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Augmented Embodiment. Excavated Dynamics of Media Theory – Critical Inlets to the (Second) Medial Turn

Der ‘medial turn’ als Großformation verschiedenster Theoriezüge und –programmatiken zehrt im Gegensatz zu kanonischen ‘Medienwissenschaften’ weniger von einer eindeutigen *Definition* des Medialen oder zentralen Begriffen wie ‘Kommunikation’ oder ‘Information’, als vielmehr von einer historisch situierten und durch neue Medien getriebenen Infragestellung eines „primären Instrumentalismus“ (Feenberg), sowie der Einsicht in die Pluralität praxeologischer und epistemischer Ausdrucks-, Repräsentations- und Rationalitätsformen (‘kognitive Formate’). Im vorliegenden Beitrag¹ wird die Ausrufung eines gegenwärtigen ‘medial turn’ durch einen Rekurs auf die materialen und konzeptionellen Wurzeln in den 60er Jahren problematisiert. Entlang der McLuhanschen Aufwertung der medialen Archetypen der Gegenwart als Mittel der Theorie- und Modellbildung sowie seiner Absage an systematisch verfasste Generaltheorien zugunsten ‘partikularer Theoriemodelle’ (probes sensu McLuhan, 2002) werden schließlich Modelle der *augmented intelligence* (D. Engelbart) und der *augmented reality* als zeitgenössische Schlüssel zu neuen Formen eines theoriekonstruktiven Medienverständnisses herangezogen.

1) The frame and motivation: three traits of the (current) „medial turn”

The *medial turn* can be regarded as a ‘grand formation’ of different theoretical meta-currents which by using this common programmatic label do three things at the same time. For a critical perspective in the context of the current debate of the ‘medial turn’ (setting in during the late 1990s) and for giving some primary motivation of linking this formation back to the first ‘medial turn’ (the inauguration of *media theory* in the 1960s), these shall be characterized and briefly commented upon (the comments marked in the text by „— ...“).

The *medial turn*:

(1) ...reflects in a very fundamental way the meaning(s) of newly emerged and centralized concepts like ‘communication’, ‘information’ and ‘media’/‘mediatization’. But these are not seen as phenomena or categories merely to be *added* to the categorical inventory of the humanities; rather their appearance questions and alters the overall conceptions of ‘constitution’ and ‘meaning’ in the socio-cultural realm on a most fundamental level. The most common denominator for media theory arising out of the first ‘medial turn’ is the realization of the co-constitutive effects of medial *formats* in particular, and

¹ Dieser ‘Beitrag’ ist selber nur ein Hintergrundpapier einer medialen Theorie-Präsentation und ist als ‘extended abstract’ zu verstehen. Seine Blickrichtung bezieht sich in der Charakterisierung und Kritik insbesondere auf den deutsch-sprachigen Diskursraum; über deren Verallgemeinerbarkeit in andere Diskurs-Kontexte hinein müssen andere entscheiden.

multidimensional techno-cultural *forms*² in general alongside other generic factors augmenting human intentionalities and engagements, actively shaping man's cognitive, social and cultural world(s)³. In the words of McLuhan it is all about the way in which medial archetypes, infrastructures and formats tamper with purely intentional and instrumental uses – “[f]or the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.” (Marshall McLuhan, 1964)⁴

— In this regard the *medial turn* transgresses any mere re-inauguration or re-valorization of *Communication* or *Media Studies* though both discourses are of course intrinsically and historically linked through systematic study of communication media and medial communication. In difference to 'sciences' of communication (or media) *media theories* in a philosophical sense are linked to a larger socio-cultural (ontological) constellation, which demands for critical and ongoing methodo-logical re-positionings given a pluralized, multi-perspectival and complexly synchronized global mediasphere. As this constellation of critical self-positioning also constitutes the new milieu for theory-production, *media theories* at their best treat all basic categories – including 'information', 'medium', 'communication' – as *problematic* notions, as *contested* and *contestable concepts* linked to *contestable styles and forms of theory* (Marshall McLuhan, 1964; Donna Haraway, 1991, Katherine N. Hayles, 1999). At the very same time theory denominated to 'media theory' or 'media philosophy' remains linked to differing philosophical and political paradigms and programmatic – and notions like 'medium' are themselves always co-defined by these theoretical frames and constellations, i.e. what possible slots a model or theory holds for related concepts like 'instruments', 'subjects', 'mediation', 'laterality', 'intention', 'collective' etc.. Also it is of relevance that since the 1960s different and alternatively valid projects, practices and formats of appropriate media(l) theories have been advanced – sometimes *deliberately* in connection to whole praxeologies (Packer/Jordan, 2001)⁵.

(2) ...alludes and responds to the fact that by now – even more than in the 1960s – media „represent more and more – and by now presumably in a primary sense – the privileged places for the construction of social-cognitive reality/realities“ (Stefan Weber 1999). This is in fact a characterization which also is to be found as igniting impulse in the works of McLuhan and some of his contemporaries 40 years ago – an impulse now being to some extent re-affirmed *within* disciplinary bounds like philosophy, cultural sciences etc..

2 The term 'form' taken in its strict traditional and implicative philosophical meaning, see Marshall McLuhan, 1987, S.427.

3 For the question whether this shift is to be characterized as either historical, ontological, or neither see Oliver Lerone Schultz, 2004.

4 This pretty much fits the idea of (cultural) man being 'augmented' by his/her languages and symbol systems, artifacts and technologies, methodologies and systems of practice – which is exactly what Engelbart assumed within his concept of *intelligence augmentation* (Engelbart, 1962).

5 Of interest here is the new discourse on 'experimental culture(s)', which speaking for the German context is – up to now – rather focused on science cultures (STS) rather than larger socio-cultural epistemologies; c.f. Ulrike Bergermann, 2003; Henning Schmidgen u.a., 2004.

— In particular the 'medial turn' as it came out of the 1990s reflects a newly accelerated transformation in the wake of further media-technological evolution since the 1960s; like *personal computers, virtual and augmented realities, ubiquitous computing, ambient intelligence, networked communication, virtual communities, digital culture* and similarly important macro-phenomena, which led Mark Poster to the proclamation of the "Second Media Age" (Mark Poster, 1995). In this fact, it seems, we could find the *specific* legitimation of what could also be labeled as the 'second medial turn'⁶.

(3) ...inherently and necessarily participates in an originary impulse and a basic idea of an *explorative, engaged and reflexive* mediated theory, an impulse which is rooted in the 1960s, when the persistent ontological-epistemological and sociocultural effects of 'media' were being noticed in different and pervasively changing social, geographical and cultural environments and actively reflected in the humanities.

— An awareness of this points us – by looking into the rear-view mirror of theory – to thinkers like Marshall McLuhan (1995/1964), Douglas Engelbart (1962), and others like Nam June Paik (1966), Guy Debord (1967), Dick Higgins (1984)– all of whom articulated and participated in these infrastructural and cultural developments. The question then arises, why the so-labeled *medial turn* of the 1990s – at least when it comes to the German-language context – rarely connects programmatically and methodically to its own historical predecessors, particularly in terms of self-reflexive mediality and new, more open formats and styles of theorizing. Instead, all differentiations in descriptive terminology granted, current *media theory* effectively returns to the Gutenbergian *status quo ante*: thetical descriptions "from nowhere"⁷, literary research programs, and often a pseudo-Kantian approach of constructing (unmotivated) quasi-transcendental "conditions of possibility", or it falls back to vulgar-materialistic versions of 'medial materialism' or thinly cloaked determinisms⁸. Within all this we can witness a persistent clinging to and proliferation of traditional academic *text*-formats along with its accompanying and implicated methodologies⁹. Methodologically and programmatically *media theory* (or 'media philosophy') mostly presents itself in the gesture of a new totalizing or grounding theory (cf. Mersch 2006: 16), *practically* (i.e. in its own theoretical praxis) discounting the

6 Thus, the 'second media turn' could also be discussed critically through the interpretative lens of a second, usurping academic appropriation of the first hetero-doxical impulse of *media theory* arising from the 1960s.

7 Here this critically minded formula of the philosopher Thomas Nagel is taken up in the sense of a general, in fact more elaborated critique McLuhan launched on the illusionary objectivations of the 'individual' as well as an 'objective' ("third perspective") *point of view*. He saw this kind of self-understanding of modern man exactly as the result of "typographic trance" and the absolute prevalence of the linearized and mono-medial text-format. For McLuhan alphabetic man, including the book scholar, "loses the ability to sense the plural and discontinuous existence of [cognitive] forms" (McLuhan, 1964)

8 With some apparent dissatisfaction in view of the 'Big Programms' addressing the new medial and communicative settings, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht felt it necessary in 2005 to "bury" *medial materialism* as a paradigm of explanation, after he was one of the figures ascribed in inaugurating it.

9 This also applies in the larger setting to the otherwise differing programs of *discourse theory, systems theory* and *deconstruction*, in as far as they all re-fit themselves to the field of scholarly argumentation, the grammar of statements and classical Gutenbergian text-production.

methodological challenges of its footnoted forerunners¹⁰. While thinkers in the 1960s took up the task of developing processual, aesthetical and mediological methodologies of 'theorizing', the current wave of 'media theory' – confronted with a radically networked, digitalized and mediatized culture – goes back to what McLuhan characterized as “typographic trance”: papers, books and talks; Powerpoint often being the farest to get toward new mediologies, more daring exceptions being few and sporadic or having the status of artistic excursions¹¹. An awareness of this should stimulate attention to aspects and styles of theory left behind, forgotten or sorted out by current positions on the „medial turn“.

2) The argument: how theorize multiple, open-ended and reflexive mediality? Or: the question of media theory as the question for a *mediatized theory*

By now it is quite clear, that the greater *medial turn* setting in during the 1960s and reverberating in the 1980s and 1990s has to be characterized as a *de-naturalization* and *methodological culturalization* of knowledge production in all its forms as it become more and more dependent on the medial situation and media-based 'modes of rationality'¹². Theorizing this anthropologically minded- and actor-sensitive media-theories established the notion of an „epistemologic-technological *co-evolution* of medial dispositifs and the medial discourses shaping man“ (Keck/Pethes 2001; also Hayles 1999) thereby giving new intellectual and sharpened sense to McLuhans dictum that (cognitive) man in some socio-cultural sense „becomes his/her media.“

But while dogmas about rationality and epistemology and our being-in-the-world are radically shifted when it comes to some *descriptions* given by 'media theory' (of whatever sort) there is not really any fleshed out program within the 'medial turn' *actually reflecting* how media-induced changes in the measures and dynamics of rationality are affecting *theory(-production) itself* – including the very own format of *media theory itself*; in other words: how a *theory of basic human mediality* and the *medial situation of theory* are actually in 'resonance' (to use an overlooked McLuhanian topos). Just the opposite: the declared *medial turn* while discussing the *medial apriori* is in most cases further from touching the very *format* or *grammar* of 'theory' than most predecessors of 40 years ago.

10 This is of course not to say there are no historical references within *media theory*. Quite the opposite: given a 'historicist bias' of new (german) *media theory*, texts often track their own topic back to historic inaugurators and list them in their footnote apparatus; this applies surpassingly often to thinkers from the 1960s, like L.C.R. Licklider, Ted Nelson, Marshall McLuhan, Günther Anders et al., always depending on the context. But also surpassingly often this happens in a mere *historiographic* gesture and as part of frozen conventions of academic text production.

11 For exceptional approaches within the german-language context beyond the declarative see Lemke, C. u.a. *Sense & Cyber*; 2003 and similarly formatLabor. Also interesting and somehow connected to the german context: Lev Manovich, 1997

12 Taken the increasing constitutive role of technical instruments Bachelard already noted in 1949 that even in the realm of 'hard' sciences 'real' objects are more and more indirectly and medially co-produced.

Rather it takes shape as a substantialized re-codification of traditional philosophic paradigms of rationality, incorporating the media sphere as just another field for – textual – reflection and thematization. Thereby academic theory retreats from the the more interesting (or uncomfortable) media-induced questions that are shaking its own conceptual and methodological ground, tacitly reintroducing the traditional/analytical logic of text-based theory.¹³

This methodo-logical *blind spot* of media-theory and philosophy, furthermore, seems connected to certain content-issues and positions (mis-)conceptualizing the human subject in relation to media in a very certain way. Undertheorized within the current paradigms are (1) the embodied positionalities of medial actors in resonance with instituted social and cultural formats (– with theoreticians *themselves being part of this medial continuum*), (2) the simultaneous and interacting plurality of media based human rationalities and formats – the „multiconsciousness“ replacing „the supremacy of unified print consciousness“, to use McLuhans characterization and (3) the dynamic, transformative and open-ended nature of mediation within the open circles of practical socio-political *use*¹⁴ – (a notion predisposed in the idea that media are, in fact, creative metaphors and interactive environments). (4) the socio-political fields of positioning and power in which media are placed: “For each of the media is also a powerful weapon with which to globber other media and other groups.” (McLuhan, 1964).

3) The reference: re-tracing Engelbart and McLuhan

With McLuhan and Engelbart, we can trace some of the original impulses and some of the lost methodo-logical insights questioning any view of *non-mediatized theory*, while on the same token their respective theories demonstrate inherent links between an open methodology and certain conceptions of the situated human medial actor and his/her medial augmentations. Both describe a situation of man, as non-reducibly and multiple mediatized, while holding on to the idea of bodily human actors being able to practically and cognitively *use* this fundamentally non-instrumental situation in terms of a creative methodologies¹⁵ – a claim which doesn't stop short of 'theory'-production itself. According to this view man could reflectively come to grips with media-induced heterogeneity and complexity, as – in the larger frame – with an anthropological situation, which both thinkers characterized as fundamentally „problematic“ and „problem driven“ (also in the sense of pervasive social

13 Referring to the German stage Matthias Vogel (2001) and Martin Seel are exemplary cases of this kind of re-codified *media philosophy*. The non-instrumental and poly-thetical nature of mediatized reflection and understanding (as opposed to paradigms of 'truth'), thus is often described by a thetical, static and mono-perspectival 'theory', at least when it comes to master-theories, a peculiar interesting example being Welsch's (1995) monographic theory of „transversal rationality.“

14 Bolter/Grusin, 1999.

15 The real challenge for a media(l) theory being to simultaneously reflect on the motivating but generally *open ended* meaning-producing grammars of its 'object' (macro-media) and its *own* motivated but medially embedded and formatted *point of view* (taken in a broader sense).

problematics)¹⁶. Both were themselves actively laboring on and shifting the front of forms and formats of theory-production in a way, which actively included media-logics.

McLuhan prefigures the idea of a quasi-poetical recapturing of semi-autonomous mediologies, using cognitive theory devices like *mosaics*, *puns*, tetrads, *probings*, *anti-environments et. al.* – all resonating between conventional theory and processual, graphic, performative and artistic styles. Using this *experimental form* of theory, reflectively acknowledging and pro-actively using logics of simultaneous medial forms, he aimed at breaking up the 'closures' of any specific medial logic – foremostly: the linear text format and the limiting cognitive environments cast by their mechanisms (McLuhan et al., 2002). McLuhan understood very well, that theory-'systems' are themselves to be reflected upon mediologically, stating for example that “[a] man’s system is thought of as a kind of space into which he puts or arranges his experience. This is the old, visual pattern. Critics are looking for the space in which I fit my experiences. There is no such space. There is no continuum except that which we impose on things. The only sense which has the effect of continuum is the visual sense. Beyond the attempt to merely re-frame McLuhan within the old academic schemas of discursive classification – mis-labeling him as “anthropological”, “deterministic”, “mechanical” etc. – thinkers involved in understanding McLuhan look particularly at his *format of theory* to find that “Method is the Message”¹⁷. Grosswiler remarks: “McLuhan's method, ..., was not a mechanistic, technological determinism. Instead, McLuhan was mining the interstices of media interaction for openings that allow human awareness and autonomy.” (Grosswiler, 1996)

Taking a different route within the same historical medial field is an visionary R&D engineer in the Cold War period, also being the co-'inventor' of the *mouse*, hypertext and multiple other computer related innovation. Douglas Engelbart puts up a theoretical as well as very practical „framework“ for developing „intelligence augmentation“ which not only relies on a problem-oriented collective of medially 'augmented' users, but at the same time makes the corporal interaction and cognitive ergonomics central to any interaction, consciously including simultaneous instrumental, medial and symbolic processes (see Thierry Bardini, 2000)¹⁸. His model of augmented cognitive actors – which bore within itself a cultural model based on the notion of *augmentation* – focused in on four 'augmentation means', which are heuristically conceived spheres of attention rather than specific kinds of technical means. Among these four he specifically lists *methodology*: “the methods, procedures, and strategies with which an individual organizes his goal-centered activity.” Setting himself consciously aside from the contemporary theory-programs of *cybernetics*, *artificial intelligence* and mere '*interactive computing*', he envisioned – and to some extent developed – a method in which the augmented user groups recursively re-incorporate the technologies, methods and conception arising out of the dynamic medial

16 This being in difference to abstentist theoretical descriptions like *systemstheory* or *post-humanist* and *post-structuralist* positions, all stressing a quasi-ontological prevalences of *observation*, *heterogenity*, *otherness*, *supplementarity* effectively de-potentializing medialized man as an medial, situated actor.

17 One of the few texts of the german-language discourse understanding McLuhan in this respect is Angela Spahr, 1996.

18 In some respects this paradigm today best exemplified by *Augmented Reality*.

augmentation process itself⁹. 'Bootstrapping' for him was a process of „feeding back of positive research results to improve the [medial] means by which the researchers themselves can pursue their work“ (Douglas Engelbart, 1962).

– Some examples of these two mediologies will be given in a medial presentation.

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19 "We feel that the effect of these augmentation developments upon group methods and group capability is actually going to be more pronounced than the effect upon individuals methods and capabilities," (Engelbart, 1962)

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