Tertium datur. Introduction to a Negative Media Theory[1]

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Abstract

The objective of this article is to present general lines of a negative theory of media and its methodological approach. Every effort of a negative theory of media is based on risking the impossible to somehow extract such exhibition of its own mediatization and becoming the visible medial in itself as medial.

Keywords: media theory, philosophy of language, philosophy of communication, mediality

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[1]. Slightly reworked and abridged version of: "Tertium datur. Einleitung in eine negative Medientheorie", in: S. Münker und A. Roesler (Eds.). Was ist ein Medium?.Frankfurt am Main, 2008

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APORETICS OF THE MEDIAL

The concept of medium is equivocal. It clearly has no exact point of reference. Therefore it cannot be analysed precisely; it is marked by a structural impenetrability. My starting point is that "media," whatever the expression means exactly, are to be characterised in that they obscure their mediality to the same extent as they produce mediating effects. "Media" forfeit their own appearance by making *something* appear. Their presence has the format of an absence.

Instead of "media" it would be better to speak of "mediality" in the sense of the structure of the medial – that structure that shows what "media" create, represent, transfer or mediate, so that "medium" itself is not an adequate object of enquiry. Instead one should look at the underlying materialities, dispositives and performances that accompany medial processes i.e. are integrated into them without disclosing themselves.

This outlines a programme of research that I would like to expound as a programme of negative media theory. It deals with the characteristics of the medial itself. Even the word "media" refers to something that *holds the centre* and is therefore neither one thing nor the other, neither something given or something mediated, transferred or transformed because it itself is lost in the process of mediation. No mediation can mediate its own conditions or for that matter its materiality and structure – this is the culmination of the medial paradox.

The concept of mediality is "marked" by this – this paradox also being admittedly true for sign processes as well as for the logic of embodiment and

for the symbolic order. What these are cannot in turn be an element of their function, whether it be the materiality or structurality of signs, the moment of their positing, the corpus of their embodiment and its limits, the form of the symbolic order, their points of origin or the performance that they deliver as such – they can all only be described negatively, that is with a series of negations that constantly state what these are not. This figure also corresponds to that "centre" or mediality of the concept, as it appears in the middle of the second part of Hegel's *Wissenschaft der Logik* where it is identified as the negativity of mediation, namely as the constantly "disintegrating centre" in the process of mediation, as Hegel puts it. This is the fundament for the concept of a "negative" media theory. Embedded in a series of concepts that are structurally related and have similar characteristics, it refers to the irreperable negativity of medial processes in general. If "media," as the theory suggests, resist all analysis, if they themselves disappear in their appearance, if therefore their work consists of dissolving themselves in fulfillment of their function – and the whole dynamic of technical *perfectio* pertaining to the art of illusion and audiovisual immersitivity can be derived from this – then a theory of "media" in the sense of a study of their specific "mediality" can at best only work indirectly, as it were, looking at it "from the side." Whereas Hegel still trusted in the rationality of the concept of "concept" in order to unfold as much as to observe it, this is impossible in the field of mediality because it is a matter of external structures that shape perception, thinking and action and thereby remain antecedent to all reflection and determination. We are therefore dealing with the systematic problem or aporia that we have to analyse something that constantly causes the analysis to become volatile and foists itself on it like an unconscious cultural element without being observable because observation is only possible through a mediation that produces its own effects and practices, its structures and materiality on the process of observation and simultaneously denies them. For this reason, some have spoken from a media philosophical point of view of a "media a priori,"[3] but this expression is unfortunate since it evokes a "media idealism" that in turn creates an antinomy that makes one see the defining and the defined according to the same schema, that is, to posit and at the same time to lose the

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[3] See Frank Hartmann or Reinhard Margreiter, in Stefan Münker, Alexander Roesler, Mike Sandtbothe (eds.), *Medienphilosophie. Beiträge zur Klärung eines Begriffs*, Frankfurt-am-Main 2003, p. 135ff., 150ff.

medial as the undefined. Although the medial partly constitutes the mediated, *it in no way forms its constituens*. In such a case conceiving of or even discovering the medial at all becomes incomprehensible.

Obviously, any positive definition of mediality must fail. Correspondingly, the medial, which obscures as much as it makes possible, can only be decyphered from its results, which again brings us back to the unavoidable indirectness of media theory. The consequence of this is that the mediality of the medium refuses determination; it doesn't allow any statement to be made about it – that is what Wittgenstein tried to demonstrate in his *Tractacus logico-philosophicus* with regards to the logical form of images and language: "The picture, however, cannot represent its form of representation; it shows it forth."

> Propositions cannot represent the logical form: this mirrors itself in the proposition. That which mirrors itself in language, language cannot represent. That which expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by language. The propositions show the logical form of reality. They exhibit it. (Wittgenstein: 1968: 2.172 e 4.121).

An analogous formulation might be: no medium can communicate its own mediality because the form of the message cannot itself be the content of the message. The resulting basis for a negative media theory is that the structure of the medial cannot be that which is mediated – *it shows itself*. All attempts of formulating a negative media theory are grounded in daring the impossible and teasing this *showing itself* out of mediation and making the medial within the medial visible.

TRAILS, FISSURES, FURROWS

An indirect procedure of this kind owes something to Heidegger and Derrida. They deal entirely with language, but can serve as a methodological model for the development of a negative media theory.[4] For example, Heidegger's consideration of the problem of the unavoidable self-referentiality within all discussions of language, since they have always already begun using the same language they are discussing, which originates from *Der Weg der Sprache*. Here he shows that it is impossible to discuss language in any other way than through language since all other forms in which reflection is meant to take place are themself a language. All discourse shows itself to be so pervaded by the medium of language that when it

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[4] See Dieter Mersch, "Negative Medialität. Derridas Différance und Heideggers Weg zur Sprache," in *Journal Phänomenologie*, Jacques Derrida, vol. 23 (2005), p. 14-22.

becomes the subject of the discourse *as* language, it becomes stubborn and occasionally intervenes insubordinately. This intervention, however, remains so general that talk about language finds itself in the confusing situation of continously raising the topic in the discussion and obscuring it again. We are dealing therefore, as in the beginning, with a fundamental withdrawal that cannot be avoided since it is a condition of the possibility of media and linguistic reflection. This awkwardness implies, Heidegger argues, that by being "in language and with language we have first to 'clear a path'" to it – a path that is not pre-ordained, without goal and therefore without an end – in order to be able to follow it in the sense of a method, but which we can only open up by walking, that is, by speaking. All talk about language therefore remains with the limitation, as Heidegger later put it, that it can only make language talk as language" – a finding that threatens to bury any attempt at a philosophy of language from the start as it sees itself entangled in talking

> that wants to release language in order to imagine it as language and to articulate that which it imagines, which at the same time shows that language itself has entangled us in talking. (Heidegger, 2008: 192, passim)

Evidently we are dealing with the same difficulty as in media theory, which Heidegger solves by striving to illuminate language from the differences that reflection on language leaves within itself. Thinking becomes like following a trail. At the fissures, or "furrows" as Heidegger calls them, that talking creates, its "rift" or breakdown is manifested – a word evoking at the same time a "sketch" or "blueprint" and which summarises the whole indirectness of linguistically reflective endeavours. For Heidegger it becomes a basic theme: All talk that finds itself "on the way" to language has already "marked" this in talking, that is, has modified it. The philosophy of language therefore cannot discover language direcly (as philosophy of media cannot discover media themselves), but only traces of such modifications, and one has to constantly move and displace language in order to tease out different, surprising and

unexpected channellings, just as is the case with the mediality of media. It is incidentally worth noting that Heidegger uses the same word for it as Wittgenstein, since language is not a structure, not a system of meanings, nor a tool for communication, but rather, to use a somewhat mannered expression, "die Zeige", the "pointing out." The "Zeige" or "pointing out" is that which can only show in the process of speech, that is, the performativity of talking, and what is shown that cannot be said. The consequence similarly corresponds to Derrida's deconstruction, which works with the multiplication of over-writings of a text in order to reveal its unconscious aspect and its implicit intentions and to describe its "procedure" (which is not actually a procedure) using what Heidegger calls a "furrow", a "rift" and "delineation" and Derrida calls a "trace" or "engraving" to describe the analogous manoeuvre of making apparent something invisible or unrepresentable, namely the structurality of a structure and its occurrence, with those changes and displacements that are happening through its implementation, its performativity. They reveal their hidden markings most urgently where they most obviously depart from their normal path. The programme of negative media theory takes its model and its radical character from this. Mediality in this context is that indeterminability from which one can only make new sketches whose delineations and breakdowns arise above all from transversing performances and their interruptions, coming from the side and intervening in the structure involved, inventing leaps and contradictions, which attempt to tackle the paradox of the medial, its disappearance at the moment of appearance, using medial paradoxes to literally tease it out of the reserve, to challenge it, break it open and expose the contours which stubbornly hide in the appearance of things that are not only technically perfect.

ANAMORPHOSIS AS A METHOD

Admittedly this requires practice in ways of seeing that do not follow the functions in the foreground but focus instead on ruptures and dysfunctionalities that correspond to the "view from the side" mentioned above. Artistic interventions can serve as a model. The connections between art and media are reflected in this. Its paradigm is especially exemplified by the image production of the early modern era. As is well known, since the regime of the subjective gaze

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established itself, art used technical apparatus and the mathematics of central perspective as its rational principle. Alberti defined a picture in two ways, namely on the one hand as a view through a window, whose frame constructs the mediality of its pictorial character by positing iconic difference, and on the other hand as a cross-section though a visual cone, which guaranteed the geometrical constructability of its depiction and disciplined the gaze as well as the representation.

Many pictures by Leonardo and Dürer, not just their instruction manuals and sketch books, but also the self-representations of the artists, provide evidence of the unprecedented effort to raise the prestige of their craft and make art a *Scientia*.
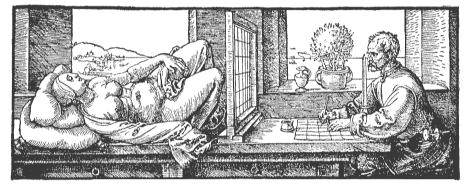
Fig. 1: Albrecht Dürer, Perspektivkonstruktion, extraído de: Albrecht Dürer, Unterweisung der Messung mit dem Zirkel und Richtscheit, viertes Buch, "Theorie der Perspektive", Nürnberg 1925, o.P.

These representations intervene in the construction of illusion by simultaneously revealing and confirming the secrets of their production. These images owe less to techniques such as the *camera obscura* than some media theories have suggested, although they are a part of the story, rather, it would be much more precise to talk of techniques in the sense of practices that were kept secret in order to enhance their performative power.

The dependence on such techniques, especially in popular art such as panoramic theatre, were increasingly refined in order to lose their frame, their immobility and their limitations and thereby released a dynamic which bears witness to the constantly failing magic of a merely technical illusion by having the apparatus used grow to monstrous scale to overwhelm the distrustful but seducable audience. Art, however, always went for the interruption

Fig. 2: Johannes Vermeer, A Arte da Pintura (ca. 1666), Museu Kunsthistorisches de Viena, fonte: Wikipedia., o.P.

of the manic eye by setting up aesthetic strategies that aggrevated uninterrupted desire with irritations and obstacles.

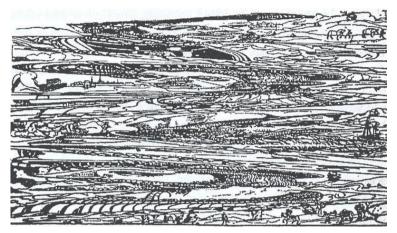Anamorphosis is such a procedure, one that originally dates from the time central perspective arose and operates just as mathematically, but uses non-Euclidian geometry instead of Euclidian. Its radicality consists of unmasking the latter by bringing another method of image production into play that does not only relativise the as Leonardo disputed, but also exposes the pictorial ical construction. Already discovered and systematically studied by the painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth century to solve the problem of distortion in large wall and vault frescos, it shook both the mathematical foundations of art and seeing by creating a paradox. As part of the mathematical order of image construction it provides no recognisable representation, rather it erases that which is represented and dissolves the figure in order to have it emerge in another place, namely at an extreme angle of almost 180°. We are therefore dealing, as Jurgis Baltrušaitis has observed, with a "rupture… between the form and its depiction."[5] The picture has to be negated, it has to be dissolved in an incomprehensible tangle of lines, in order create a puzzle that the observer can experience, the solution to which he can only discover if he looks at it *from the side*, where one normally doesn't see anything. It suddenly leaps out like a fantasy and shows itself where it cannot be: *in front of* the picture like a mysterious apparition without a cause.

Fig. 3: Anamorphose, Erhard Schön, „Vier Portraits europäischer Herrschen (1535/40)", extraído de: Max Geisbach, Der deutsche

One of the most famous anamorphoses, Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* of 1533, puts this directly into the picture. Something comes into play between the two depicted figures that disrupts the image and appears to disturb the representation – the anamorphotic representation of a skull that introduces an ambiguous third figure into the image. Either ones sees life and misses death – or one sees death and life is dissolved. In this way anamorphosis creates a

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[5] Jurgis Baltrušaitis. „Vorwort". *Anamorphosen. Ein Spiel mit der Wahrnehmung, dem Schein und der Wirklichkeit*. Ausstellung 1975. Cologne, 1975, p. 6.

paradoxical figurality that by appearing to show nothing shows the mediality of image construction – that visible *Imaginarium*, which upsets all the criteria of rational explainability as a rational construct. It is not a question, as it would be later in the art of the Romantics, of representing the unrepresentable, but of showing the limits of image construction (that *as* a boundary are required by the whole dispositive of image production and exhaust its repertoire) to make it apparent by bringing its function to a halt.

Fig. 4: **The Ambassadors** *(1533), Hans Holbein, The National Gallery – London. Source: Wikipedia.*

MEDIA PARADOXES

Because of this one could describe anamorphosis as a kind of "chamber of wonders" of perspective art, which, like the other chambers of wonders of the baroque era, contains curiosities that demand a way of classifying the world that go against the usual classificatory systems: I do not mention them to mark them as curiosities, but to present them as examples of the kind of operation I call "viewing from the side." For me they function as a metaphor for the kind of observational strategies that are the basis of negative media theory. They are also a metaphor for a specific reflective procedure in the arts. It was Roland Barthes who introduced the metaphor of anamorphosis as an operational principle for textual strategies in a similar way and identified them with what he called "diversifying critique" (Barthes, 1967: 76). That is a kind of critique that does not attack the text or the interpretation from the exterior and subject it to the personal projections of the reader, but rather a reading of the dispersions and repetitions that reveal the mechanism of its organisation (one could say its mediality) with constant re-reading. It is a reading that breaks with the usual dimensions of reading and opens the text to that which works beneath the text but cannot be read with it because it constitutes the specific textuality of a text and expresses itself in surprising rhetorical tricks, ruptures in argument or figuration that disturb or recast images, which are already in circulation. The procedures are aesthetic, as the idea of anamorphotic method is itself an art that is neither canonisable nor based on rules, but rather, as I will show with a few selected examples, posits ever new paradoxes on what is already a lawless invention, whose productivity is in no way limited to anamorphosis in a literal sense, but serves various forms of erasure, redirection of the gaze,

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destabilisation, interference or chiasmus in order to open up the now often mentioned angled point of view, the oblique angle from the side by plumbing the depths of their contradictions: "Wanting to change content is not enough," wrote Roland Barthes in this context, "the main thing is to make ruptures in the system of sense" (Barthes, 1988: 12).

This gives negative media theory its contours. Its models are interventions, disturbances, obstacles, the reversal of structures, the extreme slowing or acceleration of time, the doubling up of or iteration of signs, amplification exploited to obscenity and much more: They all induce strategies of difference which cannot be listed individually, only discovered anew. Mediality as a non-ascertainable concept to be understood from within, and with a similarly insecure and open process of prismatic breaks that constantly exposes other facets and unknown dimensions. One example of this is Robert Rauschenberg's Erased de Kooning Drawing of 1951, which, whether it is a fake or not, in no way obscures the lines, but instead keeps traces of the erasure and thereby the pictorial character of the picture. Another example is René Magritte's famous Ceci n'est pas une pipe, which he painted in various versions between 1928 and 1966 with titles like La trahison des images (1929, 1948) or Le deux mystères (1966). By using well known codes from advertising and posters that everyone is aware of, and are always comprehensible, but going against the grain, they generate complex text-image

Fig. 5: *La trahison des images*, René Magritte. René Magritte, *Die Kunst der Konversation*. Catalogue of Colection of Art Nordhein-Westfallen, Munique/New York 1996, p 66.

paradoxes, which appear unsolvable from all sides and thereby reveal something about image-sign and text-sign relationship. The pictures do not want to show, as some have suggested, that pictures are not pipes but only depict them – that would make the statement true – rather the whole instability only works if one recognises the pipe-image as an image, that is, as a pipe – which makes the statement false. It is not just a logical-discursive problem that is at issue, a chiasmus is created that crosses two medialities in contradictory ways and thus unhinges the text-image hierarchy that has been established for centuries. For now it is no longer clear which has priority, if the image dominates the text, or the text the

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image. Similar things could be said of Jasper Johns' Flag of 1955. It seems to double the paradoxes and to introduce a fathomlessness between image and political action. An American flag that displays the tachistic way it was painted, which simultaneously confirms and annuls its emblems, whilst keeping its character as a national symbol that a patriot could salute, but which denies its own character as a flag and shows what American culture is in general, i.e. pop. In short, we are dealing with painting that is not painting inasmuch as it uses a political symbol, so that in the end we are dealing with a political act that intervenes performatively by committing sacrilege.

REFLEXIVITY IN THE MEDIAL: THE ROLE OF ART

These are only examples, but such examples are legion in the history of the arts and can be reclaimed just as easily from music, poetry, film or so-called media arts. They express the specifics of aesthetic procedures in contrast to discursive ones. In particular they permit *effects of media reflection* on the basis of artistic strategies. I am engaging with art in an attempt to make it productive for a negative media theory and it is my view that reflections on media need the kind of artistic strategies outlined here, and vice versa. Where these are lacking the mediality of the medium remains chronically obscured. This, incidentally, is also a profound reason for the abrupt division between an aesthetics of illusion and the work of the arts. The latter breaks the medium open, uses it against itself, ensnares it in contradictions to uncover the medial dispositive, the structures of exposure, narrative operations and so on, while the former just uses and continues them. In this sense the artist is less a *maître de plaisir*, an arranger of effects, than a *maître de paradoxe*, a master of contradiction and reciprocal interventions. Using the mediality of the medium against the grain and making its indiscernability discernable – that is the function of such contradictions and interventions and where negative media theory finds its actual profile and method, a method which, incidentally, cannot be made systematic because to a great extent it exists due to these singular creative adventures and their "leaps," which in his musical-philosophical work *Quasi una fantasia* Adorno said consist ultimately of doing things "where we do not know what they are." [6]

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[6] Theodor W. Adorno, Quasi una fantasia, in *Musikalische Schriften I-III*, Frankfurt-am-Main 2003, p. 540.

In short, the problem facing negative media theory is this – if, as assumed, "media" have their primal function in transfering, constructing and making something perceivable, if this is the case nothing can be said of presence without the mediality of a medium and, as Derrida put it in his early philosophy, the event does not take place because its uniqueness presents itself only to death and the presentation of "presence as such"7 always preserves "the presence of what is present" and erases it at the same time, then the mediality of the medium would always be closed and indeterminable and becomes the victim of its own magic. That is why I spoke of a fundamental withdrawal, a negativity – but this indeterminability can at least be partly forced open and the magic therein excorcised through the use of "medial paradoxes." This is what I see as the special relationship between media and the arts. The latter are always probing the quasi-anamorphotic manoeuvre, the change of visual angle that allows for a "seeing from the side" where there is no reflexivity. We are dealing with "medial reflexivity", which is capable of paradoxical manoeuvres that show the mediality of the medium. At the same time it makes a position of distance possible without a locatable Other. In this way it blasts the immanence from the immanence. Correspondingly it has no discursive rationale and does not adhere to a strict procedure or to objectifiable criteria of its construction, but rather it is content in the directives of an endless artistic experiment. This is also the reason why art has more to show media theory than media theory has to say to art. By means of paradoxical interventions it brings medial conditions and structures into play, as much as it uses and turns them around against themself in a negative way and in so doing brings them to light. Thus the paradoxes complete a movement of postponement and confusion, as Heidegger claimed for language and Derrida did for writing – as movement that creates "traces" and "furrows" and thereby leaves behind "delineations" which expose the specific mechanisms and operations of medial processes and their evident nature – as the work of the picture, for instance, of the visible, the bulkiness of material in meaning, as the uncontrollability of construction, as power effect or indifference between reality and fictionality, to name but a few. We are dealing, therefore, entirely with difference strategies, with the

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[7] Jacques Derrida, *Die Schrift und die Differenz*, Frankfurt-am-Main 1976, p. 374.

differences in medial repertoire, where what Heidegger called the "breakdown" happens, with all its connotations of the ephemeral and the provisional as well as the open, which suddenly makes something visible that is normally hidden from view. Constantly kindling the processes anew, making them restless in order to tease out another, still unknown side – this is not art for art's sake, not l'art pour l'art, but a way of aesthetic perception that cannot be discovered any other way, but which can never be guaranteed since it consists exclusively of indirect effects, of processes of showing, that do not take part in the discursive.

PRESENTS

As a postscript, I would like to turn to an artistic work that brilliantly summarises my theses. I am referring to a work by the Canadian artist and experimental film maker Michael Snow. It dates from 1981 and is called *Presents*. The title plays with the multiple meanings of the word – "gift," "present" "attention" and "show." It is no coincidence that these terms go together. The present shows itself to us as a gift, as that which is given can be interpreted as a gift that we receive without need for reciprocation, but which in turn demands our attention in the medium shown to us. This marks an opposition, namely the opposition between presence as gift and the presence of something that was always present, which constructs presence as such. The film plays with this opposition. It begins with a scene that is prototypical in the history of art by attempting to depict absence in the picture. The evocation of a presence supposedly occurs most forcefully when we are addressed and affected by the object that is represented, for instance, when our physical desire is directly involved and reacts – traditonally in the nude, in male dominated art, specifically the female nude. It represents the depiction of the present *par excellence* in the historical order of the male gaze – flawed at the same time because of the painful distance that the medium induces, namely the impossibility of presence. We are therefore dealing with an invocation whose failure increases the more it tries to provoke desire. The nude is therefore a conventional topos, one that has long symbolised all sorts of things in a

way that distorts and discredits the simple nakedness in the double sense of bareness and the gift of simple presents. It appears to confirm Derrida's dictum that the present can be presented to us only in mediated form, that is, as an already overwritten present that therefore is always already met by an original non-presence. With the example of Michael Snow's work, I would like to show that this not the case, that the presence involved here occurs in a different place than expected. Snow uses the traditional topoi anew, he uses them with all the clichés of their presentation, including the peep show format and the interior; he adds movement, has the nude stand up and observe us as the observer to shame us in our voyeurism; but this too is a well known theme that adds nothing really new to the subject.

On this level, *Presents* fails, just like all other picture media, to overleap the presence of the gift and the gift of the presence and make them experiencable. Something else happens, however, and this makes the video interesting for our current context. It is not what is shown, the playing with conventions and their stereotypes, that is important, but the fact that the video itself *stretches* before our eyes and, grounded with a tension-producing sound, slowly creates a picture, and exposes its pictorial character by emphasising the frame and the detail with a small photographic format and disturbing its visibility by being a little out of focus. The image makes us not *witnesses* of a scene, but *witnesses of the medium itself*. Its mediality is presented by the fact that we see nothing at first other than a distortion, which is again incidentally also anamorphotic, we see a picture being erected and unfolded in an almost martial act of force, leaving us for a long while uncertain of what we are seeing and calling from the onset into question if we see what we think we see, but which captures us to the extent that it becomes clear, only for it to disappear in a new distortion.

Presents is in fact something other than the presence of a visibility, and the question of the relationship between presence and absence is raised in a new way – it is not that which is seen that is not made present to observation through desire, rather the mediality of the medium becomes apparent – and in means of depiction whose paradoxical contours show something that

is undepictable, namely the medial conditions of depiction itself. They confront us with the massive optical intervention of its technical production, with the power of immersitivity that is strengthened with the penetrating dramatic tone. In other words, there is a medial depiction that as non-presence can lay open the presence of the medial by referring to the mediality of the medium. Such a referring is a *showing.* In this sense *Presents* is the paradoxical presence of the medial, whose perceptibility includes the empty void and the darkness at the beginning and end of the sequence, where a something, a line, although we do not yet know what it is and what it means, heralds the start of something uncanny.

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