

Por uma estética da comunicação: entrevista com Frank Hartmann¹

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Frank Hartmann esteve no dia 18 de agosto de 2010 no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação e Semiótica da PUC-SP, onde proferiu a palestra “*Towards an aesthetics of communication*”. Hartmann é professor titular da Universidade Bauhaus, em Weimar, na Alemanha e professor convidado do Departamento de Comunicação da Universidade de Viena, na Áustria. É autor, entre outros, de: *Medien und Kommunikation* (2008); *Mediologie – Ansätze einer Medientheorie der Kulturwissenschaften* (2003); e *Medienphilosophie* (2000). Mais informações em seu site: http://www.medienphilosophie.net/f_hartmann.html

For an aesthetics of communication: Interview with Frank Hartmann. In August 18, 2010, Frank Hartmann was present at the Post Graduate Program in Communication and Semiotics of PUC-SP, where he lectured on the following theme: “*Towards an aesthetics of communication*”. Frank Hartmann is full professor at the Bauhaus University, Weimar in Germany and external faculty member at the Dept. of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria. He is the author, among others, of: *Medien und Kommunikation* (2008); *Mediologie - Ansatz einer der Medientheorie Kulturwissenschaften* (2003), and *Medienphilosophie* (2000). More information on his website: http://www.medienphilosophie.net/f_hartmann.html

LL: The first question I would like to propose is about the title of your lecture, “Towards the aesthetics of communication”. How do you define aesthetics? Why not discuss the epistemological aspects of communication?

FH: As well as I can imagine to address the epistemology of certain media, especially related to the changes with digitalization, this is not possible in regard to communication. We do not really know what this is, and I tend to say that communication is an effect of

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the technologies we are using. So we could talk about the epistemology of the printing press, or the television, or the Web - and we would talk about how it changes the way we 'think' about our world. But when people say that they communicate, they are using different media and doing different things all the time. This changes how and where we 'are' in this world, and also defines the way that we 'assemble together' (this relates to Bruno Latour's terminology).²

Now, being a philosopher by profession, I formulate according to the classic position of Kant: epistemological questions target the transcendental logic, while transcendental aesthetics are neglected - that is, how humans make experiences under the conditions of both, space and time. A typical example of occidental abstraction, which was corrected, amongst others, by Foucault's notion of a 'historical a priori'. When I found out about his *Archaeology of Knowledge* - which my academic teachers in philosophy totally neglected - I started my media philosophy project.

It seems clear to me that to rethink aesthetics is one major goal of media philosophy. So what happened then, after the glorious formulations by Kant, to our notion of space and time? Aesthetics in our culture underwent fundamental changes with telecommunications media since the 19th century. After my book on "media-philosophy", I was trying to understand these changes, and did some historical explorations on "global media culture", on how cables, radio and television, and online networks changed the aesthetics of our communication, that is since we are able to record without scriptorial code, as with photography, and transmission without mechanics, as with the radio waves. The media revolution is about how we deal with space and time - a new ontology unknown to Kant, therefore my emphasis on the term 'aesthetics'.

LL: In your lecture, you said you decided to adopt Charles H. Cooley's definition of communication. Charles H. Cooley, in "The significance of communication"³, said that:

By Communication is here meant the mechanism through which human relations exist and develop—all the symbols of the mind, together with the means of conveying them through space and preserving them in time. It includes the expression of the face, attitude and gesture, the tones of the voice, words, writing, printing, railways, telegraphs, telephones, and whatever else may be the latest achievement in the conquest of space and time. All these taken together, in the intricacy of their actual combination, make up an organic whole corresponding to the organic whole of human thought; and everything in the way of mental growth has an external existence therein.

Could you explain why did you choose this specific concept, and why is it so important for your research?

2 See, about this: Latour, Bruno. "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik (an Introduction to Making Things Public)". In: Mute magazine - Culture and politics after the net (<http://www.metamute.org>).

3 "The Significance of Communication." Chapter 6 in *Social Organization*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, (1909): 61-65.

FH: Cooley is not so interesting in terms of theory and definitions; instead he made a close description of the intertwinedness of cultural and technical practices.

Unlike philosophers who were dealing with text related issues, he could see the ongoing changes at the beginning of the 20th century. As a railway engineer and also, as a sociologist, his agenda was different from contemporary academics - just as McLuhan's, by the way, a few decades later. But we are not talking big theory here, just about an effect: the new tele technologies, the railway and the telegraph, led to the overall concept of what was then called "communication".

All approaches which theorized this concept in interpersonal terms (I-Thou, face-to-face, etc.) proved to be wrong or simply insignificant for what happened to become a networked society. The railway engineer had a better sense for what it means to live in a network culture than any later structuralist or post-structuralist philosopher.

LL: **Could you tell us something about your current research at the Department of Design of Bauhaus-Universität Weimar (Fakultät Gestaltung | Bauhaus-Universität Weimar)? In the section about "The Research Centre for Visual Culture", it is written that the main objectives are to "develop appropriate methodologies and to formulate theories in order to integrate them into the artistic and design practice in terms of a trans-discipline constructively".**

FH: We have just successfully started a practice-based PhD-program for artists and designers. There are about 60 candidates, and the "artistic research" they do is diverse and very exciting of course. After decades convicted to theory, academia finally opened up to different forms of expression and reflection: the artists and the designers are free to make an input without the submission to some theoretical master discourse.

LL: **Your webpage⁴ opens with this quotation "In the beginning was the bone, not the word" from Régis Debray. Debray is known mostly for his concept called "mediologie". I would like to know what is the importance of Debray's ideas for your research.**

FH: Debray was a very important reassurance to my media-philosophy, because he disrupted with the paradigm of semiotics. He was telling about politics and infrastructures where others only saw free floating signifiers, actually he introduced McLuhan in the French discourse with a delay of three decades, but that was it. Debray has absolutely no impact on the German discourse, where the anti-hermeneutic discussion was ruled by Friedrich Kittler. Actually there is not much exchange and Debray never read any of the German media theory. The typical French thinker always is a master of the universe, the only star blinking in the dark of the night, how pathetic! After all, Debray is a politician, and was smart enough to cover the topic of media and save an academic position, since

4 http://www.medienphilosophie.net/f_hartmann.html

revolutionary politics failed. So, let us then go back to the source - McLuhan is much more important and still very much worthwhile reading. And to develop a methodology out of the concept (approach?) of mediology.

Why a methodology and not a theory? When I was teaching at USP last summer, I got the impression that Scholars in Brazil are very keen to always find an appropriate 'master theory'. And if it is not this one, it might be replaced by that one, at least it should be of some French origin. Even if the defense of a master theory is done in a very sophisticated way, it is based on "text" and its "hermeneutics" - and this is doomed to be epigonal in the end. We should learn to think in terms of problems, not of discourse, and this is what I want to teach my students in terms of methodology.

LL: You have mentioned, in your lecture, the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) originally developed by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon. In "On Actor Network Theory: A few clarifications", an article that circulates via nettime⁵, Latour said:

Put too simply ANT is a change of metaphors to describe essences: instead of surfaces one gets filaments (or rhizomes in Deleuze's parlance (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980). More precisely it is a change of topology. Instead of thinking in terms of surfaces -two dimension- or spheres -three dimension- one is asked to think in terms of nodes that have as many dimensions as they have connections.

I was wondering how do you see these ideas in relation to your own research?

FH: Well, I am not explaining or defending the ANT here. We are facing certain fundamental questions related to changes in our media environment. And we should not think that any kind of theory is providing any kind of solution. The good thing about Latour is that he does not promise anything: let us forget theory and let us try to make sound descriptions instead, this is his message. I met him in Brussels and we discussed, he is a very humble person. Let us describe, he says, how society works: how we make things explicit, how topics are published, how we assemble together. And this "we" includes things and matters. This means that we put intelligence into things and products, so we should find ways to include them in our parliament, in our public negotiations. This is a very big issue for *designers* and *design* research. We tend to think that conscious decisions are the ground of our social reality, while what really matters is beyond any concern in this way. To think in terms of nodes all of a sudden means that a ship owner in Hamburg is connected to a pirate from the Somalian coast. And that is the way it is, the change of topology has taken place already. And I believe, by the way, that this is why Brazil is one of the most interesting places to be now, in the beginning of the 21st century: once that, on the grounds of a rising economy, artists and intellectuals will realize that French theory is dead, and that they don't need imported thoughts at all, they might surprise the world intellectually like they did with their soccer skills. The artists are leading the way - as far

5 <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9801/msg00019.html>

as I get it from the last Sao Paulo Biennale, they have already liberated themselves from the thought that ideas and creativity have to be imported to be 'of worth'.

LL: In your website, it is possible to access an article in English about Otto Neurath, intitled "Visualizing Social Facts: Otto Neurath's ISOTYPE Project"⁶. In your article you said that "the International Picture Language proposed by Otto Neurath would serve not only as the *lingua franca* in a globalized economy, but as an iconic interface to the global database of knowledge". Could you tell us more about it?

FH: Well, I was always fascinated about Neurath's work, which relates to practical means and politics. He ran a research office in Vienna in the 1920's dedicated to applied research in visual communication techniques. As it is possible to access some text online, everybody is invited to read it.

Neurath was the head of the Vienna Circle, and he terrified Wittgenstein, who did not dare to come to meetings where Neurath was present. As a student, I was very impressed by how this history - philosophy has a hidden agenda, and it is not just about the better use of argument!

Neurath also was one of the first to see a global media culture in the making. His goal was to develop new media literacy beyond the cultural code of reading/writing. Not a professor with 'approaches', but working in a team of applied researchers, he did many projects and basically, he wanted to improve living conditions for the people and searched ways to "communicate" scientific data to the public. The technologies to do so did not exist at the time. Today, we have these technologies, and also, we have improved the living conditions. But some of the questions which were important to Neurath still remain: for me personally, these questions are about the "research for" and the "design of" a better world. I don't mean to be pathetic, but we have a lot of things which were not common in the 1920's, and still we are in need of a lot of others.

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