Comments on Arie Rip’s “Technology as prospective ontology”

“Turn to Ontology in STS”, Oxford, June 25th 2008

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Stuff, furniture, landscapes …
A characteristically subtle, qualified and reflexive treatment of the issues … Comments here are restricted to one strand that runs through the piece, crystallised in the idea of ‘material narratives’.

Prospective ontology
Issues of interpretation tend to be displaced to issues of uncertain outcome. Uncertainty is not about the existence or nature (of stuff), but about how it might turn out, evolve, change
 – for example (de Laat’s) ‘fictive scripts’ used to refer to fact that technological configurations are “realised only by changing the world so that it can accommodate new technological outcomes” p1

This emphasis has some significance for the idea of material narratives

Material narratives
“Artefacts are part of such a socio-technical landscape, and offer avenues of access, or be like boulders that have to be circumvented. The material story is told by the overall set-up, and does not need words of human actors to unfold.” p.8

“Just as in writing novels, the writer [engineer] is not in complete mastery of his characters, the unfolding storyline has its own dynamics”. p9

In many respects, congenial claims …
 – but the assertion that elements within narratives (of whatever kind) escape the control of their authors does not mean that the assertion is any less part of a(another) narrative
 – (cf the recent, possible, death of the ‘death of the author’?)

So, first point of doubt
 – are there material narratives that speak for themselves? Or do they need a(n STS) narrator to discern/articulate/create them, just as characters need a novelist?

Bridges …
 – “The reader is part of a socio-technical ensemble […] which shapes the reading” p8
 – but aspects of this reading can, of course, be contested (even if technology provides some key resources for so doing) …
So, second doubt
- does the idea of a material narrative, which speaks for itself, not imply something incontestable? does the existence of contestation, which speaks for itself, not problematise this kind of formulation?
- if narratives (of whatever kind) are open to, perhaps constituted by, interpretation, contestation, translation etc, what is gained by this particular version of the turn to ontology (cf Woolgar et al)?

**Magical realism**
‘Noumenal technologies’, one way of indicating the invisible and ‘unruly’ nature of (nano)technologies; an extreme case offering general characteristics
- noumenal technologies tell a story we cannot hear?
- if so, perhaps bringing them “into the realm of phenomena” (p12) illustrates the more general characteristic of ventriloquism?

**The narrative of material narratives**
A good story, but a story nonetheless, and one that I at least cannot hear without the help of a good narrator