multitudes

Antimediation

Eugene Thacker, Yves Citton

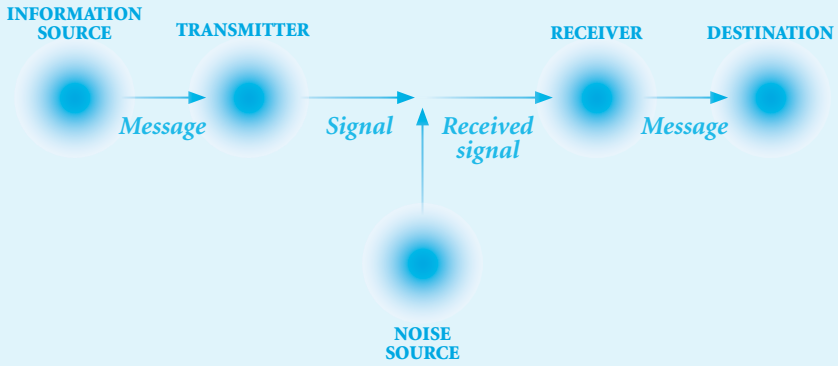
In Multitudes 2012/4 No 51 , pages 99 to 110
Publisher Association Multitudes

ISSN 0292-0107
ISBN 9782916940854
DOI 10.3917/mult.051.0099
Uploaded: 02/08/2013

Antimediation

Eugene Thacker

Our modern ideas of media are largely influenced by cybernetics and information theory. In the well-known communications model put forth by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, a sender and receiver are connected by a channel, which serves as the conduit for an informational message. The channel is a medium, and as such it both connects and separates two points that are physically or geographically separated. The channel reinforces the distinction between sender and receiver, as well as providing a means for connecting them. Even though there may be "noise" along the communications channel, the aim of the mediation is to provide as seamless and as transparent a connection as possible, "as if" sender and receiver were physically co-present.



The information communication model. From Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1949)

Shannon's diagram has become part of the standard way in which we view media today. It puts into a formal language what we take for granted—that a medium is some device X that connects two separate points A and B. What was previously inaccessible—due to the contingencies of space or time—is rendered accessible via media and the process of mediation.

Antimediation

But what happens when media cease to mediate—at least in the conventional sense of the cybernetics diagram? We know that in the 19th century there were many instances of media devices being used in unorthodox ways, from spirit photography to phantasmagoria. This moment is unique, but it also looks forward to similar uses of video and digital media today, just as it reaches back to a premodern understanding of magic, divination, and occultism. Given this, what should we make of the many examples of video cameras used to prove the existence of ghosts, or the use of digital audio to record the voices of the dead, or the use of photography to capture spirits or a person's aura? In our skepticism, we often dismiss such fringe uses of media as mere gimmicks; we are more likely to attribute to media the ability to trick us into believing the existence of ghosts, demons, and the supernatural. At the same time, we seem to take pleasure in imagining media behaving in very unorthodox ways. Nowhere is this skepticism and fascination more apparent than in popular culture. From *Poltergeist* to *Paranormal Activity*, we see representations of a range of media that make contact with the supernatural. In contemporary Japanese horror film, video tapes, digital cameras, mobile phones, and web cams are used in such ways that they provide a link to what author H.P. Lovecraft once referred to as "cosmic outsideness."

In our post-secular age, we are constantly reminded of the radically unhuman aspect of the world in which we find ourselves. No longer is there a great beyond, be it in the topographies of the afterlife or the journey of reincarnation. Instead, the supernatural is embedded in the world here and now, manifest via a paradoxical immediacy that constantly withdraws and negates itself. The function of media is no longer to render the inaccessible accessible, or to connect what is separated. Instead, media reveal inaccessibility in and of itself—they make accessible the inaccessible, in its inaccessibility. To reveal the manifestation of that which does not exist—this is not simply a matter of visualization, computing, or the construction of alternate or augmented realities. *This is a religious impulse.* It is, in the words of the 5th century mystic Dionysius the Areopagite, the path of negation (*via negativa*), whereby one asserts a paradoxical "negation beyond every assertion." Dionysius is, of course, talking about the way in which the divine is enigmatically inaccessible to us as human beings. But he is also talking about mediation—and its possibility or impossibility. While we may use media today in an everyday context, it seems that we also like to imagine media having the exceptional ability to mediate between a world here-and-now and a world that remains enigmatically inaccessible to us without the use of media. This suggests to us something at once simple and far-reaching: that *media are not human*. Perhaps this is also the strange attraction of media which present us with a world that immediately recedes into obscurity, clouds, and darkness.

I would suggest that one has to look outside of the fields traditionally associated with media studies to think about media in this way. This would require an experiment in thinking about media and mediation less in terms of technical artifacts or technical processes, and more in terms of the capacity of media to at once mediate between two points (as in Shannon's diagram), while at the same time negating all forms of mediation and communication. I am tempted to refer to such moments as *antimediation* for reasons that will become clearer later on. Thus the aim would be to consider media and mediation as not simply defined by on/off states, and not simply as conductors for a vitalistic flux and flow, but as embodying a fundamental paradox: media and mediation as those moments when one communicates or connects with that which is by definition absolutely inaccessible.

Ontological Horror

To give us an idea of what antimedia look like, consider the short story "Black Gondolier," written by Fritz Leiber, and published in 1964, in the Arkham House anthology, *Over the Edge*. In this story, an unnamed narrator tells us of the mysterious disappearance of his friend Daloway, an obsessive, reclusive autodidact. Daloway, who for years lived by an oil field in southern California, had developed an unnatural fascination with oil—not only as a medium of energy and high technology, but as something much more gothic and funereal. In one conversation he describes to the narrator this impression:

"[1]…that black and nefarious essence of all life that had ever been, constituting in fact a great deep-digged black graveyard of the ultimate eldritch past with blackest ghosts, oil had waited for hundr eds of millions of years, dreaming its black dreams, sluggishly pulsing beneath Earth's stony skin, quivering in lightless pools roofed with marsh gas and in top-filled rocky tanks and coursing through a myriad channels…[2]"

In hyperbolic prose worthy of H.P. Lovecraft, Leiber's story depicts modern industrial capitalism as a viscous meshwork of reservoirs and channels feeding into a whole panoply of objects, including the very car Daloway uses to drive into town. However, in "Black Gondolier" it turns out that Daloway's delusions are more than just the ramblings of a madman—it turns out he is right. The narrator continues:

"Daloway's theory, based on his wide readings in world history, geology, and the occult, was that crude oil—petroleum—was more than figuratively the life-blood of industry and the modern world and modern lightening-war, that it truly had a dim life and will of its own, an inorganic consciousness or sub-consciousness, that we were all its puppets or creatures, and that its chemical mind had guided and even enforced the development of modern

1 Note: A modified version of this essay originally appeared in German in the anthology *Die technologische Bedingung*, ed. Erich Hörl (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011).

2 Fritz Leiber, "Black Gondolier," in *Night Monsters* (New York: Ace, 1969), p. 14.

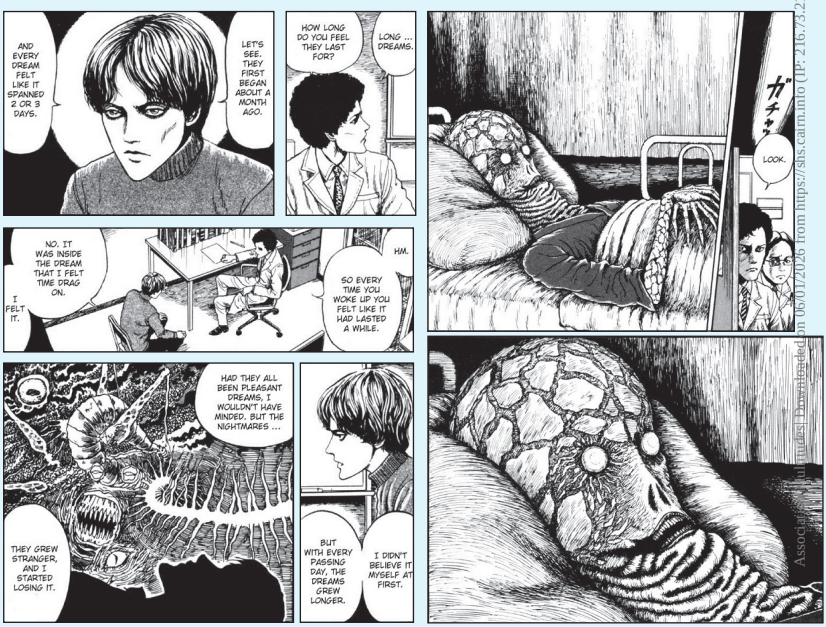
technological civilization…In brief, Daloway's theory was that man hadn't discovered oil, but that oil had found man.[3]"

In itself this idea of the formless creature is noteworthy, if only because it asserts, against Aristotelianism, the very principle of life as defined by form. In this light, we may also think of the numerous examples of "formless monster" stories, from the tales of Algernon Blackwood, Kyoka Izumi, and William Hope Hodgson, to films such as *X: the Unknown*, *Caltiki the Immortal Monster*, and, more recently, *The Mist*. But the idea here is that of oil as an ancient, living, malevolent, oozing "thing"—this is more than just a blob, this is the perfect conjunction of life and media in a form that lies beyond all form, a kind of formless mediation. In "Black Gondolier" oil is not simply an inert object waiting for us to make use of it as subjects; instead it becomes a cosmic medium for the production of "modern technological civilization" and all of its dark eldritch avatars…

Leiber's story presents us with an extreme case of mediation beyond spatial constraint. A similar effect takes places on the temporal level in Junji Ito's manga *Long Dream* (also adapted into a film). In many Japanese horror films, familiar media devices suddenly becomes endowed with supernatural properties, from the video tape of *Ring*, the web cams of *Pulse*, or the entire architecture of a city in *Marebito*. One can detect a final stage beyond even this, in which it is, finally, factical being itself that mediates the supernatural, and being itself that is also the source of horror. *Long Dream* follows this motif, but on the level of temporal rather than spatial transformation. Based on a manga story by Junji Ito, the main character, Tetsuro Murkoda, can't stop dreaming—the inverted insomniac. As he looses all sense of (waking) time, his body begins to change and adapt in grotesque ways. He soon loses his eyelids, the his eyes themselves become hyper-sensitized, able only to see an unnamable "beyond" that bears no relation to what can normally be seen. The gradual disintegration of body and mind is elaborated in the manga version of the story. Murkoda's skin becomes scaly and crystalline, he loses his hair and his head elongates, his senses withdraw, his nose, ears, and even eyes gradually receding into his unhuman body.

Attended by physicians in a hospital, Murkoda's dreams get longer and longer, though the actual time he sleeps is the same. His "long dreams" eventually span years, decades, centuries, and beyond, into an unhuman, timeless time. Near the end of the story, a grotesque, alien-looking Murkoda mumbles, "What happens to the man who wakes from an endless dream?" In the final scenes, Murkoda's body disintegrates completely, leaving behind only strange, crumbling, unidentifiable crystals laying in his hospital bed. Paradoxically, mediation reaches its endpoint once it becomes absolute, once there is no longer anything to mediate exception the pure form of mediation itself.

3 Ibid., pp. 14-15.



Two pages from Junji Ito's manga short story *Long Dream*

This sort of reversal is common in the horror genre. Indeed, a cursory glance at the horror genre today reveals a number of examples in which everyday objects—and in particular, media objects—become infused in some way with the supernatural, the paranormal, or the unexplained. In these stories the innocuous and even banal ubiquity of media objects, from cell phones to web cams, enters into a liminal space, where such objects suddenly reveal the ambivalent boundary separating the natural from the supernatural, the uncanny from the marvelous, the earthly from the divine. And, we should note that, in our contemporary, cross-platform culture, the representation of such supernatural media themselves takes place via one or more media forms—novels, films, TV shows, comics, video games, and so on. Thus what we are witnessing is not a single, master medium that represents all possible cases of haunting or the supernatural, but a variety of media that mediate or remediate other media: a novel about an cursed videotape, a film about haunted webcams, a videogame that uses a paranormal camera.

But what makes stories like these such a privileged site for thinking about media and mediation? To begin with, we can suggest the following distinction: in the everyday context of media, mediation is epistemological, while in supernatural horror, mediation is ontological. In the former case, one assumes a certain practical knowledge of how media work and how they can be used. The questions one asks are questions of knowledge that presume a basic

ontological framework—What's your number? Who's calling me? Can you hear me now? And so on… By contrast, in supernatural horror one still assumes a certain working knowledge of media, but something goes wrong—fundamentally wrong. Ironically, the problem is not that the media in question are broken; if anything, the problem is that media are working *too well*—we get more than we bargained for, as specters turn up in our photos, the dead appear on our computer screens, and that videotape, well, you probably shouldn't watch that. Here one cannot presume a common ontological ground, as the mediation is really a mediation between different "reals," or, if you like, between different ontological domains –the natural and the supernatural, the normal and the paranormal, life and the afterlife.

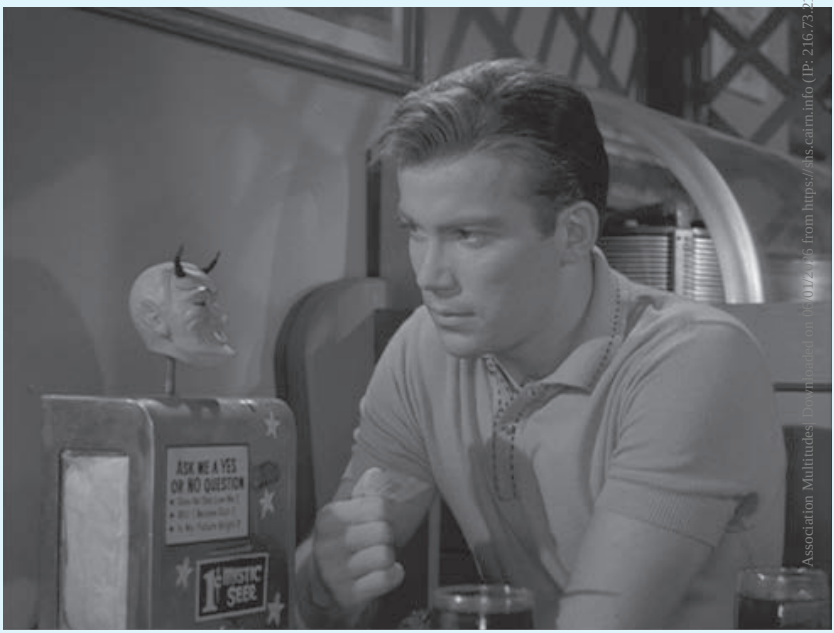
In this triangulation of media, horror, and philosophy we see a concept of the supernatural deployed that is at once immediate and mediated—the supernatural appears to inhabit the domain of pure affective experience beyond the reach of words or images, and yet, in the examples we've pointed to, the supernatural is only ever apparent via some form of mediation. This presents us with a dilemma: if the supernatural exists, to what extent can it be experienced? If it cannot be experienced, how are we to distinguish it from mere subjectivism—an illusion, a dream, a bit of visual trickery…?

That the supernatural is mediated, and that it is by definition mediated—this seems to be taken for granted as much in modern supernatural horror as in premodern mystical theology. At the same time, in supernatural horror a character experiencing the supernatural nearly always comes up against a loss of words, inadequate descriptions, and unnamable things. Characters confront something that seems to evoke a contradictory language of negation and silence. All that remains is this bare activity of mediation, a mediation that almost immediately negates itself—in an antimediation.

Occult Qualities

But how can mediation also be the negation of mediation? To address this dilemma, we should remind ourselves that what is at stake in these examples of supernatural horror is not simply a primal, ineffable experience, but that this form of mediation is quite literally embodied in media objects—videotapes, cameras, cell phones, and the like.

The original *Twilight Zone* episodes are exemplary in this regard. Many of the episodes utilize banal, everyday objects in ways that allow them to become more than just objects. For instance, in the 1960 episode "Nick of Time," a young newlywed couple stop in a small town while driving across country. While in the local diner, the husband Don (played by the incomparable William Shatner) becomes obsessed with an innocuous napkin holder that has "Mystic Seer" written on it, with a toy devil's head on top. Inserting a penny gives a fortune, a fun game that soon turns into neurosis, and then, as with many a *Twilight Zone* episode, into something else entirely.



Don (William Shatner) confronts the Mystic Seer in the *Twilight Zone* episode "Nick of Time"

In the "Nick of Time" episode we see a simple napkin-holder and "Mystic Seer" undergo a series of transformations: utility (napkin-holder), entertainment (fortune-telling games), neurosis (anxiety, doubt, fear), and finally what literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov calls "the fantastic" (the possibility of another reality altogether). This last phase is wonderfully encapsulated in one of the wife's panicky phrasing: "are you going to let that…that *thing* run your life?"

This moment, where the object is at once present and yet recedes into a nether region of strange attributes, but a strange 'depth' that is also 'flat' with nothing to uncover or discover. This is what Arthur Schopenhauer once called "occult qualities" (*qualitas occulta*)—and it is a motif that runs through many of the *Twilight Zone* episodes. We encounter children's dolls that are alive with malicious intent, telephones that provide a direct link to the voices of the dead, and player pianos that hypnotize us into divulging our deepest darkest secrets.

In short, we have to remind ourselves that what is at stake in these stories is not just the experience of a subject, but the mediation of, and through, an object. The concept of the supernatural is here not simply oriented towards a subject, as a locus of unmediated, authentic experience. It is also oriented towards the many objects that themselves embody or mediate the supernatural, objects which elusively slip between the everyday and

the exceptional, between their artifactual transparency and their strange aura of opacity. The question, then, is whether it would make sense to think about this mediation of the supernatural, less in terms of a subject-oriented approach, and more in terms of an object-oriented approach—and what such an object-oriented approach might mean for us as subjects.

There are, of course, many precedents both ancient and modern for doing this. There is, for example, Heidegger's extensive meditations on "the thing" and the dynamic, active process of "gathering" that characterizes "the thingness of the thing." There is also Bruno Latour's investigation of the interface between humans and objects, where a whole panoply of gadgets and gizmos form a complex apparatus for the production of knowledge. Objects act on us, or condition our own actions, just as much as we act on them. Searching for a middle term, Latour uses the phrase "non-human actants" to describe the intermediary agency of objects on us as subjects, a relation that is for Latour inescapably political: "In other words, objects—taken as so many issues—bind all of us in ways that map our a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of 'the political.'"[4] More recently, there is also the so-called "object oriented ontology" (OOO) movement, which attempts to shift philosophical discourse away from subject-object relations and towards object-object relations. In all these approaches, what is important to note is how objects appear to exist in this contradictory movement of givenness and withdrawal. Even in their most intimate, phenomenal interaction with us as subjects, objects still maintain some reservoir of inaccessibility—in short, for every object there is an inaccessible more-than-object. It seems that this almost perfectly describes the objects that populate the many examples of supernatural horror.

To get at this in more detail, let us step back a bit. Objects, of course, are different from things, and there is nothing that prevents us from noting that not all media are objects or things. To clarify our terms a little, we can return to Kant's distinction between objects and things, since Kant does provide a number of key points that undergird the various strands of post-Kantian philosophy today, including the object oriented approach.

In Kant's critical philosophy objects are never simply objects. In fact, Kant tends to use a number of different terms for what we would, in English, term objects. These include: the term *Objekt*, which denotes objects of experience that are made into objects for knowledge through the unity of apperception; the term *Gegenstand*, which denotes objects of experience that conform to the structures of intuition and/or understanding; and the term *Ding* (also translated as "thing"), which denotes the object in itself apart from any given experience of it. With this last term *Ding* we arrive at an entity that serves a philosophical function for Kant: the logical necessity of there being something rather than nothing, which can never be known, and which provides the ground for *Gegenstand* and allows it in turn to become *Objekt* for a subject.

4 Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik," in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), p. 5.

"That there is something real outside us which not only corresponds but must correspond to our external perceptions can likewise be proved to be, not a connection of things in themselves, but for the sake of experience…for we have nothing to do with other objects than those which belong to possible experience, because objects which cannot be given to us in any experience are nothing for us.[5]"

While all these terms may be translated as "object," this last term—*Ding*—is also referred to by Kant as *Ding an sich* or the "thing-in-itself." The "thing-in-itself," or simply "the thing," is a limit concept. It serves a transcendental function, in that it provides the guarantee that there is some thing out there that we as subjects perceive, even though we can never know it in itself.

Let us abbreviate this a bit and suggest that for Kant there is a basic distinction between "objects" and "things," a distinction that corresponds neatly to Kant's overall critical framework. While objects can be sensed and intuited, and while we can produce knowledge of objects based on such intuitions, things remain forever beyond the pale of human comprehension. While objects are always objects as they appear to us as subjects, things occupy a dark, nebulous zone outside of subject-object relations altogether. Despite these distinctions, Kant is forced to note a basic contradiction, which is that things—being inaccessible and unknowable—are still posited by us as thinking subjects. Thus they can only ever be negative concepts. The most we can do, according to Kant, is to simply note the logical necessity of the thing-in-itself. Beyond that there is only silence…

Or is there? For Kant, what both the object and thing have in common, strangely enough, is that they both bear some minimal relation to a subject. The difference is that in the former that relation is positive, while in the latter it is negative. And, while contemporary thinkers like Harman want to shift our thinking from subject-object to object-object, there is another type of object-oriented thinking implicit in Kant's critical philosophy. That is *the relation between objects and things*, between that which exists for us as subjects, and that which remains indifferent to subject-object relations altogether. We can briefly list these different approaches as follows:

- Relation of subject-object (Cartesianism, Kantianism, phenomenology)
- Relation of object-object (Actor Network Theory, Object Oriented Ontology)
- Relation of object-thing (occult qualities, weird realism)

In this last relation—that between objects and things—we are not considering traditional subject-object relations, nor are we interested in the uncanny object-object relations. Instead, we are considering the possible passages between objects and things, between that which is readily accessible to us as human subjects, and that which enigmatically withdraws into a region that we can only describe as the "thing-in-itself."

5 Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus, revised James Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1977), §49, p. 77.

This is one of the primary reasons for thinking about supernatural horror. Between the object "for us" and the thing "in itself," there is at once the smallest interval and the greatest void. As we noted, the media objects that populate supernatural horror are not broken—in fact, they are working quite well, perhaps too well. When ordinary objects become extraordinary, are we strange witnesses to this secret passage from object to thing? In supernatural horror, relations of subject-object and object-object are the by-products of a more fundamental relation between object and thing. Given this, let us put forth a hypothesis: in supernatural horror, *the mediation of the supernatural takes place via the ambivalent transition from object to thing*.

On What Cannot Be Said

If we're willing to take an expanded view of media, then the question is the following: at what point do media and mediation end up negating themselves, resulting in a kind of pure continuum or "communication"—or even, with what an earlier age would call mystical experience? This is a question posed by Georges Bataille, who, in his own critique of and reinvention of mystical theology, makes frequent use of the terms "communication" and "mediation."

As Bataille notes, in case of mystical experience, "knowledge is still mediation—between me and the world—but negative: it is the rejection of knowledge, the night, the annihilation of all middle terms, which constitutes this negative mediation."[6] Negative mediation names this paradoxical mediation of non-mediation. Whenever Bataille speaks of communication or mediation, his references are always that of the darkness mysticism tradition; for him mediation and communication always imply the dissolution of sender and receiver, the message that is the gulf or abyss. "These movements flow out into an external existence: there they lose themselves, they 'communicate,' it would appear, with the outside, without the latter taking a determined shape and being perceived as such."[7]

For Bataille, negative mediation involves a threefold process: first, a minimal connection between two ontologically distinct and incompatible orders; second, the production of an absolute gulf or abyss between these two orders; and third, the effacing of mediation altogether, in part due to this gulf or abyss.

"It is the annihilation of everything which is not the ultimate 'unknown,' the abyss into which one has sunk…Understood in this way, the full communication which is experience leading to the extreme limit is accessible to the extent that existence successively strips itself of its middle terms…[8]"

6 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), p. 115.

7 Ibid., p. 117.

8 Ibid., pp. 115-16.

Bataille's comments lead us to a question: Given the way that both haunted media and weird media arbitrate between the natural and supernatural, would it be going too far to consider the pre-modern case of divine ecstasy and demonic possession as an instance of mediation? If so, could one then consider the governance of the boundary separating divine ecstasy and demonic possession as an act of political theology? The discourse surrounding demonic possession in the early modern Christianity is especially instructive in this case. Given that the realm of the supernatural (divine and demonic) was, by definition, absolutely beyond the earthly and the human, by what living signs or works (*opera vitae*) could this inaccessible domain become accessible?:

"In the theological discourse, the concept of the possessed body presupposes and is opposed to the notion of life and the human person. The Scholastics had refined and made more precise this distinction… They asked themselves to what degree angels and demons could take advantage of the possessed body. Were they capable of feeling, of moving, of speaking, or eating, or, finally, of generating life? Could they, according to the expression of Saint Thomas, exercise the *opera vitae*?"[9]

Of course, this may be taking things too far, widening the scope of the terms "media" and "mediation" to the point where they cease to have any reliable meaning at all. But it can also be argued that the world in which we find ourselves constantly challenges our conventional ideas about media and mediation. We are living in the very world that we stand apart from in order that we may record, document, and mediate the world. Our ideas of media and mediation are, perhaps, all-too-human.

Magic circles, grimoires, dowsing devices, spirit photography, ectoplasmic images, ghostly static on the radio, the possessed TV, the cursed videotape, and the webcam of the dead—in supernatural horror all these "really" exist in that they are not mere figments of the imagination, symptoms of mental illness, or the by-product of drug abuse. Their artifactuality is expressed in their pragmatic and material use as media objects. At the same time, the mediation of the supernatural allows such objects to recede from the familiar and the everyday, sometimes to the point that the object itself becomes vitalistically lifelike and animate. The strange life of media would then be equivalent to their slippage from objects to things. In a way, then, media are the most alive precisely at the moment that they are the least accessible…

9 Maaike Van der Lugt, *La Ver, La Démon, et la Vièrge* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2004), p. 238, translation mine.