

The Return of the Aesthetic in American Studies

International Conference

29. November — 1. Dezember 2018

returnoftheaesthetic.de

Aesthetics is coming back.

For the past forty years, scholars across the humanities have routinely rejected aesthetic inquiry as ideological, exclusionary, or politically quietist. In American Studies particularly, this anti-aesthetic attitude has congealed into the field's common sense. Only in the most recent past have several scholars begun to pay renewed attention to the aesthetic and to rethink its relationship to the spheres of the social, economic, and political. "The Return of the Aesthetic in American Studies" critically takes stock of recent returns to the aesthetic and extends their scope.

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Scholars working in such diverse areas as media studies, identity theory, animal studies/posthumanism, and democratic theory have begun to put the aesthetic dimension of their objects of study at the center of their work, even if they do not necessarily consider their scholarship to belong to the field of aesthetics proper. To bring these approaches into the conversation, we propose to broaden the definition of "aesthetics" so as to reflect that in American Studies – as much as in many other disciplines within the humanities – "the aesthetic" is increasingly recovering its original reference to sense perceptions (aisthesis). At the same time, however, scholars have also begun to rethink traditional concerns of aesthetic theory. In particular, they have been revisiting the question of aesthetic autonomy. Far from conceiving of aesthetic autonomy as apolitical, the resurging debate explores its potentially oppositional and utopian position vis-à-vis recent economic, social, and political developments.

These two major strands of recent aesthetic inquiry are often in tension with one another. While conceptions of the aesthetic that emphasize the notion of aisthesis tend to assume that the aesthetic is a driving force of recent social, political, and economic developments (like the solidification of neoliberal capitalism or the rise of populism in Western democracies), conceptions of the aesthetic related to artworks tend to regard the aesthetic as a potentially oppositional force to these very developments.

So far American Studies practitioners have not yet adequately reflected on the co-presence of these two concepts of the aesthetic. Thus, the conceptual differences between them and the ramifications that these differences have for assessing the relation between the aesthetic and various social forces have hitherto remained unaddressed. Can the two major strands of aesthetic inquiry mutually challenge each other to interrogate uncritically accepted premises? To what extent do they unwittingly borrow from each other? And what are the avenues to aesthetic inquiry outside of the two strands sketched here?

Please go to www.returnoftheaesthetic.de to watch our speakers in conversation with fellow experts. These conversations are being recorded in the course of the event and will be uploaded soon.

Walter Benn Michaels (UI Chicago) with **Juliane Rebentisch** (Offenbach)

Rieke Jordan (Frankfurt)

Caroline Levine (Cornell)

Bernd Herzogenrath (Frankfurt)

Julius Greve (Oldenburg)

Eugenie Brinkema (MIT)

Elisabeth Bronfen (Zürich)

Luvena Kopp (Tübingen)

Lee Edelman (Tufts)

Jennifer Greiman (Wake Forest)

Johannes Voelz (Frankfurt)

Russ Castronovo (Madison)

Hanjo Berressem (Cologne)

Susanne Rohr (Hamburg)

Jennifer Ashton (UI Chicago)

Winfried Fluck (FU Berlin)

Laura Bieger (Groningen)

Nathan Taylor (Frankfurt)

Patricia Pisters (Amsterdam)

Gabriele Rippl (Bern)

Ruth Mayer (Hannover)

Laura Bieger (Groningen)

Christa Buschendorf (Frankfurt)

Ralph Poole (Salzburg)

Andrew Gross (Göttingen)

Thomas Claviez (Bern)

Philipp Schweighauser (Basel)

Ulla Haselstein (FU Berlin)

Dustin Breitenwischer (Freiburg)

Günter Leypoldt (Heidelberg)

Peter Schneck (Osnabrück)

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Thursday, November 29

- 1** Casino, CAS 1.801
- 15:00–15:30 Welcoming Remarks and Introduction**
Johannes Voelz (Frankfurt)
- 15:30–16:30 Panel 1: Aesthetic Theory Today I**
Walter Benn Michaels (UI Chicago): "Making Art: Action, Autonomy, Adorno, and Anscombe"
Chair: Stephan Kuhl (Frankfurt)
- 16:30–17:00 Coffee Break**
- 17:00–19:00 Panel 1: Aesthetic Theory Today I (continued)**
Rieke Jordan (Frankfurt): "Reader, Curator"
Caroline Levine (Cornell): "Sustainable Aesthetics"
Chair: Stephan Kuhl (Frankfurt)
- 19:00 Opening Reception**

Friday, November 30

- 1** Casino, CAS 1.811
- 9:30–11:30 Panel 2: Practical Aesthetics**
Bernd Herzogenrath (Frankfurt): "Towards a Practical Aesthetics"
Eugenie Brinkema (MIT): "Colors Without Bodies: Wes Anderson's Drab Ethics"
Chair: Thomas Clark (Frankfurt)
- 11.30–11.45 Coffee Break**
- 11.45–12.45 Panel 2: Practical Aesthetics (continued)**
Julius Greve (Oldenburg): "Material Praxis and 'Pragmatic Aesthetics' in Pound and Olson"
Chair: Thomas Clark (Frankfurt)
- 12:45–14:15 Lunch**
- 14:15–16:15 Panel 3: Aesthetics of Identity**
Elisabeth Bronfen (Zürich): "Getting Out, Getting Even: Aesthetics of the Interracial Posthuman"
Luvena Kopp (Tübingen): "On the Aesthetics of Collage: Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing and the Death of Eric Garner"
Chair: Linda Heß (Frankfurt)
- 16:15–16:45 Coffee Break**
- 16:45–17:45 Panel 3: Aesthetics of Identity (continued)**
Lee Edelman (Tufts): "'Queerness,' Afro-Pessimism, and the Aesthetic"
Chair: Linda Heß (Frankfurt)
- 19:00 Conference Dinner**

Saturday, December 1

- 2** IG-Farben-Gebäude IG 411
- 9:30–11:30 Panel 4: Democratic Aesthetics**
Jennifer Greiman (Wake Forest): "Fragility and Gravity: Herman Melville, William Connolly, and the Aesthetics of Radical Democracy"
Johannes Voelz (Frankfurt): "The Aesthetics of the Populist Space of Appearance"
Chair: Magda Majewska (Frankfurt)
- 11:30–11.45 Coffee Break**
- 11.45–12.45 Panel 4: Democratic Aesthetics (continued)**
Russ Castronovo (Madison): "Gothic Communications: Terror and the Informational Sublime"
Chair: Magda Majewska (Frankfurt)
- 12:45–14:15 Lunch**
- 14:15–16:15 Panel 5: Aesthetic Theory Today II**
Hanjo Berressem (Cologne): "Aesthetics squared: Félix Guattari's Schizo-Ecological Aesthetics"
Susanne Rohr (Hamburg): "The Aesthetics of Madness"
Chair: Simon Wendt (Frankfurt)
- 16:15–16:45 Coffee Break**
- 16:45–18:45 Panel 5: Aesthetic Theory Today II (continued)**
Jennifer Ashton (UI Chicago): "Post Previous Art: The Return of Autonomy in American Poetry"
Winfried Fluck (FU Berlin): "What is Freedom? The Contribution of Contemporary Art"
Chair: Susanne Opfermann (Frankfurt)

