

## **Conference Report on "the re/turn of the nonhuman in the study of culture. concepts, concerns, challenges"**

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), Justus-Liebig-University Gießen (JLU), May 27-28, 2013

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## Conference Report on "the re/turn of the nonhuman in the study of culture. concepts, concerns, challenges"

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In a politically, financially and technically changing world, the concept of the post-/non-human is gaining more and more relevance in recent academic research, and is proving to be an essential, yet highly difficult challenge for the humanities as such. In an attempt to abandon the humanist perspective as the only horizon of experience, natural and cultural sciences begin to merge, as the limits of both disciplines become apparent. "Turning towards the nonhuman in the study of culture, however, is not just about 'contemporary thought' – it's about politics, knowledge and embodied experience both in the present and throughout history. Thus a 'nonhuman turn' in the study of culture might just as well be described as a 're/turn of the nonhuman', as research on the cultural and social relations of human and

nonhuman actors can be traced to a variety of different intellectual and theoretical developments moving back through the last decades of the 20th century and well before" (conference-flyer).

This was the first in a series of conferences at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) for emerging topics in cultural studies and was held in cooperation with the Center for 21st Century Studies (C21)/University of Wisconsin.

RICHARD GRUSIN (Milwaukee), the Director of the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, provided introductory notes on the field of the nonhuman. He named several schools of thought related to the subject, such as the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour, the field of Animal Studies, speculative realism, the systems theory of Niklas Luhman as well as neuroscience and biogenetics – disciplines that seem divergent, though are parts of a whole, as he stated.

While he lamented a certain resistance in academia against a 'Nonhuman Turn', his statement that "we have never been human" (instead of Latour's "we have never been modern") pointed to the conceptual problem of 'the humanities' and the shortcomings of anthropocentric scholarly research. Grusin formulated the goals of this conference as the overcoming of binary

oppositions in thought and the examination of philosophical, ethical and political questions concerning the nonhuman.

## I, Rainforest



The first keynote lecture on "I, Rainforest: Posthumanism and Multispecies Communities in the Anthropocene" was held by URSULA HEISE (Stanford), Professor in the Department of English and the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability at UCLA. Her lecture provided not only insights into the field of the nonhuman from the perspective of Literature and Environmental Studies but also a comprehensive outline of the various approaches to posthumanism. Starting with the term 'anthropocene' (coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer) – shorthand for new environmental thought following the realization that 'nature' untouched by humans no longer exists – she identified several propositions for an augmented relationship between humans and the environment, like Peter Kareiva's Domesticated Nature and Richard Hobbs' Intervention Ecology, in which science is promoted as the remedy for environmental problems, were it applied more wisely. She then clarified the fundamental categories of the human-machine relationship and its implications for posthumanism. Whereas Bernard Stiegler argues that technology is what makes us human in the first place and Ray Kurzweil sees cybernetically enhanced humans as the logical continuations of the evolutionary process, theorists such as Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe on the contrary oppose the perpetuation of enlightenment thought. For them, not only the interactions between machines and humans but also humans and animals serve as initial points for criticizing the humanist subject. In terms of multispecies ethnography, they describe an emancipated perception of the world in which animals not only deserve 'human-like' rights but also in which a perspectival multinaturalism dissolves the categorical distinction between humans and non-humans. In a similar yet even more radical approach, Jane Bennett's vital materialism extends the status of agency to all forms of matter and emphasizes the "active powers issuing from non-subjects" (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*). Heise acutely differentiated this approach from network theories such as Luhman's system theory and Latour's actor-network theory, which rather turn their attention towards the 'intra-activity' between objects of all sorts and the constitutive power of their relations. Citing Michael Pollan's New York Times article "Some of my best friends are bacteria" (in which Pollan addresses himself in the first-person plural after being confronted with the fact that only 10 percent of the cells in his body are his own and the rest microbial species), Heise provided compelling evidence for the ubiquitous, yet often very discrete, nature of such affiliations in the human realm.

## Aesthetics of the Non-Human



JÖRN AHRENS (Giessen), Professor for Cultural Sociology at the University of Giessen, questioned the limits of reflection on the nonhuman from an anthropological perspective in his talk “The Gravity of Infection. Contagion and the Moving Adversary”. Analyzing Sonderbergh's movie *Contagion* (2005), he identified the deadly virus as a nonhuman actor that, notwithstanding being a militant adversary, withdraws itself from human ethical categories. It, thus, remains an

epistemological object which can only be overcome as a problem of knowledge, not of morality.

In her lecture “Wagers of the Apparatus: Transgenic and Robotic Citizenries”, ERIN OBODIAC (Cornell), Mellon postdoctoral fellow at Cornell University, addressed the problem of nonhuman entities as members of society. With personhood as one of the foundations of legal order, what challenges are implied for this order when personhood is to be extended to trans-/non-humans? Is it still “as heretical to say that man is a machine as it was to say that god is a man” (Obodiac)?

The following keynote lecture “Psychogeophysics: Aesthetics for the Non-Organics” by JUSSI PARIKKA (Winchester), Reader in Media & Design at Winchester School of Art, inquired into the field of psychogeophysics, a term coined by the London Psychogeophysics Summit of 2010. As psychogeographics relies on “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, 1955) predominantly in urban environments, psychogeophysics introduces the non-organic into the scope, studying the interactions between individuals and their environments on a planetary scale. Parikka presented a vast array of science and art projects dealing with the perception of the non-organic, for example Katie Paterson's *Vatnajökull* (the sound of), where the recordings from an underwater microphone connected to a glacier can be experienced by anybody from anywhere in the world. According to Parikka, the aim of psychogeophysics is the “synchronization of human senses with non-human entities like the earth or the soil”. For him, Michel Foucault's understanding of genealogy is superseded by geology, and he favors Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic, topographically simultaneous notion of history over the arborescent, linear one. The proposed shift in focus does not only imply a heightened awareness of power structures in relation to human geography, however, but also, and again, a modified idea of possible interchange between human psyche, media and non-organics.

## The Non-Human in Performance

On the evening of the first day, visitors to the conference could get a hands-on experience of the non-human in performance in the panel held at the Institute for Applied Theater Studies. BOJANA KUNST (Giessen), the institute's Professor for Choreography and Performance, shared

her "Welcome thoughts about nonhuman", in which she delineated the central role of the non-human in performance. As 'agency' in a theatrical sense cannot be divided between human and nonhuman, choreography is not perceived as the organization of dancing (human) bodies, but rather as an exploration of aesthetic and political relations between matter and space. Artists like Stelarc or the Critical Art Ensemble also focus on the means of performance production and the generative potential of the non-human.

After the lecture, SWOOSH LIEU (Frankfurt) showed their draft of many of the above concepts in a performance called "Everything but Solo". The four performers Jungyun Bae, Rose Beermann, Wiebke Dröge and Ekaterina Giorgadze interacted with spotlights, loudspeakers, ladders and cables, at the same time revealing and challenging notions of contemporary dance. In a first step, they used their bodies as measuring tools for a construction plan of the stage setting, according to which the 'non-human actors' were put into place. When positioned correctly and cable-connected, the apparatus became 'alive' in a very anthropomorphic way, the dancers suddenly appearing as engineers in a 'mad scientist' tradition, willingly constructing a 'monstrous' machine-body.

When being disassembled, it was now the machine that/who altered the performers' actions, providing the sequence according to which a ballet unfolded, involving both human and nonhuman bodies. A secondary, virtual space became more and more prominent amongst the repetitive motions and actions on stage, as well as through the use of technical loops. Using video projectors, the dancers first created virtual replicas of themselves and then of the whole stage. Still another doubling, as well as a reference to the technical means of production, was produced in a final scene that projected a recording of the show and, thereby, blurred the distinctions between production and performance, original and image.

## The Production of Vitality

The second day of the conference started with a talk by MARTIN MÜLLER (Paderborn) on the implementation of synthetic biology in anthropocentrism. He claimed that the spectacular promises of future synthetic biology have led to a "renaissance of the Homo Faber," with mankind finally gaining (nearly complete) sovereignty. However, Müller claimed, these (phallogocentric) fantasies of power produce a "tension between human control strategies and nonhuman agency within Synthetic Biology" that requires greater attention from an academic perspective.

JORDANA GREENBLATT (Giessen), Postdoctoral Research Member at the GCSC, proposed a different 'reading' of DNA as a bodily text that updates discoveries initiated by the Human Genome Project (decoding of the DNA) in the 90s. Epigenetics, with its more acute understanding of how the genetic code materializes in the body, reconciliates an essentialist with a constructivist understanding of the body, envisioning "organisms-as-contingent-readings" - linguistically speaking, conjoining the syntagmatic with the paradigmatic.

## Outlook



GRETA OLSON (Giessen), Professor of English and American literary and cultural studies at the University of Giessen, presented a paper on the peril of "Romancing the Non-Human Animal". She stressed the potential of derogating "certain types of human animals" in the endeavor to critique the humanist subject. By analyzing British eighteenth-century abolitionist literature regarding cruelty to animals,

Olson uncovered how the argument of 'savagery' was used to degrade members of the lower orders that participated in blood-sports involving animals. She argued that while the non-human animal was never at the center of the anti-abuse movement, it has always been a caveat for established hierarchies amongst humans. Warning against repeating the history of delineation, Olson raised the question of whether we are really ready to become post-/non-human.

The last keynote lecture by NOORTJE MARRS (London), "From non-humans to issues: felicities of digital culture", involved an outlook towards political and social development concerning the non-human. Marres discussed a series of examples where technical apparatus equipped with empirical devices actively alter their surroundings, like the arduino-enhanced teapot (Chris Adams) that provides information about the temporary disposability of sustainable energy for boiling water. She described the process as "issuefication", meaning that objects become charged with a political, no longer latent but explicit agency.

Taking this cue, Richard Grusin commented on the environmental and political relevance of digital culture and the potential of "these little moments" that are produced when new thought is exchanged. The conference held at the GCSC generated ideas for turning attention to nonhuman objects, impressively demonstrating the relevance of cultural studies in an altered world, while the 'non-human turn' might well be a turn away from the humanities, as Grusin indicated.