Citation for published version (APA):
For centuries, *medium* presupposed *environing*. Media did not necessarily produce environments, mind you. Nor was a medium necessarily environmental or elemental (in John Durham Peters’s sense of the term).¹ Both of those formulations concern our present moment, and its rubric for marking the relationality of medium and environing. Extant records suggest English scribes in early centuries of the English language had somewhat different presuppositions about how, exactly, media and environing belonged to one another. Their medial environing stemmed from a different manner of doing and dwelling, marked by distinct regimes of vocational, economical, and geographical production. To put the matter in concise and sweeping terms, in medieval and early modern England, *medium* and *environment* encompassed a communicative chain sustained by lively mortals, spirits, images, texts, homes, fields, plants, beasts of burden, blessings, tax assessments, and much more. Their in-mixing precluded thinking one term entirely separate from the others.

One of the earliest written records of *medium* in English, a 1573 inquiry addressed to the Mayor of London, sketches some elements that might be populating then-current cosmologies of communications.² In the midst of a longer inquiry bearing on bakers, brewers, and barley, the letter inquires of the mayor, “What mediam have you made of the price of the severall sorte of the said corne & what assise have you sett to the bakers & brewers in that behalfe doth the Assise that nowe is in the moneth of marche vary from that which was in decembre or January[?]”³ For all the academic talk of biopolitics in the last few decades, and the necessity of thinking life with governmental calculation, this passage reminds us it wasn’t always so challenging to put these thoughts together. In it, we find a robust yet vernacular relationality among living bodies, signs, and surroundings, in which the character and agency of medium involves ongoing and open-ended environing. It is not that “mediam” (presumably a mathematical averaging of prices, in this context) refers to environing, but rather that medium, environs, signs, territory, farming, and collective life constellate as elements of a common matter of concern. The semio-technical processing of community, the calculus by which government recasts agricultural labor and goods, calendrical cycles, and professions, form part of a collective, environing becoming.

What happened, in the intervening centuries, that so sundered media from the environment? One fact seems to be that communication engineering successfully recast irreducibly phenomenal dimensions such as *near, far, earth,* and *air* as bare mathematical functions like *time, space,* and *resistance.*⁴ In this light, the much vaunted “annihilation of time and space” announced by Karl Marx concedes too much ground to what it purports to contest. That is, the very phrasing annihilation of time and space glosses over the fact that the terms *time and space* are what does the conquering and annihilation. They are terminological vessels for a homogeneous scientism, emptied out of substantive difference, that expropriate a material and lively expanse of trees, rocks, clouds, roots, labor, first nations, winds, critters, and mountains.⁵
While I have not undertaken a systematic analysis of telecommunications advertising, it strikes me that across the twentieth century, in the United States at least, they register the retreat of environments from popular thinking about communications. A 1930 advertisement for the Bell Telephone System (Figure 1) announces its firm’s goal “to clear all barriers for the human voice,” which includes the installation of “underground cables” and “service to ships at sea.”

In the latter half of the twentieth century, AT&T advertising focuses more narrowly on personal intimacy across environmentally undifferentiated time and space. A 1986 advertisement (Figure 2) for AT&T reads, “Flirt with her again. Call the U.K.,” superimposed over a man and woman with greying hair, pensioners perhaps. Accompanying text tells the reader “even though so much has happened since you left London, since you left her side, you still carry a torch for her. Why not give her a call and tell her?...[I]t costs less than you’d think to stay close.” Whatever this is, it is not the annihilation of time and space. It is, on the contrary, an annihilation of environments—places appear, but surroundings, have almost no role whatsoever in the spatial calculus. Environments have been replaced by a communications that count only as time (cost per minute) and space (long distance zones). The communicative triumph of time and space, as measures that count, steamrolled land, sea, and human ingenuity. When it came to communications, these elements no longer merited consideration.

Figure 1: “To clear all barriers for the human voice.” American Telephone and Telegraph Company, 1931, *Popular Science*, February 1931, p. 17.
And yet, even as thinking on media and the environment seemed to part ways, they persisted as mutual points of reference, determining the basic intelligibility of one another. For example, the 1960s and 1970s renewal of interest in ecology took place under the sign of cybernetics (e.g., Bateson, Lovelock, and Margulis), and its conception of nature as a quasi-informatic system. This, despite the fact that environmental consciousness of the period, from the United States to West Germany, often imagined environment and technological industry as distinct domains, with the former in want of defense from the latter. Everyday artifacts like the West German children’s board game, *Ökolopoly: Ein kybernetisches Umweltspiel von Frederic Vester* (1980, 1984) revealed the mutual involvement of environmental and technological reasoning. It is as if the collapse of a reliable distinction between nature and technology affected by the Great
Acceleration (see Rosol, this volume) brought these two domains into nostalgic, possibly ironic, conceptual relief. Another exemplary artifact from the environmental consciousness of that period, Canadian-American folk singer Joni Mitchell’s 1970 song “Big Yellow Taxi,” acknowledges as much. Reflecting on a trip to Hawaii, Mitchell sang “They took all the trees, put ‘em in a tree museum, and they charged all the people a dollar and a half just to see ‘em. Don’t it always seem to go, that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone.” Her words, as much as farming or governmental texts from half a millennium earlier, witness the deep relationality of media and environing. The difference, in the intervening centuries, is largely a matter of inflection: by the 1970s, the force of technical enclosure and systematization, even for critics of such measures, figured centrally in commentaries on media, technology, and the environment. It was unavoidable. The relationality among media and environment proved striated, fractured, piecemeal, and coercive, even for those who wished to privilege one term over the other.

It is partly admitting these precedents that delivers the full shock of the present volume’s approach to “environing media.” To consider how media environ is, also, to acknowledge their unsettled grounds today. The terrible affront of environing media lay in the fact that, much as it joins philosopher Bruno Latour in challenging what he termed “the modern constitution,” that divides the world into subjects and objects, culture and nature, environing media offer no return to nonmodern relationality. Whatever inroads Latour has made in arguing we have never been modern, it remains the case that we cannot experience our environments in a nonmodern fashion. Today’s environing and elemental media attest to the scars wrought on our surroundings by centuries of programmatic insistence on separating bodies from their surroundings. The essays in the present volume reflect on their belated and piecemeal recomposition in the wake of the great and terrible disruption wrought by planetary technics of the past few centuries. Christoph Rosol’s talk of the technosphere, John Durham Peters and Adam Wickberg’s meditations on the cultural techniques of the Aztecs and Conquistadores, and Nina Wombs’s climate change models, like the other contributions to this volume, attest, in varied manners, to the great and terrible shattering of environments made possible by modernity. The furious trade these essays find at work among media and the environment follows routes carved out by our colonial, imperial, scientific, and commercial traffic, whose ways and thoroughfares persist as deep fissures on the face of the today.

If the environing media of today does have something of a nonmodern quality, it is less the extant medievalism of A Midsummer’s Night’s Dream (ca. 1595), a misty realm peopled by fairies, than the industrial ferocity of Richard Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen (1848-1874, 1876). As musicologist Gundula Kreuzer brilliantly recounts, the early staging of Wagner’s operatic cycle wielded vast locomotive boilers in manufacturing a quintessentially environing medium, fog-enshrouded landscapes, in this case of imagined German and Scandinavian mythology. As Kreuzer explains, this use of industrial steam apparatuses had conflicting dramaturgical effects. It fulfilled Wagner’s dream of an exhibition that, in his words, took place “in some beautiful solitude, far away from the fumes and industrial stench of our urban civilization.” However, it also brought the chief instrument of that civilization—steam power—into the center of this mythic, nonmodern scene. In the wake of industrialization, the nonmodern, when it appears, does so through the systematically brutal manners availed by modernity.

Indeed, much as we might like to imagine environing media as a return to nature—the Black Forest clearings, for example, enamored by Heidegger—the brute, elemental force of the steamroller offers a more relevant image for the paths clearing our way to thought. As
Wagner’s contemporary Karl Marx famously put it, in the wake capitalist industry, “alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft.” The usual translation, “All that is solid melts into air” might suggest fantastical flight. The original German phrasing indicates a more elemental and environmental violence, by which industrial power “steams away all the familiar estates and orders,” i.e., steam engines vaporize religious, aristocratic, and national orders. Or, rendered in the freest of translations, under industrialization, “outstanding estates and standing orders get steamrolled,” clearing the way for humankind to see, “with unclouded eyes, their reciprocal relations” [ihre gegenseitigen Beziehungen mit nüchternen Augen anzusehen]. For Wagner as for Marx, there is a distinctly theatrical quality to how the elements confronts us with our conditions of modern existence. A terrible clearing away figures in our belated encounter with the surroundings that play host to the spectacular revelation of our actual state of affairs. In this sense, the nonmodernism of Wagner’s spectacle anticipates what critic Walter Benjamin would later attribute to the industrial mechanisms responsible for Hollywood’s wonders: “Self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.” So yes, environing media are back. The force of the earth is on display—wielding and wielded—by technical media. And these wonders should be nothing less than terrifying.
Reference List


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The words are Wagner’s, but the analysis and framing of the words is Kreuzer’s. Gundula Kreuzer, “Wagner-Dampf: Steam in Der Ring Des Nikolaus and Operatic Production,” *The Opera Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (2011): 196.


