

Report on ESSCS/TransHumanities Joint Summer School 2023 “Bouncing Forward: Future Narratives, Scenarios and Transformation in the Study of Culture”

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“Bouncing Forward: Future Narratives, Scenarios and Transformations in the Study of Culture” is the title of the summer school organized at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen through the joint effort of the ESSCS (European Summer School in Cultural Studies) and TransHumanities. Both organizing bodies strive to create a platform for interdisciplinary research and knowledge exchange in the fields of art and culture. “Bouncing Forward” was a true embodiment of those ideals, as it brought together 25 young scholars from 17 universities from across the globe for a full week program, from the 19th to the 23rd of June 2023. This summer school’s focus, as the name already betrays, was on the uncertain future and the role of cultural and interdisciplinary scholars in shaping it. To put it more whimsically, how can we “bounce forward” in our scholarly practices?

Monday, June 19

The first day of the Summer School began with the welcoming words of MICHAEL BASSELER, the Director of the GCSC, and DEBORAH DE MUIJNCK (GCSC), the organizer of the Summer School. Afterwards the Summer School officially began with an inspiring keynote by ANSGAR NÜNNING (Justus Liebig University), titled “Extending Futurability through the Imagination: Affordances and Constraints of Factual and Fictional Narratives as Cultural Ways of Making Futures.” In this interesting keynote, Ansgar Nünning addressed the importance of narratives not only in the process of meaning making, but also, and more importantly, in their role in producing future scenarios, in making future worlds possible. The keynote was also filled with stimulating book recommendations such as: *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (London 2021) by Peter Fleming, *Man in the Dark* (London 2009) by Paul Auster, *The Redemptive Self:*

Stories Americans Live (Oxford 2005) by Dan McAdams, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (London/New York 2016) by Peter Frase, *Happy Teachers Change the World: A Guide for Cultivating Mindfulness in Education* (Berkeley 2017) by Thich Nhat Hanh. In the first part of the lecture, Nünning mentioned the presence of the future in the present, where narratives can be seen as symbolic weapons to create future worlds. According to him, novels are laboratories for future forms of life. In the second part, he focused on the role of digitalization. He underlined that we do not need more digitalization; what we need are more healthy people. He then mentioned the importance of the four P's, which are essential components for a good present and future life: passion, pleasure, problem, and purpose. The Keynote was followed by a "get together" in the university canteen for a lunch break.

After the lunch break, the first panel "Challenging Futuristic Tech-Discourses" chaired by MIKE TOGGWEILER (University of Bern) began with a presentation by BO WANG (University of Amsterdam). Wang focused on the concept of socio-technical imaginaries, especially the role of technology and machines in the context of Chinese nationalism. He mentioned the struggles to understand the notion of time within its socio-political implications. LUCIEN SCHÖNENBERG (University of Bern) was the next speaker. His talk focused on algorithmic video surveillance; more specifically, on the construction of humanity's future in the business of algorithmic systems. Furthermore, he talked about his own experience as a cultural anthropologist in tech-fairs as sites of "future crafting," as spaces where social norms are consolidated. The third speaker of this panel was MARCO PRESAGO (IPP). In his presentation, he shed light on the novel *Meet us by the Roaring Sea* (New York 2022) written by Akil Kumarasamy. More specifically, he focused on how the second-person narration of Kumarasamy's novel enables the reader's processes of forward thinking in regards to issues related to the future of memory, technology, ethics, and grieving.

After a coffee break the Summer School started with another interesting panel on "Shifting Cultures and Implications of Societies" chaired this time by JAN RUPP (GCSC). MATTHEW CHILDS (University of Washington) was the first speaker of this panel. Matthew's paper "Foggy Pasts, Shifting Presents, Uncertain Futures: Wilhelm Raabe's *Pfisters Mühle: Ein Sommerferienheft*" looked at the way in which the German author Wilhelm Raabe Pfister presents a world that is always already in a state of change. He showed how the story's characters represent the full implications of what it means to become a society in modernity

and argued that this transformative process is not merely displayed in Raabe's work, but also exemplified by it. The next speaker was PIERA MAZZAGLIA (GCSC), who gave a presentation titled "New Ways of Representing Love on Social Media: Is the Future of Love Letter Writing really at Stake?" In her talk, Piera Mazzaglia shed light on the changing dynamics of some important cultural communicative practices within the panorama of future scenarios and narratives. More specifically, she focused on the present and future survival of the practice of love-letter writing in a society dominated by constant technological changes. Finally, she supported her thesis by presenting some examples extrapolated from 19th century and contemporary collections. The last speaker of the panel was ZILING SONG (GCSC) who presented her paper titled "Which Culture for the Future? A Debate about Eastern and Western Cultures around May Fourth Era in China." Song focused on the May Fourth Movement in 1919 (an anti-imperialist and patriotic student movement in China), which saw Chinese intellectuals engaging in a famous Eastern and Western Cultures Debate regarding the future of Chinese culture in the face of the national crisis in China and the crisis of rationalism in the western world.

The first day of the Summer School concluded with the 20th Anniversary Dinner Reception at the GCSC.

Tuesday, June 20

The second day of the summer school opened with the panel "Alternative Epistemologies and Bio-Futures" chaired by JENS KUGELE (GCSC) and featured two speakers both coming from the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA): JUELING HU and CHEN ZHOU. Juelling Hu's paper, "A Flash of Silver Green: Machine, Rainforest, and Tropical Futurism" explored the use of 'technology-infused' tropical rainforests as representations of possible regional futures through a study of Southeast Asian art installations and audio-visual works from the Asian Film archive and Singapore Art Week. The second presentation, "Consuming Ecological Food: Permeable Imaginations of Rural Authenticity under the Ecological Crisis" by Chen Zhou presented the functions and imaginations of rural authenticity by analyzing Beijing Farmers' Market, China's most emblematic market for ecological food. As a way to construct said rural authenticity, Chen Zhou elaborated on the entanglements based on care of ecological food production with non-human actors by showing the work of the Pingren Farm, one of the many

ecological farms involved in the Beijing Farmers' Market, which planted eggplants to create the perfect environment for insects like hoverflies and lacewings that naturally counter pests like aphids to avoid the use of chemical pesticides.

Moving on, the second panel "(Post-) Human Futures & the Anthropocene" chaired by SUSIE O'BRIEN (McMaster University) featured three speakers: LIDIA CUADRADO PAYERAS (University of Salamanca), MATTEO GALLO STAMPINO (University of Bergamo), and FRANCISZEK W. KORBANSKI (Lund University). Lidia Cuadrado Payeras' paper "Time Paradoxes in Contemporary Speculative Fiction: How to Make Sense of (Post)Human Futurities" looked into the use of speculative fiction narratives as tools for engaging with predicted future scenarios, while presenting, at the same time, a survey of the time paradoxes appearing in novels such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (Toronto 2003) and *The Heart Goes Last* (Toronto 2015), Larissa Lai's *The Tiger Flu* (Vancouver 2018), and Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* (New York 2000), pointing out the importance of time cartographies as essential instruments for literary and critical analysis. Matteo Gallo Stampino's presentation "'Bouncing forward' in the Apocalypse: Valerie Fritsch's *Winters Garten* (2006) and Mats Strandberg's *The End* (2019)" focused on the act of cultivating one's individual moral values in order to contrast passivity in the face of catastrophic or dystopic scenarios. According to Stampino, the novels analyzed and especially the morals embedded in them can serve as alternative perspectives that contrast the perception of uncertainty and constant change that characterize our own present day. The third presentation of the panel, "Exploring the Future in 'What-If' Mode: Scenarios, Future-making and Anthropocene" by Franciszek W. Korbanski investigated the etymology and history of the term 'scenario,' as well as the applications of said concept in the present day across multi- or even interdisciplinary contexts relating to the environment, socioeconomics and politics of development.

The afternoon continued with two masterclasses on "Conceptual Tools for Future Research: Scenarios and Narratives" held by DORIS BACHMANN-MEDICK (GCSC) and "Bouncing Back, Bouncing Forward? Temporalities of Resilience" held by SUSIE O'BRIEN (McMaster University) and MICHAEL BASSELER (GCSC).

"Conceptual Tools for Future Research: Scenarios and Narratives" focused on the concepts of scenarios and narratives as tools for addressing the challenges of uncertain futures.

Highlighting the importance of scenario thinking or scenario building and their embedded connections to aspects of story-making, cultural narrativity, imagination, and image construction, the masterclass explored such concepts, providing examples from literature, science fiction, arts, visions of companies (Shell, Daimler AG 2015/Mercedes-Benz Group AG) as well as military and ecological strategies. The masterclass “Bouncing Back, Bouncing Forward? Temporalities of Resilience” chaired by Susie O’Brien and Michael Basseler focused on some of the most recent positions within interdisciplinary resilience studies while also exploring the temporal structures and implications of resilience thinking. The masterclass featured an active and prolific discussion among the participants about the use of resilience as a concept in their own PhD projects with the aid of a number of extracts dealing with forms of ecological or social resilience.

The second day of the summer school ended with the keynote lecture “Into the Multiverse: Cultural Studies and Environmental Futures” held online by URSULA HEISE (UCLA).

During the Lecture, Ursula Heise explored the concept of multiverse as a significant theme in recent novels and films through references to works such as the Oscar-winning film *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (2022), Gibson’s novel *The Peripheral* (London 2014), *Spider Man: Into the Spiderverse* (2018), and Micaiah Johnson’s *The Space between Worlds* (London 2020). According to Heise, the narratives contained in these works highlight socioeconomic differences and cultural conflicts, delving, in their turn, into a profound sense of significant change, environmental crisis, and widespread uncertainty that hinders not only assured predictions for the future but also the cognitive understanding of the present. Having observed a certain fragmentation in the field of cultural studies, Heise called for new unifying paradigms in said field and presented the multiverse metaphor as a potential source of inspiration for collaboration between different academic trajectories.

Wednesday, June 21

Wednesday began with the third keynote lecture of the week, “Imagineering & Co. Transformative Practices and Cultures of Change” delivered by JÖRG METELMANN (University of St. Gallen). While St. Gallen is considered one of the leading business universities in the German-speaking world, Metelmann specializes in the fields of culture and media studies. Exactly this duality served as the foundation for the keynote lecture as one of his leading

questions was “what do humanities and social sciences contribute to the business education?” Departing from the idea of “Imagineering,” through the notions of “critical literacy” and “literary thinking,” to his own coined concept of “Vorbildungskraft,” Metelmann proved that the way the future is being seen or predicted in literary studies is not that different from the way it is being seen and predicted in business, and argued that the two fields can learn a lot from each other. Eventually, he proposed viewing the fictional expectations for a western capitalist future as a “cultural fact.”

After a coffee break, the day continued with the fifth panel of the week consisting of GABRIELA ANDRINA JÖRG (University of Bern), CAESY STUCK (University of Duisburg-Essen) and SABABA MONJUR (Marburg University), chaired by ISABELLA KALTE (GCSC). All three presentations gathered under the panel title “Explorations of Non-Human Entities and Paranature.” The first presenter, a visual artist, introduced the notion of “paranature.” In her artistic practice, Gabriela Andrina Jörg plants everyday objects in places where we expect to find nature to confront the viewers with how they perceive nature against the background of consumer demands. She proposed the possibility of “Nature 2.0,” going against our prevailing dystopian visions, in which nature evolves through plastic. In the following presentation, Caesy Stuck discussed the character and importance of plants in speculative fictions. She suggested that the use of plants in speculative fiction offers a unique opportunity to expand frameworks of non-human narration and explore the negotiation of cognition and embodiment in these narratives. Closing the panel, Sababa Monjur analyzed the *MaddAddam* Trilogy (Toronto 2003–2013) by Margaret Atwood and *The Tiger Flu* (Vancouver 2018) by Larissa Lai to see how non- (or sub-)humans, or perhaps an alliance between humans and non-humans, can oppose techno-capitalist practices in the future. In her opinion, the analyzed works offer alternative, restorative futures in which the extractive capitalism and the trans-special commodification have been opposed. Thus, the panel finished on a hopeful note.

“Artistic Transformations and Compositions of Time,” the sixth panel of the week chaired by BOJANA KUNST (Justus Liebig University), consisted of two presentations. The first presenter, AMARU IBARRA OLGUIN (University of Copenhagen), focused on two pieces from the Mexican American performance artist and activist Xandra Ibarra: *Fuck My Life* (2012) and *Spic Ecdysis* (2015). The panelist examined the artist’s work through the lenses of shame and anti-assimilations. The second panelist, PAYEL PAL (LNM Institute of Information Technology Jaipur),

introduced Amitav Ghosh's "Call for Planetary Solidarity" to engage with a variety of topics on the ecological crisis we are dealing with currently. Central to her presentation were the ideas of colonial ecological violence, which draws similarities between the violence between humans and violence to the Earth. She spoke of Gosch's idea of "the Great Derangement," according to which the two most significant causes of environmental violence are capitalism and empire. Pal challenged us to question the way we perceive nature, not only in cultural studies, but also in everyday life.

After a short coffee break, the afternoon featured two presentations organized by the Panel on Planetary Thinking chaired by LIZA BAUER (Justus Liebig University). After a short introduction to the panel's mission and objectives by Liza Bauer, Nigerian climate activist ADENIKE TITILOPE OLADOSU, discussed her paper "My Fight for Climate Justice: A Perspective from Nigeria — Climate Action through Ecofeminism" showing examples of her work in Nigeria's Kwail area in 2021, and her engagement with the Checheyl community in 2022 with the objective of empowering local girls and women through ecological awareness. Next up, curator and writer JASON WAITE presented the paper "Art and More-than-Human Worlds in Fukushima" in which he showed videos and photos from different artistic installations scattered around Fukushima's inaccessible exclusion zone. Different objects and photos from before the disaster were placed in abandoned structures as mementos of the past which could not be enjoyed by humans because of the radioactive activity. To everyone's surprise, wild animals still inhabiting the zone not only interacted with the materials but also became themselves active participants or objects of the exhibition while being captured by motion sensors and cameras. Overall, the project featured an active collaboration between artists and activists in order to find long term solutions to the ecological disasters of the exclusion zone as well as fostering strong connections between the two groups.

After an intense day of presentations, staying within the scope of issues of the future, the participants visited a mono-graphic exhibition of the Luxembourg artist MARY-AUDREY RAMIREZ at the art gallery Kunsthalle in Giessen. The exhibition, entitled *Forced Amnesia*, had been curated with the co-operation of Casino Luxembourg and occupied the entirety of the gallery space in Giessen. The artist's pieces take inspiration from video games and the digital world, hence appear otherworldly and carry a very peculiar mix of menace and charm.

Afterwards, participants had the chance to speak with the artists and ask her more about her work.

Thursday, June 22

The fourth day of the summer school was opened by the keynote lecture “Unsettling Resilience Stories: Dismantling Colonial Ideas of Futurity” by Susie O’Brien. Firstly, she introduced the concept ‘resilience’ and further explained Eve Tuck’s and K. Wayne Yang’s concept of ‘settler colonialism’ — a form of colonialism that describes the arrival of settlers who attempt to permanently settle down in the region and establish sovereignty. By using convincing examples from two novels, David Chariandy’s *Brother* (Toronto 2018) and Leanne Betasamoke Simpson’s *Accident of Being Lost* (Astoria 2017), she then discussed the settler colonial resilience narratives with the focus of the loss of childhood resilience and the quest to restore “old-fashioned fun.” In the final part of the presentation, she talked about the resilience narrative in the official report “Toronto’s First Resilience Strategy,” underlining the risk of climate change and the resilient cities movement.

After the break, the next panel, “Re-Imagining Past and Present Alternative Realities through Narrative,” chaired by ANDREAS LANGENOHL (Justus Liebig University), began with the presentation by PARVEZ ALAM (University of Amsterdam) titled “Journey through the Fury Road: Grasping Historical Images and Radical Potentials in Dystopian Imagination.” Firstly, he introduced Mark Fisher’s concept of ‘capitalist realism’ and considered that the reification of capitalist reality is conveyed in the representation of crises, language, law, and subjectivity in the world of *Mad Max*. Then, he argued that the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) tries to imagine redemption through the plays and negations of a spectral figure of law in a world where “capitalist realism has become the norm in post-apocalyptic or dystopian representations.” The second speaker of the panel, ANNA DIJKSTRA (Huygens Institute), analyzed how the individual modernist crisis is reflected in its treatment of space in Kafka’s novel *The Castle* (London 2000) and argued that the castle can be understood as a sublime place, which can be also seen as an expression of alienation. GOUTAM KARMAKAR (University of Western Cape), the last speaker of this panel, delivered a presentation about Imbolo Mbue’s novel *How Beautiful We Were* (New York 2021) arguing that the poor people in Kosawa are not only victims of ‘slow violence’ sensu Rob Nixon, but also subjected to what Miranda Fricker has termed ‘testimonial injustices.’ In

the end, Karmakar concluded that Mbue's novel shows its significance in endorsing the 'decolonial turn' and that the extraction of resources cannot be seen as merely an ecological issue but needs to be viewed as inherently sociological and epistemological.

After lunch, panel eight engaged with the topic of "Experimental Futures" chaired by FREDERIK TYGSTRUP (University of Copenhagen) consisting of another three presentations. ANUPAMA SURENDRANATH (Indian Institute of Technology Bombay) discussed India's first time travel film *Aditya 369* (1991) with focuses on several topics such as wandering children, the growing revivalism of the Hindu golden past in the Indian cultural domain in the 1990s, the role of child characteristics with the concept of 'growing sideways' facilitated by the emerging consumer culture. The second speaker, JONAS MÜLLER (Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz), situated Ben Lerner's novel *10:04* (London 2014) as an eco-anxiety narrative and argued that this narrative might offer some answers to what makes this anxiety so disorienting and how this affect might be transferred to something productive. The very last presentation of the panel was delivered by TAISUKE WAKABAYASHI (University of Illinois). He discussed the historical development of Nevada National Security Site from 1951 to 1992 and argued that the landscape of this site is "an archive of entrapped/entrapping history of the human-nonhuman assemblage" as well as the object and the subject of memory.

After the last panel of the day, participants enjoyed an interesting guided tour through the city of Giessen followed by a communal dinner.

Friday, June 23

The last day of the summer school opened with the final panel on "Feminist and Queer Ways of Imagining Futurity" chaired by ANNA TABOURATZIDIS (Justus Liebig University). The first presenter, KACPER RADNY (GCSC), opened the panel with a discussion on the struggles of exhibiting queer and feminist art in Eastern Europe. Working from the historian's point of view, he explained the recent history of attempts to exhibit queer and feminist art in Eastern Europe and then attempted to predict their future trajectory. Closing the panel, as well as the whole summer school, was YSABEL MUNOZ (Trondheim University). Her presentation "Islands of Transition: Reimagining Caribbean Futures through Trans-Ecofeminist Narratives" tackled the issues of environmental collapse through the works of non-western speculative fiction, specifically the works produced by Caribbean women, trans, and non-binary authors.

Having concluded the intensive week of student presentations, keynote lectures from professors and a pair of master classes, all attendees of the summer school gathered for a round of discussions and closing remarks from the organizers. During the discussion, attending students expressed their gratitude for the inclusive format of the conference, in which everyone had the opportunity to attend every presentation, without having to choose between simultaneously planned panels. During the closing remarks, representatives of the GCSC, Michael Basseler and Jens Kugele, thanked everyone for the hard work they had put into their presentations and brought attention to the interdisciplinary and multidimensional aspect of the event, leaving participants with the question of what the role of scholars in the field of cultural studies is in shaping future narratives. Closing off the discussion, one of the founding members of the ESSCS, FREDERIK TYGSTRUP (University of Copenhagen), brought up his view about the relationship between the past and the future and how the future is now moving in the direction of forecasting and projecting back. After concluding the academic part of the summer school, the participants were invited to enjoy lunch at the GCSC and afterward started leaving Giessen to embark on their journeys back home.