



Future Directions in the Humanities and Social Sciences

The Institute of Advanced Study in the Humanities and the Social Sciences organizes guest lectures on innovative topics in the humanities and social sciences. The particular aim of these encounters is to promote the dialogue between various disciplines and especially between the «two cultures». For this purpose, the Institute invites scholars who venture outside their own fields into the territory of the natural sciences and medicine, law, economics, politics and other fields.

Wednesday, 9 March 2011, 16:15 – 17:45
Unitobler of the University of Bern, Lerchenweg 36
Room: F022

‘Our Microscopic Allies’: H. G. Wells among the Microbes

Prof. Dr. Bruce Clarke, Texas Tech University

Reading some of H. G. Wells’s late-19th century science-fiction classics from a Gaian perspective enables us to see how the science of microbes has shifted since his day. Wells momentarily intuited this change, from microbe as enemy to microbe as ally, almost despite himself and certainly against the bias of late Victorian culture, in *The War of the Worlds* of 1898. I will preface my discussion of this text and also Wells’s *The Time Machine*, by glancing at some recent works on related themes, Ronald Wright’s 1997 literary novel *A Scientific Romance*, and two feature-length animated movies, *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* (2001) and *WALL-E* (2008). Relative to the earnest but cartoonish environmentalism of these movies, Wells’s fictions accurately convey how *his* world understood life on Earth to work.

The Time Machine transmits a telling late-Victorian version of classical notions about the possibility of taming the natural environment. Wells’s fiction imagines that a world from which bacteria and fungi had been expunged could be not just viable but enviable. *The War of the Worlds* carries forward the notion that microbes are dispensable pests to be exterminated by the hygienic advancement of a scientific civilization. Wells’s text remains strongly imprinted with Pasteur’s germ theory of disease and its pervasive medicalization of the microbial realm. Indeed, Wells’s Martian invasion is an allegory of the germs in Pasteur’s theory. The bacteria represent the naturalization of the diabolical within a larger salvational scheme. Nonetheless, the novel’s denouement gives the role of the microbes an interesting evolutionary twist: when pitted against the Martians, bacteria become our “allies” in the war to defend human dominion over the Earth. In this moment Wells’s imagination leaps a century ahead of his time.

Bruce Clarke is Professor of Literature and Science at Texas Tech University. He is a past president of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts (2006-08), and currently co-editor of *Configurations: A Journal of Literature, Science, and Technology*. He is the author of *Allegories of Writing: The Subject of Metamorphosis* (1995), *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism: Gender, Individualism, Science* (1996), *Energy Forms: Allegory and Science in the Era of Classical Thermodynamics* (2001), *Posthuman Metamorphosis: Narrative and Systems* (2008), and numerous essays, and the co-editor of *The Body and the Text: Comparative Essays in Literature and Medicine* (1990), *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature* (2002), *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays in Second-Order Systems Theory* (2009), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science* (2010). He is currently Senior Fellow at the International Research Institute for Cultural Technologies and Media Philosophy, Bauhaus University Weimar. Homepage: www.faculty.english.ttu.edu/clarke

In cooperation with the English Department of the University of Basel where the talk will be held on Tuesday, 8 March, 8:15am - 9:45 am.

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