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ARTICLE

NODE: "THE MATTER WITH MEDIA"

Undermining Media

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Abstract

A distinction between the terms medium and media, as can be found in the work of Marshall McLuhan, is taken as the starting point for developing a materialist theory of media. Media, as 'cultural techniques', are understood to be undermined by the material contingencies of the medium which constitutes an indifferent channel for symbolic content. This process of undermining reveals something of the medium itself as an affective and influential matter. The affective potential and occasional surfacing of the medium as material substrate is explored through the work of three artists: Will Schrimshaw, Martin Howse and Jonathan Kemp.

Keywords

materialism, media, art, matter, McLuhan, pure information

*La debilitación de los medios***Resumen**

La distinción entre los términos medium y media que propone la obra de Marshall McLuhan se toma como punto de partida para desarrollar una teoría materialista de los medios. Se considera que los medios son «técnicas culturales» debilitadas por las contingencias materiales del médium, que constituye un canal indiferente para el contenido simbólico. Este proceso de debilitamiento revela que el medium es una materia afectiva e influyente. El potencial afectivo y el resurgimiento ocasional del medium como sustrato material se explora en la obra de tres artistas: Will Schrimshaw, Martin Howse y Jonathan Kemp.

Palabras clave*materialismo, medios, arte, materia, McLuhan, información pura*

1. Matter and Media

This argument is concerned less with media than with matter, specifically the matter with(in) media. The title of the present edition can be read as a question: *what's the matter with media?* Against the interpretation of this question as being concerned with a “crisis” within media studies regarding an elusive object of study, it is herein read as stating the terms of a perennial problem, terms held in a productive tension.¹ This problem is the relationship and interdependence of matter and media, their dependencies, interactions and independence. While the title's preposition presents the terms in relation it also suggests that a difference persists; it is this difference that I wish to briefly explore. A distinction is proposed between the terms matter and media, the precedent for which can be found in the work of Marshall McLuhan. This argument claims that, despite McLuhan's insistence that media be understood as ‘the extensions of man’, we can identify in his work a number of openings onto that which underpins and eventually undermines both media and that which it is thought to extend. It is in the concepts of ‘pure information’ and ‘matters of indifference’ that we find these openings, suggesting that, rather than extensions of man, media are often best understood as epistemic openings onto exteriority. In what follows these two concepts will be explored with reference to recent artistic research carried out by myself, Martin Howse and Jonathan Kemp.²

For McLuhan, ‘the “content” of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium’ (1971, p. 16). Here McLuhan makes a distinction between—symbolic—content and the medium through which it is transmitted from sender to receiver. This distinction can be mapped onto that already posited between matter and media. Making clear the reductive mappings or structural equivalences that will—initially at least—help to outline the relationship between matter and media with which we are presently concerned, the key terms of the present argument can be organised in a table of distinctions:

Matter	Media
Medium	Content
Pure Information	Cultural Technique
Real	Symbolic

According to this initial distinction, the coupling of matter and media is not evenly balanced; as with any such list of oppositions the above table presents a hierarchical structure privileging one side over the other. In

exploring the relationship between matter and media—and the terms with which they are structurally equivalent—an emphasis is placed upon the former term. The reason for this emphasis—which serves to isolate the real term—is that in our *experience* and consumption of media it is matter that ordinarily constitutes the ‘low other’, being occluded in support of the symbolic efficacy of media. The occlusion of matter and medium is necessary for clear communication, a condition for the veridical transmission of *content*. To hear the medium in which a message is encoded is to begin listening to noise, to the meaningless yet affective substrate that must silently underpin the symbolic. In becoming audible this clamorous silence undermines the symbolic, the voicing of a meaningless substrate that has nothing to say but says it nonetheless. The process of undermining media indexes and uncovers a substrate anterior and indifferent to ‘cultural techniques’ of media (Siegert, 2007, p. 30).³

The undermining of media reveals what McLuhan calls a medium's ‘character’. This character defines what a medium is capable of doing; this character also describes the medium's affective capacity, its capacity to affect and be affected, to impress and retain a range of impressions. In this sense the character of the medium to which content blinds us is a specifically *functional*—rather than symbolic or representational—issue, being concerned with the difference made within and between assemblages. This functional orientation is primarily concerned with a medium's capacity to influence and inform, to establish connections and break them, to impress and erase. (See Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 257). This functionalism describes deterministic capacity, as for McLuhan the character of a medium is to be discerned in how it ‘shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action’ (1971, p. 16). The medium is neither passive nor innocent but influential, informing behaviour, patterns of consumption, the speed and nature of communication as much as—if not more than—the content it carries. A technical medium, in its exploitation of natural capacities is as much discovery as invention. The aims of invention necessarily become complicit with the capacities of the natural materials it unearths and draws upon, materials indifferent to invention, to media, and so hold in reserve unforeseen and unrealised potentials. A medium has a particular capacity for establishing connections and communications, limited relations, actions and associations, transmitting certain types of signals and content. For McLuhan the message transmitted is secondary to the effect of the medium itself upon spatio-temporal relations between senders and receivers, an emphasis that foregrounds the affective capacity of medium as material. It is this capacity for the deformation

1. This particular ‘problem’ is not to be considered negative, being instead derived from the Deleuzian ‘problematic’ which indicates a productive field of elements that force thought. For a discussion of the object-or lack thereof-in media studies see Horn (2007).

2. See <<http://willschrimshaw.net>>, <<http://1010.co.uk>>, <<http://xxn.org.uk>>.

3. The term substrate identifies the elementary conditions of media and the ‘physical materiality of signs’, the material capacities or ‘affordances’ exploited in fabrication and impressed with content (Siegert, 2007, 42).

of spatio-temporal relations that characterises McLuhan's description of electric light as 'pure information' (1971, p. 15).

2. Pure Information

The decision to focus upon the matter implicated within media brings into question the effects of a medium anterior to its medial organisation through cultural techniques. These effects can be described according to medium-specific capacities, capable not only of relaying symbolic content—or 'messages'—but also productive of information in a 'pure' sense. The concept of 'pure information', rather than implying a metalanguage or formal essence, informs a *functional* and deterministic paradigm seeking to ground media and its symbolic correlates within a materialist continuum of thought. The concept of pure information is taken from McLuhan, for whom electric light formed the best example: 'The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name' (1971, p. 15). Here we see that the 'medium without a message', the medium itself, is considered synonymous with pure information. It is this ability to think of a medium devoid of message or meaning that asserts the anteriority or primacy of matter as a necessary precondition of media. This position does not abandon the symbolic but seeks to better understand its preconditions according to a materialist paradigm. What makes the medium itself 'pure' is, for McLuhan, an absence of referential of coded content that ascribes primacy to the material and affective capacities of the medium itself. The concept of pure information identifies the capacity of a medium to inform, not only through the transmission of encoded content but according to spatio-temporal differences in relations and interactions that are made anterior to the interpretation of symbolic content. For a medium to be capable of not only relaying information but producing it in a 'pure' sense is to say that the medium is capable of producing difference, differences in relations, behaviours, physical, physiological and emotional states, differences that take effect not only in the active consumers of content but the inhuman components of technical assemblages.

The equation of electric light and pure information was explored in *Spectral Influence*, a research residency conducted by myself during the winter of 2011 at Acces Space (Sheffield, UK).⁴ In accordance with McLuhan's functional concerns for a medium's capacity to control the 'scale and form of human association and action' (1972, p. 16), *Spectral Influence* was concerned with the use of public street-lighting to perform spatio-temporal deformations through the production of electromagnetic islands. Through the use of electric

light, an area of a city is illuminated to a level closer to the given—or 'natural'—spectral state of a location on the other side of the globe than that to which it is immediately connected, residing just outside the perimeter of the artificially illuminated area.⁵ Of equal concern was the metabolic modulations and distortions performed by electric light's interruption of circadian rhythms historically regulated by the sun. A simple homemade spectrograph and ad-hoc software formed the technical components of a programme of *pedestrian research*. Wandering the city at night in small groups, the spectra of Sheffield's nocturnal and artificial illumination were documented and analysed to form the basis for cross references with research carried out within the field of light therapy. The information gathered formed a database used in further speculation on the subliminal influence of electric light upon the movements, and physiological and emotional states of citizens. The physiological implications of ubiquitous electric lighting are well documented, based upon the knowledge that ambient light regulates 'processes other than vision, such as hormone secretion, body temperature, and sleep, but also alertness and cognition. These nonclassical responses [also called "non-image-forming" or "nonvisual" responses] to light are mediated through a nonclassical photoreception system, which is maximally sensitive to blue light (around 480 nm), as opposed to the classical photopic luminance visual pathways, maximally sensitive to green light (around 550 nm)' (Vandewalle, 2010, p. 1). Here the affective capacity of light itself is emphasised rather than occluded through implication in symbolic content and signage or its apparent neutrality when at the service of vision, illuminating objects. Where the medium of light is understood according to this *infraesthetic functionalism* it remains the invisible medium of vision yet its affective capacity becomes known. It is this a-referential and intensive function that characterises light itself as pure information rather than sign or mnemonic trigger. Where light itself, the ordinarily invisible medium of sight, is studied as an affective medium independent of the content with which it may be encoded, it 'ceases to be a light cast upon objects to become a pure phosphorescence of things in themselves (Deleuze, 2004b, p. 350). In light of McLuhan's concept of pure information, the phrase 'to inform' is not restricted to the transcendental or epistemological, but describes a medium's capacity to make an impression upon and within a material state, to affect difference within and between 'assemblages'. In summary, pure information describes the *functional*, 'pre-symbolic' or affective capacity of a medium 'without any content to restrict its transforming and *informing* power' (McLuhan, 1971, p. 62).⁶ In its capacity to illuminate architectures and 'external' environments as well as influencing 'internal' metabolic function, the combined effects

4. <<http://www.access-space.org>>

5. A similar idea was explored by Fabric | ch in *RealRoom(s)* (2005) and *Tower of Atmospheric Relations* (2008).

6. Emphasis added.

of electric light exercise an 'extimate' influence. This pervasive medium informs domains ascribed to interiority—psychological and physiological states—and exteriority—geology, architecture, environment—according to experience or the 'manifest image'.⁷ As an example of the conditioning of external domains, the development and near ubiquitous application of street-lighting has contributed to what the architectural group Fabric | ch refer to as a 'second day', contributing to an 'elimination of time and space factors in human association' (McLuhan, 1971, p. 16), displacing behaviours and interactions associated with nighttime prior to its widespread use.⁸ It is these extimate, compound and complex effects of light-itself—as an independent medium—that characterise what McLuhan refers to as pure information.⁹

3. A matter of indifference

The undermining of media unearths a 'matter of indifference', a material substrate indifferent to its implication within media and cultural techniques (McLuhan, 1971, p. 16). It is in McLuhan's brief reference to the medium itself as a matter of indifference that we find a window onto a material continuum in excess of its medial organisation, stretching beyond the anthropic horizon of McLuhan's project. Both the indifference and independence of a medium with regard to media contribute to an undermining of the anthropic orientation of McLuhan's own project, forcing openings onto inhuman exteriority. Opening onto this exteriority, the medium constitutes an interface with nature more than an extension of man, the terminal point at which matter folds into media.

What McLuhan identifies as 'indifference' due to its independence should not be confused with homogeneity. This indifference is perhaps not as banal as it sounds, as it is to be thought as indifferent only insofar as it is an indifference to media, to the symbolic and the domain of representations. What McLuhan identifies as indifference is so only according to the 'external illusion of representation' according to which 'groundlessness should lack differences, when in fact it swarms with them' (Deleuze, 2004a, p. 347). In contrast to this groundlessness that appears indifferent from the perspective of representation, 'each well-grounded image or claim is called a representation' and 'to ground is always to ground representation' (Deleuze, 2004a, p.

342-3). Here the indifference of matter and medium is identified with the groundlessness that appears meaningless and indifferent from the perspective of representation. Consequently media are to be identified with the grounded, with representation, signs and the symbolic. The equation of apparent indifference and groundlessness asserts that neither should be thought to lack the capacity for the *production* of difference already identified in the concept of pure information above. What McLuhan identifies as indifferent is not, therefore, homogeneous but the medium of 'total change' (McLuhan, 1971, p. 62). It is in this sense that the undermining of media is also an ungrounding. In light of this correlation or equivalence the material substrates of contemporary media are better thought in terms of intensive difference rather than indifference, an *in-difference* that remains productive in its undermining of media. This in-difference is made evident in 'negative' yet nonetheless productive processes of decay and corruption, through active decomposition or undermining, in those instances where the substrate makes itself heard despite having nothing to say. Undermining and ungrounding name productive processes that reveal the 'elementary conditions of 21st century computation', processes executed under the name of decrystallisation in the work of Jonathan Kemp.¹⁰ Within workshops initiated by Kemp, cycles of decrystallization and recrystallization—roughly equivalent to the concepts of ungrounding and grounding, deterritorialization and reterritorialization—are explored in three stages:

1. Attempting to recover minerals and metals (including copper, gold and silver) from abandoned computers through execution of various volatile and chemical processes.
2. The re-crystallisation of these minerals in novel arrays using raw/renditioned mineral assemblies including piezoelectrics, positive feedback, colloidal dispersions.
3. The re-purposing and embedding of components and structures within wider geological and geophysical systems.¹¹

Kemp's workshops bear a disclaimer: 'Participants take part at own risk: workshops include high heat and highly toxic processes - some safety gear provided and experiments conducted outside so gas masks not essential'. This disclaimer is included here for its underpinning of the fact that the act of *decrystallisation* is not simply metaphorical but an active process, physically and chemically loosening the elementary

7. On the concept of extimacy see Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Extimacy': <<http://www.lacan.com/symptom/?p=36>>. The research undertaken during the *Spectral Influence* project built upon the extensive work carried out by Fabric | ch and Phillipe Rahm architects.

8. On the artificial production of a 'second day' see: <<http://blog.fabric.ch/index.php?archives/1694-Arctic-Opening-Fenetre-Arctique-follow-up-pictures.html>>

9. The purity that McLuhan ascribes to the real term in the matter-media coupling, the 'meaningless' medium, has a particularly Deleuzian feel, which is most evident in the statement that 'the message of electric light is total change. It is pure information without any content to restrict its transforming and informing power' (McLuhan: 1971, 62). This 'total change' bares similarities to the 'virtuality' of the Deleuzian concept of pure difference.

10. See Martin Howse 'the earthcodes project: substrate/shifting the site of execution' <<http://1010.co.uk/org/earthcode.html>>.

11. See Jonathan Kemp <<http://xxn.org.uk/doku.php?id=recrystallization:pr>>.

conditions of media from within the components and assemblages in which they are organised, 'crystallised', and recognised as the instruments of media and so-called 'immaterial labour'. The recovery, recrystallisation and re-purposing of elements from discarded computers directly indicates the in-difference of matter to the media within which it is implicated, being able to resurface in new forms and assemblages. The physical disorganisation and decomposition of media reveals the elements of a patient and persistent substrate capable



As the causes of a loosening or slackening of that which pins matter to media the processes of decrystallisation and undermining make evident an increased or persistent mobility of matter beneath the surface of media. Where undermining is not actively pursued it inevitably occurs naturally through processes of decay and corruption. However described or executed, the undermining of media reveals what Martin Howse describes as the 'being substrate of contemporary digital technology'.¹² The medium as a matter of in-difference is indexed in decay and decomposition according to material durations indifferent to their semantic implication. The aesthetics of digital media tends to refer to this insistence of the in-different substrate, the surfacing of material durations that corrupt or 'rupture' encoded signs and signals, as 'glitches'. The aestheticization of the glitch has, unfortunately, limited it to the superficial margins of aesthetics, where it fails to retain a functional or ontological link to any meaningful sense of contingency. We find a more thorough attempt to engage with the infraesthetic and potentially incompatible durations of the material substrate to media in work that risks crashing, such as Howse's



Earth Codes project in which 'crashing is the price to pay for booting straight from the earth'.¹³

Describing the respective indifference of matter and media, the *Earth Codes* projects explores how 'substrate interfaces with code, yet this set of symbolic, linguistic and logical operations denies the being-substrate, just as the carrier of any signal is erased by the receiver'.¹⁴ Countering this position, Howse has produced various strategies and techniques for unearthing the contingencies of contemporary media through shifting the site of execution from apparent indifference to a 'direct' confrontation with matter, a shift most evident in the *Earthboot* project:

Earthboot boots straight from the earth itself, exploring the being-substrate of contemporary digital technology; the material basis of 21st century computation. Earthboot revives the use of underground flows of electricity or telluric currents which were first exploited as generators of power within the telegraphic communications apparatus of the 19th century. [...] The laptop, or PC, literally boots up directly from the specially designed, earthboot USB device pushed into the earth, running code which is totally dependent on small fluctuations in electric current within the local terrain. A prototype has been constructed based on the ATMEGA32u4 which emulates a USB mass storage device, sampling earth voltages and converting these directly into instructions for an earthbooting computer. Preliminary tests for earthboot have proved successful using code based on the LUFA mass storage example.¹⁵

4. Conclusion

To undermine media is to undermine their characterisation as the apparatus of immaterial labour, not their importance within contemporary society. While a certain 'primacy of the base' is asserted as a necessity for a materialist media theory, this assertion does not devalue that which appears atop this foundation but seeks to reconnect with reciprocities and contingencies between the two. As the inescapable complement or conjoined twin of contemporary media it is the medium which is understood to provide a window onto exteriority, revealing something of that which resides beyond anthropic horizons, providing the conditions of an epistemic extension through an opening onto ontological difference.

12. See Earth Boot: <<http://1010.co.uk/org/earthcode.html>>.

13. <<http://1010.co.uk/org/earthcode.html>>

14. See Martin Howse, <<http://1010.co.uk/org/earthcode.html>>.

15. See Martin Howse, <<http://1010.co.uk/org/earthcode.html>> and <<http://vimeo.com/38842564>>

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CV



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Will Schrimshaw is an artist, researcher and drummer. Working with sound amidst a larger vibrational continuum, his work is broadly concerned with the subliminal influence of backgrounds and the imperceptible determinants of space and place. In 2011 he completed a PhD in Philosophy and Architecture at Newcastle University, focusing upon ideas of acoustic space and auditory influence within architectural and artistic practice. He teaches courses on sonic interaction and sound design and has completed residencies, solo and group exhibitions, performances and workshops across the globe.