MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY

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It. *Antropologia dei media*; Fr. *Anthropologie des médias*; Germ. *Medienanthropologie*; Span. *Antropología de los medios*. Media Anthropology designates a broad field, generally concerned with media's specific preconditions, effects, and opportunities as seen from anthropological, ethnological, and ethnographic perspectives. Theoretical frameworks and research methods may vary, yet all approaches share a comparative perspective on individuals, sociocultural contexts and their respective media practices. While the American tradition in Media Anthropology examines the production, consumption and distribution of (mass) media, the focus of this entry is on an approach developed in Germany and in particular in Weimar. This approach, rooted in German Media Philosophy and Philosophical Anthropology, is centered on the concept of Anthropomediality, which highlights the constitutive relationship between humans and media. Rejecting a uniform concept of "human nature", this specific Media Anthropology considers that not only perception and knowledge conditions are determined by media, but also modes of existence as such. Aesthetics play a central role in the methodology of Media Anthropology, as aesthetic milieus offer themselves as privileged vantage points for analyzing the operational and procedural relations between humans and media. Moreover, aesthetics has an "anthropomedial performativity", since artistic practices not only allow for the observation of existing modes of human-media interactions but can also negotiate, transform, and create new ones.

HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT AND THE AMERICAN APPROACH TO MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY

From its terminological beginnings around 1970, "Media Anthropology" designated a diverse field, unified by "an awareness of the interaction (both real and potential) between the various academic and applied aspects of anthropology and the multitude of media" (Eiselein/Toppler 1976: 114), and encompassing different philosophical, anthropological, ethnological, and ethnographic perspectives on the specific preconditions, effects and opportunities of media perceived as pervasive. Theoretical frameworks and research methods in the "messy and open field" (Costa *et al.* 2023: 2) of Media Anthropology are diverse, yet all approaches share a comparative view on media, focusing on the individual, specific sociocultural

contexts and their respective media practices. Their understanding of media ranges from a broad view to an exclusive focus on modern and Western mass media; prominent studies such as those by Warner and Henry (1948) or Keil (1966) can be read as Media Anthropology *avant la lettre*. Apart from the Weimar approach, the predominantly American approach to Media Anthropology is characterized by a strong focus on mass media (turning their "attention from 'exotic' to mundane and from 'indigenous' to manufactured culture"; Coman/Rothenbuhler 2005: 1), media, its practices of production, distribution, consumption, and impact. Furthermore, this approach stands out by bringing together three directions: (1.) Anthropological, ethnologic and ethnographic research of media, (2.) the use of media in these areas (e.g. field notes, photography, video and audio recordings), as well as (3.) teaching, communicating, and popularizing anthropological research to a broader public through media, which might be beneficial for anthropologists themselves ("The more media exposure the anthropologist has, the more widely known are his/her name, reputation, and the nature of his/her work"; Eiselein/Toppler 1976: 119). At the same time, and closely intertwined with these practices, experimental approaches to Media Anthropology conduct anthropological and ethnographical research, especially on subjective experiences in media practices, by exploiting the specific possibilities of media (see for example Emmanuel Mark Bamidele's film *Paradise in My Mind* (2015), which explores the production and impact of Nollywood films in Switzerland).

THE WEIMAR APPROACH: MEDIA ANTHROPOLOGY BETWEEN MEDIA PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

The Weimar approach to Media Anthropology, on the other hand, has its roots in (German) Media Philosophy, and emerged in the 1980s (although based on the work of precursors like Ernst Kapp, Marshall McLuhan, and Günther Anders), at the same time as the rise to ubiquity of computers and the internet. The growing adoption of such technologies generated theoretical questions concerning, among other issues, the integration of all preceding media in the new medium, the substitution of reality by means of simulated, virtual realities and the position of the human in media-determined situations. The discourse about Media Philosophy in the early 2000s concentrates on the question of what is to be understood by the term. Is it either a sub-discipline of philosophy focusing on media and their epistemological implications, or even a contemporary *prima philosophia,* which could be described as *the* fundamental cultural discourse? Even though, at first glance, the different positions in this discourse do not seem to have much in common, they all share the idea that media or medialities are an unavoidable aspect of human existence. Even perspectives describing the project of Media Philosophy as "a temporary matter" (Seel 2003: 10) attribute a considerable role in the shaping of historical and cultural reality to media operations. Also, there were at least two proclamations of a *medial turn* by Reinhard Margreiter and Stefan Münker to be heard following the preceding cultural and epistemological turns of the 20th century (especially Richard Rorty's *linguistic*, W.J.T. Mitchell's *pictorial*, or Gottfried Boehm's iconic turn), perceiving media as an *a priori* determining all perception and therefore all conditions

of knowledge. The Weimar Media Anthropology does not explicitly put itself in any of these lines of discourse, but is informed by Media Philosophy's broad understanding of what media are: "The term 'media' as media philosophy understands it, comprises three components: (1) everything that lies in between, that is, the intermediate; (2) the material bodies and procedures of mediation; (3) the encompassing milieu" (Voss 2023: 20).

In this sense, the Weimar approach on Media Anthropology argues that media and humans are always intertwined or "entangled" (Voss/Engell/Othold 2023). This perspective takes up a middle ground between two media theoretical positions of some popularity: the "anthropological and possibly even anthropocentric a priori" (ibid.: 5) idea by Marshall McLuhan that media are 'extensions of man' nor Friedrich Kittler's techno-deterministic perspective. As an alternative to these two positions, this branch of Media Anthropology develops an idea pioneered by Christiane Voss and termed "anthropomediality", which "aims to highlight the irreducible mediality of human existence as well as the immanent polymorphism of their entanglements, manifesting in concrete situations, operations and constellations" (ibid.: 8). Therefore, the concept of anthropomediality replaces additive or instrumental understandings of the relations between humans and media while focusing on these relations instead of their *relata*.

Originating from a focus on the questions of where, when and under which conditions the "human" is, instead of the question of *what* the "human" is (cf. Engell/Siegert 2013), the concept of anthropomediality "puts its emphasis on questions of *how* existence-forming processes can be described in their operational dimensions" (Voss 2023: 17). While partially descending from Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen, the Weimar approach distances itself from these philosophical anthropologies "for being too subject-centered and for their ideological motivation in the tendency to universalize arbitrary and particular characterizations of 'the human'" (ibid.: 18). In contrast, for Weimar scholars "the plurality of manifestations of human existence replaces a uniform concept of 'human nature'" (Voss/Krtilova/Engell 2019: 1). This also follows their aspiration to evade the strong anthropocentrism inherent in former anthropological considerations. At the same time, they accept that a "weak, heuristic anthropocentrism is inescapable as soon as we examine forms of 'human' modes of existence" (Voss 2023: 24). To put the emphasis on the operational and processual relations between human(s) and media (technology) instead of these *relata*, the method of Weimar Media Anthropology consists in describing and analyzing anthropomedial scenes. This "thinking from the relations" might seem complex, and the necessity of "detailed descriptions and scenic analyses bear[ing] considerable weight in its analytical work" might "be considered a disadvantage", but it enables the appropriate portrayal of "the relational, processual character of hybrid modes of existence" as well as an explanation of "what it means to be operatively entangled with a myriad of (nonhuman) factors" (ibid.: 28). For this endeavor, "aesthetic analysis is the methodology of choice to gain the necessary distance to the phenomena being examined" (ibid.).

AESTHETIC AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERFORMATIVITY

Regarding aesthetics, Media Anthropology's relational approach aims to overcome the limitations of both traditional philosophical aesthetics and technocentric tendencies in Media Aesthetics. The aesthetic tradition since Baumgarten and Kant has mostly concentrated on human modes of sensory perception, considering the role of media "just as an abstraction" (Drucker 2010: 6). On the other hand, Walter Benjamin inspired the development of Media Aesthetics, a branch of aesthetics analyzing how sensory perception is culturally influenced and technically shaped (a perspective that risks however techno-deterministic positions like Kittler's). On the contrary, Media Anthropology discusses aesthetic practices neither from the perspective of human individuals and their sensory perception exclusively, nor only focusing on their media-technical conditions.

A starting point for thinking about a relational, non-essentialist paradigm in the field of aesthetics is constituted by the work of Etienne Souriau and its reception by Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour. Souriau focuses on the processual "modes of existence" of the artwork seen as a "work-to-be-made" (*oeuvre à faire*; for example, a lump of clay molded by an artist and transformed into a statue). Instead of describing the statue solely as an end product, the realization of an artist's project, Souriau depicts it as the result of a process of "diastematic relation" (Souriau 2015: 236) between the human and the clay in which the statue is "instaurated" (ibid.: 236) and "moves towards existence" (ibid.: 127). The artistic practice does not consist in the application of a form to a passive material waiting for the animating spark of the human spirit, but it is a "dramatic and perpetual exploration" (ibid.: 229), an adventure of mutual constitution. The material "welcomes, gathers, prepares, explores and invents" (Stengers/Latour 2015: 21) different possibilities and the artist's activity is configured as a form of responsibility towards the work, intended as the capacity of responding to the affordances of the work-to-be-made.

Some authors further developing Media Anthropology show that aesthetic milieus provide a privileged vantage point for analyzing the relationships between human forms of existence and media, while others plead for a more radical ontological interest in the "anthropomedial performativity" of aesthetics (Engell/Voss 2015: 13). Artistic practices not only allow for the observation of existing modes of human-media interactions but can also negotiate, transform, and create new ones. Eva Schürmann (2018) shows that aesthetic practices of representation should be understood in their poietic dimension, not as the mimetic reproduction of "something as something", but as the generation of impressions and modes of appearance through media that constitute human existence and social reality. The "Film Anthropology" of Edgard Morin goes in a similar direction, proposing a conception of the human being not as a given, static unity but rather as a supervenient effect emerging from the cinematic images. Morin's "imaginary man" is a technical and aesthetic figure originated by the medium of film that condenses human possibilities and implements his unconscious capacities (cf. Morin 2005).

While Morin's Film Anthropology still concentrates on an imaginary and mostly immaterial man, Voss, inspired by the film phenomenologist Vivian Sobchack, applies these reflections to the living and affective body. Voss (2013) introduces the concept of *Leihkörper*, "Borrowed Body", suggesting that film borrows the bodies of the viewers to become sensory effective. Within the cinematic space and for the duration of the film screening, the spectators are affected, transformed, and merged with the medium, lending their bodies to the film along with their imaginative, emotional, somatic, and perceptual capacities. In this way, Media Anthropology goes beyond the neurological theory of cinematic embodiment as it describes affective intertwinings between the organic and the technical, enabling forms of aesthetic experience and, consequently, subject formations that are inherently hybrid. Therefore, Media Anthropology also implies a conception of the aesthetic domain as involving, not merely an experience that a human subject has, but a space of sensation – a dynamic, agentic, energetic zone generated by the interplay between the medium and the resonant bodies of the spectators. This entanglement dislocates the boundaries between object and subject, technology and nature, human and non-human, thus revealing the political potential of Media Anthropology to queer traditional dichotomies, replacing the conception of a unique and normative "human nature" with the recognition of a plurality and hybridity of forms of existence.

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