

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 ‘socionic’ 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.

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