Medien und Mimesis

Things Beside Themselves
Mimetic Existences

The concluding conference of the DFG /
SNF research group 'Media and Mimesis'
3rd – 5th February 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 milieux, 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/milieux.

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.

- In the digital sphere, the notion of being beside oneself may call to mind social bots, fake news in social media, high-speed algorithms used in securities trading, and particularly the ever-increasing mobilisation of images and the continual process of differentiation that results from the dynamics of their distribution and circulation. The laws of imitation (to borrow Gabriel Tarde's expression) are inseparable from questions concerning the speed of dissemination and distribution, along with the associated transport calculations and formatting standards. The conference will pursue these questions via contemporary debates around the technologically induced and aesthetically intensified metamorphosis of image media, in order to redefine the relationship between original and copy (in the current context of 'streaming frenzy', for example, or via the work of contemporary artists such as Hito Steyerl and Hasan Elahis).

- In the arts, it is particularly trompe-l'oeil paintings and marquetries that bring to light the being-beside-themselves of the objects depicted. Nevertheless, intermedial transpositions ranging from textile media to film and computer animations and modelling can transport this dimension of trompe-l'oeil things beyond the ontological domain of illusion.

- In the sphere of literary practices, ever greater attention is being paid to the interaction between human beings and machines in contemporary textual production. Key questions here include the relationship between algorithmic creativity and mimetic appeals to literary precursors, and the problem of specific levels of style derived from textual corpora (together with their modelling for precise applicable formulations). This field of enquiry ranges from text generators programmed to produce poetry (and a potential Turing test for such texts) to professional publishing software than can perform editing duties and algorithm-based fan-fiction texts.

- Examinations of popular media, meanwhile, might analyse the exhibition of taxidermies in dioramas, which appear as bodies that are permanently in the process of becoming estranged from themselves. These bodies remain on the threshold between themselves and something else – between habitat and animal, animal and thing, thing and sign, particular example and type, life and death.

- In the sphere of ethnology, African and American possession rituals and their associated media are particularly relevant to the conference theme.

- In the field of political intrigue, objects and milieux interact with one another as part of subjectivation and de-subjectivation processes. Between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, for example, quasi-objects functioned as media that bound loyal subjects to the sovereign or helped to stabilise dynasties. The process of becoming a traitor, by contrast, can be seen as one of dis-identification, in which subjects are removed from their milieux and cast outside themselves. In such processes, things (such as documents, stamps, and passes) on the one hand serve to certify, fix, and validate existing identities. On the other, they exert a form of magical attractive power that seduces subjects into relinquishing their existing attachments and changing their loyalties.

- From a historical perspective, being beside oneself can be conceived as a mode of historical transition. Historiographic analyses may then consider how things (in the form of goods, cultural goods, legal titles, informational units, and so on) are encountered within an ensemble of infrastructural surroundings, technical and administrative milieux, and socio-cultural usage contexts. On this basis, it may be presumed that mimetic affinities exert a deregulating, transformative pressure on things and their relationships – a pressure that may be observable in the shifting of administrative and auditory culture into the digital sphere, in the facilitation of digital appropriation practices by embedding something in analogue media, and in the exploitation and integration of disparate economic spheres in colonial contexts.