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Media in Action: From Exorcism to Mesmerism

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In the Bavaria of 1775, the popular exorcist practices performed by the catholic priest Johann Joseph Gassner were discredited and superseded by the enlightened, 'scientific' system of Franz Anton Mesmer's "Animal Magnetism". As the article argues, this replacement could happen so easily because—below the apparent ideological differences—both procedures were based on the same idea of technical functioning, they relied on the same principle of operation. Gassnerism as well as Mesmerism revolved around the idea of communication, and in both cases this 'communication' was not about conveying a message, a meaning, it was a about mediating between two corporeal states which were marked by an imbalance of energy. In the frame of this common operating system, the message was nothing, transmission everything; and so both Gassner's and Mesmer's deliberations concentrated on the technical means and media which could allow for such a transport of forces.

A hypothesis drawn from this episode is that throughout the early modern period there can be found basically two ways of understanding supernatural communication (and, maybe, communication *tout court*): One might be called 'contact paradigm' and would among others include the practices of Gassner and Mesmer, the second one could be named 'code paradigm' and would unite all magical practices primarily based on the interpretation of signs. Perhaps one can find here an origin of the theoretical bifurcations that still govern today's media and communication studies: medium vs. message, channel vs. content, hardware vs. software, presence culture vs. meaning culture.

Keywords: Media Theory, History of Media, Mesmerism, exorcism

Ways of Communication

As we know from Niklas Luhmann, communication is always improbable. Different kinds of media have to intervene in order to treat this problem and make communication happen despite its improbability.¹ Yet there are communications which appear even more unlikely than others. In the case of ‘magical’ or ‘supernatural’ dealings, the uncertainty does not only refer to the advent of communication (will it happen or not?), but also to the way it works. Epistemologically, this uncertainty has been extremely productive: While ordinary, everyday communications tend to forget the media by which they were established, the enigmatic cases of supernatural interaction inevitably incite reflections on the ways and means of communication. So any magical practice (and any attempt to explain it) contains a kind of communication theory: an explicit or implicit hypothesis on the possibility of transmission. As the following episode from the late 18th century shall illustrate, communication must not necessarily be understood in today’s sense of transmitting a meaningful message; it may also be conceived as a principle of pure contiguity, as a way of establishing a material contact.

Gassner and the Beasts

For many years Johann Joseph Gassner, a Catholic priest from the small Austrian village of Klösterle am Arlberg, had been a local celebrity, known for his power to command the devil and to heal the most hopeless diseases. In the summer of 1774 he sets out for a journey to cure several noble patients in Upper Swabia. Travelling criss-cross through the region north of Lake Constance, he becomes increasingly famous as a faith healer and miracle worker. Following an invitation by the Lord Provost, Anton Ignaz Graf von Fugger, Gassner takes residence in the town of Ellwangen from October 1774 to April 1775. The place, counting only 230 houses, soon becomes the target of a spectacular miracle tourism.² According to a contemporary report, the roads are “full of supernatural and possessed sick” peregrinating to Ellwangen “under constant praises to the Blessed Virgin.”³

¹ Luhmann, Niklas. “Die Unwahrscheinlichkeit der Kommunikation.” In *Soziologische Aufklärung 3: Soziales System, Gesellschaft, Organisation* (Opladen: Westdt. Verl., 1981), 25–34.

² Siegfried Müller, *Drei ‘Wunderheiler’ aus dem Vorarlberger Oberland: Pfarrer Johann Joseph Gassner, Dr. Johann Josef Schoder, Hermann Dörn*, (Feldkirch: Rheticus-Gesellschaft, 1986), 34.

³ Anon, *Lustiges Abentheuer eines geistlichen Don Quixotte Pat. Gassners, Teufelsbeschwörer in Ellwangen* (Berlin, 1775), 5.



Figure 1 – *Abbildung des Herrn Johann Joseph Gassners* (Augsburg 1775).

Gassner's miracle cures take place in modest, barely furnished rooms: in the inn, in the chapel, or in secondary rooms of the castle. The patients are recruited from the uneducated classes, from the common people and the lower rural nobility: "When I entered the site of the operations at nine in the evening [...], I saw the priest sit at a table, with two lights on it. Around him there were placed two rows of chairs for the nobility, behind them there was the place for the other viewers. Next to the table were standing the possessed and other sick."⁴ Despite their austere setting, Gassner's treatments have something of a fairground attraction:

The strange gestures, convulsions, positions made by the patients, their farts, which did not go off without noise, the ditties they sang or warbled appealed so much to the Miracle Worker and the bunch of viewers, they made them laugh so pleasantly, that he [Gassner] would let them repeat several times, augment them, modify them, and make them even more

⁴ Ferdinand Sterzinger, *Die aufgedeckten Gassnerischen Wunderkuren: Aus authentischen Urkunden beleuchtet, und durch Augenzeugen bewiesen*, (s.l.: s.n. 1775), 38.

ridiculous. To please curiosity he even repeated the whole operation. The chapel where [the cures] were mostly carried out was so often filled with loud, resounding laughter, that one could easily mistake it for a comedy house or a toothbreaker's shop.⁵



Figure 2 – *Abbildung des Wohlehrwürdigen Herrn Johann Joseph Gassners* (Augsburg 1775).

Gassner's fiercest adversary proves to be the priest Don Ferdinand Sterzinger, who observes the miracle cures as an emissary of the Munich Academy of Sciences. Sterzinger is disgusted by the carnival character of the event, the obscene behavior of the sick, their theatrical 'acting out'. But even he cannot

⁵ Contemporary report, cited (without indication of source) in Müller, *Drei 'Wunderheiler'*, 48.

escape the physical effect of the performance. Strictly determined not to laugh, he is “not able to abstain from it:” “I liked it all too well how the farmer danced around as if he was in the inn, but in my inmost I was angry that a comedy was played with the sanctuary.”⁶

In this confrontation between the exorcist and the ghostbuster, there is more at stake than just personal animosity. Gassner and Sterzinger themselves know quite well that they act as exponents in a culture war. Their dispute exemplarily reveals the distance between country and city, folk culture and erudition, oral tradition and literacy, popular piety and religious institution, between trance cult and a religion of the book.⁷ What particularly interests me in this clash of civilizations are the unmistakably media-theoretical questions which are raised here, in the dress of a theological debate. Gassner’s and Sterzinger’s controversy over the possibility of supernatural communication is also a dispute about the possibility of communication at all, and if their ideological positions seem to be irreconcilable, this may be so because they are based on fundamentally different models of communication.

Actually their debate is not about the question whether the devil exists or not; this is a foregone conclusion for both sides. Also Sterzinger believes in the possibility of possession; at least he would not rule out that “still today *ex speciali permissione divina* [with special Divine permission] the devil could take the body of the person in possession.”⁸ The main difference is, how the agency of the devil is thought. For Sterzinger, the demoniacal influence reveals itself not by “vile gestures” and “hysterical attacks,” it rather manifests itself by performances of improbable and therefore uncanny communicational skills, as for example in the case of a person who “talks in languages which he has not learned” or who discovers “the most hidden things” of which “he cannot have the slightest knowledge.”⁹

For Sterzinger, the demonic influence is marked by the communication of unlikely messages, and for this semantic devilry, the medium of transmission is of minor importance. Conversely, the diabolical communication put on stage by Gassner can manage without message, but it ascribes an eminent role to questions of transmission and mediality. It is this difference in the perception and

⁶ Sterzinger, *Die aufgedeckten Gaßnerischen Wunderkuren*, 24-25.

⁷ For a reconstruction of the Gassner affair as an ideological struggle between Catholic conservatism and enlightenment, see H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the demons of eighteenth-century Germany* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2005).

⁸ Sterzinger, *Die aufgedeckten Gaßnerischen Wunderkuren*, 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*

conception of communication which directs the course of the debate revolving around Gassner's exorcisms.

Following the idea that communication must always be communication of information, of meaningful messages, Sterzinger cannot help but oppose the coarse body-therapeutic orientation of the Gassnerian cure. If the diabolical influence manifests itself by unusual mental benefits, the true direction of the treatment cannot be to let the patients wildly dance around or to let them talk without thinking. The task rather consists in the reconstruction of the lost meaning, in the restoration of order, in the readjustment of the mental displacement, in the assignment of the correct position. So, when Gassner uses the occasion, and sickens a frenzied female patient onto his adversary, Sterzinger reacts by reordering the woman's confused speech and by bringing her back to her "canapé."¹⁰ Gassner's exorcist operations, however, and in Sterzinger's eyes this is a sufficient reason to distrust them, seem more to rely on the unleashing of forces than on the rearrangement of order. Their symbolic efficacy does not lie in the reconstruction of a semantic hierarchy, but rather in its dissolution.

This momentum of dissolution is particularly evident in the strange mutations that occur to Gassner's *protégés*. Sterzinger describes the treatment of a "Freyfrau [baroness] von E." who suffers from convulsions and who, on Gassner's command, repeatedly produces a "*Fraiss*,"¹¹ an epileptic crisis:

There she fell into a *Fraiss*: She began to warp her mouth, to gnash her teeth, to roll her eyes, to beat with hands and feet, and to rear up. Now we have already won it! cried the priest, laughing enthusiastically.¹²

An observer, who introduces himself as a transient Prussian officer, depicts a scene with "nine obsessed wenches:"

One is screaming, the other barks like a dog, the third shows her tongue, the fourth laughs, cries or sings, or she savages one of the spectators to scare him.¹³

The funniest thing though, according to this witness, is that the unleashed patients "no longer treated each other as women," but "as if they were the devils

¹⁰ Ibid, 30.

¹¹ According to Adelung's Dictionary, "Fraiß" doesn't only mean "terror, fright, or danger" (similarly to fr. affreux, engl. afraid), but also "epilepsy." Johann Christoph Adelung, *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der hochdeutschen Mundart: Band 2: F-I* (Wien: Pichler, 1808), 263.

¹² Sterzinger, *Die aufgedeckten Gassnerischen Wunderkuren*, 28.

¹³ Anon., *Lustiges Abenteuer*, 30.

themselves.”¹⁴ “I really thought I was in hell,” admits the officer, and he confesses his addressee, “that, if I had assisted these horror games in my 12th or 14th year, I would not only have become a disciple of Gassner, but, on the spot, I even would have turned Catholic.”¹⁵



Figure 3 – *Abbildung des wohlehrwürdigen Herrn Johann Joseph Gassners* (1775).

Becoming-dog, becoming-devil or, what for a Prussian officer of the time may amount to the same thing, becoming-Catholic: In all these cases there seems to be at work a demonic transformation which, in its both terrible and fascinating violence, evades any emblematic, symbolic, or structural interpretation. As it is

¹⁴ Ibid, 37.

¹⁵ Ibid, 38.

emphasized by Deleuze and Guattari (who, at this point, can speak somehow ‘sympathetically’ for Gassner’s miracle cures), “a becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification.”¹⁶ Rather – and Gassner and his charges seem quite to follow this direction – it is about approximating the animal or the devil, about entering a zone of proximity or of indiscernibility with the “beast,” not by imitating a form, but by dissolving the solid shapes, by extracting particles, “between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are closest to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes.”¹⁷



Figure 4 – *Saint Antonius surrounded by Demons* (late 17th or early 18th century).

Inasmuch as this becoming-beast means nothing else than to abandon the (all too) human shape and to embark on a sub-individual level of molecular motions, it includes a multiplication of relationships. “A becoming-animal,” explain Deleuze and Guattari, “always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 237.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 272.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 239.

Indeed, the devil rarely comes alone. Even Jesus, who asks a demon after his name, gets the answer: “My name is Legion: for we are many.”¹⁹ Daniel Defoe, in his *History of the devil*, reports the popular opinion “that Satan’s name may well be called a noun of multitude, and that the devil and his angels are certainly no inconsiderable number.”²⁰

Far from the Sterzinger’s cultivated devil, impressing people by extraordinary intellectual faculties, Gassner’s rural demons behave like “demonic animals, pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population.”²¹ “Demons”, Marcel Mauss writes in his *Theory of magic*, “are like soldiers in an army, they are troops, [...] bands of hunters or cavalcades; they lack any real individuality.”²² In folk magic, the devil is a “lord of the flies,”²³ a leader of a whole swarm of devils:

Mr. Gassner: So you are then the midday devil? How! - You’re all alone?

The Spirit: No, I still have other 7 million with me, and they are all devils of unchastity.

Mr. Gassner: This is a lie. I adjure you that you tell me the truth. [...]

The Spirit: So then know that our number is ten billion, no more and no less.²⁴

Perhaps it is this multiplication of references, the resolution of any individual character, which makes up the actual demonic quality of the famous ‘bargain with the devil.’ You negotiate with one, and all of a sudden you’ve got to do with an anonymous collectivity, a multitude of devils who cannot be addressed individually, but who have to be conducted and controlled, much the same as masses and collective movements must be kept in check. It is therefore only natural that the exorcism tends to have a quantitative view of possession. Dealing with the devil is less about information than about force.²⁵

¹⁹ Gospel according to *Mark* 5.9, King James Version.

²⁰ Daniel Defoe, *The History of the devil, as well antient as modern* (London: Warner, [1726]) 76.

²¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 241.

²² Marcel Mauss, *A general theory of magic* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 105.

²³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 239.

²⁴ Anon., *Ellwangisches Protokoll vom 8. Dec. 1774, eine mit zehntausend Millionen Teufeln besessene gewesene junge Nonne Namens Maria Anna Treflerin aus München betreffend* (s.l.: s.n., 1776), 13-14. It is of minor importance at this point that this text is presumably a fake. The idea that a possessed person is inhabited by a multitude of devils is a constant element in exorcist thinking and is also certified by other testimonials, see Anon. [Johann Pezzl], *Anmerkungen über den Teufel zu Seefeld in Tirol* (Seefeld: St. Monicabruderschaft, 1783), 17.

²⁵ Only the spokesman-devil acts as an informant, indicating the size of the demonic charge similar to a voltmeter indicating the electric tension.



Figure 5 – Frontispice from *Gespräche im Reiche der Lebendigen [...] über die [...] Beschwörungen und Wunderkuren Herrn Gafßners* (1775).

Possession turns out to be an energetic seizure, a quasi-physical fact, and the enlightened Pater Sterzinger only demonstrates his distance from the folk system of belief when he primarily endows the devil with intellectual skills. The popular conception of Satan is based on what he can do, and not in what he knows. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, “the devil is a transporter; he transports

humors, affects, or even bodies.”²⁶ Indeed it all starts with a symbolic agreement (the ‘devil’s bargain’), but after that, it is all about physical transformation and the mobilization of energy: copulating with the devil, overcoming gravity, causing hailstorms, and giving birth to monsters. The traditional discourse of exorcism itself points to the energetic component of demoniacal possession, using the word “*energoumenos*” (or “*Energomenen*”²⁷) to designate “possessed people.”

The fact that obsession is commonly understood rather quantitatively than qualitatively, rather energetically than intellectually, does not only arise from the incredible multiplicability of the demons, but, even more impressively, from the enormous emotional and physical effort by which they must be expelled:

But the person suffered from many violent kicks, convulsions, heart bursts, as if she wanted to vomit, moving so heavily that three or four men were hardly capable of holding her, although the Pater Exorcist had commanded [the devils] to ride out quietly. After a while he said: now ten million have left, then he further tormented the distressed woman and cried again: Christians, bless yourselves, there are new devils arriving. Whereat the previous violence took place and soon the Satan said: now ten millions are out again.²⁸

In this constellation, the function of the exorcist is above all that of a gatekeeper, a loading master, a packet switcher who has to ensure that the undisciplined sub-devils (“*Unterteufel*”) leave the body somewhat ‘orderly’, that means, in countable groups or packs, and in accordance with the prescribed channels. Since it has to deal with enormous amounts of energy, the exorcist operation cannot be confined to the commands defined in the transmission protocol of the *Rituale Romanum*. Much to the displeasure of the higher Church officials, Gassner takes refuge to physical manipulation, enforcing the demonological ‘rapport’ by touching and sometimes rudely shaking the sick.

Critically observing Gassner’s treatment, Sterzinger notices “the rubbing of the patient’s cingulum [pectoral girdle], the pressing of her head [...], the feeling of the pulse, the shaking of her body, the various positions, and many physical arrangements alike.”²⁹ According to another witness, Gassner “fiercely pressed one hand on the patient’s forehead, the other on the patient’s neck, often touched

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 253.

²⁷ Cf. anon., *Höchst verwunderliche und authentisirte Wirkungen des Gassnerischen Exorcismus: Zur Ehre des heiligsten Namens Jesu* (s.l.: s.n., 1776) 7.

²⁸ Anon. [Johann Pezzl], *Anmerkungen über den Teufel*, 32-33.

²⁹ Sterzinger, *Die aufgedeckten Gassnerischen Wunderkuren*, 51-52.

the painful spot, or violently shook the whole body.”³⁰ And the bishop of Constance complains that Gassner tends to touch and shake the “help-seeking people of both sexes on body and limbs,” which is not only “against the rule of the *Rituum*,” but also “very indecent.”³¹



Figure 6 – *Aechte Abbildung des hochwürd. Herrn Johann Joseph Gassner* (Regensburg, ca. 1775).

To the degree in which communication is here manifestly understood as physical contact – as touching, as laying on of hands, as shaking, etc. – the importance of meaningful discourse recedes. An exorcism is – at least for men

³⁰ Philipp J. Huth, *Versuch einer Kirchengeschichte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts: Zweyter Band: Vom Jahre 1750 bis 1800* (Augsburg: Bolling, 1809), 387.

³¹ “Antwort Seiner Hochfürstlichen Eminenz des Kardinals und Bischofs zu Costanz, 7. Aug. 1774.” In Johann Salomo Semler, ed. *Samlungen von Briefen und Aufsätzen über die Gassnerischen und Schröpferischen Geisterbeschwörungen [Erstes Stück]* (Frankfurt, Leipzig, 1775) 193-198, 195.

like Gassner – no ‘talking cure’. If here occurs something like speech, so its function is limited to a few phatic effects, utterances whose only aim is to create a connection. The spells and incantations in Gassner procedure have no significative function, they shall not conjure up some codified meaning, rather they serve as a kind of trigger or catalyst for the transfer of energy. In other words, even when language is used, it is not about the fabrication of meanings, it is about producing contact, it is about establishing and maintaining a channel of physical communication.



Figure 7 – *Weise wider die Anfechtungen der Hölle zu streiten* (Augsburg, ca. 1775).

As Marcel Mauss mentions, in magical incantations the linguistic material is commonly reduced “to the name of a god or demon, or a well-nigh meaningless ritual word.”³² Also Gassner’s exorcist treatment goes without many words, it revolves around a single term, the “name of Jesus”: It is enough to think at it “with firm confidence” – “and the devil with his infestations shall depart.”³³ Here, the name of Jesus does not constitute a message; it is merely a short sign, a password, a sending command, or, as one commentator sarcastically remarks, a

³² Mauss, *A general theory*, 70.

³³ Sterzinger, *Die aufgedeckten Gassnerischen Wunderkuren*, 32-33.

“universal patch” (“Universalpflaster”³⁴) that will activate the transition between human and non-human world.³⁵



Figure 8 – *Durch Ausspruch des allerheiligsten Nahmen Jesu* (leaflet, ca. 1775).

If, therefore, the meaning is not so important, it is the expression that counts all the more. In order to work as “as instruments of passage and as triggering mechanisms,”³⁶ the “repeated verbal formulae”³⁷ have to be pronounced with the

³⁴ Johann Pezzl, *Faustin oder das philosophische Jahrhundert* (s.l., 1783), 36.

³⁵ Indeed, in the Bavaria of the 18th century it is hard to imagine a word that is *less* charged with meaning than the name of Jesus. As a contemporary travel guide advises the visitors of Munich the usual greeting formula “when you meet someone, or enter the room of someone” (313) has to be “Praised be Jesus Christ!” (313). Whenever confronted with “an extraordinary event which so to say comes before reflection,” people of all ranks and ages will “cry out the name ‘Jesus!’” (316). See Lorenz v. Westenrieder, *Beschreibung der Haupt- und Residenzstadt München* (München: Strobl, 1782).

³⁶ Stanley J. Tambiah, “A Performative Approach to Ritual.” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, no. 65 (1979): 113–169, 142.

necessary emphasis, possibly “in tones of fury:”³⁸ “In the name of Jesus the Son of the living God, I command you that you are evading off me, damn infernal spirit! Jesus + Jesus + Jesus +.”³⁹ The witness, who reports this Gassnerian invocation, adds that, “if the formula [“die Formul”] is to help, it has to be pushed out in a threatening and violently angry tone.”⁴⁰

Because it is not simply about the transmission of information, but about the transport of affects, Gassner’s procedure requires the production of an effective contact, a physical act of touching. It presupposes a bridge or a channel to be created, so that the demonic energy can flow off. It requires an intermediate thing, a medium that sets up the connection and controls the exchange. It is, however, in the nature of interfaces to be replaceable, a circumstance which would become fatal to Gassner.

The Naturalization of the Devil

Failing to prove fraudulent behavior in Gassner’s performances, the Munich-based partisans of enlightenment soon take refuge to a second hypothesis: The effects achieved by Gassner are real, yet they are not due not to the influence of the devil, but of a still unknown natural cause, a “mysterious force of nature.”⁴¹ As Sterzinger puts it: “God does not do it, the devil cannot do it, and so it is nature which does it.”⁴²

There is also a suggestion at hand where the hereby assumed natural causes might be found. Sterzinger is convinced “that either a magnetic, an electric or sympathetic force brings forth the effects.”⁴³ An anonymous author, who agrees with Sterzinger’s hypothesis, immediately knows whom to contact as an expert in such hidden causes: “Should I have to propose someone, so without hesitation I would suggest the famous Doctor Mesmer, who’s wonderful and magnetic operations are in the best accordance with those of Pater Gassner.”⁴⁴

The fact that Franz Anton Mesmer, a fashionable physician practicing in Vienna, was known in the Munich of 1775 as “the famous Doctor Mesmer” seems to have

³⁷ Ibid, 141.

³⁸ Bronislaw Malinowski, “Magic, Science and Religion.” In Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948), 1–71, 55.

³⁹ Anon., *Lustiges Abenteuer*, 20. The sign “+” indicates the act of crossing oneself.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sterzinger, *Die aufgedeckten Gassnerischen Wunderkuren*, 52.

⁴² Ibid, 54.

⁴³ Ibid, 53.

⁴⁴ Anon. [C.R. Reisach), *Politische Frage, ob ein weislich regierender Landesfürst über die Gassnerischen Kuren ohne Nachtheil seiner Unterthanen, noch länger gleichgültig seyn kann?* (s.l.: s.n., 1775), 45.

to do mainly with the treatments he had carried out in the same year in the area of Lake Constance – as it were in the footsteps of Gassner, who had been working there one year before. A letter from September 1775 reports on Mesmer's stopover in Meersburg where he "had cured two nuns who both had believed to have a piece of the devil in their flesh. The confessor of the monastery himself has affirmed it, and is cured of the Gassnerian follies."⁴⁵

So, Mesmer seems to be exactly the man who is needed in Munich: His treatment produces the same effects as Gassner's exorcism, but it has the advantage to be based on a natural interpretation. The Bavarian Academy of Sciences hastens to invite Mesmer to Munich. On November 25, 1775 Mesmer provides proof of his talent before the assembled members of the academy. In particular, the secretary and scientifically informed Benedictine monk Ildephons Kennedy appears to be sensitive to Mesmer's magnetic effects:

Treating R. P. Kennedy, permanent secretary to the Electoral Academy, Dr Mesmer by merely directing one finger towards him incited and appeased a convulsive twitch which uses to attack him from to time; the convulsion appeared as often and persistently as he wanted, so that Mr. Kennedy had to ask the Doctor to put an end to this joke.⁴⁶

On the basis of this "indisputable proof of his both unexpected and useful erudition and discoveries,"⁴⁷ Mesmer is promptly appointed Member of the Academy, and is commissioned referee in the case of Gassner. The result of his investigation is as desired. Without ever having witnessed one of the disputed treatments,⁴⁸ Mesmer comes to the conclusion that Gassner was "an honest, but too zealous priest."⁴⁹ The success of the exorcist cures which Gassner attributed to the power over the evil spirit, were based on nothing else than on the "animal magnetism" described by Mesmer himself: "My experience taught me that this man was nothing more than a tool of nature. His position as a cleric and some happy coincidence caused in him a certain natural conjunction which enabled him

⁴⁵ Cited (without indication of source) in Müller, *Drei 'Wunderheiler'*, 21.

⁴⁶ "Anhang von einigen Briefen und Nachrichten, die D. Mesmerische Kurart mit dem Magneten betreffend," in Franz Anton Mesmer, *Schreiben über die Magnetkur*, (s.l.: s.n., 1776), 31–46, 45.

⁴⁷ Kennedy to Mesmer in Vienna, 28. November 1775, cit. in Ludwig Hammermayer, *Geschichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften: 1759 – 1807* (München: Beck, 1983) 51, annotation 231.

⁴⁸ Cf. Anneliese Ego, *'Animalischer Magnetismus' oder 'Aufklärung': Eine mentalitätsgeschichtliche Studie zum Konflikt um ein Heilkonzept im 18. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1991), 19.

⁴⁹ Franz Anton Mesmer, *Abhandlung über die Entdeckung des thierischen Magnetismus* (Carlsruhe: Macklot, 1781), 31.

to provoke the periodic accidents of these diseases without knowing their efficient cause.”⁵⁰

Convinced by Mesmer’s presentation, Elector Max III Joseph adopts the idea of a natural explication and decrees a prohibition of exorcism for the whole Bavarian territory. When an edict by Joseph II extends the ban to the entire territory of the *Reich*, and the pope pronounces himself against exorcist, the system of protection which had covered Gassner’s public activities, collapses. Gassner is transferred to a small parish near the Danube River, where he dies in 1778. In a letter to Mesmer, written early in 1776, Kennedy confirms that it were Mesmer’s demonstrations which “had the greatest impact in the destruction of the Gassnerian juggleries.”⁵¹

Mesmer and the Currents

How shall one – from a technical perspective – judge the shift from Gassner to Mesmer, from exorcism to animal magnetism? Henri Ellenberger, in *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, starts his historical narrative with Gassner, but he adds that it was Mesmer who “provided the decisive impulse toward the elaboration of dynamic psychiatry.”⁵² Contrary to this view, the German psychologist and hypnotist Burkhard Peter has argued that “Gassner’s particular form of practice in self-control is much closer to our modern understanding of hypnotherapy and psychotherapy than Mesmer’s methods, using physical application of iron magnets, passes or magnetic baquets.”⁵³ While, as I think, Peter is right to stress the physical orientation of the Mesmerian cures,⁵⁴ I would

⁵⁰ Ibid, 31. The scientific demonstration put on stage by the Munich Academy can aptly be described by the term “substitution test,” see Erhard Schüttpelz and Ehler Voss, “In jeder Beziehung ebenso wirksam: Die mediumistische Kontroverse im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Theorien der Passivität*, edited by Kathrin Busch and Helmut Draxler (München: Fink, 2013), 100-101.

⁵¹ Kennedy to Mesmer, 3. January 1776, cited (without indication of source) in Burkhard Peter, *Hypnotische Selbstkontrolle: Die wirksame Therapie des Teufelsbanners Johann Joseph Gassner um 1775* (<http://www.meg-stiftung.de/index.php/de/component/phocadownload/category/1-artikel?download=95:gassner>. Accessed August 20, 2014), 11.

⁵² Henri F. Ellenberger, *The discovery of the unconscious: The history and evolution of dynamic psychiatry* (London: Fontana, 1994), 53.

⁵³ Burkhard Peter, “Gassner’s Exorcism—not Mesmer’s Magnetism—is the Real Predecessor of Modern Hypnosis.” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* (53, no. 1, 2005), 1–12, 9.

⁵⁴ Indeed hypnotism (which in the 19th century usually was regarded as a prime feature of Mesmerism) has no foundation in Mesmer’s own conception of animal magnetism. It was the doctrine of artificial somnambulism and magnetic sleep, invented by Mesmer’s disciple and rival in Paris, Marquis de Puységur, which prepared the ‘psychological’ turn in Mesmerian thinking and prepared its later interpretation as a phenomenon based on the ‘power of will’. Cf. Martin Blankenburg, “Der ‘thierische Magnetismus’ in Deutschland: Nachrichten aus dem

doubt that Gassner's exorcism can appropriately be described as "a genuine psychological therapy, namely a special kind of hypnotic training in self-control."⁵⁵

Perhaps one should ask oneself why, in the Bavaria of 1775, there could be such a rapid transition from the devil to the natural cause, from obsession to disease, from incantation to magnetization. As I suppose, this conversion was facilitated by the fact that both Gassnerism and Mesmerism, despite their apparent ideological opposition, rely on the same principle of operation, on the same 'operating system', namely a paradigm of transmission by contact. Mesmer could become the exorcist of the educated, because Gassner already was a bit of a magnetizer of the ordinary people. To give a counter-example: Translating alchemy into Mesmerism would have been impossible, despite all the ideological and social proximity of Mesmerism to court and bourgeois esotericism, since both systems rely on different premises: One works on the basis of 'significance' and 'similarity', the other on the basis of 'contact' and 'contiguity'.

Apparently Mesmer, who already had "encountered the magnetic theology during his studies at the Jesuit College of Dillingen,"⁵⁶ initially conceived of magnetism in the traditional terms of 'sympathy' and 'analogy.' But even if his interest in magnetic influence can be traced back to the renaissance esotericism of Robert Fludd and Athanasius Kircher,⁵⁷ Mesmer's relevant contribution to the theory of magnetism consists in unhinging it from the neo-platonic model. If "animal magnetism" is a system of universal communication, this communication is not thought in terms of sympathy and similarity, but in terms of connection and contact. While in the renaissance paradigm of similarity the communication between two separate worlds (for example micro- and macrocosm) may well be thought as a bodiless correspondence, as a purely spiritual affinity, in Mesmer's

Zwischenreich," in Robert Darnton, *Der Mesmerismus und das Ende der Aufklärung in Frankreich* (München, Wien: Hanser, 1983), 191–228; Ernst Florey, "Franz Anton Mesmers magische Wissenschaft," in *Franz Anton Mesmer und der Mesmerismus: Wissenschaft, Scharlatanerie, Poesie*, edited by Gereon Wolters (Konstanz: Universitäts-Verlag, 1988), 11–40. If, for example, Schopenhauer claims that Mesmerism could be understood as "an immediate action of our will itself freed all causal conditions of physical activity, that means from contact in the widest sense of the word," he only indicates how far the hypnotic paradigm of the 19th century has departed from Mesmer's physical understanding of magnetic communication. Arthur Schopenhauer, "Versuch über das Geistersehn und was damit zusammenhängt," in *Zürcher Ausgabe, Werke in zehn Bänden, Band VII: Parerga und Paralipomena 1,1.*, (Zürich: Diogenes, 1977) 247–335.

⁵⁵ Peter, "Gassner's Exorcism," 2. Especially the idea of "self-control" obviously does not fit very well with the behavior of Gassner's patients.

⁵⁶ Ernst Benz, *Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) und seine Ausstrahlung in Europa und Amerika* (München: Fink, 1976), 61.

⁵⁷ Cf. Florey, "Franz Anton Mesmers," 21.

system of animal magnetism everything depends on the possibility of establishing a physical contact, an effective connection between the poles of communication – a conception which necessarily includes the idea of a material support, even if the materiality of this medium will remain widely hypothetical.



Figure 9 – *Le Baquet de Mr. Mesmer* (after 1778).

This is the basis for what one might call Mesmer’s obsession with the medium. If every human being “is gifted with an inner sense that stands in connection with the whole of the universe,”⁵⁸ there must be a kind of universal medium which guarantees this connectivity. Picking up a familiar expression which had already been used by Leibniz,⁵⁹ Mesmer calls this all-round medium “the *fluidum*.” “Everything in nature has a communication by a universal fluid, in which all bodies are plunged.”⁶⁰ The interesting thing about this universal fluid is that it is not conceived as a passive matter which would only receive the

⁵⁸ Franz Anton Mesmer, *Aphorismes de M. Mesmer dictés à l’assemblée de ses élèves* (Paris: s.n., 1785), 31.

⁵⁹ Cf. Georges Poulet, *Metamorphosen des Kreises in der Dichtung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1966), S. 101.

⁶⁰ Franz Anton Mesmer, *Mesmer’s aphorisms and instructions* (London: s.n. 1785), 1.

impressions imposed on it by some signifying intelligence. Calling it an “ocean” [“Ozean der Allfluth”⁶¹] Mesmer points to the physical force which is at work in this mediating substance. The universal ocean is dominated by “a continuous circulation which establishes the necessity of entering and exiting currents.”⁶² While Mesmer himself apparently did not use the word ‘medium’, the English translator of his *Aphorismes* (1785) explained the nature of Mesmer's currents by calling them “currencies, or acting mediums.”⁶³ So the Mesmerian conception of medium is obviously not that of an instrument used for the transfer of messages. Dealing with an “acting medium” does not mean receiving information (there is no trace of spiritualism in the early mesmeric *séances*), it means controlling a physical or quasi-physical force, it means channeling and switching currents, intervening in the tides of the universal flood.

Mesmer himself obviously was in the first place interested in the fact that there *was* such a universal medium and not *what* it exactly was. Before he adopts the notion of “animal magnetism,” he tries out “the names of all the forces known to the physics of that time: ‘gravitas’ (gravity), ‘materia luminosa’ (matter of light), magnetism and electricity.”⁶⁴ Fascinated by the new paradigm of electricity, “Mesmer imagined his fluid as having poles, streams, discharges, conductors, isolators, and accumulators.”⁶⁵ He even seems to have fancied the idea to brand his invention as “electricism.” The fact that Mesmer finally favors the notion of magnetism can be explained, according to the Mesmerian physician Eberhard Gmelin (1791), by the “apparent analogy of the phenomena of attraction and repulsion”⁶⁶ which are active in both animal and mineral magnetism. But also Gmelin, who prefers to think of the *fluidum* as “a life spirit or vital fluid,”⁶⁷ testifies to the arbitrariness of all these names, declaring that “the force acting here also has a close resemblance to electricity” which itself –like magnetism– might only be a “modification of the elementary fire.”⁶⁸ So Gmelin nonchalantly

⁶¹ Franz Anton Mesmer and Karl C. Wolfart, *Mesmerismus, Oder System der Wechselwirkungen* (Berlin: Nikolai, 1814), 4.

⁶² Mesmer, *Aphorismes*, 61.

⁶³ Mesmer, Mesmer's aphorisms, 1.

⁶⁴ Götz Müller, “Modelle der Literarisierung des Mesmerismus: Mesmers Versuche, das Unbekannte zu erklären,” in *Franz Anton Mesmer und der Mesmerismus: Wissenschaft, Scharlatanerie, Poesie*. Edited by Gereon Wolters, (Konstanz: Universitäts-Verlag, 1988) 71–86, S. 71

⁶⁵ Ellenberger, *The discovery*, 63.

⁶⁶ Eberhard Gmelin, “Was ist thierischer Magnetismus?” In *Materialien für die Anthropologie, Band 1* (Tübingen: Cotta, 1791), 342–88, 354.

⁶⁷ Gmelin, “Was ist thierischer Magnetismus,” 347.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 369.

concludes: “Call this thing animal magnetism, animalized electricity [...], or whatever you like.”⁶⁹



Figure 10. – *Le Mesmerisme confondu* (round 1800).

Mesmer’s universal fluid can be considered as a medium, insofar as it constitutes the general condition for everything being connected with everything. A second, more instrumental view of mediation comes into play with the procedures of the Mesmerian treatment. Departing from the assumption that “Man constantly finds himself embedded in general and special streams, and is penetrated by them,”⁷⁰ malady can be understood as a local aberration from the cosmic balance of flows. Correspondingly “the treatment consists in reestablishing the troubled harmony.”⁷¹ As Mesmer tells his disciples, “there are several means [“plusieurs moyens”] to increase the number and activity of the currents.”⁷² The first and simplest means is corporeal touch, the physical connection between the patient and the magnetizer. But the transmission of the magnetic flow does not only work by “immediate” contact. It even may “produce

⁶⁹ Ibid, 357.

⁷⁰ Mesmer, *Aphorismes*, 27.

⁷¹ Ibid, 76.

⁷² Ibid, 71.

more effect” when applied “at a certain distance.”⁷³ In any case there has to be a physical support, something which establishes the connection. The magnetic transmission is conceived as a “wirkliche Mittheilung,”⁷⁴ a “real imparting” which will not work without “conductors and mediating bodies [“Mittelkörper”] of any kind.”⁷⁵ Here one can find the reason for the miraculous proliferation of media and media dispositives so characteristic of the Mesmerian treatment. As the magnetic “currents can be communicated and propagated by any means where there exists continuity either solid or fluid,”⁷⁶ there is literally no limit to the media arsenal of a Mesmerian doctor. Anything which conforms to the idea of continuity and contiguity can be considered and used as an agent of transmission, even “the rays of light, or the oscillations of sound.”⁷⁷

If everything is about establishing contact, it may not be so important by which means this contact is accomplished. What does not work with one medium, will perhaps do with another. So the development of the Mesmerian system is characterized by the fast and easy replacement of the media of transmission, a practice of testing and dismissing the various channels of communication. The metallic magnets initially used by Mesmer are soon abandoned. In his Munich demonstrations, Mesmer performs “most of his cures without any artificial magnets by merely touching the suffering parts, either directly or indirectly.”⁷⁸ 1785, in Paris, Mesmer proposes to “touch mediately” [“mediatement”] using an “external conductor,” “a small stick” which preferably should be made of glass but can also be made of “iron, steel, gold, or silver etc.”⁷⁹

The experimental trait of Mesmerism, its tendency to try out all kinds of mediating bodies is especially apparent in the famous *baquet* which tries to maximize the effects of animal magnetism by combining all media of contact one can think of. The dispositive is described by the members of the royal board of inquiry in 1784:

They saw in the middle of a large room, a circular chest made of oak wood with an elevation of one foot or one foot and a half, called the *baquet*; which makes that the top of this tub is pierced with a number of holes, whence come out bent and moveable iron branches. The patients are placed in

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Mesmer and Wolfart, *Mesmerismus*, 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mesmer, *Aphorismes*, 29.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Peter v. Osterwald, *Schreiben des Churbayrischen geheimen Raths Herrn Peter von Osterwald an Herrn G. F. Brander, Mechanicus in Augsburg, einige Mesmerische sogenannte Magnetkuren betreffend* (Augsburg: s.n., 1776), 13.

⁷⁹ Mesmer, *Aphorismes*, 64.

several rows around the baquet, and each of them has her iron branch, which, by means of a hinge, can be applied directly to the diseased part. A rope wound around their bodies unites them with each other; sometimes they form a second chain by linking their hands [“en se communiquant par les mains”]⁸⁰.

Additionally one can find a “piano forte placed in a corner of the room” that has been magnetized “according to the principles of Mr. Mesmer:” “Via the sounds of the instrument the magnetism will be transferred to the surrounding sick.”⁸¹ So, as the report of commission documents, there is a variety of means which are all meant to do the same thing. The flows of animal magnetism will be propagated by the iron branches, by the ropes, by the chain of hands, and by “the sound of the piano or of a pleasant voice.”⁸² And last but not least there is the Mesmerian doctor who will directly magnetize his patients “by means of the finger or the iron stick.”⁸³

Depending on the kind of disease and on the stage of the treatment the communication of the magnetic fluid may happen in very different ways. As the report from 1784 notes, some of the patients “are calm, quiet, and do not feel anything; others cough, spit, feel some mild pain, local or universal heat, and sweating; others are restless and tormented by convulsions.”⁸⁴ It is this phase of convulsion, called crisis, which especially catches the attention of the commissioners: “Nothing is more astonishing than the spectacle of these convulsions; if you have not seen it, you cannot get any idea of it.”⁸⁵ As the commissioners note, “these convulsions are characterized by precipitated and involuntary movements of all members and the entire body, by tightening the throat, by ups and downs of the hypochondrium and the epigastrium, by the derangement and the clouding of the eyes, by ear-piercing cries, weeping, hiccups, and immoderate laughter.”⁸⁶

Code and Contact

There may be quite a lot of differences between the gross appearance of a Gassnerian exorcism in a German backwater town and the fancy atmosphere of a

⁸⁰ Bailly, Jean S., Benjamin Franklin, Joseph I. Guillotin, Antoine L. Lavoisier, and others, *Rapport des commissaires, chargés par le Roi, de l'examen du magnétisme animal* (Paris: Moutard, 1784), 4.

⁸¹ Ibid, 5.

⁸² Ibid, 6.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 7.

Mesmerian treatment in Paris. The magnetized piano and the “matressed” “salle des crises”⁸⁷ do not only indicate the difference between a religious procedure and a medical treatment, they also mark a social distinction: While Gassner’s exorcism has the air of rural incivility and folk superstition, mesmerism goes very well with an attitude of enlightened skepticism and scientific curiosity. Despite all rhetoric of equality, borrowed from contemporary freemasonry, the Mesmerian circles of Paris remain restricted to the nobility and upcoming bourgeoisie.⁸⁸

Yet below the apparent differences, Gassner’s exorcism and Mesmer’s magnetic cure are linked by a fundamental identity which can be found on the level of their technical functioning. Mesmer could replace Gassner (and Mesmerism can be regarded as kind of secularized exorcism), insofar as both procedures rely on the same principle of operation. Both Gassnerism and Mesmerism revolve around the idea of communication, and in both cases this communication is not about conveying a message, a meaning, it is about mediating between two corporeal states which are marked by an imbalance of energy. In this operational system, the message is nothing, the transmission is everything; and so both Gassner’s and Mesmer’s deliberations concentrate on the technical means and media which can allow for such a transport of forces.

To draw a more general conclusion I suppose that throughout the early modern period there can be found basically two ways of understanding supernatural communication (and, maybe, communication *tout court*): One might be called ‘contact paradigm’ and would among others include the practices of Gassner and Mesmer, the second one could be named ‘code paradigm’ and would unite all magical practices primarily based on the interpretation of signs. Practices which rely on the idea of a hidden, codified message (like alchemy, astrology, Paracelsian medicine, the Kabbalah and other hermeneutical systems), necessarily have a tendency towards erudition and over-complexity. In contrast, magical techniques relying on the idea of contact and contiguity, impress with the simplicity of their assumptions and proceedings. While the ‘analogical’ systems which emerged from Renaissance esotericism, necessarily imply a certain idealism (the conception of a non-corporeal accordance between separate ontological regions), the ‘contact paradigm’ implicitly tends towards a kind of materialism: the down-to-earth-assumption that there can’t be communication without connection, without an intermediate agency that cares for the

⁸⁷ Ibid, 8.

⁸⁸ According to a contemporary pamphlet Mesmer’s “Society of Harmony” consisted of “48 persons, among whom there are 18 gentlemen almost all of eminent birth; 2 knights of Malta; one lawyer of unusual merit; 4 doctors; 2 surgeons; 7 to 8 bankers or merchants, some retired; 2 clergymen; 3 monks,” cited after Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the end of the enlightenment in France* (Cambridge, Mass, London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 73-74.

transmission. So even if the communication is conceived as ‘mental’ or ‘spiritual’, there must be some kind of support, some medium of transport to put it into effect. Paradigmatically this view is expressed by the 17th-century scientist and physician Jan Baptist van Helmont, deliberating upon the effectiveness of witchcraft:

There is therefore a certain spiritual ray from the witch to the human, or the animal that she intends to kill according to the common rule that there is no action without some bringing-together [“Zusammen-Bringung”] of the acting and the suffering thing, and without their forces being linked, it may now happen such bringing-together in a physical or a spiritual way.⁸⁹

Of course the proposed opposition between code and contact suspiciously resembles the famous distinction made by James George Frazer in his *Golden Bough*, first published in 1890. According to Frazer the whole universe of bewitchment and sorcery can be reduced to two simple laws of magical efficiency: the “law of similarity” and the “law of contagion:”

From the first of these principles, namely the Law of Similarity, the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it: from the second he infers that whatever he does to a material object will affect equally the person with whom the object was once in contact, whether it formed part of his body or not.⁹⁰

So one could argue that conceiving the spiritualist communications of the eighteenth century in terms of code and contact means applying an extraneous, anachronistic analytical scheme, analogous to the binarism of similarity and contagion which Frazer had imposed on the most divergent cases of magical dealing.

But, as I would like to think, it is not me who makes the distinction, applying a binary opposition of today’s media science to the innocent material of the past. Rather I suggest that this distinction was made by the historical actors themselves, that it was operative in the early modern debates on witchcraft and sorcery, and that it shaped and ordered both learned and popular discourses on the possibility of supernatural communication. Magical or religious practices were, of course, always ‘mixed’ and included elements of diverse semiological orders or systems of transmission.⁹¹ In the practices themselves, however, there can very

⁸⁹ Jan Baptista van Helmont, *Aufgang der Artzney-Kunst* (Sulzbach: Endter, 1683), 1032.

⁹⁰ James George Frazer, *The golden bough: A study in magic and religion: Vol. 1: The magic art and the evolution of kings* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1920), 52.

⁹¹ Even Frazer who established the analytical binarism of similarity and contagion was conscious of the fact that “in practice the two branches are often combined” (Frazer, *ibid*, 54).

well be found a tendency towards conceptual discrimination, a steady work of differentiation between ways of communication that ‘work’, and others that don't work. Attributing certain practices to the one or the other mode of operation, the practitioners themselves were establishing an implicit understanding of magical efficiency based on binary distinctions. This tendency towards bifurcation became explicit when the practical ad hoc distinctions were translated into ‘theory.’ Theologians and physicians succeeded in reducing the complexity of supernatural dealings to a neat binary scheme that allowed for discriminating various practices of supernatural communication and for drawing a demarcation line between different systems of belief.

So, speaking of code and contact as paradigms of early modern communication, I do not intend to re-read the metaphysical past of human thinking in today's media-materialistic terms.⁹² I rather want to make a historical argument on the origin of media and communication sciences. It seems as if they did not arise from scientific curiosity as such, but from a very special problem of early modern confessional culture: to make sense of supernatural communication. While people felt little need to explain ordinary, every-day communication, they were obsessed with the idea of discovering the truth of communications whose senders and paths of transmission were not so plain to see. So, it was not the normal course, it was the wonders of communication which first incited something like media theory. Taking into account this historical genealogy, it is not surprising that spiritualism and media theory share a common vocabulary. If magical practices can be so easily described in semiotic and media-theoretical terms, it is because these concepts and distinctions were originally created for the very purpose of understanding and controlling these practices.

So, while media theory undoubtedly helps us to understand magical or spiritualist practices (it has long experience of doing so), the history of these practices can also help us to better understand media theory.⁹³ Regarding media theory as a kind of secularized media theology, would at least explain one of its characteristic traits, namely the tendency towards clear-cut conceptual dichotomies: medium vs. message, channel vs. content, hardware vs. software,

⁹² As an example for the anachronistic rewriting of the history of philosophy in terms of media and information science see Michael Wetzel: “Von der Einbildungskraft zur Nachrichtentechnik: Vorüberlegungen zu einer Archäologie der Medien,” in *Mediendämmerung. Zur Archäologie der Medien*. Edited by Peter Klier and Jean-Luc Evard, (Berlin: Tiamat, 1989) 11–39. In this text from the springtime of German media theory the philosopher Leibniz marks the “progress [...] from Read Only Memory to Rapid Access Memory” (28), and the poet Lessing is presented as an “IT specialist as hard as steel” / “stahlharter Informatiker.” (31)

⁹³ Thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this article for calling my attention to this point.

presence culture vs. meaning culture, etc. Basically, it seems as if one still had to choose between two theoretical platforms: a system of 'holy signs' confronted to a network of 'magical channels'. Showing a predilection for meaningful communication and a clear disinterest in the materiality of the transmission, the Luhmannian system theory seems to have entered into the inheritance of symbolic magic. Reciprocally media theory – at least in its 'hard', McLuhanian or Kittlerian variant – tends to show an ostentatious disdain for the 'contents'. Keeping instead to the material preconditions, the channels and apparatuses of communication, it follows the tradition established by men like Gassner or Mesmer. So, may be this is why adhering to a certain communication theory still has something of a religious choice, a decision which is certainly more profound than the one between *Apple* and *Microsoft*.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Cf. Eco, Umberto. "MAC vs. DOS," in *La bustina di Minerva* (Milano: Bompiani, 1999), 165.

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Illustrations

- Fig. 1 – *Abbildung des Herrn Johann Joseph Gaßners* (Augsburg 1775).
- Fig. 2 – *Abbildung des Wohlehrwürdigen Herrn Johann Joseph Gassners* (Augsburg 1775).
- Fig. 3 – *Abbildung des wohlehrwürdigen Herrn Johann Joseph Gaßners* (1775).
- Fig. 4 – Saint Antonius surrounded by Demons (late 17th or early 18th century).
- Fig. 5 – Frontispice from *Gespräche im Reiche der Lebendigen [...] über die [...] Beschwörungen und Wunderkuren Herrn Gaßners* (1775).
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