

Things Beside Themselves Mimetic Existences Agenda

3.–5.2.
2020

From the perspective of industrialised, Western societies of discipline and control, to be 'beside oneself' denotes at best a religious, and at worst a pathological state of subjective exception. Through intoxication, possession, or various affects, the subject here enters an alternative state (of being) in which he or she assumes the identity of something else or becomes simply non-identical. To be beside oneself is then a key indicator of an excessive form of mimesis, which in the dispositif of modern Western ontologies is experienced as a loss of self – a loss that is regulated and subjected to therapy.

In contrast to such normalising classifications, mimetic practices in a wide range of media cultures show that being beside oneself represents a mode of existence of mimetic artefacts and mimetic subjectivation. This excessive mimetic mode of existence allows us to conceive the historical and ontogenetic being of things as a transformative intermediate being. Mimesis can thus be understood as a trans-subjective, intermedial praxis that is tied to particular materials and techniques and emerges through hybrid operational chains.

The conference's thematic focus on 'things' is intended to underline the transhuman, object-oriented dimensions of mimesis, in line with a research approach that is less interested in psychological explanations than in connections and feedback loops between

heterogeneous materials, cultural codes, and mimetic practices. It nevertheless does not exclude the being-beside-oneself of human actors, yet conceives the latter as agents of mimetic practices on the basis of an overarching conception of things as processual assemblages of materials, digital and analogue objects, human and non-human actors, and cultural technologies and practices that are capable of initiating desire-driven mimetic economies.

The conference subtitle, 'Mimetic Existences', is intended to capture the milieu-specific character of media: as forms of milieu, media function as affordances through which people and things come to be beside themselves. On the basis of a milieu-oriented conception of media, the conference will focus on intermedial mimetic processes, including mimicry and processes of fusion, transformation, and embodiment that operate mimetically between heterogeneous media/milieus.

In accordance with the research group's outlook, the conference themes are intended to highlight such intermedial practices and processes of embodiment and metamorphosis in highly diverse contexts, including digital image media, artistic, literary, and publishing practices, popular science media, and the ethnology and history of political (de-)subjectivation processes and economic media practices.

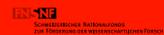
Things Beside
Themselves.
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Salon IKKM
Cranachstraße 47
99423 Weimar
Germany

www.fg-mimesis.de

The concluding conference
of the DFG/SNF research group
Media and Mimesis

Medien und Mimesis



Mo. 3.2.2020

14.00 Opening

Session 1

14.30 Peter Bexte (Cologne)

Professor of Aesthetics at
Academy of Media Arts in Cologne

Backbenchers in the Parliament of Things. Or: Re-reading Psalm 118,22

In 20th century art and philosophy, a remarkable history of quoting Psalm 118,22 can be observed ("The stone that the builders rejected ..."). It has been quoted in pop-songs, in theories of collage as well as in actor-network-theory. When Bruno Latour developed the concept of a "parliament of things" he came up with that line. The presentation deals with some of the (pre)positions reflected in quoting Psalm 118,22 (Kurt Schwitters, Ernst Bloch, Franz Rosenzweig, Bob Marley, Bruno Latour).

Response: Research Group *Media & Mimesis*

15.30 Coffee

Session 2

16.00 Christoph Bläsi (Mainz)

Professor of Book Studies at
Johannes Gutenberg-University in Mainz

Automated 'Gatekeeping' and Automated Text Production: Machines in Publishing and Authoring Processes as well as in Content Discovery

This contribution, originating from book / publishing studies, highlights mediality aspects of book communication. - In different places of the book value chain or, more broadly, the book communication circuit, artificial intelligence systems increasingly influence what gets published and what is read. This paper will embed the

analysis of selected applications - mainly ones that compose certain types of texts, that support editorial decisions and that support discoverability - not only into considerations about what might be the core contribution of particularly editors as professional 'connaisseurs' of literature (or book contents, respectively) in a streamlined (book) publishing business, but also into considerations concerning possible cultural (and political) effects. Moreover and towards the end, the outline of an interdisciplinary and intersectoral project (book/publishing studies, psychology, law studies; a publishing house) will be presented; this project is meant to shed additional light on some of the questions raised.

Hannes Bajohr (Basel)

Postdoctoral researcher in the
Research project "Subalterne Mimesis",
Department of Media Studies
at the Univeristy of Basel

The Gestalt of AI: Machine Learning Beyond the Atomism-Holism Divide

The expectations generated particularly by the connectivist paradigm of artificial intelligence and machine learning are high. But it is not only the capacity of discriminating patterns and learning to identify or reproduce complex structures rule base systems are unable to bring forth that make machine learning a fascinating topic for media studies. It is also that it seems to break with some basic conceptual assumptions about digital systems. Andreas Sudman has suggested that the layers of a neural net - consisting of "perceptrons" operating with floating point numbers, and making the state of the entire system rather than the rule of its successive handing the condition of its operation - move it in the direction of analog rather than digital systems. In this talk, I would like to suggest a reading for the interpretation of these states. I argue that the connectivist paradigm makes it possible to conceive of its operations as instances of holistic rather than atomistic states. The way neural nets work suggests its objects as a Gestalt rather than a mere aggregate. This tendency toward a quasi-holistic interpretation has ramifications for the concepts such neural nets are able to represent, particularly those that seem beyond quantification, such as genre or style.

Response: Research Project
Subalterne Mimesis

19.00 Conference Dinner

Di. 4.2.2020

Session 3

10.00 Rosa Eidelpes (Vienna)

Postdoctoral researcher at the Music
and Arts University of the City of Vienna

Mimesis redoubled

In prewar Paris of the late 1930ies, mimicry became the political strategy of the hour: Dissident surrealist around Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois founded a secret research society called "Collège de Sociologie (1937-39)" and envisioned a collective, epistemic as well as political, activism that aimed to "infect" an ailing democracy with novel "sacred" forces that would spread "epidemicly." Bataille and Caillois were unmistakably fascinated by the fascist destruction of bourgeois "homogeneity," (Bataille), and so their response to it was "mimetic" in more than one respect: Drawing to Caillois' theory of mimicry from the early 1930ies, the secret Collège de Sociologie's tactic was camouflage and its objective not to devise a political agenda of its own but to subvert fascism through imitation - to beat it at its own game. As a political strategy, however, mimesis harbors the same danger that Caillois had pointed out in his essay on insect crypsis: that excessive assimilation to the enemy leads to a loss of self, leaving the mime incapable of telling himself apart from the other side.

Manuel van der Veen (Karlsruhe)

PhD-Candidate in Art History at the
Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe

Placing things beside themselves - "to see how they hold up" (Georges Braque)

Augmented reality as a technological phenomenon, as a field of vision within which real and virtual objects have to coexist simultaneously - is a procedure, which consults explicitly the juxtaposition of things. It is based on newer mimesis-techniques like scanning or video-imaging, but by superimposing them with animated objects. How will the ontological status change, when imitated objects pop up beside physical ones? This copresence is neither defined by identity nor by a simple alternative. Thereby it shares common ground with art historical procedures like trompe-l'œil. To approach these questions, the strategy I propose relies heavily on bringing together current technology and

traditional artistic techniques. According to Jean Paulhan, George Braque dragged his canvases to a field in order to juxtapose them beside other things - "to see how they hold up." With this in mind, first of all one may ask which strategies are being used to place things beside themselves, and secondly, where they are located? Therefore it is our ultimate aim "to see how they hold up".

Response: Research Project
Mimetische Existenzweisen

12.00 Lunch

Session 4

13.30 Michael Suter (Basel)

Assistant professor in History of
the 19th and 20th Century, Department
of History at University of Basel

Mimetic Currency and Gradated Sovereignties in Colonialism

This paper looks at the introduction of the German rupee in colonial Tanzania in order to explore a set of questions about money as a contested societal medium that is "co-substantial with sovereignty" (Michel Aglietta). The German rupee was a silver coin that, in terms of weight and fineness, represented an exact copy of the Indian rupee, which already circulated on the East-African coast in pre-colonial times. Initially issued by a private company in 1890, the German rupee existed in an inter-imperial framework of British and German colonial state power and finance. The profits from seignorage, the violence of taxation, and the silent force of arbitrage all molded the German rupee. What is more, colonized Africans had manifold, and divergent, use for the currency. As the example of the German rupee shows, imperialism hinges on processes of commensuration, which in turn depend on specific media. Money appears here as an instance of what the literary scholar Lydia Liu has termed "eventful translation": its functioning required the enactment of various, often contradictory, scales of valuation which, importantly, had temporal dimensions.

Margie Borschke (Sydney)

Senior lecture Journalism and Media,
Department of Media, Music
Communication and Cultural Studies
at Macquarie University Sydney

The poetics of circulation

Metaphors are commonly wielded to organize and make sense of network technologies, artefacts and practices – we look to ‘the cloud’ to describe a complex infrastructure of technologies and techniques and invoke ‘remix’ to refer to any number of new expressive practices and artefacts from memes to mashups. These same metaphors, however, often obscure their own material and cultural histories and work to promote the myth that the networked cloud and its digital data are immaterial and ephemeral. This talk will show how and why a focus on copy as an artefact, practice and key abstraction that underpins the digital can help to recover these material and cultural histories and why doing so is crucial to the development of a poetics of circulation in the age of the Internet.

Response: Research Project
Produktive Imitationen

15.30 Coffee Break

Session 5

16.00 Noam Elcott (New York)

Associate professor for the history of modern art and media in the Columbia University Department of Art History and Archaeology, the Sobel-Dunn Chair for Art Humanities, New York.

Four Stations of the (Wooden) Cross: Symbolic, Real, Imaginary, Trompe l'oeil

This paper ventures a media-theoretical account of the wooden cross. It argues that the (wooden) cross is variously the paradigmatic instantiation of the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary; and that it regularly transgresses these boundaries to produce sacral presence and secular trompe l'oeil.

Hendrik Blumentrath (Berlin)

Interim professor of Newer German Literature (18th Century to present) at Humboldt University of Berlin

Stage Actors

Human actors are not the only actors on the theatre stage. It is the circulation of props – daggers or rings, letters or hats – that drives the action of the play forward, interacting with both the static and mobile elements of the stage as well as the human actors and actresses. A concept of mimesis as an imitation of human action has for a long time kept the spotlight away from the central role of things as agents of mimetic practices. Theories on the relationship between humans and objects on stage show, however, that increased attention to the actor status of props may also offer new perspectives on the status of human actors and actresses on stage. After a brief look at some theoretical reflections on stage props, a theatrical constellation around 1800 will be the focus of this talk: In the tragedy of fate, the so-called ‘fatal stage prop’ and its connections with the other elements on stage is used to investigate the question of the necessity or contingency of the chain of events displayed. On the back side of representing things as taking on a life of their own (something that refers to their ritualistic genealogy) we find the staging of a subject ‘beside itself’: through possessed or sleepwalking protagonists the plays explore the subject’s ability to act in the midst of an unmanageable world of things.

Response: Research Project
Einbetten, Aufklappen, Anhängen

18.30 Dinner

19.30 Reception and Party

Mi. 5.2.2020

Session 6

10.00 Mareike Vennen (Berlin)

Postdoctoral researcher in the research project “Dinosaurs in Berlin” at the Department of Art History at Technical University of Berlin

How to Picture a Dinosaur? The Visual Politics of Natural History Objects

Dinosaur skeletons in museums are often presented as ‘pure nature’ with fossils promising an unmediated link to deep time. Taking the example of the Tendaguru-Expedition (1909-1913), a paleontological excavation in today’s Tanzania that belonged to the then colony German East-Africa, the talk will examine the visual politics involved in the ‘making of dinosaurs’ at a paleontological and historiographic level. Both paleontological and historical reconstructions are based on processes of finding, assembling, questioning and interpreting fragmentary traces and remnants, yet both create monumental, consistent objects, images and narratives. In a first step, the talk will concentrate on the paleontological practices of (re)constructing dinosaur skeletons in the museum space. Since no one has ever seen a dinosaur, on what model are their images and skeletal reconstructions based? The second part will shift the focus to the historical reconstruction of the Tendaguru-Expedition and its objects. How has the history of the expedition and its’ objects been pictured and framed in science, in the museums and in the media: what role did and does their colonial provenance play from the Empire to the present?

Michael Cuntz (Weimar)

Interim Professor of Media Philosophy at Department of Media Studies, Bauhaus University Weimar

“Can you do that again?” Trajectories of (auto-)mimesis in musico-technological ensembles

Musical instruments are a special class of objects that do not simply function, but work together or against their players - often in an in-between, that undermines clear attributions of initiative. Again and again they produce sounds, effects, phenomena that can make both instrument and player appear as something that stands next to them as as actants, who ecstatically have exceeded their known possibilities. The technical disruption is often the aesthetically valued sound event. Instruments not only allow players to play, but also require them to be outside themselves in a coupling of the logic of gesture and voice (producing a sound at least with the help of the hands). Despite the fact that someone has mastered an instrument, the relationship should be viewed less as a maîtrise than as a non-ethyleomorphic process of complex chains of operations involving physical and cultural techniques, in which all entities involved mutually possess each other and are unpredictable, often difficult produce reproducible sonic and physical phenomena. These relationships are exponentiate by the electrification of music, in which complex technical ensembles form, in which, in addition to classic instruments, technical objects such as amplifiers, effect devices, recording devices occur, or in the synthesizer the boundaries between these categories (generation vs. modification of sound) are entirely blurred.

“Can you do that again?” Is the crucial question of these tracts and their tracing. In contrast, the reliability of digital technology is emphasized, which at the same time is perceived as sterility or loss of possibilities and surprises. This explains the continuing interest in analog devices that are combined in hybrid ensembles with digital equipment (which acts as a stabilizing framework). The ensembles of instruments, equipment and human actors also challenge a reflection on intermediaries and mediators, the ways of existence of the technical and the fiction – because these ensembles always seem to be situated in a gap between these ways of existence that has to be negotiated anew, a space in which the way of existence of metamorphosis also comes into play.

Response: Research Project
Mimesis des Raumbildes

12.00 Closing Remarks
Farewell Coffee / Snacks
