"You mean my entire fallacy is wrong."

–Marshall McLuhan, in Annie Hall

"I don't know if I mean what I say. And if I knew, I would have to keep it to myself."

–Niklas Luhmann, "How Can the Mind Participate in Communmication?"[1]

In Annie Hall, there is a famous scene in which Woody Allen is stuck on a movie line next to an obnoxious media studies professor from Columbia University who insists on broadcasting his stupid opinions about cinema. When the professor starts to hold forth on Marshall McLuhan's theories of media, Woody can stand it no longer. He steps out of the line and addresses the camera and movie-goer directly, complaining about being trapped next to this boor. The professor then steps toward the camera as well and responds: "Hey, it's a free country. Don't I have a right to my opinions too?" [Fig. 1; Fig. 2] When he goes on to defend his own credentials to explain McLuhan, Woody has his moment of triumph. He says, "Oh Yeah, Well I have Marshall McLuhan right here." McLuhan steps into view and squelches the obnoxious professor with the decisive put-down: "I heard what you were saying. You know nothing about my theories." Woody smiles at the camera and sighs, "if only life were like that."

The only problem with this moment of at least negative clarity and insight in the welter of media theories is that someone (Woody Allen? McLuhan himself?) has inserted a tiny glitch into the intervention of the authority figure, the media guru, the One Who Is Supposed to Know. Generally overlooked (or unheard) is a quiet little remark nested inside McLuhan's assertion of authority over his own theories: "You know nothing about my theories. You mean my entire

[1]In The Materialities of Communication ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 387.

fallacy is wrong."

One wants to play this scene over and over again to be sure one has heard the words correctly. What nonsense! There must be some mistake in the script, or in McLuhan's delivery of his lines. Of course his *fallacy* is wrong. That is what it means to be a fallacy. But why should McLuhan, as he steps forward to declare his authority as the oracle of media theory–a kind of meta-medium in his own right--subvert his authority by calling his theory a fallacy?[2] At the very least it suggests that one had better approach the question of media somewhat cautiously. If even the inventor of media studies, the great avatar of media theory who became a media star in his own right, is capable of slipping on a banana, what lies in wait for the rest of us who think we have "a right to our opinions" about media. How can we hope, as McLuhan promised, to "understand media," much less become experts about them? Perhaps we need a less ambitious model than understanding. That is what I propose to explore by "addressing media," not as if they were logical systems or structures, but as if they were environments where images live, or personas and avatars that address us and can be addressed in turn.

The lives and loves of images, it seems clear, cannot be assessed without some reckoning with the media in which they appear. The difference between an image and a picture, for instance, is precisely a question of the medium. An image only appears in some medium or other–in paint, stone, words, or numbers. But what about media? How do they appear, make themselves manifest, and understandable? It is tempting to settle on a rigorously materialist answer to this question, and to identify the medium as simply the material support in or on which the image appears. But this answer seems unsatisfactory on the face of it. A medium is more than the materials of which it is composed. It is, as Raymond Williams wisely insisted, a material *social*

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[2]This line does appear in the script as reproduced on the Annie Hall website, http://www.un-official.com/anniehall.txt. (August 29, 2003). What Allen intended by it one can only guess.

practice, a set of skills, habits, techniques, tools, codes, and conventions.[3] Unfortunately, Williams wanted to push this insight to the point of jettisoning the whole idea of the medium as an unnecessary reification. The title of his essay on this subject, "From Medium to Social Practice" suggests as much. The idea is to release the study of media from a misplaced emphasis on the material support (as when we call paint, or stone, or words, or numbers, by the name of media), and move it toward a description of the social practices that constitute it. But perhaps this gesture of de-reification goes too far. Is every social practice a medium? This is not the same as asking whether every social practice is mediated. Is a tea party, a union walkout, an election, a bowling league, a playground game, a war, or a negotiated settlement a medium? Surely these are all social practices, but it would seem odd to call them media, no matter how much they might depend upon media of various sorts–on material supports, representation, representatives, codes, conventions, and even mediators. The concept of a medium, if it is worth preserving at all, seems (unsurprisingly) to occupy some sort of vague middle ground between materials and the things people do with them. Williams compromising phrase, "*material* social practice," is clearly an attempt to sketch this middle ground, in contrast to his title, and the thrust of this argument, which wants to move us from one side (materials) to the other (social practice).

Perhaps this is the fundamental paradox built into the concept of media as such. A medium just is a "middle," an in-between or go-between, a space or pathway or messenger that connects two things–a sender to a receiver, writer to a reader, artist to a beholder, or (in the case of the spiritualist medium), this world to the next. The problem arises when we try to determine the boundaries of the medium. Defined narrowly, confined to the space or figure of mediation, we are returned to the reified picture of materials, tools, supports, and so forth. Defined more

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[3]Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 158-64.

broadly, as a social practice, the medium of writing clearly includes the writer and the reader, the medium of painting includes the painter and beholder–and perhaps the gallery, the collector, and the museum as well. If media are middles, they are ever-elastic middles that expand to include what look at first like their outer boundaries. The medium does not lie *between* sender and receiver; it includes and constitutes them. Are we left with a version of the Derridean maxim about texts–i.e. "there is nothing outside the medium"? What does it mean to *go to* the movies? When are we inside or outside the medium? When we are in the theater, or like Woody Allen in Annie Hall, standing on line in the lobby?

The vagueness built into the concept of media is one of the main stumbling blocks in the way of a systematic discipline of "media studies," which seems today to occupy a rather peculiar position in the humanities. One of the youngest emergent disciplines in the study of culture and society, it exists in a parasitical relationship to departments of rhetoric and communication, to film studies, cultural studies, literature, and the visual arts. The common rubrics these days are "cinema and media studies," as if the general idea of media was merely a supplement to the centrally located medium of film; or "communication and media studies," as if media were merely instrumental technologies in the master domain of communicating messages. In the field of art history, with its obsessive concern for the materiality and "specificity" of media, the supposedly "de-materialized" realm of virtual and digital media, as well as the whole sphere of mass media, are commonly seen as beyond the pale, or as a threatening invader, gathering at the gates of the aesthetic and artistic citadel.[4] A symptom of art history's ambivalent relation to media is the way it marginalizes architecture as (at best) the third most important medium in its purview, well

[4]The hostile reception to the emphasis on new media art at the 2002 Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany is symptomatic of this continued resistance to moving, virtual, and de-materialized images in the art world. Of course, like everything else in the art world, the new media are contested zones, and there are many who regard them as the frontier of artistic experimentation and research. The other notable "invaders" of the media territory of art history are, of course, the verbal disciplines–literary theory and history, rhetoric, linguistics, and semiotics.

down the standard hierarchy that places painting at the top, sculpture a distant second, while the oldest, most pervasive medium human beings have devised, the art of constructing spaces, languishes at the bottom. In the study of literature, the medium of language, and the specific technologies of writing, from the invention of the printing press to the typewriter to the computer are relatively minor issues compared to questions of genre, form, and style which are generally studied independently of the specific material vehicle through which literary works are transmitted.[5] Cultural studies, meanwhile, is such an amorphous formation that it may well be synonymous with media studies, or vice versa, with a bit of emphasis on technologies of communication and archiving.

Thirty years after the death of Marshall McLuhan, the great pioneer of media studies, the field still does not have its own identity. Symptomatic of this is the need to constantly overturn McLuhan, to recite all his mistakes and bemoan his naive predictions of the end of labor, the emergence of a peaceful "global village" and the development of a new planetary consciousness, a kind of wired "world-spirit." Contemporary media theory, as if in reaction against McLuhan's optimism, is driven by an obsession with war machines (Kittler, Virilio) and traces every technical innovation to the arts of coercion, aggression, and destruction, surveillance and propaganda spectacle.[6] Or it is enveloped in a presentist rhetoric that takes the internet and the age of digital information as the horizon of its interests (Lunenfeld, Manovich).[7] Or it focusses

[5]This claim might seem counter-intuitive, given the importance of structural linguistics in the study of poetry and literary narrative. But these studies (along with their poststructural and deconstructive descendants) tend to focus on tropes and structural elements that are quite independent of the technical media in which a "text" makes its appearance. Thus, Kittler's arguments about the importance of the typewriter to the gendering of literature in the late 19th century have fallen, so far as I can see, on deaf ears among students of literature.

[6]Friedrich Kittler, Gramaphone Film Typewriter trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (first pub. 1986; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Paul Virilio, War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception, trans. Patrick Camiller (New York: Verso, 1989).

[7]Peter Lunenfeld, Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); Lev Manovich, The Language of the New Media (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001).

exclusively on the so-called "mass media" (television and print journalism) as a uniquely modern invention that can be rigorously distinguished from more traditional media.[8]

Perhaps the most interesting symptom in the current discussion is the recurrent theme of the end of media, and the death of media studies, a claim which, if true, would make this one of the shortest-lived concepts in the history of human thought. Just thirty years ago, in the wake of McLuhan's meteoric career and burn-out as a has-been media star in his own right, Jean Baudrillard penned a "Requiem for the Media," in which he denounced Hans Magnus Enzenberger's hopeful attempts to sketch out a socialist theory of media in terms of productive forces and a "consciousness industry."[9] "There is no theory of the media," declared Baudrillard, except "empiricism and mysticism," and the idea that socialism could somehow harness the productive forces of the intransitive, non-reciprocal structures of mass media was dismissed as a pipe-dream harnessed to an illusion. Even Friedrich Kittler, who opens Gramaphone Film Typewriter by declaring that "Media determine our situation," within a few pages is hinting that the age of media, the era of the great media inventions (cinema, sound recording, the keyboard interface) may now be over. The invention of the computer promises "a total media link on a digital base" that will "erase the very concept of medium. Instead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will run in an endless loop." All that is left for the present, according to Kittler, is "entertainment," as we wait for the arrival of the endless loop that will not include any human component in its circuits.[10]

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[8]See Luhmann, The Reality of the Mass Media. (Stanford U.P., 2000). By "mass media" Luhmann means "those institutions which make use of copying technologies to disseminate communication" (2).

[9]Enzensberger's "Constitutents of a Theory of the Media" appears in Timothy Druckrey's important anthology, Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation (New York: Aperture, 1996), 62-85. Baudrillard replied in "Requiem for the Media," in For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 164.

[10]Gramaphone Film Typewriter, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1-2.

What does it mean to "address media" today, at the threshold of the 21st century?[11] I want to raise the question this way in contrast to McLuhan's notion of "understanding" media in order to foreground the way media address or "call out" to us, and the ways in which we imagine ourselves talking back to or addressing media.[12] The primal scene of this address might be the moment when we find ourselves shouting at the television set, or putting our hands on the radio and sending in five dollars in response to an evangelical preacher. How are the media addressing us, who is the "us" they are addressing, and what is the "address" of media, in the sense of their location or place in social and mental life? How, in particular, can we address the totality of media–not just mass or technical media, not just television and print media, but obsolete and archaic media, and media in McLuhan's expanded field–money, exchange, housing, clothing, the arts, communication systems, transportation, ideology, fantasy, and political institutions. One avenue is offered by systems theory, which provides models of media as autopoetic system-environment dialectics. Every entity in the world, from the single-celled organism to the multi-national corporation, to the global economy, turns out to be a system that inhabits an "environment" which is nothing more than the negative of the system–an "unmarked space" that contrasts with "marked space" of the system. Persons and minds are also systems, and they are "isolated monads" that can never communicate with one another.

Systems theory, especially as developed by its principal exponent, Niklas Luhmann, tends to be

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[11]The phrase, "Addressing Media" was the title of a symposium held at the University of Cologne to inaugurate their new program in Media and Cultural Communication in December of 1999. This paper originated as the keynote address for that symposium, and I am grateful to the organizers, Eckhard Schumacher, Stefan Andriopoulos, and Gabriele Schabacher for their wonderful hospitality. A brief sketch of this essay appears (in German translation by Gabriele Schabacher) in the conference volume as the preface to "The Surplus Value of Images," ("Der Mehrwert von Bildern") in Die Addresse des Mediums, ed. Stefan Andriopoulos, Gabriele Schabacher, and Eckhard Schumacher (Cologne: Dumont, 2001), 158-184.

[12]McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (first appeared 1964; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

very abstract and paradoxical.[13] It can be rendered concrete, if no less paradoxical, by picturing its logic with the aid of those ambiguous figure-ground diagrams that are the icons of cognitive science. The system-environment relation turns out to be a nest of Chinese boxes in which systems (such as minds) never communicate with one another, but do manage to observe their own observing. [Fig. 3] The ultimate result of systems theory seems finally to be a rather dry mystical empiricism (in contrast to the messy, metaphorical and associative logic of McLuhan's dazzling puns and alliterations). Luhmann's own system is worked out with impeccable and impersonal logic. It finds that systems are something like living organisms, while environments, seen from a high enough level, can begin to look like systems (i.e, organisms) in their own right. Media can fit on both side of the system/environment divide: they are a system for transmitting messages through a material vehicle to a receiver; or they are a space in which forms can thrive, and Luhmann's "form/medium" division recapitulates his foundational move of "drawing a distinction" (between inside and outside, object and space, observer and observed) in a rather graphic way. In vernacular reflections on media, we describe this as the difference between a medium *through which* messages are transmitted, and a medium *in which* forms and images appear. These two fundamental models of media (as transmitter and habitat) may be visualized with Umberto Eco's familiar linear diagram of the sender-receiver circuit [Fig. 4] and with my own diagrams of Luhmann's system/environment and form/medium distinctions. [Fig. 3;]

If we are stuck with mystical empiricism, I would prefer mine to be as concrete as possible, and so I suggest that instead of using system/environment as the master terms, we think of media in terms of faces and places, figures and spaces. If we are going to "address" media, not just study or reflect on them, we need to transform them into something that can be addressed, that can be

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[13]See Luhmann, The Reality of the Mass Media trans. Kathleen Cross, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). Also crucial are "Medium and Form," in Art as a Social System (Stanford, 2000), and "How Can the Mind Participate in Communication?" [the answer is, it cannot] in The Materialities of Communication, ed. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994),

hailed, greeted, and challenged. If we are going to "address media" in the other sense, that is, locate them, give them an address, then the challenge is to place them, and to see them as landscapes or spaces. This may all correspond to the distinction between system (organism, body, face) and environment (place, space), but it will have the advantage of being more picturesque. The methodological strategy here is what I have called "picturing theory," that is, treating theory as an embodied discourse, one that is constructed around critical metaphors, analogies, models, figures, cases, and scenes. A theory of media that follows this path has to ask not only what media are, what they do; it has to raise the question of what the medium of theory itself might be. We tend to assume, of course, that some form of critical or philosophical language, the metalanguage of systems theory or semiotics, for instance, might lift us out of the welter of media and give us a neutral scientific perspective on the totality of media.[14] My approach is just the opposite. It assumes that no theory of media can rise above the media themselves, and that what is required are forms of vernacular theory, embedded in media practices. These will turn out to be what I have called "metapictures," media objects that reflect on their own constitution, or (to recall Robert Morris's wonderful object of Minimalist Dadaism), boxes with the sound of their own making.[15]

A useful metapicture of media is provided by the classic multistable image of the "One Vase/Two

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[14]Luhmann, for instance, imagines that systems theory can replace traditional "utopian" ethical/political concepts of social theory (e. g., democratization, dialectics, inequality, and struggle) and traditional concepts of media aesthetics (e. g., mimesis, expression, representation) with an Olympian survey of "*the emergence of comparable conditions* in systems as diverse as religion or the monetary economy, science or art, intimate relationships or politics–despite extreme differences between the functions and the operational modes of these systems."(ASS 2; emphasis Luhmann's). I disagree. See my essay, "Why Comparisons Are Odious," World Literature Today 70:2 (Spring 1996), 321-324, for a critique of comparatism in literature and the arts..

[15]See my discussion of Morris in Picture Theory, chapter eight. Metapictures are similar to Luhmann's concept of the "'playful' doubling of reality" in works of art, but Luhmann assumes that this is a distinctive feature of the modernist "art system," rather than an essential property of representation and mimesis as such. My notion of the metapicture is not limited to works of art, modern or otherwise.

Faces."[Fig. 5][16] If we begin with the vase, we see a useful illustration of Luhmann's distinction between the "marked" system" (the vase), and the "unmarked" environment or empty space around it. It also illustrates the distinction between form (the drawn outline that distinguishes the vase) and the medium (the blank paper on which it is inscribed). But a second glance precisely reverses these readings: the vase turns from a system into an environment between two systems that face one another, and the empty space or environment around the vase turns into the two facing systems. But the most stunning reversal in this image is the transformation of the ornamental markings on the vase into conduits of communication between the eyes and mouths of the faces. The invisible media of seeing and speaking are depicted here as channels of intersubjectivity, a kind of emblem of the very process of "addressing media." Not only do the two faces address each other simultaneously in what Lacan would call the "scopic" and "vocative" registers, the image as a whole addresses us, the beholders, staging for us our own relation to the picture as something we speak of and to at the same time we see it and find ourselves shown by it. As we "face" this image, in other words, we face our own interpolation as seeing/speaking subjects in face-to-face communication. This picture wants to address us, to be addressed, and to differentiate sensory modes of address. The unmarked ribbon of the oral medium is contrasted to the punctuated, subdivided channel of the visual, perhaps to suggest a qualitative difference between the scopic and vocative, the pulsations and nervous glances of the optical process as contrasted with the fluidity of the smooth talker.

In the following chapters, as promised, I will look at a variety of metapictures of media–painting, sculpture, photography, film, a hybrid medium I call "biocybernetics," and finally, vision itself–in moments of self-referentiality. It may be useful at this point, however, to spell out some conclusions that may be drawn from the preceding reflections on theories of media, and to make

[16]In a simpler, unornamented form, this figure is known as "Rubin's Vase," first presented by the Danish psychologist Edgar Rubin in 1921. See J. Richard Block, Seeing Double (New York: Routledge, 2002), 8.

explcit the assumptions about media that underly this series of case studies. The following "ten theses on media" provide a summary of these conclusions, followed by a more leisurely elaboration.

1. Media are a modern invention that has been around since the beginning.
2. The shock of new media is as old as the hills.
3. A medium is both a system and an environment.
4. There is always something outside a medium.
5. All media are mixed media.
6. Minds are media, and vice versa.
7. Images are the principal currency of media.
8. Images reside within media the way organisms reside in a habitat.
9. The media have no address and cannot be addressed.
10. We address and are addressed by images of media.

1. When I address the question of media, I do not confine myself exclusively or even primarily to the modern sphere of "mass" media or technical, mechanical, or electronic media. I prefer to see modern and traditional and so-called "primitive" media as dialectically and historically linked. Ancient and archaic media such as painting, sculpture, and architecture provide a framework for the understanding of television, cinema, and the internet, at the same time that our view of these early media (even our modern understanding of them as "media" in the first place) depends upon the invention of new means of communication, simulation, and representation. Ancient practices such as body painting, scarification, and gesture language, archaic cultural formations like totemism, fetishism, and idolatry survive (albeit in new forms) in contemporary media, and many of the anxieties surrounding traditional media involved questions of technical innovation, from the proliferation of "graven images" to the invention of writing.

2. Insofar as there is a history of media, it is not usefully bifurcated between modern and traditional forms. A dialectical account of media involves the recognition of uneven development, of the survival of traditional media in the modern world, and anticipations of new media in ancient practices. The "first" medium, architecture, for instance, as Walter Benjamin noted, has always been a mass medium in the sense that is consumed in a state of distraction.[17] Outdoor sculpture has addressed mass collectivities since time immemorial. Television may be a mass medium, but its point of address is generally in the private, domestic space, not a mass gathering.[18] And technology has always played a role in the production of works of art and the communication of messages over distance, from the invention of fire, to the drum, to tools and metallurgy, to the printing press. The notion of "new media" (the Internet, the computer, video, virtual reality) must be tempered then by the recognition that media are always new, and have always been sites of technical innovation and technophobia. Plato regarded writing as a dangerous innovation that would destroy human memory and the dialectical resources of face to face conversation. Baudelaire thought the invention of photography would destroy painting. The printing press has been blamed for revolution and youthful violence has been attributed to everything from video games to comic books to television. When it comes to media, then, the "shock of the new" is as old as the hills, and needs to be kept in perspective. There has always been a shock of the new with media; they have always been associated with divine invention, with double-edged gifts from the Gods, and with legendary creators and messengers (Theuth, the inventor of writing; Moses, the bringer of the phonetic alphabet from Sinai; Edison and the phonograph; Prometheus and the fire; and McLuhan, the Promethean inventor of media studies as such). That doesn't mean that these innovations are not really new, or make no difference; only that the difference they make cannot be settled by labelling them "new" and treating all of the past

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[17]Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," trans. Harry Zohn in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Shocken Books, 1969), 240

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[18]This is not, of course, a fixed condition of the television medium. In South African shantytowns, for instance, one television set may provide mass entertainment for several hundred peopl at the same time.

as "old.."19.

3. The notion of media is derivative of a more embracing concept of "mediation"[20] that goes well beyond the materials and technologies of art and mass media to include such arenas as political mediations (representative institutions such as legislatures and sovereigns), logical media (the middle term in a syllogism), economic mediations (money, commodities), biological "media" (as in a biotic "culture" or habitat), and spiritual mediations (the medium as the go-between at a seance; the idol as symbol of an invisible god). A medium, in short, is not just a set of materials, an apparatus, or a code that "mediates" between individuals. It is a complex social insitution that contains individuals within it, and is constituted by a history of practices, rituals, and habits, skills and techniques, as well as by a set of material objects and spaces (stages, studios, easel paintings, television sets, laptop computers). A medium is as much a guild, a profession, a craft, a conglomerate, corporate entity as it is a material means for communicating. This proposition leads us back, however, to the Pandora's Box opened by Raymond Williams' concept of "social practice," threatening to unleash a boundless concept of the media. Therefore we need to supplement this concept with another maxim, in this case, illustrated by the following cartoon by Alex Gregory [Fig. 6]:

4. There is always something outside a medium.[21] Every medium constructs a corresponding

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[19]An instructive example here is Lev Manovich's tendency to equate "New Media" with computerization (numeric coding, modularity, automation, variability, transcoding), and to treat photography and cinema as "traditional media," with "old media" identified as "manually assembled."(The Language of New Media 36) The line between old and new, however, is continuously re-drawn, and needs clearer specification.

[20]Here I agree with the basic position of Regis Debray, Media Manifestos, trans. Eric Rauth (New York: Verso, 1996).

[21]As Luhmann argues, this is simply a formal condition of any system, including media: "the mass media, as observing systems, are forced to distinguish between self-reference and other-reference. They cannot do otherwise . . . they must construct reality–another reality, different from their own." The Reality of Mass Media (Stanford U.P., 2000), 5.

zone of immediacy, of the unmediated and transparent, which stands in contrast to the medium itself. The window was, of course, a medium in its own right, dependent on the emergence of suitable technologies of glass rolling. Windows are perhaps one of the most important inventions in the history of visual culture, opening architecture to new relations of inner and outer, and re-mapping the human body by analogy into inner and outer spaces, so that the eyes are the windows of the soul, the ears are porches, and the mouth is adorned with pearly gates. From the grill-work of Islamic ornament, to the stained glass windows of medieval Europe, to the show windows and arcades of modern shopping and flanerie, to the Windows of the Microsoft user interface, the window is anything but a transparent, self-evident, or unmediated entity. But this cartoon also reminds us that the new medium is, paradoxically, often associated with immediacy and the unmediated, so that high definition, high speed computing makes it possible to simulate the older medium of the window perfectly. In this sense, new media do not re-map our senses so much as they *analyze* the operations of the senses as they are already constructed by nature and habit and previous media, and try to make them look just like the older media.22

5. All media are "mixed" media. There are no "pure" media (e.g., "pure" painting, sculpture, architecture, poetry, television) though the search for the essence of a medium, what Clement Greenberg saw as the task of the modernist avant-garde, is a utopian gesture that seems inseparable from the artistic deployment of any medium. The issue of media purity arises when a medium becomes self-referential, and renounces its function as a means of communication or representation. At this point, certain exemplary images of the medium become canonized (abstract painting, pure music) as embodying the inner essence of the medium as such.23

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[22]This is one of Kittler's major arguments in Gramaphone Film Typewriter, and it needs to be kept in mind when we too easily fall into the notion that media reconfigure or reprogram the senses.

[23]For more on the issue of purity in media, see my essay, "Ut Pictura Theoria: Abstract Painting and Language," in Picture Theory (Chicago, 1994).

6. Mental life (memory, imagination, fantasy, dreaming, perception, cognition) is mediated, and is embodied in the whole range of material media.[24] Thinking does not, as Wittgenstein put it, reside in some "queer medium" inside the head. We think out loud, at the keyboard, with tools and images and sounds. This process is thoroughly reciprocal. Saul Steinberg calls drawing "thinking on paper."[25] But thinking can also be a kind of drawing, a mental sketching, tracing, delineating, and (in my own case) aimless scribbling. We not only think about media, we think in them, which is why they give us the headache endemic to recursive thinking. There is no privileged metalanguage of media in semiotics, linguistics, or discourse analysis. Our relation to media is one of mutual and reciprocal constitution: we create them, and they create us. That is why so many creation myths describe God as an artificer working in various media to make an ensemble of creations (the architecture of the universe, the sculpted forms of animals and human beings).

7. If we wish to "address media" as such, we must recognize that images, not language, are their main currency. Speech and writing are of course crucial to articulating and deciphering the messages conveyed by media, but the medium itself is the embodied messenger, not the message.[26] McLuhan had it half right: the medium is "the massage," not the message. Speech and writing, moreover, are themselves simply two kinds of media, the one embodied in acoustic images, the other in graphic images.

8. Images reside *within* media the way organisms reside within a habitat. Like organisms, they can move from one media environment to another, so that a verbal image can be reborn in a painting or photograph, and a sculpted image can be rendered in cinema or virtual reality. This is

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[24]See Stephen Pinker on the concept of "mentalese" as a mixed medium in The Language Instinct (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995)..

[25]See my discussion of Steinberg in my essay, "Metapictures," in Picture Theory.
[26]See Debray, p. 5.

why one medium can seem to be "nested" inside another, and why a medium can seem to become visible in a canonical exemplar, as when a Rembrandt comes to stand for oil painting, or oil painting comes to stand for painting, or painting comes to stand for fine art. It is also why the notion of a "life of images" is so inevitable. Images need a place to live, and that is what a medium provides. McLuhan argued, famously, that "the content of a medium is always another medium." Where he went wrong was in assuming that the "other" medium has to be an *earlier* medium (novels and plays as the content of film; film as the content of video). The fact is that a newer, and even a non-existent medium may be "nested" inside of an older medium, most notably in those science fiction films that predict technical breakthroughs in imaging and communication, in virtual reality environments, teleportation devices, or brain implants that have yet to be invented. New media inventions invariably produce a set of hypothetical futures, both utopian and dystopian, as Plato saw when he predicted that writing would destroy human memory.

9. The notion of "addressing media" (all of them, as a general field) is a thoroughly mythical and paradoxical concept. The media have no address and cannot be addressed. Like the god of monotheism, like the "Matrix" of modern sci-fi, the media are everywhere and nowhere, singular and plural. They are that "in which we live and move and have our being." They are not located in a particular place or thing, but are themselves the space in which messages and representations thrive and circulate. Asking for the address of a medium is like asking for the address of the postal system. There may be specific post offices, but the medium known as the postal service does not have an address. It contains all addresses with itself; it is what makes addresses possible.[27]

10. Therefore, we cannot "address media" or be addressed by media as such. We address and are addressed by *images* of media, stereotypes of specific mediascapes, or personifying figures

[27]I believe Wolfgang Schaffner made this observation at the Cologne Symposium, "Addressing Media."

(media stars, moguls, gurus, spokespeople). When we speak of being "hailed" or "interpellated" by media, we are projecting a personification of the media, addressing it as a speaker for whom we are the addressee. The "address of media" takes two distinct forms, one figural, the other spatial: 1) the "address" as that of a speaking subject to an addressee, in which case the medium is given a face and body, represented in an avatar (as when the Matrix speaks through its "Agents" and the hackers respond, or when McLuhan or Baudrillard utters gnomic statements that speak "for" as well as "about" media, as if the media expert were a "medium" in his own right); or 2) the "address" as a location, a place, space, or site of enunciation, in which case the important thing is *where* the address is "coming from," as we say.

Given that media address us with and as images of spaces or bodies, landscapes or figures, they produce in us all the ambivalence we associate with images. They are the invisible Matrix or the hyper-visible spectacle, the hidden god, or his incarnate living Word. They are mere instruments of our will, increasingly perfect means of communicative action, or out-of-control machines that are leading us to slavery and extinction. I conclude, therefore, that a reasonable place to start "addressing media" is by addressing images of media, the forms that they bring to life, and that bring them to light. To illustrate this point, I want to end with a meditation on a scene from David Cronenberg's horror classic, Videodrome, in which a trio of "media avatars" are brought together in the same space, and the whole distinction between the medium as body and as space is deconstructed.

Max Wren (played by James Woods) is the first avatar [Fig. 9], a television producer who has been searching for a new "tough" form of pornography to raise the ratings on his struggling Toronto channel. He has been given a video cassette of a lecture by a media expert, Dr. Brian O'Blivion [Fig. 7] (a clear reference to Marshall McLuhan) who we have already met in this film as an enigmatic, oracular figure who declines all invitations to appear in person on live television, insisting that he "only appears on television *on television*," in the form of pre-recorded

videotapes. The third avatar is a gorgeous television personality named Nicki Brand [Fig. 8] who has been having an affair with Max Wren. Max has been having strange hallucinatory experiences, and is hoping that Dr. Oblivion will be able to explain what is going on.

As the tape begins to play, Brian O'Blivion recites what we know as his familiar McLuhanesque mantra about the new age of the video medium:

> The battle for the mind of North America will be fought in the video arena. The Videodrome. The television screen is the retina of the mind's eye. Therefore, whatever is seen on television emerges as raw experience. Therefore, television is reality, and reality is less than television.

Max, who has heard this all before, and is watching in a state of distraction, scratching himself and fidgeting, snorts disdainfully as if to say, "oh, sure." At this point, the voice of Dr. O'Blivion then changes drastically, and begins to address Max directly, as if in real time, no longer an archived recording:

> Max! I'm so glad you came to me. I've been through it all myself you see. Your reality is already half video hallucination. If you're not careful, it will become all hallucination.

At this point, Brian O'Blivion has Max's total attention, and continues thus:

> I had a brain tumor. I thought the visions caused the brain tumor, and not the reverse. But when they removed the tumor, it was called Videodrome.

As O'Blivion tells his story, we see the figure of a hooded executioner in a chain-mail tunic entering the room behind him. As O'Blivion continues, the hooded figure straps his arms to the chair and takes out a length of rope. Just as O'Blivion reaches the end of his story, revealing that he was "Videodrome's first victim," the executioner strangles him in mid-sentence. Max leaps from his chair and demands: "But who's behind it? What do they want?" The executioner removes the hood, and reveals herself to be Max's lover, Nicki Brand, who says "I want you,

Max," and proceeds to insist in tones that are alternately commanding and pleading–"Come to Nicki. Come to me now. Don't make me wait"–as her lips grow to fill the entire picture tube, which bulges out from the television set, while the set itself comes alive, panting and purring with desire, veins dilating under its plastic skin. The scene ends as Max obeys her demands, inserting his head into the mouth of Nicki Brand.[Fig. 10]

The three media avatars in this scene personify the three crucial components of all media systems–the sender or "producer" of messages, the code that makes it possible to understand messages, and the receiver or "consumer" who takes in the message. But these three components are immediately scrambled in the staging of this scene: Max, the producer, is put in the role of spectator; Dr. Brian O'Blivion, the master of the code, the media theorist who holds the key to all messages whatsoever, is portrayed as the "first victim" of the medium; and while Nicki Brand plays the role of cannibalistic receiver-consumer, prepared to devour the producer himself, she has also become the avatar of the medium itself, as her mouth merges with the screen, and the body of the television set merges with her physical, sexually excited body. All the supposedly stable components of the medium, sender, receiver, code, and embodied message, are re-wired in this brilliant scene to make clear the radical instability of the very concept of the medium. The producer is consumed; the embodied image that should be the consumed object of visual pleasure turns out to be the consumer; and the media theorist, the oracle of the code who should stand outside the media in Olympian serenity, is its first victim.

We can read this, of course, as an allegory of the death of McLuhan himself, the great avatar of media theory brought down by the curse of his own media celebrity. As McLuhan became a bigger media star, appearing on the Dick Cavett Show, Laugh-In, Annie Hall, and consulting with American corporations about new product lines, his academic reputation hit the skids; he was quickly supplanted by a new media oracle in the early eighties, the rising star of the more

politically correct and safely posthumous Walter Benjamin.[28]

But there is a more fundamental lesson to be learned from this scene, and that is the presence of media theory in the midst of the media themselves. Of course these theories need to be greeted and transcoded with all the tools of semiotics, systems theory, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. But this cannot happen as long as we imagine that the media are somehow an "object" for scrutiny by the master-discourses of theory. Perhaps we need a new label for this pursuit, a "medium theory" that would acknowledge its middling, muddling location, in the midst of media.29 This would be the location of theory as an immanent vernacular, closely tied to practice while reflecting on it from within. It would ask the question of media, "Who's behind it? What do they want?" without expecting the answer to be as simple as "Rupert Murdoch, dummy!" or as indeterminate as a mystical notion of the mass media system as a massive, living totality, the paranoid scenario of the Matrix, or the autopoetic system-environment shuffle of Niklas Luhmann. The answer to "Who's behind it?" may also be "ourselves," and our obscure objects of desire, the fantasy of fatal pleasure promised by Nicki Brand. As for what the media want, that much is clear: they want you.

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[28]The fall of McLuhan and the rise of Benjamin is a story that remains to be told in the history of media studies. McLuhan's cheery "global village" optimism and his mystical visions of a group mind did not play well in the era of poststructuralist suspicion and a predominantly left-oriented media studies. My confidence in the importance of this story has been bolstered by conversations with Horst Bredekamp. See his article, "Der simulierte Benjamin. Mittelalterliche Bemerkungen zu seiner Aktualität", in: Andreas Berndt, Peter Kaiser, Angela Rosenberg and Diana Trinkner (ed.): Frankfurter Schule und Kunstgeschichte (Berlin: Reimer Verlag: 1992), p.116-140 (120) which argues that Benjamin's reproduction article was celebrated since the sixties as an antidotum against McLuhan, at least in Germany.

[29]See my essay by this title, Critical Inquiry (Winter 2004), pp ?