry and Hepp (2017, chapter 3), with reference to Giddens' (1990) classic book on modernity; as the starting point of modernity/mediatization, these authors, like Giddens, consider the printing press, on the grounds that the variety of print material enabled people to first disembody in a significant way from the here and now. Giddens' approach is seconded by other media theorists, such as Thompson (1995). The emphasis on the printing press reflects the consensus among media historians, most of whom also adopt a parallel between the printing press and digitization. Indeed, a comparison between both technologies, often dubbed revolutions, has become a cliché (Bourdon, 2018).

Periodizing Mediatization

Let us accept Couldry and Hepp's (2017) historical rationale:

To understand mediatization, we must understand it is a process of the increasing deepening of technology-based interdependence. . . . Underlying these changes has been a deeper change, that media's degree of technical interrelatedness has considerably increased from mechanization to electrification, and then again from electrification to digitalization. (pp. 53–54)

Thus, these authors present history as a succession of increasingly forceful mediatization waves: mechanization (primarily the printing press), electrification (including the telegraph, broadcasting, the telephone), digitization, and finally datafication (the Internet). We do agree that such a conception in terms of waves is preferable to the still prevalent view of media history as a series of revolutions centered *on a single medium*. However, the new account is akin to its predecessors in conceptualizing the process as consecution, even if major technologies are supplanted with well-delimited mediatization waves. By projecting a growing energy and a vectorization of time, the metaphor of the wave still suggests that the power of media can be described as a linear progression. True, theorists of deep mediatization do describe this process as "by no means homogeneous or linear," asserting that "it is highly complicated, contradictory and . . . conflict-driven" (Hepp, Hasebrink, and Breiter, 2018, pp. 17–18). This complexity is predicated only of the present: From a historical point of view, linearity still rules.

Momentous as the invention of the printing press may have been, it has only a cameo appearance in the primarily contemporary plot, which propels us directly into the late 19th century. To quote Hepp and colleagues (2018), "The embedding of technologically based means of communication in the practices of everyday life is a long-term process that deepened dramatically over the past 150 years. This is what we mean by mediatization" (p. 134). Meyen (2009), as cited in Marian (2011), likewise considers the mass press of the second half of the 19th century as the first truly mediatizing technology; the apex of mediatization still taking place in the late digital age. Couldry and Hepp (2013) regard as self-evident the "*brute fact* [emphasis added] of media's growing role in everyday lives in so many developed countries by the mid-2000s" (p. 192). Undoubtedly, such facts can be easily objectified and measured. However, to cite "brute facts" in that manner is tantamount to drawing a clear-cut, albeit implicit, comparison between present and past. Insofar as we are discussing "growth," we must be able to provide comparisons over time: What has grown and when? Relative to what previous situation? For which social agents? And, most importantly, what do we mean by growth? Below, we propose an alternative, broader, comparative approach in the *longue durée*, anchored to a pluralist, anthropological analysis of human worldviews. The French historian Fernand Braudel (1960) has reconceptualized his notion of *longue durée* several times. Suffice it here to insist that we use it as an antidote to the short-termism of most media histories we insisted on (see also Balbi & Magaouda, 2018). *Longue durée* is not about reminding us of the printing press, but about taking into account very long-term changes in the way humans connect with the world, considering history since the invention of writing and even before, and across civilization. As was Braudel's intention, history here is not a backdrop to social sciences. The true acceptance of *longue durée* means a deep change in the way we consider modern societies, and affect the whole of social sciences.

Theorizing Mediatization as Distanciation

This article critiques the definition of mediatization as the rise of a new sense of *distanciation* afforded by technologies. Distanciation is a crucial notion that requires clarification. Professing to follow Giddens (1990), Couldry and Hepp (2017) contend that printing was the first technology which allowed humans to disembed "from the here and now" (p. 43). Yet Giddens' (1990) notion of disembedding is different. He distinguishes three great dynamic forces of modernity. The first is distanciation, defined as "the separation of time and space," which "tear[s] space away from place by *fostering relations between 'absent' others*" (emphasis added; Giddens, 1990, p. 18), and which was first afforded by the printing press. The second force is disembedding, "the lifting out of social relations from local contexts of interaction and their restructuring across indefinite spans of time-space," fostered mainly by "the creation of symbolic tokens, and the establishment of expert systems" (p. 21). The third force is "the reflexive appropriation of knowledge" (p. 53). When they use the term "disembed," Couldry and Hepp (2017) refer to what Giddens calls *distanciation*, as defined above. Media, on this view, are supposed to connect their users to absent people and places, disconnecting them from the here and now. By contrast, the premodern, media-less world is presumed to be experienced as the here and now: the immediate physical surroundings of human agents.

This approach gives rise to substantive theoretical difficulties: Social theory has long endeavored to define the "here and now," the directly experienced social reality, as opposed to contact with faraway places, people and moments. Such attempts have been strongly influenced by phenomenology, especially in the wake of Berger and Luckmann's (1966/1991) classic book. These authors refer to the contrast, posited

by Schütz (1932/1967), between two kinds of worlds: The proximate world of our “consociates” (those with whom we regularly have contact in daily life), of our “*directly experienced social reality*” (emphasis ours; p. 27) on the one hand, and the remote world of our “contemporaries” with which we have contact only on rare occasions, on the other.

Within the mediatization thesis, the above contrast between two forms of experience also becomes a temporal contrast between two periods of history: on the one hand, the premedia (and premodern) world of human communities in which social life was centered on the here and now—face-to-face relations with family and neighbors; on the other, the media world in which people are able to connect at a distance, first with books, then with newspapers, radio, telephone, TV; and finally by immersion in the digital realm.

Two major questions remain unanswered. First, how do we size up the experience of distancing? Today, people are indeed more connected to technologies—this is a measurable fact. However, the sense of being “transported,” of rapture, of being taken far away, whether we attribute it to technologies or to nontechnological cultural practices, should be considered within different historical and anthropological contexts. With the rise of new technologies, old technologies are usually naturalized and seem to lose their (mediatizing) power (Bourdon, 2018). But the idea that we are somehow more mediatized by virtue of scanning email, SMSs or WhatsApp chats than by reading letters derives from a conflation of two essentially distinct elements: technological capabilities as such and users’ experience of technologies.

This leads to a second question regarding mediatization research: Why the focus on media technologies as the most efficacious (if not the only) “distancer”? Indeed, practices existed long before the rise of the mass-oriented press or even the printing press as such through which human agents experienced (and reported) a sense of not being in the here and now, of not being with their immediate consociates, of making contact with others (and not only human others), a contact they experienced no less vividly/directly than their immediate physical surroundings. Or, to put it more bluntly: What about ghosts, gods, spirits, revenants? All these considerations inform our critique of assumptions underlying the modernist worldview of communication theorists, who concur with Giddens that notions regarding presence (and absence) relate only to the physical world of live human beings and faraway places, which we know to exist in “the real world out there” and which we can contact through technological mediation. However, such a conception of presence is on no account universal, in that it describes a world primarily as a material environment which is measured (and mastered) by science and technology, a world in which human beings are endowed with a unique interiority, a powerful, self-reflexive mind, and form significant relations mostly with other humans. But, as Mantoni and Riva (1999) pointed out, different ontologies generate different criteria for evaluating presence mediated by technologies. Let us explore this point in greater depth.

Reframing Media Theory in History

In this section, we first discuss the affinities between our argument and the strain of media theory that can help us overcome the limitations of the mediatization thesis better than mainstream media history: the German debate on “cultural techniques.” Second, we discuss the work of various cultural historians who, notwithstanding their Western background and leanings, have contributed rich insights about forgotten or neglected cultural practices that, from long time, have provided connections with far-away entities, beyond

the here and now. Third, to go beyond the modern, Western perspective on the here and now and the related notions of presence and absence, we resort to the pluralist anthropology that posits alternative worldviews (or “ontologies”; Descola, 2013; Lloyd, 2015; Viveiros de Castro, 1992), born outside and/or before the modern West.

Theoretical Affinities: Cultural Techniques

The cultural-techniques approach of German media theory expands media history to other practices and technologies, thus reframing questions posed by media researchers. Like us, albeit from a different perspective, its proponents question the “uniqueness” of media technologies, on the grounds that

the materiality and technicity so obviously on display in modern media technologies is now recognized to already have permeated their allegedly untechnical, more “natural” predecessors—including the so-called elementary cultural techniques like writing, drawing and counting. Cultural techniques reveal that there never was a document of culture that was not also one of technology. (Winthrop-Young, 2013, p. 6).

Even the human body is not exempt from this generalization, but is conceived of as “an inscription surface” on a par with “any other storage medium, including the human mind” (Winthrop-Young, 2013, p. 10). The role of the body as a mediator had been demonstrated earlier, in a seminal article by Mauss (1934/1992), one of the founding fathers of anthropology.

To support our thesis about the complex history of distanciation practices, we will give numerous examples of nonmedia technologies (like Siegert, 2015). Going beyond the preoccupation of media archeology (Parikka, 2012) with forgotten material machines and artefacts, we discuss practices such as ancient theater, ritual ceremonies, or language, which may or may not involve material elements. What interests us is the sense of presence transcending the here and now that such practices afford, as well as their connection with a certain outlook on the world. Crucially, we speak of *practices* rather than *technologies*. Following Siegert (2015), we question the strict separation between culture and technology that is at the heart of mediatization theory, with its focus on technology at the expense of other aspects of human experience. In other words, we extend our discussion of distanciation beyond the boundaries of the modern, naturalist rationality, and show how practices which we may have too readily dismissed as exotic are still relevant in the contemporary, deeply mediatized world. To misquote Latour (1993), we have never been as modern as we believed ourselves to be: We will demonstrate this with a wide range of examples.

In reaffirming the power of forgotten or neglected practices, we also cast doubt on the linearity and teleology inherent in the technological narrative espoused by most media histories, including the mediatization thesis. Instead, we show that the development of communication technologies, from simple to complex, from slow to fast, does not follow a linear trajectory. In this, our approach dovetails with the views expressed by scholars of cultural techniques and media archeology, but also by those historians and theorists of technology who have taken into serious consideration the history of forgotten successes and failures, thus destabilizing any notion that would ascribe more power to contemporary technologies than to other distanciation practices (e.g., Gitelman & Pingree, 2003). Today, the frequent frustration occasioned

by Internet delays and buffering (Alexander, 2017) amply shows how people can shift continually from the rapid and successful distanciation to the disappointing experience of holding in their hands a useless or problematic tool; for example, when the cellphone dies or there is a power cut. Such frustrations with the power of technologies have a long history (Bourdon, 2020). In the past, a letter might not arrive due to disruptions in the postal service. Similarly, transcendental experiences, be it a religious revelation, trance or pilgrimage, were not invariably profound or transformative, and could disappoint deeply. Cultural history offers a rich panorama of both past and current nonmedia practices that can be at least as powerful, but sometimes just as fragile, as media technologies.

Cultural and Art History

We contend that a comprehensive analysis of mediatization as a sense of distanciation from the here and now requires a historical framework that is much broader than one centered primarily on media technology. While some cultural historians have incorporated media as part of their inquiry, most media historians continue to treat the object of their study in isolation, largely in consideration of its technological dimension. The numerous variants of cultural history discussed in what follows all assign an important place to practices that are rarely, if at all, given voice in media theory and history; they are not linked to major discoveries, but to more incremental changes, such as division of labor and better transportation for the postal system (Behringer, 2006). Yet such practices, including very ancient ones, all have the potential to provide the experience of distanciation. To understand the historical and geographic variety and heterogeneity of different cultures, we opt for a cultural history combined with anthropology (Burke, 2004). Moreover, to avoid anachronism, we rely as much as possible on the perceptions of cultural phenomena by the actors themselves, based on their accounts, rather than on objectifying and measuring these developments using tools of modern science.

Among media histories, we give preference to the ones written by (or in cooperation with) cultural historians, who—as the object of their inquiry demands—take a broad view on media. For example, Burke and Briggs (2005) are among the few who discuss transportation and its transformative power. Only on rare occasions historical theorizations of communication deal with transportation (e.g., Murdock & Pickering, 2008, concerning the so-called death of distance, in the early 20th century; Balbi & Moraglio, 2016). Even less frequent in media history accounts are discussions on theater, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Cullen, 2013). Berger and Luckmann (1966/1991), for one, address theater theoretically, as an experience that once had the power to remove people from their immediate surroundings and “transport” them to another world, an observation that is relevant to mediatization. Another practice we include in our analysis is correspondence. To the best of our knowledge, only one theorist of mediatization mentions the letter, and only in passing (Krotz, 2007). Epistolary exchanges have been traditionally analyzed through literary approaches, but historians have also extensively studied popular correspondence, for example, in the United States (Henkin, 2006), France (Chartier, 1991), Medieval China (Richter, 2013) and the Antiquity (Cecarrelli, 2013). In historical inquiry, research on correspondence is also incorporated into the history of private life, a growing field, especially in the wake of the eponymous, foundational work by Ariès and Duby (1987).

Among other areas crucial to the work of cultural historians who use anthropological tools, we consider religion—not as an institution, but as daily, ordinary practices of humans who lived in an

environment rich with devotional material and images; here, we appeal again to *A History of Private Life* by Ariès and Duby (1987). Contemporary anthropologists of religion—the latter term understood *lato sensu* in line with Max Weber (1920/1993)—have explored the rich fabric of daily religious and magical practices in various cultural contexts (e.g., Fabian, 1998). Historians of visual, mostly religious representations have offered a new perspective on premodern (Western) images and artefacts. Focusing on sacred images during an era when most such representations were of a religious nature, before the emergence of the concept of art for art's sake, Belting (1994) writes:

We are so deeply influenced by the 'era of art' that we find it hard to imagine the era of images. Art history therefore simply declared everything to be art in order to bring everything within its domain, thereby effacing the very difference that might have thrown light on our subject. (p. 6).

The analysis proffered by Belting and historians who follow a similar approach focuses on Western images representing human figures. Such discussions do not take into account anthropological work that details the powerful effect of icons with nonhuman traits which do not seek to convey physical resemblance to any entity. We discuss these issues below, in the context of anthropological theory.

Anthropology and Ontologies of Presence

At this point, it is necessary to clarify some of the terms pivotal to our discussion. From now on, we will replace the designation "Western," which conflates a geographical area with a certain worldview, with "naturalist." The latter term is used by anthropologist Philippe Descola to refer to a Cartesian, human-centered view of the world, born in the European classical age, but now globalized. Furthermore, we will not talk of worldviews but of ontologies; not of different perspectives on the supposedly same reality, but of radically different experiences of the lived world. The very assumption that objective reality exists is tantamount to giving priority to the modern, naturalist ontology, and consequently would take us back to square one of mediatization theory. Our premise, in this regard, is that humans switch (and combine) different ontologies, allowing for varied and mutually contradictory perceptions concerning the presence and absence of "what is out there."

In foregrounding a plurality of ontologies, we also depart from the materialism that underlies Couldry and Hepp's (2017) approach, and that accounts for the emphasis media theory generally puts on technological artefacts. If an entire collectivity saw or sees spirits on a screen, or inside a wooden object, or in the wind, we must accord such perceptions full epistemic dignity, and accept them as these people's experience of the world.

To make systematic sense of various ontologies, we follow Descola (2013), who, in turn, walked in the steps of Viveiros de Castro (1992). Their point of departure is the dominant, modernist ontology, which Descola calls "naturalist," and within which presence is experienced in the coordinates of a homogeneous, continuous, measurable physical world. Within such an ontology, humans are endowed with a distinctive interiority (be it called mind, spirit, or soul) that makes them radically different from the surrounding nature.

To begin with, Descola contrasts naturalism with animism. In animism, humans project their own characteristics onto nature: Nonhuman entities (animals, plants, possibly natural sites) are endowed with an interiority (i.e., ascribed intentionality and relations with their fellow species) similar to that of humans. On the other hand, humans see other collectives (plants, animals) as physically different. The third type is the totemist ontology, best exemplified by the world of Aboriginal Australians, in which “tribes” (consisting of humans and nonhumans grouped together) are reassembled according to specific traits of various totems (i.e., entities that inhabited the world in a long-forgotten mythical time), which have shaped the world according to the distribution of these traits. The fourth is the analogist ontology, whereby each human group has to confront a world of entities separated by both different interiorities and different physical appearances. Such an ontology has to find ways to recompose a staggeringly diverse world and accommodate different creatures that inhabit it; in part, this is accomplished through embracing wide-ranging cosmologies, while constantly looking for correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm.

In proposing the above typology, however tentative, our purpose is to set the dominant modern, naturalist perspective in a broader context and divest it of exclusivity. To understand distanciation cross-culturally and in the *longue durée* of human history at large, we need to repeople the world, reinstating the various entities with whom (which?) different human collectives (whether we call them tribes, peoples, or cultures) have, throughout centuries, formed diverse and enduring connections. Such ontologies are entitled to a place in empirical analyses, including of contemporary mediatization; they can dissolve, reemerge and combine with one another. Crucially, such a pluralist model of ontologies makes it possible to reconsider the divide between presence and absence, and between “contemporaries” and “consociates” (Schütz, 1932/1967, as cited in Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 27) that undergirds mediatization theory. An examination of specific practices will demonstrate this point more clearly.

Distanciation at Large, or Mediatization Without Modern Media

The rest of this article is, if you will, a discussion of ghosts. We will focus on key examples of past and present cultural practices which may “serve” various ontologies. We will show that such practices, in their own right, wield a considerable distancing power.

Theater

In the West of today, theater can be regarded as an elitist practice, designed for educated and cultured audiences well versed in the literary tradition. Soberly clad, decorous spectators keep a respectful silence during the performance, and afterward, in lowered tones, comment on the merits of this or that actor or the director. Such a setup, however, is very recent. For centuries, theater was the source of enjoyment and entertainment for wide, popular audiences. Spectators responded passionately, and sometimes violently inserted themselves in the play and expressed their opinions without mincing words.

The most researched period of theater is probably early modern England. The involvement of audiences in the play at that time has been much commented on. Pollard (2005) pointed out that both critics and supporters of theater, as well as the playwrights themselves, used to describe its effects on audiences in pharmacological terms: as a physical effect of drugs. This linguistic fact, she contends, attests to a model

of theater radically different from the one we know today: plays held considerable sway over spectators' minds and bodies. Such an involvement of popular audiences in theatrical performances has also be traced back to the American 19th century (Butsch, 2000).

Before the early modern period, theater had a remarkable hold over audiences. In the West, early Greek theater connected spectators with mythical creatures, heroes and deities. Nehamas (1988) aptly compared Plato's condemnation of the theater with the 20th-century condemnation of mass media; for Plato, at issue was the power of theater on audiences, who confused it with reality; and essentially the same debate preoccupies media historians today. Lexicon may mislead us here. The word "theater" derives from Greek and strongly connotes with ancient Greece, where both the meaning and the use of this art form were categorically different than in our contemporary experience.

It is in relation to ancient Greece that, in the late 19th century, a debate arose about the origins of theater in the ritual (Rozik, 2002). Regardless of the side they take in this controversy, scholars generally concur that the gradual secularization of theater in the modern period followed many centuries in which performances involved characters that were meant to embody spirits in the literal sense. In rituals, the major performers did not "act" but were driven by spirits within them. Anthropology refers to such performers by the term "shaman," a term borrowed from a Siberian language. Contemporary theater, where actors impersonate characters but are always seen as play-acting, and where audiences are for the most part passive spectators, may be analyzed as a diluted, less potent version of such practices.

Correspondence

By its very nature, correspondence is salient to the experience of distanciation. Literary theorists have discussed its power in terms of the presence of absents, relying on epistolary exchanges, especially in the Romantic era (Hewitt, 2000). However, from its very inception, the epistolary was treated as a unique form of conversation at a distance. Early practitioners of correspondence were communication theorists in their own right: They were the first to reflect on the paradox of the absent–present inherent in this technological development, discussing, for example, the power of the letter with reference to the Greek notion of *parousia* (παρουσία—Ancient Greek: *presence*).

Correspondents overcame absence using (verbal) self-portraits or by transmitting actual portraits and indexical signs, including handwriting itself, as a trace of bodily presence (Bourdon, 2020). Letter writers metaphorized correspondence as a means of transportation to get away from the place where they wrote the letter—whence they "traveled" or "flew" (metaphors attested already in Antiquity) to their dear ones, and ultimately touched their bodies (through indexical signs on the paper). People geographically remote from each other could engage in mediatized interaction; literate people, especially, frequently wrote to each other on a daily basis, sometimes for hours. In the 16th century, Venetian merchant Matteo Merlini wrote about the growth of correspondence: "*Avemo tanto pien la testa di zanze che non so dirte, semo tutti stanchi* [Our heads are so full of waste that I just don't know how to tell you. We are all exhausted]" (Rospocher, 2018, p. 16). It goes without saying that, until the rise of mass literacy (Vincent, 2000) and extensive postal systems in the 19th century, this form of mediatization was reserved for a minority of the population. But we should not simplify the disparities between the small elites of the past and the literate masses of

modernity that comprise men and women in equal numbers. For example, in the ancient Greek world, the rate of literacy in cities extended beyond that of elites, while public writers were used by the nonliterate (Cecarrelli, 2013).

As in the case of theater, the continuance of correspondence as a mode of communication—involving a text written in the first person and transported to a specific address—should not make us blind to its historically diverse uses, within different ontologies. While clearly palpable already in Antiquity, the emphasis on the power of letter writing to bridge physical distance between specific individuals became central to correspondence only in the recent past, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when it was discussed in a quasimystical manner. Within a modernist ontology which put the unique humans as central actors in a material, homogeneous physical world, correspondence became a major technology of presence among humans (Milne, 2010). Earlier, in the Western Antiquity and Middle Ages, the use of correspondence was related also to other ontologies: Letters could make present various nonhuman entities such as deities, gods, and saints. Veyne (1987) wrote that “private correspondence of the late Roman Empire was awash with references to the Gods and their role in human life” (p. 197). In the Middle Ages, letters from the Virgin Mary and from Satan were in circulation (Boureau, 1991).

Transportation

We are not concerned here with transportation as physical conveyance, but rather focus on the phenomenological experience of being transported to a faraway world, fantasized and imagined but only rarely accessed. For example, Siegert’s (2015) analysis of seafaring across cultures details the “numberless and terrible wonders” (p. 69; Siegert quotes from Sophocles’ *Antigone*) that were associated with the experience of the sea. Siegert studies this experience from Antiquity to the 20th century, notably referring to the Trobriand people, Malinowski’s (1961) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*.

The phenomenological experience of speed must be analyzed in historical context, rather than using objective, measurable parameters. Before the ravishment and fear felt by early train passengers (Schivelbusch, 1977/2014), the progress of the horse-drawn coach used to evoke an unsurpassed sense of excitement, a combination of fear and pleasure: De Quincey’s ode to the English mail coach is a famed example. Let us note that the use of modern transportation, especially airplanes, is often fraught with similar emotions.

The Religious Experience

Just like theater, religion is a Western term which has been applied to numerous beliefs in deities not belonging to the material world. This definition has meaning only in the naturalist ontology, where religion is appended to a physical realm at whose center stand humans, not the gods. We are not concerned here with religion as a canon of texts and a set of well-regulated traditions and institutions. We embrace Weber’s (1920/1993) anthropological definition of religion as the belief in spirits, nonmaterial entities of all sorts that inhabit material entities, especially images, but also human beings. The contact with such spirits provides a sense of distanciation, which can be “routinized” in daily life, but may also trigger a strong sensation of “transport” (the metaphor comes from medieval Latin). The latter kind of experience affords the possibility of perceived contact with the divine—for example, through a powerful sermon or religious

speech (Pleizier, 2010) or receiving a message from the afterlife—and is thus akin to, and from a certain point of time overlapping with, the effects of media, as has been shown by important work on electronic media starting from the telegraph (Peters, 1999; Sconce, 2000).

The preceding examples are drawn from the experience of Westerners in the naturalist world, where various extreme forms of religious fervor, such as possession, seizures or trance, still provide a sense of extreme transport, although established religions deemphasize these states and modern rationality tends to medicalize them as abnormal (Lewis, 1971/2002). Such experiences were (and still are, in some cases) much more widespread and foregrounded in nonnaturalist ontologies. For example, in the animist ontology (Descola, 2013; Viveiros de Castro, 1992), souls and bodies are easily separated, and one can never be sure that the physical form one perceives contains the person one assumes to be interacting with; an animal can “inhabit” another animal or a plant, and a human can be present in an animal. Expert priests or shamans mediate between the physical world and the realm of spirits. An analogous phenomenon is attested, in the West by the history of the “medium” as a human endowed with a capacity to connect with the dead (Sconce, 2000). In the animist ontology, the borders between the naturalist-physical notions of presence and absence are blurred: The presence of invisible entities is perceived in nonhuman and human bodies alike.

Sacred Images

In connection to beliefs in nonhuman entities that people the world, we would like to focus on visual representations. We must first stress that, with the advent of print, media technologies gave rise to a new sense of distancing (mediatization) precisely at the historical juncture when the image, which “formerly had been assigned a special reality and taken literally as a visible manifestation of the sacred person, became subject to the general laws of nature, including optics, and so aligned wholly to the realm of sense perception” (Belting, 1994, p. 471). Friedberg (1989) likewise analyzes the powerful emotions once generated by visual representations, and proceeds to show that this effect has not been entirely lost in the modern media culture, using as an example recent forms of iconoclasm.

While Belting (1994) and Friedberg (1989), and their followers, focus on Western images resembling humans or humanized gods, we extend the scope of the discussion to other representations, mostly beyond the West (Descola, 2011). From the early stages of this science, “the worship of images, or aniconic indexes of divine presence, such as stones, springs, and threes, has preoccupied anthropologists” (Gell, 1998, p. 167), who came from the Western world, which foregrounded likeness.

A telling example of a nonmodernist conception of distancing are totemist images of Aboriginal Australians (Morphy, 1998). In the totemist ontology of these people, each Aborigine is linked to a specific ancestral figure (the totem), in a quasimythical period that anthropologists call the “dreaming” or the “dreamtime” (Descola, 2013, p. 147). Moreover, together with a whole collective of humans and nonhumans, each Aborigine shares the characteristics of such a figure. A key role in this conceptual framework is relegated to images, as the Aborigines render these figures present by reproducing their travels and accomplishments in the dreamtime using various materials: drawings in the sand, string arrangements, body paintings, or representations on tree bark. Most of us have seen Aboriginal images in art galleries, displayed side by side with other paintings or artefacts, but in actuality, they embody ancestral presence, preserved and reinstated.

Language

At the center of some religious experiences (especially the speech of powerful clerics) stands human language. Let us start with a major object of contemporary cultural history, the practice of conversation. Berger and Luckmann (1966/1991) treat this form of interaction as “the most important vehicle of reality maintenance” (p. 172). Schütz (1932/1967) considers it as typically linked to the here and now, in contrast with connecting to a larger world via telephone, correspondence and messages exchanged through a third party. Conversation is, first and foremost, human language—which, as Berger and Luckmann (1966/1991) remind us, “has its origins in the face-to-face situation, but can be readily detached from it The detachment of language lies much more basically in its capacity to communicate meanings that are not direct expressions of subjectivity ‘here and now’” (p. 52).

Crucially, spoken language has the power to invoke far-away situations and people, as well as nonhuman creatures, in all sorts of circumstances. One may plausibly object that spoken language has always (or at least until the era of the telegraph) been embedded in the direct, face-to-face setting; however, such ontological prioritizing of direct interaction is a recent phenomenon in the long-term history. From the outset, language was an essential vehicle for transporting people away from daily life. Building on Berger and Lukman, linguist Daniel Dor (2015) proposed a view of language as a technology of communication, a tool for instructing the imagination of others about the speaker’s inner experiences. Even in a world like ours, where language is no longer central to rituals, ceremonies, and other practices transporting one into the world of deities and nonhuman creatures in general, language remains the most powerful technology for carrying people away from their immediate environment—as is the case when one relays experiences (either imaginary or real, but we have seen how thin the distinction is) unrelated to the situation at hand.

Conclusion

In the *longue durée*, and in relation to nonmodern/non-Western contexts and ontologies, we have analyzed the experience of distanciation afforded by various cultural practices, either nonmediated or only remotely reminiscent of contemporary media. This has led us to reconceptualize mediatization as a specific form of technology-based distanciation defined within the confines of the naturalist ontology, born in the early modern Western world. As the world came to be seen as a homogenous material nature encompassing human beings endowed with a distinct interiority, people’s sense of the here and now changed as well, and they increasingly turned to dedicated technologies in search of a new form of connection with distant places and their dwellers. Concomitantly, not only images (Belting, 1994), but drama, rituals, prayers, ceremonies, and other performative acts and practices were losing some of their communicative power. It fell on technology to reenchant the world (Gell, 1992).

By rarefying global history to a Western, naturalist, technological narrative, mediatization theorists attribute excessive power to communication technologies and underestimate human cultural practices of the past, some of which have endured to this day. Like many sociologists of modernity, they fall into the trap of presentism (for a classic critique, see Fischer, 1970). Distanciation, which mediatization theory claims to be a product of modern technology and therefore a new phenomenon, readily lends itself to an analysis

as a continuation of ancient, varied practices, many of which are still alive today. Ultimately, the view professing the originality of the distancing process is problematic because it ignores the historical and anthropological complexities inherent in the various definitions of presence and absence derived from non-Western ontologies.

Media scholars, and especially media historians, should not only heed the appeal for non-media-centric media research (e.g., Morley, 2008), which Hepp (2020) also calls for, but collaborate in comparative studies with anthropologists and cultural historians. Such a shift will also enrich our contemporary perspective and reconcile it with our own perceptions, as we still experience distancing by means of numerous old media, or for that matter, cultural practices that cannot all be described as media without overstressing the meaning of this term: conversations, live performances, religious ceremonies, transportation, and more.

At least three directions of research can help us to relativize the assumption of the deep mediatization theory regarding a recent radical increase in technologically-enabled distancing powers. First, diachronically, we can follow a certain practice throughout history and trace its changes in the attendant distancing affordances across different epochs and societies. For example, in the 17th and 18th centuries, heavy letter writers described an arcane experience—namely, that the deep network of correspondence and publications had given birth to some almost independent images of their own selves (Bourdon, 2020; Siegert, 1999). Those “paper doubles,” which their authors could no longer control, could be analyzed as predecessors of our own “digital doubles” (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000; Hepp, 2020) circulating today in cyberspace: Here we pinpoint similarities (we leave traces which escape us), and differences (through machine learning, these doubles are “reassembled” in new ways) between ancient and modern experiences and technologies.

Second, synchronically, we can take as a starting point a given contemporary culture; then, with reference to its historical baggage, we can examine how nonnaturalist ontologies of presence and absence percolate to modern media. Contemporary Japanese culture, much commented on as hypermodern and deeply permeated with technologies, has been analyzed in terms of *techno-animism* (Jensen & Blok, 2013): Old spirits inhabit new machines. In a similar rationale, Reeves and Nass’s (1996) seminal thesis on the way humans treat their media (including TV channels, computers, computer programs) as humans could be reframed as a combination of naturalist and animist ontologies.

Third—and salient for contemporary research on mediatization—we can analyze how contemporary technologies of communication do not only “cannibalize” all domains of social life but also come under the sway of ancient practices rooted in nonnaturalist ontologies. Thus, in her examination of contemporary ceremonies in Ghana, an anthropologist of religion (Meyer, 2004) showed how media and religion transform each other. Meyer’s analysis appeals to mediatization theory, but from her own, distinct perspective. Media technologies do not only combine with each other (as the deep mediatization thesis rightly insists), but also with “old” distancing practices, giving rise to numerous complexities which can much enrich the analysis of mediatization, North and South, past and present.

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