

CONTRIBUTORS

Mark R. Anspach	Niklas Luhmann
Jan Assmann	Jean-François Lyotard
Andreas Ballstaedt	Jan-Dirk Müller
Stephen Bann	Thomas Müller
Karlheinz Barck	Helmut Pfeiffer
Klaus Dirscherl	K. Ludwig Pfeiffer
Monika Elsner	Albrecht Riethmüller
Wlad Godzich	Bernhard Siegert
Charles Grivel	Vivian Sobchack
Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht	Peter M. Spangenberg
Alois Hahn	Martin Stingelin
Wulf R. Halbach	Francisco J. Varela
Friedrich Kittler	Paul Zumthor

MATERIALITIES OF COMMUNICATION

EDITED BY

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and
K. Ludwig Pfeiffer

TRANSLATED BY William Whobrey

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

STANFORD, CALIFORNIA 1994

Stanford University Press, Stanford, California
© 1994 by the Board of Trustees
of the Leland Stanford Junior University
Printed in the United States of America

CIP data appear at the end of the book

Monika Elsner, Thomas Müller, and Peter M. Spangenberg, "The Early History of German Television: The Slow Development of a Fast Medium," originally appeared in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* and is reprinted with permission of the editor.

Jean-François Lyotard, "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?" originally appeared in *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1988-89): 74-83.

A much shorter version of Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence'" appeared as "Toward a Phenomenology of Cinematic and Electronic Presence: The Scene of the Screen," *Post Script* 10, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 50-59.

With the exception of these three chapters and the introductory chapter by K. Ludwig Pfeiffer and the closing chapter by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, which were written especially for this book, the other chapters in this book were translated from the German versions originally published in either Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., *Materialität der Kommunikation* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988) or Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche: Situationen offener Epistemologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991).

P
91.25
M364
1994

Contents



Contributors	xi
The Materiality of Communication <i>K. Ludwig Pfeiffer</i>	I
MEDIA OF COMMUNICATION AND HISTORICAL THRESHOLDS	
Ancient Egypt and the Materiality of the Sign <i>Jan Assmann</i>	15
The Body of the Book: The Media Transition from Manuscript to Print <i>Jan-Dirk Müller</i>	32
Dimensions of Literature: A Speculative Approach <i>K. Ludwig Pfeiffer</i>	45
Comments on a Ball: Nietzsche's Play on the Typewriter <i>Martin Stingelin</i>	70
The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic "Presence" <i>Vivian Sobchack</i>	83
The Early History of German Television: The Slow Development of a Fast Medium <i>Monika Elsner, Thomas Müller, and Peter M. Spangenberg</i>	107
SOUNDS, COLORS, AND THEIR NONSEMANTIC FUNCTIONS	
"The Matter of Music Is Sound and Body-Motion" <i>Albrecht Riethmüller</i>	147

HANS ULRICH GUMBRECHT

A Farewell to Interpretation



Desire for Theory

Fifteen or twenty minutes into a talk I recently gave at an American university, I was interrupted by a man in the small audience (apparently a colleague) who showed clear signs of impatience: "Could you please define what you mean by *meta-realities* of communication?" It took us further questions and answers to find out that he was referring to a recurrent nominal phrase in my talk that I had hoped would be understood as "*materialities* of communication." The embarrassment of this incident did not help make me a particularly convincing speaker that afternoon. From a more long-term perspective, however, it sharpened my perception of a sort of "everyday Cartesianism" prevailing in the expectations toward academic lectures that promise (or threaten with) "theory." "Theory," at least in the humanities, seems to bear a connotation of "high abstraction" and is expected to refer to phenomena that one would tend to qualify as "spiritual" rather than "material" (hence, probably, the prefix "meta-" in my listener's disturbing question). I therefore want to emphasize that the intellectual program circumscribed in the title of this volume as "*Materialities of Communication*" *intends to be theoretical and, nevertheless, to focus on concrete and not always "spiritual" phenomena.* Given the normal use of the word "theory," such a combination could appear to be almost paradoxical. But such an impression might not be too high a price to pay if, on the other hand, the concentration on materialities enables us to take seriously a philosophical warning against the ever increasing

degree of abstraction as a powerful and dangerous tendency within the Western intellectual tradition. Coming from sources as different as Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectics of Enlightenment* and Georges Bataille's *Les larmes d'Eros*, this warning points to the risk implied in the boundless abstraction of losing contact with the concrete and sensual dimensions of our experience.

Another (normally more aggressive) reaction that theoretical thinking in the humanities frequently encounters is the question of "whether we really need new theories." It is usually based on at least one of two different presuppositions that I want to characterize as the "instrumental" and the "mimetic" misconceptions of theory. Especially popular within literary criticism, the instrumental misconception makes the legitimacy and the value of theories dependent on their capacity to improve the techniques of textual interpretation. From such a perspective, it is often possible to make theories look superfluous by just pointing to the example of highly sophisticated literary critics who never seemed to care about theory (favorite references are the great heroes of New Criticism, together with Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach). The mimetic misconception of theory, in turn, claims that a relationship of "adequacy" must exist between abstract theories and concrete extratheoretical realities. Under this premise, theoretical innovations appear justified only if they respond to changes in "the real world."

While both the instrumental and the mimetic misunderstandings set "theory" against "reality" and invariably reduce the first to a purely reactive function in this context, the contributions to our volume, explicitly or implicitly, see theories, above all, as a *part of those institutionalized structures of knowledge that are human reality*. Second, they attribute to theory, as a sector within institutionalized knowledge, a function not of just reacting to changes but of *initiating change and of providing models for variation*. It is precisely on behalf of this function that such theories, which appear at first glance as counterintuitive, have a greater chance of making a difference than those that simply satisfy commonsense expectations. On the level of self-observation, theoretical thinking should therefore rather identify, enhance, and foster desire for theory change than impose upon itself the restrictive economies of instrumentality and mimetic correspondence. Even then, however, the question remains open where such desire and such impulses for theory innovation come from. The answer that many of the authors in this book seem

to favor (as a presupposition for their more specific arguments) points to theory as the *space where forms of human self-reference can be negotiated*. I use the word "self-reference" here—and not the word "identity"—because "identity" points to a historically and culturally specific configuration of self-reference (perhaps exactly that configuration of self-reference which the contemporary desire for theory seeks to overcome). If social knowledge *is* reality, and if theory is that sector of knowledge which negotiates figures of human self-reference, then we may assume that transformations of reality take place around transformations of human self-reference as a center of productive instability.

While "the humanities" and "les sciences humaines," as collective names for the cluster of academic disciplines to which our discourses belong, seem to confirm this speculation, "*Geisteswissenschaften*," as their German equivalent, reveals the decisive aspect of the model of self-reference that has been dominating Western culture for centuries—and that has now entered into a stage of crisis.¹ For the distinction between the "human" and the "nonhuman," it used to be crucial that the concept of the human excluded (or even actively avoided) any reference to the human body. This explains the strong convergence among otherwise diverging contemporary theory positions toward a reintegration of the body into our models of human self-reference—and it also explains the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of achieving this goal on the basis of conceptual repertoires inherited from the tradition of the humanities.² Such a reintegration would bring those phenomena, which are traditionally defined as "nonhuman," closer to new forms of human self-reference, and it might hence be associated with a trend in recent theory outlines of becoming *less anthropocentric* (or more ecological).³ At the same time—and as a reinforcement of such deanthropocentrization—we can observe a desire to discuss *functional equivalents between the human mind and the human body on the one side and machines on the other* (from a different perspective, this is a desire for models of human self-reference that have left behind the traditional bias against anything "technical"). Finally, this double problematization of traditional Western humanism might lead to a situation where a single and very abstract ("transcendental") definition of the human will is replaced by *multiple and more concrete models of human self-reference*.

"Materialities of communication" represents the desire for a

theory that integrates these three tendencies—toward less anthropocentric (less spiritual), less antitechnological, and less transcendental forms of human self-reference. The fact that we have to refer to each of these changes with a negative formula makes it clear that we still find ourselves in a stage of actively problematizing our heritage of theories rather than of working toward its substitution. And it could well be the case that there is no possibility of a continuous transition or transformation between the self-problematization and the self-substitution of the humanities.⁴ If, *today*, we see “theory” as a place where figurations of human self-reference are being negotiated and where transformations of institutionalized knowledge may originate, our desire for theory may lead toward a situation without a form of self-reference that is exclusively “human,” without a construction of “time” through which we can follow its transformations as a narrative—and hence toward a *future without theory*. Perhaps the fate of theory is connected to a period of transition within our larger cultural environment; perhaps we find ourselves in a moment of de-temporalization (if “time” is the operating space of the subject); of de-referentialization (if the existence of an outside world as a “world of reference” is dependent on its being opposed to the subject as a coherent figuration); and of de-totalization (if theory’s connotation of abstractness is an effect of the subject’s transcendental status).⁵

Exteriority

But before theory vanishes, we should enjoy it as a principle of productive instability and as a device capable of generating multiple and impossible questions* rather than as a source of answers. It is up to us to play with theory by formulating such unsolicited questions as a potential for variation in our assumptions about reality—and in our realities themselves.⁶ The chronological simultaneity between the “students’ revolution” in Europe and North America during the late 1960’s and the emergence of the philosophical position we now call “deconstruction” provides the most striking illustration of this principle. The political dreams of those years were based on Marxism as a set of certainties, and their ideological

*In his contribution to this volume, Lyotard defines “philosophical questions” as questions without possible answers.

criticism functioned upon substantialistic truth-claims. If there was any question that remained open, it was the question concerning a strategy through which the political order could be changed in a way that corresponded to “truth.” To problematize the philosophical traditions that had yielded such truth claims, as Jacques Derrida’s did in his first three books,⁷ was the least welcome and most unsolicited of all possible positions. Nevertheless, Derrida’s questions not only outlived the students’ revolution and its theoretical certainties, but have in the meantime begun to unfold so strong an impact on the extra-academic world that they ridicule the early criticism of deconstruction’s “unpolitical” character.

Doubtlessly, Derrida’s thought was originally motivated by his discontent with a group of assumptions that functioned as a common denominator for structuralism, phenomenology, and Marxism as the then dominant positions on the European intellectual scene, especially in France.⁸ Arguing that these assumptions were the result of a continuous privileging of speech over writing as a totalizing model for human communication and interaction within the tradition of Western thought, Derrida presented one side of his own position as the critique of such “logocentrism.” He only occasionally offered, as a complementary side in his early work and under the guiding concept of “écriture,” speculations about a different kind of thought repressed under logocentrism. Both as an illustration of theory as “unsolicited questioning” and as a possibility of clarifying our concept of “materiality,” I want to briefly recall the main elements of deconstruction’s antilogocentric side. Derrida argued that only speech provides the impression of a self-presence of thought and meaning (we hear ourselves speaking while we speak) on which any Western philosophy of consciousness is based, whereas the completion of meaning is infinitely deferred by the sequential character of any written or printed text. The aspect of self-presence functions as a precondition for the idea of a subject controlling its own acts and its own speech; in addition, by exempting language from the destabilizing effects of time as deferral (or “différance”), self-presence fosters the illusion that it is possible to attribute stable, self-identical meanings to individual texts and words—an illusion that strengthens the position of the subject, emphasizes its instrumental relationship to language, and confirms, through the idea of language as a mediating instrument,

its claim to controlling a "world of objects." Only under the assumption of such meaning identity can we speak of the content of individual texts and can structuralism try to analyze content as constituted in binary semantic oppositions. Finally, given the ephemeral status of the sounds that constitute speech, logocentrism tends to neglect the physical side, the "exteriority" of language. Although the logocentric exclusion of exteriority is extremely important in understanding the absence of the human body as a topic within the humanities, Derrida pays astonishingly little attention to it⁹—and exteriority almost disappeared as an element of antilogocentrism from subsequent forms of deconstructive practice. It was not until very recently that David Wellbery, in a brilliant article (1992b), systematically elaborated the connection between the exteriority of the signifier and a principle of randomness in language that, by problematizing the subject's "interiority," further contributes to its emasculation. This exteriority, together with the human body (or, more precisely: the human bodies), is a central point of reference for the research program named "materialities of communication."

I disagree, however, with Wellbery's thesis that the concept of "discursive exteriority," to which Michel Foucault gives special emphasis in his famous inaugural lecture on *L'ordre du discours*, is identical to Derrida's notion of exteriority; I don't believe the two are even close.¹⁰ What Foucault wants to underscore is the independence of the discourses from any subjective interiority. Discourses—this is Foucault's central methodological principle—should never be seen as expressions of such interiority. But Foucault does *not* thematize exteriorities in Derrida's sense; indeed their repeated dissolution into the loftiness of discursive structures has recently emerged as one of the rare shortcomings of the innovative practice of history he invented (see Gumbrecht 1992a). Regarding the articles presented in this volume, it is their focus on the concreteness of exteriority/materiality that sets them apart from the intellectual style of New Historicism—even if, in some cases, they share with the New Historicists certain narrative and descriptive techniques.* From such a perspective, one can formulate the following paradox: what made it so easy for New Historicism to

*Among the authors in this volume, at least Martin Stingelin, Bernhard Siegert, Friedrich Kittler, and Wulf Halbach would disagree with my discussion of Foucault. On the other hand, Wlad Godzich remarks that I do not draw a

speak about the body and the economy and the structures of power was its exclusion of the epistemological resistance that these phenomena offer to our concepts. And while it might be a serious point of philosophical discussion whether this exclusion is not ultimately inevitable, it can certainly not be justified by reference to the work of Derrida.

If, then, "materialities of communication" as a field of reflection is much closer, on the map of contemporary epistemology, to deconstruction than to New Historicism, such closeness becomes particularly obvious in relation to Derrida's early books—whereas more recent developments oblige us to mark three perspectives of divergence between "materialities of communication" and contemporary forms of deconstructive practice (without thereby questioning the latter's epistemological legitimacy). Deconstruction has been adopted, especially in many American departments of literature, as a modality of literary interpretation whose only difference in comparison to the New Critical tradition resides in its assumption of a basic heterogeneity characterizing the texts to be interpreted—as opposed to the New Critical premise of harmony.¹¹ Mainly under the influence of Paul de Man's work—and without contributing to such interpretive domestication—deconstruction has, secondly, developed a strong interest in the analysis of those textual structures and rhetorical forms that generate effects of meaning and illusions of reference. While this position converges with the "materialities" program in its radical skepticism concerning the hermeneutic premise of an "always already given" meaning, it seems to focus on discursive phenomena in Foucault's sense rather than on the level of "exteriority" that I have been trying to emphasize in Derrida's early work. Finally, coping with the impossibility of articulating nonlogocentric forms of thought in logocentric language and under the premise that only literary texts can offer certain nonlogocentric openings (if such can be offered at all), the discourses of deconstruction, especially Derrida's own writing, have become more and more "literary"—to the point where a collapse of the difference between philosophical and literary language has been claimed.¹² The articles presented in this volume, as

sufficiently clear line of distinction between New Historicism and "materialities of communication." See Godzich 1992: xv.

stylistically ambitious as some of them might appear, do not participate in this "literary turn." It seems to be their—perhaps problematic—claim that at least some concerns of the antilogocentrism inaugurated by Derrida can be maintained and actively pursued in a discourse that is still logocentric.

Macro-mapping: The Nonhermeneutic

Our effort to circumscribe "materialities of communication" as a field of research and reflection neither necessarily questions the epistemological legitimacy of other contemporary theory-positions nor implies any claim of covering the totality of the space that the humanities has traditionally occupied. But how do "materialities of communication" refer to concurrent positions on the epistemological map? And what basic changes is this map undergoing at present? As an answer to such questions, it is my main hypothesis that a convergence—or at least a contiguity—of some recently emerging theory-positions can be seen in their common problematizing of that concept in which the humanities appear as hermeneutics, that is, as a group of disciplines grounded on the act of interpretation as their core exercise. The institutionally most influential description of "interpretation" as a practice and its implications goes back to Wilhelm Dilthey. I quote the very passage that makes the tension between "hermeneutics" and "materialities of communication" most obvious:

However, there is a certain, increasingly strong tendency inherent to the group of academic disciplines with which we are dealing to see the physical side of what is going on as a mere condition, as mere instruments of understanding. This is caused by the emphasis of these disciplines on self-reflection, on the directness of understanding—which goes from an outside to an inside. It is a tendency that uses every exteriorization of life for the comprehension of the very interiority out of which it emerges. (Dilthey 1983 [1910]: 251)

These sentences presuppose that "meanings" are always given—in the interiority of the subject's psyche. The articulation/expression of such meanings, however, on the material surface of a spoken or a written text is expected to remain necessarily incomplete and fragmentary. Within the basic hermeneutic topology, it is precisely this insufficiency that accounts for the need of interpretation and for the

devaluation of any material surface as secondary in relation to subjective interiority. The hermeneutic paradigm is echoed by the most notorious concept of the linguistic sign—traditionally related to the name of Ferdinand de Saussure—in which the (material) signifier and the (spiritual) signified are inseparably related, although the function of the signifier lies exclusively in its offering access to the signified.

Among a multiplicity of contemporary departures from a concept of the humanities as hermeneutics (i.e., as based on the reciprocity of expression and interpretation), the project "materialities of interpretation" marks but one individual impulse. What these different departures from hermeneutics share and how they relate to each other can be shown by using the four notions with which Leo Hjelmslev complexified Saussure's sign concept.¹³ Hjelmslev not only distinguished between "content" (the signified) and "expression" (the signifier), but also projected a second distinction—between "substance" and "form"—onto this binarism. The four concepts and the four fields of linguistic phenomena that he thus established—substance of content and form of content, substance of expression and form of expression—can be related to the main concerns of contemporary theory-positions. "Substance of content" is a level of communication where impressions, thoughts, memories, and associations are not yet structured; it seems to come close to Derrida's concept of "écriture" (and it would certainly include the sphere of the imaginary that has recently received renewed theoretical attention). "Form of content" refers to those structures that give shape to the substance of content and that are therefore a necessary precondition for any articulation of meaning; this is the place for the rhetorical forms analyzed in Paul de Man's work and for Foucault's notion of discourse. "Substance of expression" points to the physical dimensions out of which signifiers emerge, whereas the notion "form of expression" covers any set of structured and—by virtue of their structure—identifiable signifiers.

It is almost trivial to mention that the most obvious phenomena of reference for "materialities of communication" belong to the two fields of "expression."* The more important insight, how-

*Although not without exception. Recent theories (and empirical investigations) on imagination as a human faculty argue for a specifically close link between imagination and bodily functions. See Bahr 1988.

ever, that our use of Hjelmslev's concepts provides, is that the mutual isolation in the four above-mentioned fields causes a shift in our main perspective of investigation. Since none of them can independently refer to articulated meaning, although each of them includes necessary preconditions for the existence of articulated meaning, this shift goes *from interpretation as identification of given meaning-structures to the reconstruction of those processes through which structures of articulated meaning can at all emerge*.¹⁴ An initial, schematic distinction between three stages of such constitution of meaning becomes immediately evident: substance of content has to adopt a form to become a potential content/signified; substance of expression has to adopt a form to become a potential expression/signifier; and both sides have to be coupled in order to become articulated meaning. Under the premise that none of the four fields in question can independently constitute meaning, they would *all* satisfy a definition that describes "materialities of communication" as the totality of phenomena contributing to the constitution of meaning without being meaning themselves.¹⁵ Thus it becomes evident that what "materialities of communication" ultimately point to is not only the thematization of a hitherto nonthematized phenomena but also—and above all—a change in the perspective with which we observe communication.

The identification of this new perspective helps to explain why, at least in the German context, the work of the sociologist Niklas Luhmann has had a particularly strong impact on the departure from hermeneutics. A decisive move in the architecture of Luhmann's theory lies in his setting apart of social systems and psychic systems (whose definition corresponds roughly to the classical philosophical notion of "consciousness") as meaning-producing systems* from any other types of systems (e.g., machines, organisms). Only in meaning-producing systems do those operations that are the systems' basic elements ("thought" in psychic systems and "communication" in social systems) have the status of observa-

*For reasons of terminological economy within the architecture of his theory, Luhmann uses the word "Sinn" (and not "Bedeutung," which is closer to, although not synonymous with, the English "meaning"). In the context of this article, however, I think that it is legitimate to make a connection between Luhmann's concept of "Sinn" and what I have been referring to as "meaning." I mainly refer to chaps. 2, 4, and 6 in Luhmann 1984.

tions. Observations are operations that imply an "awareness" of other operations that *might* have taken place instead of those that actually occur—and it is this awareness of a selectivity that Luhmann calls "meaning." Therefore, the by-now-familiar question of *how it is possible at all that psychic systems and social systems constitute meaning* is also a crucial question for Luhmann's sociology. His contribution to this volume contains perhaps the most complex and certainly the most boldly counterintuitive answer he has offered so far.

Micro-mapping: Materialities of Communication

In the previous section, we have seen that there are two different points of convergence for the essays presented in this volume. First, they are a symptom for and a part of a reorientation in the humanities that replaces, as their central concern, "interpretation" with "meaning constitution." Second, they pay more attention to phenomena like the human body or the physical qualities of signifiers than has previously been the case in the history of our academic disciplines. Ultimately these two concerns are not unrelated. Different from interpretation as meaning identification, the project of analyzing the processes of meaning constitution literally obliges us to take into account those "nonspiritual" phenomena that used to be excluded from the thematic field of the humanities. On the following, final pages I will try to chart some of the more concrete and specific problems that result from their recent inclusion.

It seems to be a recurrent strategic device in the contemporary theory-scene "to start with a difference" (see Luhmann 1988). Instead of taking for granted the degrees of complexity under which certain systems present themselves to our everyday observations, theory can analytically separate their constitutive elements, underscore the initial improbability of the interplay between them, and thus start with the question of the specific conditions under which such an interplay—and the systems' complexity as their result—becomes at all possible. This very perspective explains the interest that systems theory has taken, during the past decade, in the systems' *autopoiesis* (their self-constitution and their independent functioning), and in the *coupling* between autopoietic systems.¹⁶ What-

ever appears as a condition facilitating such system couplings can be described and further analyzed as their potential of *resonance*.¹⁷ The articles that we present in the section "Sounds, Colors, and Their Nonsemantic Functions" focus on the ways in which physical properties of signifiers make resonance and coupling possible, and on the emergence of meaning out of primary coupling-structures that do not yet include levels of meaning and observation. The concept of "coupling," therefore, marks an epistemological area where a number of hitherto underthematized "hardware" dimensions of communication become relevant. This *could* also be the case for aspects of sex and of gender (although they are not really addressed in this volume—perhaps because of the situation of gender studies in Germany). Another aspect of coupling and resonance is *speed*. The relationship between the levels of speed that certain operations adopt in different systems can turn out to be either an enhancement of or an obstacle to their integration. Whatever we call a "rhythm" is a level of speed that facilitates coupling.

Perhaps astonishingly, such reflections about coupling and its conditions allow us to rephrase the tendency in contemporary Western philosophy to *problematize concepts such as "agency" and "subjecthood"* as yet another outcome of the principle of "starting with a difference." They made the subject emerge out of specific couplings between psychic systems and social systems—and such emergence is always contingent upon specific frame-conditions under which the couplings are taking place.¹⁸ Luhmann has gone so far to present a political—or perhaps rather, ethical—argument in favor of theories that purposefully avoid a transcendental status for the subject category. According to him, as long as theories are not based on a "transcendental subject," they are incapable of formulating those universal claims or obligations that have been frequently presented in its name—and that have often turned into legitimations of totalitarianism.¹⁹ What the essays presented in our volume under the heading "Media of Communication and Historical Thresholds," then, bring into view are situations where couplings between human bodies, psychic systems, and new communications technologies (especially the printing press) produce specific subject-effects. With this perspective, they diverge from a historiographical tradition that describes technical innovations as motivated by collective needs and as "invented" by subjective genius.

Instead of confirming the deeply rooted belief in an instrumental relation between the subject and different technologies,* they encourage us to experiment with the inversion of this narrative pattern.

Seeing the subject from a perspective of contingency further enables us to discover—and to question—a relationship between the *three-dimensional concept of time* institutionalized in Western culture and the concept of agency. As long as we imagine time as a sequence of moments that link the past with the present, we presuppose that the observations, actions, and events attributed to subsequent moments on this continuum are connected by a principle of (however "soft") causality (see Luhmann 1990a). Understanding the "laws" of such causality appears, then, as a precondition for the subject's possibility of exerting control over the systems in its own environment. This, however, is precisely the central hope—or the central illusion—articulated in the concept of "agency." It is one of the more remarkable points of convergence between deconstruction and systems theory that both of them challenge such a construction of time, together with the concepts "subject" and "agency." Instead of being thematized as centers of agency, autopoietic systems are seen as maintaining their self-reproduction and a relationship of homeostasis with their environment—against "perturbations" originating in their environment. Time, then, is no longer perceived as the continuity of a transformation or of a development, but exclusively as breakdowns in self-reproduction and homeostasis. The contributions to this book collected in the section "Communication Systems and Their Discontents" discuss such a concept of time, and they seem to suggest further that moments of breakdown provide a specific opportunity for the observation and the analysis of those couplings that they discontinue.

The most flagrant shortcoming of the debates and experiments to which we refer by the title "Materialities of Communication" lies, so far, in their incapacity to overcome the conceptual dualism

*Walter Benjamin's famous article "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit" fully—and very optimistically—relies on the possibility of such a relationship of instrumentality between subject and technology. This might be one of the reasons why most of its prophecies have been proved wrong—and why it enjoys such unbroken popularity in the humanities.

between spirit and matter, mind and body, materiality and meaning. Rethematizing a wide horizon of phenomena under the notions "matter," "body," and "exteriority/materiality of the signifier" is but a first step in overcoming this situation; and speaking about couplings that connect "materialities" to phenomena that we refer to as "spirit," "mind," and "meaning" not only does not guarantee that we can retrace, in each case, the specific operations of their interactions, but might even contribute to an ultimate preservation of the Cartesian dualism. The notion of "embodiment" in one of our volume's section titles points to a number of essays that outline different theory and discourse strategies in overcoming this heritage. Despite their efforts to develop and to expand phenomenological, Freudian, and Marxist theories for this purpose, it seems unlikely that any decisive progress can be made without an opening toward the state of the art in contemporary science.

But, as I briefly mentioned in my introductory remarks, we may fall prey to an illusion if we imagine the substitution of the conceptual repertoires and questions that have come upon us as "theory" without, at the same time, imagining the end of "theory" altogether. Perhaps we even jeopardize the most important option offered by the materialities approach if we dream of a new stability for renewed concepts in a future age of theory. This most important option might well be the possibility of seeing the world under a *radical perspective of contingency*—as a sphere of extremely short-lived phenomena and without any stable or general concepts for their description. Rather than overcoming the resistance that "materialities of communication" offer to our contemporary concepts and theories, we might profit from this resistance. It could help us to overcome the temptation to fall back into theories and discourses that are inhabited by such totalitarian specters as causality, philosophy of history, and the transcendental subject.²⁰

REFERENCE MATTER

6. Cardano 1914: 27–28. On the motif of fame in Cardano, see Buck 1956: 50. On the category of “modern fame” and its meaning for the Renaissance, the comments in Burckhardt 1966 are still helpful.

7. On the relationship between book printing and the order of knowledge, see (among others) Eisenstein 1979; Graff 1987; and Ong 1982.

8. The meaning of these systems for the Renaissance’s organization of knowledge is comprehensively presented by Yates 1966.

9. See Wittkower 1965; and above all Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl 1964.

Gumbrecht, A Farewell to Interpretation

1. The famous final paragraph of Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* (1966: 398) anticipated this crisis as a possibility: “On peut parier que l’homme s’effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable.” Twenty-five years later, its multiple aspects motivated Jean-François Lyotard’s book *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991, see esp. its introduction, “About the Human”).

2. See David Wellbery’s introduction to Kittler 1990: xiv, where a reference to the body as a central focus of concern is mentioned as a central premise of “post-hermeneutic criticism.” The shocking thought, however, that European culture and philosophy might have lost touch with the human body as a dimension of experience goes back further in history. See Gumbrecht 1992.

3. Some of the problems that arise in addressing ecological concerns in institutionalized frameworks of discussion are analyzed in Luhmann 1989, esp. p. 115.

4. Toward the end of the first chapter in his *Of Grammatology* (“The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”), Derrida describes, in a similar way, the end of logocentrism and metaphysics as an end that may never come to an end. I have discussed the problem of such theory transitions with more detail in two articles: Gumbrecht 1993b and 1993c.

5. Under these three negative concepts, I have tried to describe the impact of the postmodern cultural situation on the humanities in Gumbrecht 1988b.

6. My discussion of the concept “theory” and of the social functions of theoretical practice tries to follow Luhmann 1990b.

7. They all appeared in 1967: *De la grammatologie, La voix et le phénomène, L’écriture et la différence*.

8. This thesis goes back to a Stanford seminar titled “Deconstruction

Contextualized” (fall 1991/92). For the larger intellectual context of the 1960’s in France, see Descombes 1979.

9. See the very short remarks in Derrida 1973: 82, 87, 115.

10. See Wellbery’s introduction to Kittler 1990: xii n. 2. My own distinction between Derrida’s and Foucault’s concepts of “exteriority” goes back to a seminar with Tim Lenoir titled “Technologies and Practices of Recording, 1830–1940” (Stanford, winter 1991/92).

11. See Hillis-Miller 1979: “The ultimate justification for this mode of criticism, as of any conceivable mode, is that it works. It reveals hitherto unidentified meanings and ways of having meaning in major texts. The hypothesis of possible heterogeneity in literary texts is more flexible, more open to a given work, than the assumption that a good work of literature is necessarily going to be ‘organized’” (p. 252).

12. Derrida, *Carte postale*, and Bloom et al., *Deconstruction & Criticism*, can be important marks of transition, in this context. The most frequently quoted negative reaction to this “collapse” came from Habermas 1985: 219–47.

13. I follow the Hjelmslev interpretation (and its application to the contemporary theory scene) proposed by Frederik Stjernfelt (1992).

14. See, for a further point of convergence, Wellbery’s introduction to Kittler 1990: ix.

15. See the programmatic formula on the cover of Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 1988: “To thematize ‘materialities of communication’ means to ask for the non-meaning of constituted presuppositions, the place, the carriers, and the modalities of the emergence of meaning.”

16. For the most accessible definition of these (and other) biological concepts that have become important for systems theory, see Maturana and Varela 1987.

17. See the definition in Luhmann 1989: “Resonance signifies that systems can react to environmental events only in accordance with their own structure” (p. 145).

18. The phrase “contingent upon” in this context refers to phenomena whose existence is not guaranteed by their sheer possibility. See the entry “Kontingenz” in Ritter and Gründer 1976, vol. 6. Also see Wellbery 1992a, who ends with the equally strong and interesting statement that the “realm of contingency is the space of our modernity.”

19. See the interview with Franco Volpi in Luhmann 1987: 156–66, and Luhmann’s preface to the forthcoming English translation of Luhmann 1984.

20. Godzich 1992: xv, speaks of “microphysics of history” as “revealing the folded-in dimensions of contingency, which include[d] those of

experience and of its description, very much in the noncausal and non-linear way in which the autopoiesis of systems takes place in the descriptions currently given of them."

I want to thank Helen Tartar, of Stanford University Press, for her intellectually invaluable—and constantly stimulating—help in conceiving this essay.

Works Cited



- Adorno, T. W. 1970. *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt a.M. English translation, 1984. *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt. London.
- Alonso, D. 1983 [1944]. *Hijos de la ira*. Ed. M. J. Flys. Madrid.
- Alpers, S. 1983. *The Art of Describing*. London.
- Ammianus Marcellinus. 1968. *Res gestae: Römische Geschichte*. Trans. W. Seyfarth. 3 parts. Darmstadt.
- Anonymous. 1911a. "Schreibmaschine und Augenhygiene." *Schreibmaschinen-Zeitung* 157: 217.
- . 1911b. "Der tote Brief." *Schreibmaschinen-Zeitung* 157: 219.
- . 1935. "Das erste Fernsehendespiel." *Fernseh-Informationen* 36, no. 10 (May): 298.
- Aristides Quintilianus. 1963. *De musica*. Ed. R. P. Winnington-Ingram. Leipzig.
- Aristotle. 1936. *De caelo*. Ed. D. J. Allan. Oxford.
- . 1956. *De anima*. Ed. W. D. Ross. Oxford.
- Aristoxenus. 1955. *Elementa harmonica*. Ed. R. da Rios. Rome.
- Assmann, A. 1980. *Die Legitimität der Fiktion: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der literarischen Kommunikation*. Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste 55. Munich.
- . 1988. "Die Sprache der Dinge: der lange Blick und die wilde Semiose." In Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer 1988, pp. 237–51.
- Assmann, A., and J. Assmann. 1983. "Schrift und Gedächtnis." In A. Assmann, J. Assmann, and Ch. Hardmeier, eds., *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (1), pp. 265–84. Munich.
- Assmann, J. 1983. "Schrift, Tod und Identität: Das Grab als Vorschule der Literatur im alten Ägypten." In A. Assmann, J. Assmann, and Ch. Hardmeier, eds., *Schrift und Gedächtnis: Beiträge zur Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation* (1), pp. 64–93. Munich.