1.3 The Human Medium Inspecting Itself

The theoretical background of the existential character of such human media, albeit not explicitly tied to reportage, has recently been scrutinized further; John Durham Peters, for instance, has emphasized the fundamental connection between witness and medium when he called the former a "paradigm case of a medium: the means by which experience is supplied to others who lack the original."[1] Such a general assertion, however, necessarily functions against the backdrop of more detailed and contested ideas of media and communication. In her incisive study, German media philosopher Sybille Krämer has built upon—among others—Durham Peters's observations in order to account for a kind of material shift in media theory. Her fundament is the distinction between the concepts of sign carrier and medium. Signs are generally thought of as being material and, hence, as perceptible and sensible. Yet this materiality of the sign itself is considered secondary to the sign's comparatively invisible meaning. Media, however, are conventionally imagined as primarily showing the perceptible message while making themselves disappear behind it. Roughly put:

> the procedural logic of signs fulfils the metaphysical expectation to search for meaning over and beyond the sensible, but the functional logic of media reverses this metaphysical expectation by going over and beyond the meaning and confronting the sensibility, materiality, and corporeality of media concealed behind it.[2]

This reversion is key to my study's theoretical stance because it corresponds to the ways in which the focus is extended from the textual product to the reporter's materiality.

1 Peters, "Witnessing," 2009, 26.

2 Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, 35.

In her analysis of media's materiality, Krämer distinguishes between two larger theoretical frames: the technical transmission model and the personal understanding model of communication.[3] While both concepts presume a distance and difference between sender and receiver, which communication attempts to overcome, their specific understandings of this bridging of difference diverge strongly. Communication works asymmetrically and unidirectionally in the model of technical transmission, which goes back to the work of Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver; its main goal is to produce connections between entities that remain different.[4] According to Krämer, "it is precisely through and in the successful transmission that the sense of being distant from one another is stabilized and reinforced."[5]

In contrast, the personal understanding model, which stems from Jürgen Habermas's work, views communication as a symmetrical, reciprocal interaction that functions like a dialogue. Its communicative performance, Krämer states, "consists not only in establishing a connection across distance, but also in fostering agreement and creating a unified society whose goal is precisely to overcome distance and difference."[6] In the former model, media—with all their imperfections—are indispensable because they establish connections "despite and in the distance"[7] which separates sender and receiver. In the latter model, however, media function imperceptibly as they "provide undistorted and unmediated access to something that they themselves are not".[8] In both communication models, media process communication as they function as thirds between sender and receiver that are not absolutely neutral.

Krämer's theory essentially amounts to a rehabilitation of the technical transmission model. In her theory, the processing of communication is called transmission and Krämer's transmission has four key attributes:

> (1) Transmissions presuppose a difference that is not reducible to spatial or temporal distance. (2) The role of the mediator is not always to bridge and level this difference, but also to maintain it. Media… thus make it possible to *deal* with this difference. (3) The function of the messenger… is to *make something perceptible*. … (4) This is possible through a transformation that mani-

3 Krämer, 21.
4 Krämer, 21–22.
5 Krämer, 23.
6 Krämer, 22.
7 Krämer, 23.
8 Krämer, 23.

> fests a difference by neutralizing what is 'singular' in each case. Medial mediation thus creates the impression of *immediacy*.[9]

Krämer conceives of the medium as messenger in her model, which corresponds to these attributes. Although this model might already suggest a human figure, Krämer really sketches the messenger more generally, thereby also encompassing non-human entities that function like media in the sense of a transmitter.

The Mediality of Witness and Reporter

Still, her theory fits the early conceptions of the reporter, due to its rather general functional approach. Consequently, I use Krämer's theoretical considerations in order to illuminate the reporter's specific mediality. The aim is to understand his or her very being as an "elementary dimension of human life and culture", rather than to distinguish him or her from other media.[10] As I hope to show, it is precisely the general character-encompassing technical media of Krämer's theory that help me to identify the very human nature of the reporter's ontology as medium. Krämer's own analysis of witnessing as specific transmission is particularly illuminating in this respect because it connects the theoretical considerations on media with the specific definition of the reporter as eyewitness.

A witness is a particularly complex medium because it both creates and transmits knowledge to a receiver; it essentially *produces* knowledge. This mechanism is profoundly social because it only works under the premise of the receiver's trust in and credibility of the witness.[11] Looking at legal witnessing, Krämer has conceived a grammar of witnessing containing five different aspects: (1) the witness's fundamental creation of evidence; (2) that this evidence was created by way of physical presence and sensory perception; (3) this private experience, in turn, is translated into a public statement; (4) this statement is part of a dialogue or interaction with its audience; and (5) the witness's credibility is decisive.[12] Importantly, witnesses are always human

9 Krämer, 165.
10 Krämer, 75.
11 Krämer, 144–146.
12 Krämer, 146–149.

beings, in particular when examined through the lens of media. This creates an insoluble tension between the witness's depersonalization in its function as transmitting medium and his or her existential quality as an experiencing human being.[13] On the one hand, this tension manifests itself in the relationship between the witness and the experienced event, which cannot be neutrally perceived.[14] On the other, it is present in the discursification of the witness' experience and in his or her speech acts in dialogue with the unknowing audience.[15]

The theorization of the witness—what Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel have called testimony studies—has largely occurred in two different camps that lean towards emphasizing either the witness's depersonalization or his or her humanity. The study of discursive testimony usually encompasses epistemological questions concerning the possibilities of objectivity, which are concerned with witnessing as a knowledge practice.[16] Studies of embodied testimony, conversely, usually revolve around existential questions of memory, suffering, or trauma and concern the immediate embodiment of the experience of violence.[17] While the conversations concerning the former strand of testimony studies have largely taken place in philosophy, media, or law theory, debating the latter—intensified in particular by the literary processing of the Holocaust—has occurred in critical theory predominantly. From this field, it has brought forth various analyses at the intersection of violence and culture, via the concepts of the survivor and the martyr for instance.[18]

Reporters do not neatly fit into this binary categorization. The two strands of discursive and embodied testimony refer to the two distinct meanings of witness as neutral third (testis) or as survivor (superstes) first described by Émile Benveniste, as Krämer and Weigel show.[19] While journalism has been associated with informing the public by speaking the truth, it is important to note that, as Krämer and Weigel argue, "the truth at stake in the customary disclosure of information remains a feature of linguistic utterances that lay claim

13 Krämer, 151.

14 Krämer, 152.

15 Krämer, 153.

16 Krämer and Weigel, "Introduction," xi.

17 Krämer and Weigel, xii.

18 Krämer and Weigel, xiii–xxv; Kilby and Rowland, *The Future of Testimony: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Witnessing*.

19 Krämer and Weigel, "Introduction," xi.

to validity irrespective of the person making the utterance."[20] Consequently, if reporters themselves are to be understood as human media, as in the genre of reportage, then they must engage in both discursive and embodied witnessing and must be subject to the larger tensions inherent to both types.

More importantly, then, reporters as media should primarily be distinguished as *professional* witnesses in public service. As such, Tamat Ashuri and Amit Pinchevski have pointed out that reporters essentially function "as actors in an institutionalized practice of witnessing with its specific combination of competence and circumstance."[21] This also applies to organized humanitarian witnesses such as NGO workers or human rights watchers.[22] However, whereas such humanitarian witnesses also usually occupy the position of the survivor witness,[23] reporters generally hold a more decidedly unaffiliated position. War correspondents, for instance, have been ruled under international law not to be compelled to testify in war crimes proceedings.[24] Moreover, what sets reporters apart from other quite specifically interested professional witnesses is their acting in the public's, rather general, interest. "Journalism's first loyalty", as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel have argued, "is to citizens."[25] This primary obligation to readers or viewers holds, at least in theory; in practice, however, it identifies one central conflict within reporters between what Krämer has referred to as their production of evidence and their physical experience, their discursification of private experience, and the expectations of their audience or readership.[26] As argued previously, such conflicts are negotiated, rather than resolved. Hence, as Tamar Ashuri and Amit Pinchevski have argued, the very conditions of a reporter's witnessing "are never divorced from ideology."[27] The specific theorization of the reporter as witness sharpens the awareness of such inherent conflicts and aporiae.

20 Krämer and Weigel, xi.

21 Ashuri and Pinchevski, "Witnessing as Field," 139.

22 Hartog, "The Presence of the Witness," 14–15; Norridge, "Professional Witnessing in Rwanda: Human Rights and Creative Responses to Genocide."

23 Hartog, "The Presence of the Witness," 15.

24 Spellman, "Journalist or Witness? Reporters and War Crimes Tribunals."

25 Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism. What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, 52.

26 Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, 147–148.

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

Self-Reflection: Embodied Interplay of Confirmation and Critique

One tool at the hand of writers to address such contradictions is the expression of self-awareness regarding their inherent existence in acts of mediation. In written text the intricate interconnection of acts of argued and narrated mediation effectively expresses a writer's self-awareness as a human medium who actively shapes and produces meaning, rather than uncovering a meaning that exists independently. Significantly, as I aim to show in my analyses, this subjective self-awareness does not necessarily result in solipsistic introspection, but has the potential to build a sense of community. Exhibiting considerable confidence, writers who are self-aware in this way exemplify the possibilities of collaborative human experience and action. This "exemplary character of production," as Benjamin has pointed out, carries the potential to "turn readers … into collaborators."[28] Crucially, the mere acknowledgment of the core role of the mediating function in literary journalism also entails a collaborative idea of human communication that counteracts classical realism's anesthetic qualities, which David Foster Wallace has criticized previously. Benjamin's and Wallace's positions suggest a quality of self-awareness that serves to enhance intersubjective communication and collaboration because it is particularly relatable to other humans.

This assertion is backed up by philosophical investigations of self-knowledge more generally. According to this line of work, self-reflection is a basic trait of human beings. Crucially, it is precisely this ability that signifies the social basis of both individual human consciousness and subjectivity. At its core lies a complex dialogical interaction that George Herbert Mead has described as follows:

> It is by means of reflexiveness–the turning back of the experience of the individual upon himself–that the whole social process is … brought into the experience of the individuals involved in it; it is by such means, which enable the individual to take the attitude of the other toward himself, that the individual is able consciously to adjust himself to that process, and to modify the resultant of that process in any given social act in terms of his adjustment to it. Reflexiveness, then, is the essential condition, within the social process, for the development of mind.[29]

28 Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," 89.

29 Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 134.

When seen from this perspective, human self-reflection is a rather general basis for human social existence. Humans perform it in countless and different complex ways, depending on the context. Unlike the kind of test that Walter Benjamin observed taking place in the actor performing for the camera, self-reflection is a kind of internal evaluation vis-à-vis the other with a theoretically indeterminable outcome. It is unlike any kind of test performed by any technical medium, such as the camera or the computer, and it has no clear criteria but is simply one characteristic of the modern subject's (self-)creation.

Still, more specific tendencies or risks have been identified against this larger backdrop. Claudia Jünke, for instance, has argued that, throughout the 20th century, the modern subject has reconstructed itself from within a dialectics of self-weakening and self-affirmation.[30] Florian Lippert and Marcel Schmid have also pointed out that this process of (individual and collective) self-making is the expression of a collective psychology that is necessary for modern democracies, given that it can be influenced by fears of self-weakening through potential change that is prompted either by self-reflection, or by an inability to self-distance and reflect.[31]

Consequently, any display of self-reflection in reportage carries three main aspects. It is—at the same time—a kind of skill that is employed intentionally; an act of self-affirmation; and an act of self-weakening. This insight carries two main epistemological and existential consequences. If we view reporters as decidedly human media, it is— apart from the physical mediation described previously—their ability to reflect upon themselves that marks them as such. If we view reporters as particularly trustworthy or sincere communicators, again, then their self-reflection might also decisively contribute to this effect. As Ursula Renz has argued with regard to self-knowledge, on the one hand, "our being a person or mental subject depends in a constitutive way on some form of epistemic self-intimacy."[32] On the other hand, she further states that "we are also used to thinking that what qualifies someone as wise person is, among other things, the unusual extent or depth of his or her self-knowledge."[33] Importantly, then, self-reflection can work as a kind of reflexive meta-critique

30 Jünke, "Selbstschwächung Und Selbstbehauptung – Zur Dialektik Moderner Subjektivität," 9.

31 Lippert et al., "Read Thyself: Cultural Self-Reflection and the Relevance of Literary 'self'-Labels," 3–4.

32 Renz, "Introduction," 2.

33 Renz, 2.

that encompasses both existential and epistemological concerns. As indicated previously, David Foster Wallace and Walter Benjamin seem to view critical self-weakening as a necessary precondition for successful self-affirmation in their claims that a sense of heightened scrutiny or more encompassing awareness has to be introduced into the ways in which writers cover reality.

However, there are important nuances to self-reflection. Self-aware perspectives in human social conduct are part of what the French sociologist Luc Boltanski calls the *metapragmatic register*; it consists of diverging acts of critique and confirmation and is composed of moments, which are "marked by an *increase in the level of reflexivity* during which the attention of participants shifts from the task to be performed to the question of how it is appropriate to *characterize* what is happening."[34] In these moments, priority is given to the self-referential question "of knowing exactly what one is doing and how it would be necessary to act so that what one is doing is done *in very truth*."[35] On this spectrum, the metapragmatic register of confirmation re-confirms an already existing state of reality as *the* reality—often by way of institutional action. Critique, however, points out this state's temporality, thereby emphasizing the possibility for change.[36] Humans in the roles of critics or spokespersons perform acts of critique and confirmation respectively. In the case of critique, the critic takes personal responsibility for his or her assertions. Spokespeople performing acts of confirmation, however, do not typically engage on a personal level. Still, critique cannot exist independently of confirmation, as Boltanski argues:

> The instances of confirmation, vigilant about the risk critique makes them run, shut their eyes to the evanescent character of what holds the place of foundation for them, to which critique counter-poses its lucidity. But critique ignores – and this is the form of unconsciousness peculiar to it – what it owes to the labour of confirmation that supplies it with the axis without which it would be condemned to drift aimlessly.[37]

Consequently, self-reflection in reportage has to be regarded as embodied interplay between acts of confirmation, related to certain standardized modes and methods of knowledge, and their critical questioning. Essentially, then,

34 Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, 67.

35 Boltanski, 68.

36 Boltanski, 99.

37 Boltanski, 103.

self-reflective reporters as human media engage in acts of self-affirmation precisely by way of potential self-weakening.

In general, however, this introduction of critique or self-weakening is neither a necessary nor a typical function of media. Scholars have repeatedly observed that the success of a medium's performance strongly depends upon the medium's own disappearance; that "mediation is designed to make what is mediated appear unmediated."[38] W.J.T Mitchell has referred to this as media's creation of "zones of immediacy" for themselves.[39] Sybille Krämer has also called this tendency "aesthetic self-neutralization"[40] and has identified its roots in Aristotle's, and later Thomas Aquinas's, conceptions of the transparent medium.[41]

Still, media are not autonomous entities, existentially speaking. They can only occupy middle positions between two sides. Therefore, Krämer also calls media "bodies that can be disembodied" and attributes them a "transitory corporeality".[42] As a critical function, medial self-reflection works in ways similar to what Luc Boltanski has called *existential test*.[43] Based on subjective experience, its critical operation (Boltanski calls it radical, rather than reformist) is not institutionalized and is marginal, at least initially. In Boltanski's view, it carries the potential to reveal reality's contingency by way of exemplary experience. The human medium's self-reflection, then, is a conscious and intentional affirmation of its own corporeality first and foremost. With reference to the concrete cases of reporters, it is precisely self-reflection that foregrounds the human medium's fundamental function—namely mediation—as typically veiled, but existing as their self-reflection. As I argue in the conclusion, however, it does not work in the sense of "noise, dysfunction and disturbance [that] make the medium itself noticeable"[44] but as a productive autocritique, the function of which is to establish a connection between humans that is based on a more transparent authorial self-depiction.

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38 Krämer, 31; This aspect of media is absolutely central to the work of other German media theorists, such as Lorenz Engell, Joseph Vogl, or Dieter Mersch, whom Krämer builds upon. See, for instance, Engell and Vogl, "Vorwort"; Mersch, "Wort, Bild, Ton, Zahl: Eine Einleitung in die Medienphilosophie."

39 Mitchell, "Addressing Media," 12.

40 Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, 31.

41 Krämer, 32–33.

42 Krämer, 34.

43 Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, 113.

44 Krämer, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, 31.