Toward A Second-Order Media Literacy: Conceptual Untranslatables and the Historical Semantics of the Digital

Alexander Markov [a, *], Oksana Shtayn [b]

[a] Russian State University for the Humanities, Moscow, Russian Federation
[b] Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation

Abstract

The contemporary crisis of media literacy education is not merely pedagogical but conceptual. As digital environments dissolve traditional boundaries between human and machine, original and copy, private and public, the foundational lexicon of media studies – terms like "agency," "body," "truth," "participation" – enters a state of radical instability. This article proposes a paradigm shift from a first-order literacy, focused on skills for navigating a given media landscape, to a second-order literacy, focused on the historical and philosophical contestation of the very concepts that constitute that landscape. Drawing upon Barbara Cassin's notion of the "untranslatable" as a productive philosophical difference, Quentin Skinner's speech-act theory of conceptual use, and Reinhart Koselleck's history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*), we construct a framework for analyzing what we term "media untranslatables": key notions whose semantic fissures reveal the ideological and ontological tensions of digital culture. Through an extended examination of three such pivotal untranslatables – the Mask, the Doll/Avatar, and the Transhumanist Project – we demonstrate how they operate as sites where meanings of self, embodiment, and futurity are negotiated. The article culminates in a detailed exposition of the principles and practices of second-order media literacy, arguing that its ultimate aim is to cultivate not merely critical users but reflexive conceptual cartographers.

Keywords: media literacy, untranslatables, conceptual history, media philosophy, digital culture, pedagogy, posthumanism, agency, embodiment.

1. Introduction

The project of media literacy (Buckingham, 2007), in its dominant global iterations, finds itself at an impasse. Born of a twentieth-century concern with powerful, centralized media institutions and the persuasive power of images and texts, its classic toolkit–derived from semiotics, ideology critique, and theories of representation – was designed to empower citizens to decode, resist, and produce alternative messages (Masterman, 1985; Kellner, Share, 2007). This first-order paradigm, which we might call operational-critical literacy, remains vital. Yet, it operates within a tacitly assumed conceptual universe where "author," "reality," "audience," and "influence" retain a stable, if complex, semantic core. The digital *Sattelzeit* – to borrow Reinhart Koselleck's term for a period of accelerated conceptual transformation – has unsettled these very foundations (Koselleck, 2004). We no longer inhabit a media ecology of primarily representational texts but an ontological infrastructure (Bratton, 2016; Gálik, 2019) that generates new modes of being: algorithmic selves, synthetic intimacies, and hybrid agencies. In this environment, the core

* Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: markovius@gmail.com (A.V. Markov), shtaynshtayn@gmail.com (O.A. Shtayn)

vocabulary of media education undergoes a profound crisis of translation. What does it mean to teach "privacy" when the self is constitutively porous, a data-point in a predictive model (Zuboff, 2019)? How do we approach "authorship" when creative acts are collaborations with generative neural networks, remixing endless training data (Manovich, 2020)?

The crisis is not that we lack words, but that our words have become what philosopher Barbara Cassin calls "untranslatables": not terms that cannot be translated, but those that should not be translated too quickly, for they mark sites of crucial philosophical and historical difference (Cassin, 2014). An untranslatable is a conceptual knot, a point where language reveals its limits and its world-making power simultaneously. To continue teaching media literacy as if its key terms were transparent is to risk a form of conceptual anachronism, applying the semantics of the broadcasting era to the reality of the platform-driven, post-digital condition (Berry, Dieter, 2015). This article argues that the way forward lies not in refining first-order skills but in inaugurating a project of second-order media literacy. Its primary object shifts from media content to the conceptual preconditions of understanding that content. It is a literacy about the language of literacy itself – a meta-critical, historically informed engagement with the shifting semantics of our digital lifeworld. To theorize this shift, we weave together three distinct but complementary threads: Cassin's philological-philosophical project of mapping untranslatables, Quentin Skinner's (Skinner, 2002) contextualist method of understanding concepts as speech-acts within historical debates, and Koselleck's (Koselleck, 2004) grand narrative of concepts as seismographs of socio-political change. This synthesis allows us to treat media phenomena not just as texts or technologies but as conceptual events.

2. Materials and methods

To equip media literacy for the challenges of the digital *Sattelzeit*, we must first recalibrate its theoretical instruments. The traditional toolkit of ideological analysis, political economy, and audience studies, while indispensable, requires supplementation by a methodology attuned to the historicity and performativity of the very concepts we use to think with. Our framework is built on a triadic synthesis. Barbara Cassin's monumental *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin, 2014) provides the first pillar. The project is not a lament about the failure of translation but a celebration of its necessity and difficulty. An untranslatable, for Cassin, is a "privileged signifier" that indexes a difference in ways of world-making. To trace the journeys of *logos, pravda, Weltanschauung*, or *intellectus* is not to find synonyms but to map philosophical archipelagos. Translating such a term is always an interpretative, often violent, act of forcing one conceptual universe into the grammar of another. In the context of media, terms like "interactivity," "community," "memory," or "public" function similarly. Is "interactivity" the technical capacity of a system (Engelbart, 1962), the phenomenological experience of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), or the neoliberal co-option of user labor (Terranova, 2000)? These are not different aspects of the same thing but competing conceptualizations that emerge from different historical and ideological matrices. A second-order literacy begins by suspending the desire for a single definition and instead learning to cartograph these semantic fields.

Quentin Skinner's contextualist methodology, developed within the Cambridge School of intellectual history, provides the second, pragmatic pillar (Skinner, 2002). Skinner insists that to understand a concept, we must recover the historical "language game" in which it was deployed. The meaning of a term is bound up with what an author was doing in using it – justifying, legitimizing, criticizing, excluding. This speech-act approach is acutely relevant to digital culture. When a social media platform declares its mission is to "bring the world closer together," it is not making a descriptive statement but performing a legitimizing act, seeking to align its corporate practice with a cherished social value (Couldry, Mejias, 2019). When an influencer speaks of their "authentic voice," they are engaging in a justificatory rhetoric, countering the potential charge of commercial calculation. Second-order literacy, informed by Skinner, trains the eye to see concepts as moves in a game, imbued with intention and seeking specific perlocutionary effects. It asks not only "what does 'algorithmic fairness' mean?" but "what work is this concept doing in this white paper, this regulatory debate, this activist manifesto?" Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts) provides the third, temporal pillar (Koselleck, 2004).

Koselleck argued that during periods of intense social and political transformation, basic concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) become "contested," "ambiguous," and "future-oriented." They become sites where collective experience condenses and future expectations are articulated. Concepts like

"revolution," "crisis," or "progress" are not just descriptors but engines of historical change. Our digital era is ripe with such Koselleckian concepts: "the cloud," "the network," "the virtual," "big data." They are palimpsests, carrying older meanings (the network as a metaphor of connection) while being loaded with new, often utopian or dystopian, expectations of total knowledge or control (Gitelman, 2013).

The transhumanist concept of the "posthuman" is perhaps the ultimate Koselleckian concept of our time – a condensation of technoscientific progress into an expectation of a fundamental rupture, redefining "human" as a temporary, upgradeable condition (Hayles, 1999; Ferrando, 2013). Together, this synthesis forms a powerful lens. Cassin gives us the spatial dimension of conceptual difference across languages and traditions; Skinner gives us the pragmatic dimension of conceptual use in argumentative contexts; Koselleck gives us the temporal dimension of conceptual change under historical pressure. Applying this lens to media phenomena means treating them not as stable objects of analysis but as dynamic sites where conceptual battles are fought, where the semantics of self, society, and reality are perpetually rewritten. This is the preparatory work for a literacy of the second order.

3. Discussion

With this theoretical apparatus in place, we can now turn to the concrete. The following explorations (see Table 1) are not mere applications but extended demonstrations of how thinking with untranslatables reframes our understanding of key digital phenomena, engaging with contemporary empirical research in media literacy and digital culture to ground our conceptual arguments.

The Mask: From Persona to Platformed Profile. The mask is one of humanity's oldest media technologies, yet its digital reincarnation reveals its enduring untranslatability (Markov, Shtayn, 2024). In Cassinian terms, its semantic field is vast and conflicted: the Roman *persona* (the theatrical mask that gave us "person" and legal personality), the Greek *prosopon* (face, role, but also person in a relational sense), the Russian *lichina* (a false face implying deception), and the contemporary profile, handle, or avatar. Each term implies a different ontology of the self. The *persona* is a legal and social fiction necessary for interaction; the *prosopon* is a face turned toward another in dialogue (Taylor, 1989); the *lichina* presupposes a hidden, truer self beneath; the profile is a datafied identity, a composite of metrics, preferences, and behavioral traces (Cheney-Lippold, 2011).

The digital mask, therefore, is not simply a tool for concealment. Following Skinner, we must ask what we are doing when we craft a profile. We are performing a complex speech-act: we are claiming a space of agency ("this is my account"), we are signaling belonging to a community, we are engaging in a curatorial practice of the self (Boyd, 2014), and we are providing raw material for algorithmic classification. The Koselleckian tension here is between the modern concept of the autonomous, inward-looking self (the "authentic" individual behind the mask) and the emerging concept of the distributed, networked, performative self (the profile as a constitutive interface).

The mask is untranslatable because it forever oscillates between being something we have (a tool) and something we are (a condition of subjectivity in a mediated world). This oscillation is the source of both creative possibility and profound anxiety about authenticity and accountability in digital life. Contemporary research into social media literacy and body image acutely captures this tension, where the "profile" becomes a site for the meticulous curation and subsequent internal evaluation of the self against often idealized standards (Fatt, Fardouly, 2023; Paxton et al., 2022).

Studies show that the frequency and nature of digital social evaluation – likes, comments, follows – are directly correlated with body image concerns, highlighting how the platformed mask becomes a conduit for external validation (Fatt, Fardouly, 2023). Furthermore, the concept of social media literacy (SoMeLit) as defined by (Cho et al., 2024), which centers on the user's self in dynamic causation with their chosen messages and networks, resonates deeply with the Skinnerian analysis of the profile as a performative speech-act. The user is not just decoding messages but actively, though not always consciously, constructing a "self" within the boundaries set by platform architectures (Cho et al., 2024).

The Doll/Avatar: The Enigma of Quasi-Agency. If the mask operates on identity, the doll or avatar operates on embodiment (Markov, Shtayn, 2025). This untranslatable sits at the crossroads of tool, toy, artwork, and agent. Its Cassinian map would include the *pupa* (Latin: doll, girl, suggesting an object of care or a diminished person), the *marionnette* (with its rich history linking to divine puppeteers and critiques of illusion, from Plato to Kleist), the Japanese *kyara*

("character," essential to the affective economies of anime, gaming, and VTuber culture), and the Sanskrit *avatar*, a descent of the divine into worldly form.

The digital avatar inherits all these conflicting legacies. It is a tool for navigation and action in virtual spaces (Murray, 1997), a commercial property with licensed attributes, a canvas for self-expression, and, in phenomena like VTubing, a sustained fictional persona behind which a human performer labors (Lamarre, 2009). A Skinnerian analysis reveals the complexity of statements like "My avatar was killed" or "I am my avatar."

These are not simple reports but claims that distribute agency in novel ways, blending the intentionality of the user, the affordances and rules of the software, and the cultural codes of the platform. They perform a blending of self and interface. From a Koselleckian perspective, the avatar is a futuristic reconfiguration of the concept of the body. It materializes the expectation of plasticity, multiplicity, and dis-embodiment/re-embodiment that characterizes much posthuman thought (Hayles, 1999). It challenges the Kantian unity of the embodied self, proposing instead a model of the self as a pilot or a ghost in a series of ever-changeable shells. The pedagogical challenge it poses is profound: how do we teach empathy, ethics, or critique in relation to entities that are neither fully human nor merely objects, but occupy a liminal space of quasi-agency? The untranslatability of the doll/avatar forces us to confront the crumbling boundaries between the animate and inanimate, the authentic and the synthetic, in our affective and social lives. This conceptual instability is reflected in the nuanced "tactics" young people employ when engaging with news and information on social media, where they must constantly negotiate their own agency against algorithmic curation and platform norms (Swart, 2023).

Swart's findings that news literacy is practiced as a form of situated knowledge, shaped by platform context and perceptions of agency, mirror the distributed agency experienced by a user navigating through an avatar. The challenge for media literacy education, therefore, extends to fostering critical empathy and ethical reasoning within these complex, hybrid assemblages of human and non-human agency.

The Transhumanist Project: Rendering the Human Untranslatable. While mask and avatar reconfigure existing categories, the transhumanist project – as a discursive formation and a cluster of techno-scientific aspirations – aims explicitly to render its central term untranslatable. It seeks to make "human" a concept of the past. In Cassin's framework, it orchestrates a clash between *humanitas* (the cultured, moral being), *Homo sapiens* (the biological species), *Mensch* (the existential or ethical subject), and its own neologisms: transhuman, posthuman, cyborg (Haraway, 1991).

It asks which of these meanings is accidental, a limitation to be overcome. Transhumanist rhetoric, subjected to Skinnerian analysis, is a revolutionary speech-act par excellence. Its key terms – "morphological freedom," "cognitive enhancement," "mind uploading" – are not just descriptive but performative; they aim to alter the normative language game of human rights and ethics, shifting the grounds from protecting a given nature to authorizing its radical self-modification (Bostrom, 2005). This is a profound conceptual power-grab.

For Koselleck, transhumanism is the ultimate "concept of the future." It practices an intense "futurization of time," reading all of history as a prelude to a horizon of expectation where death, disease, and biological finitude are seen as solvable engineering problems (Fukuyama, 2002). It makes the "human past" – with its vulnerabilities and its traditional dignities–a foreign country, preparing the semantic ground for a post-biological condition. As a media phenomenon, transhumanism is propagated through a potent mix of scholarly manifestos, Silicon Valley hype, science fiction narratives, and news coverage of biotech breakthroughs.

A second-order media literacy must equip students to deconstruct this discourse not by dismissing it as science fiction, but by understanding it as a powerful conceptual force that is actively reshaping our collective imagination of the possible and the desirable, redefining what it means to be a subject, a citizen, and a biological entity in the 21st century. This critical deconstruction is akin to the analytical work required to combat political misinformation, where the combination of news media literacy interventions and fact-checking has proven most effective (Hameleers, 2022). Furthermore, the transhumanist discourse intersects with critical debates about the body, technology, and representation that are already playing out on social media platforms through movements like body positivity and body neutrality. Research indicates that while body-positive content can have benefits, health professionals express concerns and often prefer the frame of body neutrality, highlighting the ongoing conceptual negotiation about the "good" or "acceptable" body in a digitally mediated age (Rodgers et al., 2022; Sharp et al., 2023).

Media literacy must therefore navigate these debates without falling into either essentialist or naïve techno-optimist frameworks, a task complicated by findings that even media literacy itself can sometimes exacerbate negative comparisons in certain contexts (Mink, Szymanski, 2022). The work (Harriger et al., 2023) further underscores the need for new theories that capture the unique, complex influences of social media on body image, moving beyond models developed for traditional media – a call that aligns perfectly with the need for a second-order literacy that can grapple with the conceptual untranslatability of the "human" itself.

Table 1. The Three Media Untranslatables – A Conceptual Synthesis

Untranslatable	Core Semantic Tension (Cassin)	Key Speech-Act (Skinner)	Historical Temporality (Koselleck)	Pedagogical Challenge
The Mask	*Persona* (legal fiction) vs. *Lichina* (deception) vs. Profile (datafied self).	Justifying a curated, platformed identity as legitimate and "authentic."	Shift from modern inner self to networked, performative interface-self.	Teaching accountability and ethics for actions performed "in character."
The Doll/Avatar	*Pupa* (object of care) vs. *Marionnette* (controlled object) vs. *Avatar* (divine descent) vs. *Kyara* (affective property).	Claiming agency and experience through a digital proxy ("I was attacked").	Reconfiguration of the body toward plasticity, multiplicity, and pilot-based identity.	Fostering critical empathy toward quasi-agential, synthetic entities.
Transhumanist Project	*Humanitas* (moral being) vs. *Homo sapiens* (species) vs. Posthuman (engineered successor).	Legitimizing the radical redesign of human nature as a right and an imperative.	"Futurization" of the human, making the biological past a condition to be overcome.	Navigating ethical debates on enhancement without essentialist or naïve techno-optimist frameworks.

4. Results

Having traced the contours of these conceptual fault lines through discussion, we can now articulate the nature of the pedagogical project they necessitate as the result of applying our methodological framework (see Table 2). Second-order media literacy is not a replacement for the first order but its necessary meta-level. It is less a specific curriculum than a pervasive intellectual orientation, an ethos that can inform teaching and learning at all levels. Its core premise is that conceptual clarity is not a starting point but an achievement – and often a temporary one – arrived at through historical understanding and rhetorical analysis.

The first principle of this literacy is conceptual historicization. This moves beyond simplistic timelines of technological invention. It involves, for instance, exploring how the concept of "public" mutated from the Greek *agora* and the Enlightenment *Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas, 1991) to the "networked public sphere" (Benkler, 2006) and finally to the "algorithmic public" (Gillespie, 2014) curated by platform feeds. Students would not just learn what an algorithm is, but how the very idea of a "public" is being recursively configured by these technical systems. They would read not only contemporary critics of social media but also historical texts on earlier media transformations (e.g., Plato's *Phaedrus* on writing, or 19th-century debates on the telegraph) to recognize recurring patterns of anxiety and utopianism around mediation (Peters, 1999; Standage, 1998).

The second principle is semantic cartography. Inspired by Cassin, this involves mapping the competing definitions of a key untranslatable within a contemporary debate. A classroom exercise might focus on "fake news." Instead of providing a checklist for detection, students would be tasked

with collecting and contrasting definitions from: a) legal documents (e.g., proposed legislation), b) platform community guidelines, c) journalism ethics manuals, d) communication theory (e.g., misinformation vs. disinformation), and e) political rhetoric (where "fake news" is often used as a delegitimizing label). The goal is to visualize the concept not as a stable entity but as a contested field where legal, technical, ethical, and political battles are fought (Tandoc et al., 2018). This cultivates an awareness that using a term always means taking a position within a semantic struggle.

The third principle is speech-act analysis in practice. Drawing on Skinner, this trains students to analyze media discourses as forms of persuasive action. When a tech CEO gives a keynote announcing a new "ethical AI framework," the task is to dissect the performative nature of the announcement. What norms is it trying to establish? What criticisms is it pre-empting? What vision of the company's social role is it constructing? Similarly, analyzing the comments section of a controversial video becomes an exercise in identifying the illocutionary forces at play: are commenters informing, insulting, performatively aligning with a tribe, or signaling virtue? This moves analysis from what is said to what is being done by saying it, revealing the deep pragmatics of digital communication.

The fourth principle is scenario-based conceptual negotiation. Here, the abstract becomes concrete through ethical and design dilemmas. A scenario might ask: "You are on the ethics board of a company developing companion AI dolls for the elderly. The doll learns and adapts to the user's personality. How do you define and safeguard 'consent,' 'privacy,' and 'emotional manipulation' in this context, given that these concepts were developed for human-to-human interaction?" Such exercises force students to actively negotiate the meaning of untranslatables in novel, applied contexts, understanding that ethics is not the application of fixed rules but the careful, contextual translation of values into new technological arrangements (Vallor, 2016). This is particularly relevant in light of research on vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women, where social media use shows complex, dual impacts on body image and healthy behaviors, demanding nuanced ethical and educational responses (Zeeni et al., 2023).

The ultimate aim of this multifaceted pedagogy is to foster what we might call conceptual agency. This is the capacity to recognize when one is operating within a particular conceptual framework, to understand its historical formation and ideological implications, and to consciously engage in the work of reframing or re-translating concepts for new contexts. It is the opposite of being a passive consumer of prefabricated meanings. A student with conceptual agency does not just ask "Is this source biased?" but also "What underlying model of 'truth' or 'objectivity' am I using to make that judgment, and where does it come from?" They do not just create a digital artifact, but reflect on how their choices of platform, genre, and interface enact specific, often hidden, assumptions about community, authorship, and the senses.

Table 2. From First-Order to Second-Order Media Literacy – A Paradigm Shift

Dimension	First-Order Media Literacy (Operational-Critical)	Second-Order Media Literacy (Conceptual-Historical)
Primary Object	Media content, messages, representations, and the skills to decode/produce them.	The historical, contested concepts used to analyze and produce media (e.g., privacy, identity, public).
Theoretical Basis	Semiotics, ideology critique, political economy, psychology of persuasion.	Conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*), philosophy of language (speech-acts), comparative philology (untranslatables).
Key Question	"What does this media text mean, and how does it attempt to influence me?"	"What are the historical and semantic conditions that allow us to ask this question in this way? What concepts are at stake, and how are they being defined/contested?"
Pedagogical Goal	Critical, savvy, ethically responsible media users and creators.	Reflexive conceptual cartographers, capable of navigating and participating in the ongoing negotiation of the language of mediation.
Typical Activity	Analyzing bias in a news report, creating a counter-advertisement, verifying a	Mapping the historical evolution of "news" as a concept; designing an interface that makes its algorithmic curation of the "public" visible.

Dimension	First-Order Media Literacy (Operational-Critical)	Second-Order Media Literacy (Conceptual-Historical)
	fact.	
Relationship to Crisis	Provides tools to navigate a complex media environment.	Takes the conceptual instability of that environment as its primary object of study.

Following the elucidation of its core ethos, the praxis of second-order media literacy must translate these philosophical commitments into tangible classroom strategies. This translation is not a prescriptive curriculum but a generative methodology, a series of iterative practices designed to make conceptual work experiential. The first such practice is the "Conceptual Archaeology" workshop. Here, students are presented not with a definition, but with a constellation of historical texts surrounding a key untranslatable. For the concept of "community," for instance, they might analyze excerpts from Aristotle's *Politics* (the *koinonia*), Benedict Anderson's seminal work on *Imagined Communities* (the nation as a print-mediated construct) (Anderson, 2006), and Robert Putnam's diagnosis of civic disengagement in *Bowling Alone*, before finally turning to contemporary platform studies literature on "networked publics" (boyd, 2014) and "affective publics" (Papacharissi, 2015). The task is not to find a linear progression but to map the discontinuities–to see how each articulation of "community" is tied to specific media ecologies (oral, print, broadcast, digital) and political imaginations. This historical layering denaturalizes the present, revealing that the algorithmically sorted "groups" of social media are not a natural form of human association but a historically specific, technically enabled configuration with its own affordances and constraints (van Dijck, 2013).

The second practice, "Speech-Act Mapping," operationalizes Skinnerian analysis for digital discourse. Students select a contemporary media text rich in normative claims – a platform's Terms of Service, a tech CEO's manifesto on "ethical AI," a viral political post, or the comment thread beneath a controversial video. Their analysis moves beyond content summary to pragmatic deconstruction. They are guided by a series of questions: What is the speaker doing with words like "innovation," "safety," "freedom," or "truth" in this context? What opposing viewpoint or criticism is this language act attempting to pre-empt, legitimize, or delegitimize? What vision of social order or human nature is being performed or proposed? For example, dissecting a statement like "We built this platform to give everyone a voice" involves recognizing it as a justificatory speech-act that seeks to align corporate power with democratic ideals, potentially obscuring the platform's concurrent role in amplifying some voices while silencing others through opaque moderation (Gillespie, 2018). This practice trains students to see language as a form of action and power, crucial for navigating the persuasive architectures of digital platforms.

Building on this, the third practice is the "Semantic Cartography" exercise, a direct application of Cassin's project. Students choose a single, fraught untranslatable relevant to their own media practices – "interaction," "memory," "participation," "addiction." Their task is to construct a visual map (a diagram, an infographic, a zine) that plots the competing definitions and contextual uses of this term. They must gather sources from diverse, often conflicting, domains: computer science papers (defining interaction as input-output efficiency), phenomenological philosophy (interaction as embodied dialogue), political theory (participation as civic engagement), and platform economics (engagement as a metric for monetization). The cartography reveals the concept not as a point but as a field of tension. The final step is a reflective commentary: in which of these semantic territories do they personally reside when using a given app? Which definitions are empowered by current business models or regulatory frameworks? This exercise cultivates a meta-awareness of one's own conceptual positioning and the political economy of meaning (Fuchs, 2021).

The fourth, more advanced practice is "Scenario-Based Conceptual Negotiation." This moves from analysis to ethical and creative application within simulated, yet highly plausible, near-future dilemmas. A scenario might posit: "You are part of a design team developing an immersive educational VR experience about ancient history. The AI-driven non-player characters (NPCs) adapt their speech and behavior based on student interactions, creating 'authentic' relationships. How do you negotiate the competing demands of historical 'accuracy,' pedagogical effectiveness, emotional safety, and data privacy? Draft a set of design principles that define your operational

understanding of 'authenticity,' 'agency,' and 'care' in this context." Such scenarios force students out of the role of critic and into the role of a responsible co-creator, requiring them to actively translate abstract values and contested concepts into concrete design decisions, understanding that there is no perfect translation, only responsible, reflexive compromises (Vallor, 2016). This practice bridges the gap between critical theory and applied media ethics.

Finally, the methodological arc culminates in the "Critical Design Intervention" project. Here, students are asked not merely to analyze or negotiate concepts but to materialize their critical understanding. The brief is to design a prototype for a digital tool, interface, or media artifact that makes a specific conceptual untranslatability tangible to its user. For example, a group might design a browser extension that visually alters a social media feed to expose the shifting semantic context of "trending" – juxtaposing the algorithmic logic of velocity and engagement with a historical timeline of what was "trending" on the same date in past years, or with parallel news headlines from non-commercial sources. Another project might create a "Data Self-Portrait" app that re-represents the user's own data traces (location, searches, purchases) not as a profile for targeting, but through the aesthetic lenses of different philosophical concepts of the self – as a Humean bundle of perceptions, a Foucaultian dossier of discipline (Foucault, 1977), or a Harawayan cyborg network. This practice, inspired by the tradition of critical design and adversarial artifacts (Dunne, Raby, 2013), affirms that second-order literacy is not passive comprehension but active, generative critique. It positions students as agents capable of interrogating and re-imagining the very conceptual infrastructures of their media environment, completing the loop from historical understanding through critical analysis to imaginative reconstruction.

5. Conclusion

We have argued throughout that the most pressing task for media education today is to meet conceptual instability with conceptual sophistication. The digital transformation is not just changing what we see and how we communicate; it is changing who we think we are, what we believe a society is, and what we imagine is possible. In this milieu, a literacy that stops at the operational and the critically representational, while necessary, is insufficient. It risks leaving learners fluent in a language whose grammar is decaying, adept at using tools whose philosophical implications remain opaque. Second-order media literacy, as we have endeavored to outline in detail, proposes a more foundational engagement. By integrating the philological sensitivity of Cassin, the rhetorical pragmatism of Skinner, and the historical depth of Koselleck, it offers a framework for turning the crisis of translation into a curriculum. It teaches that to be media literate is to understand that every tweet, every profile, every AI-generated image, and every promise of technological transcendence is an event in an ongoing history of concepts. These concepts – mask, avatar, human, and countless others – are the living, shifting ground of our political, ethical, and existential lives in a mediated world. The outcome of this education is not a student who has all the answers, but one who has been equipped with better questions. A student who, confronted with the next disruptive technology or cultural phenomenon, will instinctively ask not only "How does it work?" or "Is it good or bad?", but "What old concepts does this force into crisis? What new language games is it initiating? What futures is it making conceivable, and what pasts is it rendering obsolete?" This is the literacy required for citizenship in an age where the very definition of the human, the social, and the real is up for grabs—a literacy of the second order, for a world in a state of permanent, and profound, translation.

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