ABSTRACT

Based on the increased interest in ANT in Media Studies, this paper discusses similarities and differences in the epistemological premises of ANT and German Media Studies and, in particular, Media Aesthetics. Proceeding from well received ANT investigations on the transformational processes of scientific research and the discussion of their importance and suitability for media aesthetic approaches, basic operations and metaphors of the ANT are identified and questioned. By juxtaposing the epistemological premises of ANT and those of techno-philosophically informed approaches of media theory, profound resemblances as well as fundamental differences are outlined.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, Media Aesthetics, Media Studies, Media Theory, Mediology, Simondon, Techno-Philosophy, Zeno

A certain accordance or congruence, affiliation or just mental proximity of Actor-Network Theory and Media Theory is undoubtedly assumed and currently extensively discussed (cf. Couldry, 2008; Kneer & Schroer & Schüttpelz, 2008; Linz, 2009; Seier, 2009; Cuntz, 2013; Schabacher, 2013; Seier, 2013; Thielmann, 2013; Teurlings, 2013). The strive to differentiate possible similarities and synergies in German academia materialized just last year in a veritable tome of 700 pages: The “Akteur-Medien-Theorie“ (Thielmann & Schüttpelz, 2013, translates: Actor-Media Theory). Besides a large variety of articles that explore connections and the possible emergence of interferences that might emerge from their synopsis, a comprehensive introduction explicates further overlappings. This book was published in the “Science Studies“ series that discusses cultural and historical developments within and of sciences and arts. The encounter of a relatively young discipline, as Media Studies is, with the

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Actor-Network Theory, a – theory? method? discipline? – that has also been formulated for some decades only seems to be an extraordinary favorable coincidence: It seems like the ANT itself, as a descendant and advancement of the traditional Science Studies as a discipline, is downright predestined to describe the emergence and stabilization and, in this case, fusion of disciplines.

Both research areas still remain in a state of organization and mediation – whatever the term ‘Media Studies’, or in particular: ‘Media Aesthetics’, might designate, is still being negotiated in publications, congresses, job specifications, curricula, institutions, technical innovations, self-definations and – let us open the list – “etc“. All the same ANT is still a ‘product in progress’, arranging, and being arranged by, researchers, institutions, nationalities, disciplines and terminology. Both have been and are still undergoing a number of interconnections and dissociations. Especially the conception of “agency“ as the central operative term, as Schüttpelz (2013) puts it in his introduction, “Elements of an Actor-Media-Theory“, seems perfectly suited to grasp situations, when “something puts something else into action“ (ibid., p. 10, trans. VP) - comprehending “action, including its reflexive dimension that produces meaning“ as something that “takes place in hybrid collectives comprising human beings as well as material and technical devices, texts, etc.“ (cf. Callon 2013, in Schüttpelz 2013, p.11).

Agency then has to be conceived as a potential, that allows to put something or somebody into action – and is easily identified with the very structure of institution and mediation: actors, or disciplines, thought schools and concepts are not just shaped and configured as an effect of ongoing negotiations, ascriptions and “enrolments“ (cf. Callon, 1986), they appear as actors with a certain interest, operational range and power strictly in interdependence with the structural formation of the field of agency.

Exceeding classical sociology, the ANT directs a special attention to “things“. Similar to Media Studies, devices that organize human behavior, action and meaning, are particularly taken into focus: as “medium“ or “mediators“, things are not merely connecting links, conveyors or compliant equipment - on the contrary, “meaning is [...] in part constituted, moved, recreated, modified, in short expressed and betrayed“ (Latour 1991, p. 19) by the medium. Still in accordance with media theory, this kind of things build a network of “circulations, sequences, transfers, translations, displacements, crystallizations“ (ibid., p. 10) that negotiates and creates subjects and objects, nature and technology, society and its material substrate. The strict opposition of these spheres allegedly dominated modern Western philosophy, that consequently excluded things, concentrating on “discourse“ or “text“ as the central arena of the becoming and decay, emergence and institution of identity and meaning, comprehending things as inert matter that had to devote itself to man as sole owner of agency. In contrast to that, the ANT pledges to “recognize in means, media, mediators, the eminent alterity, the eminent dignity that modern philosophy has for so long refused them“ (ibid., p.19). Reinstalling things as a part of humankind, the endeavor of Latour’s “symmetrical anthropology“, intends to make visible the chains of transformation, association and translation, that are usually covered up by the strict distinction that modern philosophy had imposed on these domains.³ The attention is therefore focused on things inhabiting the zones in between, being neither wholly “thing“ nor “sign“ and yet both; “quasi-objects“ (Serres, 1982, p. 225) or hybrids, making it possible that the “world of things may become a sign“ (Latour, 1999, p. 48). It seems to be out of question that this applies not exclusively to “media“ identified by Science and Technology Studies - favorites to ANT investigations - like “gauges, standards, circulating papers, announciators“, but also to the “classical media of Media Studies (mass media, technical media, signal transmissions)“ (Schüttpelz, 2013, p. 16-17, trans. VP) as they are seemingly already described as transformators, “sign machines“ to “translate content to form“; and especially technical media have always been considered to take a “precarious place“ between man and technology, signs
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