

Chapter 5

What Critical Media Studies Should Not Take from Actor–Network Theory

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ABSTRACT

While supportive towards a certain rapprochement between media studies and Actor-Network Theory (ANT) this chapter identifies three main characteristics of the Latourian enterprise that critical media studies should avoid if it wants to remain its critical edge: 1. a methodological descriptivism that relies on the victor's account, 2. a rejection of the notion of structure, and 3. an innovative yet limited notion of intellectual work. The chapter next articulates a perspective on how a “weak” version of ANT can augment critical media studies while retaining the latter's strong dedication to changing an unjust social order.

INTRODUCTION

When I presented in 2006 a version of the paper that eventually would become the article “Unblackboxing Production: What Media Studies Can Learn from Actor-Network Theory” (Teurlings 2013; hereafter *Unblackboxing Production*), I promised the audience in the conference room that I would write a follow-up that would detail what Media Studies should *not* wholeheartedly take from Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Despite my initial interest and enthusiasm for ANT I also thought - and keep on thinking - that the entire intellectual project comes with a methodological and political baggage that needs careful vetting. Unfortunately, other pressing concerns and interests intervened. The present article you are about to read is a belated attempt to uphold the promise I made in that room in 2006.

In the nine years that separate us from 2006 a lot has happened within the realm of Actor-Network Theory. Even more so than then, ANT has spread its wings, so we can now read ANT analyses within Media Studies, organisation sociology, management studies, cultural studies, mobility studies, anthropology, etc. Even the grand old lady of the academy, philosophy, has not been immune to its charms. Graham Harman, one of the philosophers associated with speculative realism, has praised “the greatness

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of Latour as a metaphysician” (in Latour, Harman & Erdélyi, 2011, para. 602; the argument is fully developed in Harman, 2009). Although reluctant at first (Latour, 2010a), Latour has taken up this metaphysical challenge in a recent book on the 14 modes of existence (Latour, 2014). All of these writings contain important elements for the questions I want to raise in this paper.

The argument will proceed as follows. I will first give a very short overview of the main arguments in *Unblackboxing Production*, a summary of what Media Studies can learn from ANT. I will then proceed with what I consider to be the three errors of the ANT method that Media Studies should *not* import: a tendency to describe actor-networks from the viewpoints of victors; a reluctance towards thinking the social in terms of structures, or at least to downplay its more systemic aspects; finally, an innovative yet limited politics of intellectual work. Based on these three criticisms the article argues that Media Studies should engage with a weak version of ANT if it wants to retain its critical edge, and in the conclusion it maps the contours of what such an engagement looks like.

This also raises the question what type of Media Studies this article wants to address. After all, Media Studies is a house with many rooms, even more so if we consider the partly overlapping field of mass communications. Even though it is an unlikely combination, I am interested in bringing ANT into contact with *critical* Media Studies. By critical Media Studies I mean those approaches in Media Studies that “address... the social and cultural effects of mass communications and their role in perpetuating an unjust social order” (Harms and Kellner, 1991, p. 41). With critical Media Studies I am thinking of the type of work that is influenced by the Frankfurt School and Marxism more generally, but also by feminism, queer theory and postcolonial theory. Bringing ANT into conversation with a field that proudly proclaims its criticality may seem like an odd choice, given that Latour has published an article in which the notion of critique is taken head-on (Latour, 2004). As this article will make clear, however, rather than abolishing critique altogether I think critical Media Studies can benefit from importing some of the insights of ANT without necessarily losing its commitment to challenge the “unjust social order” Harms and Kellner talk about.

MEDIA FROM AN ANT PERSPECTIVE

The most fruitful insight to take from ANT into Media Studies is that media are actor-networks, or put more precisely, the production of a media product entails establishing a network between actors different in kind (viewers/users, broadcasters/platforms, media producers). This view differs from the more traditional view that media are first and foremost *transmission* arrangements, with a message, signal or information being transported between two or more points in space. Moreover, the notion of actor-network presupposes that such a network is not given but needs to be established and maintained, since for ANT the danger of betrayal always looms large. Media producers can lose a pitch, pilots can fail to convince the test audience, writers can go on strike, viewers can get fed up with a show, networks can decide to reorient their brand... the possibilities for the undoing of a media network are endless.

Because the threat of undoing is always there, actors’ device strategies to keep the other actors in their network aligned. They can do so through constructing themselves as obligatory passage-points, by translating other actors into their programme, or by using immutable mobiles. In *Unblackboxing Production* I gave several examples of how these three concepts help to understand the field of (mass) media production. I also argued that such an ANT perspective has a major benefit to bring to Media Studies: since ANT is focused on (non)human organisation its conceptual apparatus is particularly suitable for

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