

# ‘Legacies of the Immaterial in the Arts and Practice’ *Introduction and Framing Statements for Conference Panels*

London Conference in Critical Thought 2015; Department of Anthropology,  
University College London, 26-27<sup>th</sup> June 2015

Stream organiser: Samuel Wilson

## **Panel 1 – Representation: Creating and Questioning – Friday 26<sup>th</sup>, 11:15-12:45 - room 130**

Adam Bales - *Remediating the Image: The Digital Materialities of Vernacular Photography.*

Nina Lyon - *For the Snark was a Boojum, you see: nonsense, metaphysics and the apophatic in Carroll and Deleuze*

### **Welcome**

Welcome, everyone, to the first of three sessions on ‘Legacies of the Immaterial in the Arts and Practice’. My name is Sam Wilson and I’m coordinating this thematic stream. In the collaborative and dialogic spirit of LCCT, I thought it worth giving a very short introduction to the stream in general, as well as to this session in particular.

### **Rationale**

‘Materiality’ is, of course, a word that has lately drawn a lot of attention. This stream explores what renewed interests in materiality mean for *immateriality*.

Artistic practices provide lenses through which this question may be explored; the arts provide means for reflecting on contemporary cultural and material conditions. They engage with both representational practices and their inherent problematics vis-à-vis immateriality. Potentially, they also offer possibilities for conceiving of immateriality beyond, simply, a ‘negation of’ or ‘negative to’ materiality – for example, by accounting for immateriality as constituted through material practices.

This dialectic is already diversely explored or manifest in the histories of the arts: the plastic arts proffer us material objects, yet these evoke immaterial excesses beyond these objects taken naïvely; music, regarded historically as perhaps the most ephemeral and abstract of the arts, appears in light of always-developing technologies and materialities of sound-production; behaviours and experiential

possibilities are designated spatially through architectural and, more broadly, urban practices. Some might argue that these histories frame contemporary formations of art and culture.

One sensitive to these concerns may pose a series of productive, intimately-related questions. These include...

- How do material and immaterial practices appear within or react to dominant cultural contexts – including the context of what has variously been described as “late”, “postmodern”, and “cognitive” forms of capitalism?
- Another question: Do ubiquitous digital technologies provoke aesthetic counter-reactions that seek to reassert the place of materiality in the face of its perceived loss; or does one see a gesture of accepting the new “immaterial” regime?
- What is it to practice production, labour, and consumption within these socio-cultural contexts?
- And, what is the role of power and a cultural economy in circumscribing (imagined) boundaries between materiality and the immaterial?

## Themes

In this three-panel stream we hope to begin to address some of these sorts of questions. In the two sessions tomorrow, we'll explore questions related to, among other things, materiality, the body – embodiment –, and representational and critical practices. Today's panel also broaches concerns around the theme of representation.

In the first presentation, **Adam Bales** takes the photographic image as a site of hybrid materials. The image's relation to the author-viewer is considered – where, for instance, the image is perceived as edited, altered and ultimately dominated, under their control. Yet the status of the image *as* immaterial is questioned where this image mingles dynamically and productively with the gestures and agential movements of this same subject.

In the second paper, **Nina Lyon** extends this questioning of representation, meaning, and reading. She foregrounds the metaphysical, over the physical. Sense and nonsense, meaning and meaninglessness are explored both in acknowledged and in “less official” interconnections between the writings of Deleuze and Lewis Carroll.

What is striking for me is that both these papers recognise capacities of representational processes that are often forgotten in the moment when a representation is recognised as such: in Bales's paper, the photographic image isn't *just* an image, but a product of a dynamic mingling of subject and object; Lyon's presentation explores, among other things, how sense and nonsense have the ability to imply or subvert aspects of representationalism, and a fixity of meaning, implicit to certain modes of thinking. In this sense, both papers, though very differently, touch on the effect and breakdown of forms of mediation, as manifest both materially and immaterially.

I now have the pleasure of introducing our first speaker, **Adam Bales**, who will be presenting his paper, 'Remediating the Image: The Digital Materialities of Vernacular Photography' ...

## Panel 2 – Language, Signifying, and the Immaterial – Saturday 27<sup>th</sup>, 9:15-10:45, room 128

Sam McAuliffe - *Picture language and its Critique in Adorno, Neurath and Brehmer*

John Nyman - *Situated Deconstruction: Conceptual Writing and Signification from the Inside*

Rebecca May Johnson - *Reversing the 'Odysseus Effect' in Barbara Köhler's Niemand's Frau*

Welcome to the second day of the London Conference in Critical Thought, and to the second of three sessions from the stream, 'Legacies of the Immaterial in the Arts and Practice'. As with the first panel yesterday, I'd like to take a couple of minutes to introduce the speakers and themes covered this session, and to place it within the context of the stream as a whole. After this, the three presentations will immediately follow one-after-another; in the spirit of conversation and collaboration, we'll save questions until after the papers, and put them forward to the speakers together, as one would at a roundtable.

In yesterday's session two papers explored how acts of reading, writing and representation opened up questions around the themes of immateriality, mediation, and critique. Representation is of interest again today – but, in this session, we focus in particular on language and signification.

We begin the session with **Sam McAuliffe's** paper, in which McAuliffe considers the status of the image and picture-language – in its historical character – in the context of what Adorno and Horkheimer have called a "totally administered society".

After this, **John Nyman** argues for a stimulating connection between Merleau-Ponty's philosophies of language and situated conscious and deconstructionist views of "the text". He then suggests the relevance and necessity of this connection to some forms of contemporary writing and poetic practice.

Echoing an interest in a *situated* deconstruction, **Rebecca May Johnson** explores a poetics in which readers, and their bodies, are implicated *within* signifying processes. Themes from her paper also arch back to those of Sam McAuliffe's; Rebecca places this discussion in the context of Adorno and Horkheimer's Dialectic of Enlightenment.

If I may reflect for a moment – For me, there are two connected themes that emerge in conversation between these papers, the themes of *exclusion* and *immanence*. As Adorno pointed out *Aesthetic Theory*, qualities of things and thoughts are excluded when in the processes of reification rationalisation; perhaps we see aspects of this in a standardised a modern regime of images, and picture language? Similarly, material bodies and the mythic plenitude of nature are excluded in this Enlightenment processes of domination, as connected with Rebecca's paper. Paradoxically, the theme of immanence – of "being within" – plays out in the situatedness of these processes: be this *in* the text, and in what John Nyman calls a "signification from the inside", or in the act of its reading, in which the reader, in both mind and body, is implicated in the materiality of poetic language itself.

These two themes could return us back to the dialectic germinal to this discussion: the dialectic of materiality and immateriality.<sup>1</sup> For where and when are these two poles observable; what do they exclude and what do they embrace?

I'd like to introduce our first speaker, **Sam McAuliffe**, who will present on 'Picture Language and its critique in Adorno, Neurath, and Brehmer'...

### **Panel 3 – Labour, Bodies, and Immateriality – Saturday 27<sup>th</sup>, 11:00-12:30, room DFSR**

Andrew Woods - *Standing on the Balcony: A Study of Immaterial Art and Material Bodies.*

Craig Gent - *Dashboard interfaces: the workers' self-management we never wanted?*

Carolyn Deby - *Representing Experience: approximate strategies*

Welcome to the final session in the Immateriality stream. Our two previous panels have foregrounded themes such as representation, matter, and mediation; this final session foregrounds the body and labour in their material and immaterial aspects.

**Andrew Woods** will explore the thresholds between mind, body, the material and the immaterial – specifically, he considers contemporary art in a time of paradoxical notions of the body and of “immaterial labour”. The *balcony* acts symbolically as a place of thresholds and mediation; as an interface between public and private worlds, for instance.

In the second paper of the session, **Craig Gent** brings a critical lens to technologies instrumentalised in the service of labour and production. The *dashboard interface* is considered in the context of contemporary capitalism and modes of production. Indeed, like the “balconies” of the preceding paper, these dashboard interfaces are significant as sites or technologies that mediate bodies and their behaviours and actions.

Navigating issues of mediation, technology, affect, space, and the body, **Carolyn Deby** will give the final presentation of this session. Reflecting on both theoretical sources and her own artistic performance practice, Carolyn will explore the paradoxes inherent in the representation of experience, and the problematics of translating these through the labours of the artistic process.

After these three papers, we'll have short 'roundtable' with all the speakers; so please save you questions until after all three papers have been given. With that note, I'd like to introduce our first speaker, Andrew Woods, who will be presenting his paper, 'Standing on the Balcony: A study of immaterial art and material bodies'...

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the inside/outside division is crucial to different flavours of materialism. Jane Bennett, for instance, argues that Adorno maintains an 'outside' in his dialectics; she instead celebrates a vibrant materialism in which agency and movement emerges inherently from 'within' matter itself.