Murphy’s Law in Action: The Formation of the Film Production Network of Paul Lazarus’ Barbarosa (1982)- An Actor-Network-Theory Case Study

Markus Spöhler, Department of Literature, University of Konstanz, Konstanz, Germany

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibilities of Actor-Network-Theory as a methodological approach to Production Studies. On the basis of a detailed production log written by producer Paul Lazarus III, the coming-into-being of the film Barbarosa (1982) is described. By using Bruno Latour’s and Michel Callon’s approach, the assemblies of the film production, the hybrid networks and interconnections which are established by human as well non-human actors, are dealt with. Thus film production is not a one sided process of inscriptions by human actors on non-human actors. Rather it is thought as a reciprocal process of inscribing and acting. Consequently the “effects” are discussed which are produced by approaching the production of Barbarosa with ANT and conclusions are drawn as to how the theoretical scope of Production Studies needs to be modified: Films can be understood as “quasi-objects” or “epistemic things” which are produced and produce themselves in reciprocal processes. They translate themselves into other networks after postproduction and are thus constantly subject to translational processes and not endlessly stable, but should rather be considered metastable.

Keywords: Actor-Network-Theory, Barbarosa, Callon, Epistemic Thing, Experimental System, Film Production Studies, Latour, Motion Pictures, Paul Lazarus

INTRODUCTION

Nowhere is Murphy’s Law—If something can go wrong, it will—more constant than in the shooting of a film1 (Paul Lazarus III, film producer)

A film production2 is generally considered an ephemeral project, a network consisting of different entities (studios, directors, film actors, producers, camera-teams etc.), which is limited to a fixed time span. Such temporary forms of organization aim at performing complex tasks, which are oftentimes only vaguely defined (cf. Apitzsch, 2010, p.1). In contrast to repeating (or repeatable) procedures, a film project can be defined as “an operational production of goods, which is executed only once in a distinct manner” (Niemeyer, 2008, p.12, MS)3. For this reason certain operational procedures of film productions as well as particular skills, which are required of the actors of such networks, are hardly predictable. This circumstance impedes pre-planning, especially since certain unpredicted problems may arise during production—a
fact which is clearly reflected in the pessimistic undertone of the initial quotation by Paul Lazarus III. More than in the production of “regular goods”, a film project is confronted with a great many of risk factors, which appear to be almost in calculating (cf. Rimscha, 2010, p.125). Consequently this mode of production implies a certain kind of instability and unpredictability of the work process. In case of complications such as delay of shooting, exceeding of budget or cancellation of a leading role, production companies may cancel the production at an early stage. Thus suddenly arising problems require a high level of flexibility from the actors enrolled in a film production network. Success or failure depends on a variety of factors, but especially on how stable the various entities of such a network are related to each other throughout the collaboration4.

In the production of the western *Barbarosa* (1982), producer Paul Lazarus III5 acted as a central assemblage point in such a network. His main task was to maintain the chains of relations between the actors enrolled, in order to prevent the network from collapsing. In consideration of the “collaborative nature of motion pictures” (Lazarus, 1989, p.2) Actor-Network-Theory appears to be a potential method since case studies dealing with this approach explicitly carve out the collaborations that are formed in order to establish actor-networks (e.g. Callon, 1986). Thus ANT could serve as an approach to describe the translation processes as well as the recruitments of actors which provide the composition and maintenance of the film production network (cf. Mould, 2009). ANT is thus capable of locating weak links in a production network and can be used to describe insufficient translational efforts which lead to the destabilization of the relations between the enrolled actors. Latour (2005) argues that ANT is especially suited for forms of organizations in which “things are changing fast” (p.142). Hence for a film production, which is subject to constant rapid change, especially such a problematic one as *Barbarosa*, ANT appears to be a thoroughly justifiable instrument of analysis. According to Bruno Latour (2005), ANT “allows you to produce some effects that you would not have obtained by some other social theory” (p.143). ANT’s premise is, in contrast to other methods used for film production analysis (such as discourse analysis or context analysis; e.g. Hickethier, 2007), that the film itself acts as one of the main actors in a film production network. This premise moves the film itself into the center of the film production analysis—a step which is strangely enough omitted by some other ANT case studies on film production6.

The case study at hand will show that ANT is especially suitable for describing the mutable states of identity of the film during production and *beyond*. It will be shown that even after post-production, the stadium which is conventionally described as the film’s “closure”7, the film is subject to further inscriptions and translations. As a consequence the definition of a “project” as provided by Niemeyer is suitable only within the preset frame of *preproduction / production / postproduction*. As it will be shown the process of production of a film may theoretically be continued infinitely. Also if the application of ANT implies that the film itself is an actor, it consequently cannot be considered a passive, static object that may be neglected in favor of the (human) alliances formed around it like in many conventional film production histories. In fact within a film production network, agency can be (and is constantly) attributed to the film, which provides it with the capability of making other actors (both human and non-human) act and cause them to translate their identities in favor of the film and the network they are enrolled in. Likewise German film theorist Lorenz Engell (2010) also considers films as capable of attributing agencies: “The moving image also acts as an agency, which organizes gestures, humans, things, spaces, expectations etc. in describable practices” (p.139, trans. MS)8.

To sum up, this paper is intended to be a case study in which the applicability of Actor-Network-Theory as a methodological approach to *Production Studies*9 is put to the test. Thereby the production of the western *Barbarosa* (1982)
Actors, Networks and Assessment: An Actor-Network Critique of Quality Assurance in Higher Education In England


[www.igi-global.com/chapter/actors-networks-assessment/50125?camid=4v1a](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/actors-networks-assessment/50125?camid=4v1a)