

Cybermysticism as Mediamysticism

By Luca Di Blasi

The project „mysticism and modernity“ can be understood as a search for parallels between “mysticism” and “modernity”, but in this case it must first be clarified not only what ‘mysticism’ means, but also how to conceive of ‘modernity’. And these are indeed difficult and almost irresolvable questions, whose complexity might have the effect of discouraging further efforts.

The opposite attempt of understanding mysticism through new or “modern” questions seems more promising. An approach that seems especially interesting and fruitful to me is a media theoretical one. This has not least to do with parallels that can be established between mediality and mysticism.

Media are evasive. The best medium is the most transparent and therefore the least visible one. That makes media attractive in two ways. Those who are seeking for the best possible realization of objects and these are mostly scientists, try to use the most transparent media – and therefore tend to overlook them. It is precisely the easiness of being overlooked that makes media at the same time the privileged subjects of research for humanities or cultural studies. The hidden is namely always fascinating, is always a good subject of suspicion – or hope. The easier media can be overlooked, the deeper, more irresistible and fraudulent does their influence appear. And the more do hopes shift to new media – or to the complete overcoming of mediality itself.

Mysticism, too, deals with the hidden and elusive. The word “mysticism” comes from late antiquity, is etymologically related to “mysterious” and originally means “belonging to the mysteries, secret, mysterious”. The evading, hidden, mysterious has always made mysteries and mystics attractive, just as the hard-to-discern mediality has fascinated intellectuals in modernity. Anyway, it is perhaps no coincidence that spiritual and occultist groups who blend mystery cult and “media-research” smoothly into each other appear at the very beginning of the modern interest in media.

Another parallel is more important, however. Mystics tend towards an immediate experience, which ultimately means that they tend towards an experience that is independent of media. The goal of many mystics – and sometimes the starting point as well – the *unio mystica*, is the point, where any dependence on mediality is overcome. If this is true, it is precisely from mystics that we can expect a sharp consciousness of the limiting and manipulative effects of media. And indeed silence and all forms of negative theology are privileged subjects of mystical writings.

I suggest the term “mediamysticism” to describe the general intertwining between mysticism and mediality. Corresponding to the similarities I mentioned before, this term allows two different accentuations: On the one hand, “mediamysticism” could denominate the dependence of any mysticism on that which it aims to overcome, namely mediality. On the other hand, mediamysticism could point to a tendency of mystifying mediality.

Though I do not want to postulate strictly separated fields of phenomena, we would obtain with this, depending on the accentuation, something like a criterion for the seriousness of mystical forms of expression: Where the potentials and dispositives of media are questioned and uncovered, where a reflected overcoming of any mediality is aimed at, it is probably a matter of serious mysticism. Where new media lead to demonization or rash and far reaching speculations, we may have to do with mystifications.

At this point I want to emphasize that when I speak about a “general intertwining” or “parallels” between mysticism and media, I do not want to give a mono-causal explanation of mysticism. The advent of mystical currents may have many reasons, socio-psychological, economic, political ones, and so on. I would rather argue that mysticism has very much to do with certain media and their appearance and that it can be better understood through a media-theoretical approach. If this is the case, one should also be able to demonstrate this historically. One should expect that the appearance of important, new media was accompanied by new mystical tendencies that correspond in a specific manner to these new media.

Already a first quick glance indeed seems to affirm such a narrow connection between mysticism and mediality. Although we cannot identify a change of media for all mystical heydays, – this applies especially to the high Middle Ages–, it seems that any media change is accompanied by tendencies that can be called mystical. And such a parallel is more important for the postulated connection of mediality and mysticism than the absence of the opposite parallel between mysticism and change of media: the claim that there is a close connection between mediality and mysticism does not necessarily mean that media-bounded mysticism would only appear in phases of a media change.

A correlation between mysticism and media change seems to be given in the period of the origins of mysticism, that is, for Plato or, before that, for the so called “*Achsenzeit*”, with the appearance of the alphabetic writing. I will say more about this in just a moment. The correlation possibly holds true in late antiquity, where the codification of “holy scriptures” was accompanied by a powerful “trend to transcendence”, “*Transzendenzströmung*” (Hans Jonas). And it possibly also holds true in early modern times, where an abundance of mystical movements appear in temporal proximity to the introduction of the printing press and the spreading of translations of the bible in national languages.

By now at the latest, questions should be asked that have much to do with the hermeneutic circle: we have to deal with certain presumptions about certain keywords, whose validity could only be proven by the inquiry. In our case, this concerns especially the two difficult notions of “mediality” and, as a crucial question of our whole project, “mysticism”.

In our case there is still a third question: Especially when our procedure is successful and the interdependence between mysticism and mediality is indeed very close, their distinction becomes precarious and the media-independent aspect which enables us to identify certain phenomena as mystical, threatens to vanish.

Yet a more precise media-theoretical analysis of earliest mysticism could probably liberate us from this quandary and should even bring forward a clarification of the term mysticism. What appeared at first as a transhistorical property of all mysticism actually seems to be an answer to circumstances that come only with writing, or, more precisely, with the dynamic interaction between orality and scriptuality.

Let's take the example of the *unio mystica*. According to Plato or Aristotle the alphabet causes especially one thing, namely a distance to the world. The pursuit of an immediate experience, of an immediate unity, can be understood as a specific mystical reply to the difference originating through writing. The opposite search for an “arche-writing” on this side of occidental “logocentrism”¹ may, by the way, stay in mystical tradition as well.²

¹ Cf. J. DERRIDA, *Grammatologie*, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp) 1974.

² For Derrida's affinity with the Jewish mysticism see J. HABERMAS, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, Frankfurt a. Main, Suhrkamp 1985.

Connected with it is the biblical speech about the Confusion of Tongues at Babel, which became the starting point of a mystical yearning for a collective unity, either through pneumatic forms of communication, for example in the Pentecostal event, through the creation of the "great human being" in the hermetic and alchemistic tradition or through modern technologies like the internet in actual "transhumanistic" or "cybermystical" currents.

A further example is the feeling that we are all probably familiar with, when we discover a seemingly new and exciting matter and then have to overlook in an odd mixture of emotion and resignation the libraries of books that have already been written about this. An impressive lament on the difficulty to assert oneself in regard to all that has been written is already known from the Middle Kingdom of Egypt³ and seems to be constitutive for literal societies.

What is written has undoubtedly the effect of a great pressure. This pressure can be transformed into a pressure of innovation – in this case one has the chance to become a successful player in the cultural arena. It can also lead to a desire to avoid the writing and even to avoid meaning, a desire that can sometimes turn into an escape from "semantic slavery" (P. Sloterdijk⁴): Mantras and visualizations instead of semantics. This too is mysticism: An attempt to step out of the game.

The apparent quandary, into which we were led through the word "mediamysticism", seems to be successfully overcome, if the phenomenon that we usually call "mysticism" can actually be understood as "writing-mysticism", that is, as a specific answer to the implementation of the medium writing, or, perhaps more precisely, the alphabet. If only because it was the first, archetypical kind of mysticism, this "writing-mysticism" became, at least in the occidental tradition, mysticism per se, and constituted the scale of comparison for any further form of mysticism. Or, in other words: Especially the inquiry of "writing-mysticism" as a particular, but especially important form of mediamysticism, could provide answers to the important question of what we understand by mysticism in general.

Let me finally make some remarks on the topic "cybermysticism", while continuing to connect mysticism with mediality. If we mean by "modernity" the last 200 years, and leave the modernity-post modernity distinction aside, then two media changes are relevant for our project: the audio-visual one, which started around the middle of the 19th century and the electronic one from approximately the middle of the 20th century. The project cybermysticism is of course connected to the second, "cybernetic" media-change.

The connection of mediality and mysticism thus has the welcome side effect of specifying the project "cybermysticism" in time and content. Under "cybermysticism", one could summarize reactions to the cybernatization or informatization of the world that have a mystical character, whether in the form of obvious mystifications, or in the form of serious speculations that are researching the nature of computer, digitality or cybernetic webs and venture into "mystical" realms.

But part of cybermysticism could also be considered „mystical“ attempts at fleeing from the new medium, for instance by exaggerating or radicalizing life outside of cyberspace, in the "real-life" or, more generally, by trying to evade the influence of growing informatization. In the horizon of the notions I am suggesting, even another possibility emerges, namely to understand the paradigm of media theory dominating the last 40 years as

³ J. ASSMANN, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München (Beck) 1992, 97f.

⁴ P. SLOTERDIJK, *Weltfremdheit*, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp) 1993, 316.

a sort of nostalgia towards mediality or materiality in view of tendencies of spiritualization through information technologies.⁵ In this case, it could be possible, paradoxically enough, to see in media-theory a version of cybermysticism.

⁵ Cf. L. MANOVICH, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, Mass (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) 2001.