**DRAFT VERSION**

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# GLOBAL IMMEDIACY

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The society of the 20th century, as described by Marshall McLuhan, is a society of speed. This speed has a history. Technical acceleration has been discussed as a driving force of modernity since the early 19th century and the beginning of worldwide communications and transportations. Since then, it seems that everyone – almost everyone – can transmit messages immediately from one end of the world to the other by cable or satellite, thus becoming part of a *global village* and a 'simultaneous field of relations'.[1] It seems as if nothing has changed up till now, as we are confronted with mobile media gadgets, ubiquitous computing and immersive environments. 'Ours is a brand-new world of allatonceness. "Time" has ceased, "space" has vanished. We now live in a global village … a simultaneous happening.'[2] 'Electric [sic!] is always instantaneous; there is no delay. That's why you don't have a body. Instantaneous communication is minus the body. So that began with the telegraph. The telegraph also has that built-in dimension of the instantaneous and it completely transformed news and information. The mere speed. Didn't matter what was written; the fact that it went at the speed of light transformed everything.'[3] These sentences may serve as a paraphrase of McLuhan's ideas about electric speed in the modern age. But there is an aporia, a paradox or a contradiction located at the heart of these sentences: if there is speed, then there are acceleration and delay. If something has speed, even if it is the speed of light, it needs time to be transported or transmitted from one place to another. And when there is delay, immediacy and instantaneity are impossible. An instant time is no time. This contradiction has a wide range of implications for the formulation of a genuine theory of media like McLuhan's. To

[1] M. McLuhan, 'The Electronic Revolution in North America', *International Literary Annual*, 1 (1959), p. 169.
[2] M. McLuhan and Q. Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera: Gingko, 2001), p. 63.
[3] Interview with Louis Forsdale, in *Understanding McLuhan: A CD-Rom on the Ideas and Life of Media Guru Marshall McLuhan* (New York: Voyager, 1996).

turn it deconstructively with a notion of Jacques Derrida, 'coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire'.[4]

Immediacy means to neglect media – the media McLuhan's theory wants to describe. Immediacy in itself requires separate elements that can be mediated, but if they are immediate, they are no longer separate. The question raised by this 'coherence in contradiction' is fundamental: How can McLuhan on the one hand attempt to change the perspective from the message to the medium, and on the other hand obliterate the (electric) medium by describing it as immediate? If a transmission is immediate, it does not take any time and does not have a medium that could be its message. Nonetheless McLuhan states that electric speed is immediate and instant, and all of its effects on society, its transformation of figures without grounds to *Gestalten*, of *causa efficiens* to *causa formalis*, and of *sense ratios*, depend on instantaneity. When electric media have that 'built-in dimension of instantaneity', then there can be no non-immediate electric medium. His theory immunises itself. In conclusion, the *global village* is depraved of its unity. The discursive function, the historical genealogy and the phantasmatic dimension of immediate media are the topic of this paper.

My argument is an attempt to take McLuhan as a symptom and not to use him or his thoughts as a tool to develop a new theory or to investigate current media trends. I do not want to take him as a content, but to historicise him. Media theory or *Medienwissenschaft* [media studies] today is confronted with the need to write its own history to find new grounds. When media theory wants to be established as more than a fashionable way of thinking, it has to write a historiography of its own past, and McLuhan is obviously part of this history. But he also offered some elements of a toolbox or even a philosophical framework for the study and historiography of media. To historicise McLuhan from the standpoint of a media theorist means to historicise your own thinking.

To take McLuhan as a symptom implies to take him seriously as someone standing amidst many different discourses. He was constantly trying to balance them. He took what he could get from everywhere his arms were long enough to reach. This was the most prominent feature of his books: to bring together formerly unrelated topics and to play with them, to combine them in new ways, some fruitful, some not so fruitful. By importing ideas from so many areas, McLuhan also imported some problems related to these ideas, maybe without

[4] J. Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in J. Derrida (ed.), *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 280.

recognizing it. The struggles and tensions between the discourses confront what may be called his *media theory* with the aporia I already introduced.[5]

As indicated, there is a paradox at hand here: Media can not be immediate. Even if media are no opposite of immediacy, a medium is certainly needed if there is a distance or a difference to be mediated between two separate elements. By saying that a medium is immediate, this difference is closed and unified. If media were immediate, all mediated differences would have vanished into unity. When there is unity between separate elements, there is no need for a medium, because there is no difference to be crossed and no abyss to be bridged.[6] If two are one, there is no need for a third. And if there is mediation, then there is a contradiction to the claim of instantaneity which results in phantasms of immediacy. And these phantasms, up to today and all the time during the great days of telegraphic communication around the globe, were important to balance the imaginative economy of communication. These phantasms are working deep inside of McLuhan's theories. There is no way to ban immediacy. The claim of immediacy has an important function in his work and many of his ideas rely heavily on it. 'Past, present and future merge into electric nowness',[7] he has said, and: 'Before the electric speed and total field, it was not obvious that the medium is the message.'[8] This results in a shift that makes it impossible for him to fully grasp his own ideas. To put it provocatively: McLuhan does not recognize the potential of his own theory because he describes electricity as immediate and media not as a way to deal with differences but to produce unity. The *global village* is the most prominent manifestation of immediacy, but more important, his tools of thought are constructed on grounds of immediacy.

By historicising his idea of electric speed, which contours many of his other thoughts – acoustic space, formal cause, *Gestalt* theory, the resonant interval – it is possible to show that McLuhan described media as something that unifies. For him, electric media are a means to gain immediacy, be it in the *global village* or elsewhere, because their impact is everywhere at the same time. These ideas partly emerge from the ambivalent and phantasmatic history of electric research and telegraphy since 1730 and partly from McLuhan's resisting Catholicism, which I want to take as a discursive figure and not as an individual belief. In his letters and in the essays and interviews posthumously published under the title *The Medium and the Light*, McLuhan offers an insight into some of the concepts that hold together his thoughts. They are

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[5] McLuhan called his ideas *media theory* against all antipathies towards systematicity in *Understanding Media* and especially in *Laws of Media*.

[6] J. D. Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) and B. Chang, *Deconstructing Communication* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[7] M. McLuhan and B. Nevitt, 'The Argument: Causality in the Electric World', *Technology and Culture*, 14 (1973), p. 2.

[8] M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964), p. 28.

all, if I may say so, infected by Catholicism. Consequently, it is important to refer to this Catholic background because it frames some of his concepts, and many of their implications may not be recognizable without regarding this occupation.[9] McLuhan's Catholicism is intrinsically connected with his other ideas.

One of the most prominent ideas of his work, electricity and its role for his concepts, has so far not been subject of a thorough investigation or even critique. James Carey and James Quirk, Bob Hanke and Richard Cavell have done some pioneering work.[10] Of course it is often underlined how important the role of electricity was for McLuhan. But a discourse analysis of what this electricity is that McLuhan had been talking about in every book since his issue of *Explorations*, or a historical analysis of where it comes from are still missing. This paper will give a brief outline of such an analysis without, for obvious reasons, going into deeper detail.

It is of great importance to note that such a history is not a history like the history of television or the book. Electricity, for McLuhan, is more than a topic or a technique or a special medium – more than that it is a form of thought. Electricity is what allows media theory to emerge in the 1960s. In this implicit teleology, electricity establishes the historical moment in which the history of media is recognizable as leading towards a point of recognition from which this history is visible. McLuhan's framework not only broaches the issue of electricity but wants to show the influence of the structural changes induced by electricity onto this thinking. One could say that electricity formats McLuhan's thought. The result is more of an electrified theory of media than a theory of electric media. The change he locates in the advent of electric media could not be more influential. Electricity recalls the 'causes of things'[11] and leads to 're-cognizing process patterns in the ground of existence'[12]. This is the reason why writing a genealogy of McLuhan's electricity means to investigate first steps of a genealogy of media theory. McLuhan's theoretical output is only understandable, at least for himself, through electricity. 'So, with the use of electricity in previously mechanized situations, men

[9] Cf. T. W. Cooper, 'The Medium is the Mass: Marshall McLuhan's Catholicism and catholicism' *Journal of Media and Religion*, 5 (2006), pp.161–73. and D. F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Innvention* (New York: Penguin, 1999).

[10] B. Hanke, 'McLuhan, Virilio and Electric Speed in the Age of Digital Reproduction', in P. Grosswiler (ed.), *Transforming McLuhan: Cultural, Critical, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), J. W. Carey and J. J. Quirk, 'The Mythos of Electronic Revolution', *The American Scholar*, 39 (1970), pp. 219-241 and 395-424, and R. Cavell, *McLuhan in Space: A Cultural Geography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

[11] McLuhan, *Understanding Media,* p. 27.

[12] McLuhan and Nevitt, p. 10.

easily discover causal connections and patterns that were quite unobservable at the lower rates of mechanical change.'[13]

The central idea of his work, namely that the medium is the message, is formulated against the background of the idea of instant electric transmission. 'All rigid distinctions between thinker and doer, observer and observed, object and subject are being eroded by the 'rim-spin' of electric media.'[14] Instant electricity has three main aspects: first, says McLuhan, it offers a way to perceive *Gestalten*, that means figures with grounds and not figures without grounds. By this means, it is possible to describe media and not contents. The idea that the medium is the message is implicitly based on this assumption. Second, thinking electricity means thinking with *causa formalis*, a tool of causality that does not refer to the linear one-after-one of the Gutenberg Galaxy. *Causa formalis* can deal with the allatonceness of acoustic and tactile space, which are results of electric media. In formal cause, effects precede their causes and this causality includes an explanation of electric simultaneity. Third, electricity reenacts a balance between the senses by externalising man into global embrace. All three ideas rest on an immediate mediation which causes a lot of trouble underneath the thin skin of McLuhan's ideas. For him, the *global village* is their worldwide manifestation.

**Presence and the Rise of Electricity**

Let me at least give an impression of the historical backgrounds of these ideas, since they are mainly not of McLuhan's origin. With the advent of electromagnetic telegraphy in the 1830s, a notion emerging from the history of the sciences of electricity of the 18th century diffused into popular knowledge: the instantaneous transmission of electric action. Ever since Stephen Gray, more an amateur than what nowadays would be called a scientist, explored the properties of electric transmission through copper wires in 1729, the speed of electricity was an item of interest and subject of several investigations. Speed, that means the possibility of non-speed, as instantaneity means to negate speed. Instantaneity means that transmission does not take any time.

Electric action seems to be present at both ends of the wire at the same instant. Electricity and telegraphy were described in such manner as timeless and having no speed. The difference between slow speed and no speed is small, but this difference means everything to physics and to media. Gray arranged a wire from one end of a friend's garden in the south of England

[13] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 305.
[14] McLuhan and Nevitt, p. 1.

to the other. This connection he called 'line of communication'[15]. In the physics of that time every transmission was named 'communication'. Communication, a term often used by Isaac Newton, did not mean to give a message to someone else but to transmit an action to another place, for example between bodies, planets or the ends of a wire. Gray touched one end with a charged tube of glass. At the same instant, with 'no perceivable difference',[16] electric action was carried to the other end, resulting in the dance of some pieces of brass gold which were located under the wire. As no one was able to observe any temporal difference between the electric occurrences at both ends of the wire, they were described as instantaneous, as happening at the same time, without difference and without mediation.

So when Gray for the first time communicated electric action through a wire, but without any message or code, a space was established which would later become the space of telegraphy. There are many physical developments to come, but the structure of communication will still be the same when Samuel Morse sends the first commercial telegram from Washington to Baltimore. Morse, who can be seen as the founding father of telegraphy at least in economic respects, knew very well that electricity had a speed and was not immediate, as British physicist Charles Wheatstone had shown some years before. Wheatstone tried to measure the actual speed of electricity.[17] The results were quite ambiguous, but nonetheless it was obvious that electricity had a speed. Yet, similar to Wheatstone himself, Morse relied upon the gift of instantaneity when talking about the impact of the telegraph on society. 'If the presence of electricity can be made visible in any part of the circuit, I see no reason why intelligence may not be transmitted instantaneously by electricity.'[18]

All electricians, whether physicists or engineers, knew very well that nothing could move with an instantaneous speed because action at a distance is impossible – even though this was a complicated issue for the Newtonian physics of that time and still is for Quantum mechanics. Nothing can act where it is not; at least if there is no medium. This premise dates back to antiquity. Aristotle announced that every cause needs to be in contact and proximity with its effect.[19] This contact seemed to be disconnected with actions at a distance such as

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[15] S. Gray, 'A Letter to Cromwell Mortimer, M. D. Secr. R. S. containing several Experiments concerning Electricity', *Philosophical Transactions* 37 (1731), p. 27. Cf. J. L. Heilbron, *Electricity in the 17th and 18th Centuries: A Study in Early Modern Physics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

[16] Gray, 'Gray 1731', p. 28.

[17] Cf. C. Wheatstone, 'An Account of some Experiments to measure the Velocity of Electricity and the Duration of Electric Light', *Philosophical Transactions*, 124 (1834), pp. 583–91.

[18] S. Morse, *His Letters and Journals*, 2 vols. (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2007), vol. 2, p. 6. See also Sprenger, F., 'Between the Ends of a Wire: Electricity, Instantaneity and the Globe of Telegraphy', in: M. Hampf and S, Müller-Pohl (ed.), *Global Communication Electric. Actors of a Globalizing World* (Frankfurt: Campus), pp. 355-381.

[19] Cf. Aristotle, *Physics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 267a. and M. B. Hesse, *Forces and Fields: The Concept of Action at a Distance in the History of Physics* (London: Nelson, 1961).

gravitation, magnetism or electricity. The theoretical framework of physical sciences had to be reorganized to manage this interruption of causality and the nexus of time and space. If there is a causal relation of two separate bodies, then a medium must communicate between them. This constellation has been the matrix for the media of physics since the 17th century: for ethers, vacua and 'most subtle spirits'.[20] It also provides plausibilities to describe the new medium of telegraphy.

The common denominator of most arguments in this debate is a desire to de-paradoxize the absent presence or present absence an *actio in distans* implies. Besides, every chain between cause and effect needs time. When dealing with techniques and apparatuses or producing objects like telegraphs in all different forms, scientists and engineers nonetheless pondered about the immediacy of electricity and what it would offer to mankind. With the commercial success of the telegraph, made possible to some extent by the notion of instantaneity, this idea gained a wider influence also in the public sphere. It can be found in poems, newspaper articles, manuals, patent applications and religious manifestos.[21] Without the idea that this new medium creates a form of presence at another place but at the same time the telegraph might not have been popularized so successfully. For example, the motto of the contemporary magazine *The Telegrapher* said 'Intellect hath conquered time', and by conquering it intellect erased time. It could be everywhere at once and resulted in the essentialistic ideas of a worldwide community, anticipating what would later be called a *global village* by McLuhan.

The relation of local and global introduced by the telegraph as a spatial relation can be described as a result of this new meaning of time and space. Time and space were supposed to be transcended in no time and from anywhere. The rise of telegraphic communication raised the impression that speed was part of the process of modernization. In an article dating back to 1857, a member of the American Telegraph Company described this 'telepresence', as it was called by media theorists in the 1990s with regard to the internet, as a means to be present at a distant place: 'We publish the following novel and interesting account of a meeting of the employees of the American Telegraph Company on the 3d instant at – what place? That is the question – at no place, or at all places where there were Telegraph offices, within the circuit of seven hundred miles. A large room, that – seven hundred miles in diameter – for a meeting to convene… The members together in spirit – in communication, and yet in body seven

[20] I. Newton, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1687) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1934), p. 574.
[21] Marvin, C., *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Communications in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

hundred miles apart!'[22] The place of presence is a non-place, connected by cables. Such phrases have been repeated throughout the history of telecommunications and McLuhan will say almost the same. When two or more places are connected in such a way, the space in between is nothing more than a time to bridge. Electricity, it seemed, allowed to build this bridge. Still, it was obvious for everyone that telegraphy was not instantaneous. Physically it was not because electricity takes time to be transmitted and relays were used at every station. Practically, it was not because every message had to be decoded in time. The idea of an annihilation of space and time is part of the history of media theory, because it deals with the paradox of how something can be where it is not – one of the main aspects of the rephrasing of the term medium in the 19th century. But this discourse of near and far and speed is also part of the teleological legacy of media theory. The annihilation of time and space, which was a popular cultural self description of the 19th century, leads to a worldwide unity, to the *global village*.

**'Each with all' in a 'vital cord'**

McLuhan establishes the *global village* on this discursive field which has been prepared by the dreams of electromagnetic telegraphy as a world-connecting medium. These dreams operate with a whole repertoire of metaphors and narrations and associate different sources of knowledge.[23] They deal with the deparadoxization of the new relation of near and far, local and global and thus form the cohesion of a community. The 'intimate connection between nations, with race and race',[24] which had already been expected in 1858 with the advent of telegraphy, was supposed to expose the outdated nationalistic politics of exclusion as 'stagnation and death'.[25] In the middle of the 19th and at the middle of the 20th century the cable was described as a 'vital cord' of 'free and unobstructed interchange of each with all'.[26] There are two noteworthy aspects in this formulation: *First,* the connection of individuals is described as animate, like in the 'Kabelseele', the 'cable soul', as the inner coating of a cable was called in German. To take up another formulation of the 19th century, the connecting cable is 'the strongest bond of living creation'.[27] Connection is alive when it is immediate, and dead when it is division and difference, because, as McLuhan borrows this metaphor

[22] "Telegraphic Meeting", *Tiffany's Montly*, 3 (1857), p. 142, cf. J. Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, 2nd printing (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 21.
[23] Cf. G. Bachelard, *On Poetic Imagination and Reverie* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1987).
[24] C. Briggs, and A. Maverick, *The Story of the Telegraph* (New York: Rudd and Charleton, 1858), pp. 21-22.
[25] Briggs and Maverick, pp. 21-22.
[26] Briggs and Maverick, pp. 21-22.
[27] von Steinheil, C. A., *Ueber Telegraphie, insbesonders durch galvanische Kräfte* (München: Wolf, 1838), pp. 3-4: 'das gewaltsamste Band der lebendigen Schöpfung.'

literally a century later, ‘electricity is organic in character and confirms the organic social bond by its technological use in telegraph and telephone, radio and other forms’.[28] Consequently, the cancellation of difference donates life. Difference is emptiness, is vacuum, is forlornness, is loneliness. The separate elements come to life only as a unity. The cable brings its related elements into a proximity of living touch. The presence created by immediate connections is a presence of touch and of life while a mediated connection which includes a difference can only be dead from the start.

These formulations reach a climax with the first transatlantic cable. Symptomatic for their imaginative economy is *secondly* the connection of ‘each with all’. Connection not only means that every individual is connected with other individuals, but with all at the same time. New networks of electric media allow, it seems, worldwide connections of everyone with everyone. The connection not only exists between isolated people, but as a network of everybody with all others. If each is connected with all, and if this connection is vital, then there is no outside. In other words: the telegraph ‘reproduces in one what it has given to all’.[29] If everyone is connected with all others and all with each through a ‘vital cord’[30] then there is no other, no outside. With the rise of the telegraph a new global structure of space emerged in which the categorial status of near and far had to be negotiated in different ways. A new idea of community was born. Community, it seemed, relied on the media of its connection. In this sense, the cable does not connect with absentees, but distributes a precarious form of presence through its network. This negotiation is necessarily accompanied by exclusion and the risk of grasping the whole world as an interior that knows no outside. It is this connection of individuals with the global that McLuhan tries to describe and sees arising with telegraphy. He continues what contemporary discourses established as a new order: ‘The globe is now in electric union.’[31] As if he wrote around 1860, McLuhan in 1960 determines the telegraphic cables as the first extension of the nerves. For him, they are the life and the connection of everybody with all.

In this historical process, the world becomes a project and the projection of bodies, organs and senses, similar to a figure resembling Shakespeare’s Puck aka Robin Goodfellow. On the frontispiece of Alexander Jones’ *Historical Sketch of the Electric Telegraph*, which was published more than ten years before the construction of the transatlantic cable, it showed the

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[28] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 219.
[29] C. A. von Steinheil, , *Telegraphie, insbesonders durch galvanische Kräfte* (München: Wolf, 1838), pp. 3-4: ‘reproduzirt in Einem, was Allen gegeben’.
[30] Briggs and Maverick, p. 21.
[31] C. van Rensselaer, *Signals from the Atlantic Cable: An Address delivered at the Telegraphic Celebration* (Philadelphia: Wilson, 1858), p. 5.

imagination of what is supposed to happen some years later. The actual success only fulfilled what had been imagined. This figure holds the two ends of the world-connecting cable in her hands and pulls them on one end. Instantly, the other end moves. The figure is receiver and transmitter at the same time. Significantly, this cable is not routed around the poles, but around the equator. The cable not only connects individual spaces with each other but forms a connection that ends where it began. This is reflected by the quoted phrase from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*: 'I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes.' Electricity, these dreams say, conducts its power instantly around the world like a vital cord to each with all.

Figure Source: Jones, A., *Historical Sketch of the Electric Telegraph* (New York: Putnam, 1852), Frontispice.

When McLuhan encountered the impacts of electric media he implicitly relied on these notions. He knew about the imaginary dimension of culture as a place for such phantasms. By conceptualizing electricity as the agent of all the changes he stated for 20th century culture, he actualized these phantasms. They speak through him; McLuhan shares both the animism of the connection and the unfolding of each with all with the dreams of the 19th century. Electricity, the universality of the language of telegraphy and the arbitrariness of code relieve the Babylonian tangle which McLuhan will deplore to solve it once again: 'At the present day, all tendencies of the world's advancement are towards intercourse, unity, and peace. The swift communication of thought is the best harbinger of universal concord. As the original dispersion of mankind was accomplished by the confusion of language at the tower of Babel, so its reunion in the bonds of peace is promoted by the creation of a new, universal language, outstripping the resources of combined human tongues.'[32] The living bond of 'each with all' has become a bond of peace by universal communication. However, at stake is not simply a net of technical connections embracing the world. The net lives. Because media are extensions of the body, all people of the electric age are inhabitants of such a village, as the human nervous system, expanded in electric media, has risen on a global scale and is held together by the synchronicity of all people through media.

In such a space, relations need to be described in a new manner: as immediate, unrelated, everywhere at once. Its simultaneity is faster than the fastest speed. Everyone and everything is everywhere at every time. This is the Catholic dream of a unity, a *corpus mysticum*, as it

[32] van Rensselaer, p. 14.

was phrased throughout Christian history: 'Electric man is a "super angel"'.[33] With instant transmission the relation of speed and non-speed is disrupted. The causality of cause and effect is abrogated. The instant speed of electricity is no acceleration, but a turning point. In an interview with Bruce Powers, McLuhan compares the situation of someone or something moving faster than light with an absolute speed to a scene from *Star Wars*: 'At the exact moment [Han] Solo puts his spaceship into warp speed all those pinpoints of light stand still. He's travelling faster than the speed of light and thus the space freighter becomes simultaneous and everywhere at once – the properties of acoustic space.'[34] When instantaneity leads to allatonceness and thus to equilibrium, speed and acceleration are erased. This universe has no borders. It has no place for otherness. It may contain discontinuities of space, but they can only be discontinuous because of instantaneity. Transmission, which takes time from a physical point of view, implodes to the *global village* of instant relations. McLuhan even imagines a medium that could be faster than light.[35] Einstein would have turned over in his grave.

The manifest effect of this space of simultaneity and its relations is the *global village*. In a village everybody takes part in everything every day and hears every news in the shortest time because it spreads acoustically. Electrically, connections between human beings are unified. The use of media as 'mediators of human omnipresence',[36] whether by cable or wireless, leads to a return to the communication structures of the pre-alphabetical, tribal, mostly indigenous culture within village organisations. New social and cultural organisations originate, according to McLuhan, in concordance with Harold Innis and Lewis Mumford, from the implosion of distances induced by new media. Instead of tendencies of explosion, as with transport media like horses, trains and letters, in which medium and messenger are intertwined, implosions of allatonceness and omnipresence take place. Explosion has accelerated speed. Implosion is no longer accelerated: it is here and there at the same time. However, space on the globe is limited. Electricity is everywhere. Every place is accessible to the satellite and the outside has disappeared.[37]

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[33] McLuhan, M., 'Keys to the Electronic Revolution: First Conversation with Pierre Babin', in M. McLuhan (ed.), *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1999), p. 50.

[34] M. McLuhan M. and B. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 134. Warpspeed, of course, is not part of *Star Wars* but of *Star Trek*.

[35] Cf. the *DEW Line Newsletters*, which McLuhan offered during the 1970s. These short commercial articles have never been published in English, but in a German translation: M. McLuhan, *Wohin steuert die Welt? Massenmedien und Gesellschaftsstruktur* (Wien: Europaverlag, 1978).

[36] E. Kapp, *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik* (Braunschweig: Westermann, 1877), p. 135: 'Mediatoren menschlicher Allgegenwart'.

[37] Nonetheless, McLuhan has no concept of virtuality that might enlarge this space.

**Inside of 'each with all'**

With the *global village*, the assumed ongoing extension of the central nervous system enforces a turn to the inside of the externalised being. Because with instantaneous speed expansion to the outside is no longer necessary, the inside is the last refuge where one can find oneself. The 'colossal speech hall',[38] as which German economist Karl Knies had described the telegraphic world already in 1857, resonates with soliloquies. Though there is no more privacy because everybody can take part in the life of all others, the only possible trip is to turn inside, as favoured by the North American youth of the 1960s.[39] If electric media extend the nervous system, the inside is outside and the outside is inside. There it can be massaged: 'The medium is the massage.' 'What electric implosion or contraction has done inter-personally and inter-nationally, the TV image does intra-personally or intra-sensuously.'[40] The idea behind this argument: If people understand themselves not as isolated individuals, but as nodes in communication networks which reflect the whole world in their inside, they hopefully recognize their mutual dependence and develop a global sympathy as a collective entity. Consequently, every action would have immediate effects. Instead of being pre-civilized electric man would be super-civilized and, nevertheless, live in a postliterate myth.

On the other hand, new conflicts arise with the worldwide simultaneity of the satellite, which are a result of the end of book culture and the painful transplantation into a new environment. The *global village* is supposed to bring together a unity in disparity. There may be conflicts, but these dissonances are subordinated under a larger whole. This village is familiar with 'bad vibes' and quarrel, but has no outside and no Other in the sense of someone who cannot be reduced to something common. Towards the inside it is by no means totalitarian, but to the outside it presents a totality without alternative. It conjoins a community which is divided without differences. Many cultural problems of everyday life in the *global village* emerge from the chaotic coincidence of electric, simultaneous technologies that have arisen since the emergence of the telegraph with the sequential, linear figures of book culture. 'After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central

[38] K. Knies, *Der Telegraph als Verkehrsmittel* (Leipzig: Laupp & Siebeck, 1857), p. 242: 'die riesige Sprechhalle'.
[39] Cf. F. Sprenger, 'From Psychedelics to Cybernetics: Wie Timothy Leary und Marshall McLuhan sich den Umgang mit Medien beibrachten' *Recherche* (2011), at http://www.recherche-online.net/marshall-mcluhan-timothy-leary.html.
[40] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 280.

nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.'[41] To solve these conflicts, however, it is futile to investigate the contents of media. For McLuhan the solution is clear: Only *media theory* can help because the medium is the message. Moreover, the cause for the conflicts permits their solution. Cause and solution sustain each other. *Media theory* is a way to describe the impacts of electric media, that means, global simultaneity, and this simultaneity makes the medium the message. McLuhan's *media theory* is electrified. Only with electricity does the form-giving strength of media become visible and the *global village* rises as the dominant form of social organisation.

McLuhan sees the idea of the *global village* as a harmonious community as a widespread misunderstanding. 'There is more diversity, less conformity under a single roof in any family than there is with the thousands of families in the same city. The more you create village conditions, the more discontinuity and division and diversity. The global village absolutely insures maximal disagreement on all points. It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquillity were the properties of the global village. It has more spite and envy … I don't approve of the global village. I say we live in it.'[42] Nevertheless, it is *one* village, and only as such does it admit tensions and the possibility of coalescence. There is always tension, whether with sword and axe or with words and arguments. Even a cantankerous village is a unity on a systematic level. This tension lies, as one could say in a systems approach, on the inside of the differentiation between unity and plurality, that means on the side of unity. Tension does not result from confrontations but is a necessary evil. In the end it is no threat to unity. The discord mentioned by McLuhan arises from the unity and is a result of the imploding union. It is no discord of differences.

Behind the vitalisation of the connection and the 'each with all' lies a denial of the exclusion implied by the all-embracing vital connection. If there is only everybody and each with all, there is no Other. McLuhan does not stress the collective so far that it could rise above the individual and lead to a totalitarian or even fascist position. He obviously never aims at such concepts and underlines the role of the individual. Nonetheless, in the global village there is only plurality consisting of singularities that can exist only as a plurality or multiplicity.

Finally, at this point of the argument a critique should be articulated in reference to current theories of community. Such theories, as for example Jean-Luc Nancy's, Gayatri Spivak's or Jacques Rancière's, insist on the fact that community should be thought of as a connection only in so far it is not unified. From the standpoint of media, these debates challenge the

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[41] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 19.

[42] McLuhan, M., 'The Hot and Cool Interview', in M. McLuhan (ed.), *Media Research: Technology, Art, Communication* (Amsterdam: OPA, 1997), p. 58.

production of presence and absence by media and their ways of representation and connection-without-contact. In the last few years, these ideas have been intensely debated mainly in France to develop a concept of community that does not refer to an essentialist aggregation of individuals who are unified in a community.[43]

Two historically grounded strategies can be named for such essentialism: This unity can be produced either by a subsequent definition of shared qualities. In this way, everyone has something essential that connects him or her with everyone else, for example a political orientation or a special mobile phone. On the other hand, community can be attributed to a religious, biological or geographic affiliation in the sense of nations or churches. In this regard everyone is subordinated under a natural order and the essence is nationality, blood or God. In both cases, the radical Other is confronted as someone outside and threatening. He or she is not part of essence and no derivative of its attributes. Thus he or she can be excluded or persecuted.[44]

**Outside the *global village***

McLuhan offers a third strategy with similar effects compared to the two options mentioned. He develops his concept of community from an ontology – an ontology of the connectedness of media. The 'vital cord' is no antecedent of this community or an addition, but originates from the media of connection. McLuhan grounds the abstract universality of his community in the electric networks of the 19th century. The essence of this community are immediate transmission and instant electricity. However, as opposed to the elaborated concepts of community which connect universality with individuality, McLuhan's community resembles a Christian *communitas*. In spite of all quarrel it aims at a unity and prospects a higher union provided by the inevitable connection of electricity.[45]

From a historical standpoint the political flaws of such a conception are obvious. The telegraph networks connect empires with their colonies. The white spots on the map which are not affiliated to the cable or the places which have no radio and no television are omitted. Such a space necessarily has a blind spot: an outside that can no longer be recognized but still constitutes the inside. If all huts of the village are connected with each other and news items are everywhere immediately because they appear on every radio or television at the same

[43] Cf. J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[44] Flatscher, M. '"And there is nihil nuder under the clothing moon": Rekonzeptionen von "Bild" und "Gemeinschaft" nach Jacques Derrida', in B. Fricke, M. Klammer and S. Neuner (eds.), *Bilder und Gemeinschaften: Studien zur Konvergenz von Politik und Ästhetik in Kunst, Literatur und Theorie* (München: Fink, 2010).

[45] Cf. McLuhan's reflections of the *noosphere*, a concept developed by the Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

time, this negation of mediation and temporality, as it is employed by McLuhan, results in a unity without separation. This leads to a paradoxical situation which can be described with Derrida's concept of a 'coherence in contradiction' mentioned earlier. This connection exists because it has been divided, and this division establishes the possibility of connection. The huts of the village are separated but at the same time one because there is instantaneity. There is no unity and no presence without separation. On a discursive level disconnection is discarded because McLuhan's theoretical foundations rest on immediacy. The unity of the *global village* is only possible without separation. This presence has no difference. It leads to an essentialistic and politically explosive conception of community, which is still in usage today when, for example, Manuel Castell writes about the 'annihilation of space and time by electronic means'.[46] His idea of a network society is conceptually a result of an extensive analysis of social practices of synchronisation. The notion that this society exists 'without reference to either past or future',[47] is analogous to McLuhan's 'electric nowness'[48] and the instantaniety of telegraphy. Difference can not be a part of this unity. And a unity without difference is excluding, even in political ways.

My critique regarding the global village does not aim at a misled consideration of social practices. McLuhan has pointed out the quarrel and the discord ruling the village. There does not have to be any harmony inside the village, as it was imagined in the dreams of the transatlantic cable and in the discourses on the internet during the 1990s. McLuhan does not exaggerate the 'bond of peace'[49] and only writes about an 'organic social bond'.[50] The utopia of the global village is not totalitarian but essentialist. This unity is rather made by media. The *global village* cannot question itself because it has no alternative. Therefore, the tension among people and places may matter within the village, whereas the idea of the *global village* is problematic because it can regard difference only as a difference that is always already neglected.

The concept of the *global village* and all ideas of a worldwide connection provided by electricity constantly exclude difference. Difference can not be part of unity while it has to be presupposed to conceptualize a unity of separate, communicating and mediated elements. The *global village* is in this sense contact without tact, without time, without distance, maybe also without decency ('Takt' in German). Rather it is a co-tact, a concurrent touch without in-

[46] M. Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*. Vol. 3: *End of Millennium* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 379.
[47] Castells, *End of Millennium*, p. 386.
[48] McLuhan and Nevitt, p. 2.
[49] van Rensselaer, p. 14.
[50] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 219.

between, a tact getting stuck in the touch.[51] In McLuhan's electric media the bridging separation is erased. This mechanism of exclusion can have political effects. The *global village* conceals the relations of space and time as well as their interruptions and reconfigurations of social orders. If there is no difference in unity, but still variability, then all elements of this unity, that means all inhabitants of the *global village*, are only derivations of electric unity. There cannot be anything like the Other, like an outside which is not enclosed by the unity. Thus the resonance of the electric world stands in relation to the *corpus mysticum* as an organisation of the church in God: 'The electrically established, invisible and all-embracing environment of information presents itself as an ethereal world which is an "approximate facsimile" of the body Mysticum.'[52]

**Immediacy of Media**

This 'coherence in contradiction' is not simply the result of a naïve political utopia. It also usurps the conception of *media theory*. Immediacy of media is not a minor inconsistency. It is part of a paradoxical framework. To put it bluntly, McLuhan says that *media theory* as a change of perspective from the message to the medium is only possible under the reign of instant electricity. To see media as figures with grounds means to see figures and grounds at the same time, and this is a benefit of electric speed. Instantaneity is a necessary condition for this idea of *media theory*. Consequently, to use McLuhan today makes it important to historicise him. To understand McLuhan means not to let him explain himself. Without writing the history of his thinking, which coincides with the history of our own thinking, we will be trapped in all the impossibilities of thinking an immediate medium or we will end up in a questionable essentialistic utopia like the *global village* which has no outside and no other because of its instantaneity. We will never be able to describe difference. There would be – I am exaggerating of course – no place for critique. There would be only a Catholic utopia.

I would like to close my remarks with a more or less political statement. For McLuhan, as for his disciples Eric McLuhan, Derrick de Kerckhove or Paul Virilio, media theory in the end is a Catholic project, and only a Catholic can truly understand what media theory is about. Only a Catholic can join the heaven of *media theory*. For McLuhan, media theory necessarily must lead to this idea. Even more: because media theory is only possible under the reign of instant action of electric media, and because this instantaneity 'evoke[s] the presence of Christ

[51] J. Derrida, *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2005)-

[52] M. McLuhan, and B. Nevitt, 'Brücken', in M. McLuhan (ed.), *Wohin steuert die Welt? Massenmedien und Gesellschaftsstruktur* (Wien: Europaverlag, 1978), p. 80: 'Das elektrisch errichtete, unsichtbare und allumfassende Informationsmilieu präsentiert sich als eine ätherische Welt, die als ein 'annäherndes Faksimile' des Corpus Mysticum anzusehen ist.' My translation.

immediately via the ear',[53] only a Catholic can be a true media theorist. Catholicism offers tools to understand the simultaneity of electricity because it is itself acoustic and tactile. It restored these facilities during the reign of the *Gutenberg Galaxy* and they are revived with electricity. A Catholic can deal with the allatonceness of electric media. But what if McLuhan's Catholicism and its inborn desire for immediacy obliterate the potential of his own ideas? Perhaps a theory of media which is oriented towards unity and immediacy can not see its own implications and never fully grasp what *media theory* is about: that media are differentiators and never unify without delaying, interrupting and individualizing.

Compared to electricity, only one other medium shows similar effects: 'In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message,' the Catholic says, 'it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same.'[54] If only electricity, light (as mentioned in *Understanding Media*[55]) and Christ can be medium and message at the same time, every other medium will appear as tilted or tainted. It is in this sense that Stephen Gray communicated nothing else but the communicability of instant transmission through a wire in a garden in the summer of 1729. This electricity is McLuhan's genealogical benchmark, as he skips all breaks and interruptions of history and of electric research. Just as Christ is the message which is the medium, so the immediacy of electricity in the wire is Gray's medium and message in one, and so is electricity that is everywhere at the same time medium and message as an immediate medium. An immediate medium, as follows from this logic, is undifferentiated difference, a medium whose message is itself, even if it carries a different meaning, just like the medium of Christ in his own message, the redemption and bridging of all abysses by means of communication and communion.

If this space of electric media is the space of God's omnipresence, then there is a danger ahead. Even though 'Electric man is a "super angel"'[56] and everywhere at the same time, his material body, McLuhan fears, cannot receive the sacraments. He is lost in the vastness of expansion. From this later standpoint in McLuhan's work it is not good to be an angel. 'But a discarnate world, like the one we now live in, is a tremendous menace to an incarnate Church.'[57]

These considerations lead to the assumption that *media theory* systematically produces immediacy because it stems from the genealogy of electricity. With his convergence of

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[53] M. McLuhan, 'Liturgy and Media: Third Conversation with Pierre Babin', in M. McLuhan (ed.), *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1999), p. 148.
[54] M. McLuhan, 'Religion and Youth: Second Conversation with Pierre Babin', in M. McLuhan (ed.), *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion* (Toronto: Stoddard, 1999), p. 143.
[55] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 24.
[56] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 50.
[57] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 50.

Catholic economies of presence and electricity, McLuhan boosts a desire for proximity and touch, acoustics and tactility. He not only concedes this desire, but makes it, put pointedly, the admission requirement of a theory of media that cannot be developed in other ways. If we want to break up this absolutising concept, we have to read it as a symptom and to refer to its genealogy.

We should refuse the occupation of *media theory* by immediacy because of two reasons, and not simply because of religious matters, which I have nothing to do with. As I have described, McLuhan's theory of media is oriented towards unity, even though his ideas that the medium is the message or that every medium is content of another medium lead to what may be called a differential analysis. But McLuhan never fully applied this dimension. His is not a theory of difference. Media theory is always threatened or even thwarted by the attempt to apply immediacy instead of media. That is what McLuhan's electricity is about. And this is the reason why McLuhan, at least this is my impression, never fully grasped that his sentence 'The Medium is the Message' means that the medium makes a difference. He rarely described media as differences, but as immediate. Only if we are able to write a critical history of McLuhan's discursive influences and offsprings, for which I wanted to offer some minor inspirations, we can free McLuhan's heritage from his own occupation and use his tools as a matter of difference, that means the way they were intended: to change perspectives.

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