

SIMILARITY

A PARADIGM FOR CULTURE THEORY

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Edited by

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Places of Similarity

Literary negotiations in bourgeois realism¹

Dorothee Kimmich

Introduction

Thinking in categories of ‘similarity’ is by no means an absolutely new idea, and it is clearly not a concept without pre-existing connotations. Still, this tradition has yet to be fully accounted for in current discussions surrounding concepts of culture, interculturality or transculturality. ‘Similarity’ is thus not introduced here as a new paradigm, but rather as an innovative concept for further research. To begin with I draw on a few arguments from Bruno Latour, and then expand my reflections based on authors from classical modernism including Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel and Aby Warburg. Finally, I incorporate literary examples from works that I consider to be foundational texts of bourgeois modernism: novellas by Gottfried Keller and Adalbert Stifter.

Bruno Latour’s scientific and historically based revision of modernity makes it clear that scientific paradigms alone are not sufficient to explain modern thinking, even if most self-descriptions of modernity suggest that this is the case. ‘We have never been modern’ is a title that has become something like a slogan.² Latour’s thesis – that modernity never really established itself, and that the differentiation between modern and pre-modern cultures was nothing but a delusion of modernity – is based on his analysis of the main heuristic ‘divisions’ described by modern science. The distinctions between nature and society, subject and object, human and machine lead to a number of false conclusions, a direct consequence of which is the misdiagnosis of an end to history and the end of metaphysics.

In contrast, Latour has described modernization as a significantly more complex process of the differentiation of discourses. Surprisingly enough, this differentiation works not only according to a model of difference, but also using a model of similarity. This is especially true for the relationship between people and objects.³ With his concept of ‘hybrid’ things, Latour provides a significant philosophical impulse for a new approach towards the question of living things in modernity. For

him, modernity is not exclusively the consequence and result of scientific evolution; quite the contrary, scientific epistemology is but *one* aspect of modernity. Beyond that, he considers other epistemological constellations to be conceivable (including epistemologies of similarity) that have long been latent but never completely obsolete. To a certain extent, this connects Latour's reflections with Michel Foucault's characterization of similarity as a pre-modern epistemology. Still, Latour's observations and theses go beyond Foucault's.⁴

It is clear that Latour has sought to present a revised 'order of things' and to 'rehabilitate' similarity with the help of contemporary observations. Modern cultural theories (and cultural anthropology in particular) have developed approaches that avoid describing the relationship between modernity, imagination and magic, nature and culture, people and things as dichotomies. Instead, such approaches seek to suitably describe the complexities of the relationships between these phenomena.

The Magic of Modernity

Latour was not the first theoretician to think along these lines. If we concentrate on early modern thinkers up to 1930, we find similar theories regarding the anthropological study of magic practices. For one important example, we can look at the prominent function that magic, animism and the so-called 'omnipotence of thoughts' had in Sigmund Freud's theory of culture. In *Totem and Taboo*,⁵ for instance, Freud reminds his readers that the practical desire to control the world is understood by some as 'magic', and by others as the foundation of culture or of mechanization. 'I should prefer', he noted critically, 'to regard them [sorcery and magic] as technique.'⁶ In making such comparisons, Freud referred to existing ethnological research, and in particular cited the work of James G. Frazer who described the empowerment of the world and nature as the performance of 'similar gestures', as 'imitative' or even 'homeopathic' magic.⁷ This meant that magic functioned according to the principle of *Similia similibus curant*.⁸ As a result, he reduced magic to laws of the association of ideas, and specifically to the fundamental rules of combination: similarity – and thus analogy, and contact – and thus contiguity.

Aby Warburg followed a very similar approach to the cultural comparison and reconciliation of modern concepts in his book on the Serpent Ritual, which can also be described as a form of 'homeopathic magic': 'This synchrony [*Nebeneinander*] of fantastic magic and sober purposiveness appears as the symptom of a cleavage; for the Indian is not schizoid but, rather, a liberating experience of the boundless communicability between man and environment.'⁹

Warburg's comments that the ritual represents a form of 'danced causality'¹⁰ emphasize the similarity between modern technical and pre-modern magical practices in the same way as Freud, who did not fundamentally differentiate between magic and technology in the field of cultural analysis. Freud also connected magic with the principles of association; for him there was a magic of imitation, as well as a magic of contact, participation or contiguity. The manner in which magic was transmitted did not take place according to a principle of causality but rather by association. According to Freud it was striking that 'the two principles of association – similarity and contiguity – are both included in the more comprehensive concept of "contact". Association by contiguity is contact in the literal sense; association by similarity is contact in the metaphorical sense.'¹¹

Reading this passage today provides us with a specific, methodologically distinct connotation of Freudian teachings about association than that which emerged from his contemporary surroundings. Within the field of linguistics, association through (a) similarity or (b) participation is represented by the function of metaphor. The fact that Freud did not have a theory of metaphor at his disposal may also be the reason why his considerations regarding the connection between association, similarity, contiguity and art, found in *Totem and Taboo*, are somewhat too simple and not very convincing. What is lacking is a complex theory of metaphors, or even a 'Theory of Non-Conceptuality' ('*Unbegrifflichkeit*'), as proposed by Hans Blumenberg.¹² Blumenberg's theory is not about the illustrative emphasis of provisionally vague forms of speech, but rather about the genuine and untranslatable epistemological function of metaphoric speech. Here, more research is needed: the theory of non-conceptuality seems to be an answer to a proposition made by early cultural theory, which pointed to a specific continuity between the first and a newer form of modernity. The concept of 'similarity' plays a central role in such discussions on many levels.

Freud, Frazer and Warburg – like Franz Kafka, Alfred Polgar, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Francis Ponge, Latour and Blumenberg – were obviously not naïve devotees of magical practices, nor did they believe in ghosts or promote homeopathic medicine. But they did emphasize the insecurity and fragility of modern explanations of the world. Causality, natural laws, technology and the use of tools seemed to offer only a superficial security, and caution (or better, prudence) called for such developments to be supported by other practices – including thinking in categories of similarity. This would also allow one to assert – as Latour did – that modernity and non-modernity were not categorically distinct from one another, but rather were more or less different and more or less similar.

All of these authors were thus interested in identifying relevant traces of pre-modernism in modernity. In other words, they were interested in the Latourian question of how modern we actually are. To put it yet another way, these authors were concerned with the radical question of whether we even *should be* as modern as we claim to be, and whether the line between 'modern' and 'non-modern' might not be more fluid than we assume. Similarity plays an important role in such considerations in two ways: there is more similarity between 'modern' and 'non-modern' than previously assumed, and this similarity is found in exactly the sense of what we can call 'thinking in similarities'. This is why the works of these authors always included a critical examination of their own cultures alongside their descriptions of foreign cultural conditions. The implicit questioning behind such examinations applied to the practical, scientific and even the ethical potential of the modern interpretation of the world.

Let us briefly summarize: the authors named above all reflect on similarity and its connections to fundamental questions regarding the modern interpretation of the world. Within such reflections, similarity is initially considered to be a criterion of pre-modern thinking and magical practices. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that their actual interest was much more focused on the remnants of such thinking and such practices within the modernist and the modern *episteme*. We can conclude that these authors had the impression that modernity – and above all an interpretation of the world based on causality – did not cover all phenomena, among them the centrally important relationship between man and his things. In the works named above, we find indications that thinking in similarities is associated with a certain kind of knowledge that we can describe today with Blumenberg's theory of non-conceptuality and the metaphorical. This is a knowledge that seems to be simultaneously precise and diffuse, foreign and familiar, traditional and contemporary, and immediate but non-conceptual.

This characterization demonstrates that thinking about similarities has a certain function or is suitable for specific communicative situations. My estimation is that it is a concept or way of thinking that is intended to be used in situations in which understanding (or better, 'hermeneutic' understanding) breaks down; that it enables communication in situations where communication cannot usually take place. To put it another way: I think that considerations of similarity are not about describing how others – the foreign, the non-modern, the 'primitives' – think, but rather how one would have to think and act in order to communicate with the other – with the neurotic, the insane, or even with things, the 'wild' and with children. The specific potential of thinking in similarities can be seen

in areas that deal with the foreign – the historically, cultural, biographically, sexual or normatively foreign.

In the No Man's Land of Similarities

This leads us to the question of how the communicative practice of similarities can structure and influence our handling of the foreign. To answer this question, I fall back on and link together two works by Georg Simmel. The insights gleaned from this synthesis will allow me to show how similarity is modelled in literature while simultaneously functioning as aesthetic self-commentary using examples by Gottfried Keller and Adalbert Stifter.

Both Simmel's 'On the Spatial Projections of Social Forms' (1903)¹³ and his 'Excursus on the Stranger' (1908)¹⁴ deal with space and the foreign. According to him, the foreign is that which 'comes today and stays tomorrow',¹⁵ that is, that which becomes a part of the community. The tension-filled unity of proximity and remoteness generated by such processes determines the relationship between the foreign and the non-foreign. This relationship is a 'form of interaction'.¹⁶ In Simmel's case, the foreigners were mostly traders, and they were often Jews. Foreigners are not typical 'land owners' and do not have a fixed location in space. Particularly important for Simmel was the objectivity that foreigners could develop regarding their relationships with non-foreigners: 'Objectivity can also be called freedom: The objective person is bound by no commitments that could prejudice the grasp, the understanding, and the evaluation of data.'¹⁷ In this sense foreignness – which parallels Siegfried Kracauer's concept of 'extraterritoriality' – is assigned an existential status that includes both moral and scientifically ethical aspects. To a certain extent, it transforms the foreign from a pariah to a 'hero'.

In the final section of his essay, 'On the Spatial Projections of Social Forms', Simmel develops the idea that this status of foreignness is not merely reserved for migrants, but rather shapes a space in which *everyone* is foreign, thereby shifting the economy of proximity and remoteness. Initially, Simmel's considerations deal concretely with no man's lands, geographic buffer zones that are created in order to protect a country's territory. In addition to creating protection through separation, such areas also represent zones of neutrality and objectivity in which meetings take place that couldn't happen anywhere else:

An unforeseeable number of examples show us areas where commerce, meetings, and material contacts of the kind possible between opposed parties, so that the conflict does not come to words, without having to

give up the conflict, so that one in fact goes out from the border that otherwise separates us from the opponent, but without crossing over into it, but rather remains beyond this separation.¹⁸

Significant here is the formulation that one can temporarily remain beyond the division between 'self' (in the sense of inherent or innate) and 'foreign' (in the sense of alien or other), and that doing so allows for the suspension of certain conflicts, disputes and hostilities. This creates the conditions for a temporary 'contact' that does not require understanding. Such contact can obviously take place when trading with outsiders, but Simmel also sees other spaces – both in the concrete sense of specific buildings as well as in a figurative sense – where contact can occur: in social spheres, in churches, in art and in science. Universities, for instance, are thus not only places for research, but also Simmelian 'no man's lands': places for the social negotiation of differences and similarities between groups and individuals who might be hostile to one another in everyday, extramural life.

Still, it would be premature to call this space 'beyond division', this societal no man's land, a 'heterotopia'. Simmel defined his concept much more narrowly and precisely than did Foucault. This space is also not one in which the Habermassian idea of domination-free discourse can finally be realized. Simmel's concept is much more modest: it is not about principles, but rather about the partial and temporary suspension of principles. It is specifically *not* about understanding one another, but about communicating with one another. It is thus, in my opinion, more of an anti-hermeneutic concept than a hermeneutic one: the foreign remains the foreign. It is not about the interpretation, recognition or comprehension and understanding of the other; but much more about the alignment of interests, the preservation of distance, about civility, negotiation, and the partial, pragmatic completion of specific goals. As Simmel put it, it is about the practical exploitation of the neutrality of the space.¹⁹ As a result, it would be self-defeating to work with criteria of 'self' and 'foreign'; instead, those in spaces 'beyond division' must learn to think in similarities instead of in identities and differences.

In the following section I use literary examples to further illustrate and flesh out questions regarding the function of no man's lands. In doing so, I by no means seek to deny the fact that Simmel seemed to be sceptical and somewhat defensive of his own observations. For this reason it may be helpful to extend Simmel's approach with the help of Gabriel Tarde's theory of imitation. Tarde's theory is not just a model of conflict avoidance, but rather a concept that can be used to describe social and cultural progress according to terms described by a 'theory of the practice of simi-

larities'. In the second chapter ('Social Resemblances and Imitation') of his *The Laws of Imitation* (1885), Tarde develops a sociology based on the measurability and descriptiveness of imitation, variation and difference.²⁰ Imitation and variation lead to the gradual breakdown of differences, or, more specifically, to cultural and social similarities. At the same time, many of Tarde's observations on cultural evolution deal with spatial concepts of proximity and distance, and thus parallel Simmel's spatial theory in this respect as well.

Bourgeois No Man's Lands

Two canonical works of realism will serve as literary examples: Gottfried Keller's *Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe* (*Romeo and Juliet of the Village*, 1856)²¹ and Adalbert Stifter's *Katzensilber* (*Muscovite*, 1853).²² Both novellas deal with commonplace catastrophes. Keller's story is about the downfall of two families who are both wealthy and friendly with one another initially, but are destroyed by bitter hostility, insanity, alcoholism, financial ruin and, in the end, the deaths of their children. Stifter's work is somewhat more pleasant, and describes both a hailstorm and a conflagration in which nobody is hurt because a magical and maidenly saviour takes timely action and saves the potential victims.

A central theme of both texts is contact with the foreign or, more specifically, foreigners. Keller's story deals with the so-called 'black fiddler', a homeless musician who is unable to assert his rights to a piece of land because the town citizens refuse to acknowledge his citizenship. For Stifter the foreign is represented by the family-less and also clearly homeless 'brown girl' who is the saviour of the story, but who also represents a challenge for peace in the family.²³

If we didn't know better, we might think that Gottfried Keller wrote the beginning of his novella expressly in order to illustrate Gabriel Tarde's theories of imitation and similarity. The farmers Manz and Marti both plough their lands next to one another at the same time and in the same rhythm, they take their breaks together, and their children Vrenchen and Sali bring their meals together on the same cart. Social life seems to have a natural order. The only tiny variation that enters into this analogy comes at the moment when Manz uses his plough to work the piece of land between the two farmers, a no man's land that stands between their fields. To a certain extent, this is merely a genuine depiction of cultivating fallow land, and, in principle, this is the sort of variation that breaks up uniformity to make way for progress. In this case, however, the act of cultivation also represents a crime of theft: as both farmers know, the land actually belongs to the black fiddler. The fiddler is a typical example

of Georg Simmel's stranger who comes today and stays tomorrow: he is homeless and without rights, and is described as a gypsy or a Jew.²⁴ He lives in a world that is not completely foreign, and is ultimately not that far away (namely, just outside the village) – a world analogous to that of the farmers and citizens (families live there but with unmarried partners, they have celebrations but with different music, etc.).

It seems that as long as the world of Manz and Marti contains this empty, desolate space, this no man's land (in which the children also play extremely Freudian doctor games and organize animistic rituals), the sensible balance between the foreign and the native is maintained despite all the injustice, the mutual contempt and social tensions between them. But the moment that 'culture', the plough, the furrow and the 'line' begin to appropriate the space, and all of the knowledge and conduct within it,²⁵ both families begin a decline into madness, obsession and delusion because they immediately start fighting over the piece of land.

It is clear that this plot is about the appropriation of space, about cultivation in the original sense of the word, about colonialization and the occupation of land. It addresses the question of how one should deal with foreigners that stay but do not settle down. The answer is that they require both a real and a symbolic space, and that this space should remain foreign and empty. It is precisely this no man's land that upholds the idea of potential communication, and it is the greed and brutality of the Swiss farmers (who consider their version of the world to be the only true one) that ultimately destroys both these 'margins' and themselves.

Like in almost all of his works, Stifter's story is also about the cultivation of space, the reclamation of space by nature and the question of how cultivated nature itself is.²⁶ On the first page of *Katzensilber*²⁷ we read a long-winded and detailed description of an estate in the mountains, of the construction of different greenhouses, the grafting of fruit trees, of terrace complexes and windscreens, etc. This is contrasted by the description of the wild mountain landscape surrounding the estate. Not only is it dangerous, it is above all the setting for the terrifying legends and tales that the grandmother tells her three grandchildren on their walks through the mountains. We are thus presented with two different versions of nature: that of the children's father and that of their grandmother.

One day, while walking in the mountains, they meet a 'nut brown' girl wearing boys' clothing who can't talk and who keeps her distance. The next forty pages describe the gradual process by which the child grows closer to the family: step by step, as it were, word by word and piece by piece of clothing, until at the end she lives with the family as an adopted child. Various members of the family react in similar but distinct ways –

from the awestruck passivity of the grandmother to the rationally driven actions of the father. After initial failure, the mother successfully develops a practical way to deal with the girl by dressing her like the oldest daughter and treating her like just another of her children. In doing so, the mother imitates the way the children act, but uses it for the purposes of education.

This process of assimilation is interrupted by two events. First, the girl saves the children and their grandmother from a hailstorm by constructing a shelter from tree branches, and then she saves their younger brother from a burning house. In both cases, the grandmother is at fault: in the first, she does not turn back towards the estate early enough; in the second, she locks the door of the children's room because she is afraid of thieves. This shows how the grandmother's magical world-view is not to be relied upon. But the father's attempt to build a shelter in the forest after the storm also ends in disappointment: it quickly starts to bore the children. Similarly, there is a new danger: a fire that breaks out right in the middle of the estate just at the moment he is away. When faced with the contingency of natural phenomena, the rational measures taken by the cultivator of nature seem just as naïve as the grandmother's prayers. This is also made clear by the father's failed attempts to locate the nut brown girl's family or parents. Thus, when it comes to nature, both fully irrational and fully rational approaches represent extremes, and neither leads to success. And both make the mistake of not – at least to a certain extent – accepting nature as foreign. On the one hand, nature is demonized; on the other, it is minimized by technical cultivation. The story also illustrates a positive model of dealing with nature, namely, the playful assimilation of the children. The lengthy process of coming together, the practice of gradual and mutual familiarization, and the silent communication using gestures and especially food, require a reciprocal respect that never goes beyond the boundaries of the possible: the children do not consider allowing the girl into the house, or allowing her to spend the night, for instance, until the very end of the story. The story continually alludes to this feeling of distance and of abstinence, not only when it comes to questions of the girl's background and her family, but also particularly regarding the risk of getting too attached. The children become very devoted to the nut brown girl – perhaps because they foresee that she will not stay forever.

The conclusion of the story comes as a surprise. At the precise moment when the children become adults – or better, when the girls become young, sexually mature women – something happens: 'a call' rings out from the forest (an event that had been described earlier in one of the grandmother's stories),²⁸ the nut brown girl begins to cry (as had the woman in the grandmother's tale), and then she disappears. 'The stubborn landslide

is dead, the high cliff is dead',²⁹ the girl cries and walks away, never to be seen again. She too is one of Simmel's foreigners who comes and stays – and might leave again. The 'wound' left by her departure becomes 'ever hotter' as the years pass.³⁰

It is clear that this story describes contact with the foreign on multiple levels, and that the relationship between nature and culture represents but one sub-group of the dichotomy between 'self' and 'foreign'. It is important to note that the various types of differentiation are not presented as strict extremes, but are rather described as transitions, shades of grey, intermediate stages. Just as the story presents many other intermediate forms of dealing with nature between the extremes of the grandmother and the father, so too is the nut brown girl described in different passages as more foreign or more familiar, as more a boy or more a girl, as more wild or more belonging. The mother learns by imitating the children, the children learn by imitating the girl, and the girl even learns to read and write by imitating the other children. Imitation, similarity and variation thus represent a model of (relatively) stable development.

What remains taboo are elements such as past and future, beginning and end: the girl's original family remains unknown, and when she becomes old enough to marry, she is forced to disappear. She is barred from settling down, and she leaves longing in her wake. Contact with the foreign is described as a trip through no man's land, as the cautious crossing of thresholds and as the construction of transitional zones. As soon as these zones become fixed – for instance, through marriage – the verdict of division takes hold. Thus, in contrast to most interpretations, I would say that the estate as a whole, with all of its inhabitants and its surrounding areas, by all means represents a successful experiment as a no man's land – at least until the threat of marriage and irrevocable settledness emerges.

What remains is the following conclusion: reflections on similarity are embedded in the discourse of modernity, present in the writings of Latour, Warburg, Freud, Simmel and Frazer, and also found in bourgeois realist works. Considerations of similarity represent a central argument of modernist self-reflection, and are thus an important counterpoint to the dialectical model of the enlightenment.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this essay was published as 'Gefährliche Nachbarschaften: Bürgerliche Grenzwüsten bei Stifter und Keller'; see Kimmich (2012) .

² Latour (1993).

³ Cf. Kimmich (2011).

⁴ Cf. Foucault (1994): 46.

⁵ Freud ([1913] 2001).

- ⁶ Ibid.: 91.
⁷ Ibid.: 81.
⁸ Cf. Harmening (2005): 285.
⁹ Warburg (1992): 10. The translation is taken from Steinberg (1997): 99.
¹⁰ Ibid.: 54. Cf. Schüttpelz (2005).
¹¹ Freud ([1913] 1944): 99 ; emphasis in the German original.
¹² Blumenberg (2007).
¹³ Simmel (1995). The translations quoted in my essay are taken from a revised version integrated into ‘Excursus on the Stranger’, in Simmel (2009).
¹⁴ Simmel (2009).
¹⁵ Ibid.: 601.
¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Ibid.: 602.
¹⁸ Ibid.: 620; my emphasis – cf. the concept of contiguity.
¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*: 218.
²⁰ Tarde (1903): especially 46. Cf. Latour and Lépinay (2009): especially 17.
²¹ Keller (1919). See also Fetscher (2010); Hahn *et al.*, eds (2007); Harnisch (1994); Holmes (1991); Honold (2004); Swales (1994); Titzmann (2002).
²² Stifter (1982). See also Begemann (1995; 2007); Berger (1996); Blasberg (1998); Brüning (2005); Doppler (2007); Federmair (2005); Geulen (1992); Grätz (2006); Hillebrand (1971); Irmscher (1971); Hunfeld (2008); Lachinger, ed. (2004); Lachinger (2005); Laufhütte (2006); Öhlschläger (2009).
²³ Stifter (1982): 258.
²⁴ Cf. Uerlings (2007a; 2007b).
²⁵ Cf. Keller (1919): 212f.
²⁶ Cf. Plumpe (1984); Preisendanz (1966); Helena Ragg-Kirkby (1999; 2000); Schiffermüller (2001); Sebald (1994).
²⁷ Cf. Uhde (2004); Halse (2008); Kugler (2007); Pintar (2005); Vogel (2008).
²⁸ Cf. Stifter (1982): 248.
²⁹ Ibid.: 313.
³⁰ Ibid.: 315.

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