

Conference Report on "GCSC/GGK Anniversary Symposium: The Futures of the Study of Culture"

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Conference Report on "GCSC/GGK Anniversary Symposium: The Futures of the Study of Culture"

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This two-day symposium, centered around current questions, challenges and future developments in the study of culture, opened with remarks from Joybrato Mukherjee (President of JLU), Bruce Downton (Vice-chancellor of Macquarie University, Sydney), Ansgar Nünning (Founding and Managing Director of the GCSC) and Michael Basseler (Academic Manager of the GCSC). All speakers stressed the importance of understanding the complexity of culture, both by individual scholars and the institutions they are based in. Jens Kugele (Research Coordinator of the GCSC) and Doris Bachmann-Medick (Research Fellow at the GCSC) then offered further insight into the backdrop against which the event was conceptualized. Even though the speakers cannot be expected to act as prophets, the current pressing issues bear an explosive potential both for society and for the study of culture. Migration, terrorism, transnational/global entanglements and digitalization (to name just a few) are transforming the world and thus need to be addressed by scholars – especially since, as Doris Bachmann-Medick underlined, “the future starts in the present, and there is nothing but future”.



From disciplinary trading zones to Brexit, late-modern singularities and bioethical dilemmas

PETER GALISON (Cambridge, MA) delivered the first lecture, titled “Three Futures: Culture through Trading Zones”. His talk focused on the analysis of three categories: concepts, images and things. He briefly described an important paradigm shift in the history of culture, starting with positivism (of which Otto Neurath and his Isotype was an exponent), which grounds knowledge on observations, and finishing with the theory-centered vision of knowledge that is anti-positivism. He compared this



difference to the opposition between Newtonian time and Einsteinian time – a difference that defines the locality of knowledge. He then illustrated disputes between mathematicians and physicists caused not by epistemological and conceptual divergence but by differences in the use of scientific language. Thus, the borders between languages are of vital importance in the communication between any disciplines. Galison concluded by stating that arts and humanities are equal and inherently interlinked “parts of the world in which science sits”.

NICOLE ANDERSON (Sydney) introduced her topic by referring to cultural imaginaries, such as the one present in David Bowie’s iconic song *Is There Life on Mars?* Two aspects of the song prove relevant to the current situation: anticipation of the future and disappointment with reality. She then analyzed the UK Brexit vote, which she considered a symptom of such disappointment. According to Anderson, Brexit was primarily a “vote to leave European culture and identity”, as well as one consequence of the lack of communication between cultural studies scholars and the greater public. The former had failed to convincingly inform members of society about the problems, causes and consequences of the current political situation, thus intensifying divides between social classes and political orientations. Anderson thus reflected on the role of higher education in contemporary society, stressing the necessity of delivering more public discourses, informing citizens, and offering an ethical education that takes into account the interests and needs of others. In her view, asserting the value of humanities and making them relevant has never been more pressing.



In the next talk, ANDREAS RECKWITZ (Frankfurt/Oder) offered a detailed analysis of temporary forms of sociality, linking singularization and culturalization. He structured his talk along the divide between the social logics of generality and particularity. Modern industrial societies are based on schematization and standardization, Reckwitz argued, with the traditional capitalist economy gradually shifting towards a mode of cultural production in contemporary societies. In contrast to the “reign of the general” of the industrial age, late modernity’s singularization does not produce a universal type. Instead, its results are neither interchangeable nor authentic. Singularization appears on different levels: subjectification, objectification, collectivities, time and space. Furthermore, according to Reckwitz, singularities are enacted through performance and ritual practices to which intrinsic cultural values are socially ascribed. In an era dominated by media and digitalization, the drive towards and assessment of singularities has become crucial. Today’s “winner-takes-it-all markets”, Reckwitz stated, function according to the logic of *Entwertung* and *Valorisierung*, respectively de-singularization (as is the case with “fakes”, or objects which failed to become originals) and re-singularization (an act of valorization which lies at the core of new trends). In conclusion, Reckwitz stressed a central aspect of his method: his sociology of comparison (*Soziologie des Vergleichs*) approach simultaneously constituted a critique of the grand récit.

In her keynote, SILKE SCHICKTANZ (Göttingen) introduced the public to the intersections of biomedicine, ethics and morality. In dealing with bioethics as a socio-cultural practice, Schicktanz argued, critical reflection is crucial in revealing social stereotypes and power relations in the production of knowledge, as well as the clarification of our own normative premises. This is especially important with respect to procedures such as IVF and surrogacy, where legal responsibilities entangled with exploitative market and gender conditions that still prevail in numerous countries. While traditional bioethics focuses on expert discourse, creating a so-called expertocracy, the speaker stressed that the importance of including lay and patients' moral perspectives beyond experts' views. The "elective affinity" in the keynote's title thus encompassed both an alternative to natural kinship towards moral and cultural values, and the inclusion of morality, affective and social dimensions of power in the field of new medicine. In conclusion, Schicktanz underlined the necessity of creating new forms of translation between disciplines as one of the most important tasks facing scholars today.



Changing geographies and technologies in the global age

The lecture delivered by ISABEL GIL (Lisbon) centered on the visual as a paradigm of analysis for contemporary societies. She introduced her topic with a reference to Sophie Calle's 2013 exhibition on "Absence". The installations put the potential of absence into focus, which in turn offers a striking analogy to disciplinary academic approaches. She continued by detailing the omnipresence of surveillance in today's society, causing increasing panoptophobia. Gil complemented her theoretical approach with further examples from the world of the documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras, who creates art installations that register visitors' body temperature and physiological reactions, thus storing their traces in space. Gil then raised the question: Is the age of the panopticon, and thus the total surveillance, over? She left listeners to wonder about how we, as scholars and citizens, can deal with observation in a world where surveillance is omnipresent.



The second day began with a lecture by FREDERIK TYGSTRUP (Copenhagen). He reflected on "what is happening to the idea of literature" in our global age of changing geographies and technologies. For him, literature is the "most subtle and interesting anthropology of the way we live now", with Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich illustrating how literature still communicates "the everyday life of the soul". Historicizing the idea of literature, Frederik Tygstrup considered how today the 300 year-old "contract of fictionality" is disrupted by para- and meta-fictional forms that blur the lines of the documentary and fictional. While literature continues to function as an anthropology of the world around us, Tygstrup argued that its forms reflect the broader shift from word to text noted by Roland Barthes. As the ecology of literary production changes, literary studies turn increasingly to book history, which offers one

mode of reflecting on today's world. According to him, we live in an age of globalized "translocal idiomatics" that transcend the boundaries of nations and the bindings of books.

The global scale was extended in RICHARD GRUSIN'S (Wisconsin-Milwaukee) thought-provoking lecture. He stressed the need to tackle questions of climate change and (anti-)terrorism. Without doing so, he argued, it would not only be the study of culture that has no future. He added migration, genetic engineering, security and health, including food and water supply to the list of pressing issues for twenty-first century scholarship. But, he noted, the humanities and universities generally are now entangled in the global "forces of securitization and the forces of global capitalism", including austerity politics, with precariousness increasingly threatening academics' traditional existence. Consequently, justification of the study of culture for itself has become increasingly difficult to achieve without submitting to what Grusin called "neoliberal" logic of utility and resilience. Thus any new turns in the study of culture are likely to be increasingly self-reflexively politicized. While taking a future-oriented perspective on the environmental consequences of the Anthropocene epoch, academics should work towards resistance on the ground. As he noted in the brief discussion following this passionate lecture, non-human allies, such as computer systems, may become weapons of the weak for resisting twenty-first-century transnational forces' negative consequences.

The symposium's final lecture by URSULA HEISE (Los Angeles) continued the environmental and nonhuman themes from Grusin's talk. Heise presented literary texts, popular culture and documentary films in illustrating her call for a turn towards indigenous and alternative knowledge in facing climate change. She argued that popular Western iconography of climate change, including cute polar bears, had detracted from recognizing the extent of the damage caused by the Anthropocene era. The "speculative fictions" of sci-fi that present humans as "ecological aliens" are, for her, not only indicators of our epoch's likely consequences but also a spur to a reconceptualization of the human as inherently entangled in networks with nonhuman actors. She further stressed in the brisk discussion following her lecture, that this global and planetary perspective, which alienates the Western human while making space for indigenous knowledge and nonhuman agents, constitutes a new narrative for the future study of culture.

Challenges in today's academic landscape: funding, scholarly communication and interdisciplinarity



Beyond the lectures, the Anniversary Symposium included a roundtable discussion and a panel of brief post/doctoral presentations. The roundtable discussion, chaired by Doris Bachmann-Medick and Jens Kugele, included short presentations by selected speakers, followed by a Q&A session involving the moderators and the audience.

ENCARNACIÓN GUTIÉRREZ-RODRÍGUEZ (Giessen) referred to the increasing police violence in the US, as well as the “Black Lives Matter” campaign or the situation of refugees trying to cross borders, in order to stress the need for critical humanities that examine the coloniality of power. She mentioned the work of the GCSC Emerging Topics Research Group “Migration”, in which she participates, as example. The group deals with dimensions such as space, conviviality, new racial formations – aspects, which Gutiérrez-Rodríguez deems fruitful for the future study of culture.

ANDREAS LANGENOHL (Giessen) focused on methodological questions, reflecting upon the way in which the contemporary social world resonates in the methodologies used by scholars. According to Langenohl, the role of the study of culture is to analyze hegemonies and underlying structures of power. In addition to hegemony, antagonism also needs to be tackled as a highly actual phenomenon. Due to urgent social issues, the political system is increasingly interested in scholarly work – an interest which needs to be critically accounted for.

For UWE WIRTH (Giessen), the study of today’s culture should also include analysis of copy culture, since cutting, copying and pasting have become key elements in today’s digital media world. The field of literature and the arts is permeated by them: papier collé, ready-mades and collages (such as the ones created by Herta Müller) are just a few examples of artistic techniques that transport, collect and combine elements in order to create an original product. Thus, Wirth suggested, there is a need for new models to describe cultural processes, including travelling concepts (e.g. hybridity) or Derrida’s concepts of “quoting” and “sampling”.



How can historians contribute to a discussion about the future, asked DIRK VAN LAAK (Giessen) in the introduction to his short presentation. Referring to the roles of “prophets of the past” or “experts of collective experience”, often ascribed to historians, van Laak offered a more detailed definition of historians’ work –approaching present-day events in order to be able to foresee future developments. Sticking to complexity and explaining diversity are some imperatives for the future study of culture in his view, as is addressing students as “future audiences”.

MARTIN ZIEROLD (Karlsruhe) tackled aspects such as teaching and interdisciplinary training in his short talk. As a professor in an applied arts school, his understanding of teaching entails not only lecturing but also co-creating with students. The classroom represents the ideal setting for “testing out” formats for engaging the greater public. Nevertheless, Zierold remarked, “not everybody is able to become a student” – and this precariousness also manifests itself on the post-graduate and PhD level, or even after obtaining a doctorate. Furthermore, Zierold noted that the academic system is still based on a strong disciplinary logic; the institutional setting thus needs to undergo changes in order to allow for real interdisciplinarity.

During the following Q&A session, Jens Kugele raised the question of the “funding topographies” and their role for the academic study of culture in the future. In his reply, Andreas Langenohl highlighted the merit of the GCSC as an institution which has managed to secure substantial funding from the DFG, thus offering a great deal of freedom to the researchers. Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez then suggested new keywords for dealing with



this topic, taken from practices such as social protests, especially movements from Spain and Mexico. These protests could contribute to the scholarly practices by challenging the authorities of knowledge production; scholars ought to stay connected with public debates to draw ideas from them. Andreas Reckwitz noted the lack of dispute and controversy in the field of the study of culture, raising the

question: is a united front in the face of potential threats necessarily productive or is it perhaps a rather detrimental communication strategy within the field? Martin Zierold also expressed his skepticism with respect to absolute consensus, mentioning the lack of real communication evident even in scholarly settings. In reply, Hubertus Büschel stressed the need for a higher politicization of the study of culture, more along the lines of cultural studies and the legacy of Stuart Hall. Commenting on this line of thought, Andreas Langenohl pointed out that abstaining from grand narratives possesses in itself an inherently ideological function. During the concluding remarks, Uwe Wirth returned to funding-related aspects and expressed his concern about the financially motivated replacement of passion with strategy. In his vision for the future, academia should create a space where pragmatism does not decide about everything – something Richard Grusin had previously stated.

Post/doctoral contributions to the future study of culture

Moving on to the post/doctoral panel, the first speaker TOM CLUCAS (Giessen) addressed the necessity of incorporating the market and the public as categories of analysis into the study of culture, thereby enabling exploration of the connection between mass consumer culture and its politicization. Consumption has long become a cultural process, and thus the current rise of the mass market is bound to affect not only production and consumption, but also the analysis of cultural artifacts. The future study of culture needs to account for current models of communication and reception, focusing on the relationship between individual identities and public spaces.

LAURA MENEGHELLO's (Giessen) presentation shed light on the links between cultural history and the global economy. The study of the entangled history of economy, Meneghello stated, is a recent phenomenon that had been almost absent before the 1850s. Newer interdisciplinary research and approaches focus on processes of translation and the constructions of scientificity. These approaches aim at deconstructing



economics, questioning the universality of economic laws, as well as analyzing ethical and epistemic values pertaining to them.

ANDRESSA SCHRÖDER's (Giessen) contribution reflected upon the value that art-based research could offer the study of culture. Notwithstanding its ongoing struggle for recognition, Schröder stated, artistic research is an extremely versatile method that always takes a specific context as a point of departure, refusing to settle for one specific model of analysis. Art-based research can emphasize ambiguity, "setting free questions that had already been buried by answers". Consequently, the aim of art-based research is to indicate new poetic forms of expression rather than solve problems or offer solutions.

PAUL VICKERS (Giessen) argued that area studies have a future in academia particularly with traditional approaches to peripheral regions producing an othering effect that enables their domination by homogenizing knowledge. His model of area studies, with contact zones as a point of departure, encompasses situated methods for interdisciplinarity, as well as drawing on Jan Kubik's notion of contextual holism. According to Vickers, the most pressing challenge for area studies is building transregional studies – though, in the context of East European Studies, becoming part of a broader "European studies" largely remains hypothetical until epistemic inequalities are overcome. Frederik Tygstrup addressed the question of scale during the Q&A, which Vickers argued is vital for area studies, ensuring that not only the global-local intersection but also the regional and national form levels of analysis.



SIBYLLE BAUMBACH (Innsbruck) and HUBERTUS BÜSCHEL (Groningen) offered concluding remarks on the entire Symposium before chairing a final discussion. Hubertus Büschel emphasized a theme from the roundtable discussion and Richard Grusin's contribution, namely whether the study of culture should adopt consciously a more political stance. He also noted that the methods and theories applied in the field

largely originate in "the global North", thus if the study of culture is to meet the demands of a global, transnational age, then its epistemological and analytical toolbox should also reflect the epoch in its geographic entirety. The concluding discussion generally underlined the sense that the study of culture requires greater self-reflection on issues including its own "metapolitics", as Nicole Anderson put it, and on who can access its structures and products. After all, if the study of culture sees the future as transnational and global then, unlike the symposium line-up, the future is unlikely to be largely white and Western.

The discussion's largely convivial tone reflected the public atmosphere throughout the two-day symposium. A broad spectrum of present concerns and potential futures for the humanities, social sciences and beyond was presented in an intensive, ambitious and generally thought-provo-



king schedule. The contributions on the future of the study of culture should soon be fixed for posterity in a published volume based on the symposium.

Editors' Note: In a previous version of this article the quote „the future starts in the present, and there is nothing but future“ was mistakenly attributed to Ansgar Nünning and his opening remarks. In fact this statement was made by Doris Bachmann-Medick (GCSC, Giessen) from the organizing team, who together with Jens Kugele (GCSC, Giessen) outlined the conceptual framework of the conference.