

Distinguished Visiting Professor 2017: Prof. Gabriel Trop, PhD

Forschungsprojekt: **Attraction and Indifference – Naturphilosophie and German Romanticism**

The project attempts to uncover persistent patterns of aesthetic signification, above all in the eighteenth century, whose formal logic can be found articulated in Schelling's Naturphilosophie. Schelling construes the phenomenal world as emergent from an attractive-repulsive system that invests differences with pulls ranging from the barely perceptible to the immensely overwhelming. At the same time, if attraction regulates systems of differences, Schelling draws equal attention to a counter-operation of indifferenciation, which makes differences non-operative within any given system.

Many works of art in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries - such as works by Novalis, Schlegel, and ETA Hoffmann - can be re-examined as manifestations of these two fundamental operations: on the one hand, investing a singularity with an attractive or differential force, and on the other hand, divesting singularities of this precise differentiating capacity. At stake is a world in which the human subject both moves in a state of maximal "attraction" - pushed and pulled by forces in the world and staking out the integrity of the self amidst these forces - as well as across zones of "indifferenciation," where the self suddenly becomes commensurable with its supposedly oppositional others. Indifference, here understood as a functional commensurability between multiple elements rather than a subjective technique of detachment and self-control, may be deployed anywhere a system of differences can be perturbed, called into question, or imaginatively and affectively reconfigured: self / other, man / woman, East / West, Republicanism / Monarchism, to name just a few examples that were explicitly invoked by the romantics. Ultimately, these authors use attraction and indifferenciation in aesthetic production and reception to unsettle the conceptual categories, behavioral patterns, and normative anchoring points that typically assure the smooth and predictable organization of experience.

Although attraction and indifferenciation form two central operations of romantic poetry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these aesthetic operations have a prehistory that moves throughout Western discourses on art since antiquity. A central part of this project consists in a historical reconstruction of what will manifest itself as an aesthetics of Naturphilosophie in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the Platonic dialogue Ion, for example, Socrates compares the power of the work of art to the attractive force of a magnet. According to Socrates, the artist, operating under the influence of the muse, becomes a conduit for a force operating beyond his or her control. Moreover, the work of art produced by the artist casts an attractive power over everyone that comes into contact with it and binds individuals in a community into a fused totality. An aesthetic attraction culminates in a process of indifferenciation. This same pattern moves through Neo-Platonic discourses and can be found in the mystical tradition of the Middle Ages: in the case of Meister Eckhart, the mystic follows an overwhelming attraction in the realm of differentiation only to culminate in a perfect identity with God through the absolute suspension of differentiation. By following the interaction of these two operations in snapshot form from antiquity to the romantic period, this project aims to examine how the romantics fundamentally repurpose this persistent pattern of aesthetic signification, drawing upon these operations to imaginatively loosen or unbind the subject from its normative ground rather than embedding this subject in a transcendent metaphysical structure.