Mediating Mediatized Realities

In 2007, the writer David Foster Wallace edited an annual compilation entitled *Best American Essays*.[1] In his foreword, Wallace reflected on the criteria used in the selection of the essays. As part of his reasoning, Wallace described contemporary US culture as "a culture and volume of info and spin and rhetoric that I know I'm not alone in finding too much to even absorb, much less to try to make sense of." In Wallace's view, this culture was marked by a permanent mediation that was particularly consequential for nonfiction writers:

> Part of our emergency is that it's so tempting … to retreat to narrow arrogance, pre-formed positions, rigid filters, the 'moral clarity' of the immature. The alternative is dealing with massive, high-entropy amounts of info and ambiguity and conflict and flux; it's continually discovering new areas of personal ignorance and delusion. In sum, to really try to be informed and literate today is to feel stupid nearly all the time, and to need help. That's about as clearly as I can put it.[2]

Wallace argued that this state of social and cultural reality poses an acute, endless challenge to any human self that tries to make sense of reality, not least to a writer like himself. In his opinion, this reality craved both humility and a willingness to cooperate.

Wallace's position essentially combines two strains of argumentation; he perceives a general change in a cultural reality that is somehow decisively shaped by the very ways in which reality itself is mediated. This argument is identical, by and large, with the scholarly discourse surrounding mediatiza-

1 Foster Wallace, *The Best American Essays 2007*.

2 Foster Wallace, "Deciderization 2007 – A Special Report," xxiii.

tion, "a meta-process that is grounded in the modification of communication as the basic practice of how people construct the social and cultural world".[3]

This process, per definition, cannot be neutral. Typically, it has been conceived of as being driven by waves of technological innovation, each of which increased the role played by technical media in its respective culture. Many thinkers have pointed out that mediatization thus affects social interaction by causing a kind of separation, or even alienation, because it more clearly separates a physical entity from its symbolic meaning. The German media scholar Friedrich Krotz, for instance, has argued that "mediatization must be understood to be a dismantling process, as the growing role of media separates the unity of every instrumental action into a communicative and an instrumental action."[4]

Wallace claims that it is imperative that the authorial communication of reality be reinvented in order to live up to the ways in which communication affects reality in general, even while mediatization plays a central role in changes being made to the social and cultural world—and even as it is decisively driven by technology. In other words, writers have to come up with ways to describe and make palpable how technological mediation affects the very reality that they themselves write about. Most importantly, they must do so in a more engaging way than classic realism had, which he primarily associates with entertaining visuality. Classic realism, Wallace has claimed, is "soothing, familiar and anesthetic; it drops us right into spectation."[5] But what might this updated realism look like? In his poetological comment, Wallace only vaguely suggested that it would have to include an intensified self-reflection that resulted in both a sense of either weakness or humility and in a need for human collaboration.

Analyzing the practical answers to the task outlined by Wallace is this study's main objective. It explores how writers of reportage, such as Mac McClelland,[6] Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah, George Saunders, or David Foster Wallace himself, have taken on this complex challenge by way of emphasizing their

3 Krotz, "Mediatization: A Concept With Which to Grasp Media and Societal Change," 26.

4 Krotz, "Media, Mediatization and Mediatized Worlds: A Discussion of the Basic Concepts," 83.

5 McCaffery, "An Interview with David Foster Wallace," 138.

6 In 2018, McClelland underwent sex reassignment therapy and, consequently, identified himself as the male reporter Gabriel Mac. I herein stick to Gabriel Mac's former female identity, Mac McClelland, because it is highly significant for the analysis of his text and because, in fact, the text analyzed was published under his previous female name. Mac, "The End of Straight"; Mac, "About."

own existential humanity (as media manifested in various acts of self-reflection). First, the writers exhibit their own specific acts of mediation throughout their texts in four key domains. Thus, they anchor both material and symbolic acts of sensemaking in their bodies and assert the specific qualities of human mediation and aesthetic experience. Second, the writers demonstrate how their subjective sensemaking corresponds to the larger world, and how sensemaking is affected by a mediatization that occupies the core of the very real topics they write about: communing, subjectivity, and violence. In this way, these writers pit their specific human mediality against the larger processes of technological mediation that similarly shape social and cultural reality.

More to the point, I argue that these writers' self-reflective texts signify the human medium's response to technical media's commodification, spatialization, and anestheticization of human experience. The texts represent a specific way of a coming to consciousness as a medium within journalism's commercial context. Just like artists, to use Fredric Jameson's argument, reporters act "within a mediatic system in which their own internal production also constitutes a symbolic message and the taking of position on the status of the medium in question."[7] This kind of awakening, as a human subject within technologically mediated culture, involves a foregrounding of sensual perception, feeling, imagination, and memory in order to provide an epistemological depth by way of self-reflection that technical media alone cannot muster. On a larger level, as I argue in the conclusion, these texts amount to a human reclamation of agency by way of an intensification of critique that necessitates scrutinizing mediation itself.

This theoretical frame most obviously applies to a specific kind of realist writing in which the concepts of author and narrator—which are kept apart in the study of fictional literature for good reasons—converge. A specific portion of such writing has been theorized as literary journalism. As Josh Roiland has suggested:

> literary journalism is a form of nonfiction writing that adheres to all of the reportorial and truth-telling covenants of conventional journalism, while employing rhetorical and storytelling techniques more commonly associated with fiction. In short, it is journalism as literature.[8]

7 Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 162.

8 Roiland, "By Any Other Name: The Case for Literary Journalism," 71.

Following Roiland's definition, then, literary journalism is the product of a narrowly defined kind of work that includes both reporting and writing. Literary journalism is infused with a clear intentionality to carry out a particular professional assignment. Writers of literary journalism are required to research a pre-determined topic and are expected to convey their findings in artful prose that tells a story. Hence, all of the texts analyzed in this study were originally conceived within this professional framework. The three texts by George Saunders, for instance, were contracted by *GQ* magazine, which sent Saunders to Dubai, Nepal, and Fresno, in order to experience a predetermined material aspect of contemporary reality first-hand. In Dubai, he experienced the emerging megacity as a global community. In Nepal, he investigated the reality of a Buddhist boy who had supposedly been meditating for an extended period. Finally, he literally exposed himself to homelessness by living in a camp in Fresno, all while pretending to be homeless.

The assignment's context also usually provides an indicator as to where these texts were originally published. These pieces were all first published in American periodical print magazines that commission this kind of reporting, even though they were occasionally compiled in essay collections or made available online thereafter. Another indicator of their connection to a specific branch of publishing, which focuses on magazine journalism, is their occasional acknowledgment of the industry itself. Some of the nine texts, which are analyzed in the chapters that follow, were nominated for a National Magazine Award in Feature Writing, and one of them won a Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing. Finally, scholars like myself have explicitly categorized the texts written by David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, John Jeremiah Sullivan, and Mac McClelland as literary journalism.[9]

Importantly, I do not mean to imply that I view the challenge formulated by Wallace or the writers' responses thereto as new. Instead, I identify the contemporary configuration of an older less explicit, albeit still very modern, authorial stance that views communicative potential in the writer's self-reflection as a living human medium. Still, this synchronic study of nine exemplary texts (each selected for their extensive display of self-reflection published with and after David Foster Wallace) seeks to identify an intensification of authorial consciousness in reportage since the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s.

9 Roiland, "Derivative Sport: The Journalistic Legacy of David Foster Wallace"; Sigg, "The Disclosure of Difference."

Crucially, this intensification corresponds to a comparative increase in mediatization. The writers' motivations, broadly canonized under New Journalism, can be tied to concerns with mediation generally, concerns that were similar to (but not yet as pervasive as) those of the contemporary writers analyzed throughout this study. Many scholars share the view that New Journalism's emphasis on language or style was mainly a response to a media business, the primary mode of representation of which was an industry-driven objectivity more akin to images than texts. In Chris Anderson's view, for instance, the New Journalists' style and their very use of language was typified by a stubborn "belief in the power of language to order and create" and was itself the argument.[10] Jason Mosser has claimed that written language in works by New Journalists could attain a rhetorical power that could generate a sense of presence.[11] New Journalism has generally been credited with undermining "the authoritative versions of reality created by conventional journalism."[12] However, the writers of such experimental texts, from the 1960s and 1970s, mainly highlighted the impossibility of directly accessing meaning in a culture and society increasingly perceived of as fantastic, given that they primarily questioned communication itself.[13] These writers only began to reflect upon their own role as media in response to media technology's development, as the existing analyses of New Journalism suggest.

David Eason, for instance, has argued that the American New Journalism, of the 1960s and 1970s in particular, should primarily be read as a response to the ubiquity of visual mediation in a new mass-produced image-world that failed to account for social and cultural diversity. Most importantly, Eason also identified a modernist mode, in contradistinction to what he termed a realist approach in which reader and writer "are joined in an act of observing which assures that conventional ways of understanding still apply."[14] This approach

10 Anderson, *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction*, 180; Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction*; Mosser, *The Participatory Journalism of Michael Herr, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion: Creating New Reporting Styles*, 33–42.

11 Mosser, *The Participatory Journalism of Michael Herr, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion: Creating New Reporting Styles*, 44; Winterowd, *The Rhetoric of the "Other" Literature*, 32.

12 Mosser, *The Participatory Journalism of Michael Herr, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion: Creating New Reporting Styles*, 54.

13 Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," 192.

14 Eason, 192.

engages, according to Eason, in a "multilayered questioning of communication, including that between writer and reader, as a way of making a common world", [15] as is evident in the writings of Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer, or Joan Didion. In other words, the experimentation undertaken by these writers mainly serves to emphasize communication's inconvenient aspects, which they perceive to be repressed in other forms of communication, such as the image-world that is manufactured by the mass media. I would suggest that, overall, the texts analyzed in my study take such concerns with communication or mediation one step further, even though I cannot deliver evidence by way of a synchronic analysis and there may be exceptions too.

A Postmodern Approach

It appears tempting, at first glance, to categorize my undertaking as the unearthing of a humanist post-postmodern turn in nonfictional literature, and particularly from a narrower literary studies perspective. David Foster Wallace's nonfiction has already been classified as post-postmodern, after all.[16] However, rather than departing from postmodern thought, I understand the texts that have been analyzed, as well as my own analysis thereof, as the very expression of postmodern ideas of knowledge and literature itself. Similar to certain postmodern ideas, the texts are concerned with countering realism on a larger level. For instance, Linda Hutcheon has argued, with regard to postmodern fiction, that it "asks its readers to question the process by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture."[17] More particularly then, this study aims to stake out the ways in which this claim might apply to recent literary journalism, an explicitly realist field of literature.

My approach relies on the work of French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who understood the postmodern as a tripartite structure. In his 1985 essay "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-'", Lyotard identifies three conflicting and contradictory versions of the postmodern: the first version marks the sense of succession in "post-" that signifies a new direction, compared to that taken by

15 Eason, 192.

16 Hoffmann, *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*.

17 Hutcheon, "Telling Stories: Fiction and History," 235.

the modern.[18] The second version simultaneously suggests that this sense of succession ought not to be equated with a sense of progress in Western societies. This is because progress, as Lyotard writes, "seems to proceed of its own accord, with a force, an autonomous motoricity that is independent of us."[19] The third version points to a kind of critical self-reflection that Lyotard sees at work in postmodern thought, "a working through… performed by modernity on its own meaning."[20] For Lyotard, then, the postmodern combines a particular analysis of the modern western social world, as disrupted or disaggregated by forces of capitalism, with a continuous critical self-reflection that itself resists the possibility of taking any idea of continuity for granted.

My aim is to perform an analysis of contemporary literary journalism that takes Lyotard's three versions of the postmodern and his understanding of art as intervention into account and that expands the possible ways to present human experience.[21] Literary journalism and reportage, as discourse and genre, are at the very intersection of art and journalism—an explicitly realist practice and business—and appear particularly promising for a reevaluative postmodern study. Such an approach seeks to find what is different, and potentially new, in the texts that have been analyzed, while at the same time it scrutinizes the pre-existing categories of analysis of literary journalism and reportage as typically modern genres; in this way, it involves performing a self-reflection of modernity in ways similar to the writers themselves in their actual works of reportage.

Consequently, at the core of such an undertaking resides an updated and specific understanding of the key concepts of realist representation and hence genre, including the authorial self, reality, and their interrelations. This updating requires certain theoretical groundwork, the results of which are deployed throughout different areas of this study. As a primarily literary analysis, it places a premium on a critical analysis of the field of literary journalism and the genre of reportage.

Detailed discussions of genre and specifically the theoretical disentangling of literary journalism and reportage are presented in the following theoretical chapter titled "Reportage and Mediation". This generic and historical reevaluation necessitates an explicit construction of the concept of the author or writer

18 Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of Post-," 76.

19 Lyotard, 77.

20 Lyotard, 80.

21 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*.

as witnessing medium, which I present in the third theoretical section titled "The Human Medium Inspecting Itself". This rather prominent authorial self engages with and communicates presentations of heavily mediated realities. An initial, larger theoretical account of socially and medially constructed reality is given later on in this introduction. However, the three more specific aspects of reality that are represented in the writers' actual texts—communing, subjectivity, and violence—are theoretically introduced in the three main chapters, in which they are directly tied to the textual analyses of the texts that have been selected.

The Mediality of Literary Journalism

Most fundamentally, I view the texts analyzed as narratives that make truth claims. As such, they have to be distinguished from fictional narratives. In the same vein, they have to be viewed in light of what Martin Kreiswirth has termed the *narrativist turn* (an erupting critical interest in the ideology, ontology, and epistemology of narrative rather than its function or form). This interest has its roots in the Humanities' linguistic turn and that paradigm's general assumption that language serves as the primary condition for the possibility of both meaning and knowledge. Consequently, "research into social, political, psychological, cognitive, behavioral, philosophic, and cultural questions must be formulated in terms of linguistic issues."[22] Despite growing scientific interest, however, making the distinction between fictional and factual narrative has proven difficult, in part because, as communicative acts, both work similarly in that they communicate "temporal and causal relationships between agents and events".[23] Therefore, whether a narrative can be regarded as true, Kreiswirth has argued, lies mainly in a commitment to truth that devolves from context, contract, and convention.[24]

One of narrative's most defining characteristics as communicative form is its inherent connection to temporality. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, takes "temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate

22 Kreiswirth, "Merely Telling Stories? Narrative and Knowledge in the Human Sciences," 298.

23 Kreiswirth, 313.

24 Kreiswirth, 313.

referent".[25] Therefore, rhetorically, narratives that claim to be true are first and foremost structured as allegories. According to the poststructuralist critic Paul de Man, the figure of allegory acknowledges this temporality most explicitly.[26] Understood in a broader sense as a narrative "that continuously refers to another pattern of ideas or events",[27] allegory signifies an idea of representation that acknowledges (temporal) difference. In contrast to the symbol, de Man has stated, allegory "designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference." [28]

De Man's observation has proven particularly useful as an instrument of critique in areas in which positivist or empiricist representation have dominated. In a landmark essay on the rhetorical turn in ethnography, James Clifford has argued that ethnographic writing ought to be understood as fundamentally allegorical.[29] Importantly, Clifford offers a way to use some of poststructuralism's main insights for a more elaborate analysis of reality's representation. Based on Clifford's argument, documentary film has also been read in terms of its allegorical structure.[30]

Similarly, allegory helps to identify literary journalism's fundamental mediality in a twofold structure. Clifford has argued, again with reference to ethnographic writing, that it maintains "a double attention to the descriptive surface and to more abstract, comparative, and explanatory levels of meaning."[31] Of course, this also holds true for literary journalism's texts. Here, allegory helps us to locate the areas of mediation in the relationships between a particular set of facts, usually stemming from human experience, and that experience's more generalized meanings. Importantly, allegorical mediation between the particular and the general is reciprocal and dynamic in the texts under analysis, since the general simply cannot exist without a corresponding particular and vice-versa.

In literary journalism, as in ethnography, these acts of mediation occur along the basic dimensions of narrative: content and form.[32] In texts that claim

25 Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 165.
26 De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality."
27 Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 99.
28 De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," 207.
29 Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory."
30 Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary*.
31 Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 101.
32 Clifford, 98.

to refer to an extratextual reality, they differ mainly in that the allegorical relationships in terms of content have to be situated in events located outside the text and that took place prior to its final publication. Their formal equivalents, however, mainly encompass the actual text's allegorical relations themselves and, therefore, concern the spatial and temporal differences between the text's finalization and its reading. As a consequence, any transcendence of the posited spatial and temporal difference between the particular subjective experiences in reality and their generalized meaning is only temporary. To make matters more complex still, this transcendence's temporality—and this is again in crucial difference to fictional texts—has a material component, in that it is physically embodied by the writer who then materializes it as text. In terms of content, then, writers communicate a certain consciousness, an overall set of values of what it means to live and be a human part of these realities. In terms of form, they communicate a set of formal features that are concretely employed and, hence, are an example of how a human experience can be expressed in arranged letters.

This existential aspect of literary journalism has largely remained unacknowledged in scholarly debates, as I show in the following chapter. That being established, the general theorization of literary journalism is highly contested and contradictory. As I will argue in the following chapter, this is at least in part due to generalized understandings of literature and journalism that are not concerned with the particularities of mediation or communication. One potential reason for this is that, as Christopher Wilson has claimed, there is precious little critical scholarship in the first place.[33] Another scholar, William Dow, has called for "much closer attention to the 'experimental progress' that combinatory and hybrid narrative forms have made and what writers are doing with such forms" and claims that "we also need to see how these forms interact with 'raw material', the actual workings and driving forces of culture and society."[34] My analysis also seeks to contribute to tackling these rather pressing research issues by making a general point about the critical analysis of literary journalism; by identifying and defining a specific strain of experimental drive in contemporary literary journalism that engages with literary journalism's existential mediality.

33 Wilson, "The Chronicler: George Packer's The Unwinding (2013)," para. 4.

34 Dow, "Reading Otherwise: Literary Journalism as an Aesthetic Narrative Cosmopolitanism," 119.

When it is considered by scholars, literary journalism often appears as a kind of hybrid between journalism and literature—that is, between fiction and nonfiction. These general binary oppositions risk obfuscating our view of very concrete texts, as I argue in my first chapter, because they themselves are compounds of contested and conflicting ideas. For instance, on the side of literary studies, questions of reference and function have been foregrounded. Literature, depending on the definition of literature one uses, is a term which has been perceived as synonymous with fiction from certain vantage points; therefore, such a thing as literary journalism simply cannot exist. Conversely, on the side of journalism, issues of form, modality, and style in particular have dominated critical discourse, which has been mainly concerned with demarcating this kind of journalism from industrial news journalism; questions of materiality and research methods have largely been taken for granted. Hence, in the very worst case, texts from the tradition of literary journalism can be seen as unworthy bastards: not humble enough to be literature proper, not serious enough to be journalism proper, and impossible either to situate generically or to grasp critically.

Mediatization and Reportage

To make the matter even more complex, the very subjects of recent literary journalism are themselves existentially mediated. Modern western societies and cultures, such as the U.S.A., are themselves constructed via infrastructures and processes of communication that are mediated by technology.[35] Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp have detailed this material perspective in the following way:

> The fundamentally mediated nature of the social – our necessarily mediated interdependence as human beings – is … based not in some internal mental reality, but rather on the *material* [emphasis in original] processes (objects, linkages, infrastructures, platforms) through which communication, and the construction of meaning, take place. Those material processes of mediation constitute much of the *stuff* [emphasis in original] of the social.[36]

35 Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 1; Krotz, "Mediatization: A Concept With Which to Grasp Media and Societal Change," 28–31.

36 Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 3.

Thus, as mentioned previously, Western societies take part in a meta-process behind modernity that has been theorized and termed *mediatization*, along with individualization, commercialization, and globalization.[37]

First, according to Friedrich Krotz, mediatization should be understood as a "historical, ongoing, long-term process in which more and more media emerge and are institutionalized."[38] Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp have argued that this long-term process—the history of mediatization—can be broken down into three successive and overlapping transcultural waves: mechanization, electrification, and digitalization, with a nascent fourth wave, datafication. These waves are characterized by underlying technological changes in the media. According to this history, mechanization began with the invention of the printing press and continued as the industrialization of communication more generally culminated in print mass media. The electrification of communications media began in earnest with the invention of the electronic telegraph, and ended with broadcast media such as the radio and forms of telecommunication like the telephone. Digitalization is tied to the invention of computers, the mobile phone, or the Internet.[39]

Mediatization is by no means a neutral process, even though it may appear as a byproduct of a history of technological evolution. Krotz also pictures mediatization as a "process whereby communication refers to media and uses media so that media in the long run increasingly become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture as a whole."[40] Mediatization is primarily driven by the changes in people's communication practices resulting from technological change. For example, an early manifestation of such a shift was observed when orality shifted to literacy. Writing was generally perceived as a technology that stood for increased de-contextualization, distancing, and precision when it first emerged, compared to orality. The change from oral to written culture was a move from sound to visuality, from the dominance of hearing to the dominance of sight and printed texts: in specific, it invited a sense of closure that oral speeches lacked.[41]

One of this study's central claims is that one explicit literary response to mediatization can be found in the genre of reportage. This particular genre

37 Krotz, "Mediatization: A Concept With Which to Grasp Media and Societal Change," 25.

38 Krotz, 24.

39 Couldry and Hepp, *The Mediated Construction of Reality*, 34–52.

40 Krotz, "Mediatization: A Concept With Which to Grasp Media and Societal Change," 24.

41 Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 77–114.

emerged in Europe during the second half of the 19th century and had an explicitly artistic drive. Compared to literary journalism, the theorization of reportage in Europe has revolved rather explicitly around the issue of human mediation when faced with a more generally technologically mediated reality. As I demonstrate in the following chapter, Egon Erwin Kisch's short theoretical manifestos help us to trace reportage's genesis as the account of a specifically human medium. Taken together, this historical contextualization of reportage in relation to mediatization supports what Jonathan Fitzgerald's theory claims, that changes in media technology have historically correlated with boosts in innovation within the field of literary journalism.[42]

The Critique of Technical Mediation

As indicated previously, shifts in favor of increased technical mediation have been viewed critically. Many thinkers have pointed out that mediatization generally changes social interaction by causing a kind of separation or even alienation because technical media spatializes, commodifies, and anesthesticizes human experience. Shortly after the invention of mass printing, the very reproducibility of symbolic forms made possible by electronic media became an important lens for a harsher critique of the effects of technical mediation on human consciousness. In his highly influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), Walter Benjamin observed that new mechanical technologies worked in specific ways as media because of their reproductive powers. As a result of the extraction process, rather than production, reproducible art lacked a unique presence in space and time. In film, for instance, the use of the camera essentially subjected the actor to a series of optical tests, according to which the resulting film was compiled. Hence, Benjamin argued that the actor performed for the camera instead of the audience, which led to the audience taking the distanced position of a critic. "Those who are not visible, not present while he executes his performance", Benjamin stated, "are precisely the ones who will control it. This

42 Fitzgerald, "Setting the Record Straight: Women Literary Journalists Writing Against the Mainstream," 141.

invisibility heightens the authority of their control."[43] Thus, the actor's self-alienation is essentially put to great productive use.

As Benjamin's point only vaguely suggests, the emergence of electronic media technologies, such as cameras and microphones, turned the audience into a new kind of both distanced and involved witness. On the one hand, they affected the audience's experience of reality because their technological representations consisted of a wealth of engaging visual and aural evidence that conveyed a sense of power. This act of witness, as John Ellis has argued,

> enables the viewer to overlook events, to see them from more points of view than are possible for someone physically present: to see from more angles, closer and further away, in slow and fast motion, repeated and refined. Yet at the same time, and by the very act of looking, individuals in the witnessing audience become accomplices in the events they see. Events on a screen make a mute appeal: "You cannot say you did not know."[44]

On the other hand, despite its plural character, this new modality of experience was limited to the audio-visual and had a distancing effect on the audience. Again, according to Ellis,

> the feeling of witness that comes with the audio-visual media is one of separation and powerlessness: the events unfold, like it or not. They unfold elsewhere and – especially in the case of film – another time as well. So for the viewer, powerlessness and safety come hand in hand, provoking a sense of guilt or disinterest.[45]

It is this combination of engagement and distance, which are inherent in newer media technologies such as radio and TV, that has been criticized as having potentially anaesthecizing effects on audiences.[46]

However, the decisive point that Benjamin raised was electronic media's reproducibility more generally. In this vein, the most prominent critique of

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43 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," 33.

44 Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, 11.

45 Ellis, 11.

46 Main critical works with regard to U.S. society and culture that pursue this argument in more detail are, for example, Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*; Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*.

recent mediatization stems, perhaps, from the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard who combined concerns of anaestheticization with concerns about reproduction. Baudrillard sweepingly argued that, in modern mediatized societies, reality disappeared behind a simulated world produced by mass media where "we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real".[47] The main shift, according to Jean Baudrillard, occurs in the moment at which symbolic forms change because "they are no longer mechanically reproduced, but *conceived according to their very reproducibility* [emphasis in original]".[48] According to Baudrillard, it is in this moment that the signs, selected mainly on the basis of their very reproducibility, lose their material referents and give way to processes of simulation that work as perpetual tests according to a binary system of question/answer signals.[49] Baudrillard states with Marshall McLuhan that, in such an environment of mediatized reality, it "is in fact the medium, the very mode of editing, cutting, questioning, enticement, and demand by the medium that rules the process of signification."[50] One main consequence of mediatization, therefore, is the increased empowerment of technical media.

The analysis of the recent mediatization wave of datafication, characterized by computation and information, has to be read as a continuation of these earlier concerns. Today, the test's binary logic, identified by Benjamin, has found its most powerful expression in the computer. Frederic Jameson, for instance, has argued that the computer has changed the ways in which we conceive aesthetic representation and contributes to what he perceives as flatness or depthlessness, as a medium of reproduction rather than production. For Jameson, this is manifest in the expanding culture of the image, a weakening of temporality, and a waning of affect.[51]

The computer's most distinctive feature as medium, however, might be its capacity to mediate itself by way of a kind of reduced reflexivity. Mark B. N. Hansen has argued that "for the first time in history, the technical infrastructure of media is no longer homologous with its surface appearance."[52] This is to say that the computer offers no correlation between its technical storage faculty and sensory human perception. Consequently, Hansen perceives a separa-

47 Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, 34.
48 Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 56.
49 Baudrillard, 62.
50 Baudrillard, 65.
51 Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."
52 Hansen, "New Media," 178.

tion of technics and media that, in turn, illuminates two specific and different functions of media. On the one hand:

> to exteriorize human experience in durable, repeatable, and hence transmissible form; on the other, to mediate for human experience the non- (or proto-) phenomenological, fine-scale temporal computational processes that increasingly make up the infrastructure conditioning all experience in our world today. What is mediated in both cases is, to be sure, human experience, but according to two distinct programs: for whereas media in the first, traditional sense mediates human experience itself (its content is that experience), media in the second sense mediates the technical conditions that make possible such experience – the 'transcendental technicity' underlying real experience in our world today.[53]

In ways similar to Benjamin's camera, today's computers still contain the power to shape reality according to a principle of quantitative selection. As media, they are most effective, as Theodore Porter has argued, "if the world they aim to describe can be remade in their image."[54] People's communication practices change in relation to the patterns of the computer if, as the theory on mediatization suggests, the computer has become relevant for the social construction of everyday life, society, and culture.

Writers as Human Media

Taken together, the demands of allegory, the mediality of literary journalism, and the analysis of mediatization and its historical connection to reportage call for a detailed conception of the writer as a decidedly human medium. The theory that I will present in the following chapter acknowledges the specifically human capacities of perception and sensemaking, as well as the complexities of communication within the framework of professional writing. Such a theory also has to be situated within a larger and cultural, rather than functional, understanding of communication. In *Speaking Into the Air* (1999), John Durham Peters details an idea of communication that emphasizes dissemination rather than dialogue. For Peters, the idea of a perfect union of communicants in mutual understanding is misleading because of the communicants' fundamental

53 Hansen, 180.

54 Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*, 43.

spatial and temporal differences. Instead, it is the listener or reader who complements the received message as he or she interprets it.[55] It is this imbalance, as Peters shows, which marks the very possibility of social interaction. He argues that "communication should be measured by the successful coordination of behaviors"[56] and understood, thus, as "more fundamentally a political and ethical problem than a semantic one".[57] In sum, Peters's model of communication works well as the basis for a more elaborated theory of the writers or reporters, as the main generative subject in reportage, because it takes their very subjective specificities and ambivalences and their mass-medial function into account.

In line with Peters's larger theory, I conceive of writers of reportage as intentional eyewitnesses who witness by assignment.[58] In my theory, I use the analysis of witnessing provided by German media theorist Sybille Krämer based on the messenger as a figure where acts of inter- and excorporation intersect.[59] I understand these processes to take place with, within, and through the writer or reporter, thereby composing a particular overall mediality of the reporter as communicating human subject. I understand mediation as, according to Andreas Hepp and Friedrich Krotz, referring to "a very fundamental moment of communication as symbolic interaction" or construction of meaning.[60] I pair these with theoretical considerations of reportage by German literary scholar Michael Geisler. He was active during a rather recent wave of reportage theorizing in Germany in the 1970s and 1980s. Crucially, for Geisler, it was the reporter's very self-awareness as medium that defined the genre of reportage, which he distinguished from other journalistic text forms: "The degree to which the reporter is aware of this mediality [*Vermitteltheit*], how he applies it consciously and ultimately also makes the reader aware of it, marks the distance between the report and reportage."[61] In ways similar to Krämer's earlier grammar of witnessing, Geisler identified three areas of mediation, which can be attributed to the writer's sensory experience, the person of the writer, and the written text. He names, first, the selection of the excerpt

55 Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, 268.

56 Peters, 268.

57 Peters, 30.

58 Peters, "Like a Thief in the Night," 197.

59 Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, 83.

60 Hepp and Krotz, "Mediated Worlds – Understanding Everyday Mediatization," 3.

61 Geisler, *Die literarische Reportage in Deutschland: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen eines operativen Genres*, 97.

of reality experienced by the writer; second, the person or character of the reporter; and third, the structuring of the portrayed selection of experienced reality in the text.[62]

Geisler's concept serves as a crucial launchpad for my own concept of the reporter as human medium. I distinguish four mediated domains in which writers of reportage are active, on the basis of both his and Krämer's findings, as well as those of Ashuri and Pinchevski. The first one I will call the area of *work*, namely their very intentional and selective production of experience of reality as mediated by professional journalistic practice and incentives. The second one is the area of *experience*, which concerns the writers' physical experience of the real world as mediated by their senses. The third area I call *interpretation*, since it relates to their explicit self-reflection and to the deliberations that are mediated by thought. The fourth and final area, *transmission*, refers to their communicative interactions with readers mediated by written language, that is to say, text.

The area of *work* is primarily mediated by the power structures and incentives at play in the professional field of freelance journalism. Freelancing is rather typical for works of literary journalism. For instance, Mark Kramer has argued:

> The defining mark of literary journalism is the personality of the writer, the individual and intimate voice of a whole, candid person not representing, defending, or speaking on behalf of any institution, not newspaper, corporation, government, ideology, field of study, chamber of commerce, or travel destination.[63]

Although Kramer somewhat idealizes the literary journalist's independence here, he raises an important point: freelance reporters adopt a professional role that is separate from the journalistic work that occurs within professional power structures.

This aspect includes the fact that writers deal more individually and freely with fundamental issues of knowledge production that are typically negotiated and institutionalized within either newsrooms or publishing houses. The most prominent of these are: Which aspects of reality deserve their specific attention and why? How are these aspects to be processed and turned into a text

62 Geisler, 96.

63 Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists."

and why? The first question concerns what is commonly called gatekeeping: an inevitable act of selection that takes place when researching for reportage. The second question concerns the professional principles that they are required to adhere to, such as telling the truth, being disciplined in verification, and maintaining independence.[64] How they select what merits their attention and how they turn the fruit of their attention's labor into a written text is, thus, affected by what Ashuri and Pinchevski call "the conditions of witnessing," the professional relationships with editors and readers in the context of which the texts are produced.[65] Needless to say, these relationships are deeply affected by capitalist incentives. As a contractor working for a publisher, a freelance writer produces and delivers a text that has been commissioned. The text is then printed and turned into a resource in order to attract attention as it performs in the media business's attention economy.[66] In sum, the work is performed both by the reporter, who researches and writes a reportage story, and by the story itself. In both cases, there are strong incentives to create a certain kind of value within a capitalist logic that mediates the work's performance.

In contrast to the area of work, the main mediation taking place in the areas of *experience* and *interpretation* is more explicitly concerned with the making of meaning that occupies the heart of reportage. If this meaning-making is affected in a rather sterile manner by the pervasive qualities of capitalist logic in the area of work, then it is utterly subjective in acts mediating experience and interpretation. Fully embodied by writers, these acts of mediation ascribe meaning to phenomenal experience and make sense through thought. What is central to this integrated approach, which views all human meaning-making as fundamentally body-based, is a broad understanding of aesthetics rooted in the premise that "all meaningful experience is aesthetic experience."[67] Crucially, as Mark Johnson argues, this entails that "[b]ody and mind are not separate realities, but rather aspects or dimensions of a process of organism-environment interaction, in which organism and environment are interrelated, in-

64 Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism. What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, 5; Chris Wilson lists a range of texts on how these principles can be applied to specifically narrative journalism. Wilson, "Chapter 1: Introduction and First Principles."

65 Ashuri and Pinchevski, "Witnessing as Field," 140.

66 Celis Bueno, *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*; Franck, "The Economy of Attention in the Age of Neoliberalism"; Wu, *The Attention Merchants*.

67 Johnson, *The Aesthetics of Meaning and Thought*, 2.

terdependent and interdefined."[68] Meaning is produced aesthetically in these processes of interaction, which make up our ideas of ourselves and our world. More specifically, it is past, present, or possible future experience that defines the meaning we assign to people, events, or objects.[69]

Experience and its interpretation have a fundamentally qualitative and temporal character. Following the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, Mark Johnson argues that the human mediation of experiential situations occurs in particular reactions to particular aspects of a remembered past, a perceived present, or to an imagined future experience.[70] Although every such experiential situation has a distinctive unifying quality, any attempt to assign meaning thereto or to conceptualize it will necessarily select some of its aspects and will, ultimately, miss the unity of the entire situation.[71] Johnson also shows that any meaning assigned to any experiential situation is felt before it is known. This temporal hierarchy associates feelings and emotions with a sense of immediacy.[72] This is why they are particularly important in human acts of interpreting past, present, or possible future events. Johnson states:

> Emotional response patterns are, literally, changes in our body state in response to previous changes in our body state caused by our interactions with our environment, and they usually precede any reflective thinking or conceptualization. In that sense, they might be called "noncognitive" (as not conceptual and not propositional); but they are nevertheless at the heart of our cognitive processes, taken in the broadest sense, as concerned with all the ways we experience, make, and transform meaning.[73]

Johnson has a lot more to say about this distinction, as well as about the importance of emotion and feelings for the human creation of meaning. Most important for the mediation occurring through writers' sensory experience and interpretation, however, is the proximity of emotions and feelings to the sensory perception of particular characteristics of reality and their distinction from later reflective thinking. As primary, physical human acts of meaning-making, emotional responses play an important role in the writer's interpretation

68 Johnson, 14.
69 Johnson, 14.
70 Johnson, 15–16.
71 Johnson, 17.
72 Johnson, 19–20.
73 Johnson, 21.

of reality and function as a crucial threshold between sensory experience and interpretation.

Another of the human medium's singular qualities is the fundamental interrelatedness of human organism and environment. This essentially supports Usher's claim to the specific epistemic quality of reporters' 'being there'.[74] The specific processes of this interrelation are detailed in a recent book by the science journalist Annie Murphy Paul. In fact, extra-neural resources are crucial to both human thinking processes and physical activity, surroundings, and human company have all been proven to shape the human interpretation of experience. Murphy Paul distinguishes between *embodied cognition*, *situated cognition*, and *distributed cognition*. Embodied cognition is concerned with the body's role in thinking and, for instance, how hand gestures can enhance the human interpretation of abstract concepts. Situated cognition refers to the effects that place can have on human thinking, such as how environments can instill a sense of human belonging or control and can heighten performance and concentration, for example. Distributed cognition means the ways in which human cooperation affects individual human action and can produce results that exceed the possibilities of a group's members' individual capabilities. Annie Murphy Paul's observations are based on the theoretical considerations outlined in a paper by Andy Clark and David Chalmers. The two philosophers examine how the mind can be extended by technology, such as a notebook, and argued in 1998 that "there is nothing sacred about the skull and the skin"[75] and "once the hegemony of skin and skull is usurped, we may be able to see ourselves more truly as creatures of the world."[76] This view contradicts popular metaphors of the human brain as either a computer or muscle and suggests a discrete entity that is locked in the skull that determines the quality of human thinking, has fixed traits that can be measured, ranked, and compared, and are congruent with the significance of individualism in postmodern Western societies.[77]

The area of *transmission* highlights the mediation that shapes the transmission of physically produced meaning that is stored and distributed in both

74 Usher, "News Cartography and Epistemic Authority in the Era of Big Data: Journalists as Map-Makers, Map-Users, and Map-Subjects."

75 Clark and Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," 14.

76 Clark and Chalmers, 18.

77 Murphy Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain*, 9.

writing and text. It, thus, similarly emphasizes writing's fundamentally social aspect. Most important in this regard is the writers' awareness that acts of reading themselves represent a human experience that entails processes of individual and communal meaning-making. This means, according to the basic premises of reader-response theory, that a text does not really exist until it is read by a reader. This view accords readers a fairly active role as producers of a text's meaning. By reading, then, they enter into collaborative relationships of meaning-making with the text's authors.[78] As Stanley Fish has argued, in so doing readers enter different interpretive communities "made up of those who share interpretive strategies … for constituting [texts'] properties and assigning [texts'] intentions".[79] Basically, any potential meaning that is communicated in any text is contingent upon its interpretation by its readers, who may interpret it differently at either the same time or at different times. Just like witnesses then, reporters fundamentally depend on the audience's trust.

Still, there are nuances. The reading process at play in nonfiction differs, as Phillip Lopate has argued, from the one involved in reading works of fiction. While fiction may offer the possibility of delving into a created world, potentially to the point of forgetting that reading is taking place at all, nonfiction permanently reminds readers that they are in contact with another, real human being working out a problem. Lopate states: "What makes me want to keep reading a nonfiction text is the encounter with a surprising, well-stocked mind as it takes on the challenge of the next sentence, paragraph, and thematic problem it has set for itself."[80] The experience of these processes of reading and corresponding meaning-making takes place, of course, away from the text. Nevertheless, we can still find traces of the writers' awareness of the readers' agency and their reading for the story of a real human being working to solve a problem within reportage texts. For instance, it can manifest itself rather explicitly in what Chris Wilson, in his study of immersion journalism, has called the second-order narrative: "a coexisting literary story about how the text we're reading ostensibly came to be researched and written."[81] Writers' awareness of readers' agency can also manifest itself more subtly in a text's particular formal or stylistic aspects, such as in its composition or direct reader address.

78 Cuddon and Preston, "Reader-Response Theory," 726.

79 Fish, "Interpreting the 'Variorum,'" 483.

80 Lopate, *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*, 6.

81 Wilson, "Immersion and Second-Order Narrative," 347.

Of course, all four of these domains of mediation should not be seen as equal instantiations of one and the same kind of mediation, but which instead come in different combinations and hierarchies. For instance, as I hinted at previously, a post-structural theorist of literature would point out that the area of transmission rules all of the others, since all acts of mediation are ultimately expressed in text. By contrast, a more strictly Marxist reader would point to the importance of the work's circumstances that pervade all acts of mediation, very much including transmission. However, as will be seen in my concrete analyses of concrete texts, these areas mediate each other as they interact and intersect in occasionally wonderous ways that defy clear-cut distinctions and isolations, but which nonetheless produce impressions of peculiarly mediating subjectivities. My main point with respect to these four areas is not, then, primarily their conceptual analytical separation, but rather their real simultaneous integration into the very real physical presence of a human writer existing in space and time. The main claim of my analysis is that this integrated mediation contrasts the real technological forces at play in mediatization that separate symbolic and material action.

Unlike fictional literature, it is also this integrated character of human mediation in nonfiction that necessitates a narratological approach that does not strictly separate author from narrator. In the following analyses, the texts are understood in the sense of the rhetorical narratologists James S. Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz as being designed by their "authors (consciously or not) to affect readers in particular ways."[82] Consequently, this means that the author as a real, existing human being bears responsibility for the narrator as a textual persona. The text thus appears as the rhetorical performance of an author who both narrates and argues for the credibility of his or her narration. To a large degree, the foundations of both of these functions—narration and argumentation—are inevitably intertwined and performed off the page. The writer conducts research for the potential story and this research itself becomes part of the story that he or she ultimately tells in the text. This means that the actions of writers performed off the page can be viewed not just as merely plot-driving scenes, featuring an intra-diegetic narrator in the story being told, but also as instances of the writers' self-characterization in the text as reliable and trustworthy narrators.[83]

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82 Phelan and Rabinowitz, "Narrative as Rhetoric," 5.

83 In his introduction to reading narrative journalism, Chris Wilson argues this crucial case in much greater detail. He states: "Matters of style and selection really *can't* be

Presence and Production

My theory of the reporter as human medium implies certain consequences for analyses of literary journalism. As mentioned previously, it insists on the very material processes of meaning-making in reportage depending on the very existence and presence of a physical human body as the precondition for communication. This approach is decisive because the human medium's physical presence implies a stronger human agency and carries a specific epistemic quality. Nikki Usher has shown that reporters' 'being there' amounts to a claim to place-based epistemic authority that includes the communication of what this presence means in ways not available to other social actors. "Historically", she argues, "journalists retained this role by exercising power over the platforms people used to access news and by taking advantage of their material resources, professional practices, and routines".[84] Consequently, when seen as *human* media, reporters engage in the very *production* of knowledge, not merely in its neutral transmission.

This perspective amounts to a reconstitution of transmission as generative rather than neutral. As Sybille Krämer has shown, this reconstitution, in turn, only works if the witness's—or the reporter's—audience considers him or her to be credible and when situated within the context of larger intersubjective communication. It is the result of a fundamentally social process, essentially, where knowledge is produced by way of witnessing.[85] This materialist perspective on communication, then, ultimately also serves to draw attention to how, as Raymond Williams has argued, the means of communication are also always means of production.[86]

Taken together, my approach amounts to a rather specific theoretical stance that is concerned with nonfictional narratives that integrate embodied and discursive knowledge in the particular role of the writer as witness or, more generally, as medium. I necessarily depart from some of the main arguments offered in critical debates about narrative in general, which are mostly

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separated from the interpretive work of a given work of narrative journalism: rather, they tell us *how* a journalist interprets the events he or she reports on." Wilson, "Chapter 1: Introduction and First Principles."

84 Usher, "News Cartography and Epistemic Authority in the Era of Big Data: Journalists as Map-Makers, Map-Users, and Map-Subjects," 248.

85 Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, 145–146.

86 Williams, "Means of Communication as Means of Production."

based on concepts of narrative fiction or text more generally.[87] For instance, from my point of view, writers of reportage are unable to definitively represent reality because they never work alone. Moreover, they always fundamentally operate in cooperation with their readers and depend upon their attention, understanding, and trust. However, this by no means amounts to them being dead, even metaphorically, as one of the most prominent poststructuralist arguments has posited.[88] These truths or facts are constructed, but not fictional, if reportage texts could still be deemed to communicate true or factual stories. They are subjectively and socially constructed by way of the writers' and readers' mutual acknowledgment of the very possibilities and limits of their own bodies, as well as by the very temporal and spatial separation that is inherent in communication. In the present study, I use this framework of the writer as human medium in two ways; initially, it functions as an existential definition of the authorial subject and the delineation of a specific genre of nonfiction in which the roles of author and narrator are integrated. Subsequently, and more importantly, I use it as a prism through which to identify self-reflection represented in the texts.

Self-Reflection in Recent American Reportage

As my analyses show, each text carries a unique imprint of self-reflection. In each case, the four domains of mediation are manifested, albeit to different degrees, and are shaped in distinct ways. My intention was not to mechanically assign them to different passages, but instead to use them as launchpads for textual analyses that seek to illuminate broader issues—communing, subjectivity, and violence—in modern American society and culture. The texts analyzed here are all products of a human processing of intentional experience and were composed by American writers. The writers all left the comfort of their desks to experience contemporary realities from the perspective of an American subject confronted with the specific task outlined by Foster Wallace. Their self-reflection, thus, showcases the actual display of the self in modern American society. It reflects upon this self's intrinsic construction and agency and

87 Kreiswirth, "Merely Telling Stories? Narrative and Knowledge in the Human Sciences," 302.

88 Barthes, "The Death of the Author."

it looks at how this self is part of a larger community that is shaped by human action in both symbolic and material reality.

First and foremost, as I explore in more detail in the third section of the following theory chapter, their self-reflection amounts to the self-affirmation of the reporter as human medium. In nonfictional literature, such as reportage, critique by way of self-reflection often has a defining function. However, many of the most popular analytical concepts used to analyze self-reflection in literary texts, such as metafictionality or autofiction, apply exclusively to fictional literature and hence to a decidedly different kind of mediation. Still, overlaps exist. For instance, as Mary K. Holland has demonstrated, various links between realism and metafiction have been made throughout the course of theorizing the two concepts. One of the main insights into these connections and overlaps is that literature foregrounds the inevitable integration of form and idea.[89] My claim is that reportage writers also foreground a roughly corresponding kind of integration in the texts analyzed, as they integrate the negotiation of concerns pertaining to the material production of both experience and its symbolic meaning.

I have selected the sample of texts according to their date of publication, following David Foster Wallace's iconic essay collection in 1997.[90] As the means of their production indicate, they were all initially produced for publication in an American magazine at short-story-length; only a few were amended and extended in order to be included in book collections. Where this was the case, I have used the newer version for analysis. In order to conform to the generic frame of reportage, I have only selected texts that primarily relied upon the American author's subjective, first-hand experience of reality and combined this with a high degree of self-reflection. The selection also seeks to exemplify the diversity of authorial perspectives that shed light upon specific themes from different subjective angles. Through the selection of three texts by George Saunders and two by John Jeremiah Sullivan, it furthermore examines the diversity of manifestations of self-reflection within the body of a single author's work.

I have organized the nine textual analyses into three thematic chapters in order to illuminate their allegorical rhetorics and cultural and social specificity. These chapters highlight how writers' specific self-reflection as human media

89 Holland, *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism*, 53.

90 Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments*.

emphasizes the subjective construction of reality's complex and singular mediality. Against the background of the social and cultural issues at stake, they furthermore ponder the individual and collective human agency in the material and symbolic world- and meaning-making more generally.

The first chapter of textual analyses examines how writers reflect the irreproducibility of human experience as they combine self-reflection with analyses of human communing in tourism. Due to its influential character, I begin with David Foster Wallace's "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again" (1997).[91] In this text, Foster Wallace combats the despair that he feels aboard a cruise ship with an intense exercise in self-reflection that seeks to unveil the insincerity of the consumerist narratives shaping the experience of the cruise community. Foster Wallace, thus, creates a specific kind of awareness and attentive subjectivity in order to engage with a challenging reality. More optimistic than Wallace, George Saunders describes his experience of Dubai in, rather hopeful, terms as a manifestation of the possibilities of capitalist globalization. In "The New Mecca" (2007),[92] he identifies more basic human similarities and possibilities. He productively engages in social and communicative interactions, subject to the rules of global capitalism of course. Finally, the third text, John Jeremiah Sullivan's "Upon This Rock" (2012),[93] explores the power of religion to create community by means of the shared belief in a narrative. Attending a Christian rock festival, Sullivan contrasts his own inability to believe in God with Jesus's aestheticization of weakness, thereby reflecting on the shared aspects of storytelling in religion and in writing about religion. Although their approaches and interpretations vary, the writers counter the ritual performance of pre-fabricated trust in touristic experience with narratives of more fundamentally uncertain communing in all three texts.

The second analytical chapter looks at texts of reportage that employ authorial self-reflection to profile other human media and thereby illustrate the possibilities of irreproducible, singular human self-creation in contemporary mediatized societies. The first text, George Saunders's "Buddha Boy" (2007),[94] examines the physical possibilities of mind-control, exemplified by a meditating teenage bodhisattva. This is contrasted with Saunders's own acts of mind-control in his interpretation of experience. In this demonstration of his own

91 Foster Wallace, "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again."
92 Saunders, "The New Mecca."
93 Sullivan, "Upon This Rock."
94 Saunders, "Buddha Boy."

mind's agency, he lays the foundation for the case that the capabilities of the human subject to make itself are potentially wider than humanely understandable. In the chapter's second textual analysis, I demonstrate how John Jeremiah Sullivan's "Getting Down to What is Really Real" (2011) playfully juxtaposes the self-awareness of the cast members of a reality TV show with his own self-awareness as the performed character of his writing. As he turns his own self-awareness into an object, he illuminates the reality-TV stars' acting as playful identity construction. In the third text analyzed in the chapter, "Delusion is the Thing With Feathers" (2017),[95] Mac McClelland portrays two ornithologists on a research trip to Cuba. By showing how her own experience differs vastly from those of the two birders, she also points to the constructed character of their subjectivities and to the productive aspects of difference. In all three texts, writers zoom in on their subjects' performance of reflexivity that reveals human subjectivity's existential plasticity and a realm of possibility for change that resists objectification.

With the final group of case studies, I analyze how three texts engage with violence by considering its reflexive mediality and the consequential limits of technological mediation primed for reproducibility. In "Tent City, U.S.A." (2009),[96] for instance, George Saunders recounts the story of his own experience in a homeless camp in Fresno, California. In his self-reflective report on the structural violence of homelessness, he links the precarious social and material conditions in the camp to the fundamentally social aspects of communication. In "Should We Get Used To Mass Shootings?" (2016), Michael Paterniti visits scenes of past mass shootings and reflects upon the effects of the mediation of gun violence. By analyzing how the personal and industrial mediation of past shootings affects potential future acts of violence, he points to deadly violence's fundamentally objectifying character. In the final text under discussion, Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's "A Most American Terrorist" (2017),[97] the writer's moral production of experience serves as a testament to the racist reality of contemporary U.S. society. Necessary, harrowing, and revealing, her black body's research experience integrates reflections on intention, interpretation, and communication as acts of nonviolent resistance; she reveals racist violence's fundamentally cultural and social roots by detailing the complexities of the making of her own role. As the authors demonstrate in

95 McClelland, "Delusion Is the Thing with Feathers."

96 Saunders, *Tent City, U.S.A.*

97 Ghansah, "A Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylann Roof."

these three texts, the material and symbolic causes and effects of violence are deeply intertwined. As a consequence, the authors' complex acts of mediation turn into urgent acts of witnessing imbued with a moral imperative.

As I detail in the conclusion, the writers' self-affirmation, as decidedly human media, can be read as a reaction to recent developments in media technology. As kinds of supermedia that mimic humans, computers have come to shape modern Western societies and cultures with their capabilities of integrating symbolic and material acts by way of a limited reflexivity under a binary logic. Although this is never directly addressed, writers' increased self-reflection can be interpreted as an answer to such technological mediation, given that it seeks a more humble and humane connection with readers that resists reproducibility and insists on the mediated quality and fundamental ethics of all communication about human experience.

1 Reportage and Mediation