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Alfred Nordmann. Hermeneutics of Science and Technology

Hermeneutics was and is primarily concerned with the life of the mind as it is expressed in religious, legal, and literary texts as well as works of art. These texts and works require exegesis. As outlined by Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer, or Ricoeur, the hermeneutic process and the practice of exegesis require that we enter the work as a composition of symbols or elements, and thus as a world onto its own. Within the horizons of this world we recover meaning, make sense - and after this encounter we do not leave quite as we entered. As opposed to the knowing subjects of scientific research, the subjects of hermeneutic exegesis do not remain unchanged in their course of inquiry.

If this is a canonical description of hermeneutics, it appears to exclude scientific texts as well as technical works. It is the achievement of „normal science" that scientific texts might interpret data and explore the meaning of theories, but the texts themselves do not require exegesis by other scientific readers. Science pursues an image of knowledge that emphatically excludes the need for exegesis. If there is nevertheless a hermeneutics of science, this is because the quest for transparency and the exclusion of exegesis need to be understood as well: how do scientists as readers and writers achieve the seemingly unproblematic intelligibility of their texts? For the historian of science, this achievement is based on „paradigmatic" shared presuppositions which can be deconstructed hermeneutically - and thus historians often enough undo the achievement of science. This tension has characterized STS and HPS for half a century by now.

Much more recent and perhaps more interesting is the question of hermeneutics of technology. How much of a stretch is it to consider sense-making in respect to clocks, assembly lines, fireworks, or wastewater infrastructures? The hermeneutic approach to technology begins by undermining the distinction between works of art and works of technology. Contemplating a machine, do we also enter the work as a world onto itself, seeking orientation within the horizon of the work, allowing ourselves to be transformed by this experience?