

DARK MEDIA

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ALONE AT LAST

It is said that the shortest horror story ever written is Frederic Brown's story "Knock," published in the December 1948 issue of *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. The story, in its entirety, is as follows:

The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door . . .

A variation on the story appeared few years later, in the July 1957 issue of the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. There Ron Smith published "The Horror Story Shorter by One Letter Than the Shortest Horror Story Ever Written":

The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a lock on the door . . .

While they differ only by a single letter, each story encapsulates within itself a very different kind of horror—the horror of an

This chapter has grown out of my "Dark Media" seminar, given at The New School. My thanks to those who have participated in it over the years. Portions of this chapter have previously appeared in other publications, including Alexander Galloway et al., *French Theory Today* (The Public School/Erudio Editions, 2010), *Die technologische Bedingung*, ed. Erich Hörl (Surkhamp Verlag, 2011), and *Conveyor Magazine* (issue no. 4, 2012).

unknown mediation that is about to happen, and the horror of the absence of mediation that has already happened. Who—or what—is it that could be knocking at the door? Who—or what—has put the lock on the door? How should one answer a knock from beyond, and where is the key to a lock that at once shuts one in and shuts some other entity out? Which is the greater horror, the something that wants to come in, or the impossibility of ever going out, that something unknown that is locked out, or that something all-too-familiar that is locked in?

However, what both stories have in common is that they present to us situations in which communication is impossible. This is one sense of the term excommunication—the impossibility of communication, that is nevertheless presented or “communicated” as such. In these stories, communication is impossible because we are dealing with the last man on Earth, one of those imaginary end-of-the-world scenarios so popular in the genres of horror and science fiction. When there is only one, communication serves no purpose; at best one speaks to imaginary others or, what amounts to the same thing, one speaks to a redoubled self. Only delusion, glossolalia, and madness can result. Just another day, this same room, the same chair, the same daylight or darkness, and the enigmatic door, suspended in ambiguity. Sooner or later, some sort of communication must take place—the knock must be answered, the lock must be removed. In fact, a life without communication seems unthinkable, if not unlivable. It is as if there is a communicational imperative that haunts every possibility of solitude, refusal, and silence; it is as if communication must have its say, even if it necessitates the dissolution of the subject it is meant to reaffirm and bolster.¹

It is for this reason that these two little stories are of interest. They encapsulate an impossibility of communication that is at the heart of the communication concept itself. But notice that this initial impossibility of communication—being the last man on Earth—immediately fails. In the first story, it turns out that either one is mistaken (one is not the last man on Earth, another

is knocking at the door) or that one is correct (one is the last man on Earth, yes, but there are other beings that await, perhaps impatiently, just outside the door).

Something similar takes place in the second story, except here the ambivalent promise of solitude is interrupted by a different sort of gesture. It is not the affirmative gesture of a knock that interrupts, but the more negative gesture of a lock that prevents passage. Here, as in the first story, either one has put the lock there themselves (but what is there to fear, since there is no one else outside?), or someone or something else has put the lock there, and without first asking permission.

The end result of both stories is the same. In both, the solitude implied by being the last man on Earth is immediately interrupted by the communicational imperative. But this is a communication that can never really take place, for how can one communicate with someone—or something—that is presumably beyond the pale of all human notions of communication? And how can communication take place when the only gesture of communication—a lock on the door—forbids it? In both instances the form of communication remains intact, though its content either exceeds it or withdraws from it. A communicational imperative is expressed, but one either confronts an otherness beyond all possible communication, or communication's possibility is enigmatically foreclosed and withdrawn.

In the preceding chapter, we saw how Alexander Galloway invoked excommunication across three different modes of mediation. Each mode shows how communication encounters its own impossibility. Tied as Hermes is to the idea of hermeneutics, excommunication comes to be understood as an always contentious and often confrontational testing of the limits of communication. Hermes is the messenger who is a deceiver, the wayward guide, the trusted courier whose own words involve entanglement. At the same time, the luminous communication of Iris presents a different window onto excommunication. Rather than the threat of excommunication into foreign lands,

Iris represents the reverse threat, that communication will cease entirely as the communicational structure collapses into itself, resulting in pure immediacy. Finally, there is a third mode, the swarming exemplified by the Furies. The Furies are a flat assemblage, and as such lapse into the absolute vacuity of a kind of non-communication.

By contrast, in the chapter following this one, McKenzie Wark proposes another approach to the excommunication concept. Rather than taking excommunication as the always-negotiating, always-critical in-between (where both signal and noise uneasily co-exist), Wark suggests that excommunication be thought of in relation to massively distributed forms of communication that exceed normative—and human—forms of communication. Either the nonhuman punctures normative human communication in an excommunicational rupture, or communication itself is so radically transformed and alien that to speak of communication at all makes little sense.

Proceeding from this, we can add another dimension to the notion of excommunication, and that is the way in which excommunication collapses the two extreme poles of mediation—that of pure immediacy and that of total opacity. It seems that there is always the communicational imperative, even if it is to respond by saying no, refusing, or ignoring the imperative. This is a more melancholic form of mediation, a mediation that seems to have already failed before the drama has even begun. In this sense, communication cannot be thought of apart from its own annulment, even though, in this possibility of annulment, one always seems to return to the knock or the lock on the door. We can thus propose another definition: *excommunication is a double movement in which the communicational imperative is expressed, and expressed as the impossibility of communication.* In excommunication, the very possibility of communication is annulled. Excommunication employs a logic of negation, a logic that dreams of an absolute negation, though the truth is that this negation is always shadowed by an enigmatic residue—the message that says “there will be no more messages.”

THE REALISM OF THE UNSEEN

In the sections that follow, this double movement of excommunication will be traced through cultural examples drawn mostly from the genre of supernatural horror, examples that are expressed through a variety of media, including literature, film, television, and the graphic novel. These examples will eventually take us into the shadowy corners of medieval mysticism, particularly that branch known as apophatic mysticism (from *apophanai*, “saying away,” or speaking by negations). The aim is to undertake a sort of experiment—to think about communication, media, and mediation less in terms of technical artifacts or technical processes, and more in terms of the capacity of media to at once mediate between two points, while at the same time negating this very same form of mediation. This means understanding media as not simply defined by on/off states or the obligation to stay connected, and not simply as technical conductors for a vitalistic, communicational flux and flow, but understanding media as embodying a basic paradox: mediation as those moments when one communicates with or connects to that which is, by definition, inaccessible. I will be calling this enigma—the mediation of that which cannot be mediated—*dark media*. Dark media are, in a way, the consequence or the effect of excommunication. And, if excommunication precedes or conditions every communication, we might likewise say that dark media precede or condition every mediation.

One example of dark media is given at the birth of cinema—which also coincides with the birth of the horror film. Georges Méliès, known to many for his innovative use of special effects in early cinema (and generally credited with the first horror film), gives us three interesting examples of mediation that combine a fascination with new technologies while also evoking a sense of the supernatural.

In the film *Long Distance Wireless Photography* (*Photographie électrique à distance*, 1908), a young bohemian inventor demonstrates to his benefactors his unique invention—a machine that

captures the living, animated image of a person on a screen. The invention itself is a hodge-podge of steampunk-like devices, including a mirror-like “camera,” a large cinematic screen, and an assembly of gears and turbine engines driving it all. At first, the machine faithfully captures still images, which then take on a life of their own on the screen. But something goes awry, as the benefactor and his wife sit to have their images “animated” on screen. The benefactor’s wife has her rather pudgy face magnified into contorted, grotesque expressions, while the benefactor himself is transformed on screen into a monstrous, clown-like monkey. A minor riot ensues, culminating in the overheating and destruction of the machine itself.

Another Méliès film, *The Mysterious Retort* (*L’Alchimiste Parafaragamus ou La cornue infernale*, 1906), depicts an aged alchemist who attempts to use magic from a grimoire to call up angels, demons, and other unnamed creatures. The lab itself features a large glass container set atop a brick alchemist’s stove. The glass container itself is centrally displayed like a screen, within which we see a sequence of figures (a mythical female figure bearing gold, a monstrous spider with a human head, and finally the Devil himself).

Finally, in the film *The Black Imp* (*Le diable noir*, 1905), a bourgeois lodger at a hotel is perplexed when furniture in his room suddenly disappears. Chairs vanish just as he is about to sit down; tables and wardrobes suddenly move as he is about to unpack. When he tries to put everything back in place, the furniture magically multiplies out of control. Eventually a demon-like figure becomes visible as the trickster behind it all; a chase ensues and eventually the entire room is destroyed, leaving only the laughing demon behind.

Like many of Méliès’s films, these films can be read as allegories of the “new” medium of cinema, a medium as magical as it is technological. Taken in sequence, these three films give us three views of media and mediation. In *Long Distance Wireless Photography*, mediation takes place via media, in the sense

that we understand “media” to be commensurate with technological devices and the machine apparatus. While Méliès has fun with the baroque complexity of the machine in the film, it also serves a kind of pedagogical function as to the inner workings of cinema itself, as we witness first the proper mediation from the thing itself to its (animate, living) representation, and then the accidental or unexpected mediation of the benefactor and his wife into grotesque monsters. But between the thing itself (the living body in a space) and the mediated image (animate on the screen), there is the medium of the machine, the apparatus, the device. In a sense *Long Distance Wireless Photography* is the encapsulation of media in the era of industrial capitalism, at once transparently mediating between the thing and its representation, while also providing some value added, either in terms of enhancement or synthesis.

But the next two films, while they still take up the issue of mediation, do something different. *The Mysterious Retort*, borrowing as it does from Renaissance alchemy and the Faust myth, analogizes modern industrial technology in terms of another “technology,” that of magic, alchemy, and the occult. Instead of cameras, turbine engines, and cinematic screens, we see a grimoire, magical potions, and an alchemical glass. Again, both the expected and unexpected happen—the alchemist does get his gold, but he also gets more than he bargained for, as the alchemical lab—like the technological lab in *Long Distance Wireless Photography*—is eventually consumed in smoke and fire. Importantly, the alchemist—like the inventor in *Long Distance Wireless Photography*—is rarely in control of the medium or of the process of mediation. In *The Mysterious Retort*, the Devil seems to be coordinating everything we see in the alchemical glass, while in *Long Distance Wireless Photography* it seems to be the machine itself that generates the surprising images of its own accord.

The third film, *The Black Imp*, effaces mediation altogether, at least in the traditional sense. There is no machine or device, no book of spells or alchemical lab—simply a devious and un-

seen demon arbitrarily causing things to appear and disappear, to magically move or suddenly multiply. There is also no screen or glass upon which or within which the products of mediation appear, separating their “virtual” reality from that of the real characters themselves. The demon and the vanishing/appearing furniture are just as much a part of a shared reality as is the unsuspecting hotel lodger. Indeed, in *The Black Imp*, Méliès only shows the demon to us the viewers at the beginning and the end of the film. Otherwise the demon is invisible to both the character and viewers—we as viewers do have the added advantage of knowing that the demon is invisibly present in the room, but we also are left to fill in the relations of causality that we subsequently witness, in effect speculatively inserting the demon—as a mediator—into the supernatural events of the vanishing table or multiplying chairs.

These, like many of Méliès’s films, appropriate the vernacular of supernatural horror (monsters, ghosts, spirits, demons, magic, and the occult), but they do so not without a good deal of humor. The apparatus always breaks down and consumes itself, the inventors or magicians always lose control, and in the end it is the demon that has the last laugh. Méliès’s films chart the enigma of media and mediation, an enigma at once technological and theological: how to make something present that is absent, how to make something alive that is dead, how to create something out of nothing. In spite of Méliès’s overt humor, there is always something that recedes into a shadowy, unspoken region: the machine that shows us more truth than we are prepared to see, the magic that calls up forces beyond human comprehension, or the everyday apprehension of an invisible nexus of causality, behind the veil of what can be seen and heard and felt. Méliès’s “horror” films are not only pedagogical moments of mediation, but they also point to the shadowy absence at the core of all mediation. In any given moment of mediation, there is always a minimal separation, a differential, a gap, lacuna, or fissure . . . a blind spot. This is both what conditions and what undermines mediation, but it is also the reason why the media

that fully succeed are also the media that fail. The most perfect mediation comes in *The Black Imp*, in the form of demonic possession; but for us as viewers to realize this, it must be remediated as a special-effects film, and we must be shown the demon, so that we can go back to viewing the scene “as if” the demon isn’t there. The fantastical element of Méliès’s films is to be able to see what media and mediation usually don’t make visible—this is why Méliès’s films are about film, and more broadly, about technological mediation. But it is, of course, only through the medium and its “special effects” that one can gain a glimpse of what is not mediated.

Perhaps this can serve as a description for the types of media and mediation we will be calling “dark media.” Dark media have, as their aim, the mediation of that which is unavailable or inaccessible to the senses, and thus that of which we are normally “in the dark” about. But beyond this, dark media have, as another aim, the investigation into the ways in which all mediation harbors within itself this blind spot, the minimal distance that persists in any instance of mediation, however successful or complete it may be. Dark media inhabit this twofold movement—seeing something in nothing (e.g., the animate images appearing on the screen or the alchemical glass), and finding nothing in each something (the paradoxical absence or presence of the “demon” behind each thing).

As a concept, dark media takes up concerns at once technological and theological. But this is not to say that dark media is simply “about” religion. Dark media is not to be found in the representation of religion in the media, where media act as a purely formal container for a separate religious content (be it faithfully rendered or not). In such instances, media serve as the image of religion. Dark media is also not to be found in the use of media by religious communities or within religious rituals, in spite of the ubiquity of multi-media in churches and the longstanding use of media to further religious ideology. Here media are the tools of religion. Lastly, dark media is not the latest avatar of religion-as-media, in which one would retrospectively

interpret premodern religion in terms of modern concepts of discourse, rhetoric, or mass communication. Dark media is neither the image, the tool, or the discourse of religion. Although it invites us to consider a premodern genealogy of media, one that would stretch back to medieval mysticism and beyond, dark media is not reducible to religion.

Instead, we can ask how dark media is “religious,” from *religo* “I bind”—a binding between the human and the divine, between the subject and God, between members of a religious community, a binding to the institutions and values of a religion, and ultimately the binding or un-binding within one’s self. All these bindings are ways of relating and mediating, not just in the secular domain (between one person and another, between believers and nonbelievers), but also in an exceptional type of binding—that between the human and the divine (even in those instances in which the human is divine, the divine “in” the human). Perhaps we can even understand this in a post-secular context, in which there is a *religo* specific to dark media: the relation between the human and the nonhuman, but a nonhuman that is not necessarily outside the human or separate from it. With dark media there is an “anti-humanism” at work, a form of mediation that ultimately does away with the terms of mediation itself.

These instances of dark media invite us to think about media and mediation as religious problems.² In his lectures on religion and mysticism, William James notes the strange status of “objects of belief” in mystical accounts, neither fully adhering to the Kantian framework of coherent intuitions given over to the understanding and reason, nor simply arbitrary statements of unreason. James suggests that this intuition—of something present and non-empirical—is not just of the order of mystical experience, but of everyday experience as well. James calls this “the reality of the unseen”:

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call “some-

thing there,” more deep and more general than any of the special and particular “senses” by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.³

In language that also serves as an apt description of media and mediation, James suggests that the Kantian framework holds in both directions—not only is our reason only as good as our sensory apparatus, but our sensory apparatus also sees what it is prepared to believe. “The truth is that in the metaphysical and religious sphere, articulate reasons are cogent for us only when our inarticulate feelings of reality have already been impressed in favor of the same conclusion.”⁴

The question is what role media and mediation play in this charged space between scientific reason and religious belief. This is the reason why the supernatural horror tradition is of interest, presenting us with extraordinary phenomena, to which we may respond with philosophical skepticism or religious acceptance. Méliès’s films present media as having this dual nature of skepticism and belief, ghosts and the machine, the engineer’s ratiocination and the mystic’s laughter.

COMMUNICATIONS HORROR

Historically speaking, our modern ideas of media are largely influenced by postwar cybernetics and information theory. In the well-known communications model put forth by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in the 1940s, a sender and receiver are connected by a channel, which serves as the conduit for an informational message.⁵ The channel is a medium, and as such it both connects and separates two points that are physically or geographically remote from each other. The channel presumes the distinction between sender and receiver, as well as providing a means for connecting them, just as the message presumes a relative autonomy with respect to the sender and the receiver. Even though there may be “noise” along the communications

channel, the aim of the mediation is to provide as seamless and as transparent a connection as possible, “as if” sender and receiver were physically co-present.

Shannon and Weaver were adamant that this was ostensibly an engineering concept; they even stress that the informational message has to be viewed as purely quantitative, a certain amount of data sent at point A and received at point B. Their research would go on to influence the modern concept of the information network as well. In the 1960s, communications engineer Paul Baran would expand the “Shannon diagram” to encompass multiple point-to-point communications.⁶ Most notably, Baran provided a way of understanding how the Shannon diagram could be scaled up to form a fully distributed network of computers, each sending and receiving messages within a system based on this basic relationship of sender-channel-receiver. Very quickly the idea was taken up by different groups for different applications, from Cold War era “first strike” scenarios to idealistic proclamations concerning the freedom of information sharing and virtual communities. Our twenty-first-century lingo of social networks, WiFi, and trans-media are in many ways extensions of these same concepts.

The technical detail of such research has not prevented the Shannon diagram from entering the broader cultural discourse surrounding information and communications technology, especially as computers ceased to be Moloch-like, military mainframes and entered the workplace and gradually the home. Shannon’s diagram has become part of the standard way in which we view media today—it is the common vernacular of media literacy, intuitive interfaces, and the constant urge to become early-adopters of the newest of media. It puts into a formal language what we take for granted—that a medium is some device X that connects two separate points A and B. It is modular, scalable, and applicable across a wide spectrum of everyday examples, from the most personal of computers to the most social of networks. Within the Shannon diagram, the media industries themselves discover a message as powerful as it is di-

rect—everything everywhere is always available and connected. What was previously inaccessible—due to the contingencies of space or time or corporeality—is rendered accessible via media and the process of mediation. This is the promissory rhetoric of new media, in whatever capacity it is used, and for whatever purposes it is deployed.

From a philosophical perspective, the Shannon diagram is important because it implies that *media* and *mediation* are the primary ways through which one lives in modern, technologized cultures. At the same time, however, these concepts of media and mediation have an extensive philosophical genealogy. Media and mediation are central to the Western philosophical tradition, whether it be in terms of the relation between self and world (the metaphysical monism found in presocratic thinkers like Parmenides, Anaxagoras, or Heraclitus), the relation of self to others (the ethical, human-centric turn of Socrates and his followers), or the relation of thought to an intelligible reality, whether or not that reality be apparent to the senses (the emphasis on language and rhetoric in Plato, the emphasis on logic in Aristotle).

The pioneers of modern cybernetics and information theory were engineers and not philosophers, but even so, their concepts also presume some minimum ground of mediation as the basis for any possible communication. In the Shannon diagram, a starting presupposition is the interplay of identity and difference—I am who I am in part because I am not you, my body does not occupy the same space as your body, and I am at point A while you are at point B. The individuation of “point A” is dependent on its separation from a “point B” with which it is communicating, and in fact the possibility of connecting points A and B relies on this notion of a prior separation—the conditions of connection relying on a prior state of disconnection. We might even say that the very possibility of communication lies in the presupposition of a prior discommunication. Connection is a way of formally articulating a prior (and perhaps, primordial) state of disconnection.

While the Shannon diagram ostensibly has, as its goal, the connection of points A and B, it is what happens between those two points that is of special interest. Thus, we can ask: What happens when media cease to mediate—at least in the conventional sense of the Shannon diagram? With media and mediation, everything happens in the middle; it is the locus where things go smoothly or fail to connect at all, the place where one not only finds information, but noise as well. Likewise, are there also instances in which media work “too well,” that is, instances in which media and mediation seem to operate beyond the pale of human capacity or comprehension. Another question presents itself: Might there be instances in which the former are also the latter, instances in which the “failure” of media are also an indication of the limits of our ideas of media and mediation?

We know that in nineteenth-century Europe there were many instances of “new” media devices being used in unorthodox ways, from the popularity of spirit photography, to phantasmagoria shows such as those found in the Parisian *Cabaret du Néant*, to the use of modern media in early examples of “ghost hunting” carried out by groups such as the Society for Psychical Research and the British Ghost Club. While this moment is unique, it also looks forward to similar uses of video and digital media today, just as it reaches back to a premodern understanding of mysticism, magic, and occultism. Given this, what should we make of the many contemporary examples of handheld cameras used to prove the existence of ghosts, or the use of digital audio to record the voices of the dead, or the use of photography and Photoshop to capture spirits or the aura of an individual? In our skepticism, we often dismiss such fringe uses of media as mere gimmicks; we are more likely to attribute to media the ability to produce novel aesthetic effects, generating a momentary “as if” experience that is, nevertheless, always framed by our secular, scientific understanding of such effects as effects. Arguably, we no longer believe that media can trick us, if this was ever the case (indeed, accounts of nineteenth-century spirit

photography and phantasmagoria suggest that we've always known, and always played along, "as if").

At the same time, we seem to take pleasure in imagining media behaving in unorthodox ways. We often sublimate such media trickery into entertainment, perhaps allowing ourselves a nostalgic, ironic longing for a belief in the supernatural that could, at the same time, be verified via the technicity of new media. Nowhere is this combined skepticism and fascination more apparent than in popular culture, and in particular the horror genre. From TV programs such as *Twilight Zone* and *Fringe*, to films such as *Poltergeist* and *Paranormal Activity*, we see representations of a range of media that attempt to make contact with the supernatural. In contemporary horror film, video tapes, digital cameras, mobile phones, and webcams are used in such ways that they provide a link to what American author H. P. Lovecraft once referred to as "cosmic outsidersness."

Indeed, a cursory glance at the horror genre today reveals a number of examples in which everyday objects—and in particular, media objects—become infused in some way with the supernatural or the paranormal. In these stories the innocuous and even banal ubiquity of media objects, from cell phones to webcams, enters a liminal space, where such objects suddenly reveal the ambivalent boundary separating the natural from the supernatural, the uncanny from the marvelous, the earthly from the divine. Furthermore, in our contemporary trans-media culture, the representations of such supernatural media themselves take place via one or more media forms—novels, films, TV, comics, video games, and so on. Thus what we are witnessing is not a single, master medium that represents all possible cases of the supernatural, but a variety of media that mediate or remediate other media: a novel about a cursed videotape, a film about haunted webcams, a videogame that uses a paranormal camera.

Consider the case of contemporary Japanese horror (also referred to as "J-horror"). Some stories portray media as normative technologies that behave in abnormal ways, serving to medi-

ate between the living and the dead, or between the natural and the supernatural. The best-selling novel *Ring* and the film based on the book use the videotape and the video image as the point of mediation between the natural and the supernatural. In the *Ring* film, there are scenes in which the object of the videotape is itself imbued with vitalistic and supernatural properties, contagiously passing from one person to another. But there is also a key scene in the film where a mysterious figure in the video crosses the threshold of the screen, actually emerging from the TV into the room in which the TV is being watched by a horrified viewer/character. In such moments, it is less the media object that is the source of horror, and more the fact of mediation itself that is horrific, a mediation that strangely seems to work all too well. Kiyoshi Kurosawa's atmospheric film *Pulse* takes this idea a step further, showing us webcams and chat rooms that are portals to the dead. The media themselves are quite quotidian, and even, by today's standards, out of date. A simple laptop anywhere will do. But it is the form of mediation itself—this time via webcams—that makes the mysterious contact with the supernatural possible.⁷ These motifs are also apparent in the video game franchise *Fatal Frame*, in which the player, moving about a haunted landscape searching for clues, must “kill” the menacing creatures there—by taking a photo of them with a special camera. The near opposite of *Pulse*, in which media passively mediate ghosts and the dead, the *Fatal Frame* games re-imagine media in terms of active “capture”—in which capturing and killing become identical. In these and other examples we see readily familiar media objects—videotapes, TVs, computers, cameras—which continue to function as media technologies, albeit at another level.

But not all horror films characterize media in this way. In many ways the first lesson of the horror genre is that the body itself—as living, dead, or possessed—is the medium of all media. Other examples of J-horror move beyond the use of technological devices, and show us the ways that the human body

can serve as a medium. This not only points back to the earlier, nineteenth-century sense of a spiritual “medium,” but it also dips back deeper into the cultural history of funeral rites and the preparation of the corpse. For instance, author Koji Suzuki’s sequel to *Ring*, entitled *Spiral*, shows us the corpse as a medium, with DNA and informational code eerily emerging from the organs of the body. Another of Kurosawa’s films—*Séance*—more directly plays with the double sense of medium, and the manga series *Kurosagi Corpse Delivery Service* combines the detective genre and gallows humor to tell the story of a group of college students at a Buddhist seminary, who make money on the side by performing exorcisms and capturing ghosts with a range of strategies, both high-tech and low-tech.

Yet another iteration in the J-horror story is one that understands space itself as a point of mediation. The “old dark house” motif is perhaps the most familiar motif of the horror genre, emerging as it does out of the gothic novel tradition, and forming a staple within horror film to this day. But what happens when the mediation of the supernatural occurs not via media devices, and not even via the body—but in and through physical space? Space and place themselves serve as points of mediation, and such haunting is also scalable, from the suffocating confines of a coffin, to the domestic space of houses or apartment buildings, to the dark cavernous spaces of the city’s underground. The film *The Grudge (Ju-on)* is a well-known example, borrowing as it does both from the gothic novel, as well as from Hokusai’s *manga* and the *yokai* folklore tradition. The tight spaces of a bedroom, a shower, even one’s own bed, all become occasions for a sudden dilation of physical space, revealing impossible beings suddenly present in incongruous spaces. The reverse also takes place, in which large spaces suddenly constrict and focus on particular spaces—an elevator, a corridor, a corner on the stairwell. The scope is expanded to an entire apartment building in *Dark Water*, and to an entire haunted city in the film *Marebito*.

J-horror is interesting because it pushes the idea of media and

mediation outward, from everyday media devices, to the body, to space and place. A last iteration occurs in which it is thought itself that is haunted, thought itself that is the point of mediation between the natural and supernatural. Junji Ito's metaphysical horror manga *Uzumaki* offers what is perhaps the strangest theory of media. A small seaside town becomes obsessed with the abstract geometrical shape of the spiral. Soon spirals are cropping up everywhere in eerie ways, from the strangely shaped grass on the hillside, to the noodles in a bowl of udon soup, to the patterns on traditional kimonos, and so on. The spiral craze causes one character—a potter—to begin to make grotesque pottery, with contorted spiral-like limbs. After another character commits suicide (by attempting to cut out the spiral-shaped cochlea in her head), her burned ashes at the funeral ascend into the sky, forming a gigantic black spiral of smoke. An abstract horror, a kind of black matheme, seems to arbitrarily haunt the town and its inhabitants—in a spectacular perversion of Plato, their ultimate obsession is to become spirals, which one character attempts by impossibly contorting his body, with all the studied discipline of an ascetic.

One can detect a final stage beyond even this, in which it is, finally, being itself that mediates the supernatural, and being itself that is also the source of horror. The low-budget film *Long Dream* follows this motif, but on the level of temporal rather than spatial transformation. Based on a manga story by Junji Ito, the main character, Tetsuro Murkoda, can't stop dreaming—he is an example of an inverted insomniac. As he loses all sense of (waking) time, his body begins to change and adapt in grotesque ways. He soon loses his eyelids, the his eyes themselves become hypersensitized, able only to see an unnamable “beyond” that bears no relation to what can normally be seen. The gradual disintegration of body and mind is elaborated in the manga version of the story. Murkoda's skin becomes scaly and crystalline, he loses his hair and his head elongates, his senses withdraw, his nose, ears, and even eyes gradually receding into his unhuman body. At-

tended by physicians in a hospital, Murkoda's dreams get longer and longer, though the actual time he sleeps is the same. His "long dreams" eventually span years, decades, centuries, and beyond, into an unhuman, timeless time. Near the end of the story, a grotesque, alien-looking Murkoda mumbles, "What happens to the man who wakes from an endless dream?" In the final scenes, Murkoda's body disintegrates completely, leaving behind only strange, crumbling, unidentifiable crystals lying in his hospital bed. Paradoxically, mediation reaches its endpoint once it becomes absolute, once there is no longer anything to mediate except the pure form of mediation itself.

In all these examples, we see the communications diagram at work, though in anomalous ways. Media shift from the connection of two points in a single reality, to an enigmatic and ambivalent connection with an unnamed "beyond." We begin with "media" in the colloquial sense of technological devices, and we end with the mediation as equivalent to thought and being itself. J-horror takes up the communications diagram and stretches it to its extreme point, provoking us to wonder where mediation ends and something outside mediation begins.

ON WHAT CANNOT BE SAID

If examples such as these are any barometer for our post-secular culture, it appears that the supernatural has returned—not in the guise of answered prayers or divinely sanctioned holy wars, but via the panoply of media objects that satellite us and that are embedded into the very material fabric of our bodies, cities, and lives. No longer is there a great beyond, be it in the topographies of the afterlife or the mythical journey of reincarnation. Instead, the supernatural is embedded in the world here and now, manifest via a paradoxical immediacy that constantly withdraws and cloaks itself. The supernatural seems to be as immanent as our media are—distributed, ubiquitous, in the "cloud" and enveloping us in its invisible, ethereal bath of information and noise.

The function of media is no longer to render the inaccessible accessible, or to connect what is separated. Instead, media reveal inaccessibility in and of itself—they make accessible the inaccessible—in its inaccessibility. To reveal the manifestation of that which does not exist—this is not simply a matter of data visualization or the construction of augmented realities. *This is a religious impulse.*

John Durham Peters, writing about the role of language and communication in the work of Augustine, puts it succinctly:

For Augustine, the appearance of God to humans is essentially a media problem. For how could God, he asks, “appear” to the patriarchs and prophets when God has no appearance or physical form? If God appeared to appear, he was resorting to deception, donning a disguise to meet the crudity of human sense organs. Theophany is either deception (of humans) or debasement (of God).⁸

This dilemma is laid out in Augustine’s *Confessions*, where the possibility of communication with the divine is characterized through an analogy between communication and “light”:

Into myself I went, and with the eyes of my soul (such as it was) I discovered over the same eye of my soul, over my mind, the unchangeable light (*lucem incommutabilem*) of the Lord: not this vulgar light, which all flesh may look upon, nor yet another greater of the same kind; as if this should shine much and much more clearly, and with its greatness take up all the room.⁹

Augustine analogizes a light that is superlative to all empirical or optical light, in order to describe a type of communication beyond all human or earthly communication. The pinnacle of communication surpasses the senses, language, and even the human activity of meaning-making; in effect, Augustine evokes a kind of mediation that, in its very description, is always sur-

passing itself into the ever-higher realms of divine communion and union.

But this is also a problem, for the divine by definition cannot appear, cannot be mediated, and cannot communicate. Even when the usual forms of theological mediation are employed—the notion of Christ, the God-man, as mediator; the role of various “spiritual creatures,” including angels, to deliver divine messages—even in these instances there is still the duplicitous combination of something mediated that itself cannot be mediated. While Augustine arbitrates this problem by parsing God’s mediation into two forms (the divine and its mediation are two different things), the problem of the mediation of the supernatural persists.

At the heart of this is the problem of presence, lyrically evoked by Augustine in a well-known passage in which he asks, “Whom do I love when I love God?”¹⁰ Augustine’s first reply is to separate the love of God with the love of earthly or worldly things: “What now do I love, whenas I love thee? Not the beauty of any corporeal thing . . . not the brightness of the light which we do behold . . . not the pleasant melodies of songs of all kinds . . .” But just as he separates them, Augustine acknowledges that the divine and earthly cannot be separated in this way, noting “and yet I love a certain kind of light, and a kind of voice, and a kind of fragrance, and a kind of meat, and a kind of embracement, whenas I love my God; who is both the light and the voice, and the sweet smell, and the meat . . .” In a remarkable rhetorical turn, Augustine seems to imply that the divine is not separate from the earthly, because the divine is “in” the earthly—the divine seems to be both that which is fundamentally separate from the earthly, but which is also identical with it.

This is where the duplicity that Peters points to appears. When Augustine asks “Whom do I love when I love God?,” the problem is the opacity of the divine and the necessity of discovering some form of mediation.¹¹ In this latter view, where the divine seems to be identical with the world, mediation is rendered unnecessary,

since God “is” the world and vice versa. But Augustine is in no way asserting a position of pantheism, for it is clear that the transcendence—the absolute separation and opacity—of the divine is never under question. Augustine arbitrates this through theological forms of mediation between the divine and earthly, supernatural and natural (the creation of the creatures by a Creator; the manifestation of the divine via earthly signs and symbols; the miraculous intervention of the supernatural into the natural). As he notes, divine mediation is the moment when “that light shineth into my soul, which no place can receive; that voice soundeth, which time deprives me not of; and that fragrant smell, which no wind scatters; and that meat tasteth, which eating devours not . . .” Such mediation is unidirectional, a one-way communication that only becomes a two-way communication in the theologically exceptional moments of miracle, mercy, or grace.

Augustine’s own reflections on divine mediation map out a problem central to the mediation concept itself—how to connect without also separating, insofar as connection implies a separation (and, in the case of divine mediation, an absolute separation). The link between a premodern and modern concept of mediation is summarized by Peters: “Augustine’s account of divine communication with mortals foreshadows modern communications and the problem of how to conjure the credible presence of an absent body for an audience remote in time, space, or degree.”¹²

In the horror genre, the mediation of the supernatural is always problematic, either because what is being mediated (e.g., ghosts, demons, and disembodied spirits) is not accessible by the senses, or because it is, in its very existence, a contradiction (e.g., living corpses, words made flesh, hybrids and monsters). In the J-horror examples above, something appears that has no appearance, or something appears that shouldn’t appear. Something defies the litmus test of the empirical, or something defies natural law and the production of knowledge. In each case, something is given that is also withdrawn, a presence asserting

itself only through absence, a *disbelief* that has two sides to it—I can't see what I believe, or I can't believe what I'm seeing.

It is this push-pull of mediation that Augustine identifies in the citations above. While Augustine attempts an affirmative reply (the divine can be mediated, though the divine itself is not mediation), the early-sixth-century mystic Dionysius the Areopagite opts for another approach, distinct from, yet in conversation with, that of Augustine. For Dionysius, the communication with, or mediation of, the divine can only take place through a practice of negation. If the human capacity of the senses, language, and ultimately thought are limited, and if the human is attempting this communication with that which is, by definition, beyond the human, then it would seem that any such communication or mediation would have to confront, or even embrace, the paradox of mediation—mediating that which cannot be mediated. No superlative analogies will do, nor will any attempts to cloak the divine by inserting intermediaries such as angels, demons, or theophanies. The problem remains the same—how to mediate that which cannot be mediated—but the approach is different. In contrast to Augustine's analogy of light, Dionysius offers the analogy of darkness; in contrast to Augustine's affirmationism of divine mediation, Dionysius explores a negative form of mediation. The contrast is brought out in Dionysius's influential text *The Mystical Theology*:

The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.¹³

It is this negative method of stripping away and emptying that characterizes Dionysius's text and the negative theology tradition it inaugurates. Whereas with Augustine the self and God are mediated via an attenuated union of creatures and Creator (God as absolutely apart from the world, and yet identical with

it), with Dionysius the mediation of self and God are mediated via a process of abandonment and self-abnegation. In a complex phrase, the author repeatedly asks how we can know the “ray of divine darkness”: “By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine darkness (ΘΕΙΟΥ ΣΚΟΤΟΥΣ ΑΚΤΙΝΑ) which is above everything that is.”¹⁴ In this enigmatic evocation of divine darkness, Dionysius is elaborating a logic of negation that is neither simply privative nor oppositional, but instead a kind of superlative negation, a “negation beyond every assertion.” In this use of the analogy of darkness, Dionysius attempts to mediate that which cannot be mediated, while also preserving the opacity of the divine, an opacity that is characterized in negative terms (“dark,” “shadow,” “abyss”).

As with Augustine, for Dionysius the task of mediating that which cannot be mediated requires a method. In the *Mystical Theology*, Dionysius outlines two paths of mystical knowledge: an affirmative path, or the *via affirmativa*, and a negative path, or the *via negativa*. In the former, one arrives at knowledge of the divine through successive affirmations, as when one describes individual human acts as “good” but the divine as “the Good” or “Goodness” in itself. The latter approach arrives at the divine through successive negations, as when one describes the divine as that which is not created or not existing in time. The *via affirmativa* implies what can be positively said of the divine, or a “kataphatic” approach (*kata-phanai*, literally to “come down” or “descend” in order to speak), while the *via negativa* implies what can be negatively said of the divine, or an “apophatic” approach (*apo-phanai*, “to say no,” or to speak by not speaking). For Dionysius it is this second path, the *via negativa*, that yields the most profound results, based on the author’s metaphysical commitment to a concept of the divine that is fundamentally inaccessible. As he notes, “[s]ince the Divine is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being.”¹⁵

But even this approach must necessarily fail (and Dionysius seems readily aware of this), for the logical extension of the *via negativa's* language is the failure of language and logic itself. While Dionysius—like Augustine—never doubts the transcendence of the divine and its super-essential character, there is a sense in which the *via negativa* is ultimately a kind of performative failure, a failure which ends up serving as this mediation of that which cannot be mediated. Denys Turner puts it in the following way:

It is of the greatest consequence to see that negative language about God is no more apophatic in itself than is affirmative language. The apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language. It is not done, and cannot be done, by means of negative utterances alone which are no less bits of ordinarily intelligible human discourse than are affirmations. Our negations, therefore, fail of God as much as do our affirmations.¹⁶

Turner recaps his points within the terminology of analytical philosophy: “there is a very great difference between the strategy of *negative propositions* and the strategy of *negating the propositional*,” the latter of which describes the ultimate point toward which Dionysian mysticism tends.¹⁷ Through a successive stripping away of attributes, through the negation of affirmation, Dionysius puts forth a concept of darkness that is, first, an anti-empirical one (in that one moves away from what is seen and sensed), and then an anti-idealist one (in that one moves away from what can be thought and put into language), before arriving at a stage the author can only describe as “unknowing.” For Dionysius, the divine can only be discussed through a language pushed to its limit—the divine as a “brilliant shadow,” the “divine darkness” or the “darkness beyond every light.”

Dionysius is, of course, talking about the way in which the divine is enigmatically inaccessible to us as human beings. But he is also talking about mediation, and its possibility or impossibil-

ity. This emphasis on the impossibility of mediation, or the negation of mediation itself, brings us back to the tradition of supernatural horror. We can suggest the following distinction: in the everyday context, mediation is epistemological, while in supernatural horror, mediation is ontological. In the former case, one assumes a certain practical knowledge of how media work and how they can be used. The questions one asks are questions of knowledge that presume a basic ontological framework: What's your number? Who's calling me? Can you hear me now? And so on. By contrast, in supernatural horror one still assumes a certain working knowledge of media, but something goes wrong—fundamentally wrong. Ironically, the problem is not that the media in question are broken; if anything, the problem is that media are working *too well*—we get more than we bargained for, as specters turn up in our photos, the dead appear on our computer screens, and that videotape, well, you probably shouldn't watch that. Here one cannot presume a common ontological ground, as the mediation is really a mediation between different realities, or between different ontological domains—the natural and the supernatural, the normal and the paranormal, life and the afterlife.

While we may use media today in an everyday context, it seems that we also like to imagine media having the exceptional ability to mediate between a world here-and-now and a world that remains mysteriously inaccessible to us without the use of media. In the horror genre, what we witness is an evocative concept of the supernatural as itself mediated, often through objects that are at once overly familiar and highly technical, objects that are everyday and opaque at the same time. In the broadest sense, the mediation of the supernatural prompts us to wonder whether the supernatural is by definition always mediated.

CINEMA AND DEMONOLOGY

In this triangulation of media, horror, and religion we see a concept of the supernatural deployed that is at once opaque

and transparent—the supernatural appears to inhabit the domain of pure affective experience beyond the reach of words or images, and yet, in the examples we’ve pointed to, the supernatural is only ever apparent via some form of mediation. This presents us with a dilemma: If the supernatural exists, to what extent can it be experienced? Given that the supernatural is, in itself, beyond the senses, what then would be an “experience” of the supernatural? If the supernatural cannot be experienced, how are we to distinguish it from mere subjectivism—an illusion, a dream, a drug, a bit of visual trickery . . . ? The dual specters of realism and idealism haunt media and mediation—either “it’s all in your head,” or everything is reducible to the engineered and technical manipulation of sensory and cognitive affordance.

The literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov has a name for this dilemma, and he calls it the “fantastic.” Drawing on the literature of supernatural horror, he provides a definition of the term: “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.”¹⁸ Todorov goes on to elaborate on the logic of the fantastic:

In a world which is indeed our world . . . there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. . . . The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty.”¹⁹

Instances of the fantastic abound in the “weird fiction” tradition, most often associated with authors such as H. P. Lovecraft, and pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales*. But the fantastic inhabits not just a single moment, but a certain duration, in which

it is carefully parceled out in failed attempts at description, in confessional language, or in quasi-scientific arguments between characters. In Lovecraft's 1936 novel *At the Mountains of Madness*, an expedition to the Antarctic reveals the massive, black ruins of a "cyclopean city," whose very existence questions all human knowledge. In the bowels of these ruins, the characters discover weird creatures that defy category and even description—the "Shoggoths." At once formless and geometric, oozing with malefic intent and swarming with temporary eyes, these creatures confront the explorers with their radically unhuman character, rendering them catatonic: "The shock of recognizing that monstrous slime and headlessness had frozen us into mute, motionless statues. . . . It seemed aeons that we stood there, but actually it could not have been more than ten or fifteen seconds."²⁰

In this frozen moment, the testimony of the characters' senses are absurd, language falters, and thought becomes equal to silence: "I might as well be frank—even if I cannot bear to be quite direct—in stating what we saw. . . . The words reaching the reader can never even suggest the awfulness of the sight itself."²¹ In a last, desperate attempt to comprehend their situation, Lovecraft's characters resort to what is essentially a negative language, the language of negative theology:

We had expected, upon looking back, to see a terrible and incredibly moving entity if the mists were thin enough; but of that entity we had formed a clear idea. What we did see—for the mists were indeed all too malignly thinned—was something altogether different, and immeasurably more hideous and detestable. It was the utter, objective embodiment of the fantastic novelist's "thing that should not be."²²

This is the moment of the fantastic, a moment that tenuously tips to one side (it must be accepted and yet it cannot not be accepted), and tenuously tips to the other (there must be some explanation, scientific or otherwise). In this apophatic silence of

language and thought, what results is an all-pervasive stillness of everything except the furtive, lurking revelation of a limit. Lovecraft's stories are replete with such revelations, expressed through the kind of purple prose that has become a hallmark of the weird tale. At the same time, these revelations point to a limit that Lovecraft's characters can only negatively articulate: the beyond, the unnamable, the nameless thing, and so on.

For Todorov, the fantastic presents a fork in the road—either one accepts what appears to be exceptional, but then everything must be rethought (what Todorov calls “the marvelous”), or one discovers a rational explanation for what only seemed exceptional, and both natural law and social norm remain intact (“the uncanny”).²³ However, Todorov says very little about what role media have in this fork in the road, and he says nothing about the ways that media themselves may serve as the conduit to either the marvelous or the uncanny.²⁴ In short, the *how* of the fantastic is left an open question. That the supernatural is mediated, and that it is by definition mediated—this is taken for granted in Todorov's analysis. At the same time, in our examples thus far, a character experiencing the fantastic nearly always comes up against a loss of words—in short, *the fantastic in supernatural horror has the structure of apophatic mysticism*. The characters in the stories of authors like Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, or Izumi Kyoka experience the fantastic in terms of the *via negativa*; like Dionysius the Areopagite, they can only resort to either negative terms or to passages filled with aporia and self-annulling contradictions. All that remains is this bare activity of mediation, a mediation that almost immediately negates itself.

This turning of mediation upon itself is not only voiced by early mystical thinkers such as Dionysius, but it is further expanded in later mystics working in the apophatic tradition. The sermons of Meister Eckhart provide an example. Eckhart frequently uses the Middle High German term *niht* and its cognates to describe the “nothing” or “nothingness” of both finite creatures and infinite divinity. In one sermon, Eckhart derives two

basic senses of the term *niht* from a passage in Acts 9:8 (“Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes saw nothing”).²⁵ The first is the “nothing” of finite creatures (creatures are “nothing” in the sense that they are created in time and in the world as flux and flow, as coming-to-be and passing-away; but also, creatures are “nothing” in that they are founded on a primordial, pre-existent, non-being). This nothing is, as we’ve noted, the moral-theological notion; nothing in this sense is both privative and subtractive. A second sense has to do with the *niht* specific to the divine (the “nothing” of God as that which is outside of time, space, and modality; God is “nothing” in so far as God is not a being among other beings). But Eckhart expands even this second sense of the term *niht* beyond “God” to what he terms the “Godhead” (*Gotttheit*), in which the divine is purely apophatic, the divine to which no attributes, properties, or even names can be given (what Eckhart enigmatically calls “the One”). The Godhead bears no relation to the categories of Being or Non-Being. In one sermon Eckhart asserts, “God is all, and is one.” Elsewhere he notes that the Godhead is “a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image; rather, He is a sheer pure limpid One, detached from all duality.”²⁶ Nothing in this second sense is at once superlative and nullifying.

On the one hand, there is the nothing of creaturely life, the non-substantiality of what is ephemeral and temporary, the nothing of the all-too-human in its creaturely finitude. On the other hand, there is the nothing of the Godhead, the nothing that superlatively encompasses everything, including the very dichotomy of something and nothing, being and non-being.²⁷ The problem of divine mediation leads to a dilemma, a fork in the road between two types of mediation: either that there is no relation to the divine, or that there is a pure relation to the divine . . . as “nothing.” For Eckhart this is ultimately a false dilemma, in that his aim is often to show that the *niht* of the divine is inseparable from the mystical subject, the divine immanently “in” the subject—but one must abrogate some of the

most basic principles of philosophical and theological thinking to reach this point. For Eckhart, divine mediation has little to do with a negative that must be overcome by a positive; instead, divine mediation is the collapse of negative and positive, privative and superlative, into the strange negative immanence, an immanence of “nothing” that Eckhart terms the Godhead.²⁸

Eckhart does point out that divine mediation is different from the everyday mediation of human beings with other human beings or with their surroundings; but he also borrows the *form* of this human mediation to describe divine mediation. Eckhart at once implies the necessity of mediation, at the same time that mediation is ultimately that which is negated, as the fulfillment of the mediation of the divine—a fulfillment that leads to “the desert of the Godhead.” Caught between the necessity of mediation and its impossibility, the divine appears as that which is immanent to all that exists, but which is also in itself “nothing” or not-existent.²⁹ In short, Eckhart outlines the two forms of mediation central to dark media, understood as the mediation of that which cannot be mediated:

- A mediation of a relation to the divine, but the divine understood negatively, as “nothing.” Here mediation itself is positive, but that which is mediated is negative; positive relation and negative divinity. This generally describes a type of mediation we can call *immediation* (also immediacy, immediate).
- A mediation of no relation to the divine at all (except in the positing of this opacity). Here what is mediated is positive, but mediation itself is negative; negative relation, positive divinity. This generally describes a type of mediation we can call *antimmediation* (also antimmediacy, antimmediate).

While “immediation” and “antimmediation” have a premodern genealogy in early modern mystical discourse (Dionysius, Eckhart), they reach a certain pitch in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the introduction of “new media” such as pho-

tography and film co-exist uneasily with a range of spiritual practices, from Spiritualist séances to black magic and the Black Mass. Often, one finds that the two overlap in complex ways, from spirit photography of séances, to belief in the animistic, magical properties of early cinema. What is more, the ambivalent religious impulses behind such instances of dark media are often brought into the foreground in the space between religion and horror, and the horror genre provides one key site in which we can witness an early theorization of media and mediation as inseparable from the concerns of negative theology, apophaticism, and “dark mysticism,” a trend that has been extended into our own cultural moment.

A case in point is the “breaking-through” motif in horror film. While many horror films point outside themselves to the real world of the audience, some films allegorize this through a scene in which some menacing, unknown force crosses the media threshold of the screen *in* the film, only to suggest a similar transgression of the screen *of* the very film the viewer is watching.

The 1982 classic *Poltergeist* (directed by Tobe Hooper, co-written and co-produced by Steven Spielberg) features a newly built suburban home that has been constructed on top of a cemetery. Hauntings abound throughout the house, and finally the family must call in a high-tech team of ghost hunters to investigate the problem. Armed with video cameras, microphones, and CCTV monitors, the team stakes out the house, waiting for the first evidence of the supernatural. The key scene occurs late at night, as a glowing, ethereal specter floats down the staircase in the living room. Importantly, the first witness to this event is not the human characters, but the camera itself, which turns of its own accord toward the staircase.³⁰ The camera rolls and the audio begins recording. Eventually the characters in the film do witness the ghost (evidenced by the facial expressions of the characters, in what is by now the trademark effect of the Spielbergian sublime), but just as quickly the ghosts pass by. Immediately, with-

out a word to each other, the ghost hunters and the family go to the video deck to play back the scene they have just recorded. We again see their faces, this time crowded around the glow of video monitors, as they re-watch the scene they have just experienced, with the same expression of awe and wonder.

Poltergeist is here performing the same pedagogy that we found in the films of Méliès—this is how it works, this is how one watches, and this is how one reacts. It also serves as a comment on supernatural horror (e.g., this is how one reacts to the experience of supernatural horror, and more importantly, to the viewing of supernatural horror). The media devices (camera, audio, an EEG-type readout) serve as the eyes, ears, and nervous system of the human characters in the house. In one instance, the scene even goes so far as to simultaneously show us the actual ghost descending the staircase, and the correlating image on the video monitor (all of which is, of course, viewed by us on a movie screen, on a TV, or, nowadays, on a computer).³¹ Media here serve both to verify and to reify the supernatural, whether or not it has been actually experienced. The panoply of devices ready to capture suggests an immediation, and, while the capture is successful, the ghosts appear to lie in a realm so far beyond human comprehension that this immediation can only be an anti-mediation. Even after recording, viewing, and re-viewing, one has learned nothing.

Something different happens in a film such as *Demons*, the 1985 project of Lamberto Bava and Dario Argento. The premise of the film is simple. The entire film takes place inside a movie theater, where there is a screening of a new horror film. The film-within-the-film appears to be a supernatural slasher, featuring a group of students who come across an old book, which contains a spell to call up demons. While this film-within-the-film is running, we are introduced to the various characters in the movie theater who are watching the film. Eventually we as viewers realize that the curse in the film-within-the-film has spilled over into the audience in the theater. The key scene comes

when the death of a character in the film-within-the-film perfectly coincides with the death of a character in the theater. A study in self-reflexivity, both scenes involve a breaking-through (or slashing-through)—in the film-within-the-film, a demon attacks a girl camping in a tent, slashing through the canvas of the tent; while in the theater itself, another girl, grotesque and possessed, has wandered to the back of the theater screen, where, choking and rabid, she claws her way through the canvas screen of the movie theater itself, at the very same time the canvas of the tent is slashed.³²

Demons looks forward to the breaking-through motif in films such as *Ring*, but it also looks back to the reflexivity of genre horror in films such as *Madhouse* (1974) and *Targets* (1968; which features Boris Karloff as an aging horror actor, attending a drive-in screening of his actual 1963 film *The Terror*, while a deranged sniper shoots at viewers in their cars). While *Poltergeist* contains mediation within media devices themselves (which serve the perfunctory role of capture and playback), in *Demons* the very function of media is to hyper-mediate, to mediate in a way that constantly spills over and crosses boundaries. In *Demons*, mediation is so immediate that it is always transgressive, jarringly passing with contagious ease between human, machine, and demon. This transgression also applies to the way that the film comments on film itself: in *Demons*, the entire movie theater is at once a haunted house, a medium for the passage of demons, and a film set for the film *Demons*. Viewers and characters exchange places, as media-as-representation becomes media-as-transmission, infection, or possession. And yet, the source of the transmission/possession remains a mystery, receding into an antimediacy, as the strange non-being of the demonic curse passes with ease between one person and the next.

The next step is the film that deals with immediation/anti-mediation at the level of form itself, a move that necessitates a shift from narrative to non-narrative film. While the horror genre is notoriously conventional when it comes to film narrative, the tradition of avant-garde horror film takes mediation

to this formal level.³³ These “art horror” films combine the formal experiments of the avant-garde with the tropes and motifs of genre horror, often resulting in films that themselves either become threateningly life-like, or take on a menacing life of their own.³⁴ A case in point is the short film *Outer Space* (1999), by the Austrian filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky, known for his meticulous deconstruction and reconstruction of appropriated film footage. *Outer Space* uses film technologies old and new to imagine a kind of cinematic demonology. Tscherkassky uses footage from *The Entity*, a 1982 film featuring Barbara Hershey about a purportedly real case of demonic possession in the modern world. One need not have seen *The Entity* to appreciate *Outer Space*; it extracts, but also abstracts the concrete narrative into its minimalist basics. But more than this, *Outer Space* also displays a cinematic tension between the demonic possession in the film and the possession of the film itself. Ultimately, the film itself becomes “possessed,” until both image and sound overload the medium so completely that all we are left with is the actual, physical, material film itself (the frame of the film is evident, as it clips and slows down, the audio waveform made visible, the screen flickering into black and white). *Outer Space* borrows from the avant-garde tradition of Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow, but it couches its formal experiments in relation to the horror genre and the motif of demonic possession. The film becomes so immediate that it overtakes and consumes the material and formal aspects of film itself, dovetailing into an antimediacy that ceases to visually or acoustically communicate at all. The logical extension of the narrative (“in” the film) is that it crosses over into an excessive, material, non-narrative domain (“of” the film).

Perhaps the final stage in the “breaking-through” motif of horror film is when the mediation in the film and the mediation of film itself collapses, the point at which immediacy is also antimediacy. This is one way of understanding Kenneth Anger’s oft-cited provocation that “cinema is magic.” In films such as *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969), Anger carries out this idea

of film as “casting a spell.” While other films of his *Magick Lantern* cycle portray rituals of magick within the film, *Invocation of My Demon Brother* is itself structured like a ritual. Montage and sound serve as its primary techniques, the media-equivalent of magic circles, divination spells, and grimoires. One does not so much watch *Invocation of My Demon Brother* as one, by watching, participates in it. Iconographic images of Satanism and the occult are juxtaposed to strobing effects, experiments in color, and a trance-like electronic soundtrack (performed by Mick Jagger). Anger’s film represents what is perhaps the furthest limit of the breaking-through motif—the desire to dissolve all remnants of representation in film, using the motifs of the horror genre to do so.

This is, of course, the idea (or ideal). We are well aware that, for instance, films like *Invocation of My Demon Brother* are most often seen in the context of film and film history, not in the context of actual ritual or practical magick. All the same, however, these variations on “breaking-through” point to an ambivalent form of transgression, one that displays a will to annul all semblance of mediation, in effect dissolving the boundary between the screen in film and the screen of film. But such films also display an equal desire to activate a special kind of mediation that would allow one to witness the gulf or the abyss of there being “nothing” to mediate. Georges Bataille notes this ambiguity when he notes that “[t]here exists no prohibition that cannot be transgressed. Often the transgression is permitted, often it is even prescribed.” Furthermore, the effect it brings about is also an ambivalent combination of a brilliant emptiness, a saturated negation: “More than any other state of mind consciousness of the void about us throws us into exaltation. This does not mean that we feel an emptiness in ourselves, far from it; but we pass beyond that into an awareness of the act of transgression.”³⁵

This dual desire is analogous to the attempt in mystical texts to “get at” the divine through a language of negation, contradiction, and apophatic terms. In this sense horror film takes up the lessons of mysticism and the *via negativa*. Language negating

itself in its articulation, film consuming itself in its being shown, a body distending itself because it is possessed by another life—in these instances, it appears that the endpoint of mediation is the negation of mediation itself.

In fact, we can note a subtext that runs throughout our investigations thus far: that *the modern horror genre takes up a set of concerns that were previously the provenance of apophatic mysticism and negative theology*. Furthermore, supernatural horror does this in a way that highlights the dual meaning of media and mediation—as a modern fascination with new technologies, and as a premodern concern with the limits of media and mediation.

DARK MEDIA, DARKER OBJECTS

Though it is possible to regard supernatural horror as taking up the earlier concerns of mysticism, there is one element that makes modern horror unique, and that is the function of different objects in any tale of haunting and the supernatural. In other words, what is at stake in these stories is not just the experience of a subject, but the mediation of and through an object. The concept of the supernatural is here not simply oriented toward a subject, as a locus of unmediated and authentic experience. It is also oriented toward the many objects that themselves embody or mediate the supernatural, objects that elusively slide between the everyday and the exceptional, between their artifactual transparency and their strange aura of opacity. The question, then, is whether it would make sense to think about the supernatural less in terms of a subject-oriented approach, and more in terms of an object-oriented approach—and what such an object-oriented approach might mean for us, as subjects.

There are, of course, many precedents both ancient and modern for doing this. In a modern context, there is the example of the later Heidegger, who meditates at great length on “the thing” (*das Ding*) as an ontological category, resulting in his tongue-twisting phrase, “the thingness of the thing.”³⁶ What Heidegger calls “the thing” is defined by such characteristics as

“self-supporting,” “standing-forth,” and above all the dynamic, active process of “gathering.” Less a tool or object of knowledge, the thing is for Heidegger that intersection or congealment of materials, production processes, and ideologies that is encapsulated in his phrase “the thing things, and thinging gathers.”

More recently, the work of Bruno Latour has investigated the interface between humans and objects, particularly in the history of scientific experiment, where a whole panoply of gadgets, gizmos, and dooleywhigs form a complex apparatus for the production of knowledge. Objects act on us, and condition our own actions, just as much as we act on them. Searching for a middle term between subjects and objects, Latour uses the phrase “non-human actants” to describe the intermediary agency of objects on us as subjects. As he notes, “[e]ach object gathers around itself a different assembly of relevant parties. Each object triggers new occasions to passionately differ and dispute.” For Latour, objects are not simply passive and inert entities waiting to be acted upon. Rather, “objects—taken as so many issues—bind all of us in ways that map a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of ‘the political.’” Latour suggests a renewed engagement with the Heideggerian concept of “the thing,” focusing on the political aspects of assembling and gathering: “If the *Ding* designates both those who assemble because they are concerned as well as what causes their concerns and divisions, it should become the center of our attention: *Back to Things!* Is this not a more engaging political slogan?”³⁷

These aspects of objects abound in contemporary philosophy.³⁸ A recent attempt to think about objects is the so-called object oriented ontology (OOO) school, which directly takes up Latour’s slogan. As OOO argues, Western philosophy, in its almost exclusive focus on the relation between subject and object, has elided the equally important “perspective” of objects in relation to each other. Thus, in place of the relation between subjects and objects, Graham Harman suggests we think about object-object relations, and their separateness from the cognitive and

aesthetic framework of human subjects. As Harman notes, “object-oriented philosophy has a single basic tenet: the withdrawal of objects from all perceptual and casual relations.”³⁹

But this is an agenda that must grapple with its own problems, though they may be different from those of subject-object relations. As Harman notes, this approach “immediately implies a single basic problem: how do relations occur?” He continues: “[g]iven that an object always remains aloof from its dealings with the world, causality can only be *indirect*, can only occur through some medium other than the things themselves, since these forever elude any sort of relation.”⁴⁰ While it suggests an evocative image of objects as constantly withdrawn and elusive, OOO also sidesteps the central problem of objects—that of mediation and its paradoxes, the dual necessity and opacity of all mediation, not just that of objects in relation to each other. Hence the central blind spot of OOO, which Harman himself encapsulates: “It will need to be shown concretely how two objects can be absolutely hidden from each other *and* capable of affecting one another.”⁴¹

Whether or not a comprehensive philosophy of objects is possible, without simply being recuperated into the double-bind of the object-for-us (Latour) and the thing-in-itself (Heidegger), we must always be brought back to the persistence of that most peculiar of objects—the subject. For our purposes here, what is important to note is how objects exist in this contradictory movement of givenness and withdrawal. Even in their most intimate, phenomenal interaction with us as subjects, objects still maintain some reservoir of inaccessibility—in short, for every object there is an inaccessible more-than-object. Indeed, it seems that this almost perfectly describes the objects that populate the supernatural horror genre.

To get at this in more detail, let us step back a bit into the history of philosophy. Philosophically speaking, objects are different from things, and it is important to note that not all media are objects or things. To clarify our terms, let us return to Kant’s

distinction between objects and things, since Kant provides a number of key points that undergird the various strands of post-Kantian philosophy today.

In Kant's critical philosophy objects are never simply objects. In fact, Kant tends to use a number of different terms for what we would, in English, term objects. These include: the term *Objekt*, which denotes objects of experience that are made into objects for knowledge through the unity of apperception; the term *Gegenstand*, which denotes objects of experience that conform to the structures of intuition and/or the categories of understanding; and the term *Ding* (also translated as "thing"), which denotes the object in itself apart from any given experience or knowledge of it. With this last term *Ding* we arrive at an entity that serves an important philosophical function for Kant: the logical necessity of there being something "out there" rather than nothing, but a something that can never be known in itself. It is a something that provides the ground for *Gegenstand*, and allows it in turn to become *Objekt* for a subject. The more we probe into it, the ground for our relation to the world as subjects to an object becomes rather shaky and uncertain. Kant encapsulates this enigma:

That there is something real outside us which not only corresponds but must correspond to our external perceptions can likewise be proved to be, not a connection of things in themselves, but for the sake of experience . . . for we have nothing to do with other objects than those which belong to possible experience, because objects which cannot be given to us in any experience are nothing for us.⁴²

While all these terms Kant employs may be translated as "object," this last term—*Ding*—is also referred to by Kant as *Ding an sich* or the "thing-in-itself." The "thing-in-itself," or simply "the thing," is for Kant a limit concept. It serves a transcendental function, in that it provides the guarantee that there

is an actual, independently existing world out there that we as subjects relate to, even though we can never know it in itself, in its independent existence.⁴³

Let us abbreviate this a bit by suggesting that for Kant there is a basic distinction between “objects” and “things,” a distinction that corresponds neatly to Kant’s overall critical framework. While objects can be sensed and intuited, and while we can produce knowledge of objects based on such intuitions, things remain forever beyond the pale of human experience and comprehension. Yet, in spite of these distinctions, Kant is forced to note a basic contradiction, which is that things—being inaccessible and unknowable—are still posited by us as thinking subjects (even if they are posited as a limit concept). Thus they can only ever be negative concepts. The most we can do, according to Kant, is to simply note the logical necessity of the thing-in-itself. Beyond that there is only silence . . .

Or is there? For Kant, what both the object and thing have in common, strangely enough, is that they both bear some minimal relation to a subject. The difference is that in the former that relation is positive, while in the latter it is negative. And, while contemporary philosophers want to shift our thinking from subject-object to object-object relations, there is another type of object-oriented thinking implicit in Kant’s critical philosophy. That is *the relation between objects and things*, between that which exists for us as subjects, and that which remains indifferent to subject-object relations altogether—that is, between the domain of phenomena and the domain that Kant calls noumena.⁴⁴

Schopenhauer, admittedly a pessimistic reader of Kant, often refers to this strange opacity of objects as occult qualities (*qualitates occultae*). Though the effectiveness of philosophy may lie in its explanatory power, there is always some prior assumption that enables such explanations to be carried out in the first place. In the Western philosophical tradition, Schopenhauer cites one such assumption, commonly known as the principle of sufficient reason—everything that exists has a reason for existing.⁴⁵

For Schopenhauer, there is no *reason* to assume that something exists, much less that it exists for a reason (which, for Schopenhauer, almost always amounts to a reason for us as self-interested human subjects). Even the sciences must assume this prior principle, else the work of scientific experiment and hypothesis cannot carry on. As Schopenhauer notes:

Thus we see mechanical, physical, and chemical effects, as well as those of stimuli, ensue every time on their respective causes without on that account ever thoroughly understanding the process. On the contrary, the essential element of this remains a mystery, and we then attribute it to qualities of bodies, to natural forces, and even to vital force, all of which, however, are nothing but *qualitates occultae*.⁴⁶

It should be noted that this is not simply an anti-science position; Schopenhauer's target here is as much philosophy and logic as it is the sciences. The occult qualities are those qualities that, by definition, can never be elucidated; they inscribe the radical contingency of the human sensorium and cognitive apparatus, and they outline the contour of no object for us as subjects. What Schopenhauer terms the *qualitas occulta* is the form of dark media; it describes a paradoxical, empty aesthetic form in which the thing-in-itself is at once mediated and not mediated. For Schopenhauer this applies equally to the mediation of philosophy as it does to science and technology: "[e]very natural scientific explanation must ultimately end up in an occult quality, and hence in something completely obscure."⁴⁷ Things are hidden, but in an absolute way, an occulted relation in which there is no content to be revealed, no knowledge to be gained, and no philosophical system to be constructed.

Thus, while one can trace a genealogy of philosophical thinking about objects, one is always confronted with the stark and simple realization that one is always thinking about objects, arbitrating a form of mediation in increasingly esoteric ways. By way of summary, we can list these different relationships as follows:

- Relation of subject-object (Kantianism, phenomenology)
- Relation of object-object (actor network theory, object oriented ontology)
- Relation of object-thing (occult qualities, dark media)

In this last relation—that between objects and things—we are not considering traditional subject-object relations, nor are we interested in the uncanny object-object relations. Instead, we are considering the possible passages between objects and things, between that which is readily accessible to us as human subjects, and that which enigmatically withdraws into a region that we can only describe as the “thing-in-itself.” Note that, strictly speaking, there can be no relation between object and thing. This is the “relation” of object-thing. While objects are always objects as they appear to us as subjects, things occupy a dark, nebulous zone outside of subject-object relations altogether (including object-object relations). If objects are always objects for a subject, then things are like impossible objects, occult objects, or better, apophatic objects—objects absolutely withdrawn, leaving only a strange, fecund emptiness, an inaccessibility that knows no limits.

MYSTICISM AND NON-MYSTICISM

This enigmatic emptiness of the Kantian “thing” is, however, still relative to a conceptual apparatus that thinks it as such. As Jean-Luc Marion notes, this remains so even in the contentious case of mystical experience, where the object of experience is qualified precisely by its receding into a shadowy background of the ineffable and the unintelligible. For every subject, an object (even if an object replaces the subject, in a series of object-object relations), and for every subject-object relation, there is an a priori framework that grounds every possible intuition and conditions all possible knowledge. Such knowledge is, for Marion, marked by “the primacy of the knowing mind over what it knows,” and what it is preconditioned to know:

By “object” here, according to the received idea of what a science should be, we shall mean the result of a synthesis (or of the constitution) of a sensible given of a delimited concept, or the result of the synthesis (or of the constitution) of a sensible given by a determined concept in such a way that this product would be able to be delimited, produced, undone, and reproduced at will (or almost at will) by the mind that takes and maintains the initiative.⁴⁸

Marion’s somewhat technical recapitulation of Kant describes the blind spot of mystical experience with respect to philosophy—not that mysticism somehow transcends philosophy, but that, in its evocation of the limits of experience, language, and thought, mysticism evokes the limits or the arbitrariness of the a priori conditions of experience, language, and thought.⁴⁹ The passage also reads as a summary of the basic preconditions for any media theory, tethered as media often are to the human body and sensorium, and to the desire to codify, capture, and redesign that sensorium. In fact, we can suggest that it is precisely in the rift between these two understandings of the Kantian framework—the mystical and the medial—that what we’ve been calling “dark media” come into play.

Borrowing from the phenomenological tradition and from the philosophy of religion, Marion’s approach is to suggest that the domain Kant called “noumena” or the “thing-in-itself” is not so much a closed-off, forbidden, and inaccessible zone beyond which philosophy stops and faith begins. Instead, the thing-in-itself is actually the site of phenomena that fail to adhere to the Kantian framework, “phenomena that cannot appear according to the a priori conditions that a finite mind imposes on experience.”⁵⁰ This is either because there is no pre-existing category within which such phenomena can be adequately understood, or because their inconsistency and variability prevents them from adhering to the sensible form of intuition. By definition, such phenomena cannot be prepared for in advance, and in this failure of experience, the cognizing mind recognizes

its own finitude and its own conditions. Thus, almost any attempt to create new categories for knowledge must do so as a conciliatory gesture—as the product of a failure or finitude built into cognition itself. “Within these phenomena, intuition is not limited to filling or fulfilling the finite measure of the concept and/or the signification but spills over to the point of saturating it.”⁵¹ Marion calls these “saturated phenomena,” and they range from the aesthetic experience of listening to music, to the ethical confrontation with a stranger, to the ongoing public contestation over the meaning of political events.⁵² While saturated phenomena do dovetail with the more common notion of experiences that are ineffable or sublime, Marion is careful to note that saturated phenomena have less to do with the shutting down of experience or cognition, than with a rift or sudden shift that ends up producing thought and language. Elsewhere Marion provides more analytical descriptions of a saturated phenomenon: “The saturated phenomenon will be described as invisible [from *viser*, that which cannot be aimed at] according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, absolute according to relation, irregardable according to modality.”⁵³ Borrowing from the Kantian framework, Marion argues in each case that saturated phenomena are related to the “categories” via their excess, by their “passing beyond the concept.”

Kant left the thing-in-itself to itself; it was the boundary at which philosophy stops, and something else non-philosophical begins. But Marion’s suggestion is that the confrontation with this horizon of thought is itself an intuition, though of a special type. For Marion, the genealogy of the saturated phenomenon can be traced back to early Christian mystical literature, in which the divine is frequently characterized in negative terms:

Portrayed in theological words, this issue may be summed up, according to the Greek fathers, in the fact that God is invisible, unspeakable, uncircumscribable, and incomprehensible. Yet the experience of not being able to comprehend, see, or think God can

be taken seriously as a positive experience. We can be confronted with something completely outside our reach and nevertheless present as such, as absent.⁵⁴

It is tempting to read this passage as a synthesis of Kant and the mystics—God is a thing, or, what amounts to the same thing, God is nothing. But what Marion outlines here and in other works is a more nuanced version of the Dionysian *via negativa*. At its core lies something that is absolutely inaccessible, and thus can only be speculative—what for Kant is a secularized thing or noumenon, for the mystical tradition is God or the divine (or in Eckhart’s terms, the “Godhead”). Beyond this, we find the contradictory language of the *via negativa*, in which language is stretched beyond its self-inscribed limits to describe the indescribability of the thing-in-itself or of the divine—hence Dionysius’s contradictory notions of “brilliant darkness” or the “ray of divine darkness.” And beyond this, the use of the more familiar mechanisms of figurative language to produce inexact analogies (e.g., the ocean, the desert, the sun as figures of the divine). In what appears to be a broadly Neoplatonic approach to the inaccessible and unintelligible, Marion suggests that the Kantian impasse of the thing-in-itself be understood as an intuition—though one that can only be obliquely stated, either through negative definitions (“not finite,” “not temporal”) or through superlatives (“beyond space and time”).

Yet Marion’s approach intentionally characterizes the saturated phenomenon in terms of generosity and fecundity; there is an implication that saturated phenomena are always “more” than what we intuit and know, and more than what we can ever possibly intuit and know. In a way, for Marion *all* phenomena are saturated phenomena, both because they were at one point (and have since entered the narrower, legitimate halls of Kantian conceptualization), and because saturated phenomena are this very horizon of possible intuition and knowledge. In short, Marion not only characterizes the Kantian domain of the thing-in-itself

as an intuition, but he does so though what we might term a *metaphysics of generosity*:

To the limited possibility of phenomenality, shouldn't we . . . oppose a finally unconditionally possible phenomenality, whose scope would not be the result of the finitude of the conditions of experience? To the phenomenon characterized most often by lack or poverty of intuition (a deception of the intentional aim), indeed, exceptionally, by the mere equality of intuition and intention, why wouldn't there correspond the possibility of a phenomenon where intuition would give *more, indeed immeasurably more*, than the intention would ever have aimed at or foreseen?⁵⁵

In this metaphysics of generosity, there is always something more, something beyond, something larger within which we as cognizing subjects are always-already interpolated. In a sense, calling this something-more the "thing-in-itself," "the Absolute," or "God" matters little. The structure it articulates remains that of philosophy's primordial encounter between Thought and World, and it is qualified by the phenomenological priority of the givenness of World to Thought. Thus, what appears to be a negative theology turns out to be an affirmative theology; what in effect begins on the path of the *via negativa* discovers that it was on the path of the *via affirmativa* all along. Human finitude is revealed less in terms of its poverty and more in terms of its richness: "Finitude is disclosed more in the encounter with the saturated phenomenon than with the poor phenomenon."⁵⁶

One can easily characterize approaches such as those of Marion in terms of affirmative theology and the *via affirmativa*. All that exists, exists fully and over-fully; there is always more, it is always flowing, and this undulating embrace of all being elicits in us a kind of euphoria, the ecstasy of being. One always has faith in something more, perhaps because this something more is, at the end of the day, always some more for us as human subjects. But this rather romantic, vitalistic image of the flow of

being also inadvertently evokes the enigmatic negation—the negation that is not negative—evoked by mystics such as Dionysius. Is there a *via negativa* that would not simply be recuperated into the vitalistic and romantic *via affirmativa* of saturated phenomenon? To Marion’s “saturated phenomena” we could suggest the “desaturated phenomena” of negative theology; to Marion’s ontology of generosity we could offer a paradoxical ontology of nothingness or emptiness, even inviting a comparative approach with non-Western philosophies. But all this would simply recapitulate a game of logic already at work within the texts of Augustine and Dionysius themselves. The real question is what is it that seems to necessitate, within the philosophical stance, a proposition concerning either the givenness or the withdrawal of mediation. In philosophy, mediation is constantly slipping away, either saturated or subtracted, either ebullient flow or the void of specters and traces. What is that philosophical blind spot that a priori commits philosophy to a metaphysics of either generosity or of poverty? To ask such questions is, in short, to inquire into the non-philosophical boundaries of philosophy.

This is precisely the question taken up by François Laruelle near the end of his essay “The Truth According to Hermes.” There Laruelle points out the fundamental link between philosophy and media. All philosophy, says Laruelle, subscribes to the “communicational decision,” the idea that everything that exists can be communicated or mediated. In this self-inscribed world, all secrets exist only to be communicated, all that is not-said is simply that which is not-yet-said. The communicational decision presumes that everything that exists, exists *in order to be mediated and communicated*. One senses that, for Laruelle, the communicational decision is even more insidious than the philosophical decision (the idea that everything is philosophizable). It is one thing to claim that everything that exists, exists for a reason. It is quite another to claim that that everything-that-exists-for-a-reason is immediately and transparently communicable, in its reason for existing. If the philosophical deci-

sion is a variant on the principle of sufficient reason, then the communicational decision adds on top of it the fidelity of any media theory to the communicability of meaning.

But this is all speculation—there is no *reason per se* to presume this is the case. Perhaps this is why Laruelle criticizes philosophers for simply being “mailmen of the truth,” these academic “civil servants of the Postal and Telecommunication Ministry.” When one presumes the communicational decision on top of the philosophical decision, what results, according to Laruelle, is a compounded fidelity to the communicability of anything that exists, indeed of being itself. Laruelle mimes (and mocks) the hermeneutic presupposition of any philosophy of media: “Meaning, always more meaning! Information, always more information!” The logical conclusion of this position is encapsulated by Laruelle: “the real is communicational, the communicational is real.”⁵⁷

Communication is inherently ambiguous; it connects at the same time that it separates, unifies at the same time that it differentiates. Arguably, the communicational decision reaches a point of crisis, not in the postmodern architectonics of semiotics, information theory, cybernetics, or language games, but in the premodern context of mysticism. Nearly every account of mystical experience relies in some way on a union between the mystical subject and an enigmatic, inaccessible, and mysterious “outside” that is variously called God, Godhead, or the divine.

As we’ve seen, the dominant paradigm for this is established by Augustine, who describes the divine as an “Unchangeable Light” that is beyond human vision, beyond anything that can be seen, and ultimately beyond human comprehension. This duplicity—accessible manifestation and inaccessible source—is especially marked in those mystical texts where the divine is almost paradoxically described in terms of darkness, shadows, or the abyss. We’ve seen this in Dionysius the Areopagite, who notes how the divine is in itself absolutely inaccessible, and is therefore an enigmatic “ray of divine darkness.”

This sort of duplicity is addressed by Laruelle in his own non-

philosophical vernacular. In his *Principes de la non-philosophie*, Laruelle distinguishes between “la mystique” and “le mystique.” Let us call “la mystique” *mystical* and “le mystique” *mystique*. A single article distinguishes them, but the differences are significant. As Laruelle notes, “the mystical is an experience of identity between the soul and the transcendent.”⁵⁸ But the soul—the divine part existing within the earthly subject—can only experience the transcendent “outside” of itself, and thereby attain a union with the divine, so long as there is a baseline immanence that can serve as the backdrop for the union of the soul with the transcendent. Thus, for Laruelle, this identity of transcendence and the soul takes place within a certain immanence. The mystical “makes of this immanence a property or an attribute of a relation between the soul and God, more than an essence in and of itself.” Immanence is the mystical launching pad for transcendence.

By contrast, Laruelle calls *mystique* “a real and actual essence, something already-formed-without-formation, as it were, an absolutely autonomous instance more than an attribute, property, event, or relation.” The stakes of *mystique* are high; *mystique* “absolutely excludes transcendence.” The reduced and residual aspect of the divine that is the soul begins to confuse itself with this absolute immanence. There is no mystical subject that goes out of itself (*ec-stasis*) to meet the divine or the great beyond. There is no religious subject that discovers the divine spark within itself, bolstering and reaffirming the coherence of the subject. As Laruelle notes, “*mystique* is never a *below* or an *above*, and not a phenomenon of the frontier or the limit.” Instead, “*mystique* is ‘subject’ in the most rigorous sense . . . [it is] that which determines the subject in-the-last-instance.” The finite and the infinite, the temporal and eternal, the relative and the absolute—all these “confuse” themselves into an immanence that can only be immanent “with” or “in” itself.

But the immanence of *mystique* is, arguably, different from the fecund and saturated immanence of Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, or Alfred North Whitehead, those continental bea-

cons of the metaphysics of generosity. Laruelle's brand of mysticism looks askance to Meister Eckhart, for whom there was an important distinction between "God" and "Godhead," the latter in itself a "nothing" or "nothingness" that immanently pervades everything. Insofar as this is immanence, it is a *negative immanence*, moving not toward proliferation but indistinction. It is, in Laruelle's phrasing, an affect prior to all affection, a given prior to all givenness, a manifest prior to all manifestation. There is no First Cause because there has never been causality; but this also does not mean that what is real is simply what exists, a tautology that would simply bring us back to the Kantian problematic. When contingency becomes immanent in this way, it also becomes boundless, and this boundlessness, far from being a great beyond, is nevertheless something inaccessible that Laruelle terms "the One" or "the Real." As Laruelle comments, in his own specialized grammar, "mystique is in-us or better it is us who are actually in it, in-mystique or in-One as the One itself."

From the vantage point of philosophy, Laruelle's treatment of immanence here is complicated. On the one hand, he places himself "on the side of" immanence, and in particular on the side of an immanence that is not subordinate to transcendence. But Laruelle is also careful to distinguish immanence of this type from that of Deleuze and Michel Henry, both of whom remain committed to a dynamic and fecund notion of immanence. Laruelle also remains committed to a notion of the Real that is absolute, and which is not apparent (that is, not manifest, not given, not a becoming). Again, from the philosophical point of view, the only remaining option is a notion of immanence that is pervasive (immanent with/to itself) and yet that is absolutely inaccessible. In Laruelle's terms, it is as if immanence is all-pervasive and all-withdrawn.

This brings us back to Laruelle's discussion of the two decisions: the philosophical decision and the communicational decision. Historically speaking, mysticism is interesting because, on the one hand, it subscribes to the communicational decision—in

this case, that an experience of the divine or the supernatural can be communicated via earthly or natural means. While the actual forms of this communication may vary (from scholastic treatises to mystical poetry), what they have in common is this commitment to the communicability of experience. Except that, in the case of mysticism, what it is that is being communicated is itself, by definition, beyond all comprehension and beyond language. Mysticism is interesting because it finds itself in the position of having to communicate the incommunicable. Even those who assert a generative, fecund notion of the divine—as outpouring, radiating Light—must at some point resort to a paradoxical language beyond language in order to hint at the absolute inaccessibility of the divine. Others in the darkness mysticism tradition utilize a hyperbolic language of darkness, nothingness, and the “wayless abyss” to indicate that which cannot be adequately thought or put into language. All roads of light, it seems, lead to darkness—but a darkness of which light is only a shadow.

With mysticism generally (including Laruelle’s “mystical” and “mystique”), what we see is a sort of perversion of philosophy’s dual fidelity to the philosophical decision and the communicational decision. Philosophy believes in both, that existence is meaningful (by virtue of existing) and thus communicable. At one level, mysticism retains the philosophical decision, but it subtracts the communicational decision. The divine is manifest, and therefore filled with meaning—and yet we as human beings cannot comprehend this manifestation and its meaning. Mysticism is thus the inability to communicate what is manifest in the inaccessibility of the divine (that is, the inaccessibility that “is” the divine). Further, this opens onto a subsidiary form, in which mysticism inverts its prior position, retaining the communicational decision and subtracting the philosophical decision. Here the divine can indeed be communicated—in its incommunicability. Both of these movements re-describe, through the language of mysticism, the passage from “object” to “thing” that we derived from the Kantian framework.

DARK MEDIA — AN ABBREVIATED TYPOLOGY

At this point, we can pause and offer an abbreviated typology of media based on this basic distinction between objects and things, incorporating this motif into the mediation of the inaccessible (the supernatural) that we've been calling dark media. Such a typology will not only help elucidate the concept of dark media, but it will also allow us to make distinctions within dark media, for, as we will see, the mediation of the supernatural doesn't always occur in the same way. In particular, we will distinguish three variants within dark media—"dead media," "haunted media," and finally "weird media." All of these variants can be grouped under the larger umbrella of dark media, insofar as they each grapple with the inaccessible as that which is ambivalently mediated. In all cases, the primary rule is that the media are not "broken," but are working "too well," so well in fact that mediation functions at a level beyond that of traditional forms of human mediation.

To begin with, we can distinguish dead media from haunted media. With dead media, the object is no longer in use, but the form of the object remains active.⁵⁹ For example, while we no longer use magic lanterns, one could argue that the idea of image projection remains very alive today with digital projectors and the like. With haunted media, the object is still in use, but in a non-normative way. An example is the complex interplay between the photographic camera and spirit photography in the late nineteenth century. The camera normally used to take pictures of people or places was also the privileged medium for revealing the spirits of the dead. Both dead media and haunted media involve a temporal disjunction, but in different ways: with dead media the disjunction is between an outmoded or outdated artifact and its still-active technical principle; with haunted media the disjunction is between a contemporary artifact and its connection to adjacent fields such as religion and spirituality. There are functional differences between them as

well: with dead media, objects oscillate between being activated and inactivated, whereas with haunted media, the object becomes more than an object, endowed as it is with almost divine (or divining) powers—something like a “divine object.”

While there are many examples of haunted media in history, the horror genre again gives us the most instructive case studies. Consider the genre of the “occult detective” story, popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and exemplified by books such as Sheridan Le Fanu’s *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), Algernon Blackwood’s *John Silence, Physician Extraordinary* (1908), and William Hope Hodgson’s *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder* (1913). In these and other like stories, one often finds a protagonist schooled both in modern science and the ancient occult arts. The occult detective must use a combination of scientific ratiocination and practical magic to solve a given mystery. In some cases the mystery turns out to be a hoax, and the apparently supernatural phenomena simply a bit of trickery. But in other cases we actually see an affirmation of the supernatural, ironically affirmed through scientific rationality (or its failure).

In the occult detective genre, the supernatural is always mediated—in fact, the supernatural can only be mediated. In Hodgson’s stories, published together as *Carnacki the Ghost-Finder*, we see detective Thomas Carnacki employ an array of means for revealing the supernatural. Sometimes Carnacki uses media as a means of documentation—a camera used to take a snapshot of a haunted room, sound equipment to record the strange sounds of a haunted house, even candle wax seals on windows and threads across doors to indicate an entrance. At other times Carnacki must actually build his own media to continue the investigation—a shining example of this is the “electric pentacle,” a vacuum-tube, steampunk variant on the magic circle, that Carnacki uses both as a protection and as a conduit. Still other moments move beyond media artifacts altogether into another dimension that Carnacki can only describe as “Outer Monstrosities”—a haunted room turns into a giant, fleshy mouth,

emitting an eerie whistling sound; a man is possessed by a horde of cosmic pigs emerging from a black hole; a derelict ship encounters a menacing, sentient, nocturnal mist.

The occult detective genre gives us two types of haunted media. First there is the *artifact*, in which a media object in itself is haunted or endowed with supernatural powers.⁶⁰ With the artifact we witness the strange animation of inanimate objects—dolls begin to talk, haunted houses seem to have intentions of their own, and an ancient relic at a distant archaeological dig calls up malefic “Old Ones.” Along with the artifact, there is also the *portal*, in which a media object, while not in itself haunted, serves as a passageway or conduit between the natural and supernatural.⁶¹ Here it is not the object itself but the act of mediation that is haunted. The spiritual medium, the *séance*, and necromancy all fall into this category. In some cases the mediation of media objects may appear to function normally (e.g., the white noise on the TV set that is actually transmitting messages from the dead), while in other instances the mediation may take place through ancient or premodern means (e.g., a magic circle drawn on the floor).

Haunted media, then, may express themselves as artifacts or as portals, and sometimes as both.⁶² Here we come to a key characteristic of haunted media, whether it be an artifact or a portal: with haunted media, the “divine object” establishes a connection between two different ontological orders (natural-supernatural, earthly-divine, life-afterlife). This is quite different in principle from the modern view of mediation given by cybernetics and information theory. There one has a mediation between two points within a single, shared, consensual reality. While there may also be messages, channels, senders, and receivers, haunted media have one important difference: the mediation is not between two points in a single reality, but between two realities.⁶³ More often than not, haunted media mediate the supernatural in a positive sense, in that the mediation process brings that which cannot itself be understood within the am-

bit of human sense and knowledge—cameras reveal images of ghosts, sound recording devices capture the sounds of spirits, and video images depict the invisible presence of the dead.

There are also stories in the supernatural horror tradition that move beyond even this paradigm. Tales of supernatural horror from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offer examples, engaged as they are both in the developments of modern science as well as in the tradition of mysticism and the occult. Fitz-James O'Brien's 1859 story "What Was It?" takes up the monster motif, but puts a spin on it—the creature in the story is, strictly speaking, non-existent. It can neither be seen nor heard, and its only manifestations are negative ones—an impression in a bed, the shifting of a curtain, the creak of a floorboard, and so on. Physical yet non-empirical, the creature can only be verified by forcing it to become a body; eventually it is trapped and the characters make a cast mold of it, in effect creating a monstrous sculpture. The same theme is dealt with in Ambrose Bierce's 1893 story "The Damned Thing," in which a menacing, predatory creature stalks a village, invisible except for the large claw marks it leaves on its victims. A lesson in optics and the fourth dimension enables the characters to catch fleeting, shadowy glimpses of the creature, as its movement blackens out the stars of the night sky. Just as there are sounds outside the range of human hearing, so there is light and color beyond the range of human vision (and, as one of the characters horrifically concludes, "God help me, the Damned Thing is of such a color!"). In Bierce's story, the characters encounter the same challenge, both philosophical and practical—first they must verify the existence of "the damned thing" (drawing on knowledge from science and religion), and then they must figure out how to either ward it off or evade its threat.

That the human sensorium is a medium, and at best an imperfect medium, serves as the premise for many instances of haunted media. But, that the human sensorium can be augmented, transformed, or, in some instances, "see" more than a human subject is prepared to see—this is the premise of what we

can term “weird media.” Many examples of weird media are given in the subgenre of “weird fiction,” published in early-twentieth-century pulp magazines such as *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories*. One type of story involves what we might call the other-dimensional creature, found in stories such as H. P. Lovecraft’s “From Beyond” (1920), Frank Belknap Long’s “The Hounds of Tindalos” (1929), and Clark Ashton Smith’s “Ubbo-Sathla” (1933). In Lovecraft’s story, a crazed scientist has invented a device that enables the average human being to see the invisible, menacing, amphibious creatures that swim about us in the air every day. In Long’s story, a heady combination of drugs and quantum physics leads to the discovery of a portal in the strange angles of a room, through which predatory, bodiless creatures enter. And in Smith’s story, a modern-day sorcerer uses a crystal—the medium of all mediums perhaps—to make contact with the first, primordial ooze of life on the planet.⁶⁴ In each case mediation comes up against an absolute limit, while also mediating beyond what is normally expected.

In weird tales such as these, one again finds the mediation of the supernatural that is expressed in haunted media stories, but with a crucial difference: the mediation only results in an absolute impasse, in the strange non-knowledge of the impossibility of mediation, in the way that all communication collapses back into a prior excommunication. Whereas haunted media expressed the mediation of the supernatural in positive terms, with weird media mediation only indicates a gulf or abyss between two ontological orders. Sometimes the supernatural is present but not apparent (e.g., an invisible creature that nevertheless exists within our same reality, but outside the visible spectrum). At other times the supernatural is apparent but not present (e.g., unnamable entities from other dimensions). With weird media, all objects inevitably withdraw into things. What results is a negative mediation, the paradoxical assertion and verification of the gulf between two ontological orders. Table 1 provides a comparison.

To summarize: media are “haunted” when they affirmatively

TABLE 1. HAUNTED VERSUS WEIRD MEDIA

<i>Haunted Media</i>	<i>Weird Media</i>
Connection	Disconnection
Communication	Silence
Transparency	Opacity
Phenomenal presence	Noumenal “nothing”
Transcendence	Immanence
Recapitulates the human	Limit of the human
Reciprocity	Indifference

mediate between two different ontological orders, and by transforming the object into a divine object (the artifact or the portal). By contrast, media are “weird” when they negatively mediate between two ontological orders, whereby the object recedes into a thing.

Between the object “for us” and the thing “in itself,” there is at once the smallest interval and the greatest void. As we’ve noted, the media objects that populate supernatural horror are not broken—in fact, they are working quite well, perhaps too well. When ordinary objects become extraordinary, are we witness to this secret passage from object to thing? In supernatural horror, relations of subject-object and object-object are the by-products of a more fundamental relation between object and thing. Given this, let us put forth a hypothesis: in supernatural horror, *the mediation of the supernatural takes place via the ambivalent transition from object to thing.*

MYSTICISM AND MEDIATION

In spite of the fact that dark media (inclusive of our typology above—dead media, haunted media, weird media) are replete with objects of all kinds, at the core of dark media is the idea of the mediation of what cannot be mediated. As we’ve suggested, this has the structure of the *via negativa* in mysticism, which we can summarize as follows: first, an originary decision regarding

the fundamental distinction between the human and the divine (even if the divine is “in” the human); second, the philosophical assumption of a commonality between human and divine that is prior to their distinction, and that serves as the condition for their possibly being mediated; third, the assertion that this mediation between human and divine is of a different order than human-human mediation; fourth, that divine mediation involves a union with a “something” that is by definition contradictory, lying as it does beyond the senses, beyond language, beyond thought, and beyond the subject-object distinction altogether; and finally, the proposition that any comprehension of this divine mediation can only proceed through negation, ultimately the negation of the human subject that is mediated in this way.

If we’re willing to take an expanded view of media, and consider media not just as devices, tools, or even objects, but as a form of mediation that is operative in this passage between objects and things, then the question is the following: at what point do media and mediation end up negating themselves, resulting in a kind of pure continuum or “communication”—or even, with what an earlier age would call mystical experience? This is a question posed by Georges Bataille, who, in his own critique of and reinvention of mystical theology, makes frequent use of the terms “communication” and “mediation.”

As Bataille notes, in case of mystical experience, “knowledge is still mediation—between me and the world—but negative: it is the rejection of knowledge, the night, the annihilation of all middle terms, which constitutes this negative mediation (*médiation négative*).”⁶⁵ What Bataille calls negative mediation names this paradoxical mediation of non-mediation. It is precisely this type of negation that Bataille, in an early text called *The Anti-Christian Manual*, regards as being regulated within institutional religion: “In fact, the intimate and blood-stained aspects of Christian divinity are nothing more than aspects of *mediation*, which are *intermediary* between the real world of living bodies and the movements of the transcendent world of the ‘God

of the philosophers.”⁶⁶ Whenever Bataille speaks of communication or mediation, his reference is always that of the mystical tradition of the *via negativa*; for him mediation and communication always imply the dissolution of sender and receiver, leaving perhaps only the message that is the gulf or abyss between them. “These movements flow out into an external existence: there they lose themselves, they ‘communicate,’ it would appear, with the outside (*le dehors*), without the latter taking a determined shape and being perceived as such.”⁶⁷

For Bataille, negative mediation involves a threefold process: a minimal connection between two ontologically distinct and incompatible orders; the production of an absolute gulf or abyss between these two orders; and finally, the effacing of this mediation altogether, in part due to this gulf or abyss. Bataille provides one of many descriptions of what such inner experience entails:

It is the annihilation of everything which is not the ultimate “unknown,” the abyss into which one has sunk. . . . Understood in this way, the full communication which is experience leading to the extreme limit is accessible to the extent that existence successively strips itself of its middle terms.⁶⁸

Bataille here isolates something that is central to dark media and its preoccupation with the mediation of what cannot be mediated—the annihilation of “middle terms,” conceived not as the result of a saturated and overflowing divinity, but as the no less ecstatic outcome of a mediation that has delimited itself.

In addition, Bataille’s comments lead to a question: Given the way that dark media arbitrate between the natural and supernatural, would it be going too far to consider the premodern cases of divine ecstasy and demonic possession as instances of mediation? If so, then another question poses itself: Could one then consider the governance of the boundary separating divine ecstasy and demonic possession as an act of political theology? The discourse surrounding demonic possession in early modern

Christianity is especially instructive in this case. Given that the realm of the supernatural (divine and demonic) was, by definition, absolutely beyond the earthly and the human, by what living signs or activities (*opera vitae*) could this inaccessible domain become accessible? Philosopher of religion Maaïke van der Lugt summarizes these dilemmas:

In the theological discourse, the concept of the possessed body presupposes and is opposed to the notion of life and the human person. The Scholastics . . . asked themselves to what degree angels and demons could take advantage of the possessed body. Were they capable of feeling, of moving, of speaking, or eating, or, finally, of generating life? Could they, according to the expression of Saint Thomas, exercise the *opera vitae*?"⁶⁹

In Scholastic theology, the human body comes to be conceived as the primary medium upon which and through which the signs of the divine or demonic are evident. However, divine theophanies are different in this regard from the manifestations of the demonic; while theophanies are resplendent in their spectacular presence, in Scholastic demonology the manifestation of the demon is given only in negative signs, only as aberrations, only as the error of the body. Indeed, it becomes difficult to even speak of the mediation of the demon, since, according to the demonologists, the demon is rarely present as such, only manifest negatively, obliquely, and opaquely. In Scholastic demonology, the demon and its manifestation are always a horizon. Such a theory required an entire discursive and hermeneutic apparatus for allowing the demon to be manifest and present. Armando Maggi, writing about the role of language in early modern demonology, notes the following:

By reading natural signs (winds, clouds, animals' expressions), devils are able to bring about storms, plagues, and floods. Moreover, by reading a human being's gestures, facial expressions, lin-

guistic intonation, a devil can produce a “discourse” able to erase that human being’s soul and body. . . . The devil constructs his nonlanguage by interpreting nature’s and human being’s signs and turning them against creation itself.⁷⁰

Perhaps, then, dark media are really demonic media, the mediation of that which recedes beyond an always-moving horizon. Of course, this may be taking things too far, widening the scope of the terms “media” and “mediation” beyond the point where they cease to have any reliable meaning at all. But it can also be argued that the world in which we find ourselves today constantly challenges our conventional ideas about media and mediation. In the midst of planetary disasters both human-made and nonhuman-oriented, we find we are in the position of recording and documenting events that increasingly slip from our comprehension, events that we can only define using vast phrases like “global climate change” or “planetary extinction.” We are living in the very world that we stand apart from in order that we may record, document, and mediate it. If there is a lesson to be learned from Scholastic demonology or medieval mysticism, it is that our ideas of media and mediation are, perhaps, all-too-human.

CONCLUSION—ON WHAT CANNOT BE SAID (CON’T)

In the opening pages of his book *Deep Time of the Media*, Siegfried Zielinski notes the need for an expanded view of media and media studies today:

The history of the media is not the product of a predictable and necessary advance from primitive to complex apparatus. . . . Instead of looking for obligatory trends, master media, or imperative vanishing points, one should be able to discover individual variations. Possibly, one will discover fractures or turning points in historical master plans that provide useful ideas for navigating the labyrinth of what is currently firmly established.⁷¹

For a thinker like Zielinski, what matters is less the academic founding of new fields or subfields, and more the variations that allow one to move across fields, or even to abandon them altogether. It is this that Zielinski refers to as “variantology.” In *Deep Time of the Media* Zielinski appropriates the geological concept of deep time, with all its connotations of nonhuman and material fluxes and flows, and asks us to consider what a deep time of media might look like. For Zielinski, this gesture is necessarily experimental. It means that sometimes one will end up not going far enough, perhaps recuperating a novel artifact or event into the deeply entrenched histories of technology—by humans, for humans. At other times, one will go too far, opening up the terms “media” and “mediation” so much that one ends up simply talking about life or being in the abstract. Zielinski seems aware of this; but he is also equally aware of the need to not settle for institutionally calcified boundaries:

It is our hope that media experts will see their research areas in a broader light than before, and that disciplines which have so far not participated in these discourses (such as theology, classical studies, many areas of the history of science and technology) will develop an openness for media questions.⁷²

The concept of dark media offered here is just one example that asks us to bring approaches from philosophy, genre horror, and mysticism to a kind of occult variantology of media. Magic circles, grimoires, dowsing devices, spirit photography, ectoplasmic images, ghostly static on the radio, the possessed TV, the cursed videotape, and the webcam of the dead—in supernatural horror all these “really” exist in that they are not mere figments of the imagination, symptoms of mental illness, or the by-product of drug abuse. Their artifactuality is expressed in their pragmatic and material use as media objects. At the same time, the mediation of the supernatural allows such objects to recede from the familiar and the everyday, often to the point that the object itself becomes vitalistically lifelike and animate. There

is, perhaps, a strange life of media that is equivalent to the slippage from “objects” to “things.” In a way, then, media are the most alive precisely at the moment that they are the least accessible . . .

NOTES

1. I derive this phrase “communicational imperative” from an essay by François Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes,” translated by Alexander R. Galloway and published in *Parrhesia* 9 (2010).

2. This is an issue that has been taken up by recent work in media studies, to which I am indebted: Erik Davis, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (New York: Three Rivers, 1998); Tom Gunning, “To Scan a Ghost: An Ontology of Mediated Vision,” *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007): 94–127; Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light (Shadow Optics)* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Joe Milutis, *Ether: The Nothing That Connects Everything* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Art Symons, “Divine Decadence: Towards a Degradation of the Senses,” *Literary History* 49.2 (2004): 23–44; and Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Seeing and Hearing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902), 58.

4. *Ibid.*, 71.

5. Shannon’s ideas are elaborated in his 1948 paper “On the Mathematical Theory of Communication,” published in *Bell System Technical Journal*, vol. 27. This research was expanded into his book with Weaver, published as *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).

6. Baran’s 1962 paper is titled “On Distributed Communications,” published in *RAND Corporation Papers*, P-2626.

7. This film, like others in the J-horror style, features media as

“portals,” much in line with earlier horror films, except whereas in earlier films it is the architecture of the house that is the portal, in J-horror it is the media device. Kurosawa’s film also shows the webcam images as eerie interior shots of other rooms, shrouded in darkness, without any human beings—an aesthetic that seems to evoke Ozu’s films, with their many long takes of empty, domestic interiors. (In fact, it is tempting to imagine Kiyoshi Kurosawa as the Ozu of horror . . .)

8. John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 71.

9. Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 7, ch. 10, trans. William Watts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/Loeb Classical Library, 2006), vol. 1, 371.

10. *Ibid.*, bk. 10, ch. 6 (vol. 2, 87ff).

11. This is dramatized later on in the same passage, where Augustine asks “where” God is, posing the question to the lowly beasts as well as to the heavenly stars, all of whom reply “I am not God.” Interestingly, Augustine’s own corporeality becomes a sort of mediator between the horizontal plane of earthly creatures and the vertical plane of divine transcendence.

12. Peters, *Speaking*, 71.

13. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, III 1033B, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 139.

14. *Ibid.*, I 1000A, 135.

15. *Ibid.*, I 1000B, 136.

16. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34–35.

17. *Ibid.*, 35.

18. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), 25. Todorov’s structuralist study remains one of the most important sources for the analysis of supernatural horror. Other, later, studies that both draw upon his work and extend it include Noël Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Istvan Csicsery-Ronay’s *The*

Seven Beauties of Science Fiction (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), and Rosemary Jackson's *The Fantastic: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 1981).

19. Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25.

20. H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness*, ed. S.T. Joshi (New York: Penguin, 2001), 331.

21. *Ibid.*, 334.

22. *Ibid.*, 334–35.

23. It is also worth noting that, while for Todorov the fantastic proper belongs to the horror genre (in particular, supernatural horror), the marvelous takes one into the genre of fantasy, whereas the uncanny takes one into the genre of science fiction.

24. As Todorov notes, the uncertainty of the fantastic applies both to the characters in a story as well to the readers of the story—though they do not necessarily overlap. We as readers may have knowledge of events that characters do not, and vice versa. Thus the fantastic may characterize what occurs in the story as well as the story itself (the most common technique used in the latter case is the “dossier” or documentary approach found in authors such as H. P. Lovecraft—“these are the papers of X, found at a distant archaeological dig,” etc.).

25. Meister Eckhart, Sermon 19, in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. and trans. Maurice O’C. Walshe (New York: Herder and Herder, 2009), 137.

26. *Ibid.*, Sermon 97, p. 469, and Sermon 96, p. 465.

27. We have outlined two general usages of the term “nothing” in Eckhart. But even this division ultimately breaks down. The nothing of creatures immediately opens onto the nothing of the Godhead, collapsing the division into what Eckhart describes as the nothing of that which is, the nothing of “letting be.”

28. But Eckhart too runs into problems, and any careful reading of Eckhart must acknowledge that all this talk about God as nothing is always attenuated by an equal commitment to the Trinity, the *kenōsis* or self-emptying of Christ, and a Person-oriented mysticism of Father, Son, and Human. Put simply, the “philosophical” Eckhart is always doubled by the “theological” Eckhart. Both are, perhaps,

brought into an uneasy relation, and it is this assemblage that constitutes the “mystical” Eckhart. Eckhart at once shores up the limits of the human while at the same time asserting a profound commitment to the human—but a human that is also a “living without a why.”

29. The role of “nothing” or “nothingness” in Eckhart is elaborated in my essay “Wayless Abyss: Mysticism, Mediation, and Divine Nothingness,” *Postmedieval* 3, no. 1 (2012): 80–96. On the concept of nothing/nothingness in Eckhart with respect to continental philosophy, see John Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 97–139; Beverly Lanzetta, “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” *Journal of Religion* 72, no. 2 (1992): 248–68; Reiner Schürmann, *Meister Eckhart, Mystic and Philosopher* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 135–68.

30. Presumably the camera is being remotely moved by the ghosts, suggesting that even the dead desire their fifteen minutes of fame (and it is comforting to note that even ghosts have a sense of *mise-en-scène*).

31. But if one looks closely, there is a slippage even in this scene (as there is in Méliès), for the actual ghost and the recorded ghost on the monitor are different, even though they are placed side-by-side, and even though the human characters appear to react in the same way to both the event and its recording.

32. The sequel to *Demons* updates this motif—in *Demons 2* (1986; again a Bava/Argento production) the break-through comes through the TV in a high-rise apartment building.

33. Of course, more recent horror films do experiment with narrative linearity and continuity; the *Saw* franchise often adopts the structure of a puzzle, whereas the onslaught of zombie films frequently uses a video game logic. Films such as *Devil* and *Cabin in the Woods* build on viewers’ knowledge of the horror genre to push self-reflexivity to new extremes. Arguably, however, all these techniques are already evident in earlier films, such as the 1960 William Castle production *Thirteen Ghosts*.

34. The term “art horror” is explored in Joan Hawkins, *Cutting Edge: Art-Horror and the Horrific Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Univer-

sity of Minnesota Press, 2000). Here one could also include many of Stan Brakhage's films, as well as those by the Vienna Actionists. This would invite a further exploration of the linkages between the horror genre, avant-garde film, and performance art.

35. Georges Bataille, *Erotism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), 63, 69.

36. "If we let the thing be present in its thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as a thing." "The Thing," in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennial, 1975), 181.

37. Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 5, 13. This essay builds upon Latour's earlier work in such books as *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

38. Recent examples include the work of Bill Brown on what he terms "thing theory," and the work coming out of science studies on objects and objectivity in the history of science. See Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, as well as Elaine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2010). Brown borrows from Heideggerian distinction between objects and things, which is different from that of Kant. Suffice it to say that for Heidegger the thing is that which presences, whereas for Kant the thing is that which "absences" (indeed, the thing is an absencing integral to all objects).

39. Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 20.

40. *Ibid.*, 19.

41. *Ibid.* Suffice it to say that, when all is said and done, the main insight of OOO is to have inadvertently shown us the limitations of philosophical phenomenology.

42. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, §49, trans. Paul Carus, revised James Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1977), 77.

43. “[O]bjects in themselves are not known to us at all, and that what we call outer objects are nothing other than mere representations of our sensibility . . . whose true correlate, i.e. the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*), is not and cannot be cognized through them, but is also never asked after in experience.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A30, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 178.

44. “[T]he purity of the categories from all admixture of sensuous determinations may mislead reason into extending their use beyond all experience to things in themselves. . . . Such hyperbolic objects are distinguished by the appellation of *noumena*, or pure beings of the understanding (or better, beings of thought).” Kant, *Prolegomena*, §45 (74).

45. The principle of sufficient reason is commonly traced back to Aristotle’s logical treatises, such as *The Categories*. It was later expanded by Leibniz, who agreed that anything that exists must have a reason for existing, but added that such reasons may be infinite and/or only known by God (that is, such a reason may exist, but may not be comprehended within the human framework of cognition). Schopenhauer, deeply influenced by Kant, undertook an extensive critical examination of the principle in his early work *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813; originally written as his doctoral dissertation). There Schopenhauer offered a more pessimistic Kantianism; he analyzed the principle in more detail, outlining its four major aspects and suggesting that what Kant called the noumena or the thing-in-itself was forever blocked from our understanding—except in this comprehension itself of an absolute limit. For Schopenhauer, every form of human knowledge—including the sciences—assumed some prior principle of this type, and thus relied on some unquestioned, purely speculative *qualitas occulta*, whether or not it recognized it as such.

46. Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 213.

47. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*,

vol. 1, trans. and ed. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 107.

48. Jean-Luc Marion, “What Do We Mean by ‘Mystic’?” trans. Gareth Gollrad, in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2.

49. As Marion notes, “[n]o phenomenon can be given to knowing, or be admitted into the limited field of knowledge, if it does not accept being made into an object—in other words, if it does not assume as its own the conditions of phenomenality that the limits of our mind assign to it in advance” (ibid.).

50. Ibid., 3.

51. Ibid.

52. The idea of saturated phenomenon is developed in Marion’s book *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

53. Ibid., 199.

54. Marion, “What Do We Mean by ‘Mystic’?” 4.

55. Marion, *Being Given*, 197.

56. Ibid., 206.

57. Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes,” 22.

58. François Laruelle, *Principes de la non-philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1996), 66. All translations from this text are my own, and the following quotations are all from this page.

59. “Dead media” was a term employed by science fiction author Bruce Sterling in the 1990s, in his proposal for a Dead Media Project that would collect outmoded or outdated communications technologies. The term has been taken up and theorized in media studies in works such as Matthew Kirshenbaum’s *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012) and the collections *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and *New Media, 1740–1915*, ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

60. The supernatural horror tradition is replete with artifacts of this type. They often appear as everyday objects that become extraordinary, from a painting or sculpture, to furniture, to the corpse itself (cf. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”; Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper”; M. R. James’s “The Mezzotint”; Edogawa Rampo’s “The Human Chair”; up through the stories of Richard Matheson, Ray Bradbury, and Ramsey Campbell). Haunted artifacts may also appear as unique charms, objects endowed with a possibly supernatural power—one finds many objects of this type in the stories of M. R. James and Sheridan Le Fanu. Or they may appear as religious objects at the same time rendered highly technological, as we see in Fritz Leiber’s novels *Gather, Darkness!* and *Our Lady of Darkness*. In addition, post-war TV programs such as *One Step Beyond*, *The Veil*, *Twilight Zone*, and *Outer Limits* often feature artifacts of this kind—the 1964 *Twilight Zone* episode “Night Call” (written by Richard Matheson, and directed by Jacques Tourneur), features a telephone that gradually shifts from being an annoyance to an object of horror; in the final scene, it becomes both haunted and an object of love. The *Twilight Zone* episode “Nick of Time” (also written by Matheson, and starring William Shatner), features a “Mystic Seer” napkin holder at a diner that has the uncanny ability—or so it seems—to predict the future. In other shows, the artifact is at once quotidian and archetypal—the 1964 *Outer Limits* episode “Don’t Open ’Till Doomsday” features an enigmatic, tiny box with a strange creature inside, possibly from another dimension, foretelling of a future apocalypse. Anyone who looks into the box instantly goes insane. The episode closes with uncertainty as to whether or not the world had ended.

61. The portal is also a recurrent feature in supernatural horror, perhaps finding its origins in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1602), with its dramatic scenes depicting the magic circle and necromantic rite. Hodgson would recast the motif in his Carnacki occult detective stories, and Dennis Wheatley would reference both Marlowe and Hodgson in his occult page-turner *The Devil Rides Out* (1934). The

Hammer Studios production of the film version in 1968 (starring Christopher Lee) features an extended, detailed scene of the magic circle. This motif is elaborated in my book *In The Dust of This Planet* (Hants, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 49ff.

62. The artifact and the portal come together in horror stories that feature objects loaded with symbolic meaning. Consider the case of mirrors and mirroring: Edgar Allen Poe's "The Oval Portrait"; Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; Robert Chambers's "The Mask"; Edogawa Rampo's "Hell of Mirrors"; and, though it is not, strictly speaking, part of the horror genre, Maya Deren's 1943 avant-garde film *Meshes in the Afternoon*. The culmination of the artifact and the portal is also evident in the haunted house story. In some instances the house itself, as architectural object, becomes an artifact, while in others the house or parts of the house serve as portals. The former describes much of the gothic novel tradition, exemplified in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, and extended in earlier horror films such as *The Haunting*, and in contemporary examples such as the TV series *American Horror Story*. The latter case might include films such as *The Sentinel*, *The Legend of Hell House*, and *The Amityville Horror*. The 1960s TV series *Thriller* (hosted by Boris Karloff) often featured haunted houses of this kind. The episode "The Hungry Glass" features haunted mirrors in a haunted house—or a house haunted by mirrors. Again playing on the mirror/mirroring motif, Alejandro Aménabar's 2001 film *The Others* features a haunted house in which memorial photography serves as a medium. Finally, the 1959 William Castle film *The House on Haunted Hill*, while it ultimately dispels the supernatural, is one of the few horror films to openly meditate on horror cinema and illusion (much in line with the spirit of Méliès).

63. A more rigorous, Lovecraftian way of writing this last sentence would be: ". . . the mediation is not between two points in a single reality, *but between two realities.*"

64. This idea of the crystal as the ultimate medium is further explored in Dominic Pettman, "A Dream of Crystal Ships," in *Illuminations: A Journal of Critical and Cultural Theory* 2, no. 3 (forthcoming

2014). Pettman's text draws on the Baudrillardian notion of "the revenge of the crystal" and the J. G. Ballard novel *The Crystal World*.

65. Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 115.

66. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 456, translation mine.

67. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, 117.

68. *Ibid.*, 115–16.

69. Maaïke van der Lugt, *La Ver, La Démon, et la Vierge* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2004), 238, translation mine.

70. Armando Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41, 54.

71. Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*, 7.

72. Siegfried Zielinski and Silvia Wagnermaier, eds., *Variantology 1: On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences, and Technologies* (Cologne: Walther König, 2007), 11.