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CONFÉRENCE UNIVERSITAIRE
DE SUISSE OCCIDENTALE

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE HUMANITIES



CUSO Workshop 2017: The Materialities of American Culture

Guest Speakers:

Prof. Dr. Christian J. Emden, Rice University

Prof. Dr. Mark I. Seltzer, UCLA

University of Bern Hosts:

Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rippl, PD Dr. Julia Straub &

M.A. Sofie Behluli, in collaboration with

CUSO and the GSH Bern

Date and Location:

15–16 September 2017, 9am–6pm

Unitobler, Room F-111

(including guided tour at the Abegg
Foundation on Saturday afternoon)

Further Information: <http://english.cuso.ch/welcome/>

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The Materialities of American Culture – Workshop Description

The humanities' move away from purely textual approaches goes hand in hand with a rising interest in materiality (cf. for example the publications of Ian Hodder 2012, Tilley et al. 2006, Petra Lange-Berndt 2015 and indirectly also Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory; cf. also the June 2016 summer school in Miami, Florida, and the June 2016 conference in Geneva, which both focused on this topic). Researchers have labeled this paradigm shift as a 'material turn' or a 'new materialism', denoting an interest in materials, matter, things and objects for their own sake (a feature that sets it apart from traditional materiality theories, such as Marx's). The 'vibrancy of matter', as Jane Bennett calls it (*Vibrant Matter* 2010), is therefore the transdisciplinary topic which our problem-oriented CUSO workshop intends to illuminate. Together with two experts in the field and around 12 Swiss doctoral students specializing in American literature and culture, we plan to investigate distinct cultural, medial and material processes of production, distribution and consumption of meaning of contemporary American materialities. Although we cannot circumvent the ethical issues that come with this shifting of agency onto inanimate materials, our interest clearly lies in aesthetics and media questions. By looking at photography, film, art installations, paintings and, most importantly, literary texts, we hope to distinguish the characteristics of this new materialism in American art and culture and, in addition, to develop useful methodologies for PhD students working in this field. A simple look at the new trends in contemporary literature that the concept of 'vibrant matter' has inspired, proves that the academic engagement with the materialities of American culture requires new approaches and methodologies: there is, for example, a new phenomenon called the 'aesthetics of bookishness' (which stresses the materiality of the literary text, as theorized by Jessica Pressmann and seen in Dorst and Abrams' novel *S*), or an emergence of new genres such as the digital novel and digital poetry (e.g. Shelley Jackson's hypertext novel *Patchwork Girl*; cf. N. Katherine Hayles's research for hypertextually encoded literary texts). Indeed, the relevance of new materialism for American culture is undeniable.

The targeted participants for this interdisciplinary workshop are primarily Swiss doctoral students from contemporary American literary and cultural studies, but students from the humanities in general are also welcome. The aim is to discuss American literature and other cultural products, whose aesthetics are crucially shaped by their material and medial basis, in an interdisciplinary context that also includes cultural studies, philosophy of culture and media philosophy. This will not only enable our Swiss doctoral students to widen their horizons and help them to network with researchers outside of their own discipline, but it will also connect them to the current international research discourse on materiality. The two speakers we would like to invite will complement each other discipline-wise: Prof. Christian J. Emden (Rice University) has the necessary expertise in philosophy of culture, the history of ideas and cultural studies, while Prof. Mark I. Seltzer (UCLA) brings a wide knowledge on literary and media studies to the table. Tying in with the two events in Miami and

Geneva, we hope to propel the work of doctoral students who work in the field of materiality (cf. the provisional schedule for this CUSO workshop's problem-based approach / "tough-nuts-to-crack", pages 6-7), to get an overview of theories of materiality and mediality, to illuminate in depth the aesthetics of material culture in contemporary America, and to flesh out a methodology with which to tackle these issues.

Two experts in the field of materiality and media studies will each give an academic talk (on one of their research topics; 45') and moderate a methodology-based workshop session on the materialities of American culture (90'). While the first day of the workshop will mainly consist of this lecture + workshop format, a part of Monday afternoon and the whole of Tuesday morning is reserved for the discussion of the PhD students' "tough-nuts-to-crack" (total of 4h). Our two-day workshop will be rounded off by a guided tour at the Abegg-Stiftung (Riggisberg near Bern).

Provisional Schedule

	Friday, 15 September	Saturday, 16 September
Morning: 9.00 – 10.00 am 10.00 – 10.30 am 10.30 am – 12.00 pm	Talk by keynote speaker 1 Coffee break Workshop session (moderated by keynote speaker 1)	“Tough-nuts-to-crack” II Coffee break “Tough-nuts-to-crack” III
Lunchtime: 12.00 – 13.45 pm	Joint lunch	Final discussion (30 mins) and joint lunch
Afternoon: 1.30 – 2.30 pm 2.30 – 3.00 pm 3.00 – 4.30 pm 4.30 – 6.00 pm	Talk by keynote speaker 2 Coffee break Workshop session (moderated by keynote speaker 2) “Tough-nuts-to-crack” I	All afternoon: Visit and guided tour at the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg
Evening: as of 6.30 pm	Joint dinner	Goodbye dinner with experts

Detailed Explanation:

- Talks by keynote speakers: Prof. Emden and Prof. Seltzer will each hold a lecture (45') on the Materialities of American Culture, ideally with a focus on literature and material/medial aesthetics. While the former will approach our topic through a combination of philosophy, history of ideas and cultural studies, the latter will tackle the issue from a literary and media studies point of view. In the discussion following the talk, the doctoral students will have the opportunity to ask questions and explore certain aspects in more detail (15').
- Workshop sessions: The workshop sessions will be planned and moderated by the keynote speakers (90'). They will discuss previously circulated texts (written by themselves or by other authors relevant to our topic), and take a closer look at a selection of American materialities (visual, sound, film, etc.). The goal of these sessions is to practice the theoretical and methodological approaches to American materialities with the PhD students hands-on.

- “Tough-nuts-to-crack”: In order to avoid the usual 20’ presentations that doctoral students have to deliver at most conferences and workshops, we will adopt a problem-oriented approach. We will ask the students to send in 500 words abstracts of their PhD projects along with a “tough-nut-to-crack”, which we will then circulate among all participants in advance. The “tough-nut-to-crack” should be about 3-5 sentences long and formulate a problem / dilemma / conundrum related to our topic that the students are struggling with. The goal is to discuss each “tough-nut” in a plenary session and, ideally, to come up with many ideas and suggestions on how to crack this “tough nut” (20’ per student). In doing so, our small-scale workshop with a focus on American studies ties in with the “Encountering Materiality” conference in Geneva (June 2016), which offered an exuberant overview of the field of materiality research.
- Final discussion: This final discussion aims at pulling the strings together, answering open questions and identifying overarching issues when working in the field of materiality in general, and the materialities of American culture in particular (30 mins).

Cf. also the official English CUSO website: <https://english.cuso.ch/welcome/>
and the respective page on our workshop: [https://english.cuso.ch/index.php?id=897&tx_displaycontroller\[showUid\]=3621](https://english.cuso.ch/index.php?id=897&tx_displaycontroller[showUid]=3621).