

Discipline Design: The Rise of Media Philosophy

An Email Exchange with Frank Hartmann

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Lately, in German speaking countries a “media philosophy” debate has unfolded. If you fear you missed something, don’t worry. Unfortunately, there is not much at stake. At least, the antagonists have so far failed to make clear what the controversy over this concept is all about - presuming there is one. From the outside it looks a failed cockfight over non-existing institutional arrangements, in a time of rising student numbers and shrinking education budgets. Like all academic disciplines, philosophy is also confronted with the rise of the computer. This has been the case for half a century, but it is only now that the knowledge itself is being produced and stored in networks and databases. Technology is no longer an object of study for some, but alters studying in general.

Some of you might be familiar with the work of the Vienna-based philosopher Frank Hartmann. In 2000 I posted an online interview to nettime with Frank (reprinted in *Uncanny Networks*), in which he talked about media philosophy and how this emerging discipline relates to Kittler’s media theory and the dirty little practice of “net criticism”. Recently Frank Hartmann published *Mediologie* (also in German). Like his previous *Medienphilosophie*, it is written as a general introduction to current topics. Unlike most of his continental colleagues, Frank Hartmann’s style is free of hermeneutic exercises. In the following email dialogue Frank summarizes his latest work and contextualizes the debate. For some, media and networks are the latest fads that will fade, thereby not affecting the “eternal” philosophical questions, whereas others believe that the philosophical practice will indeed be fundamentally transformed after the introduction of new media is well and truly over.

In the Anglo-Saxon world the term “media philosophy” has been compromised from the start - *Imagologies*, the cyber-hype book from Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen, contributed substantially to the derogation of the term. The tragic superficiality of *Imagologies* proved once and for all that it is not enough to link up students and scholars via email and satellite. As the Canadian

communications theorist and political economist Harold Innis realized, one's technics of practice - or "appraisal" of technology - is peculiar to the medium of communication, and will change according to the type of medium adopted. Human action, after all, is an extension of media forms; for a critical, reflexive practice to emerge, it is essential to go beyond the excitement and hubris of being early adapters. Praise of Technology is not enough: readers expect philosophers to negate, to circumvent society and its PR phrases, and not just to celebrate the latest. Only radical futurism, such as the transhumanism, has been worth debating. Speculative philosophies need to transcend the present and explore unlikely futures and reject the temptation to extrapolate the cool present. It is also not sufficient either to retreat to the safe Gutenberg galaxies of critical theory. Media philosophy has to take risks and cut across disciplinary borders. The "iconic turn" debate as summarized by Hartmann can only be one of many beginnings and proves just how difficult - and immature - "pictorial thinking" is.

Hartmann's new media analysis is free of fear and disdain. Without becoming affirmative, he is keen to avoid "totalising" concepts that try to explain all and exclude next to everything that doesn't fit into the newly carved-out discursive cave. One neither has to be subjected to the Empire of Images, nor does one has to flee it. Every day there are fresh challenges, from blogs, games and wireless to ip-telephony, all set within Big Brother, SARS and the Iraqi War. New media do not stop to surprise us researchers. Tired critics are free to leave the stage and pursue other interests, but that doesn't mean the Media Question has been resolved. It is all too human to take a break, switch profession and take up parallel passions. Hartmann's way is to stick around and describe the media reality on its own merits. Philosophy can provide us with outside references, but the outcome is little more than the reproduction of the same. And even that is about to come to an end, as we discuss below with reference to the current situation of the university in Germany and the EU's efforts to enter the game of higher education as a transnational commodity of interchange.

Deep incursions of real-time global media into everyday life continue. There seems to be no end to the technology boom, despite the latest bust. Media enter the realms of imagination and "reality" from all sides, as Big Brother and similar reality TV programs demonstrate. Infotainment has elements of both war and game, contributing to what Paul Virilio termed the "militarization of civil society". In this fluid, transient world, people long for "ethics" and "values" and dream back to the future of a society in which the individual knows his or her place. Philosophy can be one of those pseudo religions. In *Infinite Thought*, Alain Badiou calls for a return to philosophy. He no longer wants philosophy to be subordinated to a "multiplicity of language games". Language is not the absolute horizon of thought, so claims Badiou. He calls for the return of an unconditional principle. How could we translate this into media philosophy terms? Or should

we rather dismiss Badiou's call because he looks down on the mediasphere - as one would expect from a French 68 philosopher. According to Badiou, "the world is submitted to the profoundly illogical regime of communication" that "transmits a universe made up of disconnected images, remarks, statements". This is the dilemma media philosophy faces. Should it return to something stable or jump into the unknown and risk losing all ties with the institutionalised knowledge? Nietzsche would certainly have opted for the latter - but then Nietzsche himself has become captured, framed and institutionalised like no other philosopher.

GL: You're just back from a media philosophy conference in Germany. What happened there? Why has it been so crucial to draw up a new discipline? Can this drive solely be understood by institutional politics or is there something more at stake?

FH: This was a small conference in Stuttgart. Concerning media philosophy, it is significant that the discipline of design is now entering a new stage. Media and computers are becoming part of mainstream debates and teaching methodologies. There are some anthologies published, there are new teaching positions. It is quite interesting to observe that nowadays the discussion is not so much about entitling this new discipline but how to actually shape it. This is what is so crucial. Media philosophy started as a frustration of sorts, which means that as far as the topic of new media goes, one cannot simply address the tradition of philosophy in order to obtain answers. Certainly there is much valuable material in that tradition, but we will not necessarily find answers for our situation, since whether we like it or not, what we now have to address are completely new and different questions. With new technologies, the "episteme" changes, a new kind of thinking is under way. This should really be quite a simple matter - as you noted in your introduction, the Canadian media theorist Harold Innis was well aware of this over half a century ago. But we must remember that the problem of media philosophy is not only a theoretical or methodological one - institutional reputations and academic careers are also at stake!

What we can state for now without any hesitation is that since media technology changes our perception of the world, and therefore the way we think and act, it is generally a good thing that philosophers are picking up the topic of communications media. But similar to your critique of Hubert Dreyfus' account on the Internet - we need to question not only the fact that communications media play a dominant role in the organization of social relations, but more importantly, we need to critique the way this is done, which is so often completely detached from the actual "net condition". Discussing the concept and the definition of the term "media" and how it relates to some canonical writings is not something I would not grant as very exiting at the level of insight, primarily because it is about the philosophical discipline or some school or another

ascertaining itself. This is what is happening nowadays, and whether you've asked for it or not, like some Poltergeist Heidegger is back. Welcome to the desert of repetition without difference!

GL: Perhaps the current lack of complexity within media philosophy could also be the result of the effect decades of a welfare state has had on philosophers. They can only start thinking when there is a properly defined discipline that fits neatly into the academic structures, including all its institutional arrangements. There is not much "thinking on the fence" going on. Apart from the question of whether a person needs to have actual programming skills, there seems to be a complete lack of "dangerous thinking" outside of the institutions. It is only when media philosophy has been properly defined, and its existence is authorized and hence legitimized, that people will enter this field. Prior to that the central concept needs to be loaded up with hermeneutic speculations while at the same time it is sheltered against attacks from neighbouring tribes that envy philosophy's millennial history.

FH: I agree with your diagnosis that there is a certain saturation, if you will, in the discourse on media philosophy, but I also see a vast field emerging of a new kind of philosophical investigation. On the one hand, there are these self-sustained questions of the traditional approach, with all the institutional power and the assumptions of what really matters in the discipline. What are the incentives for someone in a tenured position to change this and go for new topics? Really, why bother when by the time you've reached your job as professor you're so inculcated into a largely corrupt feudalistic system of patronage? What else can you be but exhausted and demoralized? I'm more of an optimist than that, and there are significant institutional changes afoot in any case.

On the other hand, there are new premises in our culture that have been made possible by new technologies, and that matters to philosophy. One cannot retreat into a world of classic texts and negate the new mediasphere, as Debray calls it. There are problems with our concept of knowledge, with semantics and information, "intelligent" machines and the processing of data, and so forth. Dealing with these new questions, one is closer to engagement and intervention than to interpretation and hermeneutics. But you also have to cooperate with other disciplines like the sociological field of technology assessment, or go to a computer science lab and listen to what programmers have to say about software agents, rdf-code and information ontologies, or join a discussion on the effects of open source in our culture - these are all contemporary issues which should be placed at the centre of what is called media philosophy. Italian/Oxford philosopher Luciano Floridi, who has recognized this new arrangement that underpins media philosophy, said that there should be an end to cloning academics, and a start toward preparing the critical media literacy of citizens for

our reflexive, informational society, as Plato wanted.

Alas, German media philosophy has little more to offer than yet another program for cloning academics. It seems that this whole debate on media philosophy reveals little more than the complete lack of philosophical analysis concerning media products and media events, old and new. Most of the participants in this debate have not even reached the state of their own presence on the Web, not to speak of new publishing forms - they hold hardly any internet skills beyond consuming Web content (with the exception of two colleagues I would like to mention: Herbert Hrachovec, who among other things installed a wiki-web at the Vienna Institute of Philosophy: http://timaios.philo.at:8080/ph_wiki/FrontPage - and Joachim Koch, who published a Web-register of contemporary philosophers: <http://www.philosophers-today.com/index.html>).

GL: What strikes me after having read the anthology on German Media Philosophy is the absence of research programs or even basic questions. The whole debate, if you may call it one, revolves around the occupation of a term that antagonists guess may have some importance in the near future. It's dotcom for philosophers. Besides such speculations, where do you see research being done in this area? In her contribution, Barbara Becker pointed at a dialogue between philosophers and media scholars over the post-humanism issue. But that itself is an outcome of conceptual speculation. What will the empiricists and pragmatists do, once the concept wars are over? Is the Gutenberg background of many philosophers a handicap in that respect? And would you agree that media philosophy could be a hybrid and study both old and new media?

FH: I suspect that the recent excitement with media philosophy still relates to the struggle with metaphysics. What is meaning? Who is speaking? Are media just neutral agents in the production of sense? Do they just transport a message or also transform it? Do they actually produce a semantic dimension? Thus the fascination for the hardware aspects - traditional German philosophy focussed on idealism and hermeneutics. And there is a trend in the recent debate to correct the Kittler approach, which pointed out the materialistic dimension of media, ignoring questions of signification and issues of power within a socio-technical system. There is also a claim for the dignity of discourse, and again, the attitude towards McLuhan is mostly polemic, at least this is true for the Habermas School. This kind of new debate anxiously leaves out material aspects and media archaeology.

One problem is that the German language allows you to use the term "medium" in a much more substantial way than it is used in the French or English language. This is why German media philosophy bears the connotation of being much more essentialist than a philosophy of the media. So this makes it

possible to pursue questions like what is a medium?, how is it defined?, how does it impact on the formation of our thoughts?, etc. Further to this, European philosophers are trained to produce texts relating to texts. The classical attitude is to “defend” the thesis you have formulated in your text, and to “destroy” any opposing argument. There is no dialogue, no lively thought - even at workshops people do nothing else but read their prefabricated texts to each other. The inbred discourse produced in this manner is only of interest for the philosophers themselves.

It is a privilege of philosophers to discharge empirical research and indulge into what you call conceptual speculations. When it comes to a topic like the media, of course we have to address the economical and political power of technologies that transform our culture, and not just a concept. Drawing on the work of Innis, Marshall McLuhan, whom I consider the first media philosopher, first introduced reflections on this ontological shift. He pointed out that writing texts is but one form of processing ideas, and that new media culture points beyond this singular form, and even beyond the medium of language itself. This certainly is something a German philosopher does not want to hear. And yes, it is the typographic cultural bias that also forms a barrier to the transdisciplinary discourse that media philosophy should be.

We can find a very good example of such a transdisciplinary approach in the recent books of Régis Debray, who simultaneously talks about the history of art and religion when he addresses questions of transmission and mediation. To understand media we have to go into the history of cultures, and what we find there is not a better definition of “media” but instead a better understanding of the “milieu”, the ambience or the setting which in more than one way determines a culture and its use of different media. To do research on this basis does not stop once you’ve pointed at the hardware of communication. One needs to investigate the intermediary functions of technology and examine how these mental tools shape user’s visions and cognitive capacities. This is an exciting heritage from McLuhan, who saw media as “active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms”. Because without such instances of media translations of everyday experience and sensory perception, technical media would never find their acceptance. Increasingly, the challenge for businesses involved in marketing media technologies is a challenge of media translation. Just take a look at the squadrons of “cool hunters” swarming about the place, desperate to report back on user uptakes of palm pilots, new generation mobiles, fridges with inbuilt browsers that allow you to restock your food, and the like.

GL: Are you suggesting that the metaphysical clouds that surround the “media” concept in German-speaking circles need to be blasted? It’s in a sense such a luxury to indulge yourself in that ontological jargon, because the

alternative - the transient world of pop culture - seems so empty, so wary of reflection and conceptualisation. The world outside of German academia is pretty tough and cold, so detached from all these micro differences between dead authors. Of course the world of new media is exciting, because it's changing at such a fast pace. As you've suggested with your reference to "cool hunters", there is a lot at stake in that field. But it's not necessarily open to intellectual engagement.

FH: The point of any intellectual engagement is to never stop questioning, no matter what agenda there is. Following the approach of mediology, I certainly favour a materialistic model over the metaphysical cloud. Mediology means to come up with concrete research questions that could indeed be the needle to pop this bubble called "media philosophy". Rather than having a precise definition of the term "medium", I imagine a raw mix of sociological, philosophical and semiotic questions that deal with the problems of our technologically advanced culture.

It is true that there is a clear antagonism between business orientation and intellectual life. Perhaps nowadays the difference between criticism and engagement derives more from this antagonism than one might believe, because "thinking" the difference does not make any difference. Neither does the cultural theorist's interpretation of difference. No, we should go beyond texts and interpretations to come up with new ideas. Since I do not like to take on the role of an expert, I should return the question: how can we do this? A possible answer lies in the reflexive modalities towards the way we teach, do research and the forms in which we publish. These all consist of enlisting media technologies in an array of situations whose problems are peculiar to the instance of communication. So, to go beyond the impasse of media philosophy involves addressing the contingencies of the media situation.

GL: For all this bashing of media philosophy, it was you who, in the year 2000, published a book called Media Philosophy. You also own the www.medienphilosophie.net domain. Is it just a bit ironic that you are rebelling against the very term that you helped to promote? Why are you now more in favour of the term mediology?

FH: Mainstream philosophy was and still is oblivious to the topic of media, while media changed the world we live in. I did not plan to establish a new discipline, I just wrote a reconstruction of certain philosophical positions in relation to this topic. And I share this interest with a group of philosophical scholars, like Mike Sandbothe, Sybille Krämer and others from the anthology you mentioned before.

With the expected tardiness of institutionalised thought, a lot of academic colleagues have now discovered their way to media philosophy. To be honest, I am not very interested in their discussions. It is also not an alternative to lurk around and quote Deleuze. The only intellectually stimulating approach I am able to recognize is Peter Sloterdijk's "spherology", and he is not really a mainstream philosopher or even close to those discussions on media philosophy. But with his work in progress, Sloterdijk sure makes the most profound attempt to philosophically approach the topic of globalized communications.

Because I see "media philosophy" as a narrowing discourse and because I am interested in the opposite, I adopted Régis Debray's term "mediology" for my latest publication. Mediology fits quite well as an umbrella term for epistemological questions (media philosophy), the use and the perception of media (media aesthetics) and the technological and historical questions in a wider sense (media archaeology).

GL: What do we gain there, compared to, for instance, media theory? How does Régis Debray, who first came up with the term mediology, see shortcomings within media studies?

FH: When in the 19th century new questions arose on a new phenomenon named "society", Auguste Comte coined a new discipline and named it "sociology". The 20th century discovered "media" as a core topic, so why should there not be a discipline like "mediology"? But there is more to this concept than the issue of media. Debray established mediology as a general science of the transmission of cultural forms. It clearly relates to the theoretical tradition of the Toronto School, namely Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, and tries to correct the shortcomings of a text-centred structuralist tradition as well as those of mass communication studies, with its roots in American "psychological warfare" think-tanks and post-war sociology. Media and communication studies did not produce much insight into what is going on with our culture, since the research done in previous years clearly followed commercial interests. Any critical counterpoint is totally missing. And it is a sad fact that the European Commission, which became the main sponsor of research done on the Information Society, forces the rationalization of research within the limits of economic interests. As for the national promotion of research, nowadays it seems to be better to have a business plan than an intellectual ambition. This sad state of affairs is hardly peculiar to Germany or Europe, I know.

GL: Could the latest "media philosophy" fad perhaps be explained by a growing sense of unease amongst philosophers that the text, or the spoken word, delivered either in the form of a dialogue or monologue, is about to lose its hegemony? In *Mediologie* you wrote about the "iconic turn", which has been

fiercely debated lately, in Germany and elsewhere.

FH: Your question points to what is there, beyond dealing with words and texts, and could it still be called “philosophy”? We have touched on this earlier, but let me make a few additional points. It was Vilém Flusser who, in the age of video, first speculated about new forms of philosophical expression. These should not only be seen as the antagonism of images versus texts. We now have software routines and synthetic images, as well as sounds, that derive from handling data with certain algorithms. First, this media revolution does not make language extinct: but it will change it, like the printing press changed it before. Second, we are in need for a meta-medium in order to comment and reflect upon what is going on in another medium. The art critic will do better to write about an exhibition or a concert, and not create a new set of images or sounds. A philosophy of computing will be written, not programmed. But then, third, we live in a culture of “remediation”, as Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin called it. We see images composed of other images and texts, we hear sounds that are sampled and remixed. Visual design, DJ-ing or programming are most certainly also a form of philosophical reflection.

Obviously there is a post-linguistic quality in the new medial forms of reflecting culture. It has already come to the attention of pessimistic cultural critics like George Steiner (in *Real Presence*), who acknowledges that the role of language and text are no longer crucial for social reproduction. I think the problem is not so much that philosophical reflection still exists in the form of textuality. It is rather how to accept non-typographical forms of transmission. When cultural theory started to put images on the same level as texts, this was labelled as an “iconic turn”. Ten years ago W.J.T. Mitchell (in *Picture Theory*) came up with this methodological question of a second-order discourse about pictures “without” recourse to language, and he called it the concept of a “metapicture”, an interpretation within the same medium. Now I would not say that medial hybridisation never works, but as a picture will never be a text, texts and meta-texts should not pretend to be anything else than texts. It should be clear what their function is, and the context within which they work. This again points to the “milieu” that makes texts into what they are, a medium of intellectuality.

The early 90’s excitement about hypertext soon faded away. What followed was the debate on the “iconic turn”. Actually this topic has got quite a history. Take for example the work of socialist reformer Otto Neurath, who in the 1920/30’s was very well aware of the iconic turn in western culture and tried to adopt it scientifically in a new form of picture language. I published a book on this last year (<http://www.neurath.at>). Information aesthetics will gain more importance in the future.

GL: With the acceptance of references to a few contemporary French thinkers, media philosophy, as it appears out of this anthology, seems to be quite inward looking, very “German” somehow. There seems to be only a limited number of players. We all know that today’s German theorists all read English, so it’s not a matter of language skills. Aren’t people interested in what’s going on elsewhere? Do people perhaps have the idea that a philosophical program can be build up within the safe borders of the nation state and its educational institutions? Right now there are university strikes happening all over Germany. Simultaneously, the BA-MA-PhD system is being introduced, which will give students much more international mobility. And of course the German universities also have their eye on the much sought after market of students in Asia. Shouldn’t we involve such big changes in the education system in the debate of how new media should be taught and what foundations a possible media philosophy should have?

FH: What makes this approach specific is the different concept of the term “medium”. In defence of European discourse, I have to stress the fact that we are confronted with a very narrow-minded reception of cyberculture and the net as an exclusively American thing. And sometimes we are perhaps just fed up with the affirmative prophecies of MIT professors. Anglo-American analytical philosophy also is a quite self-contained matter. Besides this, English and French authors are widely read of course.

As you note, German and Austrian Universities are undergoing profound changes at the moment - organizational and educational ones. It seems we are about to overcome the disciplinary structures, which are a heritage of the 19th century. Mobility of research in all aspects is a prime topic. The European ministers of Education adopted the so-called “Bologna process”, a reform of higher education with the aim to establish a homogenous European Higher Education Area by 2010 and to sponsor cultural and scientific cooperation. At least this is the political rhetoric, and we have to see what will come out of it.

While in the ‘68 revolt students wanted to change conservative systems, their situation now is being changed by the system itself. While access to higher education was largely free and open to everybody, recently tuition fees were introduced. Cities close to bankruptcy like Berlin have to make enormous cuts in their university budgets. The university strikes are quite lame and will not change much about this predicament.

The organizational changes in the education system certainly hold chances for innovative approaches which do not fit into the disciplinary framework. Likely contenders include gender studies, cultural theory and maybe mediology. New forms of transdisciplinary teachings are evolving, and new forms of studying,

including E-learning procedures. What about media philosophy? With the growing economic pressure, resulting in shorter terms of studying, the interest in a reflective approach is decreasing. To be attractive and exiting, media philosophy should develop its own approach to questions concerning postmodern culture. It should not only function as a fig leaf covering the bareness of philosophy as an old and partly outdated discipline. The question of how it fits into the old knowledge structures really might be not as forceful as it seems for careerist academics.

GL: In your book you've got an interesting chapter about the "knowledge society". Who are going to be the future's gate keepers and decide what is, and what is not knowledge? In these times of rapid expansion of ICTs worldwide (see: WSIS), the term is used in a rather friendly, inclusive and somewhat blurry way. Knowledge is a term that philosophers have dealt with for centuries. Can we perhaps expect a contribution there? Everything can be stored as data and processed so that it becomes information. But not every bit contains knowledge. What socio-technical configuration do you see emerging to clarify this issue? You indicate that images can also contain knowledge.

FH: Knowledge became a commodity ever since antecedents of the dotcom business, like Diderot and his publisher, created the business of enlightenment by selling the Encyclopédie in 1752 on a subscription basis. Knowledge, and the access to it, means business, it is tied to economic factors. To gain knowledge has a price: books, computers, tuition fees, software, an Internet account...and knowledge is a key factor for economic success. But we live in knowledge capitalism, not in a knowledge society. According to Jeremy Rifkin (*The Age of Access*), only 4 percent of the employed people in the US are knowledge workers, but this small group makes 51 percent of the income of all working people.

What is knowledge? Maybe the sociological approach to this question will do better than the philosophical one. The philosopher would fathom the meaning of the term, while the sociologist would relate this term to the effects it has in culture and society. The term "knowledge society" was also set against the technocratic vision of an "information society", and it holds the connotation of autonomy, which is of philosophical relevance. Because while within two or three decades the technology of our digital culture might be history, the way we organize our technology and the way we are programmed by it is not. The quality of our present and future culture will depend on our capabilities to see what is at stake. This is the philosophical challenge: how to deal with the freedom of choices, with uncertainties, with ambivalence, with errors, including the antagonists of knowledge-like religious fanatics.

Especially because 2004 is the 200th anniversary of Kant's year of death, we

will be flooded with journalistic crap on what philosophy can and cannot do. Seriously, it could be very helpful to work on a redefinition of enlightenment under conditions of new media. To technically collect and store data does not mean we gain knowledge. Purified data means information in a non-technical sense, but only for a given purpose, and it still is not knowledge. The outline for an alternative definition could be: knowledge is the mastering of meta-code. If code defines how data gets handled on a technical level, then meta-code (like belief systems, ideologies, organizing principles) is the philosophically relevant level.

This is how Otto Neurath saw the problem in 1946: “The ordinary citizen ought to be able to get information freely about all subjects in which he is interested, just as he can get geographical knowledge from maps and atlases. There is no field where humanization of knowledge through the eye would not be possible”. His project was to visualize data for easier access, so he and his team worked on the development of new tools.

GL: What could a “philosophy with images” look like, after the iconic turn? Do you know about inspiring examples? Will there still be a need for narrative structure? I know you’re interested in web design and icons. One of the trends many have speculated about is the disappearance of grand narratives (such as the Hollywood feature film) and the rise of rhizomatic, hypertext types of environments one can browse through. To some extent we’re already facing a crisis of the book as the main storage medium of knowledge, but I wouldn’t say that about film and television. Formats in the pictorial industries remain rather conservative. Perhaps navigating through the mediasphere itself is what constitutes knowledge these days, the links between data fragments - the “pattern recognition” not the works themselves and their monumental shapes.

FH: There is this old thread on the Language of Thought hypothesis and the debate on language acquisition and the evolution of cognition (Michael Tomasello). It was given a new twist by the rise of new media. Any post-typographic order does not necessarily mean to bypass language in a “Pentecostal condition of universal understanding and unity” (McLuhan), but a certain form of typographic order and thereby old school literacy. What we have to overcome methodologically is the shortcomings of Saussurean semiology - the idea that all cultural expression is somehow structured like a language. Mediology is more in the tradition of Ernst Cassirer, who in the 1920’s defined man as an “animal symbolicum”, by which he means that in using symbolic systems, humans relate to each other, not to things in the world. This was an important step in order to go beyond the philosophy of representation. The meaning of a new mediasphere is a kind of disposition which is not linear, but dynamic and relational. It is best expressed within the network metaphor, as opposed to the multimedia metaphor,

because it is all about new forms of organization within the symbolic systems. It would be shortsighted to stop with the question about interfaces or the “language” of new media.

You ask about the possibility of a new cultural poiesis. Well, what kind of experiences is expressed in the old one? Clearly those of the literate man of Western culture. This is the model to think of the human “subject” in philosophy, a model generated by the typographic era. We lack the imagination of a poiesis because - all new media technologies included - we still express ourselves using letters and numbers, i.e. symbols of typographic reason (the alphanumerical code, as Flusser called it. His vision, two decades ago, was to philosophise with video...). In his exciting new study on the “myths of book culture” (<http://www.mythen-der-buchkultur.de>), German media theorist Michael Giesecke votes for a cultural vision of a new media ecology to integrate verbal, nonverbal, natural and technical media.

Flusser pointed out that iconic culture actually is not a return to imagination (the making of images) but a move forward into calculation and computation - from graphosphere to videosphere and now to the numerosphere of digital culture, to put it in Debray’s terminology. In this sense Giesecke asks if the new poiesis could be put in a “dialogue vision”, not as a kind of return to face to face communication, but as an integrative culture of information processing under conditions of intensified transmission and feedback processes, including data-flows within incompatible orders, as can be found in and between plants, machines, and humans.

(edited by Ned Rossiter)

My previous interview with Frank Hartmann, posted on nettime, June 16, 2000

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Review links: <http://www.sandbothe.net/124.html>

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Database of related online texts, compiled by Herbert Hrachovec <http://sammelpunkt.philo.at:8080/view/subjects/medcyberphil.html>