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## Pre-socratic media theory

### Abstract

Drawing inspiration from Siegfried Zielinski's ground-breaking study of media archaeology, *Deep Time of the Media*, this paper explores the potential for pre-Socratic philosophy to provide a model for alternative conceptions of mediation within contemporary media art. It argues that pre-Socratic philosophy develops notions of mediation that extend beyond the contemporary focus on technical media. In their exploration of fundamental dynamic principles within nature and in their sensitivity to the uncertain relation between truth, appearance and finite human understanding, they suggest diverse conceptions of mediation that have continuing critical and creative relevance.

### Keywords

era2015, media, socratic, theory, pre

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## **Pre-Socratic Media Theory**

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Re:Live: Third International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and  
Technology, Melbourne 26-29 November 2009

### **Abstract**

Drawing inspiration from Siegfried Zielinski's ground-breaking study of media archaeology, **Deep Time of the Media**, this paper explores the potential for pre-Socratic philosophy to provide a model for alternative conceptions of mediation within contemporary media art. It argues that pre-Socratic philosophy develops notions of mediation that extend beyond the contemporary focus on technical media. In their exploration of fundamental dynamic principles within nature and in their sensitivity to the uncertain relation between truth, appearance and finite human understanding, they suggest diverse conceptions of mediation that have continuing critical and creative relevance.

### **Keywords**

Pre-Socratic Philosophy, Mediation, Media Art

### **Introduction**

In his *Deep Time of the Media* (2006), German media theorist Siegfried Zielinski traces a deliberately discontinuous history of media from ancient pre-Socratic conceptions of the perceptual interface through to the curious inventions of medieval and Renaissance proto-science and to the dilemmas of contemporary post-media (in which media has become so universal that it risks losing its coherent identity). He deliberately avoids structuring the book as a linear tale of progress. Instead he prefers an archaeological approach, arguing that the various historical strata – “curiosities” (Zielinski, 2006: 34) – represent rich worlds in themselves, each as sophisticated as anything that has come before or since. Rather than appearing as primitive evolutionary moments, the historical strata are positioned as alternative, equally viable conceptions of media that have the potential to inform the present, inspiring us to reconsider – perhaps at the limits of this concern – the nature and possibilities of media.

If early new media theory tended to describe a very restricted historical frame, focusing very much on recent innovations and future prospects, *Deep Time of the Media* sketches a much longer and broader context for contemporary practice. More particularly, Zielinski provides keen insight into the relationship between traditions of speculative science and

the media imaginary. This works well to demonstrate the rich interdisciplinary nature of media experimentation, but also tends to privilege a technical-scientific conception of media to a more general, philosophical-aesthetic one. This is justifiable in many ways. Our ordinary understanding of media is associated with a multiplicity of technical forms – photography, film, video, electronics, computation, etc. – so why not restrict our conception of media to technological means for expanding upon aspects of human perception, memory and cognition? However, Zielinski deliberately resists efforts to neatly define the scope of media. His aim is to unsettle conventional definitions and to open up the field to wider strands of reflection (Zielinski, 2006: 33). Within this context there may be some value in questioning exclusively technical conceptions of media. There may be a need to consider, for instance, how notions of media and mediation figure more generally within traditions of philosophical speculation. The Hegelian dialectic, for example, can perhaps be regarded as a mechanism of mediation, endlessly crunching up intransigent otherness into the progressive articulation of the Idea. Or we could consider how aesthetics is positioned as a mediating agent in Kant's philosophy, brokering a relation between pure and practical reason and mediating between the unknowable character of sensory experience and the essential structures of *apriori* understanding. While at one level this may seem to risk losing sight of the scene and concrete specificity of technical media, it may also help to clarify their complex implications.

As a means of distinguishing this broader conception of media, this paper considers Zielinski's analysis of the late pre-Socratic philosophy of Empedocles and Democritus (2006: 39-55). Zielinski argues that Empedocles and Democritus develop a notion of mediated perception - involving a play of affinities, effluences, pores and atoms - that has considerable relevance for the contemporary notion of the media interface (2006: 55). My aim is to review his argument, focusing specifically on his efforts to tease out a technical conception of media from the ancient philosophers' more integrated cosmological vision. In my view, Zielinski's emphasis on a technical conception of media overlooks broader and more fundamental questions of mediation within pre-Socratic thought. The pre-Socratics' abiding concern with issues of ontology, truth, unity and differentiation reveals a notion of mediation that extends beyond the necessity of conceiving a technical relay. Mediation is integral, for example, to the central pre-Socratic concepts of the *arche* and the *logos* (Barnes, 1987: 20-22). The *arche* denotes the fundamental principle and underlying stuff of the cosmos. Rather than taking entirely

static shape, the arche is typically positioned as a dynamic, generative substance that structures an intrinsic mediation within the play of matter itself. The closely related notion of the *logos* indicates both the intrinsic logic of the cosmos and the properly philosophical account of that logic. Here a thinking of mediation is evident in the inevitable gap between dimensions of truth and appearance – the natural structure of the world and its philosophical articulation. My discussion will focus specifically on the philosophy of Parmenides (5th Century BC), as he is famous for resisting any thought of multiplicity or differentiation - insisting instead that the cosmos represents an eternal and unchanging unity. Although apparently antagonistic to any thought of mediation, strands of paradox within his philosophy suggest otherwise. In the constant play of light and darkness, being and nothingness, truth and opinion, the philosophy of Parmenides becomes curiously emblematic of the philosophical dimensions of media.

### **Natural media apparatus**

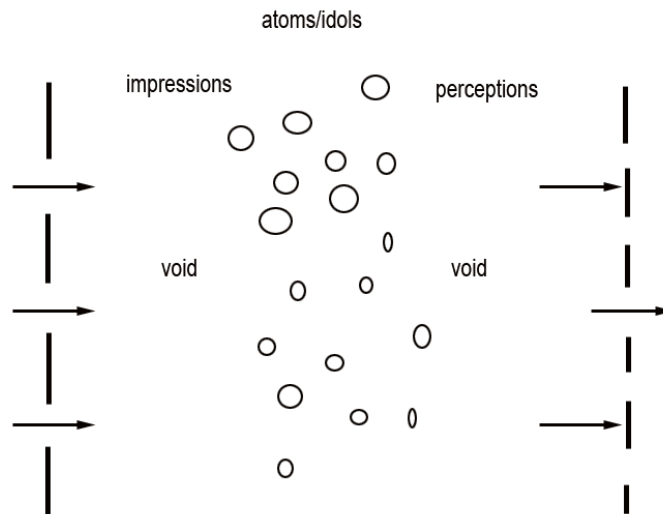
Pre-Socratic philosophy is associated with period in which ancient Greek mythological explanations of the world gave way to emerging strands of empirical observation and logical argument (Barnes, 1987: 16, Guthrie 1962: 1-3). The pre-Socratic thinkers posed fundamental questions of origin, cause and being that have informed Western scientific and philosophical thought ever since. They addressed not only the broad shape of the cosmos, but also its fundamental stuff, structure and logic. Many factors contributed to this new perspective, from conditions of relative wealth and political stability to an acceleration of cultural exchange (especially with Eastern cultures) (Barnes, 1987: 14-15, Guthrie, 1962: 29-32, McEvilley, 2002). Empedocles and Democritus appear as relatively late figures in this tradition. The first group of pre-Socratic thinkers made bold statements about the nature of things. Thales (624-546 BCE) argues that everything is made of water. Anixmander (610-546 BCE) suggests that all specific things are born from the infinite. Heraclitus (535-475 BCE) insists upon primordial fire, hence the metaphysical primacy of conflictive differential relations over any sense of stable existential identity. In a crucial move Parmenides (510-440 BCE) rejects these natural metaphors and asserts the priority of logic. Rather than describing the nature of being in terms of perceptible elements, Parmenides privileges a metaphysical standpoint. He affirms the singularity of being and argues that the concept of nothing (non-being) is a logical contradiction. Very significantly, his notion of homogenous being entails

abandoning any thought of development, motion and multiplicity. From Parmenides' perspective, there is only the undifferentiated and eternal One.

The philosophy of Empedocles (Barnes, 1987: 161-201) represents an effort to reconcile the earlier currents of pre-Socratic philosophy with the austere logical reduction of Parmenides. Empedocles agrees with Parmenides that nature is un-generated and eternal. He also accepts, with Parmenides, that it can adopt the form of an undifferentiated whole, but argues that none of this need contradict the perceptible reality of dynamic natural processes. Shifting away from a binary logical conception, Empedocles adopts a cyclical view. The cosmos takes shape in terms of an eternal alternation between the forces of Love and Strife (further complicated by relations of Chance and Necessity). When Love prevails then all matter comes together into a unified, undifferentiated whole (symbolized by the form of a sphere), but then just as quickly, through Strife, it breaks apart into the multiplicity of different things. Nature and the cosmos represent then an endless passage between unity and differentiation. The process of alternation is facilitated by four root elements: earth, air, water and fire. All specific things are products of the relation between these fundamental elements, and all things are attracted to, and repulsed by, other things in terms of their underlying elemental constitution. Their mingling and communication are conceived in terms of effluences, pores and affinities. So rather than imagining the material autonomy of particular things, Empedocles regards all matter in terms of a constant process of porous exchange.

It is this scene of exchange that interests Zielinski, particularly as it entails a theory of perception. Empedocles positions perception as an objective phenomenon. It takes shape as a natural relation of attraction or repulsion, correspondence or disengagement. Material things physically and intimately interact. They brush up against one another, engaging or disengaging with each other's effluences on the basis of their underlying elemental predispositions. This is mediated by the surface character of things – by porous skins, which both release and receive material effluences. It is precisely in this conception of a concrete perceptual apparatus that Zielinski recognizes a model of mediation and the media interface. However, Zielinski suggests that Empedocles' model involves a literal and directly material relation between things,. Zielinski draws upon the thought of Democritus (460-370 BCE) to add the two remaining (modern) ingredients: an intervening space of separation; and a neutral agent of exchange.

Objecting directly to Parmenides, Democritus argues that being and non-being exist equally (Barnes, 1987: 46). Non-being takes shape as the void between existent things – a space that opens up all possibility for movement. Further, Democritus asserts a radically multiple notion of being. Instead of a world of self-sufficient and autonomous macro-level things, Democritus argues that everything is composed of innumerable and imperceptibly small atoms. The atoms represent the positive character of being. They gain their distinctive identity and potential for motion in relation to the dimension of non-being that surrounds them. The void provides the necessary habitat for the multiplicity and animation of being. In this manner, Democritus’ atomistic theory (Barnes, 1987: 247) provides, for Zielinski, the two missing ingredients from Empedocles’ conception of perception: the void enables a space of separation; while the atoms provide a neutral carrier of information (Zielinski, 2006: 50-55). According to Democritus, the perceptible effluences of individual things produce impressions (“idols”) on the surrounding atoms, which then become the vehicle for conveying flows of perceptible information to other things.



*Fig. 1: Democritus model of mediated perception*

Overall then, Zielinski combines the thought of Empedocles and Democritus to distinguish a model of mediated perception that bears a clear resemblance to features of contemporary technical media. We can, for instance, map this conception to Shannon and Weaver’s famous Mathematical Model of Communication (1949). We have a Source in the shape of specific perceptible thing, a Transmitter in the sense of the porous

skin that releases and receives direct effluences or indirect atomic impressions, a Channel in the shape of the void and the impressionable atoms, a Receiver cast as the receptive dimension of porous matter ( the non-subjective interiority of the perceiving thing). Of course, the ancient model lacks a specific concern with issues of message entropy (noise), but it has very modern relevance in terms of the emphasis on a mediated and articulated perceptual apparatus. A remaining issue, however, is that it does not define an explicitly technical apparatus. The pre-Socratic model of perception functions within nature (*phusis*), rather than as a consequence of artificial making (*techne*). Zielinski emphasizes this point:

In actual fact, Empedocles' theory of pores renders the construction of any interface superfluous. The porous skins are ubiquitous; they are material elements of all things and people and thus move with them. Every person and every thing has received this gift. Democritus introduced a medium, and thus a third quantity, wherein one can contemplate the "idols", or simulacra, including their truth. With Democritus, though, one can imagine that, in the future, more artificial interfaces will have to be constructed in order to bridge the chasm that currently exists between being and appearance. (Zielinski, 2006: 55)

The pre-Socratic model gains significance for Zielinski precisely inasmuch as it anticipates the subsequent development of artificial perceptual interfaces (media). At the same time, however, its status as a curiosity hinges on its heterological character – its potential to open up alternative insight into the dynamic material character of media relations. Zielinski preserves a delicate balance between these strands of resemblance and difference. My concern, however, is that the emphasis on discerning features of modern technical media in pre-Socratic thought ends up neglecting more fundamental issues of mediation within the tradition.

### **Integral Mediation**

The pre-Socratic thinking of mediation highlights a play of mediation within the texture of nature (*phusis*). Rather than depending upon any work of ostensible technical artifice (*techne*), issues of media and mediation affect the self-identity of being. This has relevance in terms of developing a more nuanced conception of contemporary media, one that is not primarily focused on the traditional dramaturgy of technological alienation, but that is open to new possibilities of mobility, intersection, reduction and integration. This



is by no means to envisage the seamless incorporation of media within some amorphous conception of living being, but on the contrary to suggest that technical media is not alone in its play of separation, distance and division. The disruption of media is integral to the thinking of being itself (rather than an external technological imposition). Here I draw inspiration from Heidegger's examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the notion of technology. Heidegger questions the nature of technology and argues that it is an expression of a more fundamental existential dilemma. Linked to a complex history of thinking concerning the nature of making and revealing, technology serves as a contemporary sign of the essential work of displacement and disguise within the conception of being.

The question concerning technology is the question concerning the constellation in which revealing and concealing, in which the coming to presence of truth comes to pass. (Heidegger, 1978: 315)

The contemporary value of pre-Socratic philosophy lies precisely in its capacity to reveal this integral space of mediation – to reveal that issues of media and mediation are inherent within more fundamental questions of identity and manifestation. The pre-Socratic thinking of integrally mediated being is evident in their effort to define both the fundamental principle of the cosmos (*arche*) and the underlying logic that governs its operations (*logos*).

### *Arche*

We have seen that Empedocles conceives the cosmos as a dynamic cycle of elemental relations. In this sense, the fundamental feature of being is less some specific tangible stuff than a constant interplay of material forces. The *arche* of being is cast not as a singular and self-similar quantity, but as a motion of mediation. This sense of fundamentally mediate being is even more strongly evident in the thought of Heraclitus, who posits a radically differential conception of the cosmos. If he speaks of fire and war it is less to designate substantive existential essences than to insist that the notion of essence is radically problematic. The primary character of being is flux, self-division and conflictive mediation. In a less pointed manner, Thales' *arche* of water is also indicative of a terrain of mediation. Water is positioned as both a cosmic habitat and as a seminal generative force. Water describes an active principle that gains significant identity in the processes of life that it engenders. Its importance hinges on its capacity to enable fecund

relations – to provide a medium for, and to mediate, life. In this sense, the whole concept of an *arche* necessarily involves a thinking of mediation, of the dynamic relations that structure the nature of the cosmos.

At the same time, however, there are strands of pre-Socratic philosophy that clearly resist this mediate conception of the *arche*. Parmenides' notion of an unmoving, undifferentiated whole provides the clearest example. Yet this principle of singular, homogenous being depends on conceiving and then dismissing its other – nothing. Parmenides positions the concept of nothing as a logical contradiction: “Never will it prevail that what not is is” (Barnes 1987: 133). Since nothing cannot exist there can only be existence, which must necessarily be eternal and utterly consistent. A thinking of negation provides the logical ground for determining the nature of being, but on the condition that this ground is instantly erased. At least at a logical level then, the concept of nothing provides a vital mediating role. We could argue then, along the lines of Derrida's theory of *differance* (1974: 65), that the logical integrity of the Parmenidean *arche* is affected by a thinking of mediation at the outset.

### ***Logos***

Heraclitus is the first of the major pre-Socratic thinkers to speak of the *logos*:

Of this account [*logos*] which holds forever men prove uncomprehending, both before hearing it and when they first have heard it. For although all things come about in accordance with this account [*logos*], they are like tiros as they try the words and the deeds which I expound as I divide up each thing according to its nature and say how it is. (Barnes, 1987: 101)

Heraclitus plays upon the complex meanings of *logos* within ancient Greek. Here it refers both to his spoken/written account of the nature of things and also to the underlying logic that shapes natural processes. The notion of the *logos* engages then the fundamental problem of the relationship between the self-identity of truth and its mediated representation, particularly with how philosophy can lay claim to truth. There are many paradoxes associated with the *logos*. These paradoxes hinge on the incommensurable relation between the sphere of necessarily limited human knowledge and the infinite scope of the cosmos. Drawing on the rhetoric of traditional cosmology, Parmenides describes a mythological basis for his access to the *logos*. He relates how he

learns the true nature of things via an encounter with a goddess on the portal between Day and Night (Barnes, 1987: 130-131). This encounter occurs in a metaphoric space that represents the suspension of ordinary common-sense oppositions (Gallop, 1984: 7). It indicates that the *logos* owes a substantial debt to the apparently negative force of the Night (the goddess emerges from the House of the Night and speaks of things that exceed mortal perception). The encounter with the goddess serves as a means of indicating a higher dimension of truth, a transition beyond ordinary human perception into the sphere of metaphysical knowledge. It is in this sense a poetic-mythological apparatus – a medial conceit – that structures an interplay and an exchange between light and darkness, common opinion and philosophical truth.

One passage from Parmenides' poem is particularly indicative of the complex, perceptual, conceptual and metaphoric difficulties of elaborating the *logos*:

Only one story [logos], one road, now is left: that it is. And on this there are signs in plenty that, being, it is ungenerated and indestructible, whole, of one kind and unwavering, and complete. Nor was it, nor will it be, since now it is, all together, one, continuous. (Barnes, 1987: 134)

The paradox is very evident. At one level there is the singular, eternal and homogenous truth and then there are the multiplicity of signs that point to it. How is this multiplicity to be reconciled with the thinking of the One? And how are these signs to be perceived? If they available for our ordinary bodily senses then they are tied to the confused space of mortal opinion. If they appear at the metaphysical level, they undermine the seamless integrity of being. My aim here is less to question Parmenides' conception of metaphysical unity than to emphasize that issues of mediation affect pre-Socratic philosophy at its very basis. There are gaps, spacings and dimensions of mediating agency that take all manner of conceptual, metaphoric and rhetorical forms. The notion of technical perceptual apparatus represents only one of these figures of mediation. It may be that the reduction of the more general question of mediation to the issue of technology specifically represents a means of stepping aside from more integral dilemmas of *arche* and *logos*, displacing an internal motion of splitting and differentiation into a safely exterior form.

### **Contemporary implications**

In his introduction to *Deep Time of the Media*, Zielinski acknowledges that the interest in

technical media is very much a 20<sup>th</sup> Century concern. He predicts that in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century media will become like air or water – so much “a part of everyday life” (Zielinski, 2006: 33) that they will cease to be a central focus of concern. The pervasiveness of media and their incorporation in every dimension of human activity is likely to alter the way we think about and imagine media. If the emphasis was once upon the wonder (and horror) of novel media mechanisms, especially upon their capacity to enable various forms of technologically framed experience (mass behavior, ideological positioning, simulation, cybernetic interaction, etc.), now things are couched in less dramatic and antagonistic terms. Within this context, the pressing motivation for Zielinski’s study is “to undertake field research on the constellation that obtained before media became established as a general phenomenon” (Zielinski, 2006: 33).

My interest is more in the current flux of media, particularly in relation to the changing identity of media art. I am aware that this is a generalisation but during the last decade there seems to have been a shift away from technologically-focused new media towards work that, for instance, engages with the history of media, or that deliberately breaches the apparent limits of media, projecting new points of contact with the social and the natural. This tendency has opened up a new sense of *rapprochement* with the wider field of contemporary art. Media art is now less marginalised - less conceptually alien. It is within this context that the pre-Socratic conception of a mediation within nature and within processes of immediate human perception, reflection and understanding gains a curious contemporary relevance. Pre-Socratic philosophy reveals features of mediation that are relevant not only to making sense of traditional, technologically constituted media but also to describing the fluid, trans-medial character of contemporary media.

Here is a specific example of how a more general conception of media can work to disarm established prejudices. In his *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), French critic Nicholas Bourriaud condemns the field of new media art practice while drawing upon the model of digital communication technologies to explain the nature of relational art practice. Bourriaud insists upon “the Law of Relocation” (1998: 66) – apparently the new systems of production (communication media) must be *detoured* away from their obvious technological frames and reinvented within the space of art. Bourriaud emphasises strands of structural similarity and conceptual dialogue (programs become social models, technological networks become intersections amongst people, interactive systems

become human participatory events) but demands a strategic artistic disengagement from media *per se*. All of this is plainly indicative of the long-standing rift between mainstream contemporary art and the various media art and art/science ghettos (Cramer, 2006). However, if media no longer have a strictly defined technological essence, if they are not conceived as a variety of traditional, materially determined mediums, but instead in terms of an underlying philosophical problematic then relational aesthetic practice can itself be regarded quite coherently as a form of media practice. Bourriaud's key concept of relationality is clearly inextricably linked to the thinking of mediation. Zielinski states this very directly, “[m]edia worlds are phenomena of the relational” (2006: 33). Rather than this representing a perverse association between two utterly divergent fields, the history of contemporary art of course reveals deep levels of affinity and correspondence between the ill-defined terrain of media art and wider strands of critical-conceptual art. And this indicates another benefit of dropping the obsessive concern with a technical definition of media. It enables us to more clearly recognise the complex historical field in which modern media art emerged; to recognise, for example, how an interest in technical media emerged during the mid-1960s within the context of a much wider set of aesthetic interests. Early practitioners such as Nam June Paik (and even Andy Warhol) were drawn to technical media inasmuch as it represented, among other things, a means of playing against traditional notions of artistic subjectivity, of engaging with and undermining the ephemeral texture of everyday life and of discovering a point of purchase on aspects of mass consumption and spectacle. So in picking up video and film cameras they did not abandon their relation to the music of John Cage, or the instructions of La Monte Young, or the playful events, games and contraptions of Fluxus. Rather it was a means of pursuing the same set of interests via new means – means that would all too quickly and paradoxically obtain a narrow sense of technologically determined autonomy.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has adopted a deliberately speculative approach. It has attempted to tease out an alternative conception of media from strands of pre-Socratic philosophy. It has argued that the genuinely heterological character of the ancient conception is linked firstly to its focus on dimensions of mediation that are constituted in natural and non-technological terms and secondly to its emphasis on the problematic relation between truth, appearance

and telling. In this manner it offers a wayward model for re-thinking media in terms of wider contexts of experience and interaction. However, it is worth stressing that media art can hardly insist upon a privileged and proprietary relation to issues of mediation. The more general field of media has no single point of disciplinary purchase. If media art wishes to extend beyond its traditional boundaries then this implies less the need for an uber disciplinary entity than the need, perhaps, to risk the dissolution of ‘media art’ *per se*. Quite possibly, the contemporary role of media art may be to discover paths that obliterate the grounds for its notional distinct self-identity (and residual sense of exclusion).

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