The notion that experience is mediated through lenses and dispositions beyond one’s control is more or less an axiom of contemporary discourse. Kant concludes that I can never truly access the thing in itself; Marx preaches that the means of production shape everything that I think, feel, and do; Freud says that unconscious forces of sex and aggression are really in the driver’s seat; Nietzsche and Foucault show that those deep-seated morals and values that I like to consider “natural” are actually the products of genealogies fueled by insidious power structures; and there is that physiological fact that all sensation and perception—that is, my very sense of reality—are processed through the material mush of my nervous system. The question “How do I grasp Truth and things as they are?” is somewhat of a laughing stock among today’s intelligentsia—and yet the longing still itches. It is virtually impossible to uproot once and for all the human yearning for immediacy. In this paper, I examine two unlikely voices alongside each other, the Web-based political activist Eli Pariser and the German-Jewish theologian Martin Buber, and explore their respective struggles with mediation.

When the Internet hit the mainstream in the 1990s, no one imagined that it would conquer mediation—after all, one still sees the computer screen—but many embraced it as a radically uncontrolled access to information. The Web could continually rupture and redefine our worldviews and self-images, and thereby provide a truer picture of the way things are. Regardless of your nationality, age, race, gender, religion, or family background—you could connect to a World Wide Web and chat with people across the globe and gain exposure to foreign ideas, images, and possibilities. A ten year-old in Rwanda, a coal miner in Wyoming, and Prince Charles of Wales could type the keyword “human rights” or “grandma’s chicken recipe” into Webcrawler and all be on the same page.

Eli Pariser, the former executive director of MoveOn.org and the author of The Filter Bubble, used to have such sky-high hopes for the Internet:

To my preteen self, it seemed clear that the Internet was going to democratize the world, connecting us with better information and the power to act on it…[A]n inevitable, irresistible revolution was just around the corner, one that would flatten society, unseat the elites, and usher in a kind of freewheeling global utopia.2

The Internet appeared to be as unmediated as any medium of information-transmission could possibly be. In short, Pariser declares, “The creators of the Internet envisioned something bigger and more important than a global system for sharing pictures of pets.”3

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1 This essay is based on a paper I presented at the “Media Fever! Religion as Mediation” conference of the University of Toronto’s Department for the Study of Religion on April 12, 2013. While I have made some revisions and expansions to the language and content, I did not attempt to eliminate the textures of spokenness from the original version.


3 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 19.
Things have changed. The primary problem that Pariser highlights in his book is the “personalization” of the Internet through algorithmic filtering. There is an unfathomable amount of information about all of us being collected, bought, and sold every time we open a web browser. This information is drawn from our “click” histories online, our purchases and near-purchases, our Google searches, keywords in our emails and Gchats, our YouTube views, our geographical whereabouts, and countless other bits. As innumerable companies—some of which we have probably never even heard of—harness this wealth of information about us, our Internet experiences become increasingly personalized. This information determines what advertisements we encounter, what books Amazon suggests for us, what announcements show up in our News Feeds on Facebook, what articles make the front page of online newspapers, what websites Google displays when we seek new information, and so on. Pariser warns that excessive personalization could narrow our worldviews in devastating ways. When our Internet experiences are so tailored to whatever we are most likely to click on, then individuals can easily get stuck in what Pariser calls “filter bubbles.” Our range of exposure to different historical narratives, political positions, art, and literature dramatically diminishes.

This form of mediation is especially dangerous because it is largely invisible, Pariser argues. Most of us still think of the Web as that relatively anarchic and uncensored whirlwind of information. “We are not even aware that we’re seeing increasingly divergent images of the Internet,” Pariser observes. “Technology designed to give us more control over our lives is actually taking control away.” Like a lens,” he adds, “the filter bubble invisibly transforms the world we experience by controlling what we see and don’t see.” The so-called World Wide Web starts to look more and more like my personal comfort zone (see Figure 1 below). “The filter bubble will often block out the things in our society that are important but complex or unpleasant. It renders them invisible.” Pariser urges his readers to consider ways in which the filter bubble is not only disturbing from a personal, psychological perspective, but also ways in which it is politically dangerous.” The filter bubble, he argues, fosters a society wherein most people only consider issues from a single perspective and, moreover, wherein individuals gain a vague sense that the rest of the world must agree with them.

5 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 82.
6 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 151.
Soon enough, Pariser indicates, the filter bubble will follow us from cyberspace to the “meatspace” of the offline world. For example, consider Google Glass, a cutting-edge product at the new frontier of so-called “smart” devices.8 The days of looking down at your GPS to figure out where to go, or pulling a phone out of your pocket to snap a picture will be over very soon—you’ll be wearing the device, gazing right through it, instructing it with your voice—maybe soon enough with your thoughts. Chris Coyne, a cofounder of the online dating site OkCupid, reflects on the possibilities: “You walk into a bar,” he says, “and a camera immediately scans the faces in the room and matches them against OkCupid’s databases. Your accessories can say, that girl over there is an eighty-eight percent match.”9 Wow. This incipient mode of perception is being called “augmented cognition,” or for the lazy-of-tongue: “AugCog.”10 And Pariser predicts: “Augmented reality represents the end of naïve empiricism, of the world as we see it, and the beginning of something far more mutable and weird: a real-world filter bubble that will be increasingly difficult to escape.”11

Again, for Pariser, one of the most unsettling aspects of this current-cum-futuristic form of mediation is its very invisibility. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the “smart” product considered above is called Google

8 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 175.
9 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 211.
10 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 208.
11 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 212.
Glass—not “glasses,” which would draw too much attention to itself as an agent of mediation, but rather utterly transparent, squeaking clean, window-like “glass.” The original homepage for the official Google Glass website (see Figure 2 above) was entirely white, except for sparse units of hyperlink-text in small, light gray letters. One of the links, “How to Get One,” hints to the consumer that the product is not so much a pair of cumbersome glasses as a single pane of glass, and the brand name “Google” appears almost imperceptibly in the bottom right corner of the screen, virtually transparent.

Religious yearnings to penetrate through layers of mediation are age-old. Already in the Hebrew Bible itself, we are told that whereas prophets in general encounter the Divine in hazy visions and dreams, Moses “beholds the image of God” and speaks with Him “mouth to mouth” (Numbers 12:6-8). An ancient Rabbinic Midrash interprets this verse as follows:

What difference is there between Moses and all other prophets?...R. Judah said: Through nine specula [ispaqlariyot] did the prophets behold...but Moses beheld through one speculum [ispaqlaria] ... The Rabbis said: All the other prophets beheld through a dirty speculum...But Moses beheld through a polished speculum.  

Thus, Moses’ theophany is imagined as exceptionally direct, intimate, and immediate. In this Midrash, the speculum—from the Aramaic ispaqlaria—is a window. Moses sees God through one clear glass, as it were. Significantly, the rabbis maintain that there is still something between Moses and God—revelation implies some degree of mediation—but his perception is so unfiltered that it is as if he encounters the Divine face-to-face.  

For Martin Buber, God is “the Unmediated” [das Unmittelbare] and the human-divine encounter takes place through unmediated “I-You” relations in the world. In other words, Buber wants to remove the speculum completely—he wants to shatter the glass, as it were. He does not seek to do so by articulating a new theological concept, per se—that would only introduce a new speculum. Rather, Buber affirms the possibility of genuine, unmediated encounters with people and things in the world—I-You encounters—and in such rare moments, according to his anti-theology theology, one addresses the “Eternal You” directly in addressing the earthly You here and now.  


13 Cf. Maimonides’ commentary on this midrashic tradition, and his insistence that even Moses does not attain full immediacy before God, for there still remains one last “veil” (mehisah). Moses Maimonides, Eight Chapters on Ethics (Hebrew and English), trans. Joseph Gorfinkle (Mountain Home, AR: Borderstone Press, 2010), chapter 7, passim. Cf. idem., The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1963), 436-437. Of course, there are also trends in the history of religions—and in the history of Judaism, no less—that reflect spiritual desires for mediation. Consider, for example, the various structures of political and theological mediation portrayed in Exodus 17-23. For an exceptionally insightful midrashic meditation on the spiritual dynamics between immediacy and mediacy, the primordial capacity for nearness and the fearful craving for distance, see Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:15, s.v. Rabbi Yudan be-shem Rabbi Yuda.  

14 See Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), passim. My phrase “anti-theology theology” highlights a paradox in Buber’s thought, which he felt that he avoided successfully. While Buber insisted that he was not a theologian—he maintained that he was “absolutely not capable nor even disposed to teach this or that about God”—and that he offered no theological doctrine or “concept”—it is nonetheless the case that Buber wrote voluminously about theological matters. See Martin Buber, “Replies to My Critics,” in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, eds. P.A. Schilpp and M. Friedman (LaSalle: Open Court, 1967), 689-691. Buber’s anti-theological posture is misleading
Normally in life, according to Buber, we interact with things and people in modes of I-It. That is, we regard these entities in terms of ourselves—our own desires and repulsions, our needs and aspirations, our thoughts about them, our memories of them, and so on. Consequently, our encounters with others tend to be heavily mediated by our own subjectivities. We do not actually see the Other has he, she, or it is at this very moment. I remain trapped within my own subjective “bubble,” as it were. The speculum in this case remains opaque—or better: it remains reflective, eclipsing the You with my own image. (Indeed, the word *ispaglaria*, as well as the English “speculum,” can also refer to a glass mirror.) In this vein, Buber writes, “the egomaniac does not live anything directly [unmittelbar], whether it be a perception or an affection, but reflects on his perceiving or affectionate I and thus misses the truth of the process.”

The I-You encounter is fundamentally different: “The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination...Before the immediacy [Unmittelbarkeit] of the relationship everything mediate becomes negligible.” For Buber, these rare moments of I-You encounter are no more and no less than divine Revelation. The “unmediated word of God,” for Buber, is inasmuch as it covers up the fact that he does, indeed, introduce his readers to distinctive, historically-situated views about divinity. His language of immediacy is, to be sure, mediated and mediating. In a similar vein, see Adorno’s critique of Germany’s “anti-intellectual intellectuals,” among whom he includes Buber. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 4. See also below, footnote 44.


For the preeminent study of Buber’s shift to dialogue, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber’s Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).
the direct [direkt] life of man with man,™ and they influence inhabitants to say to themselves, “[W]e have no use for ‘immediacy’ [Unmittelbarkeit].” In such a utilitarian social climate, people and things are mere resources and Mitteln, means. Meanwhile, technological innovation flourishes so rapidly that the modern person wanders in a world of increasingly unfamiliar, alien objects. Buber refers to “this peculiarity of the modern crisis” as “man’s lagging behind his works.” In this situation,

Man is no longer able to master the world which he himself brought about: it is becoming stronger than he is, it is winning free of him, it confronts him in an almost elemental in-dependence, and he no longer knows the word which could subdue and render harmless the golem he has created.21

To be sure, Buber is no luddite. Like Pariser, he is not opposed to technological development, per se, but rather to particular ways of using and seeing technology that impoverish the sociopolitical landscape—which, for Buber especially, is also the spiritual landscape. Buber’s chief concern is the rampant degeneration of genuine community, Gemeinschaft, into utilitarian society, Gesellschaft.22 And, for Buber, Gemeinschaft is precisely the “We of an ontic directness [Unmittelbarkeit],”23 where the estrangement and alienation of Gesellschaft is overcome and “immediacy [Unmittelbarkeit] is established between one human being and another.”24 Like Pariser, Buber is also disturbed at the invisibility of the obstructions to immediacy. “Just as his degenerate technology is causing man to lose the feel of good work and proportion, so the degrading social life he leads is causing him to lose the feel of community [Gemeinschaft]—just when he is so full of illusion [Illusion] of living in perfect devotion to his community.”25 Pariser and Buber both want greater immediacy amidst the thick mediations of technology. However, as we shall see, whereas Pariser seeks to attain this through altering the technologies themselves (i.e., addressing problems with the personalization of the Internet), Buber seeks to promote immediacy at the level of human relationships and communities, which are the very sources and environments of technology. 

Readers today are, of course, duly suspicious of any notion of unmediated relation. On what legitimate grounds could Buber conclude that “unmediated” encounters are possible? What about the I of “I and Thou”—that is, the I who beholds by means of perception, language, and consciousness? What could it possibly mean to regard something “as it is” or “in itself”? The nuances of Buber’s notion of the Unmediated have yet to be adequately investigated and understood.26 For

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22 “Needless to say,” Buber writes, “we cannot and do not want to go back to primitive agrarian communism or to the corporate state of the Christian Middle Ages. We must be quite unromantic, and, living wholly in the present, out of the recalcitrant material of our own day in history, fashion a true community [Gemeinschaft]” (Paths in Utopia, 15). On Buber’s notions of Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft, see Paul Mendes-

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25 Buber, Paths in Utopia, 132; idem., Werke I, 996
26 For the main discussions of Buber’s notion of Unmittelbarkeit that do currently exist, see Nathan Rotenstreich, Immediacy and Its Limits: A Study of
now, I will let these questions linger and then we shall return to them shortly.

It is a truism among media theorists that the very idea of “overcoming mediation” is problematic. One who removes her Google Glass and looks upon the world still sees everything through the lens of her cornea—let alone all the other elements that condition human experience. While Pariser is no media theorist, he is certainly familiar with that material and incorporates it throughout his book. With regard to the Internet, he does not envision a user experience that is totally uncontrolled. Indeed, the Internet is media—in all senses of that word, from the philosophical to the technological to the cultural. Rather, Pariser outlines ways in which we can optimally deal with mediation and pursue relatively unmediated online experiences. First and foremost, Pariser argues that we must make the medium itself visible, for the most insidious and grave dangers set in when we are not even aware that we are encountering the Web through the pseudo-transparency of filter bubbles. Indeed, this is the primary aim of his book: to bring Internet personalization to the attention of broad audiences. “Because the filter bubble distorts our perception of what’s important, true, and real,” Pariser writes, “it’s critically important to render it visible.”

He also remarks, “we need to pull back the curtain—to understand the forces that are taking the Internet in its current, personalized direction.” While Pariser does not imagine that we could have a purely objective understanding of “what’s true and real” behind “the curtain”—there will always be additional curtains to pull back—he does affirm that mediation is relative. And the first step in mitigating mediation is to make the medium itself visible—to be aware of the filters that condition our views.

This new visibility then enables us, Pariser suggests, to apply greater intentionality and agency to which lenses we adopt, how they operate, how we use them, and how we shape them. First, Pariser suggests, one could simply make a point to explore different perspectives online—for example, to seek news from eclectic sources, to explore new genres of music, to research unpredictable topics. Such attempts to look beyond one’s “horizons,” so to speak, can confuse and complicate the boundaries of filter bubbles. Pariser also pressures companies themselves to offer individuals more control over the dynamics of their media. He suggests, for example, that “Google or Facebook could place a slider bar running from ‘only stuff I like’ to ‘stuff other people like that I’ll probably hate’ at the top of search results and the News Feed, allowing users to set their own balance between tight personalization and a more diverse information flow.” Thus, Internet users would still be refracting the totality of online information through prisms of mediation, but one could, on some level, use those very media to continually rupture, expand, and highlight the filters themselves.

In order to further illustrate this hermeneutical versatility and “diverse information flow,” Pariser presents the concept of dialogue. While he does not invoke Buber in this discussion—he only explicitly mentions David Bohm and Jürgen Habermas in this context—Pariser’s primary point is that the media of Internet filtering should, as much as possible, emulate dialogue. “The filter bubble pushes us in the opposite direction,” Pariser writes. “[I]t creates the impression that our narrow self-interest is all that exists…. Personalization has given us…a public sphere sorted and manipulated by algorithms, fragmented by design, and hostile to dialogue.”


30 Pariser, The Filter Bubble, 164.
Pariser’s approach to dealing with mediation is to make the “glass” visible, as it were, and to ensure that it is “refracting” the vastness in adequately diverse ways in order to consistently stimulate users to look beyond what is familiar and close-to-home, and thereby enhance their views of reality.

Turning back to Buber now, there are illuminating correlations between him and Pariser regarding their respective struggles against hyper-mediation. Moreover, this analysis shall demonstrate that Buber’s perspective on mediation is far more nuanced than it appears at first glance, especially as it appears to readers who have only read his famous book of 1923, I and Thou. In later works, Buber acknowledges that the notion of unmediated encounter is discordant with scientific epistemologies, and at least debatable from philosophical perspectives, most notably Kantian transcendentalism. He acknowledges that his commitment to the Unmediated is based ultimately on existential and phenomenological grounds. Furthermore, he concedes that a purely unmediated relation is virtually impossible to attain. Similarly to Pariser, albeit in a vastly different context, Buber senses that there are spectrums of mediation—from dense to thin, foggy to clear. He believes in the power of “longing for perfect relation”—for the possibility of unconditioned encounter—but hints that one advances in the process of actualization asymptotically. For Buber, the ultimate disappearance of mediation borders on eschatology. This is reminiscent of Paul’s grand promise: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In their broad strokes, Buber’s proposed methods for mitigating mediation correspond to those of Pariser: make the media visible, and pursue modes of interaction that rupture bubbles of subjectivity and maximize dialogue. I propose that Buber renders the medium of I-You relations visible through highlighting the most concrete, embodied aspects of the encounter. Now, given Buber’s insistence that

31 Buber explicitly addresses these concerns in his essay “Man and His Image-Work,” in The Knowledge of Man: Selected Essays (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). Modern physics, he acknowledges, demonstrates that human perception of the world is far removed from the objective reality of the world itself. From this perspective, then, “the mode of being of the space-time world as a whole and that of each part of it have become unrepresentable” (ibid., 155). Although such a conclusion may have scientific validity, Buber argues, it is unsatisfactory from an existential perspective. “It is otherwise with man in so far as he is not a physicist. He still desires…to live in a world of which one can form an image—not merely imageable in a symbolic way, but as a real world constituted in a certain way” (ibid.). However, the more significant challenge to Buber’s belief in the possibility of unmediated encounter, given his own intellectual milieu, is the philosophical refutation, especially that of phenomenology. With an allusion to Husserl, Buber concedes: “That toward which we move and which we perceive is always, from the standpoint of my intention, a thing of the senses” (ibid., 156). However, Buber conceives of a form of relationality that is more primordial than that of Husserlian intentionality, which remains rooted in the subject’s own consciousness and inner experience [Erlebnis]. “It is otherwise,” Buber continues, “when I seek to grasp the object as independent of my movement and perception” (ibid.). When I apprehend the Other in this way, as prior to the mediation of my subjective consciousness, then “he is to me only partner, not object; as partner, as my ‘Thou’ the other can be grasped in his full independence without curtailing his sense nature” (ibid., 157). Buber wants to know the Other as it truly is in itself, in its unmediated actuality. His fundamental question is: “What is it when no perception approaches it?” (ibid.). Here, Buber must defend himself against Kantian phenomenology. According to Kant, human subjects can only behold phenomena as mediated through a priori categories of perception. The noumenal “thing in itself” [Ding an sich] is, by definition, inaccessible to human consciousness. Buber argues against this conclusion. Inasmuch as Kant affirms the absolute unknowability of the thing in itself, Buber explains, he inadvertently intimates that we do know something about it, “namely, that it is. Kant would say: ‘And nothing more’, but we who live today must add: ‘And that the existent meets us.’ This is, if we take it seriously enough, a powerful knowing” (ibid.).

32 Buber, “Man and His Image-Work,” in Knowledge of Man, 164.
the I-You meetings are “unmediated,” it may seem unfair to use the term “medium” here to characterize the dynamics of Buberian dialogue. However, it is appropriate if we bear in mind that, despite Buber’s claim that “nothing intervenes between I and You,” the encounter nonetheless—and, in fact, all the more so phenomenologically—takes place through the mutual encounter of two distinct corporeal beings. The post-mystical, dialogical Buber unequivocally affirms that the material stuff of earthly relationships is no illusion, and the embodied encounter does not somehow symbolize or stand for anything else. The divine kerygma is not separate from the forms of I-You relation. As the media theorist (and former University of Toronto professor) Marshall McLuhan famously declared: “The medium is the message.” Thus, when I say that Buber renders the medium visible, the “medium” to which I refer is precisely the Materie—the stuff, or physical matter—that is the medium of dialogue—like clay might be the medium of a sculpture. And this physical matter is entirely conducive with the Unmediated, for Buber. “In truth,” he writes, “the pure relation can be built up into spatio-temporal continuity only by becoming embodied [verleiblicht] in the whole stuff [ganzen Materie] of life.”  

One who is genuinely attuned to the tangible presence of the Other holds oneself ready for the unmediated, direct encounter. No scholar has yet appreciated the fact that the theme of embodiment lies at the core of Buber’s concept of dialogue and, therefore, of his philosophical and theological thought in general. Already in the opening sentence of I and Thou, Buber emphasizes embodiment: “The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude [Haltung].” Haltung is not simply a mental disposition, as the English word “attitude” suggests, but a stance or posture

35 I use this term “embodiment” in two senses. First, it has an ontological aspect, namely the repudiation of all mind-body or body-soul dualisms. While we may perceive ourselves at times as “having” bodies or “having” minds, this does not alter the fundamental fact of monism. There is no I that “has” a body; rather the I itself is embodied. So too, all dynamics of thought, emotion, and soulfulness are embodied. Buber characterizes the psychological-bodily entirety of a person (or, in the case of non-human entities, their relational-bodily entirety) as “wholeness” [Ganzheit]. The essence of a person is not the psyche, soul, intellect, or body alone, but the whole embodied self, unfolding biographically—which is to say, relationally—in each passing moment. Second, the term “embodiment” has a phenomenological dimension. In short, if elements such as essence, truth, and holiness cannot ontologically transcend the concreteness of earthly entities, then the preeminent spiritual and intellectual pursuits must involve particular ways of positioning oneself vis-à-vis material reality—particular modes of intention and attention, facing and seeing. This is unequivocally the case in Buber’s phenomenology of dialogue. For examples of Buber’s reflections on human embodiment and spiritual-corpooreal wholeness, see Martin Buber, A Believing Humanism: My Testament, 1902-1965, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 146, 113, 155-6, 161, 169; idem., I and Thou, 58-59, 65, 137; idem., “What Is Man?,” in Between Man and Man, 160; idem., The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1966), 85, 226, 171-172. My current dissertation research focuses on the theme of embodiment in Buber’s thought.

33 Cf. “In mankind’s great ages, the Divine, in invisible becoming, outgrows old symbolisms and blossoms forth in new ones. The symbol becomes ever more...deeply submerged in life itself. It is not God who changes, only theophany—the manifestation of the Divine in man’s symbol-creating mind—until no symbol is adequate any longer, and none is needed; and life itself, in the miracle of man’s being with man, becomes a symbol—until God is truly present when one man clasps the hand of another.” Martin Buber, “Herut: On Youth and Religion,” in On Judaism, op. cit., 150-151.

34 Buber, I and Thou, 163; idem., Ich und Du, 110.
of the whole self. (For example, geduckte Haltung is a “crouch.”) According to Buber, the essential Haltung “breaks up all conceptualization,” and while it may very well be associated with an “inner” action, it is actually “built up” around “the very tension of the eyes’ muscles and the very action of the foot as it walks.” In a quite literal way, for Buber, “The basic movement [Grundbewegung] of the life of dialogue is the turning towards the other [Hinwendung].” Moreover, with regard to a
dialogical encounter with a tree, Buber comments, “The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it bodies forth [er leibt] over against me.” Also, he writes, “The It-humanity that some imagine, postulate, and advertise has nothing in common with the bodily [leibhaftigen] humanity to which a human being can truly say You.”

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37 Martin Buber, “Interpreting Hasidism,” in Commentary 36.3 (Sept 1963), 220.
39 Buber, “Dialogue,” in Knowledge of Man, 22; idem., Die Schriften über das Dialogische, 156. Buber elaborates: “If you look at someone and address him you turn to him, of course with the body [körperlich], but also in the requisite measure with the soul, in that you direct your attention to him” (ibid.). Thus, for Buber, the way in which people hold themselves physically (especially in relation to other beings) has direct effects on their psycho-spiritual outlooks. This notion that psychic states are largely functions of corporeal activity is found in Marcel Mauss’ essay “Techniques of the Body.” For instance: “I believe that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques…This socio-psycho-biological study should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of entering into ‘communication with God’” [Marcel Mauss, “Body Techniques,” in Sociology and Psychology, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 122. Similarly, Bourdieu contends that “a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy” is instilled in “the values given body…through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or ‘don’t hold your knife in your left hand’” [Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 94.] While Mauss and Bourdieu’s conceptions of the relation between body and psyche differ from that of Buber, it would nonetheless be worthwhile to examine Buber’s perspectives on embodiment in relation to other, more fully articulated theories of embodiment. Robert Wood, however, fails to appreciate this bodily meaning of Haltung in Buber’s thought. Wood seems to understand Haltung as merely a mental “attitude,” and thus portrays Rückbiegung (bending back to oneself) and

Hinwendung (turning toward the Other) as metaphorical terms denoting psychological orientations. See Robert Wood, Martin Buber’s Ontology, op. cit., 37.
40 Buber, I and Thou, 58; Ich und Du, 8. Smith’s translation “er leibt mir gegenüber” is more vivid and precise than Kaufmann’s “it bodies over against me.” In general, Smith’s translation better captures the element of embodiment in Buber’s thought. See Martin Buber, I and Thou, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner Classics, 2000).
41 Buber, I and Thou, 65; idem., Ich und Du, 14. An appreciation of this role that embodiment plays in Buber’s concept of dialogue ought to elucidate his often misunderstood notion of reciprocity in I-You encounter. If one does not regard the You as a definitively embodied You that “bodies forth” in the meeting, then Buber’s stance that even inanimate Others nonetheless “address” the I remains unintelligible. Consider the following statement in which Emil Fackenheim exhibits such a lack of understanding in what amounts to his critique of Buber’s concept of reciprocity: “In the case of these [interpersonal] relations…it is not difficult to be persuaded that the doctrine that the I-Thou relation yields a unique knowledge of another should be implicit in the actual dialogical knowledge of the other. But it is not easy to be persuaded of this in the case of I-Thou relations in which the Thou is not human, whether it be a stone or a tree or God. For here one does not have to be a fanatical devotee of I-It knowledge in order to doubt that there is an actual—rather than merely an apparent—address by another; indeed, one should be lacking in intellectual responsibility if one did not doubt it, demanding an argument for the removal of the doubt.” Emil L. Fackenheim, “Buber’s Concept of Revelation,” in The Philosophy of Martin Buber, op. cit., 293. Since Fackenheim evidently does not grasp Buber’s assertion that a You “bodies forth” to the I, Fackenheim must doubt Buber’s contention that even a rock or tree “meets us” dialogically. Fackenheim’s lack of appreciation for the theme of embodiment in Buber’s thought disables him from conceiving of a dialogical
short, through rendering the medium of dialogue visible—even touchable—Buber enables us to notice all the intangible stimuli of subjectivity that distract us from the raw facticity of encounter, which cast up screens between beings. Through drawing concrete attention to the embodied individuals of dialogue, and to the very Zwischenmenschliehe, literally the space “between people,” Buber renders the media of I-You encounter palpably perceptible.43

relation whose fruit is something other than intellectual knowledge, and this causes him to miss foundational aspects of Buber’s concepts of dialogue and revelation. 42 On Buber’s concept of the Zwischenmenschliehe, see his “Elements of the Interhuman,” in Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters, and Dialogue, ed. Judith Buber Agassi (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), passim.

Numerous scholars have concluded mistakingly that Buber’s I-It relations are material and I-You relations are immaterial. For example, see the comments in Philosophical Interrogations, ed. Sydney and Beatrice Rome (New York: Harper & Row, 1970) by Helmut Kuhn (19), Friedrich Thieberger (30), David Baumgardt (39), and Peter A. Bertocci (41-43). See also Steven T. Katz, “A Critical Review of Martin Buber’s Epistemology of I-Thou,” in Martin Buber: A Centenary Volume, ed. Haim Gordon and Jochanan Bloch (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1984).

According to Katz’s misreading, I-It perception takes place in the “phenomenal” realm of spatio-temporal, corporeal existence, whereas I-You relations take place in a “noumenal” realm of abstract, disembodied “ghostlike I’s and Thou’s” (103) that are beyond spatio-temporal reality and “divorced from all behavioral and or material predicates” (106-7). Indeed, one of the “essential points” in Katz’s critique of Buber is that “embodied existence seems essential to the knowing of an Other” (119n12, emphasis in original)—which is, in fact, not a critique at all insofar as embodiment is already a cornerstone of Buber’s concept of dialogue! Robert Wood commits a similar error in his assessment of Buber’s phenomenology in his Martin Buber’s Ontology, op. cit. Wood portrays I-It relations, not I-You relations, as definitively sensory. He explicitly associates the I-It world with “the ‘erotic’ world of interpersonal sensitivity,” “constructs of a sort, built upon the world of the senses,” and “the world of sense phenomena,” and thus characterizes Buber’s portrayal of I-It relation as “clearly Kantian” (35-36). Cf. Michael Theunissen, The Other: Studies in

Furthermore, like Pariser, Buber hopes that in making the media more visible, people will be inspired to pursue ways of seeing and seeking that are more conducive with reaching beyond interiority and entering into dialogue. There is no need to cite evidence that Buber

the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber, trans. Christopher Macann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984). See especially Theunissen’s misguided claim that Buber’s Unmittelbarkeit is a negative concept that denotes the absence of any medium (275), and his unintelligible characterization of I-You encounter: “Unveiled and unmediated by material relations, the Thou stands here before me” (299).

One of the reasons why so many scholars have concluded erroneously that It-relations are material and I-You relations are immaterial stems from Buber’s own admittedly ambiguous language. Consider, for example, the following statement in I and Thou: “The It-world hangs together [Zusammenhang] in space and time. The You-world does not hang together in space and time” (I and Thou, 84; Ich und Du, 32). While these sentences may seem to suggest that the It-world connotes material existence and the You-world is some disembodied realm, it is actually the opposite. A great paradox at the heart of Buber’s phenomenology is his notion that corporeal, concrete entities appear to us as more fluid and transient than the ideas and concepts we have of them. For Buber, objectification generates a static, frozen image of the essentially undefined, boundless Other. Things in the It-world of here and then are stable objects of reference, and one can plot their coordinates on axes of space and time. However, the Other in the You-world of here and now is ever-changing and unknown. I-You encounter requires one to let go of all the psychological images and ideas that we typically superimpose over the actual, visible Other: “What has to be given up is...that false drive for self-affirmation which impels man to flee from the unreliable, unsolid, unlasting, unpredictable, dangerous world of relation into the haying of things” (I and Thou, 126; Ich und Du, 74). According to this often overlooked aspect of Buber’s dialogical phenomenology, concrete presence is directly related to unsolid transience. This paradox in Buber’s thought has caused many scholars to cast I-It relations as material and I-You relations as immaterial, but such conclusions are diametrically opposed to Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. I hope that my forthcoming dissertation on themes of embodiment in Buber’s thought will help to clarify some of these common misconceptions.
was a proponent of dialogue—this is the key term for the last forty years of his writings. Dialogical encounter, for him, ruptures spheres of familiarity and vaporizes hypostatized models of identity that normally condition our views of the world. Unmediated You-saying is, for Buber, to go beyond oneself, to face the “primally deep otherness of the other.” 44 Pariser and Buber both recognize that making media more visible and seeking dialogical modes of interaction cannot shatter the glass completely. However, they both affirm that there are things one can do in order to see the world a bit more clearly.

44 Martin Buber, “What is Common to All, in Between Man and Man, op. cit., 96. It is worthwhile to consider Theodor Adorno’s critique of such “bodily” language in his The Jargon of Authenticity, op. cit. Adorno accuses German existentialists such as Buber, Heidegger, and Jaspers of employing terms that seem to be concrete and immediate—words like “encounter,” “dialogue,” “existential,” “Being,” and “concern”—but which are, in fact, deceptively abstract and mediated. Moreover, Adorno claims, such thinkers imbue this “jargon” with an “aura” of spiritual gravity and transcendence, and proceed as if immanence itself were somehow an indication of divine depths that are, as it turns out, beyond words. Thus, there is a double deception: words that appear to be concrete are actually abstract, and yet the abstractions themselves that presumably underlie the words remain unthinkable. “Expressions and situations, drawn from a no longer existent daily life, are forever being blown up as if they were empowered and guaranteed by some absolute which is kept silent out of reverence” (9-10). Adorno insists that this jargon is actually ahistorical terminology that distracts readers from the sociopolitical circumstances and economic conditions in which philosophizing takes place, even as the language professes to draw readers’ attention past “mere” concepts and speculations toward immediate concreteness. In the following passage, Adorno refers to the writing of O.F. Bollnow, but he might just as well have directed the content of this critique to Buber himself:

All of these words draw from language, from which they are stolen, the aroma of the bodily, unmetaphorical; but in the jargon they become quietly spiritualized. In that way they avoid the dangers of which they are constantly palavering. The more earnestly the jargon sanctifies its everyday world…the more sadly does the jargon mix up the literal with the figurative. (33)

Does Buber’s bodily language actually serve to “spiritualize” the concrete and unmetaphorical? Does his discourse of sanctifying everyday reality actually “mix up the literal with the figurative”? Such questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but I would argue that Buber is, in fact, acutely aware and cautious of the pitfalls that Adorno believes he falls into. While Buber’s early dialogical writings such as I and Thou (1923) and Zwiesprache [Dialogue] (1929) might seem somewhat withdrawn from historical-material matters despite their language of concrete immediacy, Buber’s later dialogical writings more clearly demonstrate the extent to which he developed and applied his concept of dialogue in concrete contexts of sociopolitical reality. See, for example, “The Question to the Single One” (1936) and “What Is Man?” (1938) in Between Man and Man, and see especially Paths in Utopia (1945). See also Buber’s critique of Heidegger in his essay “The Word that Is Spoken” (1961) in The Knowledge of Man, op. cit., whose arguments actually resemble some of Adorno’s own critiques of Heidegger’s detachment from concreteness; cf. Paul Mendes-Flohr, “Martin Buber and Martin Heidegger in Dialogue,” in The Journal of Religion 94.1 (2014): 2-25. Furthermore, Buber’s political thought and stances indicate that Buber’s philosophy was genuinely concerned with historical conditions. See Mendes-Flohr’s masterful “Introduction” and Buber’s own writings in Martin Buber, A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Finally, one should note that Adorno likely did not read a great deal of Buber’s works. One scholar notes, “Adorno seems not to have read the Judaic part of Buber’s works to have read at best sporadically his writings in Martin Buber, A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
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