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**Media Theory:**  
**How Can We Live the**  
**Good Life in Strata?**

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*We do not know what it is to live a good life* in the layered, stratified and mediated world of many (local and global) scales, contending histories and futures that haunt our present as anxieties. The question of the good life is an ancient one, from the Ancient Greek philosophers' *Eudamonia*, to the Protestant ethic of deferred gratification, to the Wall Street ethos of greedy individualism. Traditionally, these address the question of the good life in terms of an individual's own life and their direct relationships. However, today the power and reach of individuals is both more expansive and more indirect. We are told that our actions have global consequences but there is a mismatch between the scale of individual local action and later, global, long-term outcomes. Our efforts to mindfully elaborate ethical relations result in a much more abstract, fuzzy and delayed outcome.

Recent writers have identified media as relevant to these questions because it is located at an ontological and ontic crossroads between the human and non-human. Parikka (2013) pushes this to embrace not only technology (as in the work of Kittler, 1990; 1999), networks (as in Latour, 2005) or non-human animals (as in the work of Haraway, 1992; Serres, 1982; and others) but the Earth as a stratified geological record. Olsson argues that this changes the 'space of media':

This spatial expansion also entails a temporal transformation. Since modern geology's formation in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with scientists such as James Hutton and Charles Lyell, who authored the *Principles of Geology*

(1830), it has operated with an idea of the earth as a stratified system into which different epochs and temporalities are inscribed. Consequently, a geology of media will address and analyze different time scales than those that frame “history”. If Siegfried Zielinski’s media archaeology (or variantology) has paved the way for an analysis of the “deep time of the media” – an analysis that follows alternative routes and excavates other strata than those displayed in a linear success story of technologies – a geology of media will extend this approach to encompass a nonlinear history (Olsson, 2015 online).

Drawing on images and ideas of stratification and mediation, I would like to consider the simultaneity of these two processes. I contend that the interest in strata and sedimentary layers suggests one of the distinctive elements of contemporary time-space, which is the paradox of having to theorize and act across different levels or scales, whether they be local and global scales or different traditions that are in conflict. This requires thinking relationally. This is not only a result of the spatialization of difference onto planes where identity is juxtaposed rather than understood hierarchically as lack – for example, lack of piety, civility or capital. It is a juxtastructure (Sève, 1974) of difference that is simultaneously vertical in a hierarchical temporal order, but also visualized as a continuum, such as an exposed cliff-face that gives us a view that cuts across many sedimentary layers.

Consider our dilemma today: global media condemn us to live in perpetual impotence as we are informed of distant atrocities that have implications for us which are hard to pinpoint, equivocal and located at an indeterminate point in the future. This is a structural feature of political orientations and opinion. The stratified differences of power and distance defy our attempts to comprehend and intervene. But we must attempt to translate or project across and between strata, across and between places and spatial-temporal contexts. Consider Turkey in 2016-17: at what point does the attack on democratic institutions and the firing of academics who have proffered thoughtful critique, and even just commentary, threaten the security of our own persons and families from abuse by representatives of our States? We may forget that this is only the most recent step that follows on the violent purging of diversity from the public sphere in Turkey. To what extent can distant

developments be understood as models that could be transferred locally? Extrapolating across contexts and strata: is it possible to compare the hardening of conservative attitudes in Turkey with the United States which appears to be following a similar course? Both of these are what Lyotard would refer to as ‘paralogical operations’. They exceed any rational and deductive procedure even while they have a clear logical structure.

We do not know what it is to live the good life *in this stratified situation*. It involves both local and global, intimate and foreign, at the same time, as well as a blending of sedimentary layers of past, present and future. Horizontal layers, such as spatial scales from micro to macro, or from inside to outside, are formally distinct but often impinge on each other. Adding to this topsy-turvy situation, the hierarchical, temporal layers and successions are also formally mapped but diachronically interlaced in everyday life. This takes various forms of ‘return’, of haunting, promissory statements about future outcomes, anxiety in the present about the future, or the present distracted by nostalgia for the past. American political rhetoric, for example, revels in the formula, ‘Some day in the future, we will make the present great again (as was in the past)’, as a return to a teleological path that leads towards a predestined salvation.

Media not only inform but *organize* information. Knowledge, however, can be definitionally isolated even if it is structured by the epistemological infrastructure of, for example, tables of knowledge or spatializations of difference that code identity to geography. The rules of knowledge formation as a human process of understanding the significance of information are challenged by the juxtastructural and relational qualities of contemporary media and the mediated sensorium. We need to discover the working methods that stand in for the absence of a viable Cartesian logic that works through difference. Is the individual logical savant replaced by a dialogue in a collective? Is the incommensurability of facts and features of different strata compensated for by topological rules? For example, projected down from multi-dimensional processes to more flattened, manageable, diagrammatic visualizations? Are there emergent praxes for imagination that are the reverse of projection and that

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move from lower to higher strata, local to global? Would this respond to the challenge of the Turkish example above?

Media *stratify*. It has been long argued that they do not only classify and relate, but isolate and juxtapose. Life in strata today is an empirical reality. However, it is not a matter of living in some sort of positivist, Euclidian striated space that pre-existed media – like a kind of cultural ‘upstairs-downstairs’ set of distinctions and prejudices. Stratified space is created by media as much as by any other force. This ontological sense is discussed across the work of Innis, McLuhan, media ecologists, media archaeologists, including Kittler and *Kulturtechniken* theorists, such as Siegert. Collectively, they argue that media structures our grasp of the past and imagination of the future. That is, media allows the flow of experience and transmission of messages in time to be translated to a spatial medium (such as the surface of a sheet of paper), which allows information to be stored and thus permits experiences to be revisited, overcoming the irreversible flow of time. Thus, a photograph can be understood as a spatialization of a temporal moment: it makes the past moment of the snapshot available simultaneously in the present, rather than disappearing in the succession of temporal instants. However, non-human recording technologies favour a calculating, diagrammatic vision that spatializes information. This implicitly spatializes the world, not just as a table of knowledge but as a social spatialization of places-for-this and places-for-that. Peters refers to ‘logistical media’:

These are “prior to and form the grid in which messages are sent [...] Logistical media establish the zero points of orientation, the convergence of the x and y axis” [(Peters, 2008: 40, cited in Young, 2015)]. In ancient societies, technologies like the calendar and clock established grids through which time came to be experienced, measured and calculated (as Mumford understood in 1934). The tower established terrain as a visible field over which power could be exerted. Time and space converge in these objects: towers render the time required to move over terrain as a spatial horizon that can be processed by the eye; the discrete, spatialized movements of a clock’s hands freeze the ephemeral arrow of time; the calendar renders cultural cycles into a spatial form by which these can be

standardized and canonized (for a discussion of media and ‘the geometry of time’ see Winkler, [2009]) (Young, 2015 online).

However, what is significant today is the way in which media not only differentiate but mediate between and across what has been differentiated. This creates the situation described above as blended, interlaced or even topsy-turvy, of simultaneous separation and mediation, distinction and de-differentiation, partition and bridging. This is in strong contrast to the earlier 20<sup>th</sup> century confidence with which Simmel could oppose these pairs in a temporal succession. Speaking of the development of group identity, he argued that the same separatist practices by which a group differentiated itself would be later used to link to other groups (Simmel, 1994). Is Simmel’s metaphor of the drawbridge, first up as a ‘door’ and later down as a ‘bridge’, one obsolete page of a previous century’s social science? Media now operate simultaneously as both ‘bridge’ and ‘door’ at the same time, not sequentially.

Mediated strata demolish the certainties of modernity. Places and scales are in relationships that are mediated. It can be understood ideally as the interaction of scales, as well as an actually material set of exchanges. *Media Theory* is thus more than questions of transmission and storage. In as much as media creates new relations, new strata bridge together in a juxtastructure. This is simultaneously a sort of systematic ‘table of knowledge’ as a set of supposedly incommensurable epistemological and ontological realms together with a set of contingently emergent practices and ethics for working across the table. This ethics strives for a good life that resolves the contradictions that have been created by the same media.

These norms and practices complicate questions of ‘reach’ (Allen and Cochrane, 2010). They show the multiple translations required for mere understanding, and are more than mere ‘action at a distance’ that presumes a smooth, undifferentiated global space. Media create not only an ontological scene but an ontic, performative ecology. This is a space and tempo of agency – or agencies, plural: the agency of organizations, states, groups, individuals, children, animals, even insects, such as bees. These agencies are actions, routine and exceptional; banal and significant. This

demands not only a politics but an ethics of the relations across these spaces and between these strata.

We do not know what it is to live a good life *in strata*. Ubiquitous mediation removes the option of merely compartmentalizing between levels: us and them, the West and the rest, the blessed and the cursed or pitiable. It is this that was understood to have made Hillary Clinton's distinction between the enlightened and the 'basket of deplorables' impossible in practice. It condemned her platform to absurdity even in the face of a more ridiculous opponent. We are mutually inter-related. Impotence was once coupled with blindness and willful ignorance. In the face of relatedness, impotence is the general condition and affect that must raise demands for new understandings and strategies for mediating agency to reconstitute a ground for an effective citizen and political actor.

We do not know what it is to live the good life *in mediations across strata*. What is it, for example, to construct, organize and orchestrate mediations? This is not simply a rhetorical problem of constructing new knowledges but a pragmatics of everyday life, which is as much lived locally as a process of interaction at a distance. We cannot presume that 20<sup>th</sup> century social science captures the whole story of life today. Postmodern relativism suggested that we pick and choose between elements of many strata in an attempt to create new stratifications, new moral and political categories, but had trouble justifying and naturalizing these hybrids. Canadian indigenous cultures have called upon humanity to honour pasts and traditions but in a present and context where elders themselves acknowledge the lack of purchase traditional knowledge may have on a changing present (Coulthard 2010). The question of the good life is thus an open challenge.

Media calls out for theory because it mediates not only abstract categories and intangible realities such as audience communities of perception and taste, but media channel life chances. Mediation and relationality are today as much about what exists within what category as they are about the finitudes of processes, the death sentences passed on intellectuals and activists, the purging of possible futures despite the unsustainability of current trends. Spaces of experimentation, of news ways of living, require spaces of imagination that support the discovery of new practices,

understanding and knowing. How to live the good life in and across strata is as much a question today as it was for the Ancients. *Media* needs *Theory* to think along and across strata.

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