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ALTERITY — A CATEGORY OF PRACTICE AND ANALYSIS. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

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Alterity — A Category of Practice and Analysis. Preliminary Remarks

Abstract

This article provides introductory remarks on the concept of ‘alterity,’ which could stimulate the discussion on newsreels/media and their representation of the *Other*. Starting from the observation that ‘alterity’ has often been overshadowed by an overestimation of ‘identity,’ the article differentiates between various fields of ‘alterity’: amongst them, ‘real alterity’ in societal practice, ‘representational alterity’ in media contexts, and attitudes of ‘othering’ in movements between alterity or alienness. It critically brings to the fore some underlying frameworks and unspoken assumptions. Finally, the article asks whether the positioning of alterity in 20th-century newsreels has provided first approaches for overcoming its binary corset in the direction of a global circulation of images. Can this perhaps be seen as a step towards turning our attention to a revaluation and new recognition of the *Other*?

1 Alterity and Media

“Media exist because there is alterity” — so reads the first sentence of an introduction to media theories.¹ We need media to ensure that the position of alterity (the different, the *Other*) can be articulated, because “[a]lterity means an ‘other’ that initially denies access, that requires a third party to guarantee its conveyance, symbolization, preservation, transfer or communication.”² At first, a position of alterity seems to resist being made accessible. In the ongoing process of mediation and communication, however, the *Other* does no longer remain in this protected position. This ambivalent interdependence between media and alterity/otherness applies in specific ways to newsreels, the short documentary video clips that delivered news information before the main film features in 20th century cinemas. Such “audiovisual filmed newspaper[s]”³ function exactly in the mode of mediating vehicles. They cut the flow of news into small pieces of alterity, making the *Other*/alterity available for mass consumers. Newsreels take an ambivalent medial position between a neutral/objective communicator and mediator on the one hand, and a selective, manipulative, propagandistic actor on the other hand. They make use of their specific position as “figure[s] of the third” between identity and alterity, between the *Self* and the *Other*, in order to communicate or manipulate the *Other*.⁴ Thus, newsreels seem predestined to deconstruct the harmonious preassumption of medial communication and transmission, because they use footage quite openly as a strategy of manipulation, stereotyping, appropriation, marginalization, and devaluation.

Furthermore, newsreels confirm the claim that “‘alterity’ is a screen for the imagination.”⁵ According to such a media-related understanding, ‘alterity’ itself unfolds as a projection screen for imaginations, fantasies, wishes, national anxieties, and self-exaggerations — visions of the unknown as well as projections onto the alienized, exoticized, or stereotyped *Other*.⁶ It is exactly in this sense that newsreels (in Europe of 1968) seem to have instrumentalized and exploited “figures of alterity” (see Tom Clucas in this issue) for constructing a certain national ‘identity’ or for an effective visual staging of a national self-conception (see Danae González in this issue). In this sense, we should perhaps rather speak of an alterity ‘relation’ instead of an alterity ‘figure.’ This also applies to the notion that the *Other* in the context of newsreels mainly aroused interest in its potential to activate emotions and perceptions. By employing alterity in this sense, newsreels functioned as “powerful tools for the management of the public mood,”⁷ be it for the formation of a national identity, national self-conception or even nation-branding, or for engagement with a new discourse on Europe.⁸

2_Alterity and Identity

In the study of culture, ‘alterity’ has been discussed primarily as a counterpart of identity — by defining identity (including cultural identity) as always being constituted against the background of otherness or alterity. But it is remarkable that the study of culture and social sciences have so far been fixated exuberantly on the analysis of identity formation.⁹ “We live in an identity paradigm,”¹⁰ as Barbara Czarniawska claimed: “This fashionable focus of attention overshadows the simultaneous and unavoidable process of *alterity construction*, of constructing oneself as different.”¹¹ Since the “identity-paradigm” emerged in the 19th century in combination with the formation of nation states,¹² the humanities and social sciences have long neglected to discuss the specific meaning and function of ‘alterity’ — except in cultural anthropology/ethnography (see the Writing Culture debate in the 1980s), in the tradition of phenomenological philosophy (see the positions of Bernhard Waldenfels, Emmanuel Levinas), and in a reevaluation of ‘alterity’ in the field of Medieval Studies.¹³

Is the overshadowing of ‘alterity’ as a category in its own right in the 21st century related to the fact that, at present, the perception of alterity itself has become a largely redundant phenomenon? With globalization, we are exposed to and entangled with all sorts of lives, with transnational developments and blurrings across different contexts.

That which completely shocks us or is entirely alien to us is becoming harder and harder to find. But still, the experiences of migration and other challenges of difference disrupt the comfortable situation of a seemingly dis-estrangement and provoke a potentially productive experience of foreignization and self-alienation. Methodologically, the concept of alterity seems to become a new and promising analytical category beyond the fixation on the worn-out ‘identity route’: “Rather than pursuing the route of identity, we try to explore another route, paving a possible way of conceiving the other from the position of the other and not from fixed norms and possibilities. We therefore turn to the concept of ‘alterity.’”¹⁴ But is alterity in this context still a mode of representation as it was in the context of the newsreels of 1968?

3_Alterity — Concept and Experience

Regarding the history of the alterity concept, it could be argued that alterity is more than a stage of reflection in a dialectical framework in the wake of Hegel. It has been developed as a concept that signifies otherness and, in this sense, it has been discussed as a philosophical problem, a matter of ethics, a crucial category for anti-Hegelian and anti-identity-related thinking: The *Other* is prior to any subjective identity; it is autonomous and should be recognized and preserved (as, for instance, in the anti-Hegelian position of Emmanuel Levinas) — against an identity-based ontology. This mode of differential thinking connected with the *Other* has continued in postcolonial, non-European thinking that is focused above all on otherness and gender (for instance, by defining women as the *Other*, divergent from male norms, as Simone de Beauvoir claimed in her book *Second Sex*). It is not an essentialized *Other* that is meant here, but rather a powerful strategy of *Othering* in social behavior and encounter, as well as in the field of representation.¹⁵

Can alterity in the media context of newsreels also be taken as a characteristic of a direct encounter, aiming at an understanding of the *Other*, or better, a mutual understanding by using codes of social exchange or by seeing the *Other* as an interlocutor? Taking this position would rather pertain to cases of empirical alterity in the context of ethnography — studying strategies of *Othering* in face-to-face engagements with the ‘real’ *Other*.¹⁶ The ethnographic analysis of alterity as a social and cultural practice has been cultivated and, at the same time, critically examined by the so-called Writing Culture debate in ethnography. The result of this debate was the insight that analysis and

representation of the *Other* always go along with assuming representational authority through selection, exclusion, simplification, or exaggeration. This practice always involves “the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship.”¹⁷ In the context of newsreels, however, alterity seems to have come into focus mainly as a matter of media representation. Here it is above all a dimension of images that are working as evidence-creating tools for alterity construction. In bringing alterity to the fore and relating it to newsreels, we can thus no longer stick to the production of alterity in situations of cultural encounter, of direct interaction and social identity formation. In our context, alterity unfolds in the first place as a matter of representation — of course, with strong repercussions on social behavior.

Seen as behavior and/or representation — is ‘alterity’ a mere counter-concept to identity or could it be developed as an analytical category of its own? This question must deal with a fundamental problem: the assumed binarity between the two poles, identity and alterity. We should try to reach beyond this binary and essentialist approach in general. But the dilemma is how to conceptualize alterity, otherness, and difference without fixing and essentializing it. The newsreels, indeed, have practiced their own strategy in this respect — as they mainly functionalized the *Other* by creating impressions of alterity in favor of (national) identity constructions. What has been missing here is a focus on the *Other* in its own right. But still, even in a dichotomic setting between *Us* and *Them*, we can already recognize first attempts to differentiate among the *Them* instead of supposing a homogenized culture or monolithic identity of the *Other* (see Lyubomir Pozharliev, Nicola Nier in this issue). Instead of constructing mainly an antagonistic *Other* in the newsreels, we still see them occasionally providing “points of overlap” (see Tom Clucas in this issue) that enable the audience to recognize possible connectivities. The development of a transnational memory culture that culminates in shared reference points can also be taken as a leverage point to overcome the dominating dichotomic corset (see René Demanou and the African example in *Perspectives*, forthcoming).

4_Alterity and/as Representation

Is alterity a mode of social representation that works as “systems of values, ideas and practices which enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange?”¹⁸

In the highly mediatized realm of newsreels, we certainly face a more complex and indirect mode of alterization. We face various portrayed alterities and aliens as they are incorporated into a mostly one-sided practice of media representation. Fostered by the formation of stereotypes, this mode of representation was apt to shape the construction of national identity against the foil of the *Other*. In this function of uniting bounded collective identities, ‘alterity’ can be seen as a driving force laden with images, imaginations, feelings, and anxieties that individually might be perceived as threads to identity.¹⁹ Thus, we see an alterization at work that lives from exaggerations, stereotyping, and dramatization — often intensified through dramatic background music and sound (for example in the representation of student protests as the *Other* in 1968 Italy, see Inês Gamelas in this issue). These performative dimensions should not be underestimated in their powerful effect towards strengthening hierarchies and hegemonic power relations. External *Others* are created on the basis of the assumption of an internal cultural homogenization. In this vein, newsreels may be regarded as more or less diverting the eye from any orientation on internal alterities — thereby only duplicating a characteristic practice of social representation in modern societies: “While the modern process of socialization is characterized by an awareness of otherness, it also constitutes external others and makes us blind to alterity as an internal quality.”²⁰

The story is not complete if we do not differentiate between different forms of alterity/alterization, starting with the specific formation of stereotypes as “a set of beliefs about the characteristics of a social category of people.”²¹ Here we should distinguish further between auto-stereotypes and hetero-stereotypes that come to the fore in powerful images — and not the least between the scales of alterization in the spectrum of identification, negation, differentiation, opposition, degrees of sameness, modes of self-alterization,²² etc. In doing so we speak of alterity as if the meaning of this term is clear. But what exactly is alterity? Does ‘alterity’ refer to something that is strange and foreign or just unlike and different?

5_Alterity or Alienness?

For a more precise analysis, it seems helpful to draw a distinction between different types of foreign experience within a society. And this means, above all, to make a distinction between alterity and alienness — as the late Horst Turk has done as early as in his seminal 1993 article “Alienität und Alterität als Schlüsselbegriffe einer Kultursemantik,” in which he makes a distinction between the opposition ‘alien’ = belonging to a strange context, and ‘alter’ = without any marked strange belonging, only signifying the other of two.²³ One can certainly alterize alienness, meaning that one includes it in one’s own frame of reference. But in the strictest sense alienness means radical alterity on the basis of the existence of different system- and historical references.²⁴ Alterity, however, means only “partial strangeness,” a ‘strangeness within the neighborhood’ (in German one would call it ‘Nachbarschaftsfremdheit’). As such, it can be integrated into a culturally and historically familiar frame of reference²⁵: otherness is alterable strangeness or ‘naturalization’ (‘Einbürgerung’).

Perhaps by taking up this categorical frame of the structural counter-terms ‘alterity’ or ‘alienness,’ we could also gain a more differentiated analytical vocabulary to judge newsreel clips: Do they show a completely alien phenomenon or rather one of partial strangeness? Do they hint at possible connectivities and junctions? Is their representation of alterity one in the sense of altering strangeness,²⁶ of making the *Other* more familiar, or rather one in the sense of making otherness even more alien in the sense of alienating otherness?²⁷ An approach like this would need to consider the respective framework and context in which otherness or alterity are created and thus can be experienced according to newsreels on a case-by-case basis. As Lyubomir Pozharliev has worked out in his article, a Cold War frame, a colonial frame or a communist frame could have been dominating. And alterity could have been seen as a paradigm of approximation, a paradigm of suspendable alienation, or as a paradigm of nonrevocable exclusion. Considering historical frameworks in each case thus has to be supplemented by additional attention to classificatory structures and frameworks of alterity.

In this direction, anthropologists Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich have proposed three fundamental structures, or ‘grammars,’ of alterity, in which figures of alterity can be articulated in a sociocultural context, connected with social agency. There is the grammar of *segmentation* that defines alterity as a matter of context. It allows, for instance, for a shift from enemy to friend, according to the respective context, and thereby

enables the formation of alliances and neutralization of conflicts. Another grammar of alterity is that of *encompassment*. It works “by a hierarchized sub-inclusion of others who are thought, from a higher level of abstraction, to be really ‘part of us’“ and therefore can be appropriated easily.²⁸ In the context of newsreels, however, it seems that the grammar of *orientalization* might be the most applicable figure of alterity. It “constitutes self and other by negative mirror imaging: ‘what is good in us is lacking in them.’”²⁹ This orientalizing works within a normative, binary classification scheme (*Us=good/Them=bad*). Within the historical framework of orientalism (drawing on Edward Said’s critique in his book on *Orientalism*), the *Other* (in this case, the Orient) has been considered as a subordinate object of knowledge, as an imaginative construct (not as an ontological category) — often connected with “temporal distancing and denial of coevalness” critically elaborated on by the anthropologist Johannes Fabian in his influential book *Time and the Other*.³⁰ Still, even this specific grammar of orientalizing as a governing principle of the construction of alterity in newsreels entails “a possibility of desire for the other and even, sometimes, a potential for self-critical relativism.”³¹

Considering these three different ‘grammars’ of alterity and taking the entire cluster of alterity terms into account (difference, otherness, diversity, identity, etc.), let us turn again to our concern with newsreels. The newsreels of 1968 and their representation of (national, political, cultural) alterity — as has been said before — cannot fully be grasped with reference merely to empirical alterity, i.e. an alterity that results from a social encounter/interaction with *Others* who might be talking back and thus — encouraged through postcolonial issues — pointing critically to the authority of representation. But what does the category of alterity look like or how does it change when it shows up in a media context and not in an immediate communicative situation of face-to-face encounters? What we are facing here are mediated forms of alterity construction: directing attention to the screen as a decisive factor for projection and stereotyping — but also to seeing the *Other through* a screen or even *as* a screen (image, stereotype).³² Even if the insights of cultural anthropology into empirical alterities cannot be fully applied to the investigation of represented alterities in newsreels, taking up the reflections from the Writing Culture debate could nevertheless be eye-opening: Writing the *Other’s* culture refers to *Othering* as a practice, to writing as a construction instead

of mere representation. This is relevant for newsreels, because there are no given different national identities at work to be represented, but rather different textual and visual constructions of them.

6_Conclusion

Going back to the beginning: What has happened to an *Other* that resists accessibility? Propelled by the debates on the crisis of representation and the critique of representational authority in cultural anthropology, the current discussion has taken an anti-representational turn — by problematizing usurpations of the *Other*, by listening to the *Other's* own voice, by speaking with the *Other*, and by acknowledging the fact that those who have before been constituted as *Others* have now begun to speak for themselves. All these concerns exceed assumptions about mere representations of the *Other*. They question dichotomic polarizations between identity and alterity in favor of considering overlapping in-between positions and cultural diversity. This development can be connected to an important shift in the categorical frameworks for conceiving of 'alterity,' the shift away from those of colonialism — which still influenced the Cold War antagonistic alterities in the newsreels of 1968 — and towards those of globalization that no longer allow the assumption of a bounded 'alterity' and instead focus on transnational connections and entanglements that seem to neutralize alterities.

Committed to future responsibilities of knowledge and cognition — not the least in the field of media and news transmission — we should ask: How can we guarantee that alterity can be brought to the fore as a critical concept without surrendering it to any hegemonic power of definition or to an all-too-easy, general availability? In an age of accelerated globalization and digitalized mediation of news as well as in an image-governed consumer culture, we definitely need to address the complex questions connected to this concept — above all as an ethical reminder in a situation where we face worldwide overarching and hegemonic regimes of representation with their claims of authority and hierarchy. The cross-cultural constellations of our world today demand changed recognitions of alterities, acknowledging more than ever alterities *within* the *Self* and other productive hybridizations beyond a binary framework. Newsreels have certainly made first decisive steps in this direction. They contributed massively to the formation of images with specific performative, affective, and often manipulative power — images of the nation, images of political events, images and icons of sports.

By expanding news transmission into the domains of affective relations, the newsreels of the last century certainly paved the way for a multidirectional circulation of images, taking off from the usual linear representations and their binary, antagonistic frame of identity vs alterity. Even if the increase in the circulation of news and images becomes further prevalent in the 21st century, the ethical and political question connected with it will remain a continued concern: How can we acknowledge the ineffability, unavailability and self-representation of the *Other*?

Endnotes

- ¹ Dieter Mersch, *Medientheorien zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2006), 9: “Es gibt Medien, weil es Alterität gibt;” on the relation between media and alterity, see the volume by Joachim Michael and Markus Klaus Schäffauer, eds., *Massenmedien und Alterität* (Frankfurt, Main: Vervuert, 2004).
- ² Mersch, *Medientheorien*, 9: “Alterität meint ein ‘Anderes’, das sich dem Zugriff zunächst verweigert, das eines Dritten bedarf, um seine Vermittlung, seine Symbolisierung, Aufbewahrung, Übertragung oder Kommunizierung zu garantieren.”
- ³ Kornelia Imesch, Sigrid Schade, and Samuel Sieber, “Introduction,” in *Constructions of Cultural Identities in Newsreel Cinema and Television after 1945*, eds. Kornelia Imesch, Sigrid Schade, and Samuel Sieber (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 7–20.
- ⁴ On media as a figure of the third, see Joachim Fischer, “Figuren und Funktionen der Tertiärität: Zur Sozialtheorie der Medien,” in *Massenmedien und Alterität*, eds. Joachim Michael and Markus Klaus Schäffauer (Frankfurt, Main: Vervuert, 2004), 78–86.
- ⁵ Ernst van Alphen, “The Other Within,” in *Alterity, Identity, Image: Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship*, eds. Raymond Corbey and Jope Leerssen (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1991), 1–16, here 3.
- ⁶ On newsreels, especially regarding their effectiveness through images and imagination, see Eugen Pfister, *Europa im Bild: Imaginationen Europas in Wochenschauen in Deutschland, Frankreich, Großbritannien und Österreich 1948–1959* (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2014); see also Eugen Pfister, “Imagining European Integration: The Construction of a European Identity in Austrian, British, French and German Newsreels in the 1950s,” in *Zeitgeschichte* 38.4 (2011), 215–231.
- ⁷ Rocky W. Law, “Beauty and the Beast: Japan in Interwar German Newsreels,” in *Beyond Alterity: German Encounters with Modern East Asia*, eds. Quinna Shen and Martin Rosenstock (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 17–33, here 18.
- ⁸ For the latter, see Corina Daba-Buzoianu, “Identity vs Alterity? Constructing Europe as Alterity during the Elections for the European Parliament in 2014,” in *European Journal of Research on Education* 3.1 (2015), 1–6; see also Pfister, *Europa im Bild*.
- ⁹ As a significant example, see the seminal essay by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond Identity,” in *Theory and Society* 29 (2000), 1–47.
- ¹⁰ Barbara Czarniawska, “Alterity/Identity Interplay in Image Construction,” in *The Sage Handbook of New Approaches in Management and Organization*, eds. Daved Barry and Hans Hansen (Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore: Sage, 2008), 49–62, here 61.

- 11 Barbara Czarniawska, "Alterity (Otherness)," in *International Encyclopedia of Organization Studies*, eds. Stuart R. Clegg and James R. Bailey (Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore: Sage, 2008), 54–55, here 54.
- 12 See Czarniawska, "Alterity/Identity Interplay in Image Construction," 49–50.
- 13 See Hans Robert Jauss, "The Alterity and Modernity of Medieval Literature," *New Literary History* 10.2 (1979), 181–229 (issue on Medieval Literature and Contemporary Theory); Anja Becker and Jan Mohr, eds., *Alterität als Leitkonzept für historisches Interpretieren* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012).
- 14 Maddy Janssens and Chris Steyaert, "From Diversity Management to Alterity Politics: Qualifying Otherness," accessed November 14, 2017, <<http://openarchive.cbs.dk/bitstream/handle/10398/8127/8791023122.pdf?sequence=1>>, 1.
- 15 On the history of *Othering*, see Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson, "Theorizing Representing the Other," in *Representing the Other: A Feminism & Psychology Reader*, eds. Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 1996), 1–32.
- 16 On 'alterity' as a key term and practice in cultural anthropology/ethnography, see Bernhard Leistle, *Anthropology and Alterity: Responding to the Other* (New York/London: Routledge, 2017); on various manifestations of 'alterity,' see Raymond Corbey and Joep Leerssen, "Studying Alterity: Backgrounds and Perspectives," in *Alterity, Identity, Image: Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship*, eds. Raymond Corbey and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1991), vi–xviii.
- 17 James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1986), 1–26, here 10.
- 18 Serge Moscovici (1961), "Theory and Society in Social Psychology," in *The Context of Social Psychology: A Critical Assessment*, eds. Joachim Israel and Henri Tajfel (London: Academic Press, 1972), xiii.
- 19 See Clive Hazell, *Alterity: The Experience of the Other* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2009), xix.
- 20 Shingo Shimada, "Cultural Differences and the Problem of Translation," in *The Making and Unmaking of Differences: Anthropological, Sociological and Philosophical Perspectives*, eds. Richard Rottenburg, Burkhard Schnepel, and Shingo Shimada (Bielefeld: transcript, 2006), 83–95, esp. 83–90, here 85.
- 21 Fred Dervin, "Cultural Identity, Representation and Othering," in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*, ed. Jane Jackson (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 181–194, here 186.
- 22 See Barbara Czarniawska, "'The European Capital': The Work of Representation in Identity and Alterity Construction," in id., *A Tale of Three Cities: Or the Glocalization of City Management* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 16–40, here 34.
- 23 Horst Turk, "Alienität und Alterität als Schlüsselbegriffe einer Kultursemantik: Zum Fremdbegriff der Übersetzungsforschung," in *Kulturthema Fremdheit: Leitbegriffe und Problemfelder kulturwissenschaftlicher Fremdbegriffsforschung*, ed. Alois Wierlacher (München: iudicium, 1993), 173–197.
- 24 Turk, "Alienität und Alterität," 185: "Existenz differenter System- und Geschichtsreferenzen."
- 25 Turk, "Alienität und Alterität," 197: "eines vertrauten Auslegungsrahmens."
- 26 Turk, "Alienität und Alterität," 190: "Fremdheit zu alterisieren."

- 27 Turk, "Alienität und Alterität," 190: "Andersheit zu alienisieren."
- 28 Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich, eds., *Grammars of Identity/Alterity: A Structural Approach* (Oxford/New York: Berghahn, 2004), x, xi.
- 29 Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*, x.
- 30 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object (1983)* (Foreword by Matti Bunzl; with a new postscript by the author) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), chapter 2: "Our Time, Their Time, No Time: Coevalness Denied," 37–70, here 73.
- 31 Baumann and Gingrich, *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*, x.
- 32 See Joshua Wexler, "Alterity," in *The Chicago School of Media Theory – Theories of Media – Keywords Glossary*, accessed October 10, 2017, <<http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/alterity.htm>>.