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Social Texts: How to Account for the Cultural Work of Carrier Media

This essay develops a perspective from the field of American Studies, which on the surface of things could hardly be more distant from the historical focus of this volume. Americanists hardly venture into the premodern period, coterminous as the idea of “America” is with the end of this historiographical era. Neither do they concern themselves with the geographical areas under investigation here. Yet the interdisciplinary focus of the Heidelberg research center “Material Text Cultures” strikes a chord with my field, foremost perhaps in its strategic alignment of materiality with cultural studies. In itself, American Studies has an interesting position vis-à-vis the idea of “culture”. A relative latecomer to the ensemble of modern language studies and philologies, it distinguished itself strategically from its paramount predecessor English by decentering literature and by poaching on various other disciplines such as sociology and history in order to take on the expansive form of American Cultural Studies now taught in institutions worldwide. Alongside the still vital role of literature in this scheme, the field saw the emergence of visual culture, popular culture, media history, film and television studies, and music as central nodes of research. In recent years, scholars have begun to explore the function of objects within processes of cultural evolution, leading to a surging amount of studies on what is now referred to as American material culture. By and large, however, such studies understand material culture as encompassing tools, objects collected in museums and archives, memory sites, as well as the materials of everyday existence.¹ Literature, then, figures mainly as an archive of fictional records *about* material culture, as in Bill Brown’s seminal work on thing theory and the role of objects in fiction.² Yet, in a very basal form literature itself has always been a form of material culture, reliant on the circulation of raw materials and artifacts. Modern, typographic cultures need material media as much as pre-modern, non-typographic ones. Here, then, fields as disparate as Classics, archaeology, mediaeval studies and modern literary studies find a common research perspective: to unearth, recover, analyze, and interpret the traces and records of lives lived in the past and to build upon these artifacts our accounts of how cultures communicated about themselves and about each other 10, 100, or 1,000 years ago.

For the time being, I will attempt to downplay the vast historical gap that divides these fields and focus on some concrete but also some very abstract connecting lines between the classical period, the Middle Ages and the modern Anglo-American scene.

1 For a succinct overview of recent approaches, see Tischleder/Ribbat 2013.

2 Cf. Brown 2003

With regard to the textual media of everyday life and against the rhetoric of newness and revolutions that is dominant in media studies circles, we can perhaps posit the notion that relative durability is a prime characteristic of various media. So while theorists of the modern nation like Benedict Anderson have largely explored the ramifications of mass printing, it would be a gross misrepresentation to say that the inscriptive forms pioneered in ancient Rome have no place within modern and contemporary media ecologies. The visual and inscriptive protocols of Trajan's Column, for example, have transported shades of their meaning to the façade of the Butler Library at Columbia University in New York. The architects and designers of this library set the philosophical masters of Western Civilization on top of its imposing Ionic stone pillars: the names of Homer, Plato, Cicero, and Virgil look down on the passing crowds below, as well as on the graduating seniors at each year's commencement (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Inscription on the façade of the Butler Library at Columbia University in New York © Alexander Starre.

The library thus sets in stone a selection of authors taught in Columbia's core curriculum. To speak these names aloud or to read them in print has little in common with the aesthetic experience of walking across this campus and perceiving the formal Roman capitals in their elevated height above one's head.³

³ Type designers of the present have frequently looked to artifacts like Trajan's column for inspiration. In 1998, Carol Twombly designed the font 'Trajan', a faithful adaptation of the column's script

This imagined scenario of standing in front of Butler Library calls to mind the excellent abstract circulated before the ‘Writing Matters’-conference. In its first sentence, we read about an idealized “visitor” strolling the streets of an ancient or mediaeval town, taking in the sights of various inscriptions along the way. The structure of this sentence is indicative of a very large conundrum in the study of culture: it always appears to begin and end, to stream from and coalesce within the agency and experience of humans. This essay aims to complicate this matter a bit, before sketching some alternate pathways. The growing interest in objects and artifacts as social agents or mediators in recent cultural theories is a severe challenge to the epistemological primacy of human experience. The question this essay is meant to tackle is how to account for ‘carrier media’ in interdisciplinary work on cultural communication. The first part provides a brief sketch of earlier impulses from literary and cultural studies that attempted to come to terms with the agency of textual objects. With recourse to the New Historicist notion of ‘cultural work’, I return to the example of Butler library at the end of this first section. The second part briefly outlines three theoretical concerns that may form interfaces for future transdisciplinary and transhistorical conversations about material text cultures.

1 The Agency of Textual Media

Among native speakers of English, the term ‘carrier media’ will probably raise some eyebrows. Admittedly, the phrase sounds clunky, a bit pedantic, and perhaps also Germanic. Still, the German term *Trägermedium* deserves a proper English equivalent, as it is such a handy form of combining all the different materialities of communication from stone, to wax tablet, to paper, to electronic screen. ‘Media’ in and of itself would be a perfectly suitable umbrella term for this assortment, weren’t it for the fact that media studies—specifically in the Anglo-American grain—has bloated this category to such an extent that it is now commonly used to contain technologies, materials, cultural practices and ideologies.⁴ Another competing term, more estab-

(Bringhurst 2012, 120). It has since become a popular display font, used for example on posters for movies set in Ancient Greece or Rome.

⁴ The differing usages of the term ‘media’ are certainly confusing, as Marie-Laure Ryan observes: “Ask a sociologist or cultural critic to enumerate media, and he will answer: TV, radio, cinema, the Internet. An art critic may list: music, painting, sculpture, literature, drama, the opera, photography, architecture. A philosopher of the phenomenologist school would divide media into visual, auditory, verbal, and perhaps gustatory and olfactory [...]. An artist’s list would begin with clay, bronze, oil, watercolor, fabrics, and it may end with exotic items used in so-called mixed media works, such as grasses, feathers, and beer can tabs. An information theorist or historian of writing will think of sound waves, papyrus scrolls, codex books, and silicon chips” (Ryan 2004, 15–16). Ryan here presents a good overview of various approaches that study media as general phenomena bound up with processes

lished in semiotics and perhaps also in archaeology, is ‘sign carrier’ or *Zeichenträger*. This term, however, squares unevenly with the renewed interest in the materiality of texts, in that it insinuates that sign and carrier are separate entities. The possibility that a certain material substrate has in itself potent semiotic significance recedes behind its functional determination. A modified perspective on carrier media has three goals: first, it aims to integrate the seemingly mundane materialities of stone or paper into the domain of media theory, whose electronic bias has fueled a strong fixation on technologies; second, it emphasizes the supreme role of storage and display (as opposed to transmission) within the communication process; third, it rhetorically activates the medium so that the medium gets to do something: it is not the person who carries the medium, but the medium-as-carrier that counts.

Expressions of this idea of medial agency far predate Marshall McLuhan’s influential, but somewhat esoteric writings on the subject. In the *Areopagitica*, his defense of the freedom of the press from 1644, John Milton already perceived a strange, culture-creating force in written documents:

For Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men.⁵

Milton’s fascination with bibliographic power is steeped in an organic understanding of the book as a quasi-religious textual-material amalgam. In the 18th century, however, a growing consensus arose that split the supposedly redundant externalities of writing and bookmaking from the essence of intellectual activity. As new copyright laws in Britain and elsewhere arose, the legalistic and aesthetic fiction of the immaterial and stable literary work became the new paradigm.⁶ Along with the idea of the

of communication and artistic production. The influential media historian William Uricchio states that he rejects a notion of media as observable entities, such as texts or technologies: “Instead, I see media as cultural practices which envelop these and other elements within a broader fabric offered by particular social orders, mentalities, and the lived experiences of their producers and users” (Uricchio 2003, 24). There is of course little fault to find with the conviction that the larger field of media studies has to confront the cultural contexts that surround media like the phonograph record or the DVD. Yet, strategic concerns also motivate such spacious conceptualizations of ‘media’, specifically with regard to expanding the boundaries of one’s own discipline. Uricchio’s expansive notion makes it difficult to speak of ‘media’ in the singular form.

⁵ Milton 2006, 1816–1817.

⁶ For a succinct account of the history of copyright, see Rose 1993. Hayles 2005, 143–147, inquires into the ideological underpinnings of copyright law, with a special focus on the affordances of storage media.

originary author, this fiction of ideal textual stability has of course been thoroughly debunked by the French post-structuralists Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault.

In many regards, however, literary scholarship has long had to grapple with the heritage of this idealistic conception of artistic creations, leading to a lingering love/hate relationship with the materialities of communication. The intrinsic method of analyzing literary texts, championed by the post-World War II New Critics, inaugurated the paradigm of the autonomous literary text, complete in and of itself. Through its proximity to linguistics, new critical hermeneutics operated on the principle that text artworks are immaterial constructs of speech or thought. The backlash against New Critical formalism came in many shapes and sizes, from Marxist to feminist criticism, from ethnic studies to reception theory; all of this played out against the slow eclipse of literary studies by cultural studies. As radical as the break between later schools and the New Criticism was, the battles of the day were almost entirely fought on the level of theory, not of method. Seldom did anyone challenge the epistemological benefits of close reading.

Within this wave of revisionary programs, the New Historicism holds definitive value for historical studies of cultural production. While often blunt and poetic in their declarations of intent, New Historicists share the interest to practice historical and aesthetic study as a form of anthropology, somewhat akin to the “text-anthropology” outlined by Markus Hilgert.⁷ In *Practicing New Historicism*, the English Literature specialists Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt describe this anthropological impulse as follows: “[W]e wanted to find in the past real bodies and living voices, and if we knew that we could not find these—the bodies having long moldered away and the voices fallen silent—we could at least seize upon those traces that seemed to be close to actual experience.”⁸ To match this romantic yearning for “real bodies” and “real experience”, Greenblatt, Gallagher and other scholars turned to cultural anthropology and ethnology, as well as to the wide-ranging oeuvre of Michel Foucault. From anthropologist Clifford Geertz, they took an understanding of culture as text. With recourse to Max Weber, Geertz had described culture as the “webs of significance” that bind humans together—webs that are open to hermeneutic interpretation.⁹ Foucault’s work added to this the idea of discourse—a helpful umbrella term that accounts for all social utterances outside the narrow domain of literature and art.

Yet, the idea of discourse only superficially glosses over the ultimate stability in method: close reading—whether in the guise of New Critical formalism or in Geertzian thick description—remained the standard operating procedure of cultural analysis. Foucault himself had actually aimed beyond this simplifying gesture of understanding culture as text. His *Archaeology of Knowledge* repeatedly reaches out to the

7 Cf. Hilgert 2010.

8 Gallagher/Greenblatt 2001, 30.

9 Geertz 1973, 5.

materiality of signifiers: “The statement”, Foucault writes at one point, “is always given through some material medium, even if that medium is concealed, even if it is doomed to vanish as soon as it appears. And the statement not only needs this materiality; its materiality is not a given to it, in addition once all its determinations have been fixed: it is partly made up of this materiality.”¹⁰ While Friedrich Kittler expanded this shade of discourse theory with great force, the cultural form of literary analysis pioneered by New Historicism saw the intertextual exchange of ideas as playing out in a field of circulating energies, negotiations, and representational struggles—with little room left for robust artifactual components.

Nevertheless, one of the most useful components of the New Historicist theoretical repertoire is the idea of “cultural work”, which coincides surprisingly well with Bruno Latour’s praxeology of social mediators.¹¹ To speak of the cultural work of a specific artifact entails a critical extension of hermeneutics from the internal dynamics of a textual artifact toward the social connections it brings into the world. From the basal interpretive question of what a text *says* the spectrum now extends to the query: what does a text *do*? What kinds of collectivity can be built from a specific artifact? Does its situated materiality speak to a certain subculture or does it aim for broad appeal?

To return to the example of the Butler Library in New York, one could thus formulate that its stone façade not just represents a canon of European authors, but that it actively calls this canon into being. Aside from their retrospective angle on the classical authors, the library’s inscriptions perform prospective cultural work. Completed in 1934, Butler Library complemented the pantheon of European high culture with the names of major American writers such as Washington Irving, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville. Columbia’s president Nicholas Murray Butler chose all these names. The monument thus suggests a continuum of Western civilization whose roots lie in Europe and whose latest outcroppings occurred in North America. The entire building therefore creates a national canon—instead of merely reflecting it—and attempts to ensure its survival in its aesthetic form. This male canon came under attack in 1989, as protesters unfurled a 140-foot banner on top of the structure that listed a set of female authors from Sappho to Virginia Woolf. Amid the struggles about reading lists and literary canons that took place all across the U.S. in the 1980s, the student Laura Hotchkiss Brown had unsuccessfully attempted to install the banner during the commencement ceremony of the previous year.¹² Both events were covered in the national newspapers, yet the banner itself has since been removed. This fight

¹⁰ Foucault 1972, 100.

¹¹ Whereas the notion of “cultural work” has informed several illuminating studies of American culture, it remains somewhat undertheorized. A good overview of relevant concepts is contained in Rohr/Schneck/Sielke 2000.

¹² Silver 1999, 45.

for representation and recognition has a distinct media component. A banner made of paper or fabric will temporarily subvert or deface buildings and statues; yet, the staying power of inscriptions in stone unfolds its own historical agency.¹³ The creational force of historical monuments and artifacts likely has such a central position in American literary scholarship because the unprecedented modernity of the United States as a nation lies in the very possibility of constructing a state on founding documents and the collective belief therein.¹⁴

2 Three Concerns for Current Scholarship

From the wider arena of cultural-historical inquiry, notions of embodiment and materiality have recently migrated back into the traditional domains of literary analysis. The increasing theoretical relevance of these areas also owes to the emergence of digital communication networks, which have exposed the printed media circuit as anything but a natural way of organizing social communication. The following section outlines three central concerns, which—at least from the vantage point of literary studies—can advance the transdisciplinary exploration of the aesthetic nexus between language and media. The first of these clusters is centered on method, the second on socio-cultural frame theories, and the third on textual structures.

2.1 Presence and Medial Close Reading

Even while close reading still forms the master method of literary and cultural studies in the present, there has been renewed attention to the fact that acts of reading—as cognitive language processing—never occur in isolation from other sensual channels of world appropriation, such as tasting and touching. In his programmatic, often polemical, works on presence, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has mapped out his theory of presence as an explicit counterprogram to hermeneutics, starting with his 1994 essay “A Farewell to Interpretation”. Gumbrecht formulates a more succinct argument in his 2004 monograph *Production of Presence*. Reflecting on his own and his associates’ work from the 1980s, he explains: “We no longer believed that a meaning complex could be kept separated from its mediality, that is, from the difference of appearing on a printed page, on a computer screen, or in a voice mail message. But we didn’t quite

¹³ In his foundational media-theoretical work, Harold Innis had theorized the difference between ephemeral, but easily dispersed media and long-lasting, but stationary media with the phrases “space-biased” and “time-biased”. Cf. Innis 2007, 196.

¹⁴ Accordingly, historians such as Trish Loughran have recently refigured the history of the nation as “a material history of space, things, and people” (Loughran 2007, 440).

know how to deal with this interface of meaning and materiality.”¹⁵ In the concept of the “production of presence”, Gumbrecht perceives a solution to this challenge:

If *producere* means, literally, ‘to bring forth’, ‘to pull forth’, then the phrase ‘production of presence’ would emphasize that the effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication is also an effect in constant movement. In other words, to speak of ‘production of presence’ implies that the (spatial) tangibility effect coming from the communication media is subjected, in space, to movements of greater or lesser proximity, and of greater or lesser intensity.¹⁶

Gumbrecht here introduces a procedural understanding of materiality, which may lift the discussion of materialities onto a conceptually more advanced plane. Aside from the keyword “production”, which Gumbrecht discusses at length, the second important concept in the above passage is the “tangibility effect”. Distinguishing presence effects from meaning effects and arguing for a complex interplay between the two is one of the main goals of *Production of Presence*. To extrapolate from this: as far as the mediality of texts is concerned, pages, tablets, walls, and other writing surfaces do not possess much intrinsic value through their material presence. But the aesthetic interplay of text and carrier medium may in some cases cause a tangibility effect—in other cases, it might not.

In his brief book, Gumbrecht does not provide extended readings of artistic creations that would somehow corroborate this view. On a conceptual level, however he introduces a suggestive typology pertaining to the cultural relevance of materiality. Gumbrecht maps a number of cultural practices to a bipolar scheme, the opposing nodes of which he names “meaning culture” and “presence culture”. These definitions, he cautions, should not be taken to denominate any empirically existing culture, but merely ideal concepts, the aspects of which are present in various cultures to differing degrees. Historically, he argues, Western societies have moved from a medieval culture of presence to a modern culture of meaning. This historical axis, however, is not his prime interest since he concedes that elements of presence culture are still effective today. People in meaning cultures, he goes on to argue, favor the mind over the body and perceive themselves to be external in relation to the world.¹⁷ Bodies matter much less than thoughts and interpretations. Conversely, presence cultures habitually conjoin meaning and material: “In a presence culture, the things of the world, on top of their material being, have an inherent meaning (not just a meaning conveyed to them through interpretation).”¹⁸ These diverging epistemolo-

¹⁵ Gumbrecht 2004, 11–12.

¹⁶ Gumbrecht 2004, 17.

¹⁷ Gumbrecht 2004, 80.

¹⁸ Gumbrecht 2004, 80.

gies continue in the different understandings of what a sign is and which role humans are supposed to play in the relation to their environment.¹⁹

Building on these conceptual outlines, Gumbrecht proposes a notion of aesthetic experience that brings presence and meaning into close contact. In his view, aesthetic experience is characterized not simply by meaning-based interaction with representations; rather, he argues, perceptive interaction with aesthetic objects calls up an “oscillation” between meaning effects and presence effects.²⁰ He relates this thesis to Niklas Luhmann’s argument that the phenomenological totality of perception is not only a prerequisite for artistic communication, but an inherent component of it.²¹ Gumbrecht pushes this thesis further by insisting that works of art enforce the possibility to experience meaning and presence simultaneously. Neither effect will cancel out the other one: “[M]eaning will not bracket, will not make the presence effects disappear, and [...] the—unbracketed—physical presence of things (of a text, of a voice, of a canvas with colors, of a play performed by a team) will not ultimately repress the meaning dimension.”²² Overall, then, the relationship between these two facets is held to be unstable—thus the term “oscillation”. Aesthetic experience is thereby invested with “a component of provocative instability and unrest”, a feature that encourages the necessary slowing down of perceptive experience vis-à-vis a work of art.²³

Such slow engagement with textual artifacts is the prime marker of close reading as an analytical practice. Contra Gumbrecht, I believe that a number of very promising studies suggest the emergence of an interpretive practice that Jerome McGann in *The Textual Condition* has provisionally termed “materialist hermeneutics”.²⁴ Aside from McGann, the art critic and book historian Johanna Drucker has proven that interpretive engagement with printed texts can integrate word, image, and material even as it builds on the contingencies of semiosis that post-structuralism exposed.²⁵ A core

19 Onto this bipolar scheme, Gumbrecht adds four ideal types of world appropriation, i.e. techniques that humans might employ to interact with the world around them. Listed in an order from presence-based to meaning-based, these four techniques are: 1. Eating the things of the world; 2. Penetrating things and bodies (as in sexual intercourse or physical violence); 3. Mysticism (as in ritualized body practices or being in a state of possession); 4. Interpretation and communication (Gumbrecht 2004, 86–90). These interactive methods may occur with shifting frequency throughout the life of individuals and the larger trajectories of various societies. Gumbrecht argues that within contemporary culture, the first three types are often relegated to the margins while the fourth practice appears to be the only reasonable way in which humans may achieve an understanding of their external environment.

20 Gumbrecht 2004, 107.

21 Cf. Luhmann 2000, 22–26, where Luhmann claims that art complicates perception and thus stands apart from more mundane forms of communication.

22 Gumbrecht 2004, 108.

23 Gumbrecht 2004, 108.

24 McGann 1991, 15.

25 Drucker 1994.

aim of materialist hermeneutics is currently to develop an analytical lexicon that does not subsume the physical features of texts to their semiotic content. The result may shape up to become a form of “medial close reading”, that will transport key methodological impulses from the study of literature to other textual media.²⁶

Finally, Gumbrecht’s polemic against interpretation ignores the basic form of scholarly expression in the humanities: as long as the textual account remains the standard protocol of academia, all physical features of experience will have to be transformed, and thereby translated and interpreted within and into language. The alternative would be to remain silent. At this juncture, Bruno Latour suggests that we should concentrate on writing better accounts. For Latour, a good account is “a narrative or a description or a proposition where all the actors *do something* and don’t just sit there.”²⁷ Accordingly, in correlating things to meaning, he suggests that one should probe the “many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer inexistence.”²⁸ This would also undercut accusations of technological determinism, frequently leveled against media scholars such as McLuhan and Kittler. “In addition to determining and serving as ‘backdrop for human action’”, Latour submits, “things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on.”²⁹ It is this side of Latour—the rhetorician, not the theorist—that still needs to be fully recognized.

2.2 A Sociology of Texts

A second point concerns the relationship between materialist hermeneutics and the study of culture. At this intersection, researchers most pressingly need theory to tie together individual artifacts, their meanings, and their social function. Such theoretical vocabularies must reconstruct the complexities of social interaction in the best possible manner. The classicist William A. Johnson has recently argued for a “comprehensive approach toward understanding reading cultures, one that insists on the symbiotics of medium, literary text, writer, and reader as something deeply embedded within society, culture, politics, ideology.”³⁰ One of the most advanced, interdisciplinary frameworks in this arena is Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, which explicitly links the historical evolution of society to the development of writing and information storage systems.³¹ However, systems theory critically complicates the

²⁶ I develop the idea of “medial close reading” at more length in Starre 2015.

²⁷ Latour 2005, 128.

²⁸ Latour 2005, 72.

²⁹ Latour 2005, 72.

³⁰ Johnson 2013, 119.

³¹ For the classical era, see especially his chapter “Writing” in *Theory of Society* (Luhmann 2012, 150–173).

notion of medial agency, as it expels material carriers of information from the center of social communication. Even more radically, Luhmann also displaces the human subject from the center of society. Humans don't communicate, as his famous dictum resumes, "only communications can communicate".³² While systems theory has been developed mainly for the differentiated societies of the modern era, its principles of communication far transcend the applicability of competing theoretical schools. Against other, often more normative theories of culture, the foundational tenets of systemic inquiry see order and stability as phenomena to be explained, not as problems to be overcome. Furthermore, through notions such as operational closure, irritation, and structural coupling, Luhmann erects a macro-image of society that counterbalances the external frameworks with the internal dynamics of communication.

In a very useful essay from 2002, Andreas Reckwitz lists Luhmann's work among a number of other social theories he terms "culturalist textualism":³³

Despite profound differences between Foucault's poststructuralism, Geertz's symbolic hermeneutics and Luhmann's theory of communication, all these approaches share the position of locating symbolic orders not in mind, but on the level of extra-mental signs—be they linguistic or non-linguistic. This conceptual shift from 'mental categories' to textual or discursive codes, however, does not lead to a fundamental revision of the status of material entities. The role of the subject—structuralist or phenomenological—is replaced by discourse, symbols or communication (in the sense of Luhmann) but the material objects continue to appear as products of symbolic orders, as objects of knowledge.³⁴

With specific regard to Luhmann, Reckwitz contends that systems theory is concerned with materiality only as an environmental factor. Objects are thus always already outside of society, forming "organic and psychic systems in the 'environment' of the social (and the psychic), which are interpreted by social (and psychic) systems in a specific way."³⁵ While this is a fair representation of Luhmann's general outlook on the material underpinnings of social communication, Reckwitz ignores one group of objects: artistic media.³⁶

32 "Der Mensch kann nicht kommunizieren; nur die Kommunikation kann kommunizieren" (Luhmann 1992, 31).

33 Reckwitz 2002, 204. Reckwitz's essay clusters cultural theory into three categories: "1) the sociology of knowledge as formulated by classical sociology in the work of Mannheim, Scheler and Durkheim; 2) 'high modern' cultural theory as we find it in its different versions in structuralism and social phenomenology (two variations of 'culturalist mentalism'), in poststructuralist and constructivist 'textualism' and in Habermas's 'intersubjectivism'; 3) contemporary practice theory formulated in a radical version concerning the status of 'artefacts' in the work of Bruno Latour." (Reckwitz 2002, 196)

34 Reckwitz 2002, 204–205.

35 Reckwitz 2002, 205.

36 This is perhaps due to the fact that Reckwitz references *Social Systems* and *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft*, both of which give comparatively little room to considerations of media.

Specifically in the domain of art, media have a non-trivial function, which includes the effects of their material properties. Luhmann’s “cultural textualism” indeed relegates materiality to the environment of society. However, this only means that social communication is “operationally closed” to the materialities of communication, not that it is completely autonomous from them.³⁷ In connection to art, Luhmann expressly pointed out that specific forms of visual or textual communication can activate their medium:

For its part, a medium—the material of which the artwork is crafted, the light it breaks, or the whiteness of the paper from which figures or letters emerge—can be used as form, provided that this form succeeds in fulfilling a differentiating function in the work. In contrast to natural objects, an artwork’s material participates in the formal play of the work and is thereby acknowledged as form. The material is allowed to appear as material; it does not merely resist the imprint of form. Whatever serves as medium becomes form once it makes a difference, once it gains an informational value owing exclusively to the work of art.³⁸

In the face of the current buzz around objects and presence in cultural criticism, as witnessed in the writings of Latour and Gumbrecht, the reserved stance of Luhmann’s work may appear somewhat labored and dry. Yet systems theory’s media focus and its transhistorical understanding of communication qualify it as the more viable tool for fine-grained analyses of medial agency.³⁹ The broad understanding of things in Latourian Actor-Network-Theory does not adequately grasp the specificity of textual media such as writings on walls, steles, or monuments.

To bring systems theory to bear on the cultural functions and values of carrier media will likely not result in a text-anthropology, but in a sociology of texts. Its main objective would be to explore how extended, social forms of mediated communication became possible and how they endured with the help of, but sometimes also despite, human interventions. Pioneering book historians, such as Donald McKenzie and Roger Chartier, have repeatedly called for just such a sociology, which would have to be a collaborative endeavor of textual scholars from all periods in which writing formed the backbone of the social.⁴⁰

³⁷ On the often misunderstood concept of operational closure, see Luhmann 2012, 49–68.

³⁸ Luhmann 2000, 108–109.

³⁹ See Luhmann 2012, 113–189, for an extensive consideration of the interrelationship between social communication, language, and carrier media. Wellbery submits that “one feature that distinguishes Luhmann’s theory from those of such classical social theorists as Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Mead, and Parsons is the centrality it accords to media-theoretical considerations” (Wellbery 2010, 297).

⁴⁰ In his seminal work *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, the textual scholar D. F. McKenzie writes: “At one level, a sociology simply reminds us of the full range of social realities which the medium of print had to serve, from receipt blanks to bibles. But it also directs us to consider the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption. It alerts us to the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affect-

Several approaches in this direction are currently in their formative phase. The emergent field of media archaeology has seen stimulating work on the history of media technologies and formats, specifically on practices and apparatuses that have become obsolete. Scholars in this area borrow the terminology of traditional archeological practice, rendering their work as “excavations” of neglected and forgotten media.⁴¹ With less investment in media theory, Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman have suggested a unifying framework for textual inquiry that they term “Comparative Textual Media”. Exploring carrier media as expressive parts of the communicative process, Hayles and Pressman hold, has only been a minor concern in subfields of the humanities. “A media perspective”, they suggest, “would move these fields from the margins to the center of contemporary humanistic inquiry. In addition, it would recognize that recursive feedback loops between form and content are not only characteristic of special cases [...] but are the necessary ground from which inquiry proceeds.”⁴² This type of recursivity, i.e. the manner and degree in which texts are sensitive to their material support and vice versa, constitutes a suggestive interface for historical research into the evolution of writing cultures.

2.3 Metamedia

Building on my work on recent American literature, the third and final point directly addresses such textual recursivity. Moving beyond materialist theories and methods, my book *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture after Digitization* (2015) explores the ways in which literary texts themselves have constructed feedback loops between textuality and mediality. This aesthetic mode permeates an emergent form of fictional writing that stretches the boundaries of the literary work all across the physical artifact of the book. Gumbrecht merely alludes to the potential of text to address its carrier medium, conjecturing that “literary texts have ways of also bringing the presence-dimension of the typography, of the rhythm of language, and even of the smell of paper into play.”⁴³ Yet, in his applications of the philosophy of presence, Gumbrecht has concentrated almost exclusively on performative forms of aesthetic expression, such as dance, music, and sports. In recent works by the American authors Mark Z. Danielewski, Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer and others, we

ing the forms of social discourse, past and present” (McKenzie 1999, 15). Following McKenzie, Roger Chartier holds: “By refusing to separate the analysis of symbolic meanings from that of the material forms by which they are transmitted, such an approach sharply challenges the longstanding division between the sciences of interpretation and those of description, hermeneutics and morphology” (Chartier 2007, vii–viii).

⁴¹ Cf. Huhtamo/Parikka 2011; Parikka 2013.

⁴² Hayles/Pressman 2013, ix–x.

⁴³ Gumbrecht 2004, 109.

find an unprecedented interest in the materiality of the printed codex. In a sense, these authors rehash the self-reflexive gestures of postmodern metafiction on the level of the medium. Instead of metafiction, their works become ‘metamedia’.

I have proposed the following definition of this concept:

Metamediality is a form of artistic self-reference that systematically mirrors, addresses, or interrogates the material properties of its medium. Literary metamediality draws attention to the status of texts as medial artifacts and examines the relationship between the text and its carrier medium, such as the printed book. In linking discourse and medium, metamediality reduces complexity by stabilizing a specific sensory experience of a literary work. Simultaneously, it fosters an increasingly complex, embodied mode of reading, which appreciates the entire artifact as an integrated work of art.⁴⁴

A metamedial text, in the most general sense, knows about its environment: it makes the reader perceive not merely language, but materialized script or print. The forms of metamedial expression run the gamut from tacit and implicit variants such as textual motifs, to intermediate forms in suggestive design and typography, and to explicit, disruptive engagement with the medium. While contemporary print culture evolves within and against ongoing digitization, such close encounters between discourse and medium can be found at different junctures of literary history. Andrew Piper has shown this for German and British Romanticism, as has Janine Barchas with regard to the 18th-century novel.⁴⁵ In all this, the *longue duree* in the material history of writing comes into better view if we refrain from the rhetoric of technological revolutions and instead focus on the gradual co-evolution of materials, letterforms, and writing practices.

As recently theorized by Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish, graphic design may be thought to form the missing link between non-typographic, bibliographic, and electronic cultures. With regard to the classical era, Drucker and McVarish write:

Within the city-states of Greece and the extensive, multicultural empire of Rome, reading entailed more than the recognition of letters and words. A text’s physical and social setting were taken into account, and its graphic and material codes were interpreted. Classical Greek and Roman cultures used writing for individual expression, interpersonal communication, commemorative acts of public record, and decrees or commands. These functions were distinguished graphically by letterforms and styles, and physically by the contexts in which messages were located.⁴⁶

Finding the metamedial aspects of ancient writing cultures would mean, then, to look for those traces in monuments, inscriptions, and more ephemeral surfaces that attempt to bridge the gap between language and iconicity on the one hand, and their

⁴⁴ Starre 2015, 63–64.

⁴⁵ Cf. Piper 2009; Barchas 2003.

⁴⁶ Drucker/McVarish 2013, 17.

underlying substance on the other. So as not to force the current intellectual fascination with materiality on a distant culture, careful close reading—medial close reading, that is—has to corroborate our intuition that writing matters in the literal sense envisioned by this volume. The problem of how to account for carrier media thereby turns into the task of describing, analyzing, and interpreting the ways in which carrier media account for themselves.

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