Chapter 4
The Subject of Media Studies

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ABSTRACT

On the basis of the banal example of the rise of "the selfie", this chapter critically considers the issue of the Subjects of (and in) Media Studies and argues that the reason why Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has thus far not been widely accepted within this field has been its adherence to the Principles of Generalized Symmetry and Free Association. That is to say: ANT categorically refuses subsuming properties of entities to abstractions such as nature, society or technology. On the contrary, Media Studies have doggedly adhered to privileging "the Human" as its subject of analysis. On the basis of a critique of transcendental phenomenology, which has been specified by a critical discussion of McLuhan's famous edict "media are extensions of man", the chapter exposes the empirical fallacy of granting the human subject a status of exception and instead proposes an empirical metaphysics based on 'prehension' as an alternative. This, it is argued, will enable forms of media analyses that can be both radically empirical and politically engaged.

PRELUDE: CONSIDERING SELFIES

Despite its recent introduction into the English language, the Selfie is not a new medium per se. Self-portraits have had a long-standing tradition in (for example) painting (Cumming, 2010), photography (Roberts, 2011) and literature, especially autobiography (Shapiro, 1968). Over the last few years, the Selfie has become enormously popular, however, by virtue of the widespread use of mobile digital image recording media that have been integrated with mobile phones, digital information and communication technologies and so called "social media" such as (for example) Instagram, Facebook or Twitter (Nemer & Freeman, 2015). It has even succeeded in becoming the Oxford Dictionaries "Word of the Year" in 2013.

Understanding the selfie as an extension of the human person, who is being depicted by it, is almost self-evident. However, we need not look very far to discover that extension is a supplement that adds to but does not add up (Bhabha, 1990). The selfie inhabits electronic databases that are made available by "social networks" on line. It circulates as digital files that have a potentially infinite lifespan, at least as long as electricity remains available. However, their actual average lifespans are of extremely short

duration. Selfies are snapshots of moments in which a self is being created. The self of a selfie is a person, or perhaps better a persona, but it is not the actual person who took the selfie. It is not even correct to speak of a doubling, because that would imply a kind of hylomorphic closure based on a continuity of perception (Mackenzie, 2002). Of course, there is still a connection between the person of the image and the person who was involved in the creation of the image; but this connection itself is facilitated by an act of mediation which remains very strongly dependent on the work performed by the camera: light (photons) – electricity (electrons) – digital data (bits).

Much has been written on photography (and film) in terms of time (Deleuze, 1986; Lury, 1998, Virilio, 1991; 1997) and how this affects the way we understand perception (and phenomena). The stable "transcendental self" that was a prerequisite of early phenomenology, has given way to a "performative self" that is embodied and enacted. Photography has enabled philosophers to think perception differently, namely as something that is performed by the assembling of a particular set of actors or enactments (Lury, 1998). This is the strength of Actor-Network Theory (ANT): It has generated a method for understanding how particular enactments have been stabilized to enable a sense of durable reality.[1] Duration is time, and the "magic" of photography is, that it has created the possibility of extending the time of representation, exactly by reducing the critical time of production to a fraction of a second. Paul Virilio (1999, pp. 22-34) refers to this as "seeing time."

The performativity of the selfie is obvious: From the tilted-head-with-stuck-out tongue to the duck-face, such moments capturing this kind of self are like playful caricatures, part of a wider construction of sociability in which imitation plays a key role. Many students of media see the selfie as the ideal type of the performing of "identity." The selfie is made to say: "look at me; this is who I am." Actor-Network Theory would not deny that. However, it would want to ask: What is enabling the selfie to speak and to speak in this way?

The selfie is also often used to geographically locate an individual in some particular place, being with particular people and/or doing some particular thing (usually something that can be performed as "fun"). It is not only saying: "look at me, this is who I am," but also: "look at me; this is where I am and what I do?" Identification is never merely a matter of linking a representation with an object; instead, it is first and foremost an act of imitation. Firstly, the practice of taking selfies is something that is being imitated, including the particular poses and situations considered to be appropriate for taking selfies. Secondly, taking a selfie is an act of imitation in which one tries to re-present a situation of performing a "self" by virtue of translation (into a photographic image). Finally, the camera itself is an "imitation machine" in which the distribution of light (as photons) is repeated in terms of a distribution of pixels (electrons).

The doubling performed by the selfie as an actor-net-work cannot be contained by an assumed equivalence between the subject-of-mediation, the entity invoking the act of becoming a selfie and the subject-in-mediation as the entity invoked in the act of mediation. The selfie turns this stable notion of selfhood into a controversial object, opening the black box of psychoanalysis that had been magically deployed by Sigmund Freud in a distribution of Id, Ego and Superego. It forces us to question the triad of I, Self and Me, which for George Herbert Mead (1934) constituted the basis of a new kind of sociological inquiry. As an act of imitation, the selfie points towards desires and beliefs, towards forces that lie beyond the realm of "subjectivity." It thus also raises questions about the subject of and the subject in Media Studies and this is the primary concern if this chapter.

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