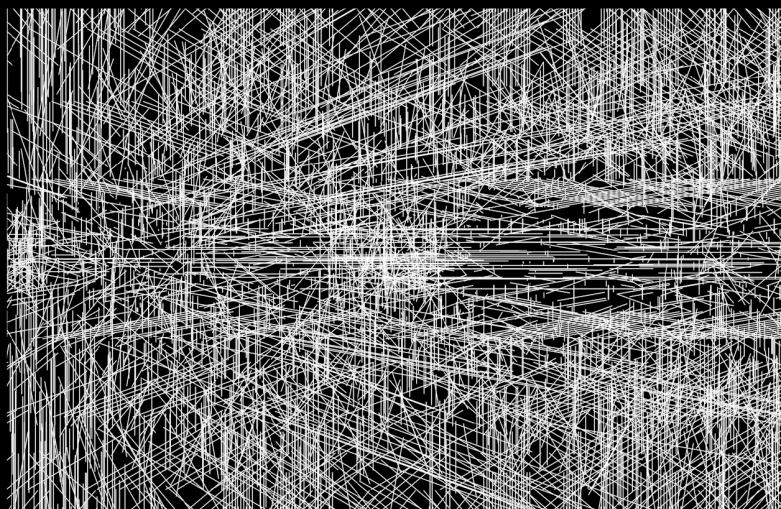


thinking|media

maria korolkova & timothy barker



miscommunications

errors, mistakes, media

B L O O M S B U R Y

Miscommunications

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Miscommunications

Errors, Mistakes, Media

Edited by
Maria Korolkova and Timothy Barker

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For Captain Pa (MK)

As ever, for Michelle and Chloe (TB)

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Introduction

Bad Operators

Timothy Barker and Maria Korolkova

The most profound dialectical problem is not the problem of the Other, who is only a variety—or a variation—of the Same, it is the problem of the third man. We might call this third man the demon, the prosopopoeia of noise.

—Michel Serres (1982), *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 68

You should call it entropy, for two reasons. In the first place your uncertainty function has been used in statistical mechanics under that name, so it already has a name. In the second place, and more important, no one knows what entropy really is, so in a debate you will always have the advantage.

—John Von Neuman to Claude Shannon,
cited in Tribus, Myron and McIrvine,
Edward C. (1971), “Energy and
Information,” *Scientific American*, 225:
179–88, 180

Fake news, misleading political slogans, interruptions to the flow of communication: these are not new phenomena, but they are ones that have started to become the most noticeable characteristic of media in the twenty-first century. To begin to think about this condition and explore the uncertainty produced by both purposefully and accidentally misleading communication, a good place to start is with two figures that have been instrumental in conceptualizing the role of noise in communication: one in the field of engineering and one in the field of philosophy. Claude Shannon was working on his now famous mathematical theory of information when he was looking for a way to describe the uncertainty of information that equates to noise. Taking his lead from John Von Neuman, Shannon

described this function as “entropy” (a word that, as Von Neuman points out, is surrounded by its own share of uncertainty). Shannon uses the language of thermodynamic, which explains how energy is lost as heat, to describe the way information can be lost as noise. This shift in thinking signified nothing less than a new way to conceive communication systems in terms of the levels of uncertainty that they are capable of dealing with. It also signified an important concept that can be used in coming to grips with the new political realities of noise.

Shifting this technical description into the field of philosophy, Michel Serres uses Shannon but gives us something altogether more radical. Serres tells us that any philosophy of communicative realities need not start from the attempt to uncover dialectic relationship between sender and receiver but should completely refocus attention on Shannon’s uncertainty function and the way that communication functions as the sender and receiver are united in a battle against noise. Any model of communication, for Serres, always involves three parties: the sender, the receiver, and a third that seeks to interrupt communication and to introduce what we could call a miscommunication.

Serres asks, how does one enter into communication with another? The answer that he offers is that for information to be transmitted and to take on meaning it necessitates noise; it is only via its differentiation from noise that information is able to exist at all. For communication to take place, it needs to paradoxically exclude that which it necessitates (Harari and Bell in Serres 1982: xxvi). Thinking of communication is only possible because of the miscommunications that it excludes. As John Durham Peters writes, “miscommunication is the scandal that motivates the very concept of communication in the first place” (Peters 1999: 6). In Serres’ work, like in Shannon’s, miscommunication is created by the noise that is introduced into the channel. The novelty with this is that Serres offers a way to completely reconceive the relationships that dialogue is thought to establish. “Communication is a sort of game played by two interlocutors considered as united against the phenomena of interference and confusion, or against individuals with some stake in interrupting communication” (Serres 1982: 67–8). What we and the contributors to this volume try to explore is the terrain of, and possibilities for, communication when we have entered a world in which the “third man,” the individual who has a stake in interrupting communication, is no longer excluded, like an unwelcome guest, but actually becomes the agent in charge of directing communication. The unwelcome guest becomes the host. This does not necessarily have negative connotations—though often it does—but can sometimes be positive and productive. In this collection, the authors grapple with the ontology of media within such

conditions. They combine to both offer and interrogate a new philosophy of media and a new approach to studying communication with the concept of the mistake, of errant communication, and of noise at its center. To set up the chapters that come, in this introduction we outline a number of pillars that support this mode of enquiry. First, we set out some existing definitions of miscommunication and indicate how this collection both builds on and then moves beyond these approaches. Second, we compare the notion of the error and the accident in the writing of Umberto Eco, Victor Shklovsky, and Paul Virilio, exploring the relationship of language, codes, and mistakes to humanness and creativity. Thirdly, we outline a model of miscommunication based on the breakdowns in the transmission of messages, mostly developed through our use of Serres' description of the figures of parasites, the Ancient Greek messenger Hermes, and fallen angels.

Now, if the potential of miscommunication begins to suggest new systems and alternative ways to operate beyond dominant structures of communication, then its definition and critical framing becomes central to the philosophy of media and communication. Of course, there are already-existing definitions of miscommunication, largely coming from the field of linguistics. In these accounts, miscommunication is seen as those ineffective or problematic moments of communication. In linguistics, a miscommunication amounts to an exchange that has an undesired outcome. In general, it is often understood as a lack of alignment of participants mental states, where they diverge particularly in the occurrence or the outcome of a communication (Traum and Dillenbourg 1996). Miscommunication here amounts to a situation where the receiver interprets the message in a different way than that which was intended by the sender (Ryan and Barnard 2009: 45; Mustajoki 2013: 35). The sender sends a message, intended to be understood one way, and for one reason or another it is misinterpreted by a receiver. This approach is common in linguistics, where communication is often viewed as an action that, while involving two people as distinct individuals, is co-performed by them as a *pair*. As Herbert H. Clark (1994) writes, "When Ann and Bob talk to each other, they each perform individual actions such as uttering words, identifying sounds and forming interpretations, but many of these actions are really parts of actions performed by the pair of them Ann-and-Bob" (244). When communication breaks down, it is because of a deficiency in this shared system. When a miscommunication takes place, according to Clark, it is not Bob's and Ann's problem alone, but something which they share and which they can manage and try to overcome collaboratively. There is a burden to construct the "unsaid" that exists in a communication. This is a burden that is not just carried by the sender or the receiver alone, but one that they share, though

not always equally (Grice 1975). The process of carrying this burden, of constructing a shared sense of meaning, often breaks down, and these breakdowns in communication are produced cooperatively by the human agents involved in communicative action. But perhaps another approach is possible? Perhaps miscommunications can be better understood by shifting the human from the center of analysis? Perhaps it is more important to ask about the structures of the system for communication that demarcate a situation as a miscommunication? Perhaps it is more pertinent to ask about the politics of a communication system and those things that are then situated beyond its boundaries? Communication systems are after all defined by those things that they exclude.

Rather than analyzing the breakdown between a sender and a receiver, this edited collection attempts to take a broader view of miscommunication and understand it not just in terms of a function, but in terms of what it can tell us about the entire communication system. Linguistic definitions of miscommunication tend to look at the reasons and symptoms of breakdowns between a sender and a receiver. What this edited collection instead draws attention to is the way these breakdowns unfold into the whole system, the way that miscommunication can tell us something about the contemporary world, rather than being relegated to the realm of mistakes, errors, and things that should be managed or forgotten because they never worked properly. To this end, authors in this collection focus on media and communication systems such as film, television, the postal system, video games, blogs, photography, and the internet. By focusing on the errant, on the things cast outside the system of communication, they all, in different ways, attempt to uncover the structures that relegate one utterance as communication and another as a miscommunication. In short, this book asks, what are the structures that define a miscommunication? When does a communication become a miscommunication? And what happens when a miscommunication enters into the communicative realm?

These questions illustrate an important detail in the linguistic approach to miscommunication. So far, we have been talking about miscommunication as misunderstanding, as a certain negative *result* of a communicative process, something that can be *repaired* or *corrected*. In other words, miscommunication is a communication that did not reach its initial goal, it is a communication that took a detour. There are of course different sources that predicate such detours. Some studies identify the misinterpreted source in the exchange of the utterance (House, Kasper, and Ross 2003; Schegloff 1987); a large body of work is dedicated to cross-cultural disconnections as the source of miscommunications (Carbaugh 2017). Unlike these approaches, our study suggests that we can see miscommunication not as a result, but as a complex

process, which has not been preprogrammed for any particular result, and does not need to be corrected, even potentially. Our aim is not to turn back a detoured communication, not to erase the unwelcomed “mis-,” but to observe what happens if we leave it be, if we let communication not reach its aim.

In addition to linguistic definitions of miscommunication, the topic has also been previously addressed in cultural studies and media theory. For example, in *Excommunication* (2013), Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark produce a novel philosophy of communication by exploring its opposite, the impossibility of communication. In three individual essays they argue that understanding the possibility of exclusion from the system of communication lets us see the realities of a media culture more clearly, particularly one characterized by illusory images and by systems of networked exchange that it is difficult to escape: there is always a difficulty in creating no messages at all. In the collection of chapters brought together in *Miscommunications*, a different (but we think equally novel) philosophical approach emerges, where the authors explore the functioning and malfunctioning of machines for communication by looking to their technical operation (breakdowns, malfunctions, etc.) as well as (and often as tied to) their cultural effects. The authors then explore how these operations relate to the difficulties of being. The positions staked out in *Excommunication*, and indeed in this book too, add to earlier work such as Galloway and Thacker’s *The Exploit* (2007), Wark’s *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), Peter Krapp’s *Noise Channels* (2011), and the essays collected together in Mark Nunes’ *Error: Glitch, Jam and Noise in New Media Culture* (2010) along with Jussi Parikka and Tony D. Sampson’s *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture* (2009), which were emblematic of a time in media studies research when theorists sought to uncover latent capacities for new media practitioners to develop novelty within and against control structures. The current collection offers an addition to these rich groundings by producing a frame with which to understand miscommunication not simply as the potential for escape from a system of communication to what Parikka and Sampson call “the dark side” of media, but also—particularly given current political realities and the disintegration of the public sphere—as a newly formed political technique with a raft of cultural effects. The current book studies this cultural of miscommunication from a historical/genealogical perspective, as well as using approaches from media theory, philosophy of language, and communication studies. Importantly, whereas earlier research situates these as deviant practices, the contributors to this volume provide a view of the mainstream realities of communicative practice, involving deliberately misleading information, unstable networks of information flows, and the

power of the false. Rather than trying to uncover a previously dark form of practice, practiced by a few, *Miscommunications* describes and contextualizes a range of miscommunication practices that have come to define twenty-first-century media and are practiced by many.

Communicating through Errors

Throughout the history of ideas, there have been multiple ways of approaching the concept of communication. Communication has been figured in terms of dialogue (Habermas), in terms of a shared partaking in exchange (Dewey), as a technical function (Shannon), as a mode of communion (Hegel), and as an ethical imperative (Levinas). In all these cases, communication is understood to establish a system, a sphere, or a territory. Whether it be Shannon's technical model, Habermas' public sphere or Dewey's pragmatic interactions, these communication systems could be thought of as territories occupied by dominate ways of doing things. And within these territories, there is a long history of resistance and subversion. For instance, Wanda Strauven has previously described the practice of the Belgium resistance exchanging coded information during the Second World War using knitting. Women, looking out of windows that overlooked rail lines, would drop a stitch to indicate the movement of German troops (Zarelli 2017; quoted in Strauven 2018). The mistakes in the knitting—a dropped stitch—was in fact a highly sophisticated mode of communication. Garments could then be exchanged with members of the resistance, forming a new site for communication removed from the occupying forces. What is usually considered as noise, as a mistake, as something to be avoided or excluded, now takes center stage, no longer a miscommunication, as something to be excluded, but now as its own media system. Nele Van de Mosselaer and Nathan Wildman point to similar function of the error in video games. The errors in the game's software design are not simply seen as “bugs” or annoyances that interrupt play. Instead, certain types of glitches (what they call generative glitches) actually afford the player opportunities to discover new stories, unintended by the game designers. Miscommunication, a dropped stitch, or an oversight in software design, offers a new territory of possibilities for communicative action. In these cases, miscommunication could be claimed to offer ways to resist systems of communication. There remains a chance at these points for what Gilles Deleuze would understand as the production of novelty, or what Yury Tynyanov would call a “constructive principle of the new form” (2002: 179).¹ In these examples, the error is not a sign among other signs. It is a material process, a thing, that might cause a reshuffling of the system for

symbolic exchange and might provide some escape from the world of capital and the distinctions and boundaries that it establishes.

The agency of miscommunications and errors is similarly picked up by Umberto Eco in *Serendipities: Language and Lunacy* (1998). Eco starts by quoting Thomas Aquinas, who in *Quaestio quodlibetalis* XII wonders “*utrum veritas sit fortior inter vinum et regem et mulierem*” (whether truth was stronger than wine, kings and women). Admitting that the four notions cannot be compared since they belong to different categories, Doctor Angelicus concludes that truth is stronger, because our animal forces depend on our intellectual ones. Eco then expands this conclusion admitting that if truth is so powerful, the same power can be attached to its opposite—the false, otherwise how can it be possible that so much of our history has been driven by false ideas. To illustrate this, Eco goes on into unraveling numerous falsities, which for a long time shaped the intellectual history of humankind: from Leibniz’s belief that *I Ching* (*Book of Change*) was based on the principles of calculus to the Ptolemaic system that was misleading historians and navigators for centuries, and from Marco Polo’s mistaking a rhinoceros for a unicorn (and being quite disappointed with the look of the “truth”) to the forged Roman imperial decree of Donation of Constantine, which provided the power for the popes, and so on. While it might be tempting to continue this list with some cases from the history of the twenty-first century, a more important take from Eco’s virtuous exposure of layers of mistakes that have shaped humankind is his idea of serendipity.

By serendipity, Eco understands the paths of a mistaken action or belief that could lead to a discovery of something true, “or at least something we consider true today” (2000: viii). One of the clearest examples of serendipity for Eco would be the story of Columbus, “who—believing he could reach the Indies by sailing westward—actually discovered America, which he had not intended to discover” (2000: viii). Importantly, Eco stresses that the term, or rather a *mechanism* known as serendipity, comes from the field of sciences, mostly referring to inventions made by chance rather than by intent (X-Ray, for example, or microwaves). Yet, it can be broader than just inventing something new out of the blue. Eco admits, “a mistaken project does not always lead to something correct: often [...] a project that the author believed right seems to us unrealizable, but for this very reason we understand why something else was right” (2000: viii); or elsewhere, and more radically, “even the most lunatic experiments can produce strange side effects, stimulating research that proves perhaps less amusing but scientifically more serious” (ix). Studying miscommunications, we believe, can engage us in this very type of research. Admitting that we are surrounded by miscommunications in every type of interaction may seem “lunatic,” as Eco defines it, yet it may build up

new paradigms of understanding through serendipity as its methodological process. For Eco, serendipity is a function of not just the history of ideas but the history of matter, of media; it is a functioning mechanism of how a variety of different things, ideas, and events may come together to produce a result that has a power to change reality—at least that reality that can be described in language.

The ideas expressed in *Serendipity* originated from Eco's earlier research into the history of perfect languages, from the Tower of Babel to Dante's reconstruction of Adam's language in *Paradise*, to Esperanto. Through this project Eco concluded that none of the perfect languages he researched actually worked, or would work, even on a fictional level. This in turn let him come to the conclusion that the imperfect language which we all use works perfectly well, we can (at least occasionally) understand each other unlike Dante's Adam, who could not understand the perfect language of the angels. Eco shows us the "force of the falsity" that is evident in human language. As both Serres and Peters describe, a communication always takes place against the background of miscommunication; it is based on moments where it does not work, on moments of communication breakdown. However, what Eco adds to these discussions is the idea that miscommunication lays at the heart of creativity.

The Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky offers a similar formulation of the energy of errors, with respect to creative literary practice. In 1981, at the end of his career, Shklovsky published a book entitled *Energy of Delusion*, a title that comes from a famous phrase taken from Lev Tolstoy correspondence with the Russia philosopher and critic Nikolai Strakhov:

All seems to be in place to start writing—to fulfil my worldly duty, however there is not enough belief in myself, in the importance of the work, no energy of delusion, that worldly spontaneous energy, which cannot be invented. And I cannot start. (Tolstoy cited in Shklovsky 2007: 36)

Interpretations of this phrase are varied. Author of one the most recent biographies of Tolstoy, Andrei Zorin, writes that this energy was produced by Tolstoy's belief that his novels would change the world, and would change himself (2020). While Tolstoy recognized the belief as false, he was totally aware of his dependency on this delusion. Taking the same phrase in a less Freudian manner, Shklovsky equated this delusion to the challenges of creative process. Quoting Tolstoy again, "to think through a million of possible connections in order to choose 1/1000 000, is terribly difficult" (Tolstoy in epigraph to Shklovsky 2007), and a writer has to try a million

falsities, believe in a million falsities in order to find the right one. Close examination of Tolstoy's early drafts proved this at several occasions. "Literary history is the history of search for its heroes, [...] It is the arch of the history of delusion," Shklovsky concludes (Shklovsky 2007: 39). Whether a part of the belief system or a part of the methodology of creativity, these theorists suggest that delusion, falsity, and mistakes are somehow at the core of the creative process, a drive of invention. Many chapters of this collection that deal with creative responses to miscommunications find new configurations of this interdependency, whether for writers (Rutten), artists (Muliaee and Mehrvarz), filmmakers (Lichtenfels), or even children (Smith).

Yet, if all the fruits of creativity are related to mistaken actions or methodologies, can it lead us to a conclusion that mistakes are at the very beginning of creation? Has it all started with a mistake? With his theory of the primal accident, Paul Virilio suggests something that feeds into Shklovsky's and Eco's search for the forces that drive intellectual history. Looking at the greatest inventions of modernity, the gems of human thought, and creativity, Virilio makes a conclusion that they are all just a shadow of what he calls the automation of accidents. For Virilio, technology is already automatically preprogrammed with accidents, with possibilities of things going wrong, possibilities of miscommunications: the invention of the locomotive is preprogrammed with the invention of derailment; the car is preprogrammed with the possibility that the brakes will fail; the invention of television is preprogrammed with an isolation from reality. In the end, any future discoveries will only anticipate "the imminent emergence of a philosophy of post-industrial *eschatology*" (Virilio 2007: 6). Like for Shklovsky and Eco, Virilio puts the drive for misfunction at the very core of human knowledge and human ability to create, not through serendipity or creativity though, but through technology and its automation. The new technology of the twenty-first century, Virilio claims, specifically the automation of warfare, makes any such misfunction a "*globally constituted accident*" (Armitage 2000). The contributors to this volume respond differently to the challenges put forward by Virilio, Shklovsky, or Eco, yet altogether they reflect on how the idea of the history driven by mistakes can find its development in contemporary case studies.

Message Bearing Systems

One of the main arguments of this book is that when, following figures like Eco, Shklovsky, and Virilio, we reconfigure a theory of communication to focus on the possibility for errors and misunderstandings, rather than on

the information content of messages, we are able to home in much more closely on the analysis of message bearing systems. Rather than determining the effects or meanings of messages via recourse to hermeneutics, a move like this would mean looking at the way systems function, their sensitivity, their weaknesses, and their ability to be misappropriated. In other words, this type of analysis emphasizes messengers rather than messages, conditions for meaning rather than meaning itself and the way that the usually excluded third, in the form of noise, enters into the communication chain. However, it is also a mode of analysis that offers alternatives to the already established tradition of medium theory, which can be seen across North American and European traditions. First let's look at the theoretical context for this work by briefly summarizing the medium theory approach. Then, after that, we might be in a position to see just what it is that this approach has missed and just what it is that this collection offers.

As is widely known, the Frankfurt School and its associates offered to nascent media scholars accounts of the cultural industry (Horkheimer and Adorno), the effects of technological reproduction (Benjamin), and the conditions for dialogical communication (Habermas). They focused not on the message bearing systems themselves but rather the political, economic, aesthetic, and social effects of these system. A similar belief in the capability for message bearing systems to create social conditions and modes of sociality can be seen in a North American context, principally in the Toronto School of communication theory, including figures such as Harold Innis, Eric A. Havelock, and Marshall McLuhan. This new approach to the analysis of the development of culture gave people ways to describe the effects of media by looking to their existence as material objects, with their own tendencies or conditions of possibility for populations and individuals. Innis showed how the bias of a medium toward spatial distribution (transmission media) or temporal distribution (storage media) impacted upon beliefs, practices, and the growth of civilizations. McLuhan, in a more individualistic way, showed how media work together in a system which has the capacity to impact and *extend* the receivers of information. For both, it was the medium, rather than the message, that was important.

Working with similar ambitions and along similar lines as McLuhan (although with often quite different results), a so-called German school of media theory was established around the work of Friedrich Kittler, which similarly obsessed over the medium rather than the message that it carries. For adherents to the German style of *medienwissenschaft* McLuhan made a good start but, as Kittler suggested, did not adequately follow his observations through to their conclusion. Contra to McLuhan, Kittler argued that media limit rather than extend the receivers of information, and because of this they

have vast epistemological effects. For Kittler, media studies needed to practice radical anti-hermeneutics: it was the technical operation of media machines that should be analyzed, rather than the meaning of content. For all these scholars, a theory of communication rested on its technical architecture, on the devices and systems that supported the transportation of messages.

Against this background, we ask the reader to continue thinking along the lines already established before us, to try and suspend an inclination to analyze the text, and to instead look at its support systems. However, we also want the reader to arrive at a different destination when reading this book than they would when reading Kittler or McLuhan. We respect these figures greatly and admire their work in getting the field to think about media as media—or to think of the characteristics of media after media, as is the case with Kittler (see Ikoniadou and Wilson 2015). However, we would like to depart from their emphasis on media as determining styles of relationships, engagement, and thought. If we look a little bit longer at the social phenomena that circulate around media systems—the talking, the chatter, the proliferation of images, the attempts to capture attention, and the playing of games—might we not find another approach, one that can help us grasp more fully contemporary political realities, by looking at message bearing systems in a wider sense, as constituted by more than just technical devices, but as used within and making use of a context. This would mean to look at a medium's capacities, at its *conditions for possibility*, as well as its technical operation.

We would like to think of message bearing systems as abstract machines that are produced by human, technical, and culturally historical elements. The book is about those things that we invent to send errands. It is about the inventions, strategies, and techniques that accompany message bearing systems. These inventions are not simply produced by the intention of humans, nor are they determined by devices. They come into being based on the intersection of traditions and the way human and technical systems form relations within these traditions.

In this book, we ask the reader to follow the authors along routes where the abstract machines that we invent to send errands somehow end up leading people astray. This is the point at which those things that are invented take on a life of their own, beyond simply that of a message bearing system. This would be, following Alexander Galloway, Eugene Thacker, and McKenzie Wark (2014), to ask “what is mediation” (9), rather than focusing media analysis on the practical questions of its operation. What we are interested in doing here is crafting a theory of communication that does not stand solely on the analysis of its technical infrastructure but instead begins by describing the conditions for miscommunication, for noise and

for errors. In this we hope the reader will find a theory of communication based on what it is capable of, based on what it can do, based on how it can be used against its design. This would be a theory of communication that can deal with the power of falsity, of mistrust, and of turbulence because this is a theory of communication that begins precisely from this premise: *the relationships produced by communication exist not in the messages that it produces but in its capacity to lead astray*. The reason that we think that this is a productive approach to address the questions of mediation so central to media and communication studies is that miscommunication, the capacity to be led astray by message bearing systems, bring into relief the distance between sender and receiver. It does this by showing how this space of turbulence, the space in-between, the space that is filled with what Wolfgang Ernst in his contribution describes as white noise, can introduce the capacity for misunderstandings. This is the same white noise that Serres tells us is the persistent background to any communication. It shows how a space of mediation can introduce the non-dialogical, how one party (the one who makes the most noise) can sway communicative reality, and how it is insufficient to think of the message bearing systems that fill these in-between spaces as politically benign.

This collection is specifically intended to prompt the field of media studies to focus on bad messengers, on the individuals, devices, and systems that corrupt messages. Instead of looking at the bad messages, like the definition of miscommunication that linguistics suggests, we look at bad messengers. Refocusing analysis on the possibility for miscommunication might offer a way to focus on the *operation* of these bad messengers, rather than their effects on messages. Eco and Shklovsky, as mentioned previously, focus on the accident and the errant in ways that allow us to see new things about humanness and creativity. Another approach to miscommunications, mistakes, and errors is one that looks to systems, rather than centering on the human. Another approach that is taken in the chapters in this book is to focus not on the human that produces accidents, but to take an approach more oriented toward the actual media systems that produce noise.

Toward this end, and in order to begin to conceptualize the cultural history of message bearing systems, Michel Serres has used the figure of the angel. Communication systems have always been bound up with the history of religion, particularly Western religions, so this move is not as surprising as it may seem. After all, the root word of communication is communion, and has for a long time been associated with communication with God. The angel offers to Serres an analogy for the channels of information that encircle the globe. Angels are, after all, carriers of the Word, moving around the globe carrying communication between heaven and earth. The angel transmits a

message; they take on the function of a communication channel among a network of channels.

Prior to *Angels*, Serres' method for discussing communication was through the familiar figure of Hermes. Hermes, both the god of orality and the god of thieves, offers to Serres a figure that allows him to talk about all kinds of exchanges as communication, whether this is the exchange of money, gifts, truth, or lies. In *Angels: A Modern Myth*, Serres finds a new figure to use to discuss communication and doing so is able to provide a picture of the world as conditioned by the network of relationship established by the communicative action of angels. This shift signifies a move in Serres' work from dealing with communication in the singular (Hermes) to addressing the plurality of networks (angels). "Our universe is organised around message bearing systems, and because, as message-bearers, they are more numerous, complex and sophisticated than Hermes [. . .]. Each angel is a bearer of one or more relationships; today they exist in myriad forms, and every day we invent billions of new ones" (Serres 1995: 293).

But now what happens when message bearing systems no longer carry out an angelic function but become bad messengers? What happens when most messengers act as fallen angels? How can we understand communication systems when the space between sender and receiver is no longer filled by angels that can be trusted but by waves of miscommunication? Can we use the figure of the fallen angel to understand this condition?

The fallen angel is an example of a bad mediator. In this case, the messenger acts over and above the message. Hermes would once lie, steal, and mislead in order to deliver his message. But the fallen angel does something different. The fallen angel cares less about the message than about the payment for the message. They care most about appearing ahead of the message. The fallen angel Atë was said by Homer to have done this quite literally, as she walked on the heads of men, rather than the hard earth. The bad mediator becomes visible, they do not withdraw but are instead visible as the third player in the communication chain. The dream of communication by technical means is that the medium, whether print, the telephone, the telegraph, or the internet, should withdraw and not alter the meaning of the message. They should deliver the message and then vanish, like St. Augustine's angels. As Maria Augusta Babo states, in the case of writing, "the more transparent it is to communication, the less noise and interference there is, the better the language becomes ductile to meaning. In the ideology of communication, the medium tends towards its maximum transparency as a vehicle of meaning" (Babo 2017: 93). In the case of fallen angels, the message bearing systems, rather than the sender or the receiver, interrupt and impose themselves on the message.

What this rethinking of miscommunication using the figure of fallen angels really asks us to do is to consider the possibility that we ourselves—and our engagement with the networked communicative realities that make up this historical moment—may act as though we are the fallen angels: “We communicate among ourselves at the speed of light; we travel at the speed of sound; and we transform others and the world by our words” (Serres 1995: 294). By doing this, we can become like Atë, leading, misleading the spirit of delusion, mistakes, and errors. The drive behind this book then is to start to explore how networked communication can begin to produce non-dialogical modes of communication, how errors in communication systems can render communicative acts as noncommunication or miscommunication, how noise can be used to rethink the possibilities for political communication, and how interruptions become productive.

Mistructure

Part One of this book, “Mis-theories,” aims to both develop new theoretical frameworks with which to explore the topic of miscommunication and explore how an emphasis on failed communication can help us reconsider older communication theory paradigms. Ellen Rutten’s chapter begins this part by digging into the genealogy of imperfection as both a methodology for creative exploration and a response to a contemporary digital neoliberal hierarchy that depends on perfection. Following on from this, Timothy Barker’s chapter explores the postal system of communication and its relationship to contemporary media as methods of organization, the outcome of which is often non-dialogical, and involves acts of partitioning, rather than consensus. Reider Due’s chapter then follows up, similarly exploring the boundaries of communication systems, by probing the notion of non-communication among the context of a historical moment that is defined by the capacity for symbolic exchange. Finally, Wolfgang Ernst reviews the recent discourse on glitch aesthetics through a media archaeological prism. Focusing on media technology and Shannon’s mathematical theory of information, Ernst argues that the notion of mistakes and errors are themselves mistaken. Noise, errors, and impurities are themselves part of the function of media machines, he writes, and without them there would be no information. For him there is no mistake, rather simply the condition for a machine to function. The chapters in this part work together to begin to set out the new territories for communication, asking us to think about the potential for errors, the potential to be excluded from communication systems, and the potential for antagonism rather than dialogue in order to come to terms with contemporary communicative realities.

Part Two, “Mis-sounds,” focuses specifically on noise not just as part of communication system, but as a bigger sonic culture to explore the specific agencies of misleading through sound and silence. Fran Dyson begins this part with a close reading of Jon McCormack and Gary Warner’s sound installation *A Quivering Marginalia* (AQM) in order to think through the place of marginal sounds in the human engagement with and study of the natural world. Dyson uses the piece to think through the dimensions of the recording apparatus that introduce noise into the environment, while at the same time obscuring or creating the conditions for ignoring nature, as it is situated outside discourse. Against this background, Stephen Kennedy in his chapter starts to think through the consequences of miscommunication, in terms of both language and noise, paying particularly attention to that which is usually excluded in communication systems. For Kennedy, this involves using Serres to think about the concepts of chaos and noise as themselves constitutive of the complexity, and novelty of systems. Thomas Sutherland then also picks up this theme in Serres’ work and sets out a rethinking of the noise information doublet and its inability to be dissolved. What Sutherland shows us is something that all media theories of miscommunication need to grapple with. He interrogates Serres’ position and argues that the signal-noise doublet continues to underpin philosophical dialogue: The desire to communicate the incommunicable still rests on the ability to filter noise into the very systems that it may have once resisted.

Following on from this, Part Three, “Mis-matters,” explores the specific materials of miscommunications, tracing what happens with materiality, matter, and materialism when the system breaks down. Maria Korolkova’s chapter focuses on objects and the misleading trajectories they are bound to draw in various acts of miscommunications, from experiments of Russian futurists to transformations of a celluloid film, and more recent cases of employing objects as forensic evidence to define between the true and the false. Maryam Muliaee and Mani Mehrvarz take a similar object-oriented approach to Korolkova and argue in their chapter for the role of errors and glitches in art to refocus attention on the constitution of objects and their affect, rather than interpretive meaning. John Hondros continues this part by expanding material focused approach to all agents of the network, not just objects or things. Hondros employs relational materialism methodology from DeLanda’s reading of Deleuze and Guattari to explore the techniques, strategies, and dynamics with three groups of video makers, who use an arrangement of people and machines to distribute their work on the internet. Hondros teases out these complex networks and shows how errant behavior, in terms of both media systems and human actors, is an integral part of these precarious assemblages. “Mis-matter” closes with Alex Lichtenfels’ close reading of Paul Verhoeven’s film *Elle* (2016) to distinguish two system of truth

that are currently present in Western reality—truth of what is (materialism) and truth of what really happened (history). For Lichtenfels, these truth systems codetermine media objects, and miscommunication between them poses a significant challenge to media theory methods and assumptive logic. Rather than thinking miscommunication as potentially resolvable by appeal to a higher notion of truth, Lichtenfels asks: “What can media theory do when the two sides of a communication have different concepts of what constitutes that communication’s truth?”

Part Four, “Mis-happenings,” then looks at the accidents that result from misdirection. Dominic Smith looks at Walter Benjamin’s live radio broadcast “The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay” and examines the way both the report on the disaster and the disaster of communication may act as a productive site for philosophy, particularly regarding the way philosophy of technology can function with and through the accident of technology. Ella Klik continues this media archaeological investigation by looking at accidental recordings and photographs as instances where it is made obvious that what a viewer sees is always from a device’s point of view and thus impacted on by the potential for noise. Reconfiguring apparatus theory through a focus on accidental recordings, Klik explores nonhuman vision and what these accidents, where a machine carries out exactly what it was designed to do, tell us about ways of seeing in the twenty-first century. Andrea Mariani follows up with the example of the first motorized crossing of the Sahara Desert from the Italian Royal Geographical Society in 1937. Focusing on the breakdowns, mishaps, and miscommunications involved in this crossing, Mariani uses the figure of interruption to explore the attempt at, and resistance to, making the desert into a colonized, traversed space. From this exploration, Mariani expands the definition of miscommunication from the fields of media and communication studies and offers a way to conceptualize this phenomenon in several types of transmission, whether this involves physical travel or the transmission of information.

The fifth and final part of this collection is titled “Mis-functions,” and it explores the interruptions provided by errors and instances of miscommunication. In some cases, the authors attempt to show how this interruption may in fact be productive, both of modes of analysis and of modes of creative practice, emphasizing a disjuncture or mode of escape from dominant communication systems. In this part, the distinction between signal and interruption is also interrogated, which ends the book by bringing into view the difficulties of communicating anything at all. Peter Krapp looks to the interruptions to internet use manifest by HTML error codes. In developing a history of HTML, Krapp offers in his chapter an account of the moments at which contingency, surprise, and unpredictability resulted

in computing developments in terms of both systematic improvements and creative recuperation of error. Stefan Höltgen in his chapter focuses on the accident in computer games, raising a number of computer archaeological questions about their constructive and creative usability. He explores the way errors became aesthetic features in certain games and also prompted new practices including the remedial hacking practices of 1980s games. Similarly, Jörgen Rahm-Skågeby offer an argument on the productive qualities of the error in transmission by producing a variantology of interruptions including the emergency broadcast, the freeze, and television “snow.” Then, to sum up this part’s investigation of error, noise, and the interruption. Nele Van de Mosselaer and Nathan Wildman finish this part by analyzing the role of the glitch in video games vis-à-vis possibilities for narrative. They argue, as all the other contributors to this part have gestured toward, that the glitch, the error, the mistake, or the misplaced object not only act as a way of leading users astray but can also serve to create new possibilities to tell stories and understand (or misunderstand) our place within a given context through misdirection.

At the end of this introduction, a question is still nagging in our minds. What if this book is a mistake? What if its main argument is a mistake? Would you still read it? Assuming that you are reading this, the prospect of being engaged with an error does not bother you that much. Perhaps you are not alone.

In contrast to what we have said earlier, mistakes are still largely considered in negative terms. Usually we tend to try and avoid them. They disturb the perfect image of reality, they make communications noisy, they lead to unwanted results, ruin, distract, deceive, and keep us in delusion. Maybe it is a mistake to think of media as underpinned by these disturbances and interruptions. Yet, you are still reading this, you are intrigued, perhaps even seduced, caught by the prospect of being led to the unknown, of being misled. Why? Following Eco, Serres, Sklovsky, and Tolstoy, we believe that there is a certain power in what we call a mistake or an error, certain creative and productive potential. If this book is a mistake, we hope it is this kind.

Notes

- 1 For transliteration from Russian here and throughout this volume, the Library of Congress System of transliteration is used, except for citations from secondary sources and conventionalized spelling (e.g. Shklovsky, Tolstoy, Yuri Tynyanov).

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Part One

Mis-theories

