Strategies of Instability:
Police and Politics of Media Dispositifs

SAMUEL SIEBER

– Draft, 10th May 2011 –

Introduction

To an attentive observer, politics currently seem to begin and end based on different media. In Europe or North America for example, media seem to have challenged and endangered politics in general and democracy in particular: apparently we live in times of a "Mediocracy" (Meyer 2001), of "Politainment" (Dörner 2005), of Media Control (Chomsky 2003) or yet, as Colin Crouch proposed, of a Post-Democracy (2008). In all these models, media have anesthetized the public, marginalized political parties and demoted all forms of representative democracy. However, changing the perspective away from a purely occidental point of view reveals an entirely different relation of politics and media. The recent developments in Northern Africa for example, seem to rely heavily on the so called "New Media": Facebook, Twitter, Google Maps or Youtube allow for political revolution and democratization, enabling oppositional organization, participatory communication in times of political crisis and the simultaneous information of a global public. In short, on a political level media seem to mark both promise and peril of transition.

Despite these obviously paradoxical relations between media and politics, most attempted explanations, particularly those coined by political or communication sciences cleave to a theory of bipolar power relations. Either politics are considered as media-dependent, or it is the politicians, political parties or governments manipulating the media for their purposes – indeed in a sense of modern propaganda. The complex relational structure of media and politics can and should however additionally be considered in another dimension. Thought as "dispositifs" or "apparatuses" in a Foucauldian sense, media themselves appear in a political coinage of arrangements of the visible and the articulable. The arrangements of technical, institutional, economical, and aesthetical relations in a specific medium – obviously marked by a certain degree of stability – reveal the dimensions of power and 'subjectivization' implied in media

1

dispositifs and can with Jacques Rancière be described as a "distribution of the sensible". In this perspective, the arrangements or distributions organized by media dispositifs can be considered as 'police' rather than 'politics'. Being strategic arrangement of discursive and non-discursive elements, media dispositifs however are constantly challenged by instability. The power-relations in media dispositifs are "simultaneously local, unstable, and diffuse" (Deleuze 1999: 62), thus allowing for transitional "interventions in the visible and the sayable" (Rancière 2010). Different dimensions of media power can thus be outlined: the politics of media in moments of instability and transition on the one hand and a media-based 'police' constantly (re-)arranging the 'distribution of the sensible' on the other.

Media Dispositifs

Subsequent to Michel Foucault's analytics and the microphysics of power, the thinking of media as dispositifs puts itself forward for an inquiry of their characteristics of power and politics. According to Foucault, two main features distinguish a dispositif: In the first place, it is "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, […] – in short, the said as much as the unsaid." The dispositif "itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements." (Foucault 1980:194) Secondly, a dispositif always responds to an urgent need, a kind of critical state of emergency. It thus always has a dominant strategic function. (Foucault 1980:195) In both their dissemination and size, the Foucauldian dispositifs can be conceived differently: according to Gilles Deleuze, his dispositifs on one hand consist "in a diffuse, heterogenous multiplicity, micro-systems" (or micro-dispositifs). On the other hand, Foucault has also carved out macro-dispositifs that refer "to a diagram, to a sort of abstract machine immanent to the whole social order" (Deleuze 2006). There are thus 'micro-dispositifs' and much more complex 'macro-dispositifs'— and both are applicable to media.

German scholar Matthias Thiele firstly designates "media dispositifs" as the arrangement of different elements by a single medium such as television or the modern mobile phone. From a media studies perspective, these media dispositifs can however also be considered as "constituent subcomponents" of larger macro-dispositifs (Thiele 2009: 44-45, [my translation]). Foucault's thoroughly described dispositifs of sexuality (Foucault 1990) or criminal justice (Foucault 1995) for instance are not solely media-based, but rely on certain media and communication technologies such as the confession or scientific taxonomies. In reverse, media can

themselves be considered as a conglomerate of different micro-dispositifs. The dispositif of the modern mobile phone for example, can be conceived as a conglomerate of other media dispositifs such as the (classic) phone, film and photo camera, the work computer with e-mail, calendar and text processing, the television and the map using GPS-Systems. In this perspective, both "media-specific and intermedia-related characteristics" become evident (Thiele 2009: 45, [my translation]) and can have very different effects: young people confessing their love life in public transport for instance, or the pictorial documentation and 'verdiction' of an entire revolution. In short, the advantage of thinking media as dispositifs lies in the possibility to combine different scopes of a medium: „technology and equipment, instituional context, economical dimension, aesthetic procedures and styles, and finally manners of perception, production and adaption" (Thiele 2009: 45, [my translation]) can be thought together and regarding their micro- and macro-effects. Thus combined, media dispositifs indicate specific arrangements of the arguable and the visible, and a 'distribution of the sensible'.

**Arrangements and Distribution
of the Articulable and the Visible**

According to Foucault, every historical formation consists "of a way of saying and seeing", to be more precise: of a combination of "discursive practices and forms of self-evidence" (Deleuze 1999: 42). The "Archeology of Knowledge" (2010) hence already operates audiovisual. As Deleuze points out: "Foucault delighted in articulating statements and in distinguishing between them, only because he also had a passion for seeing: what defines him above all is the voice, but also the eyes." (Deleuze 1999: 43) These Foucauldian 'ways of saying and seeing', the "discursive practices and forms of self-evidence" match the "distribution of the sensible", elaborated by Jacques Rancière, which also describes a "system of self-evident facts of sense perception" (Rancière 2000: 12). Such a „distribution of the sensible" definitely has political aspects, as Rancière points out, since it „simultaneously discloses the existence of something common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it." (ibd.)

The underlying political question of the arrangements of the articulable and the visible therefore is one asking for irreducibility of both singularity and alterity in a community. From Jean-Luc Nancy's philosophical perspective, ‚political' first and foremost means the experience of "sharing community"- "the outline of singularity" trough "the outline of its communication". (Nancy 1991: 40) This political sharing and communicating of community relies crucially on the system of discursive practices and forms of self-evidence

organised by media dispositifs. As Rancière writes: „A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts." (Rancière 2000: 12) In that sense, politics are actually dependent on 'mediality': it is the 'mediality' of media identifying and representing the communal: Common sense, as Christoph Tholen writes, is communciation as a process of transmission – depending on a „communal intermediacy" (Tholen 2002: 181 [my translation]). However, media dispositifs exceed this fundamental political dimension. Their arrangements and distributions of discourses and visibilities cannot solely be considered as "politics", but must also be regarded as "police".

The "Police" of Media Dispositifs:
Subjectivication, Technologies of the Self and Governmentality

Media dispositifs are characterized by a certain degree of stability—arranging, normalizing and subjectevizing the field of politics and thus simultaneously producing and constraining it. The curves of visibility and enunciation are in a dispositif according to Deleuze organized by "lines of force", "rectifying the preceding curves" (Deleuze 1992: 160). It is these lines of force which at least temporary 'stabilize' media dispositifs, rendering them into a "distribution of the sensible". As such, they are according to Rancière not 'politics' in the sense of genuinely political moment, but instead 'police'. For Rancière, the term 'politics' only applies to an "extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration– that of the part of those who have no part." (Rancière 1999: 29-30) It is thus the formerly 'partless parts' – of people, demographic or social groups as of 'medial', aesthetical or technical forms – that signifies politics. As Rancière writes in his "Ten Theses on Politics": "Politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable." (Rancière 2001) The political virtue of 'mediality' as a communal intermediacy is thus joined by a media police: a regulatory, organizational power carried by the "systems of statements" and the "machines of visibility", distributing and dividing the sensible and hence the fields of perception.

This "police" of media dispositifs, can with both Foucault and Rancière be further described as governmental techniques, revealing specific power relations of subjectivization as well as technologies of the self. There is a fourth dimension in dispositifs that Deleuze discovers in "lines of subjectification" and in "a process of

individuation which bears on groups and on people, and is subtracted from the power relations which are established as constituting forms of knowledge" (Deleuze 1992: 161). Such technologies of the self indeed play a major role in media dispositifs: For instance, politicians are forced to justify both public and private actions in talk shows, there is a constant compulsion to publish one's feeling, acting and being on social platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, as well as constraints to 'zap' through TV-channels, to reveal ones position on interactive maps using GPS-devices or to take pictures everywhere with mobile cameras and publish them online. Consequently, media dispositifs are an essential parts of governmental power relations: there is an "interaction between those two types of techniques – techniques of domination and techniques of the self." To be taken into account are "the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself" and where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination". (Foucault 1993: 203-204)

Instability, Transformation and Political Intervention

The policing of media dispositifs thus rests on the regulatory and subjectivizing arrangements of the articulable and the visible, and has qualities of technologies of the self and governmental techniques. Both the lines of force and the lines of subjectification marking media dispositifs aim to prevent political intervention or 'dissensus'. The police of media dispositifs consequently withdraws its arrangements and does not allow for any political negotiation or intervention. As a part of its functioning, media dispositifs themselves tend to be invisible, unseen or hidden. In cinema for instance, all traces of technical work are to be banned out of the representation and the perception.

It is mainly in moments of instability in which media dispositifs become evident. When a dispositif turns problematic, suffers from disorder or disruption, becomes fragile or fully fails its lines of force and subjectification are revealed—and become subject to political interventions. Such moments of instability especially occur in processes of 'medial' transition and 'intermedial' transformations. Watching TV on a mobile phone breaks with the special arrangements of a living room, posting breaking news on Twitter questions the information supremacy of 'classic' mass media and interactive maps or videos abolish the regimes of sight established by TV or Cinema. In a nutshell, it seems to be in times the field of media changes, fails, reorganizes or reconstitutes itself, that politics

in the sense of a political intervention upon the visible and the sayable become possible.

But as much as transition and transformation might allow for the negotiation of or the intervention in media dispositifs, they invariably remain characterized by their strategic prevalence. Every dispositif has at a given historical moment responded to an urgent need, which signifies its strategic nature. As mentioned, dispositifs are not only shaped by their relational structure of heterogeneous elements, but also by a certain kind of genesis. This genesis of new arrangements of the articulable and the visible calls for a re-adjustment or re-working of their elements, and in dispositifs any interventional effect enters into resonance or contradiction with others. Technical, aesthetical or perceptual transformations, the opportunity of new communication choices, new displaying, controlling or influencing possibilities equally remain dominated by the strategic prevalence of media dispositifs. Facebook or Twitter might for example empower the organization, communication, documentation and publication of a political opposition and their revolution. They can be considered as the result of 'media in transition' facilitating 'parts of those who have no parts', and thus political intervention. However, even in such political moments media stay 'controlled' by the police of media dispositifs. The limitation of message lengths using Twitter, Facebook's enforcement of constantly (re-)producing and sharing more updates, news and comments, or the boundless demand for both still and moving images of all aspects of life by YouTube or Flickr are just a few examples for this regulatory, organizational power of a media-based 'police'.

In that sense, this conferences slogan "the promise and peril of transition" almost ideally describes the political dimensions of media dispositifs. The political power of media seems to be located between the politics of media in moments of instability and transition and a concurrent, yet simultaneously operating, media-based 'police' constantly (re-)arranging the 'distribution of the sensible'.

Works Cited

Noam Chomsky, Media Control, Hamburg, Europa Verlag 2003.

Colin Crouch, Postdemokratie, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 2008.

Gilles Deleuze: What is a dispositif?, in: Michel Foucault Philosopher, ed. by Timothy J. Armstrong, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, pp. 159-168.

Gilles Deleuze: Foucault, London, New York, Continuum, 1999.

Gilles Deleuze: Desire and Pleasure, in: Two Regimes of Madness, ed. by David Lapoujade, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006, slightly differently translated version to be found online at http://eng7007.pbworks.com/w/page/18931081/Desire AndPleasure (5/11/11).

Andreas Dörner, Politainment. Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 2005.

Michel Foucault: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction, New York, Vintage Books, 1990.

Michel Foucault: Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison, New York, Vintage Books, 1995.

Michel Foucault: The Archeology of Knowledge, New York, Vintage Books, 2010.

Michel Foucault: The Confession of the Flesh, in: *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings,* ed. by Colin Gordon, London: Pantheon Books, 1980: pp. 194-228.

Foucault, Michel: About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self (Transcription of two lectures in Darthmouth on Nov. 17 and 24, 1980), ed. by Mark Blasius, in: *Political Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 2, May, 1993, pp. 198-227.

Thomas Meyer, Mediokratie. Die Kolonisierung der Politik durch das Mediensystem, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 2001.

Jean-Luc Nancy: The Inoperative Community, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1991.

Jacques Rancière: Dis-agreement: politics and philosophy, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Jacques Rancière: The Politics of Aesthetics, London, New York, Continuum, 2000.

Jacques Rancière: Ten Theses on Politics, in: Theory & Event, Volume 5, Issue 3, 2001, version to be found online at http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/cmcs/Ranciere.html (5/11/11).

Matthias Thiele, Vom Mediendispositiv zum medialen Kombinat aus Dispositiven", in: kultuRRevolution 55/56 (2009), pp. 41-46.

Georg Christoph Tholen: Die Zäsur der Medien, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp 2002.