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Repositorium für die Medienwissenschaft

Editorial

Research in cultural techniques and media philosophy owe their existence to the fading and passing, the becoming impossible, and finally even the ban on ontology. Just like media history and media theory, they even represent a form of processing of this ending of ontology and a reaction to it. The concept of »Being«, the singular subject of all ontology, taken as unchangeable and as residing somewhere behind or even above all its realizations, concretions and manifestations in the materially existing world, had already been strongly suspected by positivism, vitalism and phenomenology, but had not yet been stripped off. Existential philosophy then ventured further, until finally a number of diverse schools of thought like Foucault's history of knowledge or Derrida's deconstruction, Quine's logic, Heinz von Foerster's constructivism, Luhmann's functionalism, or process philosophy in the aftermath of Whitehead could definitively reject ontology with highly effective—albeit strongly diverging—reasons and arguments. These theories and philosophical schools did not agree on anything but on the rejection of ontology. Accordingly, the »ontological difference«, which provided that one could not speak about »Being« in the same way as about an existing being, had to be reconsidered. One solution was to project the ontological difference back into the multitude and materiality of the existing and to provide it with a new language of description and to read it against the backdrop of new types of questions. The offer that media theory and history, the cultural techniques approach, and media philosophy were able to make—successfully—in this situation was essentially a reappraisal not only of technics (»Die Technik«) in the ontological sense, but of technologies and techniques, of practices and their aesthetics. To use Heideggers terms, the focus was now set on »switching« (»Schalten«) rather than on »ruling« (»Walten«). The ban on ontology was nonetheless fully respected, and in cultural and media studies the observation of techniques and technologies, means and processes of the incessant self-differentiation of anything that is ruled out the persistent stunning standstill vis-à-vis the great ontological difference of Being and the existing beings.

However, something seems to have changed recently with respect to that ban on ontology. It no longer seems to apply without any exceptions. This does not, however, lead to downright violations of the verdict, but to perforations and infiltrations, even if the ban is still defended, of course, and still rightly so. Nevertheless, it is a recurring experience that questions that were thrown out of the

window used to come in again through the door; and this holds true also for the question of Being. Bruno Latour's spectacular rediscovery and continuation of the project of Etienne Souriau's »modes of existence« for example, or the revival and pluralization of the concept of ontology in anthropology, as in Descola, Viveiros de Castro and Kohn, can be conceived of as indications of this shifting. These and various others of the new »Onto-…« theories are in no way about returning to procedures and positions of an ontology that has been already overcome. They do not promulgate revisionist programmes. Rather, they result from the genuine insight of cultural and media studies that observing something is first of all always already in itself a technically equipped, space, time, and (in the physical sense) body involving practice of, for instance, articulation, differentiation, evidence production, and phenomenotechnics, of depiction and description. Its ontic nature therefore is not different from that what it observes, i. e. from anything that exists. It does not hover above things, but operates amongst them on the very same level.

Second, observation is also laterally entangled with the observed object, it is part of it, because it is a feedback activity, which precisely propels the very observed movement of self-differentiation of anything that is actually (be it emerging or made). Therefore, we do no deal any longer with the forbidden ontological question of what (something) is, but with the question—which has to be distinguished from the former—of how something is and by what means; or how and by what means something comes into existence and takes place; the question being how it is made, what it does, and where, and when. The Weimar project of »Operative Ontologies«, to which this journal has already dedicated a special issue, is deeply inscribed into this strand of thinking. It deals with the operations that call something into being; that set up and maintain existence, and with the media by which and in which these operations take place. The basic idea is about the same in all these approaches: Ontologies do not wait for philosophers to be written and then descend on the world; rather, they are writing themselves as materially existing and effective operations. They are at work everywhere, they arise from the practices of everyday life, from the arts, from technologies, cults and sciences; and they have always been reified in artefacts. »Being« does not exist as »the one«, but there are multiple ways and means and modes of being, which always rest in the materially existing-in-the-world. They can be seen and read from it, but they cannot be detached from it.

Ontography, which is the focus of this issue of the ZMK, is a special branch of »Operative Ontologies«. Ontography is at the same time a concept, a procedure and a way of existence. Of the many operations that set up and maintain existence and call things into being, ontography centers on graphic operations, more precisely: the cultural techniques of designing, drawing, sketching and recording, of writing, of listing, of diagrammatics, and other techno-aesthetic graphics such

as photography, cinematography, radiography. In contrast to other techniques implemented by operative ontology (like opening, discriminating, condensing, folding), ontography has a special proximity to utensils and instruments, to the techniques and technologies of drawing and registering, to the tools of painting and writing ranging from the stick in the sand to high-tech imaging tools. Unlike e. g. the operation of distinction so dear to Spencer-Brown's topo-ontology, ontographies are not imaginable as being bodiless (in the physical sense). This close connection of the ontographic to its media also distinguishes the concept of ontography from that of autopoiesis, with which it has some similarities, but which ignores any media of self-reference as it supposedly can do without. In addition, by taking into account the materials of drawing and recording, ontography is closely connected to the domain of aesthetics, especially if one allows this domain not only to concern human beings, but also to encompass the entire field of self-perception and self-inscription of matter, as it is outlined for instance already by Romanticist natural philosophy and more recently by Karen Barad's »Agential Realism«. But aesthetics also play a role in ontography in the more limited sense of artistic operations. In addition to pictorial, rhetorical, literary, and poetic procedures such as description, in particular operations like enumeration or the formation of lists shift into perspective. An open list for instance exercises an ontographic function insofar as it shows a tendency towards self-perpetuation. Moreover, its contingency derives directly from the items listed as the list represents only a very low-threshold form of processing than what it registers. On the other hand, however, unlike in traditional ontology, ontography does not prioritize or privilege in any way verbal writing and language in general. As in all operative ontology, concepts are replaced by operations, namely those of drawing, recording and depicting, as they take place within ontic reality; and here again the ontographical attention for the continuous movement implied in the operations is prevalent and less for the fixed result. Finally, ontography possesses an ambiguity, which at the same time constitutes it. On the one hand, the very procedures that—as part of ontic reality—record or »write« the respective being can be qualified as ontographic. On the other hand, also the special mode of being of those entities whose reality consists precisely of the fact that they carry out the operations of recording, or of depicting, or registering is ontographic. Drawing is ontographical, on the one hand, because it registers something and, on the other hand, because it consists in itself only of that very process of registering. And thirdly, both sides of ontography feed back to each other as what is recorded or drawn is precisely the transcript of the process of the recording or drawing itself.

The concept of »ontography« is one of those concepts that are reinvented over and over again without thereby forming a stable chain of reference. At least three of the authors involved in this issue of ZMK, for example, state that they initially

chose the term freely believing that they were introducing something original, and only later became aware of earlier and analog uses of the same term. In recent decades, however, the notion of ontography has appeared with some regularity and has recently even experienced some systematic exploration. Mostly, however, those who use the term do not care about what others mean by it. And if they do they strongly reject other scholar's understandings of ontography as Graham Harman did with regard to Michael Lynch's understanding of ontography. Even the history of concepts can hardly be of any help here because the concept of ontography can only be traced back until 1904. Prior to that date the traces of the concept's origins lead into uncertainty. Thus, the earliest source for the term »ontography« found so far was a ghost story of a certain M. R. James with the strange title *Oh Whistle And I Come to You My Lad*, taken from Robert Burns' poem of the same title, in which one of the protagonists is called »Professor of Ontography«. From the same year dates evidence of a revealing early scientific use of the term, namely in geography, when H. Goode conceived of the anthropo–geographical relationship between human and landscape, the distribution of living beings on the earth's surface, and further the ecological relationships between part and whole as »ontography«, probably synonymous with what we would call »ecology« today.

In the more recent context of the term's discussion essentially two different notions of ontography prevail. On the one hand, the concept of ontography appears in the context of »speculative realism« and »object-oriented ontologies«. These approaches are concerned with separating material reality from the status of the object vis–à–vis a (human) subject. To this end, Graham Harman, followed by other authors, created an ontography as a graphic tool of thought, a diagrammatic process by which physical entities can be seen, on the one hand, as separate from their properties and, on the other hand, as independent from their perceptions or observations and their being remembered. In this way, the relationships that things entertain among themselves are meant to become visible without observers and without description, i. e. above all without us as human beings and without any supplementation by an assumed »consciousness«. While from the perspective of media theory and »operative ontologies« the overcoming of the object status of things is certainly of some relevance, anti–correlationism, which must appear untenable to media theory, is problematic.

On the other hand, there is a phenomenological understanding of ontography, such as Michael Stadler finds it in Heinrich Rombach's work. Strictly abbreviated, the phenomenological version of ontography assumes exactly the opposite of the former one, namely that ontography is a visual modelling that creates immediacy between consciousness and the portrayed. Ontography as visual ontology thus confirms what conceptual knowledge hardly ever makes accessible: every rep-

resentation of something that exists has always been inseparably connected with that something. This applies to consciousness or objects of description as well as to the media in particular. A statement about something that exists which is independent of that something is therefore not possible. An ontographic method would take this into account instead of ignoring it. For a media-theoretical approach this would only be acceptable if one renounced the phenomenological primacy of consciousness and if at the same time consciousness was regarded as an effect of ontographic and thus medial relations and operations.

Ian Bogost occupies a peculiar intermediate position. On the one hand, like Harman, he wants to foreground the things themselves. On the other hand, he also assumes that independent statements on anything being must always ignore their own prior engagement with that being (be it with the empirical person making the statements or with the technical or physical medium in which those statements are articulated). According to Bogost, ontology, unlike ontography, must always pretend that it has nothing to do with what it is talking about. Therefore, he calls for an ontography that could directly address matter itself. In addition, he insists that ontographic procedures should be especially a-temporal because he assumes with Kant that time is a form of contemplation (»Anschauungsform«) and thus a condition that the subject imposes a priori on the perceived world. In media theory, however, one of the main features of ontography as an operative ontology consists precisely of making evident the operation of registering the operative character of which necessarily provides for a temporal process. All ontographies, on the other hand, seem to have in common that, on the one hand, they assume that images, graphics, and diagrams counteract conceptual understanding and description by means of visual perception. On the other hand, they expect, probably with the single exception of Merleau-Ponty, that what ontographically exists will become evident immediately and by itself without regard to the media that produce this evidence in the first place. In media theory these two basic assumptions are again highly problematic because they appear contradictory—nonlinguistic and nonverbal visual media like the image and the number are nevertheless still media and thus mediating instances, even if media, as we know, tend to render themselves transparent and thus invisible.

Thus the available views on ontography are quite divergent, even if they display similarities in various isolated regards. However, instead of discussing definitions it might be more instructive to follow the methodological requirement of operative ontologies, namely to pursue the operations themselves. For the operations of ontography itself are by no means vague and contradictory; rather, they are at work in clearly defined and concrete contexts. Ontography thus appears as a property and a characteristic, or more precisely: as a mode of existence of a certain kind of things that exist only insofar as they are being drawn like a draft or a diagram, or

listed up like entries in a catalogue, or written up as in a script; so that they do not exist outside these procedures, i. e. without being drawn, registered, or written. Ontography in this sense should be understood less as a method (or as a special and possibly privileged access to existing beings) rather than as a mode of existence.

In his theory of the archive, Jörg Paulus has provided a first example of this. An archive, he argues, turns into ontography when it documents and records processes that affect the archive itself, such as its own staff or acquisition files, its budget drafts and accounts, consultation protocols and register files. This idea of ontographic archivation could be applied to other facts, too, as for instance the annual rings of the trees which are ontographies inasmuch as the tree itself is at the same time writing utensil and document and consists precisely of this, producing information about the conditions to which it was subjected. Paulus extends this thought to the perhaps most comprehensive ontography we can observe in space and time: the earth's crust. It also, in its very nature, is the archive of the processes by which it was formed.

The image of classical television, rendered by cathode ray tubes, is another impressive example of an ontographic way of being. It consists exclusively of being drawn or written. 50 times per second the cathode ray runs across the screen from top left to bottom right. Line by line and dot by dot, the ray touches the individual pixels which light up briefly and fade again as the ray moves on, and light up again when the ray passes through again. Even before the whole screen is »written« in this way the image is already disappearing. Nothing remains. On the same surface of the screen an uninterrupted stream of drawing or writing runs through and touches the pixels without ever completing a retrievable or repeatable record, a time-resistant, object-like sign that would survive the process of recording and writing itself. In this sense, the television image is a continuous drawing and an incessant disappearance. It is precisely not an »immutable mobile« in the sense of Bruno Latour, but an immobile that is constantly changing in itself (since it always appears at the same place, on this television screen). »Ontography« does not work here in the same way as in lithography, photography, or diagrams for example, but in the sense of becoming incessantly drawn.

Television also transfers its ontography onto everything it shows and represents. It thereby changes ontography by turning it into a method of world mediation or a kind of cartogaphy of the existing in the sense of Harman and Bogost. There is reason to assume that through television we can only perceive the world as if it were always already ontographic by its very nature, only existing in the state of its ongoing being recorded. Television is not only a process of continuous self-drawing, but depicts the world as if also the latter consisted precisely of this process. Television constantly allows the world to register itself, i. e. it turns the world ontographic.

And what applies to television in the form of the classical picture tube can also be found elsewhere. Micheal Lynch, for instance, has pointed out that in computer-aided molecular microscopy, not unlike the process of the picture tube, the observable microscopic entities themselves have to be written and even manipulated by the apparatus, i. e. ontographically and operatively activated, in order to become effective in this activity and thus recognizable at all. They, too, exist as micromolecular facts only to the extent that they are constantly written.

For media and cultural research the concept of ontography in its current state of development is hardly more than a suggestion meant to inspire further elaboration; as such it holds a whole series of challenges in store. The first is to determine the scope of the term: Which ontological operations and procedures should be comprehended as non-ontographic and how do they relate to ontography? How can we distinguish ontography more clearly from self-reference, from mere autopoiesis, from related forms of recursion, feedback, and re-entry? What is gained when more traditional medial operations such as mimesis, representation, or transmission are rendered readable as ontographies? Can the ontographic mode be defined especially as a medially grounded mode of existence in the sense of Latour's canon of modes of existence? And finally, one can expect that further analyses will expand and consolidate the heuristic value of the concept. Hopefully the processing and answering of these questions will further the insight into the possibilities and conditions of an operative (media) ontology.

Weimar, April 2019   *The Editors*