



The Disappearance of Presence
On Heidegger's Paths for a “Magical”
Hermeneutics of Medium and Truth

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Publié le 20-05-2019



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Abstract

In this contribution I would like to investigate the conjunction between technology, media, language and *aletheia* – according to Heidegger’s understanding of this term – , while also shedding light on its connection to magic. Martin Heidegger is the German philosopher who offers the most rigorous reflection on the question of technology. In his famous conference *The Question Concerning Technology* [*Die Frage nach der Technik*] given in Munich in November 1953 and published in 1954, Heidegger expounds the famous thesis according to which: “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological”. He draws upon the notion of ἀλήθεια as un-concealment to open up another thinking of technology, according to the idea that it is a way of revealing. Starting from Heidegger’s account of technology, my essay is mainly structured in two parts: the first one concerns the notion of medium in general related to his critique towards the truth as correspondence; the second one examines the account of ἀλήθεια as an alternative conception of truth, namely as un-concealment of reality, in order to show its affinities with magic.

Résumé

Dans cette contribution, je souhaite étudier la conjonction entre technologie, médias, langage et le concept d’*aletheia* - selon Heidegger - , soulignant son lien avec la magie. Martin Heidegger est le philosophe allemand qui propose la réflexion la plus rigoureuse sur la question de la technologie. Dans sa célèbre conférence *La Question de la Technique* [*Die Frage nach der Technik*] donnée à Munich en novembre 1953 et publiée en 1954, Heidegger expose la célèbre thèse selon laquelle : « L’essence de la technique, n’est rien de technique ». Il considère la notion d’ἀλήθεια comme une ouverture à une autre pensée de la technique, comme une manière de la révéler. En partant du récit de Heidegger sur la technique, mon essai est principalement structuré en deux parties : la première concerne la notion de médium en général et liée à sa critique de la vérité comme correspondance ; la seconde examine le récit de l’ἀλήθεια comme une conception alternative de la vérité, au sens de non-dissimulation de la réalité, afin de montrer ses affinités avec la magie.

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Keywords: Magic, Medium, *Aletheia*, Technology, Martin Heidegger

Mot-clés : Magie, Médium, *Aletheia*, Technologie, Martin Heidegger

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Introduction

L’homme n’est pas seulement un producteur d’artefacts, il est lui-même artifice. Qu’est-ce à dire ? Cela signifie en tout premier lieu que les hommes ne sont pas *apparatus*, pas plus qu’ils ne *naissent* désormais humains. (Bourg 1996, 160)

Martin Heidegger is one of few philosophers offering a rigorous reflection on the question of technology¹. I believe that what makes Heideggerian thought so relevant in this matter is precisely the manner in which his philosophy deals with the question of medium/mediation, language and truth. From a philosophical perspective, I will investigate the technology, media, language and *aletheia*—according to Heidegger’s understanding of these terms—, while also shedding light on its connection to magic. It is well known that in his conference *The Question Concerning Technology* [*Die Frage nach der Technik*], delivered in Munich in November 1953 and published in 1954, Heidegger expounds the famous thesis according to which: “the essence of technology is by no means anything technological” (Heidegger and Lovitt 1977, 3–35: 4), [*So ist denn auch das Wesen der Technik ganz und gar nichts Technisches*].

In opposition to the current conception of “technology”, namely its instrumental and anthropological connotations and its association with neutrality, Heidegger draws upon the notion of ἀλήθεια as un-concealment to open up another thinking of the essence of technology, according to the idea that

¹On Heidegger and Technology, see Floyd and Katz (2016); Riis (2011); Cesarone et al. (2015); Schönherr-Mann and Engelmann (1992); Campbell (2011); Pansera (1998); Carolis (2004).

“technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. [...] It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth” (Heidegger and Lovitt 1977, 12). An investigation of this famous essay of Heidegger’s and the philosopher’s ontological understanding of technology as a means of un-concealment of being connected to the destiny of Western metaphysics, falls well beyond the scope of this paper. However, I will use some elements of his philosophy to provide an overview of the relationship between medium and truth. Furthermore, in the last paragraph, I will try to link Heidegger’s notion of *aletheia* to the work of Marcelle Detienne in order to show how it could also be related to the archaic magic-religious sphere.

“The essence of technology is by no means anything technological”

According to Heidegger, far from being a neutral medium, technology is pervasive; it is an essential component of how human beings come to experience the world. The conventional understanding of technology as the material artefacts and instruments with which we routinely interact is correct. Heidegger means that this understanding corresponds to our everyday conceptualization and experience of how technology appears, how it functions and how we come to evaluate it. This formulation being *correct*, it is not necessarily *true*, for it does not reveal the truth (*ἀλήθεια*) of technology in its essence. Consequently, technology—understood according to its standard instrumental and anthropological characterization—is not the same as technology in its essence: as Heidegger reminds us, the true essence of technology is nothing technological.

In the beginning was the medium

This thesis is closely connected to Heidegger’s idea of mediation: according to Heidegger, media shape the realities we occupy and are thereby more than just pictures or copies of a pre-existing world—in a Platonic sense—but the means of picturing a world and exercising real power over its reality. The idea is that reality is brought into existence by language or by media in general, which produce what we understand as our world and initially bring it into

existence. One can find this idea also in Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*, in which he famously argues—by way of reference to a short story by Jorge-Luis Borges—that “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. The precession of simulacra—it is the map that engenders the territory” (Baudrillard 1983, 1).

Mediation is the way in which presence—seen as immediacy—is rejected, or, better, the way in which presence disappears. Pure presence, pure immediacy disappears through an ongoing and permanent mediation and process of unconcealment. Heidegger's conceptualization of the medium as something constitutive of reality is clear in his theorization of things and language, which I will now outline.

Ready-to-hand / Present-to-hand

Since mediation is the original and normative state of things, one can say that its characterization is crucial for understanding our relationship with media. According to Heidegger, the ontological status or the kind of being that belongs to equipment is primarily perceived as “ready-to-hand” (*Zuhandenheit*), meaning that something becomes what it is or acquires its “thingly” character as a result of being put to work for a particular purpose:

The ready-to-hand is not grasped theoretically at all, nor is it itself the sort of thing that circumspection takes proximally as a circumspective theme. The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand, it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically. That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work—that which is to be produced at the time; and this is accordingly ready-to-hand too. The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered. (Heidegger 1962, 99)

Only when the thing in question fails to work, or breaks down, does it become “present-at-hand” or *Vorhandenheit* (Heidegger 1962, 67–220).

The Heideggerian concept of ready-to-hand [*Zuhandenheit*] has a peculiar meaning if we apply it to the investigation of media. This is because some-

thing ready-to-hand is defined and conceptualized as a kind of intermediary or medium. If things are and come to be what they are first and foremost as equipment, instruments and a means to an end, media will not be just one thing or one kind of thing. All things, in so far as they are something rather than nothing, are always and already *media*.

Hammering without a hammer: how media disappear

As Michael Zimmerman explains by referring to Heidegger's example of a hammer:

In hammering away at the sole of a shoe, the cobbler *does not notice the hammer*. Instead, the tool is in effect transparent as an extension of his hand [...]. For tools to work right, they must be invisible', in the sense that they disappear in favour of the work being done. (Zimmerman 1996, 139)

The same can be said of media. Our various media devices—laptop computers, smart phones, tablets or televisions—do not become objects of explicit contemplation as long as we are able to access online applications. Media do not work—or effectively mediate—because they are *seen*, but rather because they constitute a passage towards the content that they are designed to deliver.

Heidegger's distinction between *present-at-hand* and *ready-to-hand* contains a foundational insight for those seeking to engage in critical media studies. This process characterizes not only media, but all forms of objective representation up to and including scientific knowledge. Consequently, the apparent effects of media are only a symptom of a primordial and widespread mediation that has already, from the very beginning, turned things into objects of representation. In other words, mediation *comes first* and constitutes the primary condition in which we already find ourselves dealing with objects. The remoteness of the thing, the inability to think the thing as a "thing" in its immediacy, is not some recent catastrophe to be compared with some earlier age, when things were originally thought as things. Quite the contrary, things *have never been* conceived of as things, and this process—due to what Heidegger calls the oblivion of Being [*Seinsvergessenheit*]*—is something that distinguishes philosophical thinking as such.*

Medium, language and truth

The second relevant aspect of mediation regards language, which is originally disclosive, in the Heideggerian sense of the word: it brings things into the openness of their initial disclosure. In this fashion, there is a deep connection between language and technology. This idea is also taken up by Dominique Bourg in his work *L'homme artifice*, in which he refers to technology and language as “a network of artefacts” (“*réseau d'artefacts*” (Bourg 1996, 160)²) constituting the domain of the human. As Terry Eagleton explains, “language for Heidegger is not a mere instrument of communication, a secondary device for expressing ‘ideas’: it is the very dimension in which human life moves and brings the world to be in the first place. Only where there is language is there ‘world,’ in the distinctively human sense” (Eagleton 1983, 55). If language—the “first” media—is originally revealing, then that which comes *to be* occurs only in and by the mediation of language.

This alternative interpretation of language also has a transformative effect on the question of truth. Because language is originally disclosing or revealing, “truth” can no longer be conceptualized as a matter of measuring the correspondence between things and the representations of things. It is, in other words, not a matter of evaluating how well a statement about something represents the actual thing (realism) or how well something incorporates its symbolic construction (linguistic idealism). Instead, truth will need to be reconfigured as a matter of revealing what is, the place where reality “unconceals” itself, gives itself up to our contemplation.

This idea of mediation is simply a means of dismantling commonsense realism. Realism, and a certain Platonic understanding of representation, have gone largely unchallenged and left virtually unquestioned for millennia. In contesting the realist assumptions, Heidegger not only breaks with Plato and the metaphysical tradition that developed in his wake, but also problematizes the traditional concept of truth, seen as correctness, correspondence, fidelity and verification. Heidegger’s efforts deliberately overturn commonsense realism, which assumes that there is a real world of actual existing things that are then represented, more or less adequately, in various mediated forms. Instead, the world that is assumed to be out there—the things,

²Our translation.

people and events that comprise our shared sense of reality—is always and already brought forth, structured and exists as an outcome of mediation.

According to Heidegger, there is a crucial difference between *truth* and *correctness*. Starting from Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”, this particular understanding of truth as correct agreement or correspondence has dominated the history of Western thought (Heidegger 1998). Heidegger argues that the gaze of the former prisoner becomes more correct at the sight of the sun, and hence truth is characterized as — correctness of representation to the thing represented:

Whoever [like the prisoner] is turned towards more beingful beings [towards what is more beingful than something else, thus to more genuine beings] sees more correctly.’ Thus *orthos*, *orthotès*, correctness crops up, and indeed in the comparative, in an intensification: there are gradations. The correctness of seeing and viewing things, and thus of definition and assertion, is grounded in the particular manner of orientation and proximity to beings, i.e. in the way in which beings are in each case unhidden. Truth as correctness is grounded in truth as unhiddenness. (Heidegger 1998, 34:26)

Truth understood as the correctness of representation to the thing seems to correspond exactly to what is typically understood and experienced as truth. Consequently, Heidegger’s question is more fundamental and ontological, not least because *truth*, as Heidegger explains, is not just one issue among others but *the* defining question of philosophy, which, at least from Aristotle’s time, has been the Science of truth.

***Aletheia* as “magic” truth**

Our long cultural history of correspondence-based thinking means that truth is always presumed to be a matter of measuring the correctness of representation to the actual being of some objects. As Heidegger correctly points out, “if our representations and assertions are supposed to conform to the object, then this being must be accessible in advance” (Heidegger 1994, 18); it must already be given “out in the open.” In response to this problem, Heidegger advocates an alternative conceptualization of truth that is not so much an

innovation as a return to a “more original” and fundamental understanding of the concept.

Truth as correctness of representation presupposes, in order to be what it is (assimilation to the object), the openness of beings by which they become capable of being objects in the first place and by which the representation becomes a faculty of presenting something before itself as such [...] Accordingly, correctness cannot constitute the original essence of truth if it itself is dependent on something more original. The original essence of truth must then be sought in a return to this openness. (Heidegger 1994)

In formulating this more original understanding of truth, Heidegger returns to and capitalizes upon the ancient Greek word for truth, [*aletheia*], which he translates as “un-concealing”, “uncovering” or “un-hiddenness”, (*Ent-bergen/Erschlossenheit—disclosure*) which is the fundamental trait of being itself.

In other words, the theory of truth as correspondence—whether one tends to endorse the idealist or realist version—can only be true on the basis of a prior disclosure of things (whereby things are first out in the open) that makes agreement or correspondence possible in the first place.

Therefore, this formulation is based on the ancient Greek word ἀλήθεια [*aletheia*] and re-establishes truth on the grounds of an original *un-concealing* from which correspondence eventually becomes a secondary aspect, or a side effect. In this way, Heidegger recovers a more original account of truth, one that is prior to correspondence in both historical terms and in terms of its conceptual status. This original disclosure belongs to a magico-religious sphere, as we will see by referring to a hermeneutic model as per the brilliant work of Marcelle Detienne, entitled *Les Maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque*. In particular, I would like to shed light on his interpretation of *aletheia*, which is inseparable from a magic context and antithetical to a rational-logic vision of the world. Far from following the path of poetic or arbitrary etymologies, Detienne provides a historical enquiry of the semantic field of the archaic world and his account of magic truth have—in my view—many similarities to Heidegger’s idea of *aletheia*.

Marcelle Detienne’s famous work sheds light on the interpretation of truth in archaic Greece. *A-letheia* is connected to *Lethe* (forgetfulness, concealment),

through the privative “alpha” and it means un-forgetfulness, un-concealment (Detienne 1996, 16). There is no opposition or contradiction between *aletheia* and *Lethe*, rather there is an intermediate area between these two poles. This is the interplay between falsehood and truth. *A-letheia* plays a pivotal role in the transition from mythical to rational thought. It simultaneously embodies a religious power and a philosophical concept and, in some ways, it constitutes a bridge as well as a break between them. In archaic Greece, it was the attribute of certain special functions: inspired poets, diviners and just kings automatically mastered truth. Then the philosopher arrived and, like these figures, claimed the ability to achieve and reveal the truth.

Detienne identifies three different domains of *aletheia* in archaic thought: poetry, justice and prophecy. The first poetic representation of *aletheia* is in Hesiod’s poem, but it achieves a pivotal role in the field of mantic speech or prophecy connected to the process of divination and justice. There is no *aletheia* without its complementary relation to *lethe*, no *aletheia* without the muses, memory and justice. In this system of thought, *aletheia* cannot be separated from praise, ritual acts, and gestures. Thence, it is deeply related to a particular action and a pattern of behaviour. On the other hand, *aletheia* has a performative value, since it is a form of magico-religious speech, which is not subject to temporality, because it is at one with forces beyond man. Hence, the truth is established by a magical speech based on memory as well as oblivion; its efficacy is inseparable from symbolic meanings and limited to an exceptional type of person.

Aletheia is the manifestation of an archaic system of thought marked by an “archaic fusion” (Calogero, n.d., 63–95) of words and things, which constitutes its linguistic magic. This connection between a semantic and ontological level is based on a double process. On the one hand, the thing acquires a spiritual value through the word, on the other hand, the word materializes through the thing (Pisano 2018, 349–56). It’s not by chance that in the antique world, the poet, the seer and the king shared the same role as masters of truth. The magic-performative value of the *aletheia* as a speech is connected to the power of *logos*, which is “immense: it brings pleasure, dispels worries, fascinates, persuades, and changes things as though by magic” (Detienne 1996, 118). As Plato stated in *Cratylus*, *logos* is at once *alethes* and *pseudēs*, true and false: “you know speech signifies all things (to pan) and keeps them

circulating and always going about, and that it has two forms—true and false” (Sedley 2003, 408c).

The archaic world wasn’t the domain of binary and non-oppositional logic. On the contrary, there was a magical-holistic world view: There is no “opposition” or “contradiction” between the true and the false, between truth (*Aletheia*) and oblivion (*Lethe*):

Thus it is not that *Aletheia* (+) stands on one side and *Lethe* (—) on the other. Rather, an intermediate zone develops between the poles, in which *Aletheia* approaches *Lethe* and vice versa [...]. (Detienne 1996, 10)

The interconnectedness of being and not-being, truth and deception, memory and oblivion, light and night is at the heart of the archaic vision of the world, since opposites are complementary. Far from viewing truth as dogmatic and categorical, mythical thought considers that the shadow of deception goes with the light of truth.

According to Detienne, the passage from myth to reason during the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. is interpreted as a transition from magico-religious speech to dialogue speech. If the former was exclusive and limited to a peculiar type of person, the latter—in contrast—was secular and egalitarian. The emergence of rational thought is connected to a deep secularization which—according to Detienne—is the premise for the elaboration of rhetoric, philosophy, law and history. The passage from *aletheia* to *dokein* (to seem) marks the end of the magico-religious world and the beginning of a rational-secular perspective. Together with the secularization of speech, the ancient masters of *aletheia*—inspired poets, diviners and prophets—were automatically replaced by another concept of truth, embodied by philosophers, that was antithetical to the sacred sphere.

This passage to the secular resembles what Heidegger calls *Seinsvergessenheit*, a concept referring to the destiny of occidental metaphysics. The ancient idea of truth as *aletheia* has been substituted by truth as correspondence, in the same way in which syllogisms prevail over magico-religious speeches.

[Dis-]Appearance of reality

Aletheia is connected to a form of magic that reveals truth. It is nothing but the sphere of mediation in which phenomena are disclosed; within this process, appearance is deeply related to disappearance and mediation only reality's condition of possibility. The account of mediation—in my view—calls into question an idea of immediacy which excludes human transformation. One might say that the interpretation of the medium that results from a Heideggerian perspective sheds light on the status of magic itself. Firstly, because the concept of *aletheia* is deeply connected to magico-religious practices; secondly, because it implies a step back from an idea of truth as correspondence; thirdly, because it is based on a rejection of realism itself. Moreover, the process of un-concealment is deeply connected to a magic idea of being; one might say that, following Heidegger's philosophical reasoning, one finds a magical hermeneutics of media, technology, things, language and truth.

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