

Figure(ation)s of ‘the Present’

Caught in between the past and the future, what we call ‘the present’ appears to be an ephemeral and purely relational construct. Figure(ation)s allow us to grasp the transitory condition of ‘the present’ while, at the same time, they themselves problematise the very attempt to define impermanence. A closer look at the origin of the word ‘figure’ (Latin: *figura*, *forma*, or Greek: *schema*) exposes its inherent ambivalence as a term that expresses both a sense of fixation and dynamisation: whereas *forma* and *schema* imply that the figure is a physical and visible object or shape, the word *figura*, which derives from the Latin word *figere* (to mold, to form, to create), renders it a versatile phenomenon. Most recently, the term ‘figuration’ has been introduced in literary and cultural studies to account for the analysis of such ambiguities.

The second conference of the DFG Research Training Group *Contemporary/Literature* seeks to bring together different perspectives on *Figure(ation)s of ‘the Present’* as both fictional characters (from literature, film, theatre ...) as well as metaphorical and rhetorical devices (from rhetorics, theory...) in order to explore the potential of figure(ation)s to critically reflect on ‘the present’. As we invite discussions of figure(ation)s in historical presents and the present time, we hope to cultivate an understanding of the contemporary/ the present as a spatiotemporal sphere of action and experience. Accordingly, cultural, social, and political tensions and relations as represented for instance by figural or figurative constellations need to be taken into account when approaching the question of how fictional texts work towards making available experiences of alternative presents, epochs and presences (for detailed information on the relationship between fictional texts and ‘the present’, see www.grk-gegenwart.uni-bonn.de).

Taking a broad approach to fictional texts, the conference will provide a platform for interdisciplinary discussions on *Figure(ation)s of ‘the Present’*. The conference will **firstly** attend to fictional figures that either carry and conserve a certain knowledge or spirit of a specific time or that work towards structuring their textual present. The former are figures who embody a specific zeitgeist (e.g. the formation of female subjectivity through Strindberg’s Miss Julie or Carrie Bradshaw) or figures (such as Don Quijote or Ned Stark) who live through changing times and thus tragically enact the conflict between differing values of their past and present. The latter category includes figures that mark a turning point in their textual reality (e.g. the post-war soldier as both a product and mediator of certain epochal experiences) as well as those that affect the temporal order of their lived spaces through circular movement (e.g. Herrndorf’s Tschick) or specific physiological and psychological conditions (e.g. Alice in Wonderland).

As these examples show, ‘figure’ is commonly used synonymously with ‘human’ in literary- and cultural studies. However, an exclusively anthropocentric reading of fictional (re)presentations of agency neglects the original meaning of the term *figura*: referring to perceivable appearances or phenomena, it compromises both human and non-human notions of agency. With regard to what has been called the *material turn*, the conference explicitly welcomes discussions that take a non-anthropocentric stance towards *Figure(ation)s of ‘the Present’*.

A **second** point of focus of the conference lies in metaphorical and rhetorical constellations in fictional and non-fictional texts (e.g. figures of repetition such as the anaphora). These can fulfil specific functions, including the following:

- Conservation: time-specific figurations (e.g. the sublime allegory) which express certain conversational standards. As such, they (unintentionally) conserve a knowledge about the time in which they have been/ are being used.
- Evocation: rhetorical devices which evoke spatiotemporal relations through a translation or transformation of signs into mental images. If a metaphor, for instance, illustrates an abstract idea, it both conveys and evokes relations between time and space.
- Condensation: figures of thought which arrange textual structures or historical narratives (e.g. the history of literature or science) through their internal temporality. As they stand in between theory and poetry, these ‘figures of thought’ (cf. Torra-Mattenklott) can be found in literary (e.g. Lotman’s notion of periphery or the leitmotif) and theoretical contexts (e.g. Derrida’s *différance* or the paradigm shift).
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Combining a discussion of both fictional figures and rhetorical or epistemological figurations within one framework the conference invites a re-evaluation of figure(ation)s and their potential to negotiate what is contemporary and/or present.

Possible topics may include, but are by no means restricted, to the following:

- Adaptions of myths/classics/historical material in the present (time diagnostical function in reception and production)
- Questions concerning how to represent the present through figure(ation)s: dominating vs. liminal figure(ation)s (e.g. the relationship between gender and power)
- Socio-cultural fields/locations which especially allow figure(ation)s to negotiate or represent ‘the present’ (e.g. prostitutes)
- Collective figures (e.g. choir or nation) which are representative for a certain socio-cultural present
- Non-human figure(ation)s and their role in challenging notions of agency in the ‘Anthropocene’
- Rhetorical figures that in and of themselves change and challenge constellations of actors (e.g. prosopopoeia through animation)
- Figurations which structure narratives of history (e.g. the dialectic turn used in Marxism)
- Basic principles of figurations (e.g. that of repetition or replacement) as descriptive categories for temporal phenomena in deep semantic structures
- Figures and/in images or moving pictures and how they blur or evocate boundaries of ‘the present’ (e.g. freeze frame and movement in dancing)
- Genres that produce *Figure(ation)s of ‘the Present’* (e.g. the spectre in speculative fiction or utopia as a figure of thought)
- Figure(ation)s that connect theoretical and fictional modes of representation (e.g. the typical in socialist realism and the stock character of the positive hero in the socialist novel)

- Dominant figure(ation)s in scholarly discussions (e.g. what does the recent boom in discussions about the contemporary/ the present tell us about our present?)

The conference will take place on **05. – 07.02.2019** at the **University of Bonn**. Conference admission is free of charge; travel and accommodation expenses will be covered by the organisers; a publication of selected papers is planned.

Interested researchers are kindly asked to send us an abstract (in English or German) of no more than 500 words for a 25-minute presentation together with a short biographical note. Deadline: 31. July 2019. Please send your abstracts to figuration@uni-bonn.de.