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Levinas as a Media Theorist: Toward an Ethics of Mediation

Amit Pinchevski

ABSTRACT

This article explores the way Levinas communicates his ethical message through the media at work in his work: speech, writing, and rare references to modern media. Levinas's ethical message concerns the import of the relation with the other, a relation that interrupts any attempt at its thematization, including Levinas's own philosophy. Levinas's text serves as an exemplary medium for this ethical message in conveying the teaching of ethics along with the interruption it advocates. The article then extends the logic of the ethical message beyond the two key media present in Levinas's work—speech and writing—to speculate on whether the interruption it effects can be carried over to audiovisual media. Running throughout is the question of mediation, which takes the discussion outside the context of the face to face, where Levinas's thought is typically situated, to the context of the third and of justice. Levinas's thought may thus lead toward a radical ethics of media—radical in the sense that it posits the act of mediation itself as the root of such ethics.

Anyone who is familiar with the work of Emmanuel Levinas will probably find the title of this article puzzling. There are many ways to read Levinas but as a media theorist does not seem to be one of them. Indeed, Levinas rarely refers directly to media as such, or, more specifically, to the means by which symbols are stored over time and conveyed across space. What is at the center of his philosophy—ethics as first philosophy, ethics as the responsibility to and for the other—can hardly be said to be among the

questions that typically concern media theory. Moreover, Levinas's thought can be read most straightforwardly as espousing an immediate encounter with the other—"l'autrui," the other human being—who appears as a face and evades any grasp by addressing one face-to-face. That the face reveals itself in proximity, as if without mediation, seems to leave little to the consideration of media. And yet, I want to suggest that Levinas has something important to contribute to media theory and moreover, to a novel conception of media ethics. This contribution, I propose, consists in rethinking mediation as implicated by relation and in considering the ways media might carry the interruption of alterity.

Several scholars have noted the importance of Levinas's thought to communication and rhetorical studies (Arnett 2003; Davis 2010; Hyde 2001; Jovanovic and Wood 2004; Lipari 2012; Murray 2003; Pinchevski 2005), and a few have even attempted to extend Levinasian ideas to media ethics (Butler 2004; Cohen 2000; Gunkel 2007; Silverstone 1999; Zylinska 2005). While acknowledging these efforts, the discussion I develop here goes in the opposite direction: rather than applying Levinas to the study of communication and media, I consider the way Levinas communicates his ethical message through the media at work in his work. In doing so, I hope to introduce into media theory the interruption Levinas effects on the ontology of language and, more specifically, to draw attention to the way his writing mediates that interruption. With this media perspective in mind, I propose that Levinas's philosophy is informed by a fundamental media question, namely, how a medium can store more than it stores, and how can it transmit more than it transmits. This question, to be sure, is neither concretely proposed nor directly addressed by him, but it is nevertheless implicit in his later work, particularly in his account of language and has concrete significance to the way Levinas conveys his ethical message: how to relate the very relation with the other, or put differently, what is the relation between mediation and alterity?

Levinas designates Western philosophy as a discourse of the said—the logos of essence and ontology that seeks to represent and thematize the world in thought and language. The said consists in capturing and fixing meanings so as to produce a claim to truth. Subjecting everything to its ontological schemas, this discourse is impervious to whatever resists the grasp of its representational grid and is hence afflicted by an "insurmountable allergy" to alterity and difference (1986, 346). Levinas's project can be described as an attempt to unsettle the coherency of philosophy as a discourse of the said by exposing it to the otherness it strives to filter out. It is the concern with the other, before and beyond the conception of the other,

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that Levinas brings to the fore, a concern that is for him tantamount to ethics. His foray into philosophy is therefore motivated by a fundamental reversal: the "what ought" of the ethical relation trumps the "what is" of the ontological investigation, putting ethics before ontology, rendering it first philosophy. Under the priority of ethics, philosophy takes a normative turn: rather than thought for its own sake, it yields to the concern with the other; rather than the love of wisdom, it becomes "the wisdom of love at the service of love" (1981, 162).

It is in this respect that Levinas's philosophical writing, his medium of communication, constitutes a paradigmatic case for carrying out his ethics. While proceeding as a philosophical discourse, as a discourse of the said, it nevertheless endeavors to transcend itself and gesture beyond the ontology of language. It attempts such a gesture by implicating the said with what Levinas calls the saying—the relational aspect of language, regarding language first and foremost as addressing and responding and only subsequently as representing and thematizing. Herein lies the complexity of Levinas's ethical message: his teaching must not only tell about ethics but also somehow perform what it tells about ethics. Teaching, for Levinas, is not exhausted in the delivering or even the eliciting (maieutics) of knowledge; rather, teaching "comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain" (1969, 51). Teaching subjects information to relation: it attends to the knowledge given to another by attending to the relation with the other. It therefore follows that Levinas's writing must contain or retain something of the surplus it teaches—otherwise it would end up as a discourse of the said and betray its own motivation. His ethical message—his teaching—must conform to what it teaches if it is to deliver that teaching. But while the teaching of ethics is necessarily informed by the doing of ethics—the responsibility to and for the other—it is also distinct from it, and this distinction proves important to my discussion here.

Speculating about Levinas as a media theorist, however unintentionally on his part, brings us then to speculate about the media at work in his work. At the risk of technical reductionism, the task is to explore the logic of storage and transmission of the ethical message employed in his writing, a logic by which, as I suggest, both storage and transmission are transcended. Assuming that Levinas's teaching is faithful to what it teaches and that his medium of communication corresponds to the conditions of that teaching (again, otherwise the whole enterprise would prove abortive), we may therefore ask the following questions. What makes Levinas's message an ethical message? What kind of mediation is involved in the teaching of

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ethics? Can his writing serve as a model for teaching his ethical teaching? And if so, can that model be transposed to other media, however different? Attempting to answer these questions leads us toward a radical ethics of media—radical in the sense that it posits the act of mediation itself as the root of such ethics.

SPEAKING, WRITING, TEACHING

One of the only references to modern media found in Levinas's work is, interestingly, set against a Talmudic reading that concerns the handing down of the laws of the Torah and the community established thereby. As he writes in the "The Pact," ours is a society

> whose boundaries have become, in a sense, planetary: a society, in which, due to the ease of modern communications and transport, and the worldwide scale of its industrial economy, each person feels simultaneously that he is related to humanity as a whole, and equally that he is alone and lost. With each radio broadcast and each day's papers one may well feel caught up in the most distant events, and connected to mankind everywhere; but one also understands that one's personal destiny, freedom or happiness is subject to causes which operate with inhumane force. One understands that the very progress of technology—and here I am taking up a commonplace—which relates everyone in the world to everyone else, is inseparable from a necessity which leaves all men anonymous. (1989, 212)[1]

These lines could easily pass as a passage written by the Canadian media historian Harold Adams Innis, exemplifying how modern space-biased media have overtaken the ancient time-biased media, most notably the oral medium of speech. To quote Innis: "The oral discussion inherently involves personal contact and a consideration for the feelings of others, and it is in sharp contrast with the cruelty of mechanized communication and the tendencies we have come to note in the modern world" (1951, 190–91). Levinas's rare media moment is effectively an Innisian moment, pointing out as it does that direct, face-to-face interaction has been compromised by the modern monopoly of systemized modes of communication. Innis advocated striving for a dialectical balance between orality and literacy, the kind said to have existed in the time of the Greek civilization—a balance

badly wanting, according to Innis, in an extreme space-biased modern civilization. Levinas, on the other hand, has a different idea about the relation between the oral and the written, particularly as they come to play out in the conflict between what he calls the Hebrew tradition and the Greek tradition.

At the center of Levinas's Talmudic reading is the handing down of the divine law as described in Deuteronomy 27. The biblical text specifies the instructions Moses gave to the people of Israel for a ceremony that was to take place in the future after Moses's death, following their journey in the desert and upon entering the Promised Land. The ceremony was to take place on two mountains, Mount Abel and Mount Gerizim: first, the law was to be inscribed on large stones untouched by iron ("And you shall write upon the stones all the words of this law" [Deuteronomy 27:8]), and then, the twelve tribes were to congregate, six tribes on each mountain, to witness the recitation of the law ("And the Levites shall declare to all the men of Israel with a loud voice" [Deuteronomy 27:14]). "Throughout the ceremony anticipated here," writes Levinas, "all the members of society will be able to see each other" (1989, 214). The context of the ceremony is a face-to-face community where each member is present to another. When the time came to hold the ceremony, "There was not a word of all that Moses commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them" (Joshua 8:35). And so the instructions were carried out in full but with one addition: they were not inscribed and recited only before the tribes of Israel but also before women, children and strangers. The community in which people could face each other while inscribing and reciting the law is also the community that turns outside to welcome all others.

Levinas follows many threads in his reading, but here I consider the question of media as it plays out in the relation between the written law and the spoken law. In this extraordinary scene, a community is established upon its entry to the Promised Land and, concomitantly, upon the reiteration of the divine law—the law that was first given to Moses on Mount Sinai and then inscribed on the tablets. The community thus formed is not closed on itself, is not content in the presence of its members to themselves. Instead, in adopting the law, in making itself a community of the law, it makes its members turn their faces outward in hospitality of all humanity. And it is with the juxtaposition of writing the law (inscription) and speaking the law (recitation) that a revolutionary configuration of the relation between the particular and the universal is formed. Inscribing the law is

the condition of speaking the law, and speaking the law is the condition of inaugurating the law. The universal is inscribed within the face to face, and the face to face speaks the universal. What constitutes a contradiction for the modern mindset is here the condition for justice; as Levinas states, "The distinction between community and society belongs to an immature stage of social thought" (1989, 218). The particular and the universal are complementary as long as the divine law is adopted—and as long as, we might add, a distinctive relation between the written and the spoken is preserved.

Levinas goes on to expand in his Talmudic reading on the conditions for transmitting the law across time. Adhering to the law is not fulfilled only in obeying it but inherently involves passing it on from one generation to the next. The law is not transmitted merely by a dead letter that hands down the law strictly as written; rather, in order to transmit the law, one must thoroughly undertake it: learn it, teach it, observe it, and carry it out. With such undertaking, transmission goes beyond the delivery of knowledge and becomes true teaching, a teaching that, according to Levinas, "begins to take shape even in the receptive attitude of study, and adds something to that attitude: true learning now consists in receiving a lesson so profoundly that the student is compelled to pass it to another" (221). Teaching implies both knowledge and relation, understanding and addressing—the said and the saying—as two related yet distinct aspects of communication. This inbuilt tension at the heart of teaching moves Levinas to suggest that far from reducing the law to the said, teaching in fact retains the possibility of unsaying the law as the said, opening up the radical possibility that, in adhering to the law, "principles can be inverted in the course of their application" (220). Speaking the law has the potential of undoing the written law: through teaching, through the saying of the said, heteronomy is introduced into autonomy. The universal is made particular and the particular universal.

I introduce this Talmudic reading because I think it bears on understanding Levinas's own teaching, or what I am calling his ethical message. An implicit question running throughout Levinas's philosophical writings is "Why philosophize?" Why resort to philosophical discourse—the discourse of the said—in order to attend to what is, by definition, excluded by that discourse—the saying? Moreover, if responsibility to and for the other requires no philosophy—in fact, it precedes and exceeds knowledge and thinking—why bother with philosophy at all? One possible answer has to do with the idea of teaching, which brings Levinas's discussion on teaching the law together with his own ethical teaching. While ethics requires

no philosophy for its execution, the teaching of ethics inevitably does. Responsibility commands us in the face to face, prior to and irrespective of the thinking of responsibility, but for responsibility to be so conceptualized and for such conceptualization to become a teaching, we need philosophy. We need the said to convey the teaching of the saying, to convey the very idea that the saying has something to teach us—including that its teaching can never be subsumed within the said.

In this respect, teaching corresponds to what Charles Sanders Peirce called thirdness. If firstness concerns inner feelings and sensations, and if secondness concerns dyadic relation of action and reaction, thirdness brings first and second into a relation that is independent of both. Thirdness implies mediation and is assumed by any systemized thought and action; as Peirce contends, "So far as the idea of any *law* or *reason* comes in, Thirdness comes in" (1958, 385). If the doing of ethics is exclusively secondness (Levinas's philosophy has no use for firstness) and the teaching of ethics is necessarily thirdness, then the mediation implied by Levinas is one that subjects third-ness to secondness, that subjects the said to the saying, putting philosophy at the service of ethics. Yet, as the Talmudic reading makes clear, thirdness is not an addition to the face to face but is already implied within second-ness: from the very start the face to face addresses humanity at large. As Levinas observes in *Totality and Infinity*, "The third party looks at me in the eyes of the other—language is justice" (1969, 213); or as Jacques Derrida puts it in his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, "The third does not wait; it is there, from the 'first' epiphany of the face in the face to face" (1999, 31). Thus while the ethical relation remains irreducible to any law or reason, it is nevertheless the origin from which every law and reason springs forth. Such is the mediation Levinas ascribes to justice, which is necessarily in a double bind: thirdness is always subjected to secondness, and secondness is already informed by thirdness. A mutually interruptive bond ties them together.

This Talmudic reading can also be interpreted as proposing something about the media involved in teaching. Speaking and writing play different yet equally indispensible roles in the teaching of the law, speaking serving secondness and writing thirdness. The said can never be fixed either in speech or writing, and the saying is never exempt from the pressures of the said. If for Innis the moral ideal of media is a dialectical balance between orality and literacy, for Levinas it is a reciprocal push and pull between the written and the spoken, the two preempting each other and extending from one to the other. It may even be said that the mediation intimated by Levinas—or teaching, both as a verb and as a noun—proceeds by undoing

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the coincidence of medium and message, undermining the possibility that the law can be handed down as such, by one medium, and once and for all. For teaching not to solidify, medium and message must remain at odds with each other and must call for further mediation to take over the teaching.

Although Levinas refers to modern media as a dehumanizing development, which he contrasts with the type of community arising from the speaking-writing community of the biblical law, we might ask if this is necessarily true. What if modern media, contra Levinas, present us with new configurations of the said and the saying beyond the dichotomy of speech and writing? I return to consider this possibility in the penultimate section.

LEVINAS'S MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

In his first magnum opus *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas presents a rather strict hierarchy of ethical communication, positing speech as the foremost medium of responsibility and ethical contact: "Oral discourse is the plenitude of discourse" (1969, 96). Speech is the medium by which one faces and addresses the other: "The speech which already dawns in the face that looks at me looking introduces the primary frankness of revelation" (98). But speech is also the medium through which the world can be thematized and offered—thematized in order to be offered—to the other. Thematization presupposes teaching, as it is for the sake of passing on and communicating that things are thematized in the first place. It is speech that performs the fundamental function of teaching, for in speaking the speaker attends to the discourse thus conveyed, not so much to sanction a proper reception as to attend the very act of giving out knowledge: "The first teaching of the teacher is his very presence as a teacher from which representation comes" (100). The teacher attends to the teaching in attending the event of teaching. Speech transcends what is said by exposing the one who speaks: "He does not only signal himself, but speaks, is a face" (99).

If speech is superior insofar as it undertakes the act of teaching, writing is deficient precisely on that count: "This attendance measures the surplus of spoken language over written language, which has again become signs. Signs are a mute language, a language impeded" (182). Writing, which Levinas seldom attends to in his earlier work, is deemed ancillary to the teaching power of speech, which "brings what the written word is already deprived of: mastery. Speech, better than a simple sign, is essentially magisterial. It first of all teaches this teaching itself" (69). Yet it is patently clear, of course, that Levinas is *writing* about the ethical predominance of speech;

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he writes what he says about speech, which inevitably puts the medium of his teaching at odds with the medium advocated by his teaching. It is instructive that on a number of occasions in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas refers to the book, rather than himself, as the author, as what presents the claims (e.g., "This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the other, as hospitality; in it the idea of infinity is consummated" [27]). It is not Levinas, the teacher, at least rhetorically, making the propositions; instead, it is the book performing that function as if by proxy. While *Totality and Infinity* definitely presents Levinas's teaching, it remains unclear how the teacher attends to his teaching in writing.

It is precisely within the gap between speech and writing that Jacques Derrida delivers some of his most penetrating readings of Levinas's work. In his essay "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida takes issue with the privilege Levinas gives to speech in *Totality and Infinity*, arguing that it is writing that better approaches another as other. If the other is the one who escapes grasp and remains beyond representation, beyond the presentable present, is it not the writer, asks Derrida, that "absents himself better, that is, expresses himself better as other, addresses himself to the other more effectively than the man of speech?" (1978, 102). This contention should be read in the context of Derrida's larger agenda of introducing writing as an antidote against the metaphysics of presence in Western philosophy and the role of speech therein. One of the principle problems Derrida finds in *Totality and Infinity* is that while it attempts to criticize the language of ontology it is nevertheless unable to escape that language. In attempting to undo philosophy Levinas is still philosophizing. And this problem is not distinct from—indeed, it intrinsically corresponds to—the dominance of speech in Levinas's earlier thought. The alternative Derrida sketches proves critical in further rethinking the medium of the ethical message: "The limit between violence and nonviolence is perhaps not between speech and writing but within each of them" (1978, 102).[2]

In his second magnum opus *Otherwise Than Being; or, Beyond Essence*, Levinas sets out to develop what he calls "ethical language" as the "very meaning of approach, which contrasts with knowing" (1981, 193).[3] At the center of this book is the concept of the saying as opposed to the said: if the said is the thematizing power of language, the presentation and representation of themes in language, the saying is the approach and contact that precede and beget the said, the exposure and proximity that infuse the said but cannot be captured by it. "This saying, in the form of responsibility for another, is bound to an irrecuperable, unrepresentable, past temporalizing

according to a time with separate epochs, in a diachrony" (47). The language of the said can thematize the world, but one thing will forever escape its grasp—the speaker addressing and being addressed. The other as speaker speaks beyond the spoken, which is precisely where the saying will always remain incommensurate with the said. But the saying survives within the said to which it has given rise through the traces it leaves on the said. Thus the said "retains in its statement the trace of the excession of transcendence, of the beyond" (151). *Otherwise Than Being* can then be read as dominated by a persistent problem: how to convey the ethical message without fully thematizing it? How to write about the saying without turning it into a said? More pointedly, how to pronounce the singularity and irreversibility of the saying within the repeatability and reversibility of the said?

Paul Ricouer (2004, 95–96) argues that the place from which Levinas writes, the place from which he inscribes his saying on the said that comprises his book, is the place of the third and of justice—in other words, of mediation. Levinas is clearly aware of the challenge the mediation of the saying presents him with. He asks, "Is it necessary and is it possible that the saying on the hither side be thematized, that is, manifest itself, that it enter into a proposition and a book?" (1981, 43). To the first question he answers affirmatively: yes, it is necessary to undertake a certain thematization of the saying precisely for the sake of teaching. Whether it is possible requires a more complicated answer. The saying is not synchronous with the said but is "antecedent to ontology" (46). So while the "pure" saying ("pure" in quotation marks, since there is no pure saying) is anterior to anything said, its manifestation is never divorced from the said. In fact, it requires the contamination of the said in order to make itself heard: "It must spread out and assemble itself into essence, posit itself, be hypothesized. . . . Ethics itself, in its saying which is responsibility, requires this hold" (44). The saying persists through its reduction to the said while retaining something of its unsayablity. The said must then contain, despite itself, its own prehistory—the residue of the original saying. The task is to "awaken in the said the saying which is absorbed in it and, *thus absorbed, enters into the history that the said imposes*" (43).

To convey this complexity, Levinas resorts to two key metaphors. The first is echo: "In this said, we nonetheless surprise [*surprendrons*] the echo of the saying, whose signification cannot be assembled" (27); thematization "makes essence resound without entirely deadening the echo of the saying that bears it and brings it to light" (47). The said "maintains the diachrony in which, holding its breath, the spirit hears the echo of the *otherwise*," retaining the

"fading echo" of the reduction (44). The second is trace: the saying "imprints its traces on the thematization itself" (46)—"the trace of a withdrawal which no actuality had preceded" (140). Further, "the trace of saying, which has never been present, obliges me" (168). The trace "*passes* without being able to enter" (93), signifying the infinite beyond essence: "A face is a trace of itself, given over to my responsibility" (91). These temporal metaphors evoke a past always anterior to the present, but one that still haunts the present. They operate textually by intimating a beyond the said as written and a before the written as said.

A distinctive impression one gets when reading *Otherwise Than Being* is that Levinas seems to push the written medium almost to its limits. A recurring technique is piling up descriptive phrases to extremity. To quote one example: "The pre-original, anarchic saying is proximity, contact, duty without end, a saying still indifferent to the said and saying itself without giving the said, the-one-for-the-other, a substitution" (161). Reiterating but not quite repeating what is distinctive to the saying, this series of appositions proceeds like an incantation, eroding any stable sense of what the saying "is," making it incompatible with any "is," overflowing with approximation. The effect is congestion of the written medium, which in turn casts further ambiguity on the notion of the saying. A parallel technique is doubling up designators so as to create overemphasis, a key example being the way the saying is said to signify beyond the said, which Levinas sometimes conveys by the phrase "the signifyingness of signification" ("la signifiance de la signification"), a structure that is repeated with little variation throughout the text. At first blush, this phrase might appear to be a redundancy. Yet the effect is nothing less than poetic: an attempt to simulate within written language the transmittal the saying enacts upon the said, "a communicating of communication, a sign of the giving of signs" (119).[4]

The question of how Levinas's text works as a written medium is taken up by Derrida in his second big essay on Levinas, "At This Very Moment In This Text Here I Am" (the title is comprised of three recurring phrases in *Otherwise Than Being*, in which, Derrida suggests, Levinas reflects on how his work works). "How does he manage," asks Derrida, "to inscribe or let the wholly other be inscribed within the language of being, of the present, of essence, of the same, of economy, etc. . . . How does he manage to give a place there to what remains absolutely foreign to that medium . . . ?" (1991, 16) The key metaphor Derrida uses to discuss Levinas's text is texture: the text is not merely a composition of phrases designed to carry meaning

but a fabric that carries within itself the traces of the work of putting it together—the ruptures and tears, as well as the patches and stiches, that persist along its length and that unsettle its constructed coherency. The text contains something beyond itself: "The passage beyond language requires language or rather a text as a place for the trace of a step that is not (present) elsewhere" (20). The text is a medium that contains its own interruptions, and these interruptions that are woven and protrude within its texture are what "regularly puts an end to the authority of the said, the thematical, the dialectical, the same, the economical, etc." (26). The saying comes to signify through the interruptions rupturing the consistency of the text, the text striving precisely to overcome and dissimulate these interruptions. It is as if in order to perceive these interruptions, one is required to follow the text not only with one's eyes but also with one's fingers, feeling its texture.

Indeed, "interruption" is an operative word in Levinas's text, alternating between metaphor and metonymy. One the one hand, interruption is invoked metaphorically as the way ontology is troubled by alterity and the way the self is put into question by the other. On the other hand, interruption is employed metonymically to refer to the way the book, as a medium of the said, retains and betrays within its texture the "echoes" and "traces" of the saying. Interruption as the passing of the saying in the said is expressed in the text through the ruptures that somehow still inhere within the text, ruptures that are never visible as such, as they have already been woven into the fabric of the said. In trying to convey the complexity of his reflexivity, Levinas wonders whether he is not already at the risk of losing it: "Are we not at this very moment in the process of barring the issue that our whole essay attempts, and of encircling our position from all sides?" (1981, 169). Indeed, the risk exists and is indissoluble. But unlike other discourses of the said to which Levinas refers in passing, those of the state, medicine and philosophy, his discourse does not attempt to deny or erase—to the contrary—the traces of interruption. Hence Levinas's text proceeds by way of affirming and at the same time retracting the said— saying, unsaying, and resaying the said—by way of interrupting the weaving of the text and then weaving together the interruptions into the text. With these continuous oscillations, the text comes to attend to the trace of alterity that it stores.

It is in this respect that Levinas's medium of communication can be said to store more than its stores and transmit more than it transmits and, in so doing, unsettle the ontological status of both storage and

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transmission. It stores the very traces of storing, the inscription of the very act of inscription, the traces left by attempting to capture the uncapturable. The trace can then be seen as a form of storage older than any depository, "the trace of an immemorial past" (89). And it transmits transmissibility itself, the transmission that announces every transmission and the receptivity that is the condition of all transmission. The saying can then be seen as a transmission given and received prior to any signal, "giving a sign of this giving of signs" (15). This makes for a singularly elusive ethical message. We will never quite get the message, never fully accept or own it, never receive it as a fully formulated meaning. But in a sense we are already predisposed to it, already taken by it, have always and already admitted and attended to its injunction. "Transcendence owes it to itself to interrupt its own demonstration. Its voice has to be silent as soon as one listens for its message" (152). The ethical message interrupts without imposing itself. Its power is perhaps understood along the lines of Walter Benjamin's (1969) weak messianism—a power awaiting its own redemption. We are summoned by this message before we comprehend it. The most fundamental teaching of this message is that we are, and always have been, its recipients.

If in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas assigns the task of teaching to the teacher attending to the other while deeming the book external to that teaching, in *Otherwise Than Being* it is the book that performs the teaching by attending to its own textual interruptions. "A book is interrupted discourse catching up with its own breaks," Levinas remarks. Yet, he continues, "books have their fate; they belong to a world they do not include, but recognize by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forwards. They are interrupted and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said" (171). Not only does the book contain its own interruptions; it also calls for further interruptions that in turn will become interpretations. By attending to its own interruptions, the book, as a written medium, simulates the addressability of the spoken medium: books "call for" other books and for further speaking and interpreting. Interrupting the writing of the said, the discourse of the said as written, produces that supplication, that "calling for," like a saying going beyond the said. This "saying," to be sure, is not the same as the one expressed in speaking, which transcends what is spoken by approaching the other. The saying of writing bears a formal, not substantial, resemblance to the saying of speaking: both are analogous yet distinct forms of undoing the dominance of the

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said. Whether spoken or written, the saying interrupts the medium of the said, undermining its determination to have the last word.

INTERRUPTION AND THE AUDIOVISUAL

I now turn to the question I raised at the beginning as to whether media other than speech and writing can perform the interruption of the saying on the said and thereby convey Levinas's ethical message. Imagine Levinas teaching his philosophy only by speaking and without ever writing even one word, as if he were taking his own teaching on the primacy of speech to the extreme. Would such a purely Socratic Levinas produce the same notion of the saying, having to perform it exclusively by speech? Could speech alone convey the teaching of the saying? And when it comes to the teaching of the saying, is oral speech the plenitude of discourse, as Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity*? My sense is that Levinas's idea of the saying is necessarily grafted on his writing on the saying. Levinas does not attempt to transcribe in writing what the saying would be in speech, does not use writing to imitate speaking. Rather, it is in writing that the saying gains an independent dimension outside speaking, outside self-referential speech, which allows it to be disclosed as a theme and, moreover, as a theme undergoing its own interruption. The *concept* of the saying arguably owes more to writing than to speaking. It takes a said to teach the signification of saying, and it takes writing to signify the significance of speech. The teaching of ethics requires this spillover from one medium to the other.

This line of reasoning can be read as extending from Derrida's critique of the secondary status of writing in Levinas's thought. Yet when it comes to modern media, it seems that Levinas and Derrida are actually not that far from each other and, in fact, not that far from the tradition of Western philosophy they otherwise set out to criticize. For both Levinas and Derrida operate within a dichotomous media universe, subscribing, each in his own way, to the opposition between speech and writing. What is to become of this debate in an age no longer dominated by a bipolar media system, in an age of audiovisual media that operate according to logic different from both speech and writing? What is the status of ethical teaching in a time when we can not only read Levinas and Derrida but also watch and hear them teach—a privilege previously restricted to the face to face—and do so repeatedly, and from everywhere in the world? Just look them up on YouTube! The question is therefore this: if speech and writing constitute

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the two traditional media for performing the teaching of ethics, what kind of ethical teaching can be performed by means of audiovisual media?[5]

The answer, I suggest, lies in the possibility of reproducing in audiovisual media the kind of interruption Levinas attempts to simulate in writing—in other words, of creating the effect of the textual interruption in the audiovisual. What this entails, in turn, is further spillover of the teaching of ethics, from speech and writing to the audiovisual. Like written text, the audiovisual can be said to contain the traces of its own production. And to the extent that these traces can be compared with the textual traces discussed by Levinas, the audiovisual might also be considered as encompassing its own interruptions. Just like a certain kind of writing—Levinas's later writing and Derrida's writing on Levinas—negotiates and makes itself available to its own interruptions, however subtly or imperceptibly, it is conceivable that the audiovisual can perform something similar within its "writing." The audiovisual "text" can be made to attend to the ruptures it contains and at the same time mends—specifically, by means of editing, soundtrack, narration, and other techniques of producing an audiovisual articulation. Here, too, the traces of the putting together would be where interruption marks the possibility of a beyond.

Yet despite the analogies with writing, audiovisual media present a fundamentally different type of inscription, one that also introduces another level of interruption. According to German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, modern media technologies of the late nineteenth century mark a decisive transformation in the logic of storage and transmission, which for centuries was dominated by the written word. The phonograph and the cinematograph introduced a novel system of inscription that does not rely on the mediation of symbols as carriers of meaning but instead directly inscribes the physical effects of light and sound. As Kittler puts it, "For the first time in history, writing ceased to be synonymous with the serial storage of data. The technological recording of the real entered into competition with the symbolic registration of the Symbolic" (1990, 230). What distinguishes these media is that they are devices of unselective inscription, recording not only intended meanings but also the unintended, what Kittler calls "the physiological accidents and stochastic disorder of bodies"—the unfiltered and unintentional noises of the real (1999, 16).[6] Modern media do not simply store and transmit deliberate content but also the traces of the physical conditions by which content is stored and transmitted. A whole new dimension is introduced, not only

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of static and interferences but also of timbre and tone, of filterization and enhancement, of zoom and focus, of freeze and replay—in short, the materialities of communication.

Audiovisual media thus capture the material traces of mediation: the residues of meaning making, the unintentional and often inevitable non-meanings that accompany, and at the same time interrupt, the production of meaning. Levinas's metaphors of trace and echo, which are employed metaphorically in the explication of the saying, may acquire a new level of literality and referentiality with audiovisual media. At issue is what Roland Barthes calls "the grain of voice": the material traces of the signifying body that signify beyond the communicated content, that signify, to use Barthes' phrase, "the encounter between a language and a voice" (1977, 181). These material traces signify through other media as well: "The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (188). For Barthes, the materiality of expression has an erotic dimension, as it brings us closer to the body performing the expression. But it may also have an ethical dimension insofar as it goes beyond knowledge or meaning to convey something of the relationality in the event of expression. The media that attend the event of expression contain media traces that attend to that expression: they retain the physical effects of relation, the media traces of the saying.

If for Levinas and Derrida the relation with alterity is entangled with the relation between speech and writing, modern media might recast the parameters of that relation—or at least, how this relation can be mediated.[7] It is a commonplace that audiovisual media complicate the dichotomy between the presence of speech and the remoteness of writing by providing a combination of presence at a distance or distant presence. This combination accounts for the way audiovisual media might simulate the two kinds of interruption invoked by Levinas—that of the face and that of the text, the phoneme and the grapheme. On the one hand, the audiovisual brings us closer to the interruption of speech insofar as we possess the technological ability to capture and convey the actual event of expression, the actual occurrence of speaking and addressing. On the other hand, the audiovisual operates like a text—an audiovisual text—that contains and retains its own interruptions, and by attending to these interruptions, it might mark a beyond the text as a medium of the said. The interruptions mustered by the audiovisual are both diegetic and nondiegetic, within and outside the mediated event of expression, and are both produced and reproduced by media.

The effect of interruption within the audiovisual can be understood in terms of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2004) calls "presence effects" in contradistinction to "meaning effects." If meaning effects are of the order of interpretation and narrative—of hermeneutics—presence effects are of the order of the nonhermeneutic, beyond (and before) meaning. The "production of presence" refers to "the effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication. . . . [A]ny form of communication, through its material elements, will 'touch' the bodies of the persons who are communicating in specific and varying ways" (2004, 17). Presence effects, according to Gumbrecht, counteract the traditional investment in hermeneutics: "Experiencing the things of the world in their pre-conceptual thingness will reactivate a feeling for the bodily and for the spatial dimension of our existence" (118). Interruptions may then be taken as such "presence effects" insofar as they constitute the attendant material traces of relation within mediation. What this discussion emphasizes, however, is the ethical significance of the nonhermeneutic as it punctuates the hermeneutic: the effect of presence on the effect of meaning as correlative to the effect of the saying upon the said.

Although Levinas has practically nothing to say about technological mediation, what he says about poetry nevertheless resonates with Gumbrecht's analysis. In an essay on Shmuel Yosef Agnon, a Jewish author who wrote in Hebrew, a language both ancient and modern, Levinas states that "in Agnon, what is at stake is resurrection. Closer to us than any present, the Unrepresentable will not be represented in the poem. It will be the poetry of the poem. Poetry *signifies* poetically the resurrection that sustains it: not in the fable it sings, but in its very singing" (1996, 12). It should be noted that in Hebrew (which Levinas knew well) poetry and singing are designated by the same word, "shira," which suggests that poetry is somewhere between music and language. Agnon's prose, according to Levinas, does not resurrect the ancient language of Scripture as a theme but "signifies it as song," resuscitating the sound of that language (8). Put differently, poetry (some forms, at least) mediates a relation with transcendence by way of singing rather than narrating, or, in Gumbrecht's terms, by means of "presence effect" rather than "meaning effect." Poetry is a form of mediation that evokes the resonance of language qua relation within language qua designation. It resurrects the relationality at the base of language. And poetry is to be understood here both in the Greek sense of *poeisis* (producing) and in the Hebrew sense of *shira* (singing), with Hebrew implicating Greek, as it always does in Levinas's thought. "Things will indeed appear, the said of this poetic saying," Levinas notes in a reference to Paul Celan's

poetry, "but in the movement that carries them toward the other, as figures of this movement" (43).

THE ETHICS OF MEDIA ETHICS

What shape would a Levinas-inspired ethics of media take? If the ethical message of Levinas communicates the interruption of communication, if this is the "good" of Levinas's communication ethics, then teaching that message, the teaching of ethics, is, fundamentally, media ethics. And if we understand media ethics in relation to the good, then a Levinas-inspired ethics of media will be about the interruption that is performed in and by mediation. Rather than concerning itself first and foremost with codes and norms (important as they are), such ethics will attend to alterity as it undergoes mediation. It will have less to do with whether what is *in* the media measures up with the good and more with whether the good so mediated can be interrupted. A Levinas-inspired ethics of media, to the extent that one is conceivable, will therefore have to engage with the interruptions produced and reproduced by the media in question. The ethics that attends to these interruptions takes its inspiration from Levinas's teacher attending to his teaching (in speech or in writing), and in so doing prevents meaning from becoming independent and whole, secure within its medium. In this respect, even noise can be redemptive insofar as it evokes the very fact of mediation—the fact that no message passes without the contamination of passage, not least the passage from secondness to thirdness.

Derrida describes Levinas's ethics as "an Ethics of Ethics": "Levinas does not seek to propose laws or moral rules, does not seek to determine *a* morality, but rather the essence of the ethical relation in general" (1978, 111). With this formula Derrida points to the necessarily elusive basis of Levinas's ethics, which can "occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself" (111). This ethics of ethics suggests a self-deconstructive formula: it formulates without fully formulizing, it makes general without fully generalizing. And it is precisely this refractory nature that allows Levinas's ethics to operate also as metaethics, to transcend every specific ethics and provide a glimpse into what makes ethics ethical. "The interrupting force of ethics," writes Levinas in "A Rupture of Immanence," "does not attest to a simple relaxing of reason, but to placing in question the *act of philosophizing*, which cannot fall back to philosophy" (1998a, 4). What makes ethics ethical is its

insistence on not congealing into a philosophy, its remaining susceptible to the same interruption it advocates. In this respect, my argument here can be read as extending Levinas's ethics to media ethics as well as to a metaethics of media—the ethics of media ethics—and hence as a form of ethical critique.

To illustrate this metaethics I refer to two notable accounts that bring Levinas to bear on the question of media ethics. Judith Butler provides a concise account of the use of the face within the media as a marker of humanization and dehumanization. The commonsense assumption is that those who gain representation are more likely to be humanized while those who are prevented from representing themselves run a greater risk of being dehumanized, of being treated as less than human. Arguing against this assumption, Butler suggests that "personification sometimes performs its own dehumanization" (2004, 141). The faces of Osama Bin Laden, Yasser Arafat, and Saddam Hussein, for instance, are often presented as the faces of evil and hence as devoid of humanity, whereas the faces of Afghan girls who have just removed their burkas are portrayed as markers of newly won humanity. Both representations, argues Butler, although seemingly opposite, are in fact acts of defacement, as both conceal the face in the Levinasian sense, since for Levinas what is human in the face can never be fully represented. Under such representational regime, these faces, good or evil, are produced as the spoils of war.

How to present the face in the Levinasian sense without reducing it to a representation of the face? Butler's answer is by performing the impossibility of representation: "For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to present, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give" (144). Butler's ethical rhetoric relies on the performative power of failed representation in evoking that which is beyond representation. No ethical protocol can guide us here, other than a good dose of ambiguity and ambivalence. Butler adds that "the reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to representation that reality delivers" (146). Yet how can the challenge of reality, which according to Butler is always beyond representation, be invoked within the representation? How can representation be the medium of its own failure? Moreover, is it not the case that by foregrounding the failure to represent Butler is in fact reasserting representation as an organizing concept? That by challenging representation Butler's account already appeals to its priority?

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Roger Silverstone presents another compelling account of media ethics that draws on Levinas's thought. Focusing on online interaction but having in mind electronic mediation in general, Silverstone develops the idea of proper distance as a measure to sustain and evaluate engagement with mediated others. Proper distance evokes Levinas's notion of proximity, which "preserves the separation of myself and the other, a separation which ensures the possibilities of both respect and responsibility for the other" (2003, 475). Proper distance (or proximity) is the condition for creating concern without assimilation; it is where responsibility arises from difference. Modern technologies introduce unprecedented challenges to the integrity of ethical proximity, whose model for Levinas is the face to face. Zygmunt Bauman (1993) has posited the social management of proximity as a key strategy of modern control in which technology plays a crucial role. Silverstone, for his part, argues against fanciful new media rhetoric that equates interaction with commitment, advocating instead for the insertion of proper distance in our dealings with mediated others.

Following Levinas, Silverstone upholds an elusive foundation for his ethics. His account, like Butler's, is inescapably fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence: "We have to determine—perhaps case by case—what that proper distance is or might be when we are confronted with both familiar and novel appearances or representations of the other" (476). Silverstone, like Butler, also sees failure as an ethical opportunity: "The motivated irony in Levinas's position, and also in my own, is that it is precisely in the failure completely to connect, *and in the acknowledgement of the inevitability of that failure*, that technologically mediated communication might enable us ethically" (483). While proper distance shapes all ethical relations, what is particular to the mediated form is the ease with which the unfamiliar can be pushed aside, the facility to disengage: "The mediated face makes no demands on us, because we have the power to switch it off, and to withdraw" (481). Silverstone rightly sees the challenges that electronic media present us with in preserving proper distance. Yet his idea of mediation, which basically means the production and circulation of meanings and representations, effectively turns proper distance into a question of representation (and its failure). Is it not possible that a different understanding of mediation, which takes it beyond the level of representation, might find a positive role for media in maintaining proper distance?[8]

Butler and Silverstone provide two valuable applications of Levinasian ethics to the media, but both ultimately fail to adequately consider the significance of mediation to their respective efforts. To the extent that Levinas's

later work not only offers a philosophical account of the relation with the other but a reflexive account of the mediation of that relation, it is both ethical and metaethical: it sets forth a philosophy of the ethical relation and simultaneously invokes the ethical relation as that which transcends that philosophy. Thus the interruption of the other as a face (ethical level) corresponds with the interruption evoked in Levinas's text (metaethical level), and it is by attending to the textual interruptions that Levinas conveys the complexity of his ethical message. Both Butler and Silverstone address ethics alone, and so their discussions lack the metaethical dimension: focusing on representation and its failure, they overlook the mediation involved in performing a mediated ethical relation, in this case electronic mediation. The question of mediation exceeds that of representation, combining both the ethical and the metaethical, the problem *of* and the problem *in* bringing alterity to the realm of appearance. Moreover, prescriptions such as "performing the failure of representation" and "upholding proper distance" make little sense unless one moves from the level of representation to the level of mediation—that is, unless one attends to the interruptions specific to the medium.

If media are about making the particular general, what is at stake in bringing Levinas to bear on media—both as ethics and metaethics—is the idea of filtering the general through the particular, or, more precisely, exposing the general to the interruption of the particular without sacrificing the particular's appeal to the general. In this respect, the question of mediation is on a par with the question of justice insofar as both are concerned with the conjunction of secondness and thirdness. On the one hand, the other stands for the general: "In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice" (Levinas 1981, 158). On the other hand, the other disrupts the general: "Justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest" (1981, 159). No ethically informed conception of justice is possible without the mutual interruption between second and third—and likewise no ethically informed conception of mediation.

Considering Levinas as a media theorist ultimately amounts to doing to media what Levinas is doing to philosophy: making it a vehicle of the ethical message. This message has no concrete meaning, no specific referent; it consists in interrupting the production of meaning and the securing of referent, making significant the interruption itself. Making media

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susceptible to such interruptions performs the constitutive ethical paradox between knowledge and care, between being informed and being addressed, a process that requires going beyond the level of representation to the level of mediation—mediation as what comports message and passage, representation and transmission. A Levinas-inspired ethics of media will therefore be concerned with producing within mediated communication the effect of the saying's interruption on the said, letting it circulate within the articulation. Adhering to that ethics will mean figuring out—every time differently—how to mediate relation under the conditions of reproduction and secondness under the conditions of thirdness. Determining how to mediate relation is to resurrect the unique scratch the saying leaves on the said, "striating with its furrows the clarity of the ostensible" (1981, 100).

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NOTES

1. Although Levinas does not offer a sustained reflection on technology, his occasional references reveal an ambivalent approach. In one notable discussion he acknowledges the "murderous dangers and bondage" of modern technologies but at the same time insists that technology has a demystifying effect: "It is destructive of the pagan gods and their false and cruel transcendence. Through technology certain gods—rather than God—are dead" (1998b, 9).

2. Indeed, Derrida does not merely read Levinas's text but intently listens to it: "It proceeds with the infinite persistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself" (1978, 312).

3. Some have argued that it was Derrida's critique that led Levinas to revise his take on language and develop what he calls in his later work "ethical language." A partial acknowledgment to that effect is found in a short biographical sketch titled "Signature": "The ontological language which *Totality and Infinity* still uses in order to exclude the purely psychological significance of the proposed analysis is henceforth avoided" (1990, 295).

4. Diane Davis describes this as the "rhetoric of the Saying," which is explicitly nonhermeneutic (2010, 69–70). See also Levinas's metaphor of language as a "battering-ram" (1987, 122).

5. In one interview, Levinas expresses distrust in audiovisual media: "What I observe is that audio-visual media include a large measure of distraction; they are a type of dream that plunge[s] us into that sleep . . . and keeps us there" (Levinas 2004, 128). This view is consistent with Levinas's early thoughts on art as the shadow of reality (1987, 1–14).

6. The reference here is to Jacques Lacan's registers of the real and the symbolic.

7. An inadvertent yet vivid illustration comes from Derrida and Levinas themselves, as delivered by Derrida in his eulogy, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*:

> If the relation to the other presupposes an infinite separation, an infinite interruption where the face appears, what happens, where and to whom does it happen, when another interruption comes at death to hollow out even more infinitely this first separation, a rending interruption at the heart of interruption itself? I cannot speak of interruption without recalling, like many among you, no doubt, the anxiety of interruption I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone, for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance of the "without-response," of the other, to whom he called out and held on with an "*allo, allo*" between each sentence, sometimes even in mid-sentence. (1999, 9)

Is the reference to the telephone coincidental? Is it not already a reconfiguration of the relation with the face whereby a mediated interruption ("*allo, allo*") anticipates the mortal interruption? In this respect, the remoteness of the telephone (and the fear of "being cut off") prefigures the ultimate remoteness of adieu, the final farewell "without-response."

8. Daniel Dayan criticizes Silverstone's concept of proper distance, arguing that "proper distance needs to be equitable distance" and that, more importantly than morality, equidistance is the condition of justice (2007, 121). Levinas's understanding of justice would see no dispute here; both proper and equal distance are necessary but at the same time irreconcilable. Justice demands upholding the tension between the two every time anew: "'Peace, peace to the neighbor and the one far-off' (Isaiah 57:19)—we now understand the point of this apparent rhetoric" (1981, 157).

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