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The Medium of Writing and Academic Texts: On Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Marshall McLuhan

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“Signs carrying duality: they as-sign something,
they refer to something else, a meaning is added to them (...);
and: they are »there«, they have a perceptible presence,
they are based on materiality.”

– Dieter Mersch (133)

I. Introduction

When we wish to find an answer to the question what roles the structure of the book and the medium of writing are playing concerning academic texts, and how they are related to established notions—to what extent they record, carry, or even constitute theoretical concepts—Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Marshall McLuhan come to focus with a very good reason. Yet even if the notions they use lend themselves easily to be of help in many ways, to answer this question, we may find several reasons why we should be cautious over bringing the two authors together. It is true that Gumbrecht openly distances himself from media theory, while McLuhan in the 60s puts the notion of medium in a new context, rethinking the relation of the human being and the medium. However, they may still be fruitfully connected on core points of their theories, especially because they both emphasize and focus on the material, or medial conditions of human perception. Materiality—that is necessarily having a function in communication and aesthetic experience—is opposed to meaning in Gumbrecht’s conception, while it does not want to deny the existence of the latter (*Production* 1–20). The structure established here is in many ways similar to McLuhan’s quite often quoted notion of medium and message, or “content” (*Understanding* 7–23). It is by no means an accident that “content” is used between quotation marks even by McLuhan because besides

message, this is the least durable (“constant”) entity in his galaxy. McLuhan’s *medium* that becomes “content” or message—a perfect manifestation of which is total sensory awareness offered, for example, by cubism (13)—, shows some striking similarities to Gumbrecht’s notion of “presence-effects” (*Production* 19) produced by materialities, accessible by physical perception, “tangible for our bodies” (17) in space. That both authors tend to turn from “content” towards the medium, and that they both concentrate on materiality rather than meaning, may in itself already justify their being discussed together from the above mentioned perspective. Yet even this short comparison indicates that several other aspects are to be considered if we want to understand where their respective approaches converge.

II. Media Anthropology

The first question to be asked is how these two theories, putting bodily perception into focus, can be understood from the perspective of media anthropology. Although Gumbrecht’s approach may at first sight seem less adequate because of the distance he keeps from media theory, the abovementioned convergence in the two approaches indicate that this distance does not mean that his position has little to do with media anthropology. The roots of the interest in the relation between human and medium can be followed back in time until we reach the problem of the relationship between human and tool, between human beings and technology, which means, until the classical texts of anthropology, that on the other hand are understanding these correlations from a different perspective than media anthropology. At the same time, for example in Bernard Stiegler’s book *La technique et le temps 1. La faute d’Épiméthée* (Technics and Time 1, 1994) containing a reading from Leroi-Gourhan’s *Gesture and Speech*—yet using the notion of “extension” without quoting Marshall McLuhan on one single occasion—several references can be found to the above questions. Following—and sometimes close to illustrating—Jacques Derrida, Stiegler discusses an exteriorization that has always already been in operation. This, according to Stiegler, happens without a preceding interior position (141), suggesting parallels between tool and the human being in human evolution, where the invention of the tool happens together with the invention of the human (137), and what is more, where the invention of the human takes place

through a technical device.

However, Helmuth Plessner, in fact much earlier than Stiegler, goes further with the above idea in his *Zur Hermeneutik nichtsprachlichen Ausdrucks*, published in 1967 (461–77). He points out that the anthropos is always mediated by itself,¹ implying that the anthropos is preceded by the medium. This way Plessner has gained special significance for media theory, just like Martin Heidegger, who keeps emphasizing man's unquestionable dependence on the technical. Heidegger points at the interrelatedness of the human and the technical, denying human existence understood as starting out solely from itself, and without technology (31).

McLuhan's most widely known book, *Understanding Media*—which was published almost at the same time as Leroi-Gourhan's *Gesture and Speech* and Plessner's abovementioned text—establishes a notion of the human that is more central from the perspective of media anthropology. The best way to understand this is to start out from the notion of extension, which is sometimes used in a far too general way, and is far less complex than the abovementioned concept of exteriorization. Following this lead, a medium can be understood as a sort of lengthening of a given part of the body: For example, the wheel can be thought of as the extension of the foot (McLuhan, *Understanding* 46)—and as he claims at the end of the first chapter, all media are extensions of the human senses (23). It is quite evident that the human body, with its organs and senses, is in this concept a pivotal element, a center and a starting point at the same time, a centrality that precedes the medium and becomes an extension of the former. This concept gets a narrative structure through the myth of Narcissus and through a media history based on the changes in perception and in sensory domination caused by the actually appearing media. This way it secures the central position for the anthropos, despite the fact that Narcissus, setting his eyes on his mirror-image, on this extension of himself by mirror in McLuhan's interpretation, becomes the servomechanism of this image within a closed system. While for Plessner the self-mediatedness of the human being, originating among other things in the automatic operations of the human body, is a basic position, which means that it does not suppose any kind of visual experience, McLuhan's Narcissus does not even recognize himself in the mirror. He has to face a sort of sensory “numbness” instead, which McLuhan traces back to the Greek word *narcosis* (45). Thus, the

1. Cf. Kulcsár Szabó, Ernő. *Szöveg – medialitás – filológia*. Akadémiai, 2004.

visual experience according to these results in sensory perception—in total domination of the senses, and not in understanding the situation—is this way putting the human body, connected to the extensions of its own senses, in a central position.

It is not too complicated to recognize the parallellisms of this concept or even of the Narcissus-narrative with Gumbrecht's notion of presence. The ephemeral event of presence manifests itself for Gumbrecht by the objects in space having an impact on the human body and perception, and this impact results from a spatial relationship that is necessarily weakened by meaning (Gumbrecht, *Production* xiii). From this perspective, we can say that—while having a total sensory experience, and while he is unable to understand his situation—Narcissus can face the primacy of presence-effects because the act of interpretation does not occur. The unreachable, untouchable Cartesian subject, which subordinates the human body to the movements of the mind, is substituted in Gumbrecht's concept by the human body in close connection with materialities. As this body—for which even hearing is a corporeal perception, as it uses the whole body and the skin (Gumbrecht, *Stimmungen* 11)—can be “touched” by “any form of communication, through its material elements” (Gumbrecht, *Production* 17), Gumbrecht's concept of presence situates the human body in a central position, just like McLuhan's approach mentioned above, does.

III. The Medium of Writing

Based on the analogies of the two approaches, we may witness how presence gains space thanks to the weakening dominance of meaning, and to the medium replacing “content,” as well as to total sensory perception becoming possible: These are some obvious indicators of converging attitudes in these respective approaches. These theoretical insights at the same time can be recognized on another level, in the medial aspects of the structures some books of these two authors are operating at. From this point of view, the most relevant books are McLuhan's *The Medium Is the Massage*, and *Through the Vanishing Point*, which were published after *Understanding Media* and *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, in which he developed and refined his theory even further. As far as Gumbrecht is concerned, it is *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* which should be mentioned in this context; this book was followed by *Production of*

Presence. The latter can be read as a kind of synthesis of his concept of presence, but *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* or *Stimmungen Lesen* contains some relevant issues as well. *In 1926*, published in 1997, in many ways points ahead towards *Production of Presence*, not only because, according to the “User’s Manual,” the declared aim of the book is to “re-present” “some of the worlds of 1926” (Gumbrecht, *In 1926* x) but also because the medium of writing gets a significant role in the book from this respect as well. According to the intentions of the book, this “making present” is especially central in the chapter called “Arrays,” where different events of the cultural, technical, and media history belonging to 1926 are put side by side, while literary, philosophical texts, and newspaper articles are alluded to as well. This synchronous structure of placing beside—as the author points out while covering methods in advance—is established by keeping a distance from interpretations and from diachronic contextualization. However, after experiencing this historical simultaneity, we do not necessarily have to read the last two chapters about the role of history giving a historical reading of Heidegger’s, Hans Friedrich Blunck’s, and Carl Van Vechten’s texts, as this experience is accessible without them as well. At that point the question arises how this “illusion” of being present in 1926, this act of re-presentation—otherwise openly announced as impossible—can “bring out dominant surface perceptions” (Heidegger ix). An answer may precisely be given through the medial operations and the spatiality of writing. It is not only the introduction on the basis of which one can read the first three chapters in any orders, or start or finish it anywhere, but the alphabetic order followed by these “entries” as well, because of their list-like arrangement and their indexes or links pointing towards other entries. Putting these entries side by side in an alphabetic order makes the accidental nature of the arrangement quite obvious, just like the fact that the order of the entries is not established by contextual relations and elements based on meaning, but as an alphabetic list lacking any kind of hierarchy. The sequences are thus not produced by semantic connections but are given a numerical, serial basis.² List, playing a dominant role among other things in the most different sorts of academic writing, and of course in everyday life, is operating here using the seriality of its elements, and not based on meaning, while putting the emphasis on writing

2. Cf. pp. 50–52 of Sybille Krämer. “‘Operationsraum Schrift’: Über einen Perspektivenwechsel in der Betrachtung der Schrift.” *Schrift. Kulturtechnik zwischen Auge, Hand und Maschin*, edited by Gernot Grube, Werner Kogge, and Sybille Krämer, Fink, 2005, pp. 23–57.

itself. What happens here this way is not the recording of some previously existing arrangement. Writing is present here not only as a carrier of a preceding “content,” but—and this is the point where a perspective accessible through media theories is inevitable—as a medial operation that is producing this serial structure itself.

Beyond that, the list-like character of *In 1926* makes the breaking of linearity possible, but this can happen during the reading process for other reasons as well. The breaking of linearity, which will also be important from the perspective of leaving narratives using diachronic contexts behind, can happen because the entries are linked, pointing towards other entries. Following an index that can be found on a given point of an entry—while from this point of view, the system of references showing the way towards other texts may have a role as well—reading may be continued by picking any of the entries of the three chapters. This way, the text establishes a network that turns the pages of the book into parallel “surfaces” running side by side, creating immediate connections between given points of these surfaces. Beside the randomness of the seriality, this arrangement offers the randomness of reading directions as well. This “simultaneity of surfaces,” among which a “network of relations” (52) is produced, results in a network-like spatiality, which offers the synchronicity of surfaces and their parallel presence while continuously preventing the establishment of structures, that create diachronic temporality. This spatiality produced by writing—by the alphabetic list and the index-structure—makes the simultaneity of surfaces perceptible and the parallelism of their presences possible; even re-presenting the worlds of 1926 remains—as is stated in the introduction of the book—a necessary illusion. This kind of synchronicity and parallel presence, as they do not exist without writing, are not accessible thanks to a recording process, they can only be produced in the spatiality of writing, in the parallel presence of the surfaces, that is, by the medium of writing. And as “[e]ach writing space is a material and visual field, whose properties are determined by a writing technology” (Bolter 12), this, indeed, means that writing will always possess some kind of a spatiality; the medium of writing will always necessarily have a productive, constitutive role that exists together with its spatial nature.

A structurally similar book by Gumbrecht is his *Stimmungen Lesen*. While discussing the possibilities of “making present,” he gives the title “Momente” (Moments) to the main chapter, this way giving a function to the sub-chapters from this perspective—though in a less striking way—and putting them beside

each other as moments of the present. This structure of putting elements next to each other gets a possible explanation in the book titled *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*—while it even has a role in its first chapter, “Definitions”—discussing the role of lists in Pindar’s odes, looking for a definition of praising. In Gumbrecht’s interpretation, praising, and more specifically Pindar’s odes praising Greek athletes do not give a thorough description of the competitions themselves; they rather only list, register, and take note of the events (*Praise* 23). And although Gumbrecht adds the function of recording to the list as well, perhaps this is exactly the point where the difference itself may become visible, according to which listing, aiming at *re*-presentation in *In 1926* happens through putting beside each other previously registered events. Thus here, we could claim that the registering, recording function is displaced. Yet at one point, it becomes openly similar to the ways Pindar gives voice to praise: He is opposed to the interpretation of sports events and their aesthetic experience, this way referring to the abovementioned relations between presence and meaning (22), namely, that it creates lists avoiding explanations, and taking a step further, it offers a spatiality for the listed elements where they can be placed side by side and, thus, can be produced and constituted in their merely spatial relations.

The tendency of moving away from meaning and interpretation and getting closer to the medium and presence can be found in McLuhan’s work as well. These two representatives of cultural studies and media theories are in this way pointing at new directions of academic writing inspired by their insights, which are very much present in McLuhan’s case as well, though they are realized from the perspective of Gumbrecht’s books with many differences. Before discussing those books where this is quite obvious, mention should be made of McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* as well, because here the introduction speaks about a mosaic-like arrangement, a kaleidoscope-approach, where this arrangement offers a space for the solutions of the problems covered, and on the other hand, it is constituted by “data and quotations” (x). Here the resemblance to *In 1926* is not hard to detect. However, McLuhan’s *Through the Vanishing Point* is even more relevant, carrying basic differences not only with respect to *The Gutenberg Galaxy* or *Understanding Media*, but also to *The Medium Is the Massage*, which makes ample use of the possibilities offered by picture and typography. In both these latter books, the medium of writing and the medium of the picture get a highly significant role. After an introduction dealing with the spatiality of poetry and painting, perspective and the modes of perception, and before the

last chapter thematizing, among other things, questions concerning tactility, *Through the Vanishing Point* publishes pictures and mostly poetry while providing short commentaries and questions under the title, “Toward a Spatial Dialogue.” McLuhan, who understands cubism as the chief advocate of total perceptibility and as a territory where the medium is gaining ground, in fact constitutes, in a concrete way, the very listing-structure which plays such a crucial role in Gumbrecht’s work as well. The main goal of this structure is to provide some space for the elements constituting it, and to make them possible precisely through this spatiality, which is first and foremost tied to writing. In this main chapter only one picture or text can be found on every second page, thus—and as the pictures and texts themselves, as we will see, create the central part of this book—the spatiality mentioned by the subtitle, referring to poetry and painting can have a similar role here as well. The primacy of the spatial presence of the texts and the pictures is even further underscored by the commentaries, typically connecting McLuhan’s notion of “content” with the mere existence, or presence of the texts. A quotation from Archibald MacLeish draws the reader’s attention to the presence of the text as opposed to its meaning: “A poem should not mean / But be,” (McLuhan and Parker 33), or a remark made in connection with William Blake’s “The Tyger”: “The symbolic does not refer—it is” (139, emphasis original). In this way, these texts and pictures establish something like a spatial dialogue—quite different from the concept of “the dialogue” used by hermeneutics—based on a presence of their own.

It should, however, be further noted that this spatial dialogue, also referred to in the title of the chapter, comes into being through texts or pictures and commentaries placed on the opposing page. And not only because it is placed in the same space but because of the neighboring arrangement of the commentary and the commented-on text “that explains why the material form of the commentary depends on and has to adapt to the material form of the commented-on text” (Gumbrecht, *Powers* 44). This is true even if in *Through the Vanishing Point*, commentaries are always placed on the next page, and they are not presented as marginalia or interlinear texts; they follow the neighboring text anyway, in so far as they take up the rhythm of the texts following each other. They stop with them, and start again and again on the next page. But besides this “go-and-stop rhythm” (45), McLuhan’s commentaries can be called texts which adapt to the commented-on texts because first of all they are conforming to the texts of the poems on the level of the layout: They are right-

aligned, this way establishing the inverse of the poems. They communicate with their layout through the length of their lines as well, as the length of the commentary-lines is very often shortened to the size the poems have. A short line of commentary often constitutes a complete but short sentence; they give the impression that they are “enough for themselves” —as this is not alien to poems, either—this way interrupting the commentary again and again, and making it highly fragmented. These sentences are short statements, thesis-like expressions and are often maxim-like, essayistic remarks or impressions, as, for example, here: “The hand has no point of view” (McLuhan and Parker 35). Altogether we can say that commentaries adapt to the materiality of the text they are referring to, and—converting the logic used by Gumbrecht, that is, understanding the commentary not as a statement that is ready even without its being written—the rhythm, the layout of the necessarily earlier texts, and the fact that they are written, that is, their perceptible materiality is present as the material operation of the commentary as well; in the production of the commentary the materiality, the medium of writing has a constituting role, its medial precededness becomes visible.

IV. Medial Precededness

Commentaries constituted this way are pointing at, or asking questions about the perceptibility of texts and pictures, and about their spatiality, or in their weakest moments, they operate as the illustrations of McLuhan’s earlier theoretical insights. On the other hand, because of their shortness, fragmentedness, and materiality they never offer complex interpretations but they point at possible directions of reading. These commentaries are in this way operating as texts “leaving the poetic in its own aesthetic function and giving up definite attachments of meanings” (Martens 49), and they let pictures and texts manifest themselves in their spatiality, while enriching the possibilities of interpretation (Fowler 434, 442), so much so that the commentary to Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 does not do anything else but point at its being written; it calls attention to its medial operation, more concretely to a “visual pun” (McLuhan and Parker 103). Besides that, McLuhan’s remarks often refer back to other texts and pictures of the book, emphasizing at the same time their similarities on the basis of the above used criteria, and extending the space of their dialogues happening through their materiality to the level of the

book. This book, operating the interpretative gestures only on a minimal level, moving from the “content” to the medium, provides space for the perceptible presence of pictures and texts, and for the commentaries pointing at this presence, simultaneously. Although *Through the Vanishing Point* can draw our attention to this “spatial dialogue” as well, it refers to the medial precededness that presents itself in the spatiality of writing only in a very immediate way. Paraphrasing an Eskimo song—while referring to the presence of the word which is not functioning as a sign—in the first commentary of the book, we read the following remark in relation to the artist: “Used by the words am I” (33). Because here the emphasis is on the medium of language instead of its meaning, the paraphrase suggests that medial operation is not only present as a medium preceding what is said, but as a medial operation preceding the anthropos as well. This insight is indeed very close to Plessner’s concept of the human being mediated to itself, and to Heidegger’s notion of technology, that lives on in the concept of cultural technique,³ inserting the technical into the medial, this way making this notion relevant to writing as well. Although this remark is in many ways nothing but a summary of the above discussed contexts, it is not by chance that this is to be found in a spatial dialogue, at that point already taking through whole structures of sentences, and not for example on the pages of *Understanding Media*, where McLuhan’s theoretical insights are explicated.

It is exactly from the perspective of medial precededness that McLuhan’s book *The Medium Is the Massage*, published with the contribution of the graphic designer Quentin Fiore, may be significant here, according to which “[a]ll media work us over completely” as a “massage” which leaves “no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered” (*Medium* 26). This book, altering the main thesis and the title of the first chapter—“The Medium Is the Message” (7)—of *Understanding Media*, is at the same time only reshaping the theoretical insights of the earlier books, without basically rewriting them. This is because the medium is understood here as a phenomenon, touching and affecting a central anthropological content always subsequently. Although the spatiality of writing is used by the book in a really remarkable way, mostly through the typography and the unusual solutions in the layout—while the

3. Cf. Krämer, Sybille, and Horst Bredekamp. “Kultur, Technik, Kulturtechnik: Wider die Diskursivierung der Kultur.” *Bild – Schrift – Zahl*, edited by Sybille Krämer and Horst Bredekamp, Fink, 2003, pp. 11–22.

pictures of the book are mostly mere illustrations—there is no real weight given to the inevitable presence of medial precededness, at least not on the level of theoretical insights. It is true to such an extent that a part of *The Medium Is the Massage*, discussing the function of typography, and understanding it as auditive dimensions turned into visual, deals with it as if it was only an effect (*Medium* 117). This means that McLuhan interprets the medium of writing—following the logic of the book’s title—as a tool for affecting and shaping the message which is ready, “enough for itself,” even as it is. This logic stems from the not too complicated structure of media history, quite essential here, in which McLuhan conceives of the invention of writing as something that causes change between sensory modes. The primacy of hearing substituted by seeing—a process explicated in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*—has to do with the emergence of writing and the invention of the alphabetic order, which situates the perception of the “environment” on a visual, spatial basis (44). However, it is not by chance that while according to this wide-reaching concept, we have to face again the effect of the medium on the central human content, at the end of the paragraph McLuhan uses a sentence as an example, as an analogue for the spatiality of perception, since for him space and time have become linear and continuous. Writing serves here as a kind of illustration: “—this sentence is a prime example—.” The spatiality or even linearity of writing this way plays an important role in McLuhan’s concept, while he is only interested in the effect of writing on human perception.

One can really be informed of how spatiality and linearity—in academic writing as well—constitute what is said, or even the concept itself, not so much through his theoretical insights but through how his book is written. In *The Medium Is the Massage*, the textual parts, which are often shortened as if they were captions, and are dispersed among the pages for different reasons, make it impossible, in this spatiality of the medium of writing, to create a continuous text and to establish connections between longer sections and the medium of the book. The linearity of writing establishing a continuum—which is especially typical of academic writing—is summarized by McLuhan with the next two words: “c,o,n,t,i,n,u,o,u,s,” and “c-o-n-n-e-c-t-e-d.” Thus, judging by what has been said, it is not by chance that for him the medium of writing functions only as an illustration of previously existing contents. Although this book, being the most spectacular among all the those mentioned so far, serves as illustration of McLuhan’s “messages,” or, at best, it reshapes it, the fragmented nature of the text becoming close to captions, and

the absence of the continuity which results from this, do point at the inevitable presence of writing.

V. Conclusion

All the books discussed above belabor the idea that the medium operates subsequently, showing how far writing may get from the role of the mere recording, or the sheer “carrying” function. These books also emphasize that the medium has a constituting role. The simultaneity detected in *In 1926*, produced by the spatiality of writing, or the medial precededness of the commentaries in *Through the Vanishing Point*, and the constituting operation of the medium in academic writing all testify to this. McLuhan’s and Gumbrecht’s concepts emphasize the significance of the medium and the importance of materialities. Giving a central position to the body and bodily perception underscores the medial precededness of these concepts by way of calling attention to the very mode they are being written in; it is through this that medial precededness comes to the fore and is added to their concepts, reminding us that what is written is necessarily produced by the technical and the medial. Since writing itself is also technical—it is enough to think of the alphabet standing for a kind of automatism, or of the productive role of the spatiality in writing—the role of writing takes us back to Heidegger’s above mentioned insight: “[T]he coming to presence of technology gives man entry into That which, of himself, he can neither invent nor in any way make. For there is no such thing as a man who, solely of himself, is only man” (31). From the perspective of media anthropology, discussing the relation of man and technology, anthropos and medium—as long as such a perspective contains the insight that it is dependent on technology and on the context of medial precededness—writing as a technology that has always been *present* and the constitutive function of the medium can be understood as a proof of the medial precededness of the anthropos as well.

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Abstract

The article deals with the question: What role does the medium of writing play concerning academic texts? If we take into consideration that the medium does not simply carry or record “contents,” as can be characterized by a constitutive operation, the material presence of writing has to be handled as inevitable. When reading the texts of Marshall McLuhan and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, we have to face this question not only because in their books, the operations of writing are especially apparent, but also because the texts themselves reflect these aspects in many, though highly different, ways. Taking into account the works that are relevant from these perspectives may show that possible concepts of mediaanthropology can contribute to the understanding how the materiality of writing comes into focus as an active medium of academic—or any kind of—texts. Mediaanthropology, questioning the relation of the human and technology, provides a broader perspective here, as it may point at the medial precededness of the anthropos. The insight that technology has always already been there for human beings throws a different light upon the constitutive operations of writing.

Keywords: media theory, materiality of writing, academic texts, mediaanthropology, medial precededness

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