

# MAKING MATTER MATTER: PAGE, STAGE, SCREEN

PROF DR INGRID HOTZ-DAVIES TÜBINGEN

PROF DR MARTIN MIDDEKE AUGSBURG

PROF DR CHRISTOPH REINFANDT TÜBINGEN

TIME Monday 1:15–3 pm

Monday 3:30–5 pm

Tuesday 3–4:30 pm

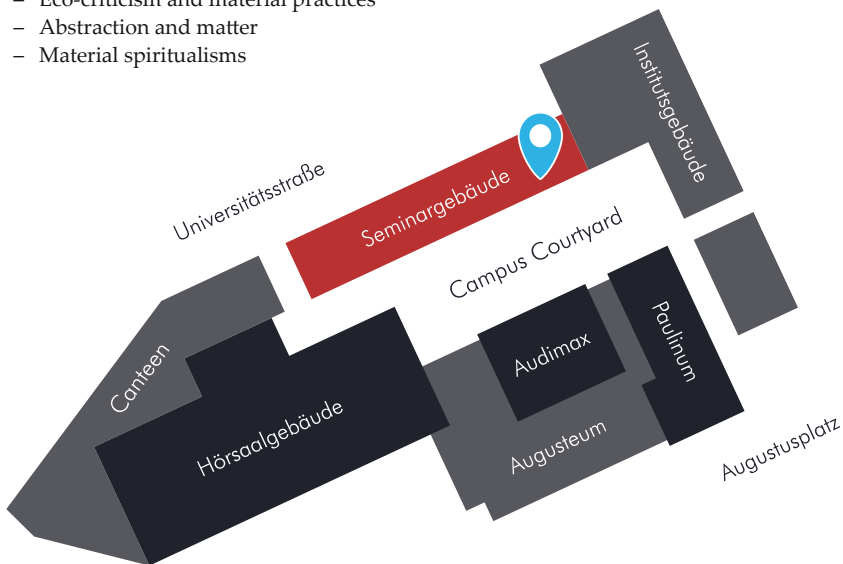
ROOM S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

If there is one discernible trend after the dissolution of the Age of Theory as it flourished under the impact of the linguistic turn, it seems to be a renewed focus on matter. While Theory (with a capital T) marked the climax of a longstanding development that refined the representational paradigm of Western culture after the linguistic turn of the early twentieth century, recent developments reformulate the modern triad of objectivity, subjectivity and reflexivity in terms of materiality, affect and mediality in order to acknowledge the ‘force of things’ and the ‘vibrancy of matter’ (Jane Bennett) in the ‘entanglement of matter and meaning’ (Karen Barad). The emergent new epistemological and ontological framework has often been subsumed under the bracket term ‘new materialisms’, which also covers parallel developments like ‘speculative realism’ (Quentin Meillassoux), ‘object-oriented philosophy’ (Graham Harman, Timothy Morton) or ‘actor-network theory’ (Bruno Latour). Of late, works by Donna Haraway (*Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*, 2016) and Bruno Latour (*Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, 2015/2017) in particular have claimed the practical and political urgency of the new mode of thinking against the backdrop of climate change and social upheaval as ultimate outcomes of the old paradigm. The interrelated analysis of matter and affect challenges traditional mind/body- and nature/nurture oppositions and, instead, highlights the complexity of oppressing linguistic signifying practices and forms in literature, theatre, and film. In this, literature, performance, art, and popular culture are seen as subverting such representations. Interrelating affect and matter, thus, accentuates sensations, intensities, valences, and interior movements that are generated and shaped by energies which are themselves embedded in diverse forms of embodied human life (i.e. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Brian Massumi, and, more recently, Sarah Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Eugenie Brinkema, Brian Massumi, Gregory J. Seigworth/Melissa Gregg, Diana Cool/Samantha Frost, Patricia Clough, Nigel Thrift). Literary texts and textures can thus

be viewed as a nexus of such matter/affect interrelation as they externalise mental activity (no matter whether in stone or papyrus or on paper or electronically).

The section 'Making Matter Matter: Page, Stage, Screen' invites contributions which clarify the concepts and assumptions at work in this paradigm. At the same time, however, it suggests that this be undertaken with recourse to aesthetic practices. (Literary) texts, performance(s), and their complex aesthetics can be regarded as complex explorations of mind/body activities which readers and spectators participate in beyond their respective cultural and historical differences. This suggestion is based on the observation that literature with its performative overcoding or repurposing of representational language use at least since Romanticism as well as modern theatre, film, music and arts have developed independently and have at times anticipated recent theoretical concerns by making matter matter beyond representation on levels of affect, process, involvement etc. Contributions to the section could thus address:

- Matter into words – words into matter
- Bodies-as-matter
- Circulation of affects
- The affectivity of bodies
- Flows and intensities that produce power, resistance, and desire
- Material practices of reading, writing, performing and seeing
- Process and meaning
- Natureculture and literature/art
- Eco-criticism and material practices
- Abstraction and matter
- Material spiritualisms



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## SUMMARY

Prof Dr Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Prof Dr Martin Middeke, Prof Dr Christoph Reinfandt

# MORAL MATTERS: POWER, COLONIALITY, AND NARRATIVE IN HANYA YANAGIHARA'S *THE PEOPLE IN THE TREES*

DR GERO BAUER TÜBINGEN

SLOT Monday 1:15–3 pm

ROOM S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

*The People in the Trees*, Hanya Yanagihara's 2013 debut novel, offers the fictional memoirs of Nobel Prize-winning biologist Dr Norton Perina, edited and annotated by his friend Ronald Kubodera. The novel is a rich and complex neo-gothic exploration of scientific megalomania – intricately captured in Perina's voice –, colonial exploitation, the human/nonhuman divide, and the physical and epistemological abuse of power. In the context of this section, I want to discuss how, in *The People in the Trees*, matter comes to matter in three different, but interrelated dimensions.

The novel's metafictional structure, with its introduction, comments, scholarly footnotes, and climactic revelation of a left-out piece of the story, refers back to a long tradition of 'fictional editions' – most prominently Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. It draws our attention to the ambiguous nature of both the confessional narrative in general, and the inequalities of power and material processes of imperial knowledge production inherent in the logic of Western science more specifically. The processes of selecting, ordering, and referencing foregrounded here prompt important questions about the power hierarchies produced and cemented in curating an archive of material and immaterial artefacts.

On the level of story, Yanagihara's novel produces an abundance of detail in the fictional construction of the island of U'ivu. The text's narrative evocation of material richness, the density of 'natural' fabric and human and non-human agency the protagonist observes and remembers, creates a fictional space that, within the logic of the novels imperialist narrative, reproduces an exoticising dichotomy of 'Western' rationality and foreign/'tropical' materiality historically tied to a logic of moral hierarchy associated with a lack of reason and sexual immorality in the colonies. This dichotomy – a manifestation of the Cartesian dualism, the foundation of modern Western thinking – is problematised in Perina's encounter with the mysterious life-extending turtle – the opa'ivu'eke –, and his fascination with the 'dreamers.' These zombie-like humans, having eaten the turtle's flesh, grow unusually old physically, while their mind and brain decay. Both the opa'ivu'eke and the 'dreamers' point towards the fragility of the material and epistemological boundaries between the human and non-human, and of western dualistic thinking in general, and ques-

tion the divide between human/animal, human/'dreamer,' nature/culture, body/mind.

Finally, by choosing two narrative voices completely caught up in their scientific/imperial/masculinist perspective, the novel, in the manner of nineteenth-century genre-fiction, sensationalises the reading experience in a way that provokes both immediate affective reactions – disgust, outrage, irritation –, and begs the question as to the moral positioning of the reader towards the narrative. Perina, the novel's protagonist and main point of identification for the reader, clearly lacks a moral compass compatible with humanist ideals. His unabashed physical/material and colonial/abusive penetration of the island and the ultimate sexual abuse of the many children he adopts and brings to Europe to serve as substitutes for his unfulfilled dream of immortality pose intriguing questions about both the material damage inflicted through colonial and sexual violence, and about the relationship between the materiality of literature, its subject matter, and the material realities of knowledge production, inequality, and violence.

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PHOTO: 'HAPPY TREE' AT CLARA ZETKIN PARK



# CONCRETE MATTERS: MATERIALS, METHODOLOGIES, AND OTHER MAKINGS

DR KYLIE CRANE POTSDAM

SLOT Monday 1:15–3 pm

ROOM S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

J.G. Ballard's *Concrete Island* imagines a postmodern Crusoe, 'marooned' upon a traffic island in the metropolis of London. Themes of domination and subordination, of language (in particular: literacy), and of shipwreck, survival and contact permeate Ballard's 1974 novel, like its obvious interlocutor, Daniel Defoe's 300-year-old novel, *Robinson Crusoe*.

This contribution addresses the various meanings of concrete in Ballard's novel, pushing back on the ostensible separation between metaphor (as 'conceptual') and matter (as, what, then? 'real?'). In doing so, it draws on Karen Barad's methodology of diffraction to articulate a mode of interpretation that concerns itself with differences and relationalities rather than representations, or sameness and mimesis. Shifting from a perspective that only 'sees' objects to one that grapples with the relations forged by *materials* gives rise to a mode of interpretation that can more readily reckon with the agential capacities of matter. It also allows for shift outside of dualistic frameworks which might otherwise seek to contain interpretations of the novel (as a 're-write', or as a 'representation of' something or another), or of matters of interpretation, more generally. Concrete emerges not 'only' as noun, or object—as a material comprised of water, sand, aggregate and cement—but also, by insisting ('standing upon') on its *concrete* (adjectival) forms, as agential.

On Ballard's setting of a traffic island, with Maitland's (the protagonist's) architectural sensibility for materials and forms, concrete emerges as co-constitutive for the fictional world of *Concrete Island*. In this interpretation, relations are shown to be forged textually (to *Robinson Crusoe*) and materially (sand!) through concrete, which is mobilised as both noun and adjective: The matters of the text are, as the play on words from the section title suggests, matters of matter, matters that matter.

## THE PERFORMATIVITY OF MEDBH MCGUCKIAN'S INTERTEXTUAL ECOPOETICS IN *BLARIS MOOR*

DR JESSICA BUNDSCHUH STUTTGART

SLOT Monday 1:15–3 pm

ROOM S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

Northern Irish poet Medbh McGuckian's work, devoted to decenteredness, fluidity, multiplicity, and a transgression of boundaries, is famously slippery and elusive; thus, one would rightly assume that her eco-feminist poems, which explore the shared exploitation of a subject and the natural settings she inhabits, would enact any dislocation(s) obliquely. Indeed, instead of simply externalizing a speaker's mental distress onto an ecology, McGuckian inverts the material relationship to embed her pastorals, like a pregnant seed, within the individualized female subject. Thus, Arcadia shifts from outside to inside, making the boundary between inner and outer material spaces murky.

[...] I had anticipated the entire echo, would there ever be one to help us to fullness again?

MEDBH MCGUCKIAN,  
"ATTEMPT AT A ROOM" (2017)

The contemporary Irish pastoral – in the context of landscape long appropriated and co-opted by the British – often serves a radical function, since it upholds a threatened cultural identity. McGuckian's latest volume, *Blaris Moor* (2017), is named after the ballad that memorializes the 1797 execution of four men branded members of the United Irishmen, called so because of their failed Rebellion intended to unite Protestants and Catholics. More forcefully in this volume than those

prior, McGuckian strains to reveal scars buried in a volatile landscape through her doggedly tireless practice of intertextuality (in which one stanza alone stitches together quotations from Gottfried Benn, Walter Benjamin, Paul Celan, and Rose Ausländer). The references without explicit acknowledgement of provenance simulate the frenzied experience of contemporary readers, caught, as Marjorie Perloff contends, by the "Internet [that] has made copyists, recyclers, transcribers, collators and reframers of us all" (49). As a result, McGuckian's aesthetic practice of building eco-poems 'recycled' from an elaborate network of references necessitates her work be read collaboratively, collectively, and, above all, performatively.

Approaching the poetic text as material performance, McGuckian's *Blaris Moor* suggests that physical trauma need not replicate a state of immobilized victimhood,



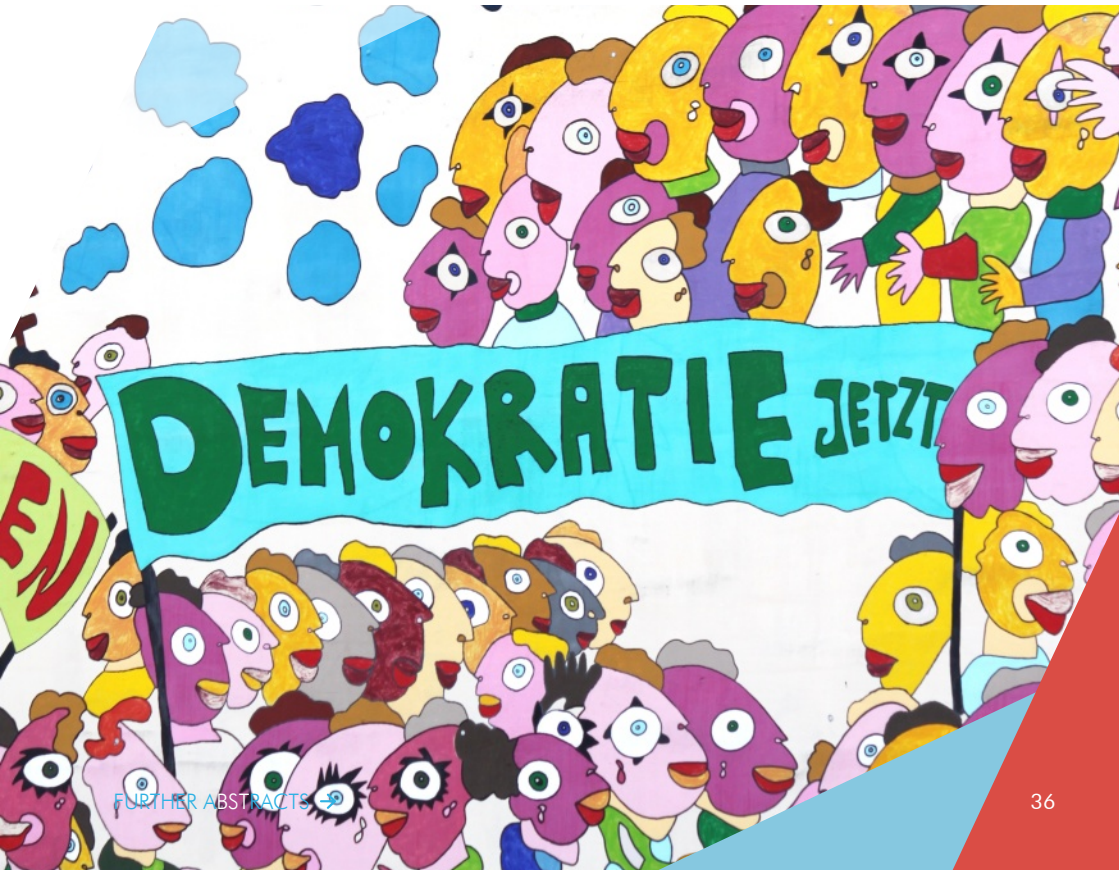
if it evolves within the reader's presence as an on-going dialogue of creation and transmission. For instance, in "The Reading Fever," while "The heart experiences systole, / small controlled doses of forgetfulness," "The intellect performs a full resolution," since it "is hidden / in an offering—the sensible, the coastal / grasses still in winter head, the apple" (McGuckian 2). That is, even if, as Ulrich Baer asserts, "an aberration of memory [...] leaves a body without a context" (18), unassimilated and unresolved, recourse to the material practice of intertextuality both grounds and splinters the speaking subject and the witnessing reader. The resulting poem of trauma, shared across a tangible site of "sensible" "coastal grasses," transforms matter into words – and words into matter.

Baer, Ulrich. *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. MIT Press, 2002.

McGuckian, Medbh. *Blaris Moor*. Wake Forest UP, 2017.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*. U of Chicago P, 2010.

PHOTO: MURAL NEAR LEIPZIG MAIN STATION BY MICHAEL FISCHER-ART





## “NO WIRES – ALL ALIVE”: THEATRICAL BODIES AND THEATRICAL THINGS

DR KERSTIN FEST FREIBURG

SLOT Monday 3:30–5 pm

ROOM S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

Objects always play a part on stage: the effect costumes, props, stage sets, or lack thereof have on the audience cannot be underestimated and the notion that props take on a significance that goes beyond being just objects on stage is not uncommon. In his monograph *The Life of Stage Objects* (1989), for instance, Andrew Sofer discusses the question of meaning and agency of things on stage. Citing Hamlet’s skull and Othello’s handkerchief as examples, Sofer argues that props “are more than just three-dimensional symbols” and that “they take on a life of their own as they weave in and out of the stage action” (vi).

The notion of a relation between subject and object that transcends a simple binary is also at the heart of Bruno Latour’s argument in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991), in which he develops the concept of the non-modern (as opposed to the modern, postmodern, and anti-modern) in which the strict separation of subject and object resolves. Objects losing their distance from and otherness to the (human) subject, for example, can become ‘quasi-objects,’ which are “much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective than the ‘hard’ parts of nature, but they are in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society” (55), they “do not belong to Nature, or to Society, or to the subject; they do not belong to language either” (65).

The non-modern is also a field of opportunities: “It is the Middle Kingdom, as vast as China and as little known” (48).

What I want to suggest in this paper is that the theatre and, perhaps even more spatially specific, the stage can be seen as a “Middle Kingdom” and that both actors and things turn into Latour’s quasi-objects when engaged in activities on stage. The quasi-objects with which I am most concerned here are puppets as they represent perfectly the often uneasy relation of object and subject in the context of performance: they blur the boundaries of acting subject and acted upon object; and they also gesture towards a potential instability in the concept of the unified acting human subject in general.

The relationship between puppets and human actors will be further investigated with the help of theoretical texts by Heinrich von Kleist, *Über das Marionettentheater* (1810), and Denis Diderot *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1773) and a discussion of Henry Fielding’s and Samuel Foote’s dramatically different opinions on and usage of puppets on stage.

# AGAINST THE “MYTH OF NON-MEDIATION”: THE MATERIALITY OF LIVE THEATRE BROADCASTING

DR HEIDI LIEDKE LONDON/KOBLENZ-LANDAU

SLOT Monday 3:30–5 pm

ROOM S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

As Jane Bennett points out in her thought-provoking *Vibrant Matter* (2010), “[f]or some time political theory has acknowledged that materiality matters. But this materiality most often refers to human social structures or to the human meanings ‘embodied’ in them and other objects” (xvi). Her idea to establish a link between Thoreau’s notion of the wild, Deleuze’s idea of the virtual and Foucault’s notion of the unthought and point to how all three “are trying to acknowledge a force that, though quite real and powerful, is intrinsically resistant to representation” (xvi) is an intriguing one and serves as the starting point for the framework presented in this paper.

By taking recent developments in theatrical performance as the focal point of analysis, I want to question this purported resistance to representation that adheres to ‘materiality.’ Is it possible to approach this force and make it more palpable, rather than merely talking about it as ‘thing-power’? In what areas does it become more manifest? Building on my ongoing postdoctoral project, which investigates the aesthetics of live theatre broadcasting and its potential for an experience of liveness in manifold ways, this paper argues that livecasting is a specific aesthetic form that puts the made-ness of performance to the fore. This stands in contrast to the rhetoric surrounding live theatre broadcasts which occludes the idea that in the filming a selection and heightening process of a given performance takes place; John Wyver also speaks of the “myth of non-mediation” around livecasts that evokes an “outside broadcast fairy” (109) that captures the performances.

By looking at two recent livecasts in detail – the NT’s *Julie* (2018) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2018) – and thinking about them as emerging out of the friction between the live, the adapted and the archive(d) (cf. Sant; Giannachi et al.), this paper suggests that, in fact, livecasting lays bare the theatrical skeleton. I would argue that it, perhaps inadvertently, precisely puts the materiality of British performance and thus its rootedness in ‘European culture’ (cf. Harvie) to the fore, at a time when the UK – as a state – are about to break away from mainland Europe; materiality, indeed, becomes the defining feature and the primary marker of quality. The made-ness of theatre, its use of human bodies, stage design, scenography, sound, becomes the de-

fining feature of the British theatre experience, also as transmitted to venues outside the UK. Through the elaborate use of technologies and broadcasting equipment such as additional microphones and cameras, each filmed performance is material and actually increases the made-ness of theatrical performance rather than making it disappear behind an apparatus; when recorded – some livecasts are later available to be bought on DVD or for download, some of them accessible only in the National Theatre’s archive – it is a material.

Thus, I understand ‘material’ as an umbrella term that encompasses several characteristics: first of all it stands for the material conditions of production that are almost grotesquely emphasized in this context and that I will call the *material-theatrical*. Second, taking the cue from performance studies’ theorization, the livecasting phenomenon invites us to reflect on the materiality of (textual) form and the hybridity that ‘the livecast’ represents, namely a generic hybrid between performance, dramatic text and film. In contrast to other ‘regular’ theatrical performances, a livecast of a production is one step further removed from the dramatic text. It challenges us to tie together conceptual nodes from the fields of adaptation studies and intermediality. This is the *material-textual* aspect. Most importantly, however, as central as this material dimension is, it is equally fragile when it gets into contact with those consuming it. The material when in touch with audiences – who themselves might enact their amateur-theatricality – and scrutinized as providing an experience of liveness becomes a material that lives. The responses on social media and the information surrounding the livecasts constitute a paradocumentational brim that is essential to the phenomenon. When liveness, the filming of a performance and the (recorded) human response to it collide, the aspect of the *material-ephemeral* comes to the fore.

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PHOTO: LEIPZIG OPERA



# IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE – PAGE, EYE-MOVEMENT, SONNET FORM

PROF DR FELIX SPRANG **SIEGEN**

**SLOT** Monday 3:30–5 pm

**ROOM** S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

With my paper I wish to contribute to conceptualising possible ways of probing into “sensations, intensities, valences, and interior movements that are generated and shaped by energies which are themselves embedded in diverse forms of embodied human life” (CfP). With new formal approaches and digital methods in the humanities as a backdrop, my aim is to combine quantitative and qualitative studies of how the sonnet as a material text interacts with the reader’s eye. I will thus probe into what recorded eye-movement may tell us about the sonnet and its form. There are only a few eye-tracking studies, so far, that have addressed the peculiarities of reading poetry, and the focus is hardly ever on the materiality of the poem but rather on phonological aspects related to rhyme schemes (cf. Carminati et al.). Equally, semantic units are still the main concern, and some studies have ventured into the organisation of the poem on the page to discuss those semantic units ([enjambment] (cf. van ’t Jagt et al.), [the alignment of the lines of a haiku (cf. Müller et al.)]). I will present the results of an explorative study that probes into the materiality of the sonnet by analysing fixations, saccades and blinks of individual readers while reading sonnets. These eye-tracking protocols of readers scanning Shakespeare’s sonnets reveal, for example, that the “matter/affect interrelation” (CfP) is indeed far more complex than the partitions of the sonnet along semantic units suggest. One fascinating result of our ongoing study is that the reader’s attention is directed at the beginning of lines rather than at their end. Most importantly, the eye-tracking data do not easily support the claim that readers identify a “particular mode of organizing and amplifying patterns of image and thought,” and that “[t]he sonnet inscribes in its form an instruction manual for its own creation and interpretation” (Levin, xxxvii). I will argue that the eye-tracking data calls for a re-appraisal of the poem as matter. Reading sonnets, the eye-tracking data suggests, requires a “particular mode of organizing and amplifying” but that mode does not simply map onto traditional conceptions of the sonnet form.

## TENTACULAR NARRATIVE WEBS: UNTHINKING HUMANS, EXPLORING NON-HUMAN MATTER IN FICTION

DR DUNJA M. MOHR **ERFURT**

**SLOT** Tuesday 3–4:30 pm

**ROOM** S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

This paper takes its cue from critical theories and the hard sciences both renegotiating relationalities between humanity and the world: current ontological debates break away from the category of Anthropos as a central organizing position and 21<sup>st</sup> century sciences disrupt the artificial boundaries between human/nature, nature/culture, human/animal/plant. For instance, microbiology's research on metaorganisms and microbiomes evidences the human as a symbiotic cooperative interactive system of (multi-)organisms, challenging the established division between the human self and nonself (Rees, Bosch, and Douglas), while the geologically established fact of the Anthropocene collapses the human/nature distinction on a macrolevel. The hard science's pointing towards a shared materiality and dynamic relationalities on a macro- and microlevel intersects with a number of recent critical theories that interrogate human exceptionalism and trouble the ingrained opposition between human and nature/animal/machine. Where new materialism (Barad, Bennett) positions the human as no longer different from matter(s) and argues for a dynamic relational ontology grounded in intra-active becoming, Katherine N. Hayles's key concept of 'cognitive nonconscious framework,' her book's titular 'unthought,' seeks to reintroduce an expanded notion of cognition and consciousness, emphasizing the shared cognitive capacities of humans, animals, plants, and machines, and "locat[ing] the human on a continuum with nonhuman life and material processes" (65). Similarly, Donna Haraway's notion of an interwoven, symbiotic "living across species", a "tentacular thinking," and of "sympoetic systems" captures the intrinsic and messy entanglement of humans and "oddkin," while seeking to replace the nihilistic Anthropocene/Capitolocene story with the counternarrative of the "Chthulucene" as a wider, messier term.

Contemporary literary texts increasingly disseminate such conceptual shifts and evolving paradigms by sensitizing us to different ways of worlding and developing narratives that describe varied material and affective relations to the world. Along these lines and working across fields, taking some cues from schema criticism's cognitive approach (Moya, Bracher), this paper reads Jeff VanderMeer's richly metaphorical (weird) speculative fiction trilogy *Southern Reach* (2014) as an attempt to

'unthink' humans in Hayles's sense and as an ecological allegory that narrates of the Chthulucene's infusion of materialities, of anthropocentric interference and bioengineering transformed into a reverse process of herbaforming, and celebrates the (involuntary) human fusion with the 'oddkin' and the remixing of all life forms' materialities. Haraway's 'tentacular thinking' resonates with VanderMeer's dense and surreal tentacular narrative web of an environment's eco-colonizing of humans that textually immerses readers into nebulous experimental passages of a dreamlike uncertainty, of poetic and messy material and discursive entanglements where words are living material. VanderMeer's Area X becomes an un/natural transformative metaorganism with diluted self/non-self boundaries, both real and abstract in the sense of Timothy Morton's 'hyperobject,' with a diffuse consciousness and a 'cognitive nonconscious,' literally and figuratively embodying the vibrant entanglement of plant-animal-human origins that instill a new way of 'unthinking' through the reading process.

PHOTO: SQUIRREL MONKEY AT LEIPZIG ZOO





## PLACES, ANIMALS, THINGS: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NON-HUMAN FOR JOHN BERGER'S SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM

PROF DR CHRISTIAN SCHMITT-KILB **ROSTOCK**

**SLOT** Tuesday 3–4:30 pm

**ROOM** S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

Francis Ponge (1899-1988), French 'poet of things' (*Le parti pris des choses*), has asked for "a sort of writing ... which, situating itself more or less between definition and description, would take from the first its infallibility, its indubitability, its brevity also, from the second its respect for the sensory aspect of things..." Many of John Berger's generically undefinable texts approach Ponge's demand. Berger's ways of seeing and writing are characterised, throughout his multifaceted oeuvre, by an open-minded attentiveness to the world in its totality, human and non-human, animate and inanimate, art(ificial) and nature/natural. This attentiveness results in a spiritual materialism based on a respectful curiosity towards the world, a relentless willingness to be impressed by it, precise descriptions and a constant interaction of sensual and critical awareness. Highlighting his preference of Spinoza over Descartes, Berger always insists on the importance of the non-human in his reflections about what it means to be human.

In recent years, a mind-set such as the one described above has gained currency as a critical concept in the social sciences and the humanities under the label 'new materialism.' New materialism now serves as an umbrella term for critical approaches across the disciplines whose common ground is a shared uneasiness with the excessive focus on language and discourse in the aftermath of post-structuralism and deconstruction. New materialists of every shade aim at countering this perceived obliviousness towards bodies, things, places, animals; they re-evaluate and emphasise, from different angles and with different agendas, the importance of the material world and our inescapable entanglement with it.

John Berger has implicitly written his own poetics of materiality and of the non-human world long before new materialism gained momentum in academic debates. It is extractable from his topics, his perspective, and from an attitude which is borne by a unique style of writing, or rather of textual organisation. What this means, how Berger's implicit poetics may be described and how this relates to his spiritual materialism: these issues shall be addressed by looking at passages from Berger's *Pig Earth* (1979) and *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (1984) through the prism of terms and concepts provided by new materialist theory. This will reveal the extent to which these concepts are thrown into sharp relief if they are approached with and through Berger.

# OF BROOMSTICKS AND DOUGHNUTS: BRITISH THING-ESSAYS FROM 1700 UNTIL TODAY

DANIEL SCHNEIDER MÜNCHEN

SLOT Tuesday 3–4:30 pm

ROOM S 122, Seminargebäude, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor

While the it-narrative, the thing-poem and thing theatre have been around for some time, the essay – which is often considered literature’s fourth genre – is still lacking its thing-subgenre. Yet, particularly in British literature, we find a wide range of texts which could be subsumed under this label – starting with Jonathan Swift’s “Meditation upon a Broomstick” and continuing with, among others, Robert Louis Stevenson’s “Philosophy of Umbrellas,” Rose Macaulay’s “Arm-Chair” and Geoff Dyer’s “Otherwise Known as the Human Condition (with Particular Reference to Doughnut Plant Doughnuts).”

This study provides a theoretical conceptualization of thing-essays, explaining why the essay as literary genre lends itself particularly well to literarizations of the personal relationships that people have fostered to everyday objects throughout the centuries. The essay’s subjective and anti-systematic approach enables it to capture even the most idiosyncratic and fragmentary experiences in the contemplations of things as they have been conceptualized in the writings of Martin Heidegger, Jean Baudrillard, Bruno Latour, Graham Harman and Bill Brown.

In order to account for synchronic and diachronic differences in thing-essays, this paper suggests a typology of three modes via which things can be approached essayistically. In the transformative mode, one thing is, in a series of comparisons, turned into another thing. This mode prevails in the earliest thing-essays, when the emergence of consumer society had created a new abundance of things that writers sought to make sense of by connecting them to older and more familiar concepts. The transformative mode has returned in today’s late capitalist society, where people, fatigued with the overflow of things, search for deeper meanings in them. The associative mode explores the associations that things trigger and is predominant in thing-essays in Romanticism, as by then, things had been around long enough for associations to gather around them. Finally, the meta-reflective mode ponders in general terms how we view things and are shaped by them. This mode proliferates in the times marked by a more detached world-view, such as the Enlightenment period. Most thing-essays, however, are hybrids where at least two of these modes are at work simultaneously.