
Introductions: Futures of the Study of Culture

Have we now reached a plateau in which the future is likely to be one of consolidation, refinement, and continuity? Or are we at the threshold of new developments, whether reactive rollbacks to earlier paradigms or dimly foreseen revolutions and emergent innovations?

(Mitchell 2004, 330)

For us, the future no longer presents itself as an open horizon of possibilities; instead, it is a dimension increasingly closed to all prognoses – and which, at the same time, seems to draw near as a menace.

(Gumbrecht 2014, xiii)

Doris Bachmann-Medick

Futures of the Study of Culture: Some Opening Remarks

In his book *The Future as Cultural Fact* the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai claims that the “orientation to the future” should be revalued as a main dimension of culture – though a dimension “that is almost never explicitly discussed” (Appadurai 2013, 179). In cultural anthropology, he observes, the future has so far been repressed in favor of tradition, heritage, and other past-oriented concepts. Cultural anthropology thus sharply contrasts with economics, a science explicitly of the future, of forecasting, prognoses, and expectations.¹ Appadurai calls on cultural anthropology to redefine culture as the “capacity to aspire” (195), i.e., to view culture as that which strengthens impoverished or marginalized groups and social classes and allows them to develop. In Appadurai’s view, this would also strengthen cultural anthropology as a discipline, and allow it to unfold in the future. But what about the interdisciplinary study of culture? Has it perhaps been more open to “futurity as a cultural capacity” (180) that is based on anticipations, aspirations, and imaginations (286) from the beginning?² Is it more future-oriented than the discipline of cultural anthropology?

Before answering this question, we must differentiate between futurity as a cultural activity on the one hand, and the multidirectional future potential of cultural research on the other (see Andreas Langenohl in this volume). How closely are these two understandings of “futurity” related? Do they stand for two sides of the same coin, as they shape the entire “social formation as a configuration of unequal positions and relations” (Grossberg 2006, 3)? As Lawrence Grossberg claims in reference to Stuart Hall, engaging with this “social formation” in its entirety and contextualizing instead of isolating categories and concepts is essential for a socially relevant cultural studies. This leads to “conjunctural analyses” (5) of conflictual social formations that combine first- and second-order observations. Appadurai, however, engages mainly with first-order observation and the future-oriented capacities of culture itself. But the study of culture also needs to connect cultural aspirations much more strongly to new analytical research categories and a conceptualization

¹ For a discussion of economics as a science of imagined futures, based on cultural tools such as “fictional expectations” and narratives that cope with the uncertainty of the future, see Beckert 2016, 3.

² See Andreas Langenohl in this volume for a more detailed interpretation of Appadurai’s concept of a cultural “capacity to aspire.”

of main entry points that structure future cultural research: risk, imagination, affects and anxieties, media representation, ecological crises, public health crises, etc.

1 Changing Positions, Changing Concepts, Changing Frames

What is the state of the art? Since the nineteenth century, we can no longer assume that the study of culture and other fields of the humanities and social sciences use the ‘future’ as a fixed frame of reference, let alone as a category of progress (see Freitag and Groß 2017, 8). Conceptions of the future today instead seem to oscillate between an evocation of crisis, a continuation of contemporary theory dynamics, and the generation of fundamentally new paradigms in the face of a “future as catastrophe” (Horn 2018, 5). Often these conceptions diagnose a massive disruption through unforeseeable destabilizing “tipping points” of social and theoretical processes (Horn 2017, 11, 2018, 5). Alternatively, they identify long-term transitions in the humanities, such as “a movement away from ‘signification’ and ‘meaning’ toward ‘communication and affect’” (Venn 2007, 51); a shift from constructivist to non-constructivist approaches culminating in evidence, presence, and materiality (Gumbrecht 2010, 2014); or a technological transformation of literary representations into new sorts of texts and new forms of reading (see Frederik Tygstrup in this volume). Another strand of future research has extended the familiar pathways of humanist thinking in a post- or non-humanist direction – following explicitly programmatic ideas and critical-ethical aims for the humanities in the twenty-first century (see Braidotti 2013; Grusin 2015). But in the end, do all of these diagnoses of future transitions not remain within the framework of ‘change,’ do they not evoke a chain of developments and a linear projection into the future? It seems worth mentioning at this point that institutional prerequisites for the development of the humanities and social sciences such as strategic financing schemes and research collaborations have played a key role in shaping such theories of the future according to the logic of their own project proposals. Questioning the frameworks that currently underpin theories of the future, however, could open up new ways of understanding and theorizing the future. We are not talking here about new ways of speculating on future possibilities, problems, anxieties, key concerns and scenarios, cutting-edge research, and emerging topics – such as, for instance, living in or constructing future cities, developing or applying future technologies, coping with surveillance cultures, etc. (see Folkerts, Lindner, and Schavemaker 2015). Nor are we talking about reframing how we acquire knowledge through distinct methods of scaling history,

for example, by turning our attention to the Anthropocene or epochal microsections and upheavals as the late Ulrich Beck does (2016, 51–60). After pointing to the Axial Age, the French Revolution, and colonial transformation, he emphasizes the current all-encompassing metamorphosis of the world. Our approach suggests something different: It encourages paying attention to the methodological suppositions underlying the various conceptions of the future, which involves digging out and differentiating shared points of reference that could highlight significant issues for social action as well as for futures of cultural research in explicitly plural terms.³

Before outlining this new approach, however, we should first consider the study of culture in its dynamic unfolding, in its own theoretical and methodological development. This unfolding or *Eigendynamik* is inflected by the cultural conflicts and asymmetries of global society, which is why a consideration of futures of the study of culture never only concerns prospective theories and methods. It demands engagement with the emerging futures of cultures and societies in their global conditions. Following this premise, Richard Grusin in this volume ties the futures of the study of culture to “the study of key concerns of the twenty-first century.” Referencing Ulrich Beck’s notion of a global risk society, which, in his view, we are increasingly becoming, Grusin contends that the study of culture can no longer be left to the traditional humanities alone. It should explicitly be blurred with scientific and public debates on the geological scale of the Anthropocene and the environmental threats facing it (see Chakrabarty 2018), and with studies of media technologies, digitalization, and surveillance – to name but a few challenging fields of research. In the spirit of enriching cultural research with such diverse paradigms, Isabel Gil in this volume focuses on surveillance, showing that the practice or even the system of surveillance not only shapes present and future cultural conditions but also changes the entire framing of the study of culture itself. This approach to surveillance indicates that the future study of culture will be obliged to address pressing problems within society.

Can this reference to the social sphere be seen as a moral-political common denominator for the study of culture? Is the familiar practice of working with ‘concepts’ as analytical tools giving way to a deeper engagement with ‘concerns’ (on matters of concern, see Latour 2014, 231–232)? This question does not necessarily call for a normative basis for the study of culture, but increasingly for

³ On the significant shift at the end of the twentieth century toward reconceptualizing ‘the future’ as a multiplicity of futures, see Gidley 2017 (ch. “The Future Multiplied”) and Seefried 2014, 2015.

a commitment to responsibility, to rethinking the common denominators and points of reference of our work with concepts in the study of culture – rethinking ‘humanity,’ ‘the world,’ ‘climate,’ ‘public health,’ ‘global justice,’ ‘human rights,’ or ‘humans’ as a species. Humans are no longer considered to be autonomous from the rest of being but are rather regarded as relationally woven into a network which includes non-humans, technologies, resources, objects, etc. (Horn 2017, 9). As “re-thinking key categories like subjectivity and affect, the environment and technology” (Venn 2007, 49) is the challenge of the day, it is important to also consider the categories with reference to which we analyze pressing global problems.

But where might potential research in the future of the study of culture take place? Though it would be naive to neglect the important institutional dimension of academic work, we should not confine research to the corporate, “entrepreneurial” university. However, the academic environment requires researchers to strategically position themselves in multiple competitive contexts. To position oneself in this field means to distinguish oneself by exploiting “ever more specialised niches” (Angermüller 2013, 265) within the academic market (on academic and financial markets in their potential of shaping research futures, see Tom Clucas in this volume). Alongside this established social-academic trajectory toward marketable professional futures, one could identify a trend in the signature areas of Western research. I am referring to the increased relevance of a culture of singularities such as that outlined by Andreas Reckwitz both in his contribution to this volume and in his provocative book *The Society of Singularities* (2020). Does the tendency to find one’s place in society by choosing a position of singularity and uniqueness apply to the field of theory, too? Are we perhaps running into a multitude of singular approaches, “a canon of singularities, a collection of intellectual incursions that were, by definition, without precedent” (Potts and Stout 2014, 2) – not a traditional canon based on “singular names” (2) of outstanding theorists, but rather a new canon of singular approaches? A symptom of this trend could be the contemporary turning away from schools and key theorists in favor of transformative theoretical breaks and new orientations such as the “cultural turns” of the past two decades (see Bachmann-Medick 2016). These “turns” suggest that there is a tendency amongst researchers to carve out and occupy specific research fields exclusively: “Working academics struggle to publish before the flag under which they began their research has been captured and replaced with another” (Potts and Stout 2014, 3). The quick turnover rate that comes with the flagging of claimed research fields seems to be accountable for an almost never-ending compulsion to produce newness. But what about already existing conversations and debates? Why should they be overrun by the obsession with newness that governs current research dynamics? Reflecting on the future of the study of culture must not necessarily repeat this entanglement between linear

theory developments and the obsession with (their) newness. Perhaps it would be more effective to employ practical-theoretical tools that follow innovative and future-oriented paths by focusing on new ways of synthesis and linking, critical revision and delinking.

2 Changing Turns or a Grand Paradigm Shift?

Will the emergence of ever-new theoretical turns make the future of cultural research more diverse, more pluralistic? The range of recent turns has drawn attention to a number of emerging topics or concerns which show and demand a deeper involvement with cultural realities (such as global migration, pandemics, climate change, the Anthropocene, etc.). Do we need to rethink our key research categories in light of increased involvement of research with cultural realities and the resulting ‘turns’ or transdisciplinary ‘studies’ – such as the ontological turn, or posthumanist, animal, disability, sustainability, etc. studies – before we can even speak of the future of the study of culture? Or will it become inevitable to break entirely with familiar theories and concepts, the *longue durée* constellations of interwoven turns and their increasing differentiation into a prolonged series of sub-sections and studies? In the end, any linear trajectories of theory might prove to be inadequate to analyze and address the contemporary dynamics of newly emerging global problems and systemic disruptions. Will it thus become unavoidable to suggest a hitherto unheard-of paradigm shift in a Copernican sense? In any case, the overarching question is: Are we forced to leave familiar theoretical frameworks behind and adjust our terms and concepts to a world that is “fundamentally different” (Beck 2016, 9) from what we have experienced so far? Ulrich Beck takes a clear position towards this question, claiming that we will be forced to carry out “epochal change” (5) in how we think about the future, to conceptualize a void that until now was never thought to be thinkable at all (see 28–30).

What, then, is the starting point for reflecting on the future of the study of culture? A good starting point would be a new conceptualization of the past. We need to historicize the key concepts that guide our engagement with the future. Historian Dirk van Laak maintains that it is a precondition for dealing with the future: We need historians to act as “prophets of the past” (van Laak in this volume, 215) and reject the assumed continuity between past, present, and future in favor of an openness for “different rhythms and paces of change” (van Laak, 215). But would the reflection on the future not go even further if we started with a new conceptualization of the present? In any case, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht

is convinced that the “broad present,” in order to be grasped, requires a new epistemological framework. This unaccustomed framework has to be developed out of an enlarged notion and awareness of a present that is no longer informed by the persistent concept of “historical consciousness” and temporal sequence, but which instead suggests a new “chronotope,” one that is shaped by simultaneity and oscillation (Gumbrecht 2014, 75–76). Gumbrecht’s postulate of a “broad present” thus implies that before we can even begin to reflect on future developments, we must question the adequacy of our temporal mindset by asking whether we can still rely on our familiar “epistemological habitat” (xiii).⁴ Such skeptical interrogation is all the more necessary in view of the global simultaneities of uneven cultural and political conditions that are a challenge to any linear projections of the future. In this context the epistemological lens could also be an eye-opener for the multiple pathways of future research that should no longer be confined to Western scholarship (see Schulz 2019, 4–5), but rather exposed to cross-cultural efforts to address the complexities, diversity, and unevenness of the contemporary world. An interdisciplinary switch to cultural anthropology/ethnology might be a productive starting point for grasping such complexities, as this discipline of complex entanglements has been critically taking up the issue that “new forms of globalization and modernization are bringing all parts of the earth into greater, uneven, polycentric interaction” (Fischer 2003, 3).

3 Changing Points of Reference, Grasping Various Futures

The complex cultural entanglements of the present and the increasing experience of the present as uneven and multiple are good starting points for reflecting upon the future in the plural. This does not mean we should project specific frames of reference onto an unknown future. It means seeking, encouraging, questioning, and critically developing new frameworks in contemporary cultural theory. It means engaging in practice-related knowledge production, not least through the work of above-mentioned multifaceted transdisciplinary ‘studies’ “that are currently cross-breeding nomadically” (Braidotti 2018, 10), with their broad range of disciplinarily hybrid critical terms. Contributors to this volume exemplify such

⁴ “... the narrow present of ‘history’ was the epistemological habitat of the Cartesian subject, another figure of reference (and self-reference) must emerge in the broad present” (Gumbrecht 2014, xiii).

transgressive approaches: Silke Schicktanz draws new ethical inspirations from biomedicine; Hubertus Büschel critically exposes entanglements between ethnography/anthropology and new cultural history; Andressa Schröder outlines arts-based cultural research on ecological issues; and Laura Meneghello offers a new cultural perspective on global economy. In cultural life itself, cross-border perspectives have been made productive for elaborating critical frames or shared points of reference. To name an example: The polyphonic negotiation of ‘universal’ human rights in the context of local social conflicts or clashes shows that such conflictual scenarios can often be mastered only by seeking shared frames of reference. To look for common frames of reference with regard to future cultural and sociological research is certainly challenging as well. However, it demands a new epistemological starting point: a fundamental “transformation of the reference horizon” (Beck 2016, 17).

As Ulrich Beck, among others, maintains, the future can only be approached if we break down our certainties and, above all, leave behind our traditional perceptions of social ‘change’ and ‘transformation.’ Instead, the future opens up in a world where change, with its reference to existing orders and institutions, is replaced by the emerging concept of ‘metamorphosis’ (Beck 2016, 29). Beck identifies a radical shift and break between the age of change, up until the present, and a coming age of metamorphosis. Global turmoils and global problems have become so complex that they can no longer be grasped and analyzed with familiar concepts. Even the concept of culture itself has to undergo massive transformation. More than ever before, culture is about to be re-envisioned as “more-than-human” (see Ursula Heise in this volume), critically engaging with the rapid developments of artificial intelligence located at complex intersections between fields of the material and ‘non-human,’ technology, medicine, ecology, computer science, biopolitics, design, and the environmental humanities. Climate change is only one significant reason for this new cultural assemblage. The familiar nature-culture divide is no longer valid; the traditional human subject has been mutated into a “controllable consumer” (Beck 2016, 9); human life has turned into “manufacturability” (25). In these terms Beck outlines a new paradigm which he calls – quite loftily – the ensuing “metamorphosis of the world.” This metaphoric phrase points to a complete change of worldviews: a “new way of generating critical norms” (39), new concepts, frameworks, and conditions, “creating a cosmopolitan frame of reference” (40). It represents the acute sense that we can no longer stick to the familiar horizon and extrapolate possible future developments from this present situation.

And yet we can only approach the future by working in the present. Indeed, metamorphosis is for Beck a “characteristic feature of the present age” (20). Finding ways to implement such grand Copernican paradigms, to put them into

practice, helps us not to get overwhelmed by them. But how should we implement these new conceptual frames in our investigations? A first “point of entry” might be to focus on a “future sense” already at work within the present, as Andreas Langenohl suggests in his contribution. Langenohl refers to Leslie Adelson’s conceptual elaboration of “futurity”⁵ but focuses on its applicability in the practical sphere of “prefigurative politics.” In the face of new radical transformations in medicine and biotechnology, global risks and catastrophes, and – last but not least – the digital revolution, the focus must shift onto new forms of collaboration and competition, new global climate and health alliances, strategies for traffic and transportation, efforts of global social justice, and increased attention to urban rights in world cities. Focusing on such mobilizing pivot points for analysis enables us to develop the paradigm of metamorphosis in concrete fields of action. Thus, the cultural and cultural-analytical reflection on futures of the study of culture could affect more important areas of investigation and research than just the isolated sequence of theories, turns, and paradigms. It would focus the study of culture on the emergence and elaboration of rather practice-oriented approaches, more so than has been done in the past.

Concerns with the dynamic of ‘turns’ and transdisciplinary ‘studies’ in their “hybrid cross-fertilization” (Braidotti 2019, 43) have already created a “nomadic expansion of multiple practices and discourses” (44). These practices across and beyond disciplines (that also find expression in this volume) have already paved the way in such a pragmatic or practical-theoretical direction. But one of the main challenges from now on is to come up with new operative tools and practices for “making” futures. Translation may well constitute such an operative tool – be it the translation of cultural-analytical concepts into societal-political concepts, the translation of academic issues into the public humanities, the study of culture as a capacity to translate between disciplines and cultures,⁶ or – facing the Anthropocene – the “displacement-translation of ‘force’ into ‘power’” (Chakrabarty 2018, 13), especially when it comes to the translation of physical-geological categories into social categories of action and responsibility. This translational or, more generally speaking, operative concern goes hand in hand with a new sensibility for processes of transition and lenses of liminality, contact zones, and mechanisms for coping with passages and context shifts. It could encourage the creation of liminal third spaces as possible junctions for giving terms such as

⁵ Leslie Adelson elaborated the “future sense” as a disjunctive, counterfactual, “long-distance sense organ of temporal perception” (2017, 200, also 40–41).

⁶ On the study of culture/the humanities as translation studies, see Bachmann-Medick 2012, 35–40; on complexities of ‘cultural translation’ seen through the lens of “grafting,” see Uwe Wirth in this volume.

‘humanity,’ ‘the world,’ or ‘cosmopolitanism’ substance. In other words, all new theoretical tools which will be developed must still be made relevant to practice. Sociology and the study of culture could once again learn how to do so from cultural anthropology: “anthropology operates in a set of third spaces (...) where new multicultural ethics are evolving (...)” and its “challenge is to develop translation and mediation tools for helping make visible the differences of interests, access, power, needs, desire, and philosophical perspective,” as Michael Fischer writes in *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice* (2003, 3). And yet, as Hubertus Büschel argues in this volume, one has to be aware of the colonial roots of cultural anthropology and their lasting impact, especially on the recently reconceptualized new cultural history. Referring critically to examples of the entanglement between new cultural history and modes of colonial knowledge production, he also reflects on important operative tools: on practices of provincializing and decentering, delinking with Western mindsets, and border thinking.

Such operative approaches do not have prophetic qualities, nor do they advocate big paradigm shifts or make predictions about future developments. Rather they allow us to start at a different point, perhaps at some impasse or rupture of seemingly continuous trajectories of theory, with stronger regard to breaking and groundbreaking practices of agency and theoretical (trans)formations as well – with a special focus on their non-linear, network-like, translational modes. If we follow Beck, for example, and consider metamorphosis to be a new paradigm, we still need to employ the “jeweler’s-eye work of ethnography and social anthropology, the back and forth of detail work and sitting back to view the settings” (Fischer 2009, 270). What is meant here is a fine-tuning of context-related and situation-adequate research attitudes. In the end, such nuanced attitudes will lead to a reconceptualization of the study of culture itself: The study of culture thus turns into a mode of translation studies. As I have tried to explain in other contexts, the study of culture could in a fundamental sense be considered translation studies, since it also strives to pluralize relations and phenomena precisely through the disruption of concepts of wholeness and unity that each translation process inevitably accretes (see Bachmann-Medick 2009, 12). Returning to an idea discussed above, translation as an analytical category could be made fruitful and future-promising if we further connected it with a practical-theoretical, translational mode of acting and agency. Peter Galison’s concept of “trading zones” could be especially useful in such an effort (see Galison in this volume). This concept suggests that we can ensure the collaboration of seemingly incompatible language and knowledge communities in interdisciplinary academic contexts and heterogeneous social encounters by establishing a “restricted” exchange language that allows a coordination of action. In a broader historical sense, however, translation as a mode of action could have strategic potential for “making” futures: Past

experiences can be reinterpreted and translated by taking up their symbols and shapes and by inserting them into new contexts. In this process new meanings are made more acceptable in traditional forms. Thus, by such innovative translations new horizons can be opened up (see Bachmann-Medick 2017).

To conclude: Discussing the future of the study of culture means much more than elaborating on emerging concepts or even paradigms. It means engaging with innovative methodological infrastructures – such as scaling, zooming (Hannerz 2016, 5), translation, grafting (see Uwe Wirth in this volume), linking or delinking, and other practical efforts to find “strategic switches and pressure points” (Fischer 2009, 270) that have the potential to transform entire research scenarios. But paying attention and fostering new methodological approaches or developing practice tools in fields of action has its limitations, too. It in no way makes the trajectories towards a plural future more manageable. The future of the study of culture is by no means to be understood as a matter of management (see Bachmann-Medick 2017a). The illusion that the future of the study of culture can be managed is maintained, on the level of individual scholars, by activities such as continuously writing reports, peer-reviewing, forming working groups, taking part in evaluation processes, participating in appointment committees, and – on the level of academic organizations and university institutions – by building research associations, making decisions about university rankings, or setting priorities in funding. Thinking about the futures of the study of culture may well lead to a dead end as long as it overestimates such strategic calculations that point to a mere technocratic image of the future of scholarship.

The subject of these introductory remarks has been neither speculation nor prophecy on possible developments in cultural theory and research. The intention was rather to outline a way to future research by mapping out new practical methods of inquiry and point to “critical thinking tools” of the humanities (as Nicole Anderson claims in this volume) and shared, transdisciplinary points of reference that make cultural analyses translatable onto the field of action. But can an approach like this prevent futures from “draw[ing] near as a menace” – as one of the themes of this essay evokes? It can conceivably help us consider the openness of the future and the opportunities for an emergence of unplanned and new perspectives, by admitting the limited manageability of future developments in the study of culture – and by suggesting instead the use of critical analytical, communicative, and ethical skills of the study of culture. Even with all these practical possibilities of knowledge in mind, the theoretical epicenter for orbiting the future resides in the present. In this sense, the words of Teresa de Laurentis could provide further food for thought: “The time of theory, as articulated thought, is always the present” (Laurentis 2004, 365).

Postscript April 2020

We are confronted at this moment with a reality that is dominated by the global coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic. How will the futures of the study of culture emerge from this crisis? At a time when bare survival is at stake, all projections into the future become more uncertain than ever. Even if it is still unknown today how enduring the repercussions of this catastrophe really will be – whether one can truly speak of an epochal ‘turn of an era’ – this situation is likely to have considerable consequences for the study of culture. It is to be feared that this worldwide unsettling of our survival conditions will continue to entail massive global challenges in the future. Alongside issues such as climate change, migration, war, terrorism, and human rights, the present crisis is bringing inherent dangers in the production and reproduction of human societies to the foreground. And with this new momentum, issues of ‘biopolitics’ come to the center of public attention: the increased urgency of public health and global health policy, coupled with the prominent role of scientific medical experts as the right arm of political decision-makers. This situation could massively accelerate a development that has been emerging for some time now: the public importance of the humanities and cultural sciences could rescind even further.

If it is currently the virologists, biologists, physicians, pharmaceutical chemists, biomedical technologists, and specialists in digital surveillance who set the tone and determine the agendas of research, and to whom the political decision-makers defer, they will also most likely collect the lion’s share of research funds in the future. But can virologists, biomedical pharmacists, technologically competent physicians, and big data specialists solve social and cultural problems? Who will be dealing with the obvious social downsides of this global crisis?

In all this, a new hour for the study of culture, for the humanities, and the social sciences could arrive. Future efforts to solve the problems caused by the pandemic will have to concern themselves with counteracting a hitherto one-sided orientation towards ‘economic globalization.’ The study of culture will have to consider the cultural, symbolic, experiential, affective, and discursive implications of the crisis. It could also furnish conceptual tools to handle the greater need for cross-border networking, solidarity, and collaborations on a global scale. But in all these developments, the cultural power asymmetries and economic inequalities will have to be assessed anew, leading to a critical analysis of the seemingly unavoidable reshaping of the global order. But there will be additional impulses to reposition the study of culture in the present turmoil of the world. They will arise from new concerns – the necessity to uncover, problematize, and counteract the massive restrictions of democratic rights and liberties; the obligation to deal with the symptoms of increasing

racism and populism; but also the need to question the forceful interventions of crisis measures into our ways of life and sociality.

One thing seems certain: The futures of the study of culture will surely be “infected” by this pandemic crisis. They will be confronted with new fundamental problems and their consequences for our everyday lives. To name but a few important ones: the changing relationship between the generations, the new rules of physical and spatial distance, the intensified mediatization and digitalization of our communication through ‘social distancing’ and its virtual tools, the transformation of our mobility in public spaces and of our concepts, practices, and relations of work. How are these new social conditions to be analyzed with a differentiating vocabulary?

There may be other and more encompassing components that demand new framings for the study of culture: How can we define ‘systemic relevance’ in our societies under the conditions produced by the crisis? Should the study of culture be further opened up to economics (see Tom Clucas in this volume)? How can we develop ethical and bioethical norms that are adequate to our needs and at the same time responsive to different cultural frameworks (see Silke Schicktanz in this volume)? Last, but not least: How can the distinctions between the spheres of the human and the non-human – in view of the present challenge from the viral world – be reconsidered and the necessary recognition of multispecies cultures be newly assessed (see Ursula Heise and Richard Grusin in this volume)?

In addition to the challenges posed by such newly pressing issues, coping with changed practices and forms of communication will be of fundamental importance. It is here that translation as a ‘methodological concept’ promises to gain further importance. When experts and politicians collaborate in an entangled way, and scientific studies and findings more increasingly become the basis for political decision-making, then the refined and critical translational capacities of the study of culture are needed all the more. It is these translational capacities that might help to steer and control booming practices of mediation management and to develop communication strategies that include democratic public participation. In this way further ‘trading zones’ for the collaboration between different knowledge and decision-making systems could be implemented (see Peter Galison and Jens Kugele in this volume). Other cultural and social practices that make a study of culture approach indispensable will gain in importance: developing modes of resilience, coping with existential liminal situations, and the modes of cultivating global social solidarity and responsibility (see Ansgar Nünning in this volume). Giving increased attention to such novel forms of action could perhaps lend a practical dimension to the rather abstract concept of a “metamorphosis of the world,” which Ulrich Beck coined to describe a radical disruption of all familiar certainties, conditional frameworks, and analytical

competences in grasping possible futures. Focusing on a practical approach like this could help the study of culture break down such overarching concepts into the operative levels of our capacities to act. Moreover, it could also help to inflect our analytical research in directions that have not yet been illuminated, since they have been almost unthinkable so far.

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