Realism(s)

Lecture 10: Objectivity and Constructivism

1) Ideas of Objectivity

2) Constructivist Perspectives

Course Requirements Revisited:

Please note that there will be **no written exam** for this lecture course, **which yields 3 ECTS** as a rule (so it is not eligible for the Wahlpflichtbereich GymPO 4 ECTS slot, which needs a seminar to be filled).

If you need credits outside of the modules offered by the English Department (which combine lecture courses with seminars in oral examinations), you will have to **hand in a portfolio by July 26 at the latest**. For the portfolio you will have to pick a work (text, image, film, sculpture, whatever) and outline **in essayistic form** how and why it can profitably be read as a realist piece **against the backdrop of the lecture course.** The portfolio should not be longer than 3 pages (A 4, 1.5-spaced, 12 pt).

Please don't forget to put your name, Matrikelnummer, the title of the course and the degree programme/module for which you want your results to be registered! **Please indicate clearly whether you need your portfolio graded or ungraded!!**

1) Ideas of Objectivity

Trad. (Greek/Latin, William of Ockham, Duns Scotus):

'object' = existing 'in mente', i.e. as an idea
'subject' = focus of a sentence

Cf. English usage to this day:
"'Objectivity' is the subject of my lecture. To inform you about the varieties of realism is the object of my lecture."

Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopedia, or, An Universal Dictionary of the Arts and Sciences* (1728):

"Hence a thing is said to exist OBJECTIVELY [...] when it exists no otherwise than in being known; or in being an Object of the Mind."

Oxford English Dictionary:

"*Obs.* Existing as an object of thought or consciousness as opposed to having a real existence."
vs.
"established usage derived from Kant:
That is or belongs to what is presented to consciousness, as opposed to the consciousness itself; that is the object of perception or thought, as distinct from the subject; (hence) (more widely) external to or independent of the mind."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817):

"Now the sum of all that is merely OBJECTIVE, we will henceforth call NATURE, confining the term to its passive and material sense, as comprising all phenomena by which its existence is made known to us. On the other hand the sum of all that is SUBJECTIVE, we may comprehend in the name of the SELF and INTELLIGENCE. Both Conceptions are in necessary antithesis."

The Reality of Modern Culture:

> a) reality as experienced (subjective reality)
> b) reality as a given (objective reality)

➤ objectivity has to be constructed and naturalised (vs. 'truth'):
➤ "The problem is that where we have no pre-given truth with which to reconcile out inquiry, truth can no longer play the role of cognitive guide. [...] If truth guided argument by showing where arguments should end, so to speak, objectivity took the opposite route, constraining how arguments should begin and continue." (Gaukroger)
➤ 'facts' > 'data'
➤ "the modern fact" becomes the "epistemological unit that organizes most of the knowledge projects of the past four centuries", successfully passing itself off as 'pre-interpretive or even somehow noninterpretive" in the process
>   (Poovey 1998, xii-xiii)
➤ processes of canonization and popularization relying on cultural conventions and dominants (such as the privileging of 'seeing') and available media (esp. imaging techniques)

Lorraine Daston & Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (2007):

"All epistemology begins in fear [...] But the fear objectivity addresses is different from and deeper than the others. The threat it addresses is not external – a complex world, a mysterious God, a devious demon [...] Objectivity fears subjectivity, the core self [...] [T]here is no getting rid of, no counterbalancing post-Kantian subjectivity. Subjectivity is the precondition of knowledge: the self who knows."

>   (372/374)

- the making of scientific images from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century as published in scientific atlases, the compendia that teach the practitioners of a disciplin wha is worth looking at and how to look at it
- these images are symptomatic of the codified ways of seeing of particular scientific communities as well as, in their popularized forms, modern culture at large
- basic types:
  > 18th century: the ideal of 'truth to nature'
  > 19th century: the ideal of 'mechanical objectivity'
  > 20th century: the ideal of 'trained judgement'

TRUTH TO NATURE:
Leaf Types Embodied
(despite the apparent naturalism, the leaves depicted are the Linnean types)
(watercolours by Franz Bauer, c. 1790)

TRUTH TO NATURE:
Symmetrical Vision
(Arthur Worthington, 1877, systematic visual classification of mercury drops hitting a clean glass plate based on 'glimpses' of the process observed with the help of millisecond flashlights)
While publishing variations, Worthington left out those which violated the ideal symmetry which he 'saw' 'behind' any particular defective splash.

MECHANICAL OBJECTIVITY:
Nature Prints Itself
(Autoprint of leaf, Alois Auer, 1853:
 non-photographic method of mechanical self-registration through pressing the object between copper and lead plates. The imprint in the soft lead could then be printed off like a copper plate.)

MECHANICAL OBJECTIVITY:
Objective Splash
(photographic representation of a milk drop splashing against a smoked glass plate, Arthur Worthington, 1894)
By now Worthington has restrained himself and is no longer struggling to see the ideal or 'type' reality 'behind' the manifest image – he called his asymmetrical images-as-they-were-recorded 'objective views'.

TRAINED JUDGEMENT:
Sun Rotation 1417, Aug.-Sept. 1959 (detail) (*Atlas of Solar Magnetic Fields, August 1959-June 1966* [1967]: This image of the magnetic field of the sun mixed the output of sophisticated equipment with a subjective 'smoothing' of data.

Consequences:

- from 'Being' to 'Doing' (cf. Maturana/Poerksen 2004)
- from ontology to constructivism (cf. Luhmann on 'The Modernity of Science' 1990/1994)
- from 'identity' to 'difference'
- from 'matters of fact' to 'matters of concern' (Latour 2004)

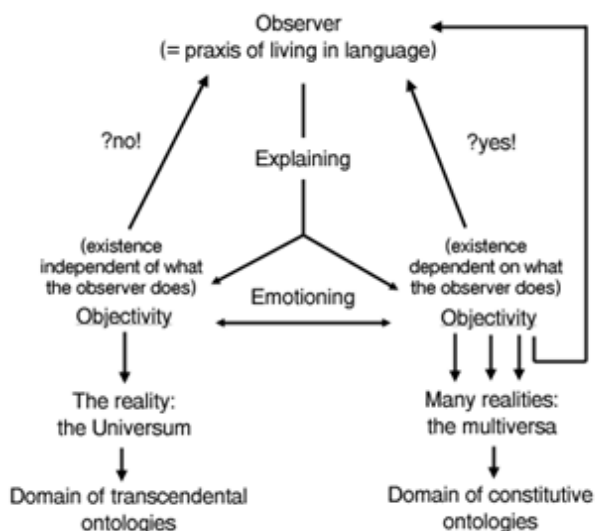(cf. Reinfandt 2011c)

2) Constructivist Perspectives

Humberto Maturana: Objectivity vs. (Objectivity)

1) The Path of Transcendental Objectivity (without parenthesis):

[T]he observer [...] accepts his or her cognitive abilities, as such, as his or her constitutive properties, and he or she does so by not accepting, or by rejecting, a complete inquiry into their biological origin. In doing this, the observer [...] assumes that existence takes place independently of what he or she does, that things exist independently of whether he of she knows them, and that he or she can know them [...] through perception or reason. In this explanatory path, the observer uses a reference to some entity such as matter, energy, mind, consciousness, ideas or God as his or her ultimate argument to validate, and, hence, to accept a reformulation of the praxis of living as an explanation of it. (1988, 28f.)

2) The Path of (Objectivity)

In the explanatory path of objectivity – in – parenthesis the observer system explicitly accepts: a) that he or she is, as a human being, a living system; b) that his or her cognitive abilities as an observer are biological phenomena because they are altered when his or her biology is altered; and c) that if he or she wants to explain his or her cognitive abilities as an observer, he or she must do so showing how they arise as biological phenomena in his or her realisation as a living system. [...] [B]y adopting this explanatory path, the observer has to accept [living systems'] inability to distinguish in experience what we distinguish in daily life as perception and illusion. (1988, 29)

(Maturana 1988, 32)

Niklas Luhmann, "Cognition as Construction" (1988/2006; cf. Reinfand 2011a):

The tradition of epistemological idealism was about the question [...]: how can cognition take notice of an object outside of itself? Or: How can it realize that something exists independently of it while anything which it realizes already presupposes cognition and cannot be realized by cognition independently of cognition (this would be a self-contradiction)? No matter if one preferred solutions of transcendental theory or dialectics, the problem was: how is cognition possible *in spite of* having no independent access to reality outside of it. Radical constructivism, however, begins with the empirical assertion: cognition is only possible *because* it has no access to the reality external to it. (242)

I [...] would like to [...] proceed from a concept of observation that is defined on the basis of the concepts of distinction and indication. [...] [C]ognition is manufactured by operations of observing and by the recording of observations (description).
This includes the observation of observations and the description of descriptions. In any case an observation of the distinction takes place and, depending on the distinction, the indication of something. The concept is indifferent in regard to the system's type of autopoiesis, i.e., indifferent to the form of operation that may be life, consciousness or communication. It is also indifferent with respect to the type of recording (memory); it may be biochemical fixations, but it may also be written texts. [...] (245f.)

Thus there is nothing in the environment that corresponds to cognition, since everything that corresponds to cognition is dependant on distinctions within which cognition indicates something as this and not that. Therefore, there are neither things nor events in the environment [...] There is not even environment in the environment because this concept only indicates something in distinction from a system and thus demands that one identify the system for which the environment is an environment. (We *said* above, *therefore*, that systems exist.) The distinction between system and environment is itself an operation that guides cognition. (246)

Mark Strand, "Keeping Things Whole" (1964)

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body's been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
to keep things whole.

(cf. Reinfandt 2011b)

> ➢ **'mediated truths' (Reinfandt 2018)**
> ➢ **realism <> interpretation**

A New Understanding of Interpretation (Connor 2014):

Now interpretation is part of a general practice of putting-into-practice […] This new, expanded form of interpretation does not say what things say, but shows how they work, which is to say, how they might be worked out. […] The purpose of playing the game is not to show what the game means […], but to explore what it makes possible. (184)
Interpretation has been drawn into a general performativity, in which informing interacts with performing […] Interpretation is no longer to be thought of as the solving of a riddle, or the cracking of a code […], but rather the playing out of a game, the running of a programme, the perfecting of a routine, the exploiting of a potential. (185)
The pursuit of interpretation now asks, not what does an object mean, but what are the implications of what it might mean – what does what it means *mean?* (186)

_____

Bibliography Lecture 10:

Connor, Steven, "Spelling Things Out." *New Literary History* 45.2 (2014): 183-197.

Daston, Lorraine, Peter Galison, *Objectivity.* New York: Zone Books, 2007.

Fara, Patricia, "Objectivity." In: *Science: A Four Thousand Year History.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009: 215-222.

Gaukroger, Stephen, "Flowers without Worms" [Rev. of Daston/Galison 2007]. *TLS* Oct 10 (2008): 23.

Latour, Bruno, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225-248.

Luhmann, Niklas, "Cognition as Construction" [1988]. Trans. Hans-Georg Moeller. In: Hans-Georg Moeller, *Luhmann Explained: From Souls to Systems.* Chicago/La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2006: 241-260.

Luhmann, Niklas, "The Modernity of Science" [1990]. Trans. Kerstin Behnke. In: *New German Critique* 61 (1994): 9-23.

Maturana, Humberto R., "Reality: The Search for Objectivity or the Quest for a Compelling Argument." In: *The Irish Journal of Psychology* 9.1 (1988): 25-82. (http://enolagaia.com/M88Reality.html)

Maturana, Humberto R. & Bernhard Poerksen, *From Being to Doing: The Origins of the Biology of Cognition.* Heidelberg: Carl Auer, 2004.

Poerksen, Bernhard, *The Creation of Reality: A Constructivist Epistemology of Journalism and Journalism Education.* Exeter/Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2011.

Poovey, Mary, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society.* Chicago/London: U of Chicago P, 1998.

Reinfandt, Christoph, "Das Wissen der Systeme. Über Niklas Luhmanns *Erkenntnis als Konstruktion.*" In: Bernhard Poerksen, Hrsg., *Schlüsselwerke des Konstruktivismus.* Wiesbaden*:* VS Verlag, 2011a: 287-299.

Reinfandt, Christoph, "Raum und Zeit – Mark Strand." In: Niels Werber, Hrsg., *Systemtheoretische Literaturwissenschaft: Begriffe – Methoden – Anwendungen.* Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2011b: 321-332.

Reinfandt, Christoph, "Objektivität, Kontingenz und Theorie in historischer Perspektive." In: Mario Grizelj & Oliver Jahraus, Hrsg., *Theorietheorie: Wider die Theoriemüdigkeit in den Geisteswissenschaften.* München: Fink, 2011c: 95-110.

Reinfandt, Christoph, "Literaturgeschichte und Konstruktivismus: Die Wahrheiten der Postmoderne." In: Anya Heise-von der Lippe, Russell West-Pavlov, Hrsg., *Literaturwissenschaften in der Krise: Zur Rolle und Relevanz literarischer Praktiken in globalen Krisenzeiten.* Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto, 2018: 59-73.