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From media anthropology to anthropomediality

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Abstract

Media anthropology is a new and interdisciplinary field of research with very different subjects and methods that seems to be already heavily informed by a comparatively narrow understanding of *media* as *mass media* (e.g. TV, Internet, social web, etc.). Therefore, most theories in this field, at least implicitly, employ a hierarchical and often dichotomic preconception of the two poles of media-human relations, by analysing the operationalities and ontologies of *the human* and *the media* independently from one another. This article deviates from this line of thought by advocating an expanded, symmetrical and relational understanding of the terms media and human, taking them as always already intermingled facets of a broader dynamic configuration. Starting from a consideration of the historically powerful, yet overlooked media of the so-called habitat diorama, the heuristic concept of "anthropomediality" is to be developed. Eventually, this relational approach may open up a new, interesting field for interrogation of (media-)anthropological analysis in general.

KEYWORDS: media anthropology, anthropomediality, anthropological knowledge, museum exhibitions, diorama, relationality

Introduction

Imagine entering a Museum of Natural History, wandering through different sections and time periods, and spotting – amidst the diverse gathering of visitors, tagged display cases, and illustrative screens – a series of human skulls. They have been carefully arranged to demonstrate the evolutionary steps of mankind and next to them are several taxidermied animals displayed in habitat dioramas, embodying a link to time periods and states of nature otherwise inaccessible to us. All of these items, prior to becoming exhibits, underwent different operations and stages of transformation: some of them were found, others were hunted and killed, but all of them were cleaned, transported, analysed, catalogued and prepared for exhibition. As exhibits, they are preserved through time, with

their individual biographies often becoming irrelevant in favour of demonstrating more typical poses and attributes of the generic groups to which they belong.

Now consider this seemingly naïve question: What is going on in this situation, a situation where we encounter the dead remains of ancestral humans and stuffed representations of previously living creatures? Especially regarding the question of representation it is striking that museums seem to differentiate, at least aesthetically, between what or who is important and characteristic in the presentation of life forms in dioramas and what or who is relegated to being a mere ornamental prop and part of their background designs. An important part of the answer has to be the context of the museum itself, the foundation of its practices of display in aesthetical, educational as well as epistemic claims and responsibilities. While early museums tended to simply present their whole inventory of collected objects, this changed under the influence of a systematic and hierarchical system of classifying botany and zoology – introduced by, among others, Carl Linnaeus in the 18th century – and later on with Darwin's work. Museums started to select and arrange objects in order to show evolutionary processes and illustrate the theoretical insights of the time. They became what could be called epistemic machines. They also began to reflect ecological factors with the inclusion of the mentioned habitat dioramas, which predominantly addressed children and laymen. Conceived of as a means of evoking mimetic impulses to re-enact or re-live the encounters the scientists and possibly taxidermists originally had when they were in the field, these dioramas were supposed to affect visitors and elicit curiosity about the world in which their ancestors lived. Such displays thus engage the imagination of their spectators by means of fictionalisation and storytelling. They are not just mummifications of the past so much as narrative devices of reconstructed history. In effect, they are a form of media and can figure as immersive interfaces and environmental schematas for a possible self-reflection and self-relocation of their spectators. They, therefore, constitute a complex media configuration of artificial and natural materials that is clearly connected with anthropology. Even so, this specific configuration and its deeper implications are not the kinds of media settings with which 'media anthropology' are usually concerned. However, what if they should be?

Media anthropology

Broadly understood as being 'to one degree or another, in varying ways and for varying purposes, the use of anthropological concepts and methods in the study of the media,' as Eric Rothenbuhler (2008: 3) puts it, media anthropology is an inherently interdisciplinary field. It is the meeting point of anthropologists concerned with the study of media effects on human life and society, and of media studies, employing or being inspired by anthropological concepts. The term *media*, in this context, is less focused on musealised skulls and animals and more on modern and post-modern *mass media* as, for example, Mihai Coman (2005: 19) demonstrates:

> cultural anthropology cannot ignore mass media: not because they are an important social reality, but simply because they are Culture itself. The cultural anthropology of post-modernity cannot be anything else than media

anthropology: this just means that media anthropology becomes the general frame, as was cultural anthropology until now, for the various anthropologies of post-modernity.

Apart from emphasising the importance of this emerging discipline and heralding its scientific role, the surprising implication of Coman's statement is this: cultural anthropology in modern or pre-modern times[1] *could* be something else than media anthropology. Apparently, mass media become and are a culture in a way that other forms of media are not – leaving our prehistorical skulls and old-fashioned dioramas, as well as books, paintings, sculptures, and architecture, in a very questionable state concerning their cultural relevance. While it is easy to argue that, of course, not only mass media but all forms of media contribute to, produce and, in effect, are culture, the point here is not to declare all (cultural) anthropology to be essentially media anthropology; after all, the shift towards media is recent, and anthropology historically was, in fact, something else. The point is instead to question how this discipline considers media and in what this consideration results.

Uncertainty

The shift of anthropological interest towards media is no coincidence. Like history, philosophy or any other field, anthropology is not an isolated endeavour, but embedded in its world, its context and interconnected with countless other fields and developments. Historically, even after being arranged as educating displays, the "correct" or valid analysis of how exactly the skulls and specimen in the museums relate to each other was not static, but depended on the prevailing theories of evolution, migration, and other topics, and thus changed over time. In the same way, science as a whole is historically contingent: its disciplines and discourses are conditioned by a historical *a priori*, as Michel Foucault (1969) points out. Moreover, with Friedrich Kittler (1985, 1986), we may add to that a media-technological *a priori*, and consider that media also influence and shape what can be said and how. As such, when these media start to produce their masses and become mass media, affecting and effecting social and cultural change in new ways, a certain anthropological interest is to be expected. Even more so, in a situation in which digital media are deeply ingrained in our day-to-day lives, where they are ubiquitous to the point of becoming atmospheric, it seems to become a necessity.

Thus far, this media-anthropological response has taken several directions, ranging from, very broadly and in no way exhaustive, the use of ethnographic methods to determine the effect of certain media on certain groups of people (e.g. in the case

[1] After Bruno Latour's *We have never been modern* (1993), it seems necessary to at least question Coman's use of the term post-modernity, regardless of it being accompanied by anthropology or not. If, as per Latour, the modernist division of nature and culture is accepted as illusory, then post-modernity would come to either be a reaction to a problem already solved or a dire sign of lacking the required terms to describe what is actually meant. Both would have consequences for any discipline of post-modernity, including anthropology. In the end, however, Latour only argues against a very specific idea of modernity – one with an apparently compulsory dualism of nature and culture – and neglects that other theories and perspectives might not share nor conform to his definition. Coman's use of "post-modernity" for one, seems to come from a more historically aligned understanding.

of technological leapfrogging) to engaging with modern mass media in the traditional categories of ritual and myth to exploring the capacity of film for anthropological content (for a more comprehensive overview, see Askew & Wilk 2002; Ginsburg et al. 2002). In many of these studies, a narrow focus on certain kinds of mass media, related to the one encountered in the quote by Mihai Coman, becomes apparent: especially forms of film, television, and now (mobile) Internet and social media are richly debated topics. In concert with Rothenbuhler's definition of media anthropology as 'the use of anthropological concepts and methods in the study of the media' (2008: 3), the unspoken but implied premise here seems to be an understanding of a culture or a society as some sort of discrete entity, to which is then added some media, capable of being analyzed as an isolated element and manifested as instances of mass media. However, while they are no doubt important subjects, an excessive focus on them seems short-sighted at best. In practice, the latest Hollywood blockbuster is no isolated incident, but one of many, and its release is probably scheduled so as to avoid conflict with other movies or the newest instalment of successful video game franchises, e.g. *Halo* or *Call of Duty*. Television series such as *Breaking Bad* and *Game of Thrones* are not just being watched, but globally discussed online and commercially accompanied by everything from T-shirts to bobbleheads. Moreover, some people will watch and play all of them – film, game, and series – while sitting on a modern designer sofa, streaming the content from a router set on a shelf bought from *IKEA*. Similarly, mobile Internet and Facebook are indeed important vectors of socio-political change, but so is the fact that they might be browsed by someone standing in a *Starbucks* in Shanghai. In short, the predominantly studied forms of media are but very visible facets, which are (along with their audience, their creators and the anthropologists examining them) entrenched in a myriad of other modes of communication, objects, and locations that all can and have to be considered as media as well.

This perspective broadens the understanding of media, but also makes it more diffuse and uncertain – an uncertainty that extends to the other eponymous aspect of media anthropology: the human. Looking at works such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer* or *Last and First Men* by Olaf Stapledon, it is evident that media can question what "human" means or will mean, in a strictly anthropological sense of the word and otherwise. However, our media-technologically induced uncertainty is more pervasive and more contemporary. An example of it might be found in the remarkable *How we Became Posthuman* by N. Katherine Hayles (1999). In it, she portrays and maligns the evolution of the notion of information as a disembodied entity, independent of material form or instantiation, which according to her results in a concept of the posthuman, where 'there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot technology, and human goals' (Hayles 1999: 3). She then attempts to rethink the articulation of humans and (intelligent) machines and works towards a different view of the posthuman, simultaneously embracing the possibilities of modern information technology while recognising the embodiment of information and human beings alike. It has to be noted that the "human" becoming abandoned in its confrontation with the "post"-prefix is not the biological human, with a body conditioned by evolution and a host of potential museum exhibits as ancestors,

but the concept of a human as an autonomous, individualised agent and as a 'liberal humanist subject' (Hayles 1999: 2). Hayles' posthuman is an accumulation, bound up with intelligent machines and thus inescapably embodied and embedded in a more dynamic, complex and unpredictable world than a classical "subject" could ever be.

A similar position is articulated by Mark B. N. Hansen over the course of *Embodying Technesis* (2000), *New Philosophy for New Media* (2004) and *Bodies in Code* (2006). The complete argument is too nuanced and extensive for the scope of this article, but most pertinent is that his comparable focus on embodiment and digital media is rooted in the diagnosis that mainstream thought has so far been unable to adequately grasp the complexity and specificity of technology and technological experience: 'Rather than an instrumentalist or socially programmed axiomatic reducible to capitalism, technology embodies the very contact between humankind and the world on which societal forms are themselves constructed' (Hansen 2000: 235).

Hansen views technology not as an accidental, additional element of human experience, but as something far more fundamental and ingrained. Technology is not just – and never was – a mere variation of social, cultural or semiotic discourse; it is pre-social, even pre-linguistic, and an elemental part of human embodiment and being. Similar to Hayles, such an interconnectedness of human and technology inevitably blurs their boundaries.

While Hayles and Hansen are only two theorists among many and their works lie outside the realm – and maybe even the interest – of anthropology as well as of most media anthropology, their arguments should not be easily discounted. Both offer resources for a new understanding not of 'human' but of 'being human' from a media-anthropological perspective by founding them on the premise that technology and per extension media are inherent to life and human experience from their very beginning. This approach can and should be extended to the way media and humans are to be reconceptualised as intertwined entities or anthropomedialities.

A question of perspective

If we do not conceive of media as an external factor, but as one of many interdependent basic aspects of being in general, if we do not look for the *causal* effects of certain forms of media, but examine how they enable different and new modes of existence, then a shift in perspective might be reached. Media anthropology would be turned over into a more self-reflexive and relational conceptualisation of life, concerned instead with anthropomedial configurations (cf. Voss 2010, 2015). Similar to the move Hayles and Hansen advocate, the human would no longer be the starting point and foundation, anchored in isolated and abstract debates of what, precisely, human does or should mean. The human would come to be more like a nexus in the changing media networks. In particular, the basic imaginary and affective movements and experiences of self-reflection relevant in the interaction with displays of musealised skulls and animals could be made explicit, as well as other enmeshments with fictional and immersive environments and scenarios in general. These kinds of immersive media settings would cease to be merely an external

element, "happening" to people, who nevertheless stay who and what they are as if they were locked-in identities. Much more than that, media, from mass media to displays and dioramas, would – and indeed do – figure as significant transformative functions of our existences. They help to shape and reshape our experiences and reflections of our historical situatedness by mediating between past, present and future.

With this in mind, the habitat dioramas and human skulls displayed in the museum can be thought of and examined differently than before. The first intuition was that their importance derives from their status and use as semantic machines and epistemic media, in that they illustrate and exemplify knowledge about the evolution of humanity. Perceiving them as anthropomedial configurations does not invalidate this interpretation, but reveals it as incomplete: Especially the habitat dioramas are not only products of anthropology, of zoological and biological investigations and scenographic as well as taxidermic practices. They themselves impact and produce anthropological differences: after inspecting the built scenarios of natural habitats and environments that are reenacted in dioramas, one might become keenly aware of biodiversity and the larger timeframes of life in general of which one's own personal life is only a part, and also aware of death, both possibly leading to a changed outlook on past, present and future or, slightly less abstract, on issues of preservation and ecology. Alternatively, the taxidermied specimen of an animal long since extinct might induce a sense of marvel at the course of evolution or, conversely, incense a firm Christian believer. While the effects and affects at play in such media-anthropological interactions certainly can be short-lived and remain transitory, they do not have to. Illusionary dispositives such as dioramas do not merely lead to a (re-)consideration of certain world views – the realisation being that they are media settings and can communicate anthropological content. Under the broadened conception of anthropomediality, they actually open up and make possible new territories of thinking, feeling, interacting and being, along with a de- and relocation of subject-object-relations. The fact is that, regardless of magnitude, the dioramas as media settings do have the potential to affect the visitors' imagination of and epistemic approaches to the world, causing them to frame their "being-in-the-world" differently than before. In this sense, in constructing and then watching and relating to dioramas and displays of human remains, we are framing and creating ourselves through a deeply media-technological enactment.

Anthropomediality

Anthropomediality then, encompassing the experiences of visitors to a museum as well as traditional, electronic, and also digital mass media, can be used as an umbrella term for different hybrid and temporary modes of existence, that consist of interacting heterogeneous facets and entities – organic and non-organic, human and non-human ones. They can be identified where, for example, immersive or otherwise affected reactions and approaches to a technical device, a discourse, an institution or to other framing "machineries" take place. If media settings affect things and living beings as well as their mutual relations, their constitutive facets cannot be separated from each other without destroying the

(concept of the) emergent hybrid entity in question. Because anthropomedial entities are not abstract entities, they cannot be defined in abstract and general terms. Instead, they are brought about by and in very concrete environmental milieus, such as in political, judicial and social institutions, in coffee shops, cinemas and in museums.

Crucially, however, this overall perspective is anchored in and informed by the awareness that in our current, collective media practices most of the traditionally claimed anthropological constants, religious and cosmic "truths", and biopolitical certainties are dissolved in favour of more dynamic, fluid and contingent concepts of modes of existence. In the accumulation and interconnection of mass media, social media, objects, bodies, discourses and institutions like museums alike, evolve very different publics and milieu-dependent configurations of people, swarms and subjectivities, where the category of the human is no longer an informative substantial category, but is instead to be reconstructed as a hybrid and pluralised entity, that is identical with various emergent effects of the different forms of anthropomedial settings and communication styles. These media-based forms of experiental and, therefore, ontological relocations of perception and self-awareness need new descriptions and new articulations. Moreover, while anthropomedial modes of existence may sometimes be ephemeral (as in front of dioramas or, by the same token, in cinema) or merely accidental, they nonetheless have critical consequences and practical relevance for human conceptions of being-in-the-world.[2] Media anthropology, if it is to become the 'general frame … for the various anthropologies of post-modernity' (Coman 2005: 19) in any way, cannot afford to ignore them.

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[2] Further examples showing a clear affinity to being understood as fields of anthropomedial relations could include phenomena as the revival of La Sape, which is a Congolese social movement of so-called "Sapeurs", transcending their past of colonial oppression precisely through a peculiar post-colonial appropriation of the clothing and style of their dandy oppressors (cf. Tamagni 2009). The Occupy Movement, especially with regards to its immense social media infrastructure and its connection to the hacktivist group Anonymous, also merits study, as do the general identity-forming effects of online networks, virtual spaces and even fictive ethnicities, as examined by Ceilia Pearce in her impressive Communities of Play (2009), which is still missing a suitable follow-up.

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Povzetek

Antropologija medijev je novo interdisciplinarno področje raziskovanja z zelo raznolikimi subjekti in metodami, ki pa se že zdaj zdijo pod močnim vplivom razmeroma ozkega razumevanja *medijev* in *množičnih medijev* (npr. TV, internet, družbena omrežja itd.). Večina teorij v tem polju tako vsaj implicitno uporablja hierarhično in pogosto dihotomno vnaprejšnje prepričanje o dveh polih odnosov med mediji in ljudmi, pri čemer analizira operacionalizacije in ontologije človeka in medija neodvisno drugo od druge. Članek se od tega pristopa oddaljuje in zagovarja razširjeno, simetrično in relacionalno razumevanje terminov *mediji* in *človek*, razumevajoč jih kot vedno že prepletene vidike širših dinamičnih konfiguracij. Izhajajoč iz zgodovinsko vplivne, a spregledane obravnave medija t.i. okoljske diorame, članek razvija hevristični koncept "antropomedialnosti". Takšen relacijski pristop lahko na koncu odpre novo, zanimivo polje za izpraševanje (medijsko-)antropološke analize nasplošno.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: antropologija medijev, antropomedialnost, antropološka vednost, muzejske razstave, diorama, relacionalnost

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