

Planet Uncanny:

Redistributing Subjectivities across Technology, Nature, and Society

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Organized by Jenny Brockmann, Henning Schmidgen, Mathias Schönher, and Aleksandra Selivanova,
Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, Chair of Media Theory and History of Science,
www.uni-weimar.de/animism-machinism

Abstracts

Didier Debaise

»Earthbound Subjectivities: From Nature to Non-Human Subjectivities in Bruno Latour«

I would like to take up for myself a proposition formulated very early by Latour: »Subjectivity, corporeality are no more a property of humans, of individuals, of intentional subjects, than being an external reality is a property of nature« (Latour, 1999:23). I would like to adopt this proposition both as a guide for thinking through Latour's work and as the crystallization of a series of transformations in contemporary thought. I would like to do so along three axes which will structure my presentation. First, I will explore the critiques that have been addressed to the concept of Nature, leading to its radical questioning. If Latour's call for a reflection on non-human subjectivities is so recurrent, it is because he sees in it a possibility of escaping the Modern concept of nature. Consequently, it will be necessary to highlight the genesis and the features of this vision of nature, along with its limits. What are the characteristics of this Modern nature? What necessities did it address? In what way does the »New Climatic Regime« compel us to let go of this concept of nature? In a first step, then, I want to bring out the diagnosis that Latour offers, particularly with the help of Whitehead, regarding the modern concept of nature. Next, the notion of »non-human subjectivities« arises to occupy the place that nature was supposed to hold. I would therefore try to identify the characteristics of this notion of subjectivity. Is it simply an extension of human subjectivities? Is it a projection of those subjectivities onto other kinds of realities—physical, biological, technical—or does it require us to completely refound the very notion of subjectivity? Finally, in his most recent works,

Latour calls for a reflection on the »terrestrial« and even goes so far as to oppose two cosmologies: the cosmology of the Moderns, entirely organized around the notion of nature, and a cosmology in the making, still to be invented, a cosmology of the terrestrials.

These three aspects form the axes of what could be called a reflection on terrestrial subjectivities, for which it would be necessary to establish the genesis and evaluate the current relevance.

Daniel Falb

»Animism's Second Coming: Socializing AI«

The evolved cognitive disposition toward animism found in humans (and many non-human animals) left its first major imprint on cultural history through its contribution to the emergence of human religions (Guthrie, Dennett). The activation of this disposition in humans' encounters with AI systems such as chatbots and robotic agents points to a potential second episode of major cultural-historical impact: the ways in which intelligent machines are socialized into human societies depend on the extent to which people are animists toward AI.

In the talk, I then confront the earlier notion of animism as a false belief (Tylor) with the idea of real-animation. Real-animation occurs where terrestrial matter is imbued with elements of enlivenment and cognitivization. Echoing the emergence of life from a planet that remained inanimate for some 700 million years, the roughly 70 years of digital systems evolving into AI constitute a second episode of real-animation that may prove significant in the natural history of this planet.

If, in times of real-animation, animism is not a false belief, which forms of animism are conducive to socializing AI in ways that increase rather than diminish planetary habitability for humans and nonhumans alike?

Vanessa Farfán

»Beyond the Uncanny: An Artistic Field«

In the worldview of the Mayan culture, concepts such as life and death, the animate and the inanimate, the human and the non-human are not understood as subjects of binomial confrontation, but rather as part of a permeable and integrative understanding of the world. In the classical Mayan language of Mexico, there is no specific word for the concept of Uncanny. The closest concept, *Pèek òol*, is composed of two words: *Pèek* (»movement«) and *òol* (»inner self«). This concept defines both the act of taking a risk and the experience of doubt, suspicion, and disturbance.

Inspired by the worldview of the Mayan culture and during the 2020 pandemic, I started an art-based research project that, a few years later, with the collaboration of Christoph Fournial (University Rennes 2) and the support of the Bauhaus University, Les Ateliers du Vent and the Stiftung Brandenburger Tor, would be titled »Re-Membering.« Based on experiments conducted with students who attended online classes

during the pandemic, »Re-Membering« raised questions about our relationship with technology, life and death, the usefulness and the waste. The experimental nature of this project made it possible to produce a wide range of formats: individual artworks, a participatory performance, and a series of actions that are now part of pedagogical and aesthetic education activities in Berlin schools.

Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell

»The Planetary Experiment: A History and Theory of Science at Scale«

We introduce and discuss the concept of planetary experimentation, its history, and its implications for understanding the relationship between humans and the environment, highlighting the need for a better understanding of knowledge production in the face of global warming and other human-driven environmental changes. We use a historical approach to understand the development of planetary experimentation, from its early phases to its current forms, by distinguishing three phases of planetary experimentation: (1) geoterritorial surveying (1830–present), exemplified by the Magnetic Crusade of the British Empire; (2) cybernetic control (1930s–present), exemplified by nuclear bomb technologies and their testing programs as well as by the postwar Green Revolution initiatives of the Rockefeller Foundation; and (3) generative management (1990s–present), exemplified by AI driven initiatives aiming at establishing Digital Twins of the Earth, such as the European Union's Destination Earth project. Our analysis suggests that references to »inadvertent« planetary experimentation likely do not help us to understand better the causes and current dynamics of the problematic global changes captured by the term Anthropocene. We argue, though, that the history and language of planetary experimentation opens up contemporary discussions of engineering and technical solutionism to a critical history of politics, truth, and aesthetics.

N. Katherine Hayles

»Analog Lifeworlds: How Organisms Evolved Analog Computing to Construct Their Worlds – Then Humans Reinvented It«

Recent research into the deep links between information, embodiment and environment have begun to make clear how much complex information processing goes on in nonhuman organisms and ecologies, for example in forest ecologies. One way into these complexities is through analog computing. Although technological digital computing now dominates the scene, technological analog computing has an equally long history dating from the late 19th century. The principal differences are these: while digital computing begins with an abstraction into two discrete binary symbols and uses logic gates to build up complex algorithmic structures, analog computing involves representations that have continuous (i.e., non-discrete) physical variables interacting directly with each other simultaneously. This means that for analog computing, numbers and counting are not necessary; computing is carried out directly through systems that compute through their morphologies and physical functioning. The important implication here is that analog computing thus opens the door to

consider trees, for example, as carrying out complex computations in their normal ways of living.

The objection to such a view is that it defines »computation« so broadly that the term becomes meaningless. Critics such as Gualtiero Piccinini argue that this makes a narrowly mechanistic interpretation of computation better, since one can then clearly distinguish between what is a (technological) computation and what is not. However, there are strong cultural reasons to prefer the broader definition.

In our contemporary world, as more and more systems are computationalized, »computation« has become a highly privileged term. Understanding forest ecologies (and other biological systems and organisms) as carrying out analog computations makes their complexities much clearer. It encourages research into the links between information, embodiment and environment, and it stimulates the formulation of analogies and homologies between natural and artificial computing. Especially important from my perspective is its ability to reframe human cognition as one kind of cognitive capability among many other cognitive capacities in the natural and technological world that carry out complex computational tasks, as I argue in my book *Bacteria to AI*. It reframes technological analog computing as a human invention that re-invents what evolution in the natural world accomplished long before humans entered the picture, thus encouraging renewed respect for the complexities (and fragilities) of our natural world and its computational achievements.

David Howes

»Pushing the Bounds of Sense: Expanding on the Notion of ›The Sixth Sense‹«

I write as an anthropologist, interested in exploring the varieties of sensory experience across (and within) cultures. I begin this talk by recounting my experience editing *The Sixth Sense Reader* (2009), the final volume in the *Sensory Formations* book series from Routledge. This experience researching the sixth sense turned out to be profoundly revelatory, since it threw the contours of »the five-sense sensorium« into relief. Lots of uncanny other ways of sensing (eg. magnetism and echolocation in humans) or techniques of perception emerged, as well as many »senses without organs.«

I advance 5 propositions: 1) that in order to understand what is given in the »new animism« we need to develop a better grasp of the »old animism« (e.g. Hallowell among the Ojibwe in place of E.B. Tylor from his armchair), 2) that the model of cybernetics needs to be supplemented by a kinship model (i.e. all beings as relatives) – that is, we need to indigenize ANT; 3) that in place of Artificial Intelligence or machine learning as the telos of inquiry we need to focus on the notion of sentience and the wisdom of the senses in different non-western cultural traditions, as well as across species boundaries; 4) that the investigation of the distribution of subjectivities needs to be complemented by inquiry into the (re)distribution of the sensible; 5) that we forget Freud and instead of conceptualizing »the idea of being robbed of one's eyes« as bound up with the fear of castration recognize that it is the very hypertrophy of the visual and the digital that is driving the retardation (or suppression) and alienation of the other senses.

The talk concludes with an analysis of the implications of the experiment in multi- and intersensory museology given in the »Marina Abramovic: Gates and Portals« exhibition (2022–2023) at Modern Art Oxford and the Pitt Rivers Museum as modelling a way of sensing that is as uncanny as it was eminently sensible, and as possibly opening the way for the decolonization of the ethnographic museum, and the western sensorium generally.

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson

»Making Generations«

Legal representations of the enslaved serves as a maximally exploitable precursory metaphor in the expansion of U.S. property law. If legal metaphors would suggest likeness and analogy by leveraging the indeterminacy of black(ened) being, metaphor's metonymic underpinnings would link, by association, a phantasmagoric metaphysical blackness to the wombs of some. Together such an order of metaphor and metonymy would incarnate myth. Slave law interdicted black maternity from a claim to rights, only for property rights law to usurp and dissimulate black maternal function. Partus sequitur ventrem: the non/status of the slave passed down the maternal line. The reproduction of property law, which is to say the reproduction of partus, is predicated on an antiblack misogynist principle of heritability that voids the capacity of motherhood via mythologizing a biologically essentialist conception of sex(ual) difference(s) that racializes sexual appetites and arrogates gestational capacity. The violent abstraction of the slave's natality, as articulated by slave law's matrilineal principle, was conceptually and rhetorically used as proxy, extending the labor of a sexually racist myth of sex difference and maternity into fields such as intellectual property, contract, and animal law, cementing a matrilineal principle as the urtext of contemporary logics of property. The law's prior nullification of the claim of black motherhood was the threshold for the pretense of derivation and metaphoric transfers of the slave's non/status in the emergence of these areas of law. Focusing on the function of gestational capacity in the poiësis of slavery and law, I investigate the implications of the law's poetics for the sexed, gendered, reproductive, and sexual constitution of antiblackness and its implications for blackness's heritability in and beyond law, into the realm of scientific discourses of generativity.

Simone Natale

»Talking to Non-Stochastic Parrots«

In Ted Chiang's short story »The Great Silence,« a Puerto Rican parrot laments the fact that humans are searching ways to communicate with extraterrestrial species, while at the same time overlooking his species as communicative partners – even if parrots are much more at hand than alien civilizations, and they might have more to say. The story serves as a reminder that, much before the emergence of communicative AI technologies, humans have attempted in many ways to communicate with entities that might not have been listening in the human sense of the word: from gods to spirits, from objects to aliens, from animals to plants. The experiences of

these attempted (mis)communications provides an exceptional entry point to understand the implications of contemporary AI systems, such as Large Language Models, companion chatbots, and voice assistants, programmed to talk with human users. Scholars have dismissed these systems as »stochastic parrots« (Bender et al., 2021) that create only the impression of communicative behavior, yet the same systems are taken seriously as communication partners by many users, with significant social, cultural, and political implications. The presentation moves from the examination of the famous case of Alex, a grey parrot that was the subject of thirty years of experiments on its communicative behavior at major US universities between 1976 and 2007. These attempts at establishing human-animal communications with a »non-stochastic parrot« are mobilized to find clues that can help make sense of a present and a close future in which more and more humans engage in communications with machines that are, at the same time, able and not really able to communicate back.

Juliane Rebentisch

»The Reality of Ghosts: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene«

One way in which humans today realize their relationships with non-human beings is through the perception of their absence. In the context of the sixth mass extinction of species, the uncanny feeling that »there is nothing present when there should be something« (Mark Fisher) points to a loss that has yet to be understood as such. In this context, cultivating a sensitivity to the »ghosts of the Anthropocene« promises to be a way of confronting the reality of loss. The lecture examines the realistic turn of the motif of haunted landscapes in ecocritical discourse and discusses its consequences for a politics of mourning.

Tom Sanya

»Earth, Glass and the Architectural Sublime«

After an eerie experience in exile, Étienne Boullée resolved to explore an architecture themed on the absolute light and absolute darkness of Edmund Burke's sublime. In Boullée's design for 1782 Palace of Justice, the justice halls, which are resplendent with light from above, sit on a podium of a dark half-buried prison. Boullée's design was portentous. It came at the throes of the industrial capitalism and hitherto unimaginable exploitation of nature and people within Europe and through global colonisation. The architectural edifice is a splendid distillation. But it is forever bonded to its birthplace. The provenance and sustenance of the edifice remain in living and non-living bodies. The relationship embodies proximate and distant endeavours, exploitation, struggles, brutality and pollution. The presentation develops the outcomes from a doctoral research on earth as a construction material. The processive and expressive qualities of earth and of glass (a new material) are used to define a boundary for thought experiments on the architectural sublime and the uncanny.

Mathias Schönher

»Distributed Proto-Subjectivity: The Animism of Félix Guattari«

In the current debate on the Anthropocene, positions advocating a New Animism are becoming increasingly relevant. Against this background, this article elucidates the animist conception of the world to which Félix Guattari aspires. To this end, I deal with the historical preconditions of his late work. Guattari focuses on post-industrial capitalism, whose formation is inextricably linked to the development of cybernetics and which leads to the supremacy of information as an equivalent form. I then demonstrate that the precise meaning of Guattari's animism results from distributed receptivity, which must be presupposed by distributed agency. Finally, I turn to Guattari's critique of the production of capitalist subjectivity in which all subjective instances are traced back to an informational pattern or a web of interactions such that any kind of interiority that does not dissolve into a one-dimensional complex of relations is rejected. As part of the final section, I explain how, in Guattari's view, Jane Bennett's account of agency does not differ substantially from the cybernetic post-humanism against which his late work is directed. Decisive for him is that distributed receptivity provides the foundation for the possibility of revealing the singular and autonomous processes suppressed by the capitalist establishment of equivalence.

Danni Shen

»Chimeric Embodiment: Posthumanism, Contemporary Art, Embodiment, Spirituality«

In the Anthropocene of fractured relations to »nature« and what it means to be »human,« where binaries between mythology and knowledge, spiritual and secular, inanimate and animate, objective and subjective suffuse a modern worldview, how are diasporic contemporary artists complicating shifting understandings of posthumanism through specific narratives and practices? This presentation includes a few recent and current curatorial projects and programs that address the intersections of such themes and questions; from a program of pseudo-documentaries, rare books and manuscripts considered in a historical continuum, to an annually-held temple stay where monastery becomes site, sangha (community) becomes environment, and art becomes the path.

Anton Vidokle

»Notes on Aesthetics of Spiritualism«

For some time now I've been interested in how art can function not only as representation but as a kind of instrument: something that transmits attention, energy, or care. The Seoul Mediacity Biennale 2025, which I co-organized with Hallie Ayres and Lukas Brasiskis, grew out of this curiosity. Its title, *Séance: Technology of the Spirit*, suggested that technologies, whether of color, sound, light, or digital transmission, might serve as connectors between visible and invisible worlds.

In this talk I will share some of the research, ideas and artworks that shaped the Biennale and reflect on the relationship between art and spiritualism. This is not an interest in the occult, but in forms that allow contact with what exceeds the self: the dead, the nonhuman, the planetary, or simply other minds. Many of these works treat color as an energy field, light as a healing medium, and sound as a vehicle of resonance rather than communication.

I will also consider how these sensorial practices approach art and exhibition as a kind of séance: a collective experiment in attention and presence, where subjectivity is redistributed among bodies, environments, and materials. Perhaps the spiritual is not opposed to the technological, but another current within it: a vibration that moves through the same fields of energy connecting us to one another and to the world.

Evening Talk and Discussion

Sandra Schäfer, Aleksandra Selivanova, Andrey Smirnov, Elena Vogman, and Margarete Vöhringer

»Working Body, Breaking Body: Biomechanics, Prosthetics, Robots, ca. 1920«

As part of the Planet Uncanny conference, this evening discussion invites participants to explore how the ideas of the mechanization of humans and, conversely, the animation of machines evolved in the art and science of the early twentieth century.

How were these hybrid unions between humans and machines visualized in their early stages? What predictions and images did artists and scientists create when envisioning a future world permeated by electric connections? How did attitudes toward machines change over time? And how was this sense of the uncanny recorded and interpreted in relation to the artistic and scientific experiments of the 1920s?

The discussion draws on theoretical and artistic practices as well as scientific research from the USSR of the 1920s, in dialogue with Europe, Asia, Latin America, and the United States. It will address themes such as electricity as the foundation for shaping the »new body,« the organization of thought and the training of consciousness, the management of time and the overcoming of death, prostheses and the idea of »organ projection,« and the mechanization of the body alongside the humanization of the machine.

The format includes short presentations (10–15 minutes each) featuring video, audio, and visual materials, followed by an open discussion.

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