

Pre-conference Workshop: The Cultural Politics of Empathy

Venue: University of Basel, Rosshof, Seminar room 1
Time: 20 June, 9.00am - 6.00pm

A one-day training day with Dr Carolyn Pedwell (University of Kent) and Professor Chris Weedon (Cardiff University). Convened by Dr Chris Müller (Cardiff University & University of Bristol) and Dr Andrea Zimmermann (University of Basel)

The ability to express and feel empathy has a long history of being presented as one of the defining traits of what it means to be human. Although this ability is increasingly being recognised in non-human entities, this very act of identification roots the empathetic response further in a “natural” bodily automatism that is involved in mediating social experience and the way we relate to others.

This workshop will complicate the immediacy of the feeling of empathy – our ability to really feel “it”, be moved and reach out to the other – by foregrounding that the expression of empathy also hinges on “specific” cultural knowledge and experience, which shapes our perception of and responses to others. If we accept that empathy is not merely a “universal” human phenomenon, but one that is also *situated*, at work in different ways in different places and situations, then empathy reveals a fractious potential also. Rather than making us merely reach out to others, empathy also immunises an “us” against those for whom no such feelings are felt. Whilst feeling empathy we inevitably also have the impression of “understanding” the other, which embeds the other’s pain in our own experience and system of values, even though these values may not be universally shared. Here the genuine expression of empathy can end up entrenching stereotypes, power-relations and cultural ignorance because the other’s situation seems so immediately understood and obvious. Empathy can also lead to moral catharsis, which vents emotional tensions and doubts to give one the impression of “caring” and “sharing” the other’s pain. As such, it can act as a disincentive to scrutinise one’s own behaviour and might lead to inaction and the sanitation of the violence of social exclusion and structural injustices. Above all, however, it is the very fact that a wide range of cultural practices – ranging from adverts, political speeches, TV-soap operas, museum exhibitions to music and sentimental literature which routinely seek to elicit empathetic responses – that reinforces the political and mediated nature of this feeling, that is so painfully real and genuinely experienced. When we all cry at the same time in a Hollywood movie, is this really an expression of our shared humanity, or are other forces at work here also?

Programme Workshop „The Cultural Politics of Empathy“

Tuesday, 20 June 2017

- 09.00am - 09.30am** **Welcome and Introduction**
Chris Müller & Andrea Zimmermann
- 09.30am - 10.45am** **Panel 1**
Zuniga Nieto, Susie Rea, Jules Sturm, Lourdes L. Zamanillo
- 10.45am - 11.15am** **Coffee break**
- 11.15am - 12.15pm** **Talk by Chris Weedon**
Empathy and the Cultural Politics of Memory: the Case of the GDR
- 12.15pm - 01.30pm** **Panel 2**
Viktoria Herold, Ruth Levin-Vorster, Ania Mauruschat, Anna Veprinska
- 01.30pm - 02.30pm** **Lunch**
- 02.30pm - 03.45pm** **Panel 3**
Millicent Churcher, Carolina Furusho, Yarran Hominh, Sarah Tafakori
- 03.45pm - 04.00pm** **Coffee break**
- 04.00pm - 05.00pm** **Talk by Carolyn Pedwell**
Decolonizing Empathy
- 05.00pm - 06.00pm** **General discussion**
- 06.30pm - 07.00pm* *Performance by HORA*
Food and drinks afterwards, please register online