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2014

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13700>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wiesing, Lambert: What Are Media?. In: Annie van den Oever (Hg.): *Technē/Technology. Researching Cinema and Media Technologies – Their Development, Use, and Impact*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2014, S. 93–102. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13700>.

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What Are Media?

Lambert Wiesing

When we look at the current state of media studies, we might well think that it may be better not to ask the question *What are media?* but rather *What isn't a medium?* Indeed the situation seems to be such that media studies is determined by a rather large number of concepts of media that are, however, equally wide, in part even unlimited. Media studies, that is, is determined by concepts of media that to a worrisome degree have moved away from the everyday understanding of the medium as a means of communication. This diagnosis is by no means restricted to an isolated current. On the contrary, the inflationary employment of the concept “media,” remarkably, can be observed in media theories that understand themselves as competing positions. The technically oriented approach of Marshall McLuhan can document as well as the system-theoretical approach of Niklas Luhmann and the concept of media in phenomenological theories how work is done – if not in the same way, then to the same extent – with an underdetermined concept of media. Just a short look at the main theses of these approaches can show this.

In McLuhan's work media – like all other “technics” – have the status of a means. Media are tools that improve human action and cognition. Just as the hammer is an artificial improvement and expansion of the human body, the McLuhan tradition holds, other media are as well. While mechanical technics relocate the bodily functions of the human being to the exterior, electronic media exterritorialize the central nervous system and the sense organs. Media simulate or amplify, implement or replace bodily and organic capacities. This understanding of media leads McLuhan – and his many followers – to count not only every tool but even every form of energy as part of the meaning of the concept “media.” We may sharpen McLuhan's concept of media in the following formulation: the concepts “medium” and “tool” are synonymous.

Niklas Luhmann's system-theoretical concept of media, in particular, deliberately presents itself as an alternative to this technically oriented approach. Luhmann, following Fritz Heider, determines the medium as a possibility for real forms. Media are an open plurality of possible connections. This means that Luhmann and his followers use the concept “medium” with the meaning “opportunity for existence,” “disposition,” or simply “possibility.” Every undetermined possibility that allows for the manifestation of determined forms is a me-

dium. The medium is the opportunity to convert a form into something. That is, completely different from McLuhan's conception, a medium for Luhmann does not itself do anything and is therefore not a part of any message either. Media themselves cannot be present and graspable at all, for they are always only a possibility determinable by concrete forms. We may sharpen Luhmann's concept of media in the following formulation: the concepts "medium" and "possibility" become synonymous, and the extension of the concept of media is correspondingly wide; art, society, and the human capacity for perception are all media.

Phenomenological media theories present themselves as yet another alternative – this time both to the technologically oriented and to the system-theoretical approach. This can be observed particularly clearly in Boris Groys's *Unter Verdacht: Eine Phänomenologie der Medien* [Under Suspicion: A Phenomenology of Media].¹ What is particular about phenomenological media theories is that they define media exclusively via their presence with the user of media. For all the differences between phenomenological media theories, one observation is always the focus of interest – the transparency of media or the self-denial of the medium. A medium, accordingly, is a means that functions only when it steps back. To fulfill their function, media must remain unthematized. Put differently, media display something without displaying themselves. In this respect they are comparable to a transparent windowpane that allows for a look without itself being seen and through which we only look as long as we do not pay attention to it. Media, from this point of view, do all the more justice to their task the more they neutralize themselves in their employment as media. A well-known description of this medial transparency in Maurice Merleau-Ponty goes as follows:

Now, one of the effects of language is to efface itself to the extent that its expression comes across. [...] When someone – an author or a friend – succeeds in expressing himself, the signs are immediately forgotten; all that remains is the meaning. The perfection of languages lies in its capacity to pass unnoticed.

*But therein lies the virtue of language: it is language which propels us toward the things it signifies. In the way it works, language hides itself from us. Its triumph is to efface itself.*²

The consequence of this phenomenological approach is clear. All means that remain unthematized during their employment are addressed as media. Accordingly, signs are media the same way every tool is. Not only is every glove a medium; even one's own body [*Körper*] is explicitly described by Merleau-Ponty as a medium, since it is invisible in the course of perception and action.³ We have to go even further: there is much to suggest that in the phenomenological tradition the body [*Leib*] is not just an example of a medium but the silent archetype of all

media. This, at least, is the conclusion reached by Christian Bernes: “The Body is the Paradigm of Mediality” [*Der Leib ist das Paradigma der Medialität*].⁴

To sum up: Even a short look at prominent positions within contemporary media theory shows that the concept of media in each case can hardly be said to correspond to the experience of media, if not in the same way then to the same extent. In all three theoretical approaches the concept of media retains only the most distant connection to the prominent everyday understanding of media as a means of communication. Media theories analyze their own “home-made media,” for the phenomena analyzed as media have been identified as such only by the respective theories. We are dealing with media theories of things that without these theories would not be media, such as energy, perception, or the body. In all three cases the concept loses significantly in intension and gains alarmingly in extension.

This progressive de-limitation of the concept of media has by no means gone unnoticed. On the contrary, we might get the impression that in this respect there is a kind of reversal in media studies, especially in the last few years. At least we can observe that the number of critics of concepts of media that are too wide is on the rise. Exemplary of this trend is Matthias Vogel, with his widely noticed study *Medien der Vernunft* [Media of Reason], in which he emphatically warns that in the pre-eminent media theories, which “are more prone to damaging the reputation of the concept of media in the long run,” the “highest point in the process of dedifferentiation” is attained, the point, that is, at which “the concept of media is threatened by substantial erosion.”⁵

Georg Christoph Tholen is even more radical in his study *Die Zäsur der Medien* [The Caesura of Media]. He does not even regard the media theories presented above as theoretical contributions but merely cites them as historical examples for the “de-limitation of the figural and authentic meaning” of the concept of media. The classics of media theory, for Tholen, come with a “sprawling metaphors in the[ir] conceptual attempts at determining the mediality of media.”⁶

In short, what is missing are the differences that make a difference. If with McLuhan every tool, with Luhmann every possibility, and with the phenomenologists every transparency is addressed as medium, there must arise a call for the determination of criteria with which it becomes possible to distinguish the screwdriver from the television set, art from the telephone, and a windowpane from a book. That is why Matthias Vogel is correct in his demands: “An alternative to the turn away from the looming equivocation of media and tools and the devaluation of the concept of media can only come into view if we distinguish the goals to whose actualization media contribute from those that can be achieved with the aid of tools or their means.”⁷ This, precisely, seems to be the challenge of a media theory that works systematically: the search for a *differentia specifica* to keep the concept of media from deteriorating into a mere synonym of other concepts. Remarkably, the labor on this question is relevant beyond the concrete

problem itself. For as long as media theories work with concepts of media according to which almost anything can be described as a medium, they will be regarded by other disciplines as worrisome academic jacks of all trades, which surely is not conducive to the process of its institutionalization in the academy. If this danger is to be continued by a fruitful perspective, there is no way around advocating a concept of media that has more sense and less meaning, more intention and less extension. And this, precisely, can only be achieved by strictly ensuring that necessary characteristics of media are not treated as sufficient ones.

When we stand on the floor wearing socks and shoes, we usually do not sense our socks and shoes but the floor. We perceive mediately whether we stand or walk on carpet, grass, or concrete. The shoes and socks are not perfectly nonpresent, for it is very well possible to distinguish whether we walk barefoot or in shoes. But this belongs to transparency: it always includes opacity as well. What is decisive, exclusively, is that the shoes and the socks are not themselves thematized but that they let the ground below and its properties such as bumps be perceived. And now the crucial question poses itself: how do the socks fare with the media theorist? Only two possible answers are conceivable.

First, the socks and shoes, too, are accepted as media, for after all it is by means of them that a thing that is not directly touched is perceived; they are a transparent extension of the body. Formally speaking, the argument is that transparency is a sufficient phenomenological property of media, which is why all transparent means, that is all tools that are not thematized in their employment, are media.

Second, shoes and socks do indeed have a phenomenal property that media have as well, but this property is not sufficient for media, only necessary. The definition of media via transparency raises a necessary property to the level of a sufficient property. Yet the sufficient property is a completely different one. The same argument can be used for McLuhan and Luhmann. Media are tools but not every tool is a medium, or media offers possibilities but not every possibility is a medium.

If we follow this second path we are concerned with the search for a *differentia specifica*, a sufficient criterion by means of which media can be distinguished from other phenomena that have the same necessary properties. What is remarkable is that what offers itself for this delimitation by means of a sufficient characteristic is a distinction that belongs to the great classical ideas of Husserl's phenomenology. The suggestion is that media are those tools that make it possible to separate genesis from validity. Media, accordingly, are tools or means that are transparent during their employment; but they are also specific tools that are capable of something that other tools cannot achieve, namely a separation of genesis and validity. This suggestion of a definition takes recourse to a genuinely phenomenological idea, albeit an idea that until now has hardly been noticed in

phenomenological media theory. This is not surprising insofar as the distinction of genesis and validity was developed by Edmund Husserl at the end of the 19th century without any reference whatsoever to media theoretical questions. The separation of genesis and validity that Husserl develops in the first volume of his *Logische Untersuchungen* [Logical Investigations] of 1900, following to a large extent similar reflections by Gottlob Frege, is seen as the central argument against psychologism and historicism.

Humans are capable of producing something that has no physical properties by means of techniques of production that can be described physically – this is the claim of the separation of genesis and validity. The concept of genesis is used generally for all physical processes. Every process of production or emergence is – in somewhat emphatic terminology, to be sure – addressed as “genesis.” Put tautologically, this means that genesis is the genetic process that generates something. These processes take place in space and time; they are empirical facts and can accordingly be studied with the means of different empirical sciences. Thus, for example, it can always be determined when such a process of emergence begins and when it ends, where it takes place and under which conditions it unfolds. An empirical process is always a process that can be changed and also be destroyed, that is to say aborted – and this is not the case for validities. We can speak of a validity when something seems to exist that has no physical properties. Indeed, it is easiest to determine validity negatively, by saying what it is not: it is something that is not physically graspable yet to which humans can nonetheless refer. We sense this nonphysicality of validities in particular when we take notice of time. If something is unchangeable and does not become older, then it cannot be an empirical thing. What is in the world also ages with the world. In considering time, Husserl describes the decisive difference between empirical processes and validities. Validities are “untouched by the contingency, temporality and transience of our mental acts.”⁸ His example is a mathematical calculation. If we take the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$, then we have on the one hand an empirical speech, a materialized process in space and time, a physically describable phenomenon. Yet on the other hand we also have the validity of this proposition, which is not dependent on who formulates this proposition when and how: “Acts of counting arise and pass away and cannot be meaningfully mentioned in the same breath as numbers.”⁹ What Husserl means is a difference that is as simple as it is important: if the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$ is printed in a book, this material sentence will age, yellow; it can be erased, or the book can be destroyed. But what is meant by the proposition is not touched by these changes in time; the content of the proposition does not grow older, which is why Husserl writes, “In this sphere there can be no talk of individual facts. Of what is temporally definite.”¹⁰ Hence a property is present that cannot be thought physically: everything that has a physical existence must grow older. Yet validities are removed from the ravages of time because they are not physically existent. What

is not in time cannot be changed by physical force. Husserl writes, therefore, “My act of judging that $2 \times 2 = 4$ is no doubt causally determined, but this is not true of the truth $2 \times 2 = 4$.”¹¹

Husserl’s example has one great disadvantage: it suggests that truth and validity are identical. Yet this precisely is not the case. What this is about is just that different people at different times can mean the same thing by the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$. Validity is a precondition equally for truth and for falsity. For even someone who wants to claim that the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$ is by no means always true finds him- or herself in opposition to whoever thinks, like Husserl, that the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$ is always true only if both mean the same thing by their different propositions and thus are of a different opinion about the same thing. Only if we are of different opinions about the same thing are we of different opinions – and this, precisely, is what validity is: the existence of something that is the same for several people at different times.

In light of the classic distinction of genesis and validity the question imposes itself: how is this possible? How can something that does not have any physical properties be generated with physical tools? The question seems unanswerable because in the end it asks how thinking and rationality are possible. Yet even if we cannot explain how something is possible, we can sometimes describe what is necessary for it, in this case: media. Media are necessary for the separation of genesis and validity – other tools are incapable of this, which is why the following definition imposes itself: media are precisely those tools with which this separation can miraculously be accomplished and which constitute at the same time the mediation between both moments. “Separation” here does not mean that one could, so to speak, really isolate validity and cut it off from the hardware and put it aside like a thing. “Separation” means that media always consist of a genesis aspect and a validity aspect and that this conceptual distinction is necessary and possible in their case alone. Husserl’s example already shows this: only somebody who employs a conceptual language as a medium is capable of thinking by means of the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$ something that can also be thought by other people at other times by means of this medium. Human beings can think things and relations that do not grow older, that cannot be influenced by physical processes, only with the help of the medium language. In short, only by means of media can different human beings at different times think and mean not only something equivalent but also the very same thing [*nicht nur das gleiche, sondern dasselbe*].¹² We may even determine the somewhat antiquated concept “validity” as follows: validity is artificial self-sameness [*Selbigkeit*] and media are the means for the production of artificial self-sameness.

In many books, in many locations, the self-same novel can be read – it is precisely this self-same novel that affects so many people so differently, that is at different times interpreted and understood so differently. Hardly anyone would seriously want to claim that only those have read the same novel who really held

the self-same copy in their hands. Everybody who has read Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* has not read a merely equivalent, but the very same novel. Husserl writes about his example, the proposition $2 \times 2 = 4$, that this judgment "is the same whoever passes it."¹³ Following this formulation we could say that the novel *The Magic Mountain* is always the very same novel, no matter who prints it. The movie *THE MATRIX* is always the very same movie, no matter when and where it is watched. A home page is always the very same home page, no matter with which computer and on what screen it may be generated. In this way the fundamental capacity of media becomes determinable: media allow for the production, in different places and at different times, not only of an equivalent but also of the very same thing. And because everybody can at different times and in different places read the very same novel, make the very same judgment, and see the very same image, it can no longer be said that what, thanks to media, comes about as validity is a private affair. Medial validity exists only in the communal form: "The number five is not my own."¹⁴ Of course there are private psychological acts of thinking with which someone at a specific moment thinks the number five but because of the employment of a medium – namely conceptual language – the very same thing that this person thinks in this moment can also be thought by another person at another moment. There is of course the private copy of Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, that is, the unique kind of genesis of the novel that sits on a bookshelf in someone's home. Yet the content of the book can no more be private property than the number five – for the content does not exist as a physical something but as a validity. The parallel to Husserl, therefore, is the following: just as writing is a medium by means of which many people can read the very same novel, so language is a medium by means of which many people can think the very same number.

These reflections show us what is meant by such widespread concepts as "storage media" and "distribution media." If media as a whole are the means by which human beings can perceive and think something that has no physical properties, then this validity is stored in storage media and distributed in distribution media. It is quite inapt to call every means of storage and every means of transportation a medium. Storage media, to be more precise, are media for the storage of validities, and distribution media are media for the distribution of validities, for the simple reason that what a storage medium stores is something special: something that does not grow older. The grain of wheat that is stored in a granary is subject to the laws of physics. No refrigerator, no matter how good, will ever be a storage medium because no matter how well it preserves the food stored within, it will not suspend the laws of physics. That is why storage media are not optimized refrigerators. A symphony that is stored in a score or on a CD no longer changes. In this sense distribution media do not allow for the distribution of just anything but for the distribution of self-sameness. Many people in many places can nonetheless see the very same TV program. No transport com-

pany has this capacity. The very same thing can be present in different places and at different times only through media.

It seems to be a genuinely phenomenological concern to pursue the idea that media produce and allow for something whose specific qualities can be described; media can be recognized by the phenomenological properties of their products. The particularity of this approach becomes clear when we compare it to the definition proposed by Lorenz Engell and Joseph Vogl in the preface to their ambitious collection *Kursbuch Medienkultur: Die massgeblichen Theorien von Brecht bis Baudrillard* [A Guide to Media Culture: The Authoritative Theories from Brecht to Baudrillard], which reads: “Media make legible, audible, visible, perceivable, yet all of this with the tendency to erase themselves and their constructive participation in these sensibilities and thus to become as if imperceptible, anaesthetic.”¹⁵ To be sure, hardly anyone would want to contradict the claim that media make legible, audible, and visible. Yet when we reduce media to this capacity, we implicitly claim that what is made legible, audible, or visible by media is not distinct from what is legible, audible, or visible without media. The use of media, so to speak, would have no effect on what is made visible with them. Yet it is here, precisely, that a phenomenological description can pick up: what is made visible by media is of a fundamentally different kind than what is visible without a medium. We can tell that what was made visible by a medium was made visible that way: media make visible, audible, legible something that does not exist physically. That is why we are not dealing with a medial process when something physically existing is made visible. When the light is turned on in the basement, it makes the things stored there visible – but the light is not a medium; it only lets things become visible that behave according to the laws of physics. The same is true for mirrors. In the case of media it is exactly the other way around: they exclusively make things visible that would not be capable of being visible without media because they are nonphysical things. This does not in the least mean that media are remarkable and relevant only with respect to this specific capacity of theirs. On the contrary, very often it would be a distorting reduction to concentrate, in medial processes, only on the validity and not on the materiality of the medium employed. In quite a few aesthetic contexts it even is the materiality of the media employed that is of pre-eminent significance. Nonetheless, no material property explains why something is a medium. Only certain materials and technologies are addressed as media, namely those with which self-sameness can be produced. This difference can be depicted particularly well in the case of images.

The visibility of the image is, medially conditioned, a kind of visibility that is fundamentally different from that of a real thing. For the image object visible on an image carrier is distinct both from the material that makes visible and, as the case may be, from the denotatum symbolized by the image object. The image object is visible, but it has properties that a real visible thing cannot have, which

is why we hardly confuse an image object with a real thing: it does not grow older; it cannot have light shed on it; it cannot move; it cannot trigger any physical effects; and it cannot be looked at from the side. That is why two moviegoers, even though one may be sitting all the way to the left and the other all the way to the right in the movie theater, still see the very same film, even if they do not look at the screen from the same direction. (This, by the way, is not true for theater; there, it may very well be the case that not everything on the stage can be seen from every place in the audience.) What is seen in an image are autonomous things that are perfectly taken out of physical reality, things that are not part of the world. It is as if Hans Jonas wanted to hint at the characteristics of validity when he writes in his essay “Homo pictor and the Differentia of Man” that the world visible in the image is “removed from the causal commerce of things.”¹⁶ In short, the image object has no physical existence but is nothing other than the visible validity of an image. This certainly surprising consequence indeed seems inevitable. What Husserl calls image object is only a form of appearance of visible validity specific to the medium of the image. This interpretation and, in particular, the formulation “visible validity” seem unusual only as long as the problematic of validity is discussed in reference to problems of mathematics and proportional truth alone. Yet in Husserl himself we do not find this limitation. In a small, somewhat hidden short remark that he makes in a supplement to the fifth of the *Logical Investigations* he explicitly clarifies that image objects are perceived validities: “The painting is only an image for an image-constituting consciousness, that is a consciousness that by means of its imaginative apperception endows a primary object that appears to it perceptually with the ‘validity’ or ‘meaning’ of an image in the first place.”¹⁷ This makes it clear that validity in the case of the image is an object that is perceived and that is no longer subject to the laws of physics, and that media are the tools that must be employed for the separation of genesis and validity. Media make legible, audible, and visible – but something special becomes legible, audible, and visible through them; namely intersubjective self-sameness, that is, validity. That is why we can say that media are precisely those tools that make it possible that not just something *equivalent* but also the *very same thing* can be seen, heard, and thought at different times, in different places, by different people – and this likely is the reason why media can hardly be overestimated in their anthropological significance.

If humans had no media, they would be a mere piece of the world – like jellyfish, they would stand in a relation of identity to their environment, if in that case we can even speak of environment. Humans are part of the world – but precisely not just that, since by means of media they participate in realities that do not behave like the world of physical things. If humans had no media, they could only see what is present; they could only see what they could also hear, smell and touch. Only because there are media are humans capable of seeing, hearing and thinking the very same content at two different points in time. Nature does

not know of the self-same, only of the equivalent. The camera is a visibility isolation machine: it separates visibility from the present physical substance of a thing. Yet what is not physically there, like an image object, has no physics; it is fantastically nonphysical. That is why images can display matters of fact that are physically impossible. Precisely this, the ability to think and perceive physical impossibilities, is possible only with media; they are the only means humans have to disempower physics. That is why without media no human existence that is more than the presence of stuff can emerge. Because there are media, humans live not only in physical nature but also in a culture, and they therefore owe their human existence to the employment of media. Thus results a perspective for work on media that is as phenomenological as it is anthropological: media liberate humans from the ubiquitously present dictates of the physical world.

This chapter was first published in English by Stanford University Press in *Artificial Presence: Philosophical Studies in Image Theory* (2009).

Translated by Nils F. Schott

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1. Boris Groys, *Unter Verdacht: Eine Phänomenologie der Medien* (Munich: Hanser, 2000).
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 9-10.
3. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 30.
4. Christian Bermes, "Medialität – anthropologisches Radikal, oder ontologisches Prinzip? Merleau-Ponty's Ausführung der Phänomenologie" [Mediality – Anthropological Radical or Ontological Principle? Merleau-Ponty's Elaboration of Phenomenology], in *Die Stellung des Menschen in der Kultur: Festschrift für Ernst Wolfgang Orth*, ed. Christian Bermes, Julia Jonas and Karl-Heinz Lembeck (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2002), 49.
5. Matthias Vogel, *Medien der Vernunft: Eine Theorie des Geistes und der Rationalität auf Grundlage einer Theorie der Medien* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001), 13, 136, 133.
6. Georg Christoph Tholen, *Die Zäsur der Medien: Kulturphilosophische Konturen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), 50, 8, 19.
7. Vogel, *Medien der Vernunft*, 144.
8. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J.N. Findlay, ed. Dermot Moran (London: Routledge, 2001), pt. 1, chap. 8, § 46, 110.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, 109.
11. *Ibid.*, pt. 1, chap. 7, § 36, 80.
12. [The distinction between *das gleiche* (What is equal, equivalent, or the same) and *dasselbe* (What is the same and identical with itself) can only insufficiently be rendered in English. The example in the next paragraph, however, will clarify the point. – Trans.]
13. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, pt. 1, chap. 7, § 36, 80.
14. *Ibid.*, pt. 1, chap. 8, § 46, 109.
15. Lorenz Engell and Joseph Vogl, "Vorwort," in *Kursbuch Medienkultur: Die Maßgeblichen Theorien von Brecht bis Baudrillard*, ed. Claus Pias, Joseph Vogl, Lorenz Engell, Oliver Fahle and Britta Neitzel (Stuttgart: DVA, 1999), 8-11, 10.
16. Hans Jonas, "Homo Pictor and the Differentia of Man," *Social Research* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1962): 201-220, 207.
17. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, pt. 1, 5th Investigation, supplement to §§ 11 and 20, 126 [entirely retranslated].

The "History of Vision"-Debate Revisited

1. See Karl Marx, "Private Property and Communism" [1956], in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2011); Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility: Third Version," in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251-283; and *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999); Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life"