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The Medium Is the (Discriminatory) Message: The Medial Epistemic Injustices of Philosophy

Giacomo Pezzano

Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences, University of Turin, 10124 Turin, Italy;
giacomo.pezzano@unito.it

Abstract: This paper brings the analysis of epistemic injustices and the perspective of media philosophy into dialogue by proposing the new concept of medial epistemic injustice. After introducing the topic, the contribution confronts some metaphilosophical stances in light of the recent medial turn in order to suggest that, despite all their controversies, philosophers seem to agree that doing philosophy uniquely involves writing texts. This discussion sets the stage for the claim that institutionally sanctioned philosophy manifests a mono-genreism that only admits one particular kind of written text and a mono-medialism that excludes all media other than writing. Next, the relationship between non-verbal media and philosophy is examined more closely on two levels. First, it is emphasized how academic philosophy leaves no room for corporeal thinking and visual thinking; second, it is illustrated how this may harm some individuals, using the example of deaf people and visually oriented autistic people. The conclusion proposes a provocative Gestalt-switch: What if current "angelic" philosophical knowledge were itself atypical, exhibiting the traits of an aphantasic mind?

Keywords: medial turn; media philosophy; metaphilosophy; philosophical practice; writing; corporeal thinking; visual thinking; neurotypicality

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1. Introduction: When Media Philosophy and Epistemic Injustice Meet

Since its emergence [1] the concept of epistemic injustice has become highly influential in the ethical discourse, with its forms and applications becoming increasingly nuanced (e.g., [2]). We have seen the rise of not only a more canonical, extroflexive analysis, i.e., a philosophy on epistemic injustices, but also a more introspective self-analysis that takes seriously the fact that philosophy itself is an epistemic field that aims to denounce the epistemic injustices committed in and through philosophy itself. The aim of my paper is to contribute to this very enterprise of debunking and reconstruction by bringing the specific perspective of media philosophy into play: I will interpret and extend the concept of epistemic injustice in the light of the medial turn and then read and develop the latter in the light of the former. This—I suggest—can lead to a double gain: on the side of the analysis of epistemic injustice, we will be able to individuate a new and particular kind of exclusionary attitude and practice that has not yet received special attention; on the side of media philosophy, we will discover—keeping in mind the lessons of the intersectional-feminist approach to media studies (e.g., [3])—a new socio-ethical dimension as a complement to the cognitive and techno-material dimension that are usually at its core.

My intention, then, is to broaden the understanding of the epistemic injustices perpetrated specifically by philosophy. When we say that academic philosophy "lacks diversity with respect to. . .", presents "substantial barriers to participation for. . ." or engenders "pre emptively denied opportunities to participate in an exchange. . ." [4], this critique also applies to the types of kinds of intra- and extra-mental media and representations accepted as legitimate sources of philosophical knowledge. A kind of transcendental exclusion exists whereby dialectical spaces are not only gendered and racialized, but also mediatized—that is, some discourses are marginalized because of the media and representations they employ.

Thus, epistemic injustice concerns who can know, which subjects are recognized as knowable, and how these subjects know and are known through different media. Restrictions on “a contributor’s full epistemic participation in a given domain”, which provide targets “with a reason to participate less often in such spaces or to avoid such spaces altogether” [4] (p. 227), also affect the use of media: this limitation reduces expressive plurality and constrains the epistemic richness of philosophy to its current standards.

The argument for a philosophy which is more open to diversity, including “not only racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, and ability diversity, but also diverse approaches to philosophy, Eastern, applied, engaged, fieldwork, field, public, experimental, literary approaches, etc.” [5] (p. 5), also touches on representations and media: why shouldn’t contributions made through comics and video games be given legitimacy as philosophical works, and—most importantly now—what kind of exclusionary consequences does this current prejudice have? The “culture of justification” suffered by philosophy requires aspiring academic philosophers to conform to “some prevailing set of norms” which define the disciplinary engagement and confer “positive status” to papers and projects [5], (pp. 6–7): this also applies to the media which are allowed in philosophical discourse. The goal of promoting a “culture of praxis” capable of creating “an environment where incongruence becomes a site of creativity for ever-expanding ways of doing professional philosophy” [5] (pp. 16–17) therefore requires that medial incongruence also be considered. The question extends beyond “how is this paper philosophy?”, i.e., “is my paper philosophical?”, to the more radical inquiry: “How is this philosophy paper?” in the radical sense of *Is my philosophy papery?*

An epistemic injustice not only “wrongs a knower as a knower” but is also “a wrong that a knower perpetrates *as* a knower and that an epistemic institution *causes in its capacity as* an epistemic institution”, in such a way that “particular knowers are precluded from making an impact, not just *with* shared epistemic resources, but also *on* shared epistemic resources” [6] (p. 14). My claim is that institutional philosophical practices also manifest a particular kind of medial epistemic injustice in action: more specifically, corporeal and visual knowers are medially targeted in philosophy, frustrating and invalidating their labor as epistemic agents, and discriminating against them as participants/receivers in the generation of philosophical knowledge. By acknowledging this, we can take a step forward in attempting to overcome the “gatekeepers for philosophical inclusion” and trying to end that “epistemology of ignorance” which avoids and denies “the contextual influences on philosophical systems and trends” and feeds “transcendental illusions about the creation of philosophical ideas and the progression of philosophical debates” [7] (p. 397). Here, combatting the inattention “to the philosophical genealogy or the relationship between ideas and their cultural contexts”, i.e., “the particularity, embodiment, and materiality of philosophical projects” [7] (p. 399), means drawing attention to the media genealogy and context of the creation of philosophical ideas and the progression of philosophical debates—holding that “it is not that the origin of an idea is all-determinative, but that we should stop assuming it has no effect without exploration” [7] (p. 403).

To discuss these claims, the rest of the text is divided into four sections. Section 2 discusses how philosophers tend not to reach an at least minimal consensus on the main disciplinary controversies, even though they all seem to agree on a medial standard that requires one to write texts in order to enter the philosophical room. Section 3 shows that a similar genuine medial discrimination is twofold: it manifests itself in a mono-genreism that only admits one particular kind of written text as philosophical (Section 3.1) and a mono-medialism that excludes all media other than writing from philosophical practice (Section 3.2). In Section 4, the relationship between non-verbal media and philosophy is considered more closely, stressing how current academic practices leave no effective room for corporeal thinking (Section 4.1) and visual thinking (Section 4.2). Section 5 discusses how the restriction of standard philosophical activity to verbal thinking contributes to an effective gatekeeping towards some people and their representational practices, looking specifically at the cases of deaf people who think corporeally (Section 5.1) and of those autistic people who think visually (Section 5.2). The conclusion proposes a provocative

Gestalt-switch: what if current “angelic” philosophical knowledge could be considered as atypical, insofar as it exhibits the traits of an aphantasic mind?

2. No Writing, No Party: The Exclusivity of the Philosophical Room

Hannon and Nguyen [8] discuss the puzzling fact that philosophy does not seems a reliable method for discovering true answers to philosophical questions, since it is common for its expert opinion to be distributed roughly evenly around many incompatible options. The authors believe that this leads to a very unsettling situation: philosophy seems to be organized like any other academic discipline, but philosophers “write paper and books, and argue back and forth” [9] (p. 37) in such a way that their controversies appear to be never settled, or to reach at least a minimal consensus. On this basis, it even seems reasonable to claim that “if you get ten philosophers in a room discussing any of the fundamental issues in philosophy, you are likely to get ten different and incompatible positions” [10] (p. 107). If things really are like that, the conclusion—Hannon and Nguyen suggest—would be that the discipline of philosophy is “an embarrassing failure”: the party in the philosophical room would run the risk of ending up in a (discursively) heated fight.

Sadly, it is not difficult to imagine that the philosophers partaking in the discussion in the room are ten white (able, Anglo-European, . . .) men: “that’s a white man’s game”, as one college guidance counsellor unhesitatingly and unashamedly put it [5] (p. 3). The philosophical room takes the form of a VIP club open only to select participants and inaccessible to others. The “standard picture” of philosophy not only seems to locate its centre in the most abstract and disembodied areas such as “metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind” [11] (p. 249), but a similar internal ranking also seems to track gender inversely [4] (p. 224), offering a scale which goes from the most masculine and serious disciplines to the most feminine and “frivolous” ones:

> *Philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and metaphysics*: The alpha dominant philosophy, done by Real Men.
>
> *Epistemology and philosophy of science*: Done by manly enough men.
>
> *Metaethics*: Done by men who are not entirely secure in their masculinity.
>
> *Ethics, social and political philosophy*: Done by girls.
>
> *Bioethics*: Done by stupid girls [12] (p. W15).

However, these are not the only assumptions that rule the participation in the philosophical room. Indeed, all ten philosophers would likely agree on at least one point, and not just any point, but the most fundamental one: philosophy consists of written texts, meaning philosophers express themselves through written words. Our ten philosophers would disagree on every topic except on the nature of philosophical media—which one is the one and only philosophical medium: perhaps the meta-colleagues would be relieved by this newfound compactness, but the problem is that it causes further epistemic injustices. That this medial statement might seem like a triviality is highly revealing of the structural ambiguity of a discipline whose members proudly proclaim: “what distinguishes the role of criticism in philosophy is precisely that there is nothing that may not be challenged”, such that “philosophy is precisely that intellectual inquiry in which anything is open to critical challenge and scrutiny” [13] (p. 202). Unfortunately, this radically critical stance seems to work with pretty much everything except the basic medium through which that same inquiry is conducted: predominant, academic philosophy presents itself as always self-questioning and searching for second-order answers, “in the sense that it reflects on its own conditions of being” [14] (p. 21), while leaving medial conditions unconsidered. This also leads to a kind of historical blindness that not only trivializes how the philosophical tradition itself—as Plato’s *Phaedrus* shows—originates as a reflection on the effects of writing and the medial conditions of knowledge, but also downplays how philosophy represents perhaps the only discipline whose tradition has not only reflected on its own expressive forms but has also intentionally explored almost all literary genres (see Section 3).

This forgetting further indicates how the prevailing trend in academic research calls for a disembodied philosophizing, in the sense that "if a thinking situates itself, embodies itself, or historicizes itself, then it is not profound, and worse, not philosophy" [15] (p. 40). This tendency has now begun to be problematized by various approaches—consider, for instance, the cases of feminist standpoint theory (e.g., [16]) and post-critical discourse (e.g., [17]): what I suggest is that such a critical consideration applies not only to race, gender, sexuality, and class—i.e., to the ensemble of all cultural and social conditions—but also to the concrete media of thought. This is particularly true if we take the "medial turn" seriously, whereby thought is finally recognized as medially contingent and impure—that is, variously affected (which does not mean determined) by the historical variety of media through which unfolds and is transmitted. In this way, the structure of the codes in which we experience the world and ourselves contributes to shaping our ways of thinking, in their contents and in their forms (e.g., [18–21]). This implies the realization that if thinking develops in time (both naturally and historically), then it always requires an external medium: not only the (pseudo-)natural one of language, but also the artificial one represented by all cultural media of experience [22] (pp. 155–157). Historically, this contingency has been completely ignored, so that philosophers have been affected by an unsettling medial oblivion: they typically forget to question which are and can be the expressive and technical media that support their own everyday practices. This situation has only recently been denounced (e.g., [23]), but we are still far from having a real impact on the standard practices of ordinary philosophy — and also from addressing the epistemic injustices involved.

Thus, even when the undeniable primacy of a particular medium is openly stated, it takes the shape of a plain fact, rather than a problem: "philosophy is done almost entirely in words", and even if "an occasional diagram may help, and some say (in words) that wordless music, dance, painting, or sculpture can express philosophical ideas", it remains that "to discuss the value of those ideas properly we must use words", such that "language is the essential medium of philosophy" [24] (p. 103). This happens in the very transcendental sense that in philosophy, language is taken both as "the medium of analysis" and "the medium for reflections about the conditions of the possibility of the analysis itself" [25] (pp. 165–166). Such a (meta-)language is the objectified written one: unsurprisingly, the same author advocates the primacy of knowing—i.e., propositional knowledge [26]. The "adversary method" of philosophy [27] seems to be secretly directed towards the elimination of any possible medial adversary of the alphabetic word.

Appiah [28] (pp. 339–342) offers an even more open and direct confession. Emphasizing the discontinuities between folk philosophy and formal philosophy, he claims that the latter is not found in every human society, but is "a distinctive institution that has evolved along with Western societies", and contrasts it with the "traditional thought of nonliterate cultures" (such as the Mbuti in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Azande in South Sudan) in terms of a difference between an adversarial and an accommodative style. The peculiar "consistency" of formal, adversarial philosophy "derives in large measure from the fact that it is written", because when you write down a sentence "it is there, in principle, forever", so that not only "if you write down another sentence inconsistent with it, you can be caught out", but also the way for a genuine tradition is paved: written records allow one to "reread—and thus rethink—the arguments of our philosophical forebears", so that it is possible to "compare our ancestors" theories in their actual words with ours." Literacy is thus not only important for "our ability to examine arguments over and over again and to record the results of experiment and experience", but also for the style of our thinking: in particular, "the generality and abstractness" of the arguments "depend upon writing", which even forces us to "move away from questions that are concrete and particular." Without literacy, thus, "it is hard to see how formal philosophy could have got started": to say that writing is "a sufficient condition for formal philosophy" is too much, but it "certainly seems to be necessary" ([28], pp. 349–353; but see also the classical [29,30]).

Finally, the traditional phrase "let no one ignorant of geometry enter", supposedly engraved on the door of Plato's Academy, has been replaced by the sign "let only writers enter" hanging on the philosophers' room. But this does not happen without consequences.

3. The Rule of the Game: Being a Philosophical Academic Writer

Words like Appiah's show how such a condition establishes a cultural prerequisite for being part of the philosophical play which is potentially discriminatory and oppressive—especially towards non-Western thinkers (e.g., [31]): "illiterate" becomes a synonym for not-Westernly-literate in the specific sense of not alphabetically literate. For example, does the monogamous exclusive relationship between philosophy and the alphabet imply that the Chinese language—not based on alphabetical writing—cannot bear philosophy? Admittedly, one might argue that this is indeed the case, as philosophy is only one historically determined practice among others, and calling any expression of thought "philosophy" may reflect a typically Western, universalist, and even colonialist attitude. In this sense, to say—as Derrida once did [32]—that, exactly for linguistic reasons, "China doesn't have philosophy, but it does however have thought" fully acknowledges the specificity of another way of thinking and even emphasizes its ability to avoid the trap of identitarian metaphysics. However, even if we accept—which is by no means self-evident—that, on a linguistic level, we must account for such a medial limitation to the alphabet, this condition still contributes to the "monochromatic profile of the discipline of philosophy" [33] (p. 403) and its discriminatory consequences in two main ways. Indeed, the alphabetical text engages in both a civil and a foreign war, attempting to preserve its philosophical primacy at the level of "Internal Politics", i.e., the relations between different written texts (Section 3.1), and at the level of "International Affairs", i.e., the relations between different media (Section 3.2).

3.1. Customs Control: The Mono-Genreism of Philosophy

On the first side, the contours of a genre trouble are outlined: philosophical works not only coincide exclusively with written texts in general, but even with a particular kind of written text. It is the paper-format, which must be written not just in English, but in standard English [34–36]. Undoubtedly, the professionalisation of the discipline [37] even requires the certification or accreditation of practitioners as competent through a process led by those already established in that profession in order to distinguish as sharply as possible between professional philosophy and popular philosophy—however, at the risk of creating a too-radical divide [38]. Nevertheless, this desire to separate philosophers from non-philosophers [39] culminates in an urgent demand for ever more rigorous, standardized forms of writing which are too often unaccompanied by the actual teaching and training of what is required in the academy [40]. Ultimately, "writtenness" as a product confined within well pre-fixed binaries [41] eclipses *writing* as a conditioned process [42]: this is even more serious in philosophy, if for no other reason than the supposition of self-reflection as its hallmark.

The result is a "territorial and defensive" posture designed to erase differences and wage effective "literacy wars" against any writing that does not "fit the mould of convention" [43] (pp. 1–3). This is a harm to the individual potential researcher, who has to contend with the mechanism of "value capture" by which pregiven and standardised institutional criteria, such as succeeding in the metrics of citation rates, rankings, etc., undermine the personal motivations for embarking on a professional career, such as pursuing truth, wisdom, and understanding [44]. But it is also a danger to the discipline itself, outlining a true existential and scientific paradox: philosophers are caught between the Scylla of being innovative and original, and the Charybdis of staying within the well-protected fence of a particular prose style that aims at nothing but commenting without entertaining and that uses the illiteracy of the current state of the art of the commentators "as a weapon for threatening those who want to make things a little more interesting" [45] (pp. 142–143).

The problem within the problem is that this weapon does not harm everyone in the same way: it would already have been difficult for Plato to pass the peer review process with one of his texts (see [46] pp., 135–161), but that would have been even more difficult for Hypatia; it would already have been difficult for Kant to be original without inventing a peculiar lexicon and style, but that would have been even more difficult for Simone Weil. It is true: current philosophical practice in the academy seems to be determined by border policemen who are constantly asking for your passport (see [15], p. 39), namely, a standard paper. But this presupposes that they are first and foremost asking for *a paper*: a written text. Certainly, the centrality of papers as the sole accredited form of writing in current philosophical research does not prevent Plato's texts from being extensively republished and studied today. Yet, this only more starkly highlights the incongruity between the effective acknowledgment by scholars of genre plurality in traditional philosophical discourse and the reality that this plurality is not only disregarded in the established procedures for training and selection processes for new philosophers, but actively ostracized.

3.2. Do Not Look at the Camera: The Mono-Medialism of Philosophy

On the second side, the problem is even deeper. Philosophy cannot cultivate "the myth of a universal form of writing and the dream of a universal form of language" [47] (p. 828) without sub-cultivating the myths of "mono-modality" [48] and "mono-literacy" [49]. Even those who stress that there are many ways of writing philosophy, and that the literary form is itself a part of philosophical content (e.g., [50,51]), still claim (more or less explicitly) that doing philosophy means writing down words (for an exception, see [52]). Philosophy, the (supposedly) free land of a dialogical attitude, risks being the paradoxical emblem of a "monological knowledge" [53] (p. 326): "in other words" appears as the fundamental philosophical expression, leaving no room for "in other than words", i.e., *in other ways*.

This is what the discipline of philosophy prescribes—both in an institutional and behavioural sense. "Alphabetic and monolinguistic texts" are taken as "superior to other forms of knowledge communication, such as multimodal and multilingual texts", since "language and therefore writing are a reliable and unique proxy for representing the world"; thus, a strict epistemic hierarchy that de-legitimizes "what counts as knowledge and whose knowledge counts" emerges, encouraging "a deficit-model approach that judges students" diverse repertoires as "deficient" rather than as resourceful" [43] (pp. 17, 26, 35, 37). Recall Williamson's admission: there can be no philosophy *through* movies, comics, and video games, but only philosophy *on* them—only written philosophical discourse about them. Finally, the average philosopher is one who would unhesitatingly agree with a statement like "the camera is not a pencil, and it is rather difficult to think with it in the way an essayist might" [54] (p. 19). But behind the supposed description of a mere normality lies the announcement of a prescriptive normativity: "it is difficult to..." sounds like "you should not even try to", if you really want to play the game of a serious and rigorous philosopher.

This is extremely narrowing and flattening if we—following the multimodal approach to human communication and cognition [55,56]—consider that we humans express concepts not only through vocal sounds and graphic representations; rather, we think verbally, visually and corporeally, relying on three fundamental media: word, image, and body (Table 1)[1].

Table 1. Human communication and thinking according to a multimodal approach.

Way of Thinking	Fundamental Medium
Verbal	Word
Visual	Image
Corporeal	Body

However, when it comes to thinking philosophically, it seems that we can only rely on the word—especially the written one. Indeed, on the one hand, orality has always found and still finds its place in philosophical practice: from the ancient dialogues of Socrates and his fellow citizens to the lessons, lectures, talks, etc. of our academic co-workers. However, on the other, the voice was never removed from the pre-philosophical limbo, also making it hard to appreciate how, for example, a seminar or a roundtable will produce different philosophical insights from an essay or an article. Even if one would consider it exaggerated to blame the history of philosophy for being theoretically affected by a male-centred "devocalization of *Logos*" [64], it is a matter of fact that, for example, podcasts are not among the possible philosophical academic outputs, even if their popular use is significantly growing—single swallows such as the all-podcast issue of the journal *Performance Philosophy* [65] do not make a summer. Ultimately, the voice is always the handmaiden of text, also in the sense that philosophers "read even when they are supposed to talk" at conferences and are so accustomed to "burying their heads in voluminous manuscripts they mumble sentences and phrases no one in his right mind would ever think of using in a conversation" [45] (p. 140). So, if *only* written words can facilitate reasoning and enable abstract and theoretical thinking (e.g., [66]), and if philosophy is inextricably bound to such a way of thinking, then philosophical cognition is ultimately restricted: there is no true alternative to writing. In this way, the production and dissemination of genuine philosophical knowledge risks being governed by a "medial TINA" ("There Is No Alternative"). Next section discusses this claim more closely.

4. You Shall Have No Other Media Before Me: Philosophizing On/Through Non-Verbal Media

4.1. Organic Reasons: Philosophy and Corporeal Thinking

At first glance, there seem to be at least three ways in which the body can act as a philosophical medium: (1) politically; (2) ethically; and (3) aesthetically (Table 2).

Table 2. Hypothetical forms of philosophical corporeal thinking.

Way of Thinking	Fundamental Medium	Possible Philosophical Use
Visual	Image	Political
		Ethical
		Aesthetical

(1) Already since Plato (*Seventh Letter*, 341c-d), we find the idea for which the knowledge that really counts "does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies", neither in writing nor in speech; rather, "it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden, as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself." From Plato's "philosopher-king" to Marx's "philosopher-revolutionary", the body emerges as a philosophical medium when it comes to political action: philosophy is not a matter of study and interpretation, but of social engagement and transformation. In other words, philosophy is something Socratic that takes place "in the field" outside the university buildings [67], which can sometimes even mean that—as in the case of Cynicism—the very philosopher's body, especially in its lower, grosser features, becomes the means to taunt and delegitimize the dominant ideology (see [68], pp. 101–133).

(2) But if you cannot change the world, you can still change *your* world, that is, work on yourself—on and through your own body. This is the ethical use of the body as a philosophical medium: just think of "philosophy as a way of life", which—from the Hellenistic schools to the Kantian idea of philosophy as a doctrine of wisdom and not as a scholastic knowledge—is based precisely on "the difference between the *discourse about* philosophy and the *practice of* philosophy itself" [69] (p. 191), meant as a practice in the first person, as the personal embodiment of a philosophical behaviour. This is also where, for example, the movement of contemporary philosophical practices can also find its roots—from the more institutional professional counsellors to the more extra-institutional spiritual guides.

(3) Another case is that of "somaesthetics", which holds that the body is not only a crucial object of study, but an essential dimension of experiential learning, i.e., the fundamental instrument for any human performance, from perception to thought—in order to take life as an experimental work of art [70,71]. This is not just about (re)thinking the body and creating a new discourse "on" it, but about thinking *through* the body: by enacting and exploring sensorially. In such an aesthetic use of the body as a philosophical

medium, philosophy can tend towards artistic and aesthetic performance, so that the flattering notion of a "philosophy of x" is substituted by an awareness that all/some of these "x" can rather manifest what philosophy might become [72]. On this basis, fashion shows, for example, can also be seen as a manifestation of philosophy: fabrics can be a philosophical medium in all respects [73].

Nevertheless, exceptions do not make the rule. Philosophical reason is traditionally separated from the (supposed) reason of the body. All the philosophies "on" the body that redeem it from its secular conceptual oblivion are not yet philosophies "through" it: to say that the body is a great reason, and even that there is more reason in it than in your best wisdom, is not to think through such a greatness. Remember Williamson's sentence again: you can say that dancing can express philosophical ideas, but you are actually *saying* it, i.e., you are discussing it through (written) words and that is where true (male able adult. . .) philosophers enter the room. Under these conditions, a figure like P.B. Preciado is considered a philosopher for what he writes "on" the body, not for what he does "with" his own body (nor for what he films "on" it). No one can imagine pursuing an academic career by acting, living, or performing philosophically: there is no impact factor measure for such approaches—no place for the Diogenes of Sinope of today.

For a serious, respectable academic philosopher—hidden curriculum rules—it is wiser to refrain from any compromising behaviour that implies political engagement, ethical commitment, and aesthetic exploration, in order to avoid any rumour and stigmatization: it is far better to study such attitudes the old-school way—by writing words about them. Undoubtedly, from the perspective of ordinary, professional activity, doing philosophy also means organizing seminars, teaching, discussing with colleagues, having research meetings, participating in conferences, carrying out public engagement projects, etc., but all these and similar (bodily) activities remain ultimately ancillary to writing: philosophical research has not effectively achieved scholarly, scientific results until they have been published in written form—that is, as a paper or a paper-like style monograph.

4.2. New Libraries: Philosophy and Visual Thinking

Visual thinking and images meet the same fate, considering that "beginning with Plato", who inaugurated philosophical skepticism about images and their cognitive affordances, "a long history of suspicion attends to the role of the visual in western thought", so that even today we can experience "the longstanding distrust of visual methods as primary modes of epistemological work" [74] (pp. 10–11). For this reason, the common belief is that bringing the image into the philosophical discourse would mean introducing philosophy within the artistic realm. Once again, we do indeed have many philosophies "on" images, but—recall Williamson's words once more—they always take the shape of a *written discourse on* this or that topic: "mainstream philosophy" works "in a disciplinary way", that is, "using only the medium of text" [58] (p. 232). In this sense, "the Gutenberg galaxy of reading and writing print texts that are published intermittently in codex book and journal form" [75] functions as the true Plato's cave of philosophers, even in relation to the usual places of their writing activity, which coincide with offices, cafes, airport halls, etc., not, for example, with graphic studios or ateliers.

This becomes seriously limiting when images take on the role of everyday communicative, expressive, and conceptual tools: while we humans—from the alphabet to movable type printing—have been living in the age of mechanical reproduction of the written word for almost our entire cultural history, in recent centuries, we have also begun to live not only—from the gramophone to the telephone—in the age of mechanical reproduction of the spoken word, but above all—from photography to the video game—in the age of mechanical reproduction of the image. The spectrum of our methods, practices, and tools for inscribing, recording, crystallizing, storing, transmitting, etc. knowledge has gradually been expanded: if—for example—books are a way of objectifying and transmitting discourses and vinyl is a way of objectifying and transmitting songs, movies and video games are ways of objectifying and transmitting, respectively, processes and actions. This means that the concrete meaning of "writing down" bits of our experiences and ideas, thus also of what a "library" is, is changing.

In addition, when all these media become digital, it is not only possible to integrate different kinds of representations and information in a multi-modal/medial way, but also to do this work of collecting, creating, and disseminating information in real time. This phenomenon, originally referred to as "secondary orality" [30] (p. 133), might be better rephrased today as "secondary co-presence": we experience the technologically mediated possibility of immediate co-participation in a shared sensorimotor context—at least to some degree. Nevertheless, philosophy seems incapable of doing anything with all this: no figurative pictorial visual representations, be they static (photography-like) or dynamic (movie-like); no schematic spatial visual representations (map-like); no kinaesthetic sensorimotor visual representations (video game-like) (Table 3).

Table 3. The spectrum of possible visual representations.

Way of Thinking	**Fundamental Medium**	**Possible Representations**	
Visual	Image	Pictorial	Static
			Dynamic
		Spatial	
		Sensorimotor	

Actually, with the rise of new popular media, some researchers have begun to acknowledge a philosophical use of these images: this happens in at least three directions. First, we have those who *write* that at least some films (e.g., [76,77]), video games (e.g., [78,79]), and comics (e.g., [80,81]) can contribute to philosophical enquiry by other means, for example, by developing medial metareflection, illustrating prior philosophical knowledge, inspiring "big questions", posing enlivened thought experiments, etc. Secondly, we have those who *write* that philosophers should not limit themselves to write that, but need to challenge in first person the current text-centred academic practice by exploring other visual ways of doing philosophy, i.e., through videos [82] as well as comics [83] and video games [84–86]. Thirdly, we have those who actually engage in alternative ways of philosophizing in an academic sense: this happens by designing research outputs in the form of video games [87][2] and comics [88], but also by resorting to computational or data-driven methods and resources to renew the traditional, textual work of philosophers by making them enter the world of data viz, which changes the very writing/reading interfaces and reserves a prominent role to diagrammatic, conceptual images of many kinds, making new aspects of philosophical knowledge explorable (e.g., [89–95]).

Nevertheless, these are—once again—exceptions that do not make the rule, however original and meritorious they may be. Indeed, the standard account of images takes them as incapable of presenting effective conceptual content, because they cannot, for example, support the basic logical operations of quantification and negation in the way that enunciations can ([96]). Definitely, thinking "on" images is something completely differently from thinking "through" images: average philosophers may endorse the classical Aristotelian view by claiming that thoughts require images, yet their actions suggest that the concrete exercise of their own thinking does not. They may even support experimental approaches such as "art-based research" (e.g., [97]) and similar methods, but they continue to regard these as merely artistic pursuits, separate from philosophical inquiry. Both theoretically and in concrete expression, the prevailing view among philosophers holds that the concept is characterised by abstraction and generality, remaining far removed from any engagement with the aesthetic realm of the sensible.

But why should such a ban be a problem? By neglecting how the changing "mediascape" [98] can also affect the production and communication of philosophical knowledge, one paves the way for a "medial poverty" that can have unfortunate consequences for the development of the discipline itself. The "paradox of professionalism" shows no mercy: "*fundamental* improvements are possible only if one is prepared to proceed in a thoroughly unprofessional way" ([45], p. 140). But the most important factor now is *for whom* this can be a problem—let us face it: if visual (as well as corporeal) thinking is marginalized, then visual (as well as corporeal) thinkers face discrimination. The underestimation and disregard of some media may not still be that bad yet, but the harm and disrespect of some people is: the true face of medial epistemic injustice is thus revealed. The thinking affordances of representations and media cannot be separated from the concrete people who want to think and be free to think in all these ways and who see their modality fully recognized and promoted—even within philosophy.

5. From Media to People: The Unwanted Consequences of Gatekeeping

The simple fact that standard philosophers limit their activity to word-writing and generally to verbal thinking contributes to effective gatekeeping towards other kinds of representational practices and already makes them complicit in the perpetration of acts of epistemic injustice, since such behavior fosters the exclusion of some people from the construction of philosophical knowledge and from participation in the philosophical game. As has been aptly noted, recognizing that "there are forms of understanding and knowledge that are not propositional" and that "focusing on propositional knowledge as though it is the only form of knowing worth considering is itself a form of epistemic injustice" is at the heart of any project committed to epistemic justice; unfortunately, I have insisted, this is precisely what the "impoverished standard philosophical views of knowing" do, by reducing "the philosophically relevant "ingredients" to propositionally evaluable knowledge", i.e., by promoting a "tunnel-vision focus on propositional knowledge" [99] (pp. 79–80).

I then focus on two possible examples of how this tunnel vision can particularly harm some groups of people: one concerns corporeal thinking and the other visual thinking. The perspectives of these people invite us to also consider the existence, respectively, of signed propositions and visual propositions, in philosophical discourse as well: they are the cases of deaf people (Section 5.1) and visual autistic people (Section 5.2).

5.1. Signed Concepts: The Case of Deaf People

By refusing to define knowledge in corporeal terms, philosophy accepts and entrenches the paradigm of the neurotypical individual: the question of what different "unable" bodies can do is simply sidestepped by, assuming that they are simply "deficient" and therefore incapable of thinking [100,101]. This is quite evident in the case of deaf and hard-of-hearing people, whose sign language is true sign *thinking* [102]. This raises the question: is there a need for "a nonverbal approach to thinking" able to unveil several discriminatory tenets which have prevailed "in one form of another throughout the history of Western thought and education" and revolve around the contingent assumption that the ability to use language is "the gauge of human intelligence" and that language, being "essential for thinking", is "the key to all that is abstract and conceptually mature in man"? The "a priori identification" of "concept" with "verbal concept" surreptitiously implies that "conceptual or abstract thinking *is* thinking expressed in verbal terms" [103] (pp. 228, 3, 8, 19, 144, 212).

The enduring misconception that "symbols had to be speech" has been "a source of fundamental confusion since Aristotle's pronouncements on the matter" and has also become a pronouncement on how philosophy could be expressed: this made it impossible to accept that "Sign is the equal of speech, lending itself equally to the rigorous and the poetic—to philosophical analysis or to making love", and even "with an ease that is sometimes greater than that of speech" [104] (pp. 15, 20). Indeed, sign language is able to combine ideality and materiality, or form and content: "while the deep structure of Sign allows the most abstract concepts and propositions to be expressed, its iconic or mimetic aspect allows it to be extraordinarily concrete and evocative", and not just in a metaphorical way, such as happens with verbal poetry, which "can elicit moods and images, but cannot portray them". Sign language thus preserves and emphasizes the two sides of the abstract and the iconic equally and complementarily: it is able to “ascend to the most abstract propositions, to the most generalized reflection of reality” and at the same time to “evoke a concreteness, a vividness, a realness, an aliveness, that spoken languages, if they ever had, have long since abandoned” [104] (pp. 121–122). Neglecting this core visual and kinaesthetic awareness of sign language perpetuates the oppression of deaf people [105].

If we take these features of sign languages seriously, we can recognize that if we have not traditionally philosophized in a signed language, that is, if we have not developed a signed philosophical lexicon, it is because we have had very few deaf philosophers using it and very few interpreters with a solid background in philosophy, and not because such a medium is incapable of conveying abstract concepts and conducting theoretical discussions due to its iconicity: the assumption that philosophy cannot be represented “in transitory visual space” is a “subtle slur on the capabilities of deaf people” [106] (see also [107,108]). After all, while in the pre-visual/pre-digital era it was difficult to imagine a public library of signed philosophy, things are very different today: “secondary co-presence” (see Section 4.2) involves precisely the possibility of designing and sharing a kind of “PhiSL” much more easily. The decoupling between “communication” and “verbal communication” is now a technological and media matter of fact, not just a purely theoretical statement made to give deaf people back their symbolic dignity.

In this case, recognizing that there are forms of understanding and knowledge that are not propositional is tantamount to saying that there are propositional forms of understanding and knowledge that are not verbal—contrasting the tendency to use the structure of spoken languages as the unique appropriate template for all possible languages: signed propositions *are* a kind of proposition; deaf people can be philosophers exactly *as* deaf people, not in spite of deafness. To doubt that philosophy can be interpreted and discussed in a signed language is tantamount to believing that philosophy can only be understood and practised—for example—in English (or Greek, for most traditionalists). Can we really imagine talking to native Italian speakers and asking them if it is possible to do real philosophy in their language? That would be—to put it mildly—quite an insult.

5.2. Graphic Concepts: The Case of the Visual Autistic People

One of the pioneers of research on visual thinking emphasized that “every visual pattern can be considered a proposition” [109] (p. 296), pointing to the “unwholesome split which cripples the training of reasoning power” resulting from the “prejudicial discrimination between perception and thinking” that affects “our entire educational system”, which is unilaterally based on abstraction from any sensorial experience: the consequence is that perception-based thinking, especially visual thinking, is regarded as intellectually inferior and is at best for entertainment and recreation, since humans would properly think only in words [109] (pp. 2–3). Under these premises, for example, a stigma is placed on today’s “generations of visual learners” who pose the exigence of a “philographic” approach able to explain philosophical theories in the language of graphic design [110]. But another, more pressing, example is that of those people on the autism spectrum who think predominantly or almost exclusively visually: their thinking has been misrepresented, if not completely silenced, due to the dominance of the text bias.

This is not a third-personal assertion about autism, which too often leads to neuronormative assumptions and stereotypes which affect autistic people’s epistemic agency [111,112], but a first-personal testimony, which tells us something we cannot ignore:

> when it comes to communication, language is the water we drink, the air we breathe. We assume that the dominance of language forms not only the foundation of how we communicate, but also the foundation of how we think [. . .]. The first step toward understanding that people think in different ways is understanding that different ways of thinking *exist*. [. . .] I am a visual thinker. [. . .] The world didn’t come to me through syntax and grammar. It came through images. [. . .] The world comes to me in a series of associated visual images, like

> scrolling through Google Images or watching the short videos on Instagram or TikTok [113] (pp. 1–2).
>
> My mind works similar to an Internet search engine, set to locate photos. All my thoughts are in photo-realistic pictures, which flash up on the "computer monitor" in my imagination. [. . .]. When I design livestock facilities, I can test run the equipment in my imagination similar to a virtual reality computer program. [. . .] My concept is sensory based, not word based. [. . .] When I read, I convert text to images as if watching a movie. [. . .] In my case, abstract thought based on language has been replaced with high-speed handling of hundreds of "graphics" files [114] (pp. 1437–1438, 1441).

Once again, it seems as trivial as it is epiphanic, when one considers current academic philosophical practices: if visual thinking does not exist as a philosophical option, then the visual autistic thinker does not exist as a potential philosopher. Even assuming that the visual analogies of the mind used by Grandin are more than mere figures of speech, the effective expression of philosophical ideas through a movie remains nothing more than a joke—not to mention TikTok videos. Grandin's repeated insistence on her own use of cameras, photographs, movies, drawings, models, and the like as thinking tools should not be taken too seriously in philosophical terms. Further, Grandin herself has been writing books for decades (with the important support of her editors), demonstrating that written words are best suited to express abstract ideas and general concepts. Actually, I have received similar comments in informal discussions of this topic in the past: Do they get to the point? To be fair, Grandin herself explains that, given that "words are like a second language", autistics "have problems learning things that cannot be thought about in pictures", such as the most abstract concepts, so that "when I am unable to convert text to pictures, it is usually because the text has no concrete meaning", as is the case—unsurprisingly—with "some philosophy books", which are thus "simply incomprehensible" [115] (pp. 18–30).

Now, even assuming that one autistic swallow makes an autistic summer (which is already a pretty generous concession), is that enough to prove that people on the autism spectrum who think predominantly or almost exclusively visually cannot philosophize in the strict sense of the term? If higher abstract thinking and visual thinking are mutually exclusive, there is a danger that some people will be seen as "lower thinkers" and perhaps even "less human", if not—most tragically—"inhuman". Almost no one would advocate a similar position (or so I suspect and hope), but the question is whether our current academic practices are really such as to avoid a similar factual outcome. Then, it would be again useful to turn the perspective around and ask whether a difficulty like Grandin's does not instead manifest a limit of the fully disembodied way of thinking and arguing that characterizes current standard philosophy. In other words, if we have not developed something like a visual philosophical lexicon, suitable for visual autistic people in this case, it could be because we have not yet worked on it, rejecting—just to give one example—the possibility of considering graphic essays in the form of comics as a worthy and evaluable output of philosophical research[3].

Once again, while it was admittedly difficult to build such a shared library in the pre-screen age, persevering in error seems diabolical today. Undoubtedly, the exclusive relationship between philosophy and the alphabet is longstanding, and this cannot simply be ignored or naively underestimated, but "longstanding" does not mean "eternal"—at least if we are willing to accept the premises and consequences of the medial turn (see Section 2) and really want epistemic injustice to be not just another new topic for a "philosophy of X", but rather an opportunity to restructure our same ways of doing philosophy (as [116] stresses for feminism). Perhaps the times are now fertile for considering that what applies to knowledge in general applies also to philosophy: as the perspective of "cripistemology" defends (e.g., [117–119]), cognitive differences can be epistemic resources for developing transformative knowledge—and even for transforming knowledge itself. Recognizing all this would be a corrective to the differential access to epistemic resources that turns neurodiversity as a natural fact into neurodivergence as a social fact, creating an effective cognitive injustice [120], the existence and perpetuation of which—as I have tried to show—philosophical practice is also guilty.

6. Conclusions: Towards the End of Aphantasic Philosophy?

This contribution started from the idea that philosophy, the supposed field in which an unexamined life is not worth living, is not immune from exhibiting unintended effects of epistemic injustice. Indeed, the philosophical practices of knowledge attribution, acquisition, and justification can also systematically disadvantage some particular kind of knowers, in different ways: by excluding them from inquiry; denying them epistemic authority; denigrating their modes of knowledge; elaborating theories that depict them as inferior and deviant, or make power relations invisible; strengthening bias and hierarchies [121–124]. In this way, the supposedly liberating concept and practice of philosophy reveals its constricting and oppressive face [125], sometimes causing frustration even among its successful participants [126]. I have argued that a similar diagnosis of structural misbehaviour should also be extended to how the institutionally sanctioned way of doing philosophy fails to provide for and incorporate the use of various media, especially media other than the written word, thus creating a peculiar kind of discrimination against people who are not primarily or exclusively verbal thinkers. I have thus claimed that institutional philosophical practices also manifest a particular kind of medial epistemic injustice and that this should be explicitly addressed and discussed, assuming that this can lead to a double gain: on the side of the analysis of epistemic injustice, we will be able to individuate a new particular kind of exclusionary attitude and practice that has not yet received a special attention; on the side of media philosophy, we will discover a new socio-ethical dimension as a complement to the cognitive and techno-material dimensions usually at its core.

With this aim, Section 2 has discussed how, although philosophers tend not to reach an at least minimal consensus on the main disciplinary controversies, they all seem to agree on the medial admission requirement in which, in order to enter the philosophical room, one has to write texts. Section 3 has highlighted that such genuine medial discrimination is twofold: on the one hand, it manifests itself in the form of a mono-genreism that only admits one particular kind of written text as philosophical; on the other hand, it sets a form of mono-medialism that excludes all media other than writing from philosophical practice. Then, Section 4 has shown how there are more things in the heaven and heart of the mediascape than are dreamt of in our current institutional philosophy, by stressing that academic philosophy menu offers a lot of philosophies "on" body/image, but that it is still far away from contemplating philosophies made "through" them as true research outputs. Finally, Section 5 has illustrated how the restriction of normal philosophical activity to verbal thinking contributes to effective gatekeeping towards some people and their representational practices, looking especially at the cases of deaf people who think corporeally and those autistic people who think visually.

In this way, this text aims to contribute to the debate on the possible outlines of a "post-literacy philosophy", conceived as the attempt "to come to conceptual terms with the fact that the dominance of the printed book as the medium of communication has become challenged by the rise of the new, electric and electronic media" [127] (p. 185). With that, I am not promoting the usurpation of philosophical papers and books, the end of alphabetic writing in philosophy, or anything of the sort, for three main reasons. *First*, it is better to think in terms of integration and cooperation rather than substitution—that is, in a medially inclusive rather than exclusive way. Moving from one exclusive, obsessive partner to a new one would not change the structure of a closed monogamous relationship: paper-centrism and, for example, visuo-centrism are both forms of -centrism. *Second*, it remains an open question whether, for example, images can serve as a mere source of knowledge, an effective expressive medium, or even a genuine cognitive medium for philosophy. Using images to extract knowledge that remains discursive is one thing; using them to present knowledge that is itself discursive is another; and using them to produce an independent philosophical discourse is yet another. While the first two paths can be more readily pursued, the third remains largely unexplored and untested. *Third*, and now most importantly, my aim here is to emphasize that we need to redefine our very discriminatory preunderstanding of philosophy in light of the medial turn.

This redefinition can allow us to reflect on cases such as Wittgenstein's, whose attempt to challenge "the literary bias of Western philosophy at a time when in everyday experience the sources of that bias were drying up" is seen as an essential aspect of his efforts to philosophically cope with his "neuro-atypical" condition ([127], p. 185; see also [128], p. 353, who speaks of dyslexia; [129], who speaks instead of autism). In this perspective, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" can be reformulated into "whereof one cannot write, thereof one can visualize", or even "whereof one cannot think neurotypically, there of one can think neuroatypically". Whether such a specific is diagnosis correct or not, what matters is the broadening of our perspective that is at stake: if we approach the question of being inclusive towards different cognitive and learning styles and ways of thinking also medially, we can come to appreciate the importance of the concrete resources used in epistemic labour; if we think about new media also in the light of the discourse on epistemic injustice, we can remind ourselves that cognitive technologies are always constitutively social as well. And this also applies to philosophy: its technological media and its socio-ethical conditions can and should be treated together. Philosophizing is one human activity among the others—that is, it is about certain human beings who use certain things to perform certain actions.

So, let me conclude with a provocation. Philosophy regards pure verbal reasoning as its own norm, and likely even as the standard for higher cognition in general; but what if this "angelic", abstract way of thinking, focused exclusively on general pieces of information and structures, is itself atypical? Considering the spectrum of aphantasia–hypophantasia–phantasia–hyperphantasia, established in terms of one's ability to visualize within the mind, the view that thoughts require images reflects the (hyper)phantasic position, while the view that verbal descriptions can replace images aligns with the hypophantasic or aphantasic position [130]. Thus, if we speak of "conceptual character" rather than psychological (or even pathological) profiles, hyperphantasia appears as the opposite extreme of the philosophical mind from a media perspective, with aphantasia as its "natural place": the philosophical mind is without images, processing abstract notions and detached facts (*words*). Even if one concedes that restricting philosophical possibilities to one extreme of the mind spectrum was unproblematic in the Gutenberg era of alphabetic, bookish knowledge, this becomes questionable in our visual, multimodal and multimedia age: now, it is "aphantasic philosophy" that appears deficient. Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in one way, aphantasically; the point however is to embrace greater imaginative freedom, especially if we aim to combat the epistemic injustices fostered and perpetuated by our ordinary practises.

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Notes

[1] One important annotation: focusing on representations and media, the table does not contemplate the possibility of "objectual" thinking: we never have—let us say—a speed bump in mind; we have its representation—be it verbal or visual. In addition, this objectual option—which probably could find place as a subspecies of corporeal thinking comprehending natural bodies and technical bodies—is even further away from what is accepted in ordinary philosophical practices. Nevertheless, the idea of things as a philosophical medium is starting to gain attention: I refer not only to the general approach of *ethics by technological design*, but

also—for example—to the ideas of "carpentry philosophy" [57] (pp. 85–111), of "craft-oriented philosophy" [58], (pp. 230–268), of "coding philosophy" [59], and of "design philosophy" [60–63].

[2] For a wider collection of video games created as outputs of philosophical research, see the web-archive of philosopher and game designer S. Gualeni at https://www.gua-le-ni.com/games (accessed on 29 October 2024).

[3] *Confession*: the example is not accidental, since I am currently leading a team developing a philosophical comic, entitled *How to Do Concepts with Images: A Graphic Essay*. This also gives me the opportunity to respond to a pertinent question raised by the first reviewer, whom I would like to thank for the thoughtful, perceptive, constructive, and helpful comments. As the reviewer rightly notes, it is undoubtedly paradoxical that a text so critical of the written nature of philosophy, and especially of paper writing, is not only written but also relies almost exclusively on traditionally textual sources. I address this criticism in three ways, in ascending order of importance. *First*, as also the reviewer partially notes, to critique the current textual paradigm, one must still follow its rules, including adhering to standards that make certain types of sources more credible than others. In this regard, one might note that the standards of most philosophical journals do not provide guidelines on how to cite a film, a video, or a video game (for instance, which is their equivalent of page numbers?). *Second*, this is an intentional paradox, meant to engage with these issues by emphasizing the limits of current academic philosophical writing to the point of encouraging the reader to feel the need for openness to other media forms, even if only regarding the sources discussed and presented. *Third*, the risk of incorporating extra-textual sources into a structurally and inevitably textual discourse is that one may end up merely performing a classic ekphrastic operation or a *reductio ad litteram*, or otherwise assigning merely illustrative or exemplifying functions to other media. Ultimately, is the goal to make media such as a video game, a video, or a comic quotable within philosophical discourse, or indeed to create a genuinely philosophical video game, video, or comic? Certainly, the two options are not mutually exclusive, but—at least from my perspective—working in the first direction risks becoming an excuse not to pursue the second. Naturally, this remains an open topic for further discussion.

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