The Possibilities of Human Media

Throughout this study I have framed the self-reflection, analyzed in reportage, as the reporter's existential self-affirmation as human medium who embodies both the material and symbolic making of reality. Furthermore, I have suggested that this self-assertion manifests an artistic streak that is central to the genre of reportage, understood as intentional eyewitness account. In the analyzed texts the human making of reality is necessarily based on embodied human experience, mediated and made meaningful in thought and transmitted in written language. For instance, David Foster Wallace pitches self-awareness against isolation, George Saunders raises the profile of feeling, and Mac McClelland and Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah detail how physical difference decisively affects meaning, as we have seen most prominently expressed in what I have termed the areas of *experience* and *interpretation*. Mark Johnson has argued that this insistence upon the centrality of the inevitable embodiment of human experience corresponds to the drive to enact modes of human experience at the core of art:

> We care about the arts and find them important, on the occasions we do, not merely because they entertain us, but more importantly because they enact worlds – or at least modes of experience that show us the breadth and depth of possibilities for human meaning. [1]

When viewed from this perspective, art is not merely a human product, but rather a particular way of paying attention to the means by which humans produce experience. The detailed accounts of the ways in which human memory, imagination, and attention shape meaning in the texts under consideration consequently have broader political implications.

1 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 25.

Essentially, they are human responses to the technological mediation of experience. This rather abstract claim certainly needs further elaboration. After all, no text raises the issue of media technology's challenge to human experience explicitly. Therefore, the following questions need more systematic treatment than I have provided so far: Against whom do reporters affirm themselves as humans more precisely? Why? What political implications does this self-affirmation carry?

I have repeatedly suggested that, to use Lyotard's term, the *inhuman other*, which is addressed by reporters' self-affirmation, could superficially be identified as various explicitly mentioned technological media. The writers of the texts analyzed confront concrete technological media directly and in quite a few instances. David Foster Wallace, for instance, contrasts the exclusively visual mediation of cameras with the complex interplay of senses found in human perception. John Jeremiah Sullivan observes reality TV's revealing fakeness. George Saunders mistrusts online news reports about a meditating boy. Michael Paterniti laments the isolating effects of live broadcasts. Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah notes the role of online forums in inciting the genesis of a racist mass shooting.

Art and Critique in a Collision of World-Views

However, I have sought to identify a more profound concern and engagement with the technological mediation of reality that can primarily be identified by way of the exhibited authorial consciousness manifested in the very prominent role of self-reflection in the analyzed texts. This points to a bigger concern with a larger underlying technological shift, an ideological conflict between media in which world-views collide.[2] As Neil Postman has argued, this conflict takes places on an existential level because the technological changes such as the ones referred to by mediatization are ecological. Because they are so fundamental, they cannot be limited to human activities.[3] "New technologies", Postman has insisted, "alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop."[4] Therefore,

2 Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, 16.

3 Postman, 18.

4 Postman, 20.

the complex ways in which media technology has come to shape the human experience of reality in Western societies, such as the U.S., deserves further elaboration. In 1984, Fredric Jameson argued that the *other* in these societies was indeed no longer nature—as in precapitalist societies—but technology as the manifestation of developed and globalized capital.[5] For Jameson, computers—"machines of reproduction rather than production"—were the most dominant technology in the new era of a capitalism dominated by media.[6] Jameson viewed their capacity to represent this new reality as limited, as machines of reproduction rather than production.[7]

More specifically, computers, as machines that can integrate other media technologies such as the camera or the written type, mark the latest development of electronic media. These have been argued—as in the early case of the telegraph— to have fundamentally altered the conditions of human representation of reality, given that they destabilize that relationship between signifier and signified or word and world. In 1999, Scott Lash described what he termed *reflexive modernity* as decisively shaped by the computer as a new medium. Late modern culture, he argued:

> rightly understood in terms of "the media," can never represent without sending, without transmitting or communicating. Indeed, contemporary "economies of signs and space," especially in their capacity as information, have a lot more to do with transmission than with representation. That is, in contemporary culture the primacy of transmission has displaced the primacy of representation.[8]

In Jameson's view, this primacy of transmission over representation or reproduction over production challenged the traditional arts. In 1991, he claimed that they were "mediatized", which meant that:

> they now come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system in which their own internal production also constitutes a

5 Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," 77–78.

6 Jameson, 79.

7 Jameson, 79.

8 Lash, *Another Modernity, a Different Rationality: Space, Society, Experience, Judgment, Objects*, 276.

> symbolic message and the taking of a position on the status of the medium in question.[9]

In other words, Jameson argued that it was precisely the primacy and ubiquity of superficial reproduction over representation that prompted traditional modes of artistic representation to address their own modes of production more thoroughly.

For the purposes of this study, this shift might be best understood with regard to yet another different dichotomy. This one is based on Lev Manovich's theorization of "new media" from 2001 that distinguishes between media technologies and communication technologies.[10] Unlike communication technologies such as gesture, speech, or telephony that transmit messages without their storage, media technologies such as writing or photography also inscribe whatever they transmit by capturing or storing the respective content.[11] New media such as the computer, then, Bruce Clarke has pointed out: "are figured as the *technological* deconstruction through conglomeration of this very distinction between communication and representation".[12] By simultaneously transmitting and storing, digital platforms: "mimic or travesty the human subject, while doubling once again in binary informatics the prior doubling of the world in communicative representations."[13] The crucial technological development is the integration of the computer's function in terms of these materials, both literally—the capturing and storing of content—and symbolically—the transmission of content as messages.

That this mimicking of the human subject might provoke an emotional response has been argued for a while. The media theorist Marshall McLuhan had anticipated the challenge of media technology and the human subject's reflexive reaction decades before Jameson performed his analysis of the postmodern. "Today technologies and their consequent environments succeed each other so rapidly that one environment makes us aware of the next", McLuhan wrote in 1965.[14] McLuhan located these consequences by way of

9 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 13.

10 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.

11 Clarke, "Communication," 136.

12 Clarke, 136.

13 Clarke, 136.

14 McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1965, viii.

his interpretation of media as extensions of our human bodies, and of electronic media specifically as extensions of the human nervous system and consciousness that carried considerable consequences for the human psyche. Any accepted use of an extension of ourselves, among them electronic media, equaled its embrace for McLuhan. At the same time, however, in the case of the extended nervous system, this embrace also necessitated the blocking of perception, or numbness, to handle its electrified amplification. "Technologies begin to perform the function of art in making us aware of the psychic and social consequences of technology",[15] McLuhan therefore argued. For him, the compression of time and space caused by electronic media necessarily came with increased senses of both apathy and unconsciousness as well as connection, commitment, involvement, and participation.[16] "The aspiration of our time for wholeness, empathy and depth of awareness is a natural adjunct of electric technology",[17] he claimed.

Importantly, McLuhan deemed the reflexive human reaction to technology to be more decisive than the technology itself and understood art as a possible cure thereto. He claimed that the: "counter-irritant usually proves a greater plague than the initial irritant, like a drug habit."[18] "In experimental art," he stated, "men are given the exact specifications of coming violence to their own psyches from their own counter-irritants or technology."[19] "The artist", McLuhan further wrote, "grasps the implications of his actions and of new knowledge in his own time" and "is the man of integral awareness."[20] According to McLuhan, artists: "can correct sense ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed conscious procedures… before numbness and subliminal groping and reaction begin."[21]

Understood by way of this functional meaning of art, the writer's self-reflection insists on a distinction between human experience and technological mediation. It addresses the tension between apathy and participation caused by technology. More specifically, self-reflection itself is one such expression of

15 McLuhan, viii.
16 McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1994, 3–4.
17 McLuhan, 5.
18 McLuhan, 66.
19 McLuhan, 66.
20 McLuhan, 65.
21 McLuhan, 65–66.

human experience that deals with the problem of the anesthetic human reaction to the nervous system's extension. It is the existential affirmation of the literal and figurative human sense confronted with its existential challenge by technology.

Thus, authorial self-reflection more generally takes on the function of critique, rather than confirmation, and works as what Luc Boltanski has termed an *existential test*. *Existential tests* emphasize possibility, unlike *truth tests* which are employed by confirming instances such as in computers and which, according to Boltanski: "strive to deploy in stylized fashion, with a view to consistency and saturation, a certain pre-established state of the relationship between symbolic forms and states of affairs."[22] They are based on lived human experience that serves to contradict both confirmed and unquestioned relations as well as the existing *reality tests* that are already in place.[23] Thus, the existential test: "unmasks the incompleteness of reality and even its contingency, by drawing examples from the flux of life that make its bases unstable and challenge it".[24]

Now, according to Boltanski, this critique can have two main trajectories. Importantly, it:

> cannot be determined solely by its opposition to the established order of reality, considered in its opaque generality, but also, or above all, by its reference to possibilities, already identifiable in the experience of the world, of which suffering and desire are the manifestation in the flux of life.[25]

On the one hand, then, the author's main reliance on deeply subjective experience and interpretation of reality affirms the validity and significance of physical human mediation, as irreproducible knowledge production vis-à-vis technical media's ways of seemingly objective and reproducible mediation. On the other hand, however, the persistent integration of the material and symbolic making of reality by the human medium that is promoted in the texts counter to experiences of alienation, disconnection, or fragmentation in society and culture, emphasizes the existing possibilities of human cooperation for potential change.

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22 Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, 103.

23 Boltanski, 110.

24 Boltanski, 113.

25 Boltanski, 113.

This embodiment not only serves to confront self-affirmation with the corresponding conglomeration of media in the computer, but it also carries a more explicitly political significance. The key is that, as is the case in several of the texts analyzed, this embodiment blurs or even erases the distinction between subject and object. As Mitchum Huehls has shown, by using the work of Bruno Latour, it has precisely been this opposition that has allowed capitalistic ideology to appropriate and render traditional modes of critique useless.[26] The most recent expression of capitalistic ideology is arguably neoliberalism, in which humans are "configured exhaustively as *homo œconomicus*" and "all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality".[27] Under neoliberalism, as Huehls has argued, *homo oeconomicus* becomes the embodiment of simultaneously subject and object of *laissez-faire* that absorbs both the critique of objective facts as well as that of subjective values.[28] To counter this force with critical literary value, Huehls has identified an ontological production of meaning in which words: "neither reduce nor stand apart from the world" and in which representation: "is not ontologically distinct from the world it describes".[29] This insight might be particularly significant for the analysis of fictional literature. For nonfictional literature, it helps at least to reiterate the critical potential of reportage as the genre of a decidedly human medium against the backdrop of identical concerns.

Irreproducible Mediation

From my material perspective, I have sought to analyze reportage as a specific instantiation of a hybrid medium that can itself be analyzed as a kind of technology. This approach opens up several possibilities for a more pronounced analysis of the kind of power that is at stake. As Peter-Paul Verbeek has argued, using the concept of a "material hermeneutics of technology", this power is exerted both materially and symbolically, as "technologies have an influence on people's actions and practices on the one hand, and on people's perceptions and frameworks of interpretation on the other".[30] On the material micro-level,

26 Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age*, 13–15.
27 Brown, "Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," 40.
28 Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age*, 14–15.
29 Huehls, 25.
30 Verbeek, "Politicizing Postphenomenology," 143.

I have already pointed to the writers' perspective onto the productive artist who rebels against reproducibility. Importantly, this idea also includes a conceptualization of the reader as a kind of complicit co-producer who does not consume the writer's material and symbolic offering in the manner of a passive consumer. The texts analyzed essentially perform the political project of de-fetishizing their experience of reality as object, thereby exposing the social process of the production of meaning.[31]

This micro-perspective transports political implications onto the macro-level because it reveals technologies, particularly new media, as clear agents of capital. This observation heightens the importance of issues of control and ownership of media technology in mediatized societies because it suggests that new media technology also mediates the very frameworks of people's interpretation of reality. This matters. "When technologies do not only mediate human actions and perceptions, but also the interpretive frameworks on the basis of which we make decisions", Peter-Paul Verbeek has argued, "there is no opt-out, and no 'outside' from which we could decide whether we want to use a technology or not."[32] Verbeek does not look for a way out of this technological dominance, but seeks a democrative perspective "from within". He finds it in Isaiah Berlin's suggestion to replace the idea of negative freedom, which means the absence of constraints on individual acts, with the idea of positive freedom that means the ability to pursue one's aims.[33]

The political aspect of the writers' self-reflection also shows itself in their endorsement of this positive freedom. More importantly, it is precisely their insistence on their own human capacities that enables them to be free in precisely this way. They use sense not merely against the machine, but *over and against* the machine as they depict themselves as subjects that find freedom *precisely in their very own human nature*. If the self-reflection in reportage, which I have examined, expresses the reflexive modern subject's resistance to capitalism's attempts to objectify human experience by way of technology, then the human subject's embrace of self-reflection equals an insistence on the powers of this human subject of flesh, blood, and nerves. As my analyses have shown, one of the core features of self-reflection in this struggle is the singularity and specificity of the respective author's mediation, because it resists its own re-

31 Bradshaw, "The Politics of Consumption," 520.

32 Verbeek, "Politicizing Postphenomenology," 145.

33 Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty."

producibility and simultaneously exerts the freedom to make itself anew on its own terms.

This singularity is expressed in four main areas throughout the texts analyzed. First, and perhaps most obviously, this works on both the levels of thematic content and knowledge. In every text, the specificity of the writer's experience of reality, signified decisively by self-reflection, unmasks existing interpretive narratives of reality as untenable. In the first section of texts, writers critically replaced the narratives of pre-fabricated touristic experience that meant to ascertain the experience's meaning. In the second section, writers positioned stories of human agency and self-transformation against larger ideas of a de-mystified, unitary, and stable subject shaped mainly by external forces. In the third section, writers unveiled existing interpretations that depicted violence as natural or inevitable as false by way of emphasizing its own specific mediate qualities and rootedness in concrete human action. Importantly, these writers' narratives all counter existing modes of material and symbolic meaning-making that suggest inevitability or pre-determination and that correspond to the interpretive logics of both the computer and neoliberalism.

Second, the singularity and specificity of the respective authors' experiences and mediations affect functions in the area of *work*. The writers effectively resist any absorption of their work as industrialized journalism produced via a defined set of professional standards and methods, as they mark their experiences as intentional and yet personal. Relational concerns appear tied to the thematic subject at hand and are more important than seemingly reproducible journalistic practices. In the first section of texts on touristic experience, writers relate to the role of the tourist as ordinary guy and primarily delineate themselves by way of their supposedly (un)-professional behavior, even while acknowledging the economic incentives of the experience produced. In the second set of texts, authors define their roles more actively in distinction from their main characters as believer, viewer, or writer. In the third section, writers consider the collective ethics of violence as they affiliate themselves more actively (in Saunders's case, however, ironically) with impacted communities.

Third, the ways in which sensory perception and thought are described to interact in the areas of *experience* and *interpretation* suggest an interplay that is operatively similar to the ways in which computers work, but which remains irreproducible. For instance, John Johnston has argued that: "both living creatures and the new machines operate primarily by means of self-control and

regulation, which is achieved by means of the communication and feedback of electro-chemical or electronic signals now referred to as information."[34] What makes these internal workings irreproducible by a computer, however, is their embedding in a human body that uses its own singular capacities to both remember and imagine in order to make sense of sensory impressions. In most instances where this interplay is considered, then, it is not the singularity of the sensory impression (i.e., a view or a smell) that authors describe as specific, but its very personal meaning in the memories that it triggers or in the future possibilities it suggests.

Like the computer, the human body integrates both the capacity to store sensory impressions as well as to communicate their meaning. Fundamentally different from the computer, however, the writers' criteria for their selection of the sensory experience produced is highly contingent, idiosyncratic, and full of surprises. Furthermore, as both David Foster Wallace and Michael Paterniti in specific emphasize, the human capacity to experience can be at odds with the respective ability to remember. Unlike technological media, which works by using automated selection criteria, writers' principles of selection are constantly re-negotiated according to reflexive ethical and moral considerations.

Fourth, the authors' depiction of *transmission* suggests a process defined by uncertain human reception in a social context. As such, it is always necessarily relative to the interaction between the specific writer and reader. This interaction, in turn, depends on many different factors, such as the thematic content or the reader's trust. In the first section of texts about touristic experience, for instance, writers seek to establish a trustful relationship infused with humility and sincerity over and against grandiose meta-tales of belief, promise, and equality. In this relationship, they depict the reader as an active participant in an ongoing dialogue about the meaning of the experiences being described. In the second set of reportage that was analyzed concerning other human media, writers emphasize the inherent performativity and difference that affect their relationship with readers. However, they depict the resulting intersubjective gaps as loci of possibility, rather than of separation. In the final group of texts, writers address readers on equal footing as imagined fellow members of privileged, inattentive, responsible, or hated communities.

All in all, their processes of transmission are described as highly contingent exercises between social actors. Due to their deeply uncertain outcomes, they decisively contradict models of automated information transmission or

34 Johnston, "Technology," 200.

supposedly effective intersubjective communication.[35] An important piece of this depiction is the idea of a certain plasticity of text or writing that allows for vast possibilities of expression. As depicted time and again, in these pieces of reportage, text is precisely not characterized as aiming at the reliable transportation of unambiguous meaning but always as the mere instrument of a human in exchange with another. In these instances, the conditions of understanding and meaning are not predefined, but are at the very most anticipated, which offers vast opportunities for a kind of (self-referential) play that is absolutely impossible with computers.

The Ethics of Everything

Still, as I have also sought to work out, critical concerns with technological mediation are generally present as a backdrop. Such concerns are a kind of secondary effect of self-reflection. It can be identified in distinction to the acknowledgment of media's tendency to "make something legible, audible, visible, perceivable, while simultaneously erasing itself and its constitutive involvement in this sensuality, thus becoming unperceivable, anesthetic",[36] as Lorenz Engell and Joseph Vogl have put it. It is only against this tendency of media to make themselves obsolete that authorial self-reflection in reportage effectively works as a kind of critique that suggests the falsity of this impression, given that it emphasizes the fundamental mediate quality of all communicated experience to produce the impression of seamless immediacy. Importantly, in John Jeremiah Sullivan's somewhat provocative words, this: "increased awareness in the complicity of the falseness of it all"[37] does not suggest the opposite of a kind of true mediation or seamless transmission, but a shift. As my study suggests, meaning-making under these circumstances, and in neoliberal mediatized societies, is not primarily an epistemological undertaking, but much more pointedly is an ethical undertaking.

As McLuhan has indicated, it is not paradoxical that this shift is attributable to the ubiquity of technological mediation in modern Western

35 For critical analyses of these concepts of transmission or communication, see Chang, *Deconstructing Communication: Representation, Subject, and Economies of Exchange*; Clarke, "Communication."

36 Engell and Vogl, "Vorwort," 10.

37 Sullivan, "Getting Down To What Is Really Real," 98.

societies and cultures, such as the U.S. But it is also worth noting that this shift, which corresponds to the corporeal turn in scholarly interest on a larger level, insists on the human body's agency as a universal knowledge container. As such, it stabilizes: "the world, putting bounds and limits to things that might otherwise run out of control" and ultimately anchors our existence.[38]

Like any other knowledge container, the human body can never be completely adequate. Siri Hustvedt asks why, as writers, we choose to tell the particular story that we end up telling and why, as readers, we relate to some stories and not to others in her essay "Why One Story and Not Another?" "The story's truth or falseness", Hustvedt writes, "lies in a resonance that is not easily articulated, but it is one that lives between reader and text – and that resonance is at once sensual, rhythmic, emotional, and intellectual."[39]

Perhaps the human body that communicates through letters on pages and screens does not have to be completely adequate as a knowledge container. Perhaps this authentic inadequacy is a substantial reason why humans who experience their shared existential reflexivity themselves relate to each other as modest and therefore trusting producers, carriers, and communicators of knowledge to make common sense. And perhaps this is especially true in the face of such an imposing medium as the computer, which claims unprecedented adequacy as container and communicator of knowledge. In relating to one another primarily as humans then, humans make their own links and connections between bodies of flesh and blood; between the only ones that ultimately matter.

38 Cmiel and Peters, *Promiscuous Knowledge: Information, Image, and Other Truth Games in History*, 256.

39 Hustvedt, "Why One Story and Not Another?," 399.