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RESEARCH

Susanne Eichner

Agency and Media Reception

Experiencing Video Games,
Film, and Television

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Film, and Television

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Potsdam, Germany

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1 Introduction

The great moments of your life won't necessarily be the things you do – they'll also be the things that happen to you. I'm not saying you can't take action to affect the outcome of your life. You have to take action. And you will. But never forget that on any day you can step out the front door and your whole life can change forever (Ted Mosby in How I Met Your Mother).¹

In their account of agency Foss, Waters, and Armada (2007) employ the example of Lola and Manni (*Run Lola Run*, Tom Tykwer, 1998) to illustrate how agency operates. When Lola makes three runs in the film trying to rescue Manni, the outcome of her three choices vary dramatically each time:

In the first run, Lola adopts an agentic orientation of victim, in which she interprets her structural conditions as obstacles and engages in the act of mortification. She and Manni obtain the money they need, but Lola is killed. In the second run, Lola assumes an agentic orientation of supplicant, viewing her structural conditions as bequests bestowed on her by structural power and using petitioning as a primary option for securing those bequests. Lola acquires the money, but Manni dies. In the third run, both Lola and Manni choose agentic orientations of director, assuming that they can direct structural conditions, themselves, and their fate. Structural conditions become resources as they employ innovative responses to secure money and life for both of them (ibid: 219).

Lola and Manni made it. They successfully directed the course of their lives. “Lola enacts agency in the first and second runs, then, just as much as she does in the third – her agentic choices are simply different” (ibid: 225). The example illustrates that agency is a structural part of acting in our lives. It relies on dispositions we maintain and on structures we face. It is inherent in Bourdieu’s *habitus* (Bourdieu 2009) and in Giddens’ *stratification model* (Giddens 1984). Agency describes the way we, as individuals, aim to perceive ourselves as empowered subjects. While acting in this world we are not only restricted by circumstances, by limited economic, cultural and/or personal resources, by societal and political structures, and by our physical body, our aims may also collide with and be restricted by the aims of other individuals, organisations, institutions, and governmental systems. Exercising our own agency might deprive others of agency, and vice versa. Mische and Emirbayer therefore describe agency as “*toward* something, by means of which actors enter into relationship with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events” (Mische/

1 *How I Met Your Mother* (Bays Carter, Thomas Craig, CBS, since 2005), season 4, episode 22: “Right Place, Right Time”.

Emirbayer 1998: 973; emphasis in the original). Agency is therefore not restricted to personal or individual agency. Following Foucault's notion of power relations, the structural dimensions of agency become apparent: discourses are created through knowledge, and those who control knowledge are thus in control of power (Foucault 1998: 100f.). Agency depends on dispositions and resources, and is neither fixed nor stable; individual agency in a society is accordingly not equally distributed nor does everyone have the same capacity for agency.

This work is not about the agency we perform in the 'real' world, nor about the agency of fictional characters in fictional worlds. *It is about the agency we experience in the process of media reception.* Agency, as indicated above, is a fundamental aspect of human action. In the tradition of communication studies, media communication is analysed according to social action and interaction theory (cf. for example Blumer 1969; Renckstorf/McQuail 1996). Media use is considered a specific form of social action and communication. Media addresses an audience with symbolic material. Media reception is a process of meaning making through interaction with the symbolic material presented. When media communication is conceptualized as social action, and agency is considered an integral part of human action, how does agency play a role in the process of media reception and media appropriation?

One answer can be found in game studies. The experience of agency as a way of performing power through text has been discussed since Murray's 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. According to Murray, "agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful actions and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray 1997: 126). Since then, agency has repeatedly been elaborated as one of the core pleasures of playing video games, and the quality distinguishing video games from other media. Games, so the assumption goes, require their players to perform actions, unfolding only through player action, thereby generating the game-specific experience of agency. As a concept informing understanding of this particular form of media experience, agency provides a persuasive alternative to the ideologically overloaded concept of interactivity. While video games are based on an interactive, computer-based system of coded rules, the feature-based trait of interactivity simply constitutes a predisposition allowing recipient-based experiences of agency to come into play. The video game appears to be a media device ideally suited to generating experiences of agency, since it enables players to make inputs with direct and 'watchable' results: by simply pressing a button in the first-person shooter *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch, Ideaworks, 2010), a gun is fired, the screen shows the result of this action as a big explosion, and the player experiences the power of agency within the video game environment.

However, as convincing as notions of video game agency seem to be, its media-exclusiveness cannot withstand deeper investigation. Agency, a central focus of sociology and pragmatism, understood as the general and fundamental capability of humans to act in the world (cf. Ahearn 2001; Giddens 1984; Mische/Emirbayer

1998), is a capacious concept that reaches far beyond the realm of video game experiences. Emerging articulations of a general media agency, incorporating re-readings of foundational works of pragmatism and social action theory, and re-considerations of media and communication approaches, have been fruitful. Once we begin to look for agency, it appears to be a ubiquitous notion, though often disguised with other concepts, terminologies, and disciplines. Agency is inherent in media literacy, in our competency to evaluate and to make use of media adequately, and in our growing encyclopaedia of media related knowledge. Agency is at stake when recipients oppose the implied meaning of a text and take on a negotiated or oppositional position (Hall 1980). Jenkins' concepts of *participatory culture* and *trans-media storytelling* (Jenkins 1992, 2006) describe phenomena that induce feelings of agency. Certain forms of cognitive activity, such as *passive control* or *mind-game*, as described by Elsaesser (2009a), Bordwell (2002) or Wuss (2009), I will argue, stage forms of media agency. Beyond media use, the empowerment of people is central to questions of the rights to participate and collaborate in societal and political decisions. And it is a central concern in the formation of our identities: when we, as children, develop our sense of self, we do this by perceiving ourselves as agentic beings, as agents of our own actions. When we negotiate, test, and stabilize our various identities in later life, agency is part of this process. Competence, power, authority and expertise are core concepts in psychology, human resource development, educational science, and social sciences. In short – agency and its aligned concepts affect us in every part of our lifeworld.

Game studies have elaborated on agency as a mode of media experience – but there is no evidence and no reason to restrict agency to the experience of video games. While agency as a mode of experiencing video games is generally recognized, this receptive engagement is particularly afforded to the nature of the computer-technology based medium of video games, due to its ability to audiovisually react to players' inputs. Yet, when taking into consideration that 1) in times of media convergence, a certain media text is no longer confined to one medium and 2) that we obviously find agency-facilitating aspects such as play or interactivity throughout the different media (cf. Anderson 1996; Stephenson 1967), I therefore want to argue that agency, as a special form of media involvement, is potentially present in all media reception. Bearing in mind that video games have their own media-specific peculiarities, several observations from film, television, and game studies indicate that the sense of agency facilitated by certain textual strategies occurs throughout all media reception. While video games might be especially good at it, this recipient-based mode of reception is not restricted to any medium in particular: the case of a cineaste, who acquires expertise on film genres and film history which is applied in discussions with friends, in writing an online film critique, or in participating a film quiz night, indicates agentic moments in the course of film reception and appropriation. We feel empowered when zapping away from a disliked

program on the television set, yet the opposite feeling emerges when a DVD's programming doesn't allow us to proceed to the main menu. Films and television also enable a sense of power and agency within the textuality of a program or movie: when realizing well before the key scene of the *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) that Dr. Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) is a ghost, when guessing along with the players in *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* (by David Briggs, Mike Whitehill, Steven Knight, 1998), and when participating in discussions of the meaning of those ubiquitous numbers in *Lost* (by J.J. Abrams, Damon Lindelof, Jeffrey Lieber, ABC, 2004–2010), a satisfactory sense emerges: a sense of power, of control, of influence and of making a difference – a sense that I will conceptualize as agency in the present work.

The approaches to agency touched on above are in need of a unifying framework. Often developed in isolation from each other, treatments of agency throughout film, game, television, communication and computer studies – as well as in sociology, psychology and philosophy – provide pieces and fragments that, when properly assembled, add up to a more comprehensive picture of agency as a mode of media experience. The core issue inspiring my research can be summed up in the following question:

If agency can indeed be conceptualized as a specific form of media experience, which impact and forms of significance maintains agency during the process of media reception and appropriation?

When staging agency as one possible mode of experiencing media, a systematic understanding of media experience in general, as well as of other possible modes of media experience, is called for. For example, the rather broad idea of media experience has been conceptually punctuated in terms of reception and appropriation (e.g. Mikos 2001a), as reception modalities (e.g. Suckfüll 2004), or as involvement (e.g. Donnerstag 1996). In the present work, the terminology of media *involvement* endeavours to encompass all processes and activities that come to pass during the phase of concrete reception. This evokes a second question:

Considering agency a specific mode of media involvement which emerges throughout different media, how does agency relate to, and integrate within, an overall form of media involvement?

When elaborating agency as one possible mode of media involvement, it is necessary to conceptualize media involvement in general. How can agency be conceptualized in the process of reception and as a mode of media involvement? What are the predispositions for any modality of media involvement? How is agency related to other modes of media involvement? Monika Suckfüll has emphasized the twofold character of modalities that refer simultaneously to the disposition of the recipients *and* to mediality and textuality. While emphasizing the recipient as the critical factor of this model of media involvement, at the same time textual structures (including dramaturgical organisation, aesthetics, and mode of address) come into focus as aspects that trigger and induce the recipient-based experience, the particular mode of textual understanding and experience.

Thus, the aim of the present work is to identify the concrete textual qualities, the specific points of agency that facilitate the emergence and the mode of agency in different media texts.

This grounds agency as a theoretical concept in the field of media studies and media reception, proposing a tool kit with which to identify ‘agency-points’ with a surplus value for the process of media reception, and thus also offers an interesting projection useful for media producers and creative professionals. On the basis of this work, it will be possible to evaluate media products in relation to their ‘agency appeal’.

As outlined above, my approach gathers well elaborated findings and models from social action theory, psychology, film theory, television studies and game studies, and attempts to amalgamate the findings concerning agency into a comprehensive model of agency as a mode of media involvement, and to validate the resulting implications with the help of exemplary analyses. Requiring a broad literary review of various disciplines, this project aims to stage a genuinely interdisciplinary research procedure, with all the advantages and impediments this implies. The present work is structured into three parts. Chapters 2 to 4 provide an extensive review of sociological understandings of agency, action-oriented media theory, and the literature of video game agency, and related concepts and theories relevant to these discourses. The second part of this work elucidates my model of *first and second order involvement* (chapter 5) which is developed on the basis of present approaches to media experience, outlining the different levels and points of agency (chapter 6). The third part consists of example analyses of video games, a reality show, a television series, and two films that will specify the different textual strategies at work which facilitate and amplify the mode of agency across the different media:

The chapter *Agency Interdisciplinary* (chapter 2) delivers a rapprochement of agency as a sociological category. As an inherent aspect of early social action theory, and referring back to Alfred Schütz, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons, the significance of agency is delineated according to *praxeological approaches* (e.g. Bourdieu 1997; Giddens 1984), which have gained new relevance in contemporary sociology and philosophy through the work of Mische and Emirbaier (1998), Ahearn (2001), Hornsby (2004), and others. The relevance of agency to contemporary media and cultural studies is specifically traced through cultural studies approaches grounded in pragmatism and ideas of identity formation and symbolic interactionism.

Agency has recently experienced a revival in the context of technoscience. Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as elaborated by Latour (2007), dislocated agency from exclusively human action, (re)integrating it into an equitable network of humans and machines. While the consequences of ANT, which promotes a radical symmetry of humans and machines, will not be pursued, related ‘socioic’ approaches do provide interesting contributions to this study – for instance the concept of *attributed agency* (Werle 2002), and Gell’s anthropological appropriation of agency through

his relational agent/patient model (Gell 1998). A final theoretical perspective incorporated into my argument is provided by psychological accounts of human agency. The question of subjective self-consciousness of one's own agency, as well as different levels of agency, come into focus and are analyzed in greater detail.

All consulted disciplines and approaches broach the issue of intentionality, of processuality and of consciousness in one form or another. Most salient to this work is the question of intentionality, which, for some scholars, constitutes the definitive quality of agency (e.g. Pacherie 2007), while others emphasize contingency, or the *could have acted differently* (Giddens 1984). Recalling my epigraph from Ted Mosby, which quotes the narrating character in *How I Met Your Mother*, the non-intentional dimension of agency is emphasized, illustrating the variety of possible manifestations of agency.

With the sociological, psychological, and techno-scientific basics of agency carved out, in chapter three the two concepts *Interactivity and Play* are elaborated, relative to the distinct concept of agency. In a simple line of argument, interactivity and media agency appear as analogical concepts, enabling media recipients to interact with a text. However, by means of communication approaches (e.g. Görtz 1995; Heeter 1989; Jensen 1998; Rafaeli 1988; Rogers 1986), interactivity is defined as a concept that is mainly concerned with questions of mediality (and concomitant aspects such as selectivity or vividness) in a departure from recipient-based models of agency. Considered more useful for the purpose of this work is the somewhat related concept of *perceived interactivity*, as elaborated by Downes and McMillan (2000) and by Kiouisis (2002).

In a second step, play is conceptualised as a specific form of social action. Interactivity and play have long been thought of as depended categories, thus obviating explicit questions about how play is actually connected to other media. By contrast, following Huizinga (1938/2001), Caillois (1958/2001), and Ohler and Nieding (2001), play is defined as a specific form of social action. In this context, the assumptions of Stephenson (1967), Hallenberger and Foltin (1990), Anderson (1996), or Wuss (2009), provide a convincing account of play as a constituent feature of pleasurable media communication in general. Play as form of social action and interactivity as a technology-based feature of media are thus conceived as distinct, agency-facilitating phenomena.

After having settled on the most fruitful approaches to agency from across several disciplines, and having considered some basic concepts that relate to media agency, in chapter four, *From Media Use to Doing Media*, the cornerstones of action-oriented media theory is reassessed and analyzed with respect to media agency. Media use and social action in media and communication theory is reconsidered, following in part the work of Renckstorf and MacQuail (1996), Meyen (2004), and Charlton and Neumann (1988) and processes of meaning making inherent to media reception are (re)contextualized within a broader sociological purview which links

media communication to the social context of the audience. A special emphasis is placed on work emerging from cultural studies which has developed praxeological approaches to agency (cf. Barker 2000) and a thematic of empowerment of people (cf. Fiske 1997), providing perspectives especially compatible with radical conceptions of the active audience.

In three subordinate chapters the specificities of film, television, and video games are fleshed out against the backdrop of agency. Following cognitive film psychology, neoformalism, and reception aesthetics, the fundamentals of perceiving and processing media material cognitively and emotionally are covered. In relation to film viewing, the concepts of *passive control* (Wuss, 2009) and of *mind-game* are identified as useful analytic concepts for clarifying agency. Examination of elements of various television formats, such as quiz shows (e.g. *Millionaire*), the textual integration of the audience in recent reality shows (e.g. *I'm a Celebrity*), narrative formats such as *Tatort Plus* (ARD, 2013), and forms of transmedia storytelling (e.g. *Lost*) reveal modes of audience participation beyond typical viewer engagement which empower media recipients with an increased sense of agency. Finally, the experience of gameplay in video games – with their ability to induce feelings of agency as outlined by Murray (1997) and further developed by many scholars subsequently (e.g. Jørgensen 2003; Mateas 2004; Schott 2008; Tanenbaum/Tanenbaum 2009, 2010) – is recounted and evaluated with regard to my argument.

All the reviewed approaches add to my understanding of agency as a mode of media involvement, which is elaborated in chapter five, *Agency as a Mode of Involvement*. Relative to, but distinct from, other modes of involvement such as presence, immersion, character alignment, ludic involvement, excitement, participation, inspiration, or habitual, agency is described as a mode of second order involvement induced by specific textual strategies. This affords a more nuanced elaboration of the concept of involvement. Drawing on Suckfüll (2004), Odin (2002), Calleja (2011), and others, a model of first and second order involvement is advanced, providing an elucidation of how modes of involvement emerge during media reception, and how they are stabilized or rejected according to the specific textuality of the media.

In chapter 6, *Levels and Points of Agency*, the aspects of agency outlined from different disciplines will be compiled into a manageable model. Borrowed from Bandura (2001) and integrated by Schott (2008) agency is conceptualised as operating on different levels: on the level of *personal agency* (consisting of mastering narrative, mastering choice, mastering action, and mastering space), on the level of *creative agency*, and on the level of *collective agency*.

Finally, the analysis chapter – *Textuality and Agency – Exemplary Analyses* (chapter 7) – provides in-depth analyses of two video games, a reality show, a television series, and two films, providing insights on the textual strategies of different media texts. Certain structural aspects and aesthetic elements are identified which affect both the emergence and sense of agency.

In *The Quality of Agency in the Media* (chapter 8), the central findings regarding agency in different media texts are presented. My initial question is recapitulated through an evaluation of the model of agency proposed. This chapter also serves as a projection for more practical applications of this model, particularly in the fields of story development, dramaturgy and creative producing.

2 Agency interdisciplinary

2.1 Agency, Pragmatism, and Action Theory

2.1.1 Sociological Principles

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines Agency as the “capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power”². Agency thus is conceived as the capacity of an agent to act in our world. Tracing the concept of agency back to its sociological roots is simultaneously straightforward – since it is an omnipresent concept – and difficult to grasp. A significant reason for this arises from the different traditions and branches of research found in Germany and the US,³ and their differing usage of overlapping terminology. In the German academic discourse agency is, until recently, a little used term, usually equated with ‘action’ (*Handlung*), such as the very rarely used terms *Handlungsbefähigung* (the ability to act) or *Handlungsermächtigung* (the empowerment to act).

Max Weber’s concept of action, distinguished from human reactive behaviour, can be considered seminal to further conceptualizations of human and social action developed in sociology. According to Weber, action is “the human behaviour when and to the extent that the agent or agents see it as subjectively meaningful” (Weber quoted in Schimank 2010: 29). In social action the “subjective meaning takes account of the behaviours of others and is thereby oriented in its course” (ibid: 38), in a meaningful rational means-to-ends deliberation. Social actions are further distinguished into four major types: *zweckrationale* (instrumental/rational), *wertrationale* (value-oriented), affective and traditional social action. While it is one of Weber’s merits to make allowance for other than rational actions, the focus remains on the intentional actions of the motivated actor. This is not unproblematic, since many actions in everyday life might occur without being rational and intentional, while still being more than reactive behaviour. One has to accept Hans Joas’ statement that, although Weber’s four types of action can be considered as a “gradual abandonment of rationalization (...), the ideal remains, then, an action that rationalizes ends, values, and consequences of action” (Joas 1990: 175). The question of inten-

2 Merriam Webster Encyclopaedia: <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (7.03.2013)

3 In the course of this work I will focus on German, American and some French traditions of sociological theorizing.

tionality is an interesting one and will be discussed in more detail in relation to human agency in the course of this work. Regardless of the question of intentionality, with his model of action and social action, Weber laid the foundation for the German *Handlungstheorie* (action theory) sometimes also labelled *Interaktionstheorie* (interaction theory), which, broadly defined, refers to all sociological theories concerned with human actions. More recently, the term *Handlungstheorie* is sometimes replaced by *Akteurstheorie* (cf. Gabriel 2004), offering a closer correspondence with the American terminology of agency. Other sociological concepts, such as the technoscientific *Actor-Network Theory* with its popular representatives Bruno Latour, Michel Callon or John Law, or the socio-economical *Principal-Agent Theory*, have their origins in classic *Handlungs-* or *Akteurstheorien*. While the former tries to integrate objects and artefacts into the action model, the latter theory relies on the *Rational Choice*⁴ tradition as it has been appropriated by scholars of economics and politic science. As outlined above, in German action-oriented approaches agency is generally implicit, yet explicitly mentioned only by few scholars.

The American sociological approaches to action are originally linked to Talcott Parsons, who is widely considered to be the founder of modern action theory. Parsons' theory of social action is based on his concept of society: action is a process in the actor-situation system where the individual 'actor' seeks goals. An action becomes social "when the situation of an actor is another actor" (Jung 1984: 217). Parsons' approach, based upon Weber's action model, is an attempt to embed individual social action in the structure of society. Parsons' contextualization of individual action within social structure can be considered paradigmatic of sociology's engagement with questions about how social structure and human action determine, influence and regulate one another. Most influential in the domain of the social sciences and the action-oriented branch of sociology was the perspective of *Pragmatism*, as elaborated for instance by Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey or Georg Herbert Mead. At the core of pragmatism is the 'pragmatist maxim', asserting that theoretical hypotheses and practices rely on each other. Thus, human practices are the sources of theory, while theory depends on these practices; there is no theorizing without practice. Mead, who claimed that the individual mind exists only in relation to other individuals and thoughts with shared meanings, laid the cornerstone for Herbert Blumer's *symbolic interactionism* (cf. Mead 1973: 244 ff.). Chapter 2.1.4 will elucidate on how this approach is crucial to understanding the dynamic relationship between media and recipient.

4 *Rational Choice* theory assumes that complex social phenomena can be explained in terms of basic individual actions. It constructs the individual as motivated by wants or goals, expressed as preferences, so as to make choices in a way that maximizes their advantage while minimizing cost. *Rational Choice* thus recurs on early sociological concepts of the *homo oeconomicus*. The American sociologist James Samuel Coleman is credited as an essential contributor to the formulation of this approach.

According to Margaret Archer (1988), the “problem of structure and agency has rightly come to be seen as the basic issue in modern social theory” (ibid: xi). Indeed, a division of sociology into two big branches is often invoked, characterizing one tradition of sociology as engaged in the explanation of society’s structure, and the other as interested in human action or agency (e.g. Archer 1988, Reckwitz 2004). In this view, there is a dualistic perspective in the sociological approach between, “Voluntarism versus Determinism”, “Subjectivism versus Objectivism”, and “the micro- versus the macroscopic in sociology” (Archer 1988: xi). From today’s point of view, the structure/agency debate seems to be oversimplifying. While there are indeed scholars that can be integrated into either the structural macro-perspective (e.g. Emil Durkheim, Talcott Parsons), or the action-oriented micro-perspective (e.g. Max Weber), many approaches aim to offer a perspective integrating both aspects. A more useful distinction is provided by Andreas Reckwitz (2004), who identifies three major paradigmatic shifts in sociological action theory, namely a development progressing from the *homo oeconomicus* to the *homo sociologicus*; a development from the *homo sociologicus* towards the *homo significans* (or *homo symbolicum*); and a development from the *homo significans* towards *praxeologic approaches* (cf. ibid: 306 ff.).

As with all theory, these sociological models did not evolve in an intellectual vacuum. In fact, the normative paradigm arises from the very ideas of Enlightenment thinkers such as René Descartes, David Hume, John Locke and Immanuel Kant, whose philosophical work staged a paradigmatic shift from rationalism and the *homo oeconomicus*, opening the way toward notions of a *homo sociologicus*. The enlightened, utilitarian individual, with his/her own interests in mind, is no longer the cornerstone of action resulting in social order. Instead, collective, intersubjective actions are based on a normative system that *requires* social order. This does not necessarily imply a rejection of the idea of means-end rationality. But the individual is no longer viewed in terms of isolated actions, instead she is always considered as acting within a broader social order. Exemplary of this normative paradigm is Emil Durkheim’s approach implicating a social system as prerequisite for (social) action.

The second paradigmatic shift can be ascribed to the increasing importance of interpretive approaches. While the normative paradigm formulates actions and social order by means of normative rules, interpretive approaches are unified via their recourse to the sociology of knowledge. They thus form an interpretive paradigm with the individual actor in her lifeworld at the centre of the approach: “the cognitive knowledge resources, conceptualized optionally as cultural codes, frames of reference, collective representations, horizons of meaning of differentiating systems (...) attribute meaning to the objects of the world” (Reckwitz 2004: 312). Reckwitz includes ethno-methodological approaches (e.g. Harold Garfinkel), social phenomenological approaches (e.g. Erving Goffman, Alfred Schütz), social hermeneutics (e.g. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor), structuralisms

(e.g. Claude Levi-Strauss), as well as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes within a broad, interpretive, culture-oriented sociological approach. According to interpretive models, social order and social rules are not normative but rather cognitively created – they aim to explain how meaning is symbolically constructed. Notably, Alfred Schütz’ work marks a significant point in sociology, focussing first on the everyday knowledge, the “universe of meaning”, of the acting agents (Schütz 1971: 11).⁵ The advantage of this model of the *homo symbolicus*, in contrast with the *homo sociologicus*, can be seen in its ability to explain collective agency and cognitive structures: only on the basis of knowledge structures can agents transform the “uncertainties of the world into meaningful certainty” (ibid: 316), organizing their environment into a comprehensible symbolic universe on a day-to-day, routinized basis.

The third paradigm shift that Reckwitz (2004) indicates refers to a branch of culture-oriented action theories that have been advanced by Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Hans Joas and Michel de Certeau (ibid: 317). In reference to Bourdieu’s terminology, they can be labelled as *praxeological approaches*. At the core of these approaches lies the concept of social practices – routinized body performances – in interplay with meaningful comprehension. In contrast to former action theories, praxeologic approaches define action not as selectively separated units, but as a process occurring in time and space. Temporality and repetition are thus important aspects of praxeological social interpretation. Each social practice then consists of a body performance – on a very basic level a practice is a skilful movement of the body: Bourdieu’s “*connaissance par corps*”, Taylor’s “*embodied agency*” and Joas’ “*constitution of body schemas*” all inherit this focus on corporeality. Perhaps most important, the structuredness of the social lies in the routinization of social practices:

Their [social practices] seemingly self-evident – as a matter of fact heavily presuppositional, since fostered by know-how – repetitive and uniform action was marginalized in Weber’s typology of action as ‘traditional action’ and thus linked to non-meaningful behaviour. Admittedly, this seems to be the real fundament of structuredness of the social world (Reckwitz 2004: 324).⁶

This very brief historical survey of sociology has introduced some basic conceptions of the acting individual in a social world. These paradigmatic shifts outline a development from the enlightened rational and intentional actor, towards conceptions of social action understood as a process of meaning making, incorporating practices that involve mind and body. With these essential principles in mind, the concept and differentiation of action and agency will be approached.

5 The approach of the *sociology of knowledge* has been elaborated in by Berger and Luckmann (*The Social Construction of Reality*; first published in 1966) as well as by Schütz and Luckmann (*The Structures of the Life-World*, first published in 1973).

6 Translation by S.E.

2.1.2 Theorizing Agency

In 2006, Biesta and Tedder state that:

Agency is not only a central concept in modern educational theory and practice, but is also a key notion and issue in contemporary social theory, particularly in sociology, economics and political science. The question in social theory is first and foremost about the *empirical conditions of agency*, i.e., the question how and when agency is possible, and about ways in which the phenomenon of agency can be conceptualized and theorised. (...) Within sociology 'the term agency is usually juxtaposed to structure and is often no more than a synonym for action, emphasizing implicitly the undermining nature of human action, as opposed to the alleged determinism of structural theories' (Marshall quoted in Biesta and Tedder 2006: 5; emphasis in the original).

My aim here is to work out a specific and application-oriented definition of agency that avoids the fallacy of equating agency with action.

The paradigm changes in sociology described in the previous chapter have affected the notion of agency. *Homo oeconomicus* is based on the Enlightenment idea of an individual equipped with free will and with the ability to make rational choices. John Locke articulated a conviction that humans are able to form the circumstances of their lives by themselves, an idea to which Jean-Jacques Rousseau adjoined the moral will and Immanuel Kant added the categorical imperative (cf. Mische/Emirbayer 1998: 964ff.). The Kantian conception of free will versus necessity served as a fundamental basis for normative approaches of agency as employed by Talcott Parsons. However, only the second paradigm shift (as outlined above) towards interpretative approaches enabled a disengagement of the conception of agency from specific (structural) situations and (subjective) intentions. Instead of merely intentional, agency could now also be regarded as *influential*.

Alfred Schutz [sic] insist that action [is] not to be perceived as the pursuit of preestablished ends, abstracted from concrete situations, but rather that ends and means develop coterminously within contexts that are themselves ever changing and thus always subject to reevaluation and reconstruction on the part of the reflective intelligence (ibid: 967).

The imputation of intentionality, however, has not yet been overcome, as Reckwitz (2004) seems to indicate. Economistic approaches relying on a sociological purview such as those found in rational choice theory, and theories of intention as elucidated by Michael Bratman (e.g. Bratman 1999), who formulated the Belief-Desire-Intention model (a way of explaining future-oriented intentions), are based on a notion of intentionality as the most crucial aspect for understanding human social action and agency. In response to such intention-based approaches, Hornsby emphasizes the false assumption that intentionality is the basis of agency. Assuming subjects to be always "keeping track" of their actions proves to be illusionary. Intentionality requires a "higher-order reflexive" state of mind, that is by no means employed in all every day (social) actions (Hornsby 2004: 3, 9). Hornsby suggests conceiving agency as either positive or negative performance, thus including inten-

tional actions as well as non-intentional, spontaneous or avoiding forms of action. The debate on intentionality brings to light the undertheorizing of the process of agency itself: it is a “black box” (Mische/Emirbayer 1998: 969) that is only very rarely touched upon. It remains a “greatly underspecified, often misused, much fetishized [concept] these days by social scientists” (Comaroff/Comaroff in Ahearn 2001: 112). As such, it is for instance still unsettled whether agency is specifically human, or if animals can have agency, or if even machines are capable of agency, as Bruno Latour (2007) promotes. Following Ahearn (2001), agency is neither necessarily intentional, oppositional nor absent, but refers to, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (ibid: 130). Thus agency is distinct from action. *While action is defined as the actual process of acting, agency refers to the general ability to perform these actions.* This ontological difference introduces interesting and continuing consequences. Firstly, it emphasizes the actor and her relation to her actions, and secondly, it refers to the socio-political impact of agency, the capacity of humans to change the social order. The main aim of this sociological conception of agency is accordingly the exploration of those mechanisms that allow agents to perform with agency which impacts the social structure; or, to put it in Ahearn’s words, “how any habitus or structure can produce actions that fundamentally change it” (ibid: 119). Agency entails the potential to trigger processes of transformation. This agentic ability is generally inherent in humanity, but varies culturally and in terms of genre, class, education, generation or ethnicity. It is something that can be improved on, but the extend to which an agent is able to deploy agency is constrained by their resources. Agency “gives people knowledge of different schemas and access to different kinds and amounts and hence different possibilities for transformative action” (Sewell 1992: 21). Sewell’s notion of knowledge resources indicates the processuality of agency, which is also emphasized by Emirbayer and Mische (1998). They regard agency as a temporal process that has three components: past, future and presence. Agency is defined as:

(...) the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations (ibid: 970).

Alfred Schütz’s earlier treatment of action introduced a similar diachronic scheme to describe how agents formulate and orient themselves via social action. An agent anticipates the future condition that would result from her actions:

What was empty in the project has or has not been fulfilled. Nothing remains unsettled, nothing undecided. To be sure, I remember the open anticipations involved in projecting the act and even the protentions accompanying my living in the ongoing process of my acting. But now, in retrospection, I remember them in terms of my past anticipations, which have or have not come true. Only the performed act, therefore, and never the acting in progress can turn out as a success or failure (Schütz 1945: 539).

Accordingly, iteration (habit), projectivity (imagination) and practical evaluation (judgement) are constitutive elements of human agency. Iteration refers to the learning effect and historical embeddedness of agency. “Past experiences condition present actions” as Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 975) put it. The recurrence of knowledge – either in forms of mental concepts, embodied practices or social organizations – as Sewell (1992) suggested, is fundamentally necessary for any occurrence of agency. However, agency is not merely employing the same schema over and over again. Projectivity refers to the “creative character” of agency (Joas 1996: 15), entailing “the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts” (Sewell 1992: 19), making agents “inventors of new possibilities” (Mische/Emirbayer 1998: 984) through various creative tactics, such as anticipatory identification or experimental enactment (cf. *ibid*: 989 ff.). Practical evaluation, finally, refers to the real life circumstances with which an agent contextualizes social experiences, which might be ambiguous and even contradictory. Practical evaluation requires an agent to recognize a given situation adequately in order to decide on appropriate actions, and to execute those actions accordingly. The cognitive dimension of agency clarifies an agent’s general ability to perform with agency, and is therefore not to be understood simply in terms of possessing agentic abilities, but as the ability to acquire them; cognitive agency refers to the process of “achieving agency” (Biesta/Tedder 2006: 18). Rather than an attribute possessed, agency is something which evolves in “transaction with a particular situation” (*ibid*: 19). *With regard to media reception, this signifies that certain specific textual characteristics might allow for more agency than others.*

So far, agency has been conceptualized as a core element of social action theory. The paradigm shifts, as outlined by Reckwitz, were the premise to acknowledge the significance of agency. Agency then is defined as *the general ability to perform actions*, while actions are the actual processes of acting. Furthermore, agency does not ‘just happen’ but is a *creative capacity that depends on individual and socio-cultural resources that can be amplified and improved on*. Its *transformative power* is due to the *processuality* of agency. The question of intentionality is still a contested topic in different fields of academic research. Even in Schütz’s early work in this field, he had suggested abandoning *intentionality* in favour of *influence*. In any case, intentional actions are just one possibility out of many positive or negative modes of performance; *intentionality thus proves to be a possible, but not a necessary aspect of agency.*

To sustain a more in-depth view on the mechanism of agency, the following chapter will employ approaches that provide a detailed insight in the relationship of human agency and societal structure. Furthermore, the concepts employed can be subsumed under what I have labelled *praxeologic approaches*. It is assumed that a nuanced appreciation of socioculturally mediated agency will also allow for a deeper understanding of agency in the process of media reception, which is at the core of this work.

2.1.3 Practice and Agency

In the following chapter I outline the sociological approaches that seem to be most fruitful for an elaboration of mediated agency. Following Reckwitz (2004), I suggest that the ‘praxeological’ approach has proven to be the most effective. Firstly, praxeological models are fundamental to current, generally accepted conceptions of the ‘active audience’, making them a cornerstone of media reception theory in general. Secondly, due to the focus on power shared by these theories, they will provide an ideal starting point from which to develop a new conception of media agency.

Significant contributions to agency can be found in Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, in Giddens’ *stratification model*, in Hans Joas’ notion of the *creativity of actions*, in the concept of *performance*, and in Foucault’s *power/knowledge and discourses* relations.

2.1.3.1 Agents, Power, and Creativity

In his elaboration of habitus, Bourdieu formulates a theory of practice which he labels *praxeology* (Bourdieu, 2009). His aim is to uncover the underlying mechanisms at work in constituting and reproducing the social world and social life. Practical sense and practical reason are considered formative principles for the social structuring of reality, and provide the basis for individual and collective agency (cf. Gabriel 2004: 170). Rejecting both phenomenological approaches (as subjectivist and unscientific), and objectivism (as detached from practical knowledge), Bourdieu strives for an integration of social actors as integral parts of the social world.⁷ The connection between the social world and individual practice is the habitus. It is a set of dispositions that generates perception, thought and evaluation:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (...) produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations (...). The practices produced by the habitus [are] the strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations (Bourdieu 2009: 72).

The habitus is a ‘structured structure’, constituted by transposable dispositions (perception, thought, and evaluation) of a certain social position (a social practice), along with schemata (or representations) of these dispositions, generate practices, which in turn (re)produce social structures (structuring practice). Thus, the habitus adjusts practice to structure, ensuring the practical (re)production of structure. This model also holds implications for the agent, since, according to Bourdieu, the habitus, and not the agent herself, is determined by social structures. The dispositions

⁷ Bourdieu critiques phenomenological approaches for reducing social relationships to communication, and interaction to symbolic transaction, thus neglecting or belittling the impact of structuration.

and schemata of the habitus thus constitute a “generating principle of all forms of practice” (Bourdieu 1997: 283)⁸ such that an agent’s habitus functions as her “modus operandi” (ibid. 281). Furthermore, dispositions can either reproduce or transform “culturally constructed meanings and values”, and thus the social world (Ahearn 2001: 118). Prommer (2012) states accurately that, more than manner and appearance, the habitus is the “individual internalized patterns of values, attitudes, opinions and beliefs, which makes humans social beings. Habitus is a system of dispositions, which is effective in everyday thought, perception and assessment practice” (ibid: 21).⁹ The practical sense in its threefold form of habitus, structure, and practice overcomes the dualism of structure and agency.

There is another side to habitus that has not been mentioned yet. The concept of habitus includes body and corporeality. Since social practices are anchored in the human body, social structures can only exist by means of bodily actions and agents. The agents have literally incorporated specific dispositions – in their movement, attitude and sensibilities – thus enabling inferences as to their social position and mode of behaviour (cf. Fröhlich 1994: 38 f.). It is important to recognize that dispositions of practice (i.e. habitus) are prereflexive and do not come into consciousness. Consequently, praxeology incorporates the idea of an agent who is non-intentional:

The actions of social actors in practice theory are not guided by rationality or intentionality, but by the practical requirements. The social actors develop a practical sense towards these requirements, which enables them to participate in forms of practice (Ebrecht and Hillebrandt 2002: 8).¹⁰

The fundamentally agentive nature of the habitus model, then, lies in its capacity – productively and creatively – to produce practices that are not directly determined by a social structure (though they are pragmatically mediated through habitus). At the same time, the creativity is restricted by the flip side of Bourdieu’s approach, the influence of structure on the habitus.

Of the infinite thoughts, meanings, and practices that the habitus can produce at any given historical moment, there is only a minimal probability that any will ever be thought or practiced because individuals are predisposed to think and act in a manner that reproduces the existing system of inequalities (Ahearn 2001: 118).

Habitus thus has the tendency to produce conservative practices, conforming to a seemingly ‘natural’ social world. However, the habitus is inherently alterable, since it adjusts to every new situation – whether in terms of conjoint affirmation or in

8 Translation by S.E.

9 Translation by S.E.

10 Original cit.: Die Handlungen der sozialen Akteure werden in der Praxistheorie nicht durch Rationalität oder Intentionalität angeleitet, sondern durch die Anforderungen der Praxis. Zu diesen Anforderungen entwickeln die sozialen Akteure einen praktischen Sinn, der es ihnen ermöglicht, an Praxisformen zu partizipieren (Ebrecht and Hillebrandt 2002: 8).