

Jens Kugele

Collaborative Research in the Study of Culture

1 Thinking about Futures

On September 5, 2019, the “Futurium” opened its doors to the public in Germany’s capital, Berlin, and extended an invitation to reflect on the possible futures we imagine for our world. This new building illustrates several key characteristics of our thinking about the future, futures, and futurity in this volume as well. First, in its spatial interplay of exhibition, forum, and lab, the Futurium demonstrates that thinking about futures requires a variety of dynamic spaces. Second, as Stefan Brandt, director of the Futurium emphasizes, it invites us to think about the future in the plural (Checchin 2019). Third, located in the government quarter of the capital and sponsored by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research as well as by several foundations and companies, this 60-million-Euro project reminds us of the role that infrastructure, politics, and economics play in our thinking about futures. Fourth, its architecture, a result of a 20-year planning and building process, presents a fundamental dilemma that all collective and institutional thinking about possible futures faces: Behind its concrete walls and its glass façade, this edifice, built with today’s materials and envisioned by yesterday’s architects, hosts visions of tomorrow. While limited by its conventional materiality, it displays in its interior exhibitions on an envisaged future architecture that uses crab shells, bamboo, fungi cultures, brick clay, and recycled materials (see Richter 2019). Fifth, inside the Futurium, visitors find a space

Note: As mentioned above in the Preface and Acknowledgements to this volume, our texts were conceptualized, written, and edited well before there were any signs of the current global covid-19 pandemic that has rapidly brought death, fear, and unforeseen challenges to individual lives and cultural systems. In light of the current global pandemic, experts are expecting that the covid-19 crisis will change the future of our health systems, our political systems, and more generally, our culture. Although we are only at the very beginning of this pandemic, it can be predicted, that, in many ways, these developments will also have unforeseeable consequences for the higher education system in general and the study of culture more specifically. Just as the crisis already has changed our perspectives on health, social interaction and distance, our notions of home, our organization of the private and public sphere, it will change the ways we organize our classrooms, our research, travels, meetings, and conferences, our interactions with colleagues, fellow researchers, and students. As leading economists at the I.M.F. expect the global economy to face the worst slump since the Great Depression, many higher education institutions and humanities departments might have to deal with major budget cuts in the near future.

of interaction and active participation that moves beyond mere representation and descriptive texts. Sixth, at its conceptual core, the Futurium features creative collaboration that reaches across institutional contexts and fields of expertise and engages in an exchange with citizens. The future “lab” inside the Futurium is thus not only an attraction for family excursions on rainy Sunday afternoons, but it enables the conceptual interaction between academic research, exhibition space, participating visitors, and the general public.

These elements are central in our thinking about futures of the ‘study of culture’ as well, which requires dynamic spaces that allow for creative reflection about the future in the plural, always with an awareness of and consideration for its political dimensions. Most centrally, exchange, in the form of collaborative research, lies at the heart of the scholarly study of culture, which imagines the possible futures of its field as well as possible futures of culture more generally.

2 Collaborative Research

At its core, an integral element of the interdisciplinary study of culture is such collaborative research across various borders. This is the case, at least, if we conceive of the study of culture not as resorting to one particular tradition such as the British *Cultural Studies*, the North American *Cultural Studies*, or German *Kulturwissenschaft* in the singular form (see also Ansgar Nünning’s contribution to this volume), but instead as an attempt to foster a non-ideological intellectual exchange among all scholarship on culture that employs theoretical and conceptual tools and takes into account its historical dimensions. In what follows, I will highlight five aspects of such collaborative research: first, developing knowledge through the work of thought collectives in the Fleckian sense; second, exchange across various boundaries, including training future generations of researchers for the study of culture; third, forms and formats that allow this collaboration including administrative imagination and structures; fourth, the academic status of collaborative work; and fifth, inextricably linked to the latter, the status of the study of culture as an academic field in the context of disciplinary formations and degree-awarding institutions.

3 Collective Knowledge Construction

Rumor often has it that academic work in the humanities and in the social sciences is the solitary work of individual scholars. The prevailing myth of the individual, independent, and solitary genius scholar goes hand in hand with the

fictions of individual talents and skill sets, independent decision-making and selection of research topics, solitary research and problem-solving, as well as single-authored publications. What this myth of the individual genius scholar does *not* account for is best captured in the notion of “thought collective” (“Denkkollektiv”), a term coined by Ludwik Fleck in the 1930s. As the title of his work *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache* (1980 [1935]) indicates, Fleck points us to his fundamental notion of a collective “development” and “formation” of scholarly facts. These scholarly facts, in Fleck’s view, are in their essence shaped and constructed by a collective of people, inherently linked to language, and instantiated primarily in different forms of scholarly texts. Thus, they bear witness to interrelations among individuals as well as across time and place. Any individualistic accounts of knowledge and of independent genius scholars must therefore be interpreted as mere fiction. While the thought collective in Fleck’s sense might often be silent in individual publications, collaborative research offers ways to make it explicit (see Wray 2002, 152). This is certainly not intended to debase individual work entirely, but to explore ways of combining solitary work with collaborative work, and to make the thought collective more explicit in the social-linguistic utterances that, in combination with academic practice, create the development of knowledge.

4 Crossing Boundaries

As Peter L. Galison suggests in this volume, “collaborating across boundaries requires a certain kind of attentive listening.” Such active engagement with the work, motivations, values, and goals of others may question established structures, hierarchies, and epistemic regimes; yet it also forms the foundation for collaboration across disciplinary, regional, national, institutional, and linguistic boundaries. Such boundary-crossing includes collaboration across status groups in academia. Integrating students and early-career researchers at a doctoral and postdoctoral level using this notion of collaboration creates opportunities to train future generations of researchers in the study of culture to enter the profession equipped with competences beyond their specific fields of expertise and beyond their individual thesis work. Lawrence Grossberg, in his preface to his *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, highlights the value of such collective work when he thanks his students “who have helped shape cultural studies at the University of North Carolina, in my seminars [...] and in the various working groups of the University Program in Cultural Studies,” as well as his graduate students, “past and present [...] for their collaborative and collective labors” (Grossberg

2010, xi). Grossberg goes on to thank his translator, his audiences, those who extended speaker invitations to him as well as his junior faculty colleagues, i.e., multiple participants in the (academic) thought collective and the construction of knowledge behind Grossberg's own single-authored publications. While it is encouraging to see esteemed scholars like Grossberg acknowledge the value of collaborative research across boundaries and status groups in their prefaces, such research needs to be acknowledged and fostered every step of the way. To use Peter Galison's words from this volume again: "There are substantive things one can do to promote the visibility and recognition of rising PhDs, postdocs, and assistant professors: They can be promoted to give academic and public talks, they can take on recognized roles in working groups, they can report at collaboration meetings, they can be leads on white papers. We ought to be thinking now about ways to do such things in the growing number of interdisciplinary collaborations in the human sciences."

5 Forms and Formats

Successful collaborative research requires appropriate forms and formats of collaboration. It requires administrative imagination, visionary institutional formations, and innovative structures. Research centers such as the Center for 21st Century Studies (C21) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee is a case in point (see Richard Grusin's contribution to this volume). In light of developments in higher education over the past decades, including financial as well as technological transformations and its increasing professionalization and institutionalization, R. Eugene Rice and others have observed that their fellow faculty members increasingly turn their thoughts inward (see Rice 1996). Collaborative research, by contrast, requires a reflection on academic genres, on both well-tested and alternative formats for research events, on enabling spaces inside and outside of buildings, and on the accessibility of research results, open access publications, and open science more generally. Scholars in the study of culture will need to become adept at using multiple modalities to present their work beyond the conventional genres and media as they expand their work into the realms of film, exhibitions, newspaper articles, community work, etc. Mary Frank Fox and Catherine A. Faver (1984) point to the advantages of such collaborative work and highlight its potential to foster efficiency, sustained motivation, and interpersonal commitment. At the same time, they also draw our attention to its costs and risks such as logistical efforts, travel costs, energy-consuming social conflicts, evaluation of publications, and ethical standards.

6 The Status of Collaborative Work

The risks and potential of collaborative research are inextricably linked to its academic status. To achieve sustained success for collaborative research in the study of culture, we ought to reevaluate our hiring practices and reconsider our idea of academic careers. Our perception of academic institutions would benefit from continued exchange amongst scholars about our conceptions of the study of culture as a research field; its relation to analyses of cultural systems, representations, historical dimensions, prognosis, and citizenship; its positionalities; and its relationship with artists and activists. One of the central questions for scholars in the study of culture will be how to situate their scholarship and thus the enterprise of the study of culture more broadly vis-à-vis the issues debated in a changing world. Topics such as climate change (see Ursula Heise's contribution to this volume), big data and surveillance (see Richard Grusin's contribution to this volume), artificial intelligence, public health and, most recently, global pandemics are major concerns in public as well as academic discourse. In light of the developments in the field of artificial intelligence and as far as the participants in our collaborative research are concerned, a new idea of "the machine" might even be needed (McCarty 2012, 7). A value-neutral version of the study of culture is unachievable, not only for epistemological reasons, but also in light of the increasing commercialization of higher education that forces the humanities to emphasize values other than those of the market, as Martha Nussbaum (2012) argues (see also Tom Clucas in this volume). Scholars in the study of culture will thus have to debate, for example, how to address political issues without resorting to the programmatic positions of British cultural studies, or how the "Heart of Cultural Studies" (Grossberg 2010) relates to the heart of the study of culture. If these discussions include a vision of collaborative research with participants from outside of academia, the study of culture might be able to realign the priorities of the professorate with democratic imperatives, thereby creating more public space in higher education (see Mathews 1998; Checkoway 2001).

In several influential articles, Clifford Geertz points to the important political role scholarly work on culture plays, particularly because of its emphasis on the constructedness of knowledge. At its core, Geertz's essay "Blurred Genres" makes a statement on the epistemological independence of the humanities. By reviewing their proper area of inquiry as well as their substantial theoretical tools, Geertz emphasizes the prominent status of the humanities in the academic construction of knowledge. Geertz's renunciation of "facticity" does not negate the possibility of substantial arguments. Rather, he invites us to ask different questions and to address emerging topics and concerns in academic and social discourse while reflecting on the methodological questions with which we are presented. Against attempts to mimic physics in order to reach higher predictability and therefore

seem more legitimately scientific, Geertz's approach favors, for example, the interpretation of dynamic variation over the quest for generalizing laws or definitions (Geertz 2000 [1980]). The latter runs the risk of violating the fundamental flexibility, nuance, and variability in the interrelations between the individual and the environment. In Geertz's view, the social sciences, having just freed themselves from "dreams of social physics" (Geertz 2000 [1980], 23), can self-confidently claim a voice in the process of academic knowledge-construction, not least because they are well equipped and much needed in times of a general "muddling of vocational identities" (Geertz 2000 [1980], 23). Geertz stresses the historical, sociological, comparative, interpretive, and "catch-as-catch-can enterprise" of rendering matters understandable as well as the importance of context. Recognizing the *grande peur* of relativism, Geertz emphasizes diversity not so much in an act of exaltation, but rather to argue that we need to take diversity seriously as an object of analysis. In regarding pluralism as an entity in and of itself, the particularities would risk being subsumed in the generalizations, which translates to a threatening of social cohesion (values, beliefs) and an endangering of the ability to understand each other. The interplay between flexibility and stability or, as Mikhail Bakhtin describes it, the tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces, needs to be balanced. Thus, pluralism should be taken seriously, and intellectual and social work will need to be vigilant about the balance between these tensions as we follow Arjun Appadurai's call to "collaboratively envisage and build a robust anthropology of the future" (Appadurai 2013, 4).

7 The Status of the Study of Culture

As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, imagining possible futures makes critical reference to the present and, at the same time, makes us more attuned to characteristics of the present (see Katharina Martin and Christian Sieg 2016). This also applies to thinking about the future of the study of culture as an academic field in the context of disciplinary formations and degree-awarding institutions. It is clear that people and ideas are always on the move, and we might agree that there are no strict borders between previously separate disciplines and subdisciplines: that, for example, string theory shares techniques with what used to be called condensed matter physics (Peter Galison in this volume). At the same time, it has been argued that the interdisciplinary research perspectives constituting the research field 'study of culture' should be transformed into an academic discipline of its own (see Böhme 2016). What is at stake in these discussions about disciplinarity (see Assmann 2016, ch. 2 and 5), interdisciplinarity (see

Bachmann-Medick 2016; Nünning 2016), and transdisciplinary collaboration, is the very fabric of the study of culture, including questions of assessment, hiring practices, tenure review processes, translatability of research questions, degrees, standards, review and assessment cultures, publication cultures (see Endersby 2016), and notions of best practice across national contexts: in short, the central institutional dimensions of the construction of academic knowledge and power.

Including work in the study of culture ranging from institutionalized forms of disciplinary formations to the work of (and with) independent scholars, artists, activists, and citizens, collaborative research in the study of culture offers us opportunities to rethink academic careers, reconceptualize our notions of excellence, reconceptualize our notions of research, and rethink our visions for scholarship. We should aim to design administrative and departmental structures that recognize diverse forms of scholarship (Bringle, Games, and Malloy 1999) and diverse roles in departmental contexts in higher education; that integrate the different phases in academic careers; and that recognize scholars who feel a responsibility towards communities, civic life, and democratic discourse more generally. This might also lead to a rethinking of our curricular designs in the context of the study of culture: We should aim to create an interdisciplinary horizon for the research field ‘study of culture’ by addressing the very issues of translating scholarship across disciplinary, national, and linguistic boundaries, and by engaging in an exchange on them together. As Fox and Faver postulate, “[i]n the future, collaborations should be used systematically, rather than haphazardly, not only to fulfill the needs of individual researchers, but also to advance science and scholarship as a whole” (Fox and Faver 1984, 356).

As Arjun Appadurai reminds us in *The Future as Cultural Fact*, it is “vital to build a picture of the historical present that can help us to find the right balance between utopia and despair” (2013, 3). Grouped in four clusters, the contributions in our volume attempt to build this picture as they first point to the horizons for our future reflections; second, discuss the political dimensions of possible futures of the study of culture; third, rethink inter/disciplinary perspectives, heuristics, and epistemologies; and, fourth, invite us to consider future connectivities, and emerging topics and concerns.

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