Chapter 15

Mind the Gap:
On Actor-Network Theory and German Media Theory

Veronika Pöhnl
University of Konstanz, Germany

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses similarities of and differences between the epistemological premises of ANT and "German Media Theory". The applicability of ANT for media investigations and the compatibility of ANT concepts in Media Studies have been discussed intensively for several years now. The profound similarities as well as the critical differences in the study of the material conditions of human culture have also stimulated current reconsiderations and reformulations in "Cultural Media Studies," as German Media Theory is most commonly called in Germany. The following article gives a brief overview on most recently published approaches to cultural techniques and intersections of media and techno-philosophy that are increasingly being translated into English and therefore also internationally accessible, alongside with the discussion concerning their compatibility with ANT.

INTRODUCTION

A certain accordance or congruence, affiliations and the mental proximity of Actor-Network Theory and Media Studies or the applicability of ANT in Media Studies have been discussed intensively for several years now not only since Couldry's influential question and summary: "Actor Network Theory and Media: Do they Connect and on What Terms?" (Couldry, 2008). In Germany, ANT approaches have been discussed, adapted and advanced for media investigations during the last years and have proven themselves to be suitable for detailed and highly original delineations of production as well as scientific, technological and, in particular media technological developments. Besides approaches to classic media topics like, for example television broadcasting (cf. Wieser, 2013; Teurlings, 2013), film production (cf. Spöhrer, 2013a) or media events (cf. Otto, 2013), the ANT vocabulary has also been tested in shaping

the understanding of translational and organizational processes arranged by "hybrid objects," which then come into sight as media due to their facilitating and restricting functions (cf. Ochsner, 2013; Schabacher, 2013; Spöhrer, 2013b). At the same time, the multi-faceted theoretical and epistemological intersections and distinctions of ANT and Media Studies are still discussed controversially (cf. Engell & Siegert & Vogl, 2008; Kneer & Schroer & Schüttpelz, 2008; Linz, 2009; Seier, 2009; Engell, 2010; Cuntz, 2013; Seier, 2013; Thielmann, 2013).

The recent coinage of an "Akteur-Medien-Theorie" (Thielmann & Schüttpelz, 2013, translates: Actor-Media-Theory) [1], which has by now acquired the status of an entry in a prominent basic Media Studies handbook (Thielmann & Schröter, 2014), represents an attempt of merging ANT and media theory that specifically takes into account approaches from the heuristically so called "German Media Theory" (cf. Peters, 2008). To define "German Media Theory," a collective term for certain media approaches in between philology, aesthetics and techno-philosophy, that are still continuously evolving, might be as hard as a consistent definition of Actor-Network Theory (for the same reasons), yet it is possible to outline common traits of ANT and "German Media Theory" on an institutional and theoretical level. The next section therefore sketches main similarities as well as new impulses in German Media Theory that were engendered by said intersection, which was called "one of the most interesting conjunctures" of media theory during the last years (Engell & Siegert, 2013b). Yet, the following section also makes an effort to display main distinctions concerning the concept of transmission in heterogeneous fields. Especially the metaphoric implications of a central concept in ANT, the "chain," is more closely examined and compared to the understanding of mediality discussed in approaches of German Media Theory.

STRUCTURAL AND THEORETICAL INTERSECTIONS OF ANT AND MEDIA THEORY

German Media Theory as well as ANT are collective terms for a number of approaches that originated roughly during the 1980s, both have been and are still undergoing a number of interconnections and dissociations. Whatever the term "German Media Theory" might designate is still being negotiated in publications, conferences, job specifications, curricula, handbooks, institutions, technical innovations, self-definitions and – let us open the list – "etc." All the same, ANT is a product in progress, arranged by and arranging researchers, institutions, nationalities, disciplines and terminology.[2] It has exchanged labels like "Sociology of Translation" (Callon, 1986a), "Co-Word Analysis" (Callon, 1986b) or "Actant-Rhizome Ontology" (Latour, 1999) as much as "German Media Theory" has gone by different names from "Media Discourse Analysis", "Media Historiography" and "History and Aesthetics of Media" to the currently most common "Cultural Media Studies" (cf. Siegert, 2014, p. 1)[3]. Their current state might well be described as a network in the sense of ANT, a "precarious achievement" (Teurlings, 2013, p. 103), an agglomeration of disparate elements that has to be continuously stabilized. Continuous negotiation and temporal stabilization might be typical for a certain state of departmental development in contrast to well-settled disciplines. Noticeably in both cases, this process is also explicitly exercised on a theoretic level. While "German Media Theory," as Jussi Parikka puts it, stresses the "variety of processes of mediation" (Parikka, 2011, 61) in contrast to and exceeding the boundaries of single media investigations, the ANT might as well be characterized by the attempt to create a "gravitational center" by the "systematic transgression of limits" (Leschke, 2014, p. 29).

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