

SLSAeu Conference 2017

Friday, 23 June, 4:30pm-6:30pm

ASSEMBLING EMPATHY

Across distances and divides, empathy extends and gathers. It collects, collectivizes. Or it doesn't. Empathies can just as well dissipate, throw up new and old walls, reinforce the gulf between these particular feeling selves and those un-feel-able others. When and how should we consider the singular valences of empathy's movements, the material and incorporeal resources of its agency, its affective potentialities (and limits)? Even more precisely as the four papers on this panel will demonstrate: how should we come to understand the nature of various empathy-assemblages at this contemporary moment -- in the midst of recent breathtaking political-populist upheavals such as Brexit and Trump [Ellis and Seigworth], in emerging forms of 'experience capitalism' [Sampson], in the context of mental health practices in the age of the digital [Tucker]. Working across different subject matter and diverse disciplinary practices, these presentations are united in their view that empathy must be thought in a manner that is radically relational / contextual and, perhaps foremost, that empathy has to be understood processually. Because empathy mediates, assembles, folds and feels/unfeels, stagnates, sometimes devours itself and its relations (and more), a process-orientation to empathy foregrounds time/tempo/rhythms, transition over place-position, shifting practices of memory and forgetting, the place of the more-than/other-than human, the evolution of technologies and techniques, the flows and poolings and oozings of affective belonging, the always unfinished affiliations of inside and outside. Processual approaches to empathy render its coming-into-and-out-of-formation as the most vital way to (paraphrasing this conference's CFP) take stock of its heterogeneity and complexity.

Paper 1: Feeling the other: processes and realities

Dr. Darren Ellis, Programme Leader and Senior Lecturer Psychosocial Studies, School of Social Sciences, University of East London

Arlie Hochschild (2016) is concerned with the political divide in America.

She asks the question, how can liberal Americans like herself, scale what she calls the empathy-wall to heal the political divide, by connecting with people on the right? The UK has a similar political division emanating from the EU in/out referendum. These splits are not simply based upon the politics of the right and left but complex assemblages that flow in and out of existence particularly through the Internet. Social-media is a key affective agent within this complex, enabling the processing of realities, producing collective empathies, apathies and fears. This paper will explore issues related to political divides, empathy-wall-scaling and associated affects oozing from social media, via a process philosophy informed by Whitehead.

Paper 2: Collective Empathy, Tunnels and Folds

Dr. Tony D. Sampson, reader in digital cultures and communication, School of Arts and Digital Industries, University of East London, UK

Sampson's paper explores collective empathy through the contrasting lenses of Metzinger's neurophenomenology and a Deleuze-Whiteheadian inspired neuropolitical assemblage theory. Whereas, on one hand, Metzinger's appeal to mirror neurons strangely supports a solipsistic tunnel vision of empathic relation, the assemblage brain, on the other, offers a radical relationality in which what is assumed to be inside is grasped in the folds of the outside. As follows, neurophenomenology commits to a kind of empathy in which the relation established with others is nothing more than a representation on the inside (Metzinger's cave brain). In contrast, in *The Fold*, the radical relation of empathy can help us to better understand (and possibly cope with) the emerging contexts and sensory environments of what this paper calls experience capitalism.

Paper 3: Intuition in a time of collective empathic machines

Dr. Gregory J. Seigworth, Department of Communication and Theatre, Millersville University, USA

In an era of algorithmic prefigurings, fake news, filter bubbles, and continuous affect modulation, it can seem as if empathy – collective and otherwise – often arrives too late. In the United States, a key debate currently raging across the Left is over whether there has been sufficient

empathy for the plight of Trump-supporting working- and middle class (most usually white) Americans from sparsely populated rural and ex-urban communities. The odd-shaped temporality of empathy shows up in the time-lag of backward-glance hand-wringing & in the proleptic feeling-forward of scheme hatching. As Carolyn Pedwell notes, of all the emotions, empathy is the one most politically inclined to the 'promise of self and social transformation.' But what if the issue now is not quite empathy but something else? Namely, how to invent/deploy an aesthetics of collectivizing intuition that moves in front of those cultural/affective logics that give modulatory contour to the kind of swerve bodies take. Here I want to consider the role that might be played by a 'transversal' intuition (via Bergson, Berlant, Deleuze+Guattari, Whitehead, Williams), not so much against collective empathy, but rather as a way to (ap)prehend the affections of bodies empathetically in pre- and mid-act, in their coming-into-form and not as always already situated/constituted.

Paper 4: Digital lines of empathy: Social media and mental distress

Dr. Ian Tucker, Reader in Psychology, University of East London

The digital is increasingly part of what makes us human (Horst & Miller, 2016). This is often seen as a threat, as if digital media are capable of shaping what we are are what we do. I seek to develop understanding of digital-human activity through the work of Ingold, who offers a process oriented concept of lines, rather than spaces, and Simondon, who theoretically articulates individual and collective activity, without prioritising human or technological. I will draw on an example from mental health communities, in which empathy is seen as central to the shared emotional work that underpins digital peer support. However, this is not just about empathy being shared between people, but rather as part of the lines of activity along which people move with social media.