Without our even realizing it, a new kind of human being was born in the brief period of time that separates us from the 1970s.

(Michel Serres, 2016: 7)

Heidegger's lifelong dream to destroy the binary opposition between form and matter may be easier to attain with the help of mathematics and computer science.

(Friedrich Kittler, 2009: 29)

I The End of the World

With media theory at a moment of development that suggests possibly conflicting directions, the arrival of an open access media theory journal can provide a speculative forum for establishing ways by which the future of the media and of media theory might be addressed. In what follows, I sketch two different kinds of contemporary approach to the media that, while caught within a classical framework, privileging either a formal or a material emphasis, nonetheless look forward to the dissolution of the opposition between form and matter and to the establishment of new categories derived from attempts to grasp the technical aetiology of the media’s sensible surface.

“It is surely not difficult to see,” writes G. W. F. Hegel, in the wake of momentous social revolution, “that our time is a time of birth and transition to a new period” (Hegel, 1997: 20). This statement, from the ‘Preface’ to The Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), announces a philosophical development that will famously struggle to keep
pace with the movement of history in the apprehension of imminent change. But it will do so in the confidence that the revolution in thought, the culmination of more than 20 centuries of philosophical development, will be as momentous as that manifested in the social history with which it forms its dialectic. One can assess Hegel’s prefatory remarks alongside comparable statements made throughout the modern age, each time addressing a sense of catastrophic and yet stimulating social turbulence, and expressing the need to match the rate of change in an unnerving dance with advancements in knowledge that at once reflect and contribute to the changes with which they aspire to keep in step. Echoing Hegel, Terence Hawkes in the ‘Editor’s Introduction’ to each volume of the New Accents series of edgy critical theory text books (first published in 1982), writes: “It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those academic disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it” (xii). The series comprises books intended to introduce emerging intellectual ideas to a non-specialist readership (particularly undergraduate students) and, although published under the rubric of literary theory, it includes topics relating to innovations in areas of cultural studies and media theory: Walter Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*, Fiske and Hartley’s *Reading Television*, Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

In 2017, some of these New Accents texts remain current and belong among key references in media history and media archaeology. Coming shortly after Jean-François Lyotard’s *La condition postmoderne* (1979) and Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981), the series marks a moment in the history of a field of knowledge, a symptom of a kind of accidental tradition, which retrospectively might be collected under the idea of a critical media theory. It becomes clearer that no attempt to grasp the character of the “rapid and radical social change” (echoing Hegel’s “birth and transition to a new period”) could begin without acknowledging the role of the intricate and yet fundamental connectivity of the technical media in every aspect of social life. Such a tradition would include the seminal texts of Walter Benjamin, Georg Simmel, and Paul Virilio, as well as, more recognizably, those of Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis. But more recently the eruption of attempts to, in various ways, and on various platforms, engage media and advance media theory, manifests what I perceive as a tension in the field that tends to show up as a contrast,
within critical media theory generally, between: 1) a tendency to engage more intimately with the physical technology of the media, on its own terms, to engage with the seductive, concealed, other side of the visible surface or interface of the technical media; and 2) turning aside from such seductions, various attempts to comprehend (to grasp and in some way to contain) a developing media knowledge within an albeit transformed theoretical framework with its roots in ancient ontology. In both tendencies, the very idea of an ontology, a science of existing, even physical, things, including variously numbers, hardware, electronic architecture, the material logic of the media itself, comes under severe strain. It is therefore desirable to identify the stakes of this tension.

In a brief late essay, ‘Towards an Ontology of Media’ (2009), Friedrich Kittler addresses what he sees as the fatal error in classical ontology: the form/matter dichotomy. And, following Heidegger, he looks forward to its eventual dissolution. If we suppose that everything – statues as well as trees and people but also technical objects – can be comprehended as a formal arrangement of some material, as actively formed passive matter, we are constrained by a framework that must fail, if our aim is to comprehend the being of the media generally. Kittler’s suggestion is that contemporary mathematical science can come to the aid of such aims. Kittler’s ontology seeks the “dark side” of the technical media rather than its “visible face,” which means putting into question the still tenacious opposition between form and matter (still alive in kinds of contemporary materialism and in words like “information”) and in the end replacing it with a new trinity made up of the categories of the technological hardware, “commands, addresses and data” (30). The suggestion resonates a bit with the practice of an albeit diverse ‘digital humanities’, concerned more with learning and exploiting the physics and technology of design as it is with developing a social or philosophical critique of media. Kittler writes:

But if an ontology of media wishes to be informed by the technical state of the art, it should know how to read blueprints, layouts, mainboard designs, industrial roadmaps, and so on, in order to learn its very categories from scratch, namely from the hardware of high tech (30).
And so, in the dissolution of old ontologies, a new ontological dawn approaches. But it does so, of course, while we are still in the dark. Kittler’s suggestion here provides an opportunity to assess the stakes as well as the challenges of ongoing attempts in the field to address the future in the intimacy of the technological details of the physical media. The physical facticity of the media in its esoteric complexity is thus drawn into the range of the critical response. I will return to Kittler’s argument shortly.

Attempts at a wider theoretical approach persist, but in forms that we tend to receive as eccentric addresses, which come often late in a thinker’s career, represent a long commitment to an intellectual field that they have informed, and offer innovative frames of thinking on the contemporary situation. Some recent instances include Jean Baudrillard’s final book, *The Lucidity Pact or The Intelligence of Evil* (2004), Peter Sloterdijk’s epic *You Must Change Your Life* (2009), Michel Serres’s small but impactful *Thumbelina* (2012), and Werner Herzog’s short film, *Lo and Behold: Reveries Of The Connected World* (2016). These authors have contributed a lifetime questioning the media (often in the forms and formats of the media under question), yet their overarching concerns remain philosophical and deal in sometimes bizarrely different ways with the state we find ourselves in (Martin Heidegger’s use of the phrase, *Befindlichkeit*, directs us to the most developed account of how one approaches a condition in question). Sloterdijk, for instance, hardly mentions the media as such in *You Must Change Your Life*, but his call for a “general immunology” implies that any attempt to engage with the media must understand the history of the race as a history of practices. And so, in the later stages of his book, it is precisely the media dominated present that stands to be transformed. The key factor that unites these works, and others that might be included among them, lies in their negotiating an environment and condition of being that in their understanding has without precedent undergone a kind of revolutionary change affecting fundamentally the connectivity of beings in the world, and thus the ontology of the transformed world itself. Serres takes as his premise the experience of a generation, who from the neo-nascent state inhabit a world not so much mediated but rather saturated by media, and who thus inhabit the mediasphere itself. Borrowing the language of the media, Serres writes of this new generation, “they are formatted by the media…they are formatted by advertising” (5). The language of formatting, alert to the heritage of cybernetics and algorithmic
determination, nonetheless recalls more than a century of existential speculation, which long before the now familiar language of computing proposed that subjects are produced by choices made in whatever environment historically predominates. The theme of choice, and of freedom of choice, has not prevailed in philosophy, since the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre began to fade in the light of the cybernetic upheavals of the decades following the Second World War. We exist in an ethical universe that produces its subjects in increasingly uncertain contexts. Much of the language of existentialism reclaims ancient arguments, like those of Aristotle, whose ethics establishes a notion of character in the repeated habits of political subjects who practice the craft of the self in their always contingent social, legal, and cultural environments. Here already the theme of choice plays only a constrained role within an ethics of habit and repetition (habituation, inhabiting languages, media) that will eventually lead a subject to a condition from which, and only after which, such ethical choices become possible. And now conditions that vastly exceed those imaginable even for Sartre, let alone Aristotle, put the grounds of ethical choice into an abyss.

It is not so much the case that the classical categories have failed in their task of supporting the sense of a substantive world, as it is that a world whose existence had indeed been supported by traditional categories has been replaced with an entirely novel one and with entirely alien categories. This view represents a significant difference from Kittler’s, who supposes that our inability to comprehend the media ontologically lies in errors that date back to the classical era. Rather, and echoing Hegel again, we are in a time of new birth and transition to a new period. Serres, with his grandchildren as theoretical examples, writes:

> Without us even realizing it, a new kind of human being was born in the brief period of time that separates us from the 1970s.

> He or she no longer has the same body or the same life expectancy. They no longer communicate in the same way; they no longer perceive the same world; they no longer live in the same nature or inhabit the same space.
Born via an epidural and programmed pregnancy, they no longer fear, with all the palliatives, the same death.

No longer having the same head as their parents, he or she comprehends differently (2016: 7).

Alongside the wearily common theme of the end of a world a new theme emerges, that of the dawn of a new media era. Passages like this from Serres represent a quite widely shared conception that is seldom stated quite so baldly. Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi (again after a lifetime of media oriented philosophy) rivals Serres in this. For example, And: Phenomenology of the End, demonstrates a similar temporal separation (Bifo identifies 1977 as the chief cut-off point) and a correspondingly post-apocalyptic formula in a notion of the “cyber sphere” that can no longer be comprehended by its receivers:

Humans have already experienced the end of the world, or the end of a world. A world ends when signs proceeding from the semiotic meta-machine grow undecipherable for a cultural community that perceived itself as a world.

A world is the projection of meaningful patterns on the surrounding space of lived experience. It is the sharing of a common code whose key lies in the forms of life of the community itself.

When flows of incomprehensible enunciations proceeding from the meta-machine invade the space of symbolic exchange, a world collapses because its inhabitants are unable to say anything effective about events and things that surround them (2015: 331).

The “semiotic meta-machine” does not refer to the physics of contemporary computer science, but to the effects of contemporary communications on the symbolic environment. Bifo builds a lexicon from the terminology of Deleuze and Guattari and others to address the situation as he finds it. The lexicon of culture, community, semiosis has already lost its purchase on a world so changed that one must speak again of the end of the world and the beginning of a new one. Any attempt to build a media theory from such energetically diverse positions will benefit
from attempting to negotiate the conflicting demands of a philosophical framework and an adherence to the factuality of the media.

II Media Ontology

Perhaps the construction of a coherent theory of media does require a ground, a set of principles on which the otherwise rapidly dispersed histories and protean forms of “the media” could be theoretically anchored. Perhaps such a ground is necessary in the aim of comprehending the media as a force among the social and political relations with which and within which technical mediations form an inextricable mesh. If so, then one would need to respond to a general sense that such a ground does not yet exist. Attempts to develop a critique or critical theory of new media, and of the Internet, necessarily stretch existing frameworks beyond their capacities. Such a theory would in its emergence pose a challenge to existing grounds for theorizing media.

Friedrich Kittler begins his enquiry into a possible “ontology of media” with a challenge of this kind (Kittler, 2009: 23). The many existing “technological or mathematical theories of communication media” suggest at first that this may be more a problem for philosophy (by which Kittler means Western Ontology from Aristotle to Heidegger or, in Heidegger’s own words, “European Metaphysics”), except that it soon becomes clear that the technological theories also fall into the errors typified by metaphysics: “McLuhan’s lecture on Aristotle’s ‘Metaphysics’ turns their true meaning upside down” (25). McLuhan’s realization, that “philosophy systematically excludes techne from its meditations,” fails therefore to observe that metaphysical categories applicable to living and natural forms – like matter, form, and entelechy – originally stem from “technical things” (25). The problem resides in a distinction between matter and form that continues to hover like a shadow over all our attempts to think things, to think especially the media, which in Aristotle’s teaching do not have an ontological status. But McLuhan’s error, while historically correct in the sense that the form/matter relation has systematically relegated technical objects to a lesser status, also fails to notice that Aristotle’s philosophy, once one strays from the Metaphysics, contains evidence of a concern with the media
as physical and natural necessities: the air that conveys sound from voice to brain, “between the thing and the eardrum as well as between the eardrum and the cochlea” (25); the air between “thing and iris” and the water between “iris and retina” that accounts for seeing in Aristotle’s description (25). Kittler thus identifies Aristotle as the inventor of the term media: “he is the first to turn a common Greek preposition – metaxú, between – into a philosophical noun or concept: tò metaxú, the medium” (26).

An ontology of the media, which currently suffers from an inability to “destroy the binary opposition between matter and form” (29), might thus be developed based on this recognition of the physical existence of the between, not a nothing or void but a thing itself, and so a being.4

In a further twist (Kittler observes that “the basic narrative remains unaffected by this”), inevitable distortions disturb the story of the coinage: 1) Aristotle’s coinage in fact belongs to Democritus (so to metaxú “is also that between the texts of Democritus and Aristotle”); and 2) the translation of to metaxú by the Latin medium “occurs first in Thomas Aquinas’ shaky command of Greek (“what he calls medium is not identical with Aristotle’s ‘between’”). No doubt “the basic narrative remains unaffected” but nevertheless another question emerges. Does the interval (between languages, across historical distance, from one text to another) operate in a way that is equivalent to how the air and water of Aristotle’s betweens operate? Can the paraphrase of Democritus by Aristotle and the shaky translation of Aristotle by Aquinas be considered to take effect across physical media? These instances do not belong to the musical and vocal environment to which Aristotle’s account of the physics of seeing and hearing refer, but instead describe situations governed by the inherent possibility of a break from such present environments, a break which extends the reach of the interval, the between, beyond finite calculability. Kittler’s answer would be something like: yes, we account for the possibility of such an interval, a transfer, a transport, or a translation, by reference to the physical medium – especially in the case of the technical (as opposed to the “natural”) media – which we regard as their precondition:

Even in Aristotle, the distinction between phone and graphe, voice and writing, was drawn just once when he wrote that, while speech sounds are signs of beings, written letters are only secondary signs of these
sounds. Thus, metaphysics – as Derrida justly, albeit much too generally, has remarked – always already forgets technical media, from writing itself up to the written book, its own precondition (26).

In this apparent agreement with Derrida, and the almost simultaneous dismissal of his “much too general” remarks on the philosophical forgetting of the technical media, Kittler manages to make light of the powerful philosophical challenge that the 1967 texts, like Speech and Phenomena and Of Grammatology (which is where Derrida picks up the same Aristotle reference), pose to anyone with a desire to construct a coherent theory of media and communication. Kittler makes light of it, dismisses it, neutralizes it, softens it with backhanded praise, but above all he seems to want to deflect any suspicion we might have that the Derrida text is forcefully at odds with him on this point. Metaphysics (or European Ontology), as is now well known, represses, domesticates, or excludes the very condition on which its key values are simultaneously built and yet threatened with ruin: the interval which breaks from all present context thus enabling illimitable repetitions in unimagined future contexts. If Derrida discovers this force animating Ontology in its generally contradictory attitude towards writing (for example mixing hyperbolic praise with dismissive scorn) it does not follow that Derrida’s understanding of writing (which he contrasts to “the book”) is the same as Kittler’s.

Indeed, Kittler exhibits a considerably more variegated sense of the technical media and yet brings a more deterministic attitude to how the physical properties of the media serve as precondition for the content of a message, its ideas, its philosophy (to the extent that, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche’s aphoristic philosophy can be traced to the emergence, and his use via secretarial help, of the typewriter). That’s not to diminish the attention that Derrida consistently dedicates to questions of the nature of a given kind of media archive; the disruption by writing of the way a book captures sense in its organized formal closure; the experiment with this disruptiveness in the formal adventures of texts like Glas, The Truth in Painting and The Postcard; patient meditations on the transformation of the archive from say an epistolary arrangement to an electronic one in, for instance, Archive Fever, On Hospitality, and ‘Faith and Knowledge’, in which the electronic media perform an
instrumental role; and throughout, the connections between drawing, writing, and photography in so many texts. But in none of these cases can the mediational element, that which grounds communication (for instance) on the between, be reduced to a physical platform. To the contrary, the element that in all rigour one would have to be able to isolate as mediational escapes ontology in every existing sense of that category, from Aristotle to Heidegger, to the extent that the physical platform is always that from which the interval – the between of the transport – must be able to break, in a repetition that gives to all media their specific quality. This is no doubt why Kittler dismisses the “remark” Derrida makes “much too generally,” about the forgetting in writing of writing itself. There would be no instance of media communication free from the property described by its general repeatability, and so each platform – whether the typewriter, photography, broadcasting, email or the internet – would be destined and displaced by its own form of mediatic disruption and the inevitable distortions that infect it but that also serve as its condition of possibility.

How, then, can this condition of possibility cohabit with something like the media ontology that Kittler’s text looks towards? Kittler fixes on the idea (the “dream of...solid state physicists”) of a future computer, “based on parallel and tiny quantum states” (30). Can critical media theory proceed with an ontology that is anchored in the hope of future scientific hardware? The inability to ground the media ontologically corresponds to the media’s capacity, and the consistent performance of this capacity, this ability, to escape ontological determination. Aristotle does not so much exclude or forget the technical media in his metaphysics, as he turns a blind eye to their corrosive force already in the domain, the physical here and now, which he must nevertheless try to protect from them. The media are inherently destructive of ontology, of physical continuity in space and time. In the 1960s, this theme in various guises represents the unmistakable crumbling of ontology generally. It had begun already in the aphorisms of Nietzsche, and in the essays on the media by Walter Benjamin. Heidegger’s “fundamental ontology” remains functional at least in name, for instance in philosophical essays by Slavov Žižek, Alain Badiou and others, but if the strange domain of the between has had any purchase at all in the last sixty years, then this has been at the cost of having to awaken from the dream of ontological grounds, of the various ways of establishing or grounding things and
relations, whether this dream takes on an empiricist character, builds itself into the connective silicone structures of the contemporary hardware, or builds its substantial reality in a more abstract domain. The media cannot be dissociated from abstraction either. The inevitable and immediate disincarnation of the message, even as it is inscribed or uttered (on a cave wall, on the page, in breath and voice, on screen, in the von Neumann architecture), defines a precondition for arithmetic and grounds logic on repeatable methodologies. The physics of water and air cannot, therefore, serve as a model for the impalpable domain of mediation.

As Jean-François Lyotard had established by 1979 in *La condition postmoderne* (and in this he was at once late to the game but also oddly prescient), such dreams are formed of a doubled glance of false memories and anxious desires, never far from a fear of social disintegration and “the paradisiac representation of a lost ‘organic’ society” (15). Instead, and with some room for speculation on a more fortunate future, Lyotard identifies the field as one in which each of us is mediated. The *between* is everywhere: “A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before…one is located at a post through which various messages pass” (15). Consequently, a great difficulty in the development of a coherent and effective media theory, if one were desirable, would lie in the sheer heterogeneity of the elements that it would need to bring into its view. And so, universities and other institutes of knowledge that foster the study of media do so through specialization, following a kind of historical rule of default by which the sphere in question, the media in general, has manifestly contributed to the tendency towards a division into specialisms in *every* domain. How does one develop a theoretical knowledge of the media when the development of media over an age a little less than 200 years old has itself largely influenced, if not steered, the development of knowledge into sometimes powerfully specialized particularities? Lyotard’s celebrated report on knowledge identifies some of what marks these trends, in the critical problem of the legitimization of knowledge, trends that have sought legitimation, variously, in narrative, pragmatic, systematic and paralogical forms. Lyotard’s method, in a developed account of language games, brings him to the conclusion that not only must we recognize that language games are “heteromorphous,” but also that “any consensus on the rules defining a game
and the ‘moves’ playable within it must be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation” (66). Increasing institutional support for the self-legitimation of disciplines (largely through indicators of excellence focused on the relevance of citation indexes) brings knowledge (still often regarded under the postmodern rubric) without struggle into an economic sphere of heteromorphous activities. Appeals to interdisciplinary research justifying an essential heterogeneity in knowledge, either by extension to or contained within an ethical or political discourse, do not advance beyond an in principle (yet often unintentionally) anti-philosophical, anti-theoretical, standpoint, happily adrift among a disjunction of activities, specialisms, and experiments in the field of media, which loosely holds together studies of languages, theories, formats, cultures, networks, technologies, societies, communities, and aesthetic discourses, and comprises an apparently illimitable range of methods (empirical, historical, theoretical, mathematical, ethnomethodological, experimental, and so on). Perhaps we at last need this final renunciation of the classical theoretical impulse. Nevertheless, the stakes of the problem seem great.

The old story that describes the crumbling of the old and the dawn of the new is rejuvenated in the merging of techno-scientific and critical knowledge. But because these trends are in each case implicitly or explicitly (intrinsically, essentially, helplessly) antagonistic towards the other, an alternative, as yet indeterminate and spectral, position begins to appear. It makes sense for media theory to come to grips with this emergent position that would be neither ontological nor merely empirical.

References


Notes

1 We can here only acknowledge, in lieu of a more extended analysis, furiously eclectic work, especially in the last ten years, that in divergent but always critically provocative ways experiments with the intricacies of such a challenge: e.g., Azuma Hiroki’s Otaku: Japan’s Database Animals; Jodi Dean’s Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive; Benjamin Bratton’s The Stack: on software and Sovereignty; and Paul Preciado’s Testo Junkie.

2 Herzog in an interview during which he discusses his Lo and Behold, his short documentary on the internet, says, “We have to be prudent when we look at social media … and of course they have some extraordinary sides to it as well … but on average it only is a manifestation of stupidity and banalities … it’s mostly banalities … which is okay because our lives are composed of a chain of banalities” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nAkjLIMqBeo&t=81s]

3 “In der Befindlichkeit ist das Dasein immer schon vor es selbst gebracht, es hat sich immer schon gefunden, nicht als wahrnehmendes Sich-vorfinden, sondern als gestimmtes Sichbefinden” (Sein und Zeit: 135). “In Befindlichkeit, Dasein is always brought before itself, and it has always already found itself, not in the sense of perceptive self-finding, but in the sense of finding itself in its moodiness” (Being and Time: 174). In the language of finding (Befindlichkeit, Sich-vorfinden, Sichbefinden) the concept of existence resonates with the concept of mood or attunement (die Stimmung, das Gestimmte: attunement, mood), and this distinguishes for all serious philosophical thought since Heidegger between a concept of self, focused on perception, and an account of being-in-the-world, discovered existentially in Dasein’s “moods” or “modes of attunement.”


5 In its early days, the word typewriter designated both the machine and person operating it. For the reading of Nietzsche, see “The Mechanized Philosopher” (195-208).

John W P Phillips teaches at The National University of Singapore. He has written about theatre, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, photography, philosophy, new media, mathematics, music, military technology, literature, education, cities, and art. He has recently completed a book on Jacques
Derrida, *Jacques Derrida’s Formal Adventure and the Signature of Philosophy*, and is currently completing a book on Philosophy and the Dawn, which follows the vicissitudes of the rising sun from Hegel, through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, to Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Irigaray, and beyond.

**Email:** elliwp@nus.edu.sg