



TransCultural Practices

Perspectives and Possibilities

Essays in Honour of
Anil Bhatti (1944–2023)

Edited by
Madhu Sahni, Babu Thaliath,
Shambhavi Prakash







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Tulika Books





Published by

Tulika Books

86/1 (ground floor), Shahpur Jat, New Delhi 110 049, India

www.tfortulika.com

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First edition (hardback) 2025

ISBN: 978-81-979383-6-8

Printed at Chaman Offset, Delhi 110 002





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New Perspectives on Similarity and Culture Theory

DOROTHEE KIMMICH

– You are like me, whether or not you admit it. (Glück 2021: 419)

Similarity and Modernity: A Critical Proximity

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the discussion of similarity relations marked a critical objection to the idea that modernity constitutes a radical break with pre-modern thinking. Reflections on similarity are understood as a commentary on all forms of – ideological – alterization and on colonial ‘othering’.¹ Many of the ideas that had been developed and discussed at the beginning of the twentieth century have had an interesting ‘comeback’ in the last decades. Today, we can identify a broad and diverse field of similarity discourses that shape a strong tradition and provide us with helpful approaches.

Similarity also belongs to a complex of concepts that have broken away from the concept of instrumental rationality, which had become increasingly problematic. It is simultaneously located by authors like Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin in magic, in mimetic behaviour, in the subconscious and in our daily habits, and can thus be found as an ethnological subject, an aesthetic idea, a psychological matrix and a sociological concept. It thereby pervades, or rather links, different fields of knowledge and discourse. We can find important reflections on an ontology of similarity in the early twentieth century in a specific intellectual milieu that is equally influenced by phenomenology, ethnology, philosophy, psychology and literature.

The ethnological perspective explores the magical moment of the relationship to the world in terms of similarity and participation with non-human beings. Psychology and psychoanalysis take up these ideas and develop them further in the field of association theory and its therapeutic function. Aesthetics devises a mode of mimetic experience in the sense of a virtual recognition of similarity, and sociology formulates





questions regarding social integration using the concept of similarity. Thinking in similarity in these modern texts is often associated with a recourse to pre-modern forms of knowledge and practice. However, this recourse is not discussed in terms of exoticizing depictions of the foreign, but rather as a foil regarding the critique of a rationality set forth without any preconditions or prerequisites (Därmann 2005).

The discussion regarding aesthetic mimesis in the early twentieth century is of particular interest. The lengthy aesthetic debate regarding the value, the lack of value, the appropriate understanding and the correct practice of mimesis is pervasive throughout all epochs of European reflection on art; it thereby comes into conflict with some theories of autonomous, subjective, radically individual and ingenious creativity, which have determined aesthetics since the Enlightenment (Gebauer and Wulf 1996; Schiller 2021). Thus, mimesis in the sense of imitation of external reality is considered to be obsolete in modernity. Therefore, the rehabilitation of mimesis and similarity in modernity must take place under new premises, and the concept must also be adapted to new conditions; in other words, it must respond to new needs.

In a comparable way, the first modern sociologists, especially Gabriel Tarde and Helmuth Plessner, as well as Georg Simmel, dealt intensively with functions of imitation and similarity. The same is true for modern research in psychology and theories of perception. In Gestalt theory, the law of similarity – alongside those of proximity, continuity, coherence, etc. – plays an important role (Koffka 1935). Ernst Mach, upon whom many Gestalt theorists such as Wilhelm Köhler, Ernst Koffka, Kurt Lewin and Max Wertheimer based their work, deals with the role of similarity, as does his student Fritz Mauthner, who addresses the function of similarity within linguistic theory. ‘We mistakenly call the perception of similarity re-cognition. For all our supposed recognizing is simply comparative classifying ...’, says Mauthner and continues: ‘our language terms [are] based on similarity, the mathematical formulae on sameness’ (Mauthner 1982, I: 434, 436; own translation). This imprecision inherent in language is not a shortcoming compared to mathematics. Instead, it is a necessary condition for language and speaking:

But I would like to maintain that this mere similarity, i.e., the scientific or mathematical incomparability of things, is what made our speaking or thinking possible in the first place, that it is therefore only the gaps in our ideas, the errors of our sensory tools, that have formed our language. (Ibid.: 437)





According to Mauthner, if we had a precise, microscopic perception, we would no longer be able to put anything into general terms, and thus, we would not be able to communicate.

As early as 1905, Mauthner's teacher, Ernst Mach, had already included another aspect into his considerations: 'Similarity perceived by the senses already determines an unconscious and unpremeditated similarity in behaviour and motor reactions towards similar objects' (Mach 1967: 162). For Mach and many others, similarity and mimicry belong together. 'Interferences from similarity and analogy are not strictly matters of logic, at least not of formal logic, but only of psychology (ibid.: 166). For him, mimetic behaviour and similarity perception form the basis for the learning of motor skills, perhaps even for the learning of social behaviour. This thesis reaches far into the future; the connection between Ernst Mach's idea and the Gestalt theorists in general, and the discovery of the function of mirror neurons in the 1990s, has been emphasized repeatedly in the meantime (Eagle and Wakefield 2007; Gallese, Keysers and Rizzolatti 2008; Gallese 2014).

Since the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s, simulation theories have been tested in various fields: empathy, self-perception, perception of others, learning, spatial orientation and aesthetics (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2008).

As perception, empathy and imitation interact so closely, it is not surprising that neuroscience has also examined fictions as simulations, thereby assuming a 'new relevance of the poetics in modern psychology', and declaring that 'fiction as simulation illuminates the problem of human action and emotions' (Oatley 1999: 105). This leads Vittorio Gallese to conclude: 'Such a new perspective, in turn, greatly contributed to revitalizing the notion of empathy and the philosophical tradition that originally identified empathy as a key element of human social intelligence, long forgotten in the debate on human cognition' (Gallese 2014: 7).

The American author Siri Hustvedt, who works closely with neuroscientists, states in an admirable, concise formulation that one could use as a pointed summary of Vittorio Gallese's and Walter Benjamin's literary theories, 'Writing fiction is remembering what never happened.'²

Going back to Walter Benjamin, perhaps the most important similarity theorist of modernity, we find extremely influential thoughts on perception and mimetic capacity. In Benjamin's anthropological theory of language of the early 1930s, similarity perception, imitation and mimesis are to be understood as a systematically interrelated complex. For him,





similarity perception is an archaic ability that originated in the depths of our human history and the depths of our individual subconscious: 'The perceived world (Merkwelt) of modern human beings seems to contain infinitely fewer of those magical correspondences of that the world of the ancient people or even of primitive peoples' (Benjamin 1979: 66). Today, we have only a small rest of these forms of intuition:

The gift which we still have today of seeing similarity is nothing but a weak rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become similar and also to behave mimetically. And the forgotten faculty of becoming similar extended far beyond the narrow confines of the perceived world in which we are still capable of seeing similarities. (Menninghaus 1997; my translation)

Similarities can be found in places where they are not consciously perceived – in other words, where they are not obvious: 'The similarities which one perceives consciously, for instance in faces, are, when compared to the countless similarities perceived unconsciously or not at all, like the enormous underwater mass of an iceberg in comparison to the small tip which one sees projecting above the waves' (Benjamin 1979: 65).

Benjamin's specific fascination with the idea of similarity, which seems to cross and connect not only the realms of cult and magic, psychology and anthropology but also those of historical theory and aesthetics, is an essential part of his literary theory. For him, in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the concept of similarity plays a key role: 'To follow the counterpoint of aging and remembering means to penetrate the heart of Proust's world, to the universe of intertwining. "It is the world in a state of similarity, and in it the correspondences rule ..."' (Benjamin 2005: 244; Patrut and Rössler 2019). Benjamin conceives similarity to be a fundamental aspect of a non-linear modern philosophy of time based on myriads of hidden and obvious correspondences.³

One generation later, Michel Foucault's theses on similarity in *The Order of Things* may be read as an interesting commentary on Benjamin's ideas. Foucault agrees with Benjamin that similarity stems from a pre-modern episteme. But the question of which role similarity still plays in modern thought is put differently in Foucault's works: 'Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture' (Foucault 2005: 19). Later epistemes exclude all forms of similarity thinking.





In a conversation with Raymond Bellour, Foucault concisely characterized what are perhaps his two most influential books. *History of Madness* is primarily the ‘history of division, the history above all of a certain break ...’ (ibid.). In contrast, in *The Order of Things*, he wanted to illustrate ‘how a society reflects upon resemblances among things ...’ (ibid.). In a 1966 interview, he stated: ‘Madness and Civilization is the history of difference, *The Order of Things*, the history of resemblance, sameness, identity’ (Lotringer 1996: 13).

Foucault discusses four types of similarity in more detail: *convenientia*, *aemulatio*, analogy and sympathy (Foucault 2005: 29). Their commonality is an inconclusiveness regarding processes, the symbolic nature of the act of comparison, which always refers to the signatures on the surface of things:

It is the same with the affinity of the walnut and the human head: what cures ‘wounds of the pericranium’ is the thick green rind covering the bones – the shell – of the fruit; but internal head ailments may be prevented by use of the nut itself ‘which is exactly like the brain in appearance’. The sign of affinity, and what renders it visible, is quite simply analogy; the cipher of sympathy resides in the proportion. (Ibid.: 31)

Foucault calls the science of symbol interpretation *hermeneutics* or *semiotics*. As long as one orders the relationship between things and their symbols according to the principle of similarity, *semiotics* and *hermeneutics* fall together. Consequently, the mathematization of knowledge can only be conceived when the concept of similarity is radically abandoned. ‘Resemblance never remains stable within itself; it can be fixed only if it refers back to another similitude, which then, in turn, refers to others ...’ (ibid.: 34). Therefore, according to Foucault, knowledge based on the episteme of similarity cannot not gain firm foundations, for it is a ‘thing of sand’ (ibid.).

In *The Order of Things*, the abandonment of an episteme of similarity is depicted by Don Quixote, who, resembling a letter himself, attempts to investigate the readability of the world according to the rules set forth by chivalric novels, but ultimately fails: ‘Similitude is no longer the form of knowledge but rather the occasion of error, the danger to which one exposes oneself when one does not examine the obscure region of Confusions’ (ibid.: 56).

Similarity becomes an idol and is considered to be an illusion of





a magical, theatrical age or simply pure nonsense.⁴ Foucault sees only marginal 'residues' for similarity within modern thought or modern practices. What is left over is merely a niche within the realm of art and madness. The madman 'groups all signs together and leads them with a resemblance that never ceases to proliferate' (ibid.: 55). Moreover, poetry has also secured a space for similarity within allegories in which things can resemble each other once again: 'They share, then, on the outer edge of our culture and at the point nearest to its essential divisions, that "frontier" situation – a marginal position and a profoundly archaic silhouette – where their words unceasingly renew the power of their strangeness and the strength of their contestation' (ibid.). These are the last realms of similarity left within an episteme that, from now on, only deals with identity and difference. Foucault has said goodbye to similarity in modernity with the same arguments that Walter Benjamin uses to explain its still virulent significance. For Benjamin, the hidden power of similarity detection explains why we need art. For Foucault, the same idea stands for the close relation between art and madness.

Bruno Latour, in particular, has once again contradicted this. His historically rooted review of modernity makes it clear that scientific and mathematical paradigms alone are not constitutive of modern thinking, even if most self-descriptions of modernity seem to suggest this. As he states, '[w]e have never been modern' (Latour 1993). His idea that the difference between modern and pre-modern cultures is a self-deception is based on his analysis of the great heuristic divisions made by modern science. The division into nature and culture, subject and object, human and machine leads to a number of erroneous conclusions which, as a direct consequence, lead to a mis-diagnosis of the end of history and the end of metaphysics.

On the one hand, Latour's considerations build on Michel Foucault's characterization of similarity as a pre-modern episteme, but on the other hand, he goes beyond Foucault in his more differentiated observations of modern developments. He obviously tries to present a revised 'Order of Things' and tries to develop it further, thereby rehabilitating similarity. Here, Latour is able to refer to his predecessors, the most important of whom is Gabriel Tarde, whose theory of imitation has only recently received renewed recognition in connection with Latour's actor-network theory. In the late nineteenth century, sociologist Gabriel Tarde developed a concept of cultural evolution based on similarity relations in his *The Laws of Imitation* (1903). For Tarde, sociologically





relevant similarities are based on phenomena of imitation and variation, which, when taken together, build groups of similar things. Today, these would be called collectives, assemblages or ‘agencements’,⁵ which differ from societies in that they include things, spaces, animals, etc. When these belong to a set of things that make up a greater whole, their reproduction is called growth or evolution. Tarde thus becomes one of the most important historical-theoretical authorities on the ‘actor–network theory’ (Latour and Lépina 2009).

Latour positions himself within this tradition, or one could say he ‘discovers’ Tarde as his predecessor and foremost authority figure: ‘But I have decided to share with readers the good news that ANT actually has a forefather, namely Gabriel Tarde, and that, far from being a marginalized orphan in social theory, our pet theory benefits from a respectable pedigree’ (Latour 2002: 117).

In his reconstruction of Tarde’s importance, Latour refers in particular to one of Tarde’s lesser-known works – *Monadologie et sociologie* – written in 1893. Here, Tarde puts forth the central thesis of a possible abolition of the radical difference between nature and society, a concept that Latour picks up in his works by pointing out ‘that the nature/society divide is irrelevant for understanding the world of human interactions’ (ibid.: 118). For Latour, the heart of the matter is always the relationship of man to his/her things: ‘If essence is the way to define an entity within the “to be” philosophy, for the “to have” philosophy an entity is defined by its properties and also by its avidity’ (ibid.: 129). This also defines the relationship of thing and man:

This rejection of the philosophy of identity has one final consequence, which is of course crucial for us ANT sociologists: the status of non-humans, for which we have so often been criticized. The crossing of the boundary between humans and non-humans has raised many problems for our readers, and is often taken as the foundation stone on which our social theory should stand or fall. (Ibid.: 130)

Indeed, this may still sound a bit strange, but in fact it is meant to be provocative:

Abstain from the ridiculous solution of saying that things exist in themselves but that you cannot know them. Either you talk or you remain silent. But you cannot possibly speak and say that the things you speak about are not in some ways similar to you: they express





through you a sort of difference that has you, the speaker, as one of their proprietors. (Ibid.)

The question which Latour raises is the core question of how it is possible to recognize something foreign as foreign (Waldenfels 1997: 85). Tarde and Latour answer that there is no possibility and there never was. Indeed, we do not even need it. The foreign is not ‘strange’ in an absolute sense, but always more or less similar. We do not confront different ways of being, but gradually different states of being. In this regard, and only in this regard, can we recognize ourselves and others as – gradually – different or other.

Shifting Aspects: Similarity, Psychology and Philosophy

Over the course of the last decades, we can find new interest in similarity theories in various disciplines, with different interests and different aims. The context problem, the inherent judgment component and the connection with ethical issues have all been taken up again in different discourses and disciplines. According to Lieven Decock and Igor Douven, ‘[t]he main stumbling blocks for the old geometrical model ... were the fact that it is unable to account for asymmetries in people’s similarity judgements as well as for the context-sensitivity of such judgements’ (Decock and Douven 2020: 66).

Within the field of psychology and increasingly also the cognitive sciences, models and methods are chosen in the discussion of similarity which – like Lotfi Zadeh’s fuzzy logic or Eleonore Rosch’s prototype theory – can be traced back to Wittgenstein’s ideas of family resemblance (Rehkämper 2005). Rosch uses empirical methods to examine the function of Wittgenstein’s model of family resemblance and states as early as 1975:

There is a tenacious tradition of thought in philosophy and psychology which assumes that items can bear a categorical relationship to each other only by means of the possession of common criterial attributes. ... [T]he categorical relationship in categories which do not appear to possess criterial attributes ... can be understood in terms of the principle of family resemblance. (Rosch and Mervis 1975: 605)

Category building on the basis of the family resemblance model must dispense with sharp delimitations.⁶ The mathematician and computer scientist Lotfi Zadeh concludes by noting, ‘the role model for fuzzy logic is the human mind’ (Zadeh 1994: 83; Belohlavek and Klir 2011), and explains:





The exploitation of the tolerance for imprecision and uncertainty underlies the remarkable human ability to understand distorted speech, decipher sloppy handwriting, comprehend nuances of natural language, summarize text, recognize, and classify images, drive vehicles in dense traffic and, more generally, make rational decisions in an environment of uncertainty and imprecision. (Zadeh 1994: 77; Tversky 1977; Heister 2021)

In a similar way, the psychologist James A. Hampton has analysed the definition problem of similarity in a variety of renowned publications since the 1980s, drawing on the findings of Eleanor Rosch, Lotfi A. Zadeh (2005: 1–40) and the linguist Georg Lakoff from the 1970s (1990). He is convinced that ‘... similarity may yet be the best explanation of how most of our conceptual categories function’ (Hampton 2001: 13). Thus, one can easily learn to recognize prototypes and relevant representative centres of a concept without having to worry about borderline cases and extraordinary circumstances. ‘The boundaries remain fluid for good reason’, Hampton argues.⁷ For him, similarity is a concept whose lines are blurred. Or, to put it another way, it is a figure of scalar proximity and ‘continuity’.⁸ Most important are granular structures and scalar relation: ‘Uncertainty is linked to information through the concept of granular structure – a concept which plays a key role in human interaction with the real world’ (Zadeh 2005: 2).

In addition to these attempts, a mathematical model was developed based on spatial concepts: the so-called Voronoi tessellations. This is a concept of covering a plane or a multi-dimensional space without any gaps, whereby the individual fields, that is, the respective fields, are delimited from each other in such a way that the points contained in a field always have a shorter distance to the point organizing the field than to all other tile centres:

Prototype theory builds on the observation that among the instances of a property, some are more representative than others. The most representative one is the prototype of the property. A Voronoi tessellation of a given space divides that space into a number of cells such that each cell has a centre and consists of all and only those points that lie no closer to the center of any other cell than to its own centre; the centres of the various cells are called the generator points of the tessellation. Given that, by way of mathematical fact, Voronoi tessellations divide spaces into convex regions, a Voronoi tessellation of a





conceptual space that takes points representing prototypes as generator points carves up that space into natural properties. (Decock and Douven 2020: 71; Enflo 2020)

This idea of a conceptual space, a metric or specific distancing definition, ultimately governs the success of a model. This is relevant, for example, not only to applications in the area of handwriting or letter recognition or facial recognition, but also in the area of so-called case-based reasoning (CBR), a method of automizing selected thinking, i.e. learning structures in order to implement them in AI research (Aamodt and Plaza 1994). To a certain extent, it is about the performance that the algorithm provides when it is sensibly formulated. And it is then that the most similar phenomena actually cluster near the prototype, and those with the least similarity are found at the farther edges of the cells.

We can find similar arguments in literary studies that use digital tools and methods to define genres or to detect and describe large-scale changes in forms and genres.

In other words, predictive models are rather like human beings: they can always find some ways two sets of works are similar and other ways they differ. If we want to know whether detective fiction and science fiction can be lumped together, no single model will answer the question. Instead, we need to pose a four-sided question that allows us to ask whether the differences defining one genre are parallel to the differences that define another. (Underwood 2019: 46; Moretti 2000)

Following these approaches, cognitive science studies in particular have reformulated the issue regarding patterns of thinking:

No single attribute, or bundle of characteristics determines the grouping of different elements into one class, instead the determining factor is a single candidate who best represents a specific class: a 'robin' is more prototypical for bird than 'chicken'. ... The use of these concepts is not without logic; however it is not as completely rationalized as it should be according to the rules of logic. (Gamm 1994: 311f; my translation)

The capacity of human thought processes is increasingly shaped after psychological or cultural studies discourses: '[I]n a remarkably short time ... categorization has moved from the background to the centre stage because of empirical studies in a wider range of disciplines', states George Lakoff (1910: 7), and points to a series of hitherto common





assumptions which this paradigm shift can now help to overcome.⁹

Since the works of Rosch, Zadeh, Lakoff and Hampton, there has been an increase rather than a decrease of positive assessments regarding the potential of similarity concepts in psychology and linguistics, more specifically, the cognitive sciences (Chater, Hahn and Richardson 2003; Hahn and Ramscar 2001; Hampton 2007; Hampton 1998). Meanwhile, a kind of consensus has developed regarding the conceptual determination – if not definition – of similarity. Ulrike Hahn expresses quite concisely what most similarity scholars would agree with today:

... similarity is determined by the transformation distance between representations: entities which are perceived to be similar have representations which are readily transformed into one another, whereas transforming between dissimilar entities requires many transformations. (Chater, Hahn and Richardson 2003: 1)

According to this definition, similarity maintains a strong affinity to spatial conceptions of proximity and distance. In recent debates about the use of digital tools and theories in literary studies, the definition of genres raises questions about similarity and distance:

... genres occupy a space of similarity with more than three dimensions, so things that are very close along one axis can still be far apart in other ways. Although we can identify a mixture of detective, science fiction, and Gothic with 78% accuracy, the differences between these genres are even stronger than their collective difference from a randomly selected background. A model trained to distinguish detective fiction from the Gothic is right more than 93% of the time. (Underwood 2019: 146; Brandes, Marshall and Schneider 2022)

The relation between similarity and proximity has been stated time and again in different approaches and with different goals. It could be understood as a purely metaphorical connection, but its significance would then be underestimated. One example can illustrate the importance of the reflection on proximities and similarities and the philosophical and ethical outcomes of such an approach.

The German philosopher Robert Spaemann¹⁰ proposed to think about proximity and similarity not as quantities but as qualities, and states that this leads to an ontology rather than to an epistemology of nearness: 'Everything that exists reminds one of something else: things of other things, actions of other actions, colours of other colours, shapes





of other shapes, thoughts of other thoughts' (Spaemann 2011: 50; my translation).

In 1996, Spaemann published a concise analysis in which he argues that memory requires similarity. Without similarity, there would be no memory, no associations, not even identity: 'Strangely enough philosophy has predominantly avoided this most elemental of all "phenomena"', he remarks (*ibid.*: 52; my translation). He criticizes the fact that philosophy has primarily grappled with the poles of identity and difference, with 'binary idiocy', as Peter Sloterdijk puts it sharply (Sloterdijk 2016: 31, cited in Kron and Winter 2005: 392). Spaemann also deems the critique of Quine and Goodman to be unpersuasive. Instead, he surmises that it is precisely the contextual problem highlighted by Quine and Goodman that holds the key to a solution. He states that 'it is the perspectives that create similarity': 'The identical perspective opens up a qualitative space, a continuum in which a specific kind of proximity and distance is made possible. However, as long as the continuum remains simply a continuum there is a lack of differentiation which is the prerequisite of similarity' (Spaemann 2011: 54; my translation)

This depicts a 'potentially infinite space of possible similarities' (*ibid.*: 55), and it is exactly this potential infinity that seems to cripple the concept. Spaemann offers an anthropological approach: 'defining an entity as that which exists' means to 'define [something] in relation to its similarity with ourselves' (*ibid.*). From this, he concludes that it is crucial that similarity is recognized as a prerequisite for being: 'It is clear that everything that exists opens such a space of qualitative proximity and distance' (*ibid.*).

In claiming a basically horizontal interconnection of all points of view, Spaemann goes so far as to state that the prerequisite for every ontology is a critical anthropomorphism, since we can only speak of being in analogy to the form of being that we know. Comparisons and similarity constructions can only be established in relation to the point of view which we occupy: 'A philosophy of similarity would have to lead to an ontology whose cornerstone concepts are those of the near and the far, of proximity and distance' (*ibid.*: 57).

Spaemann makes it quite clear here that similarity connotes a certain form of spatial thinking. A philosophy of similarity must come to grips with basic spatial relations, i.e. with concepts of relative distance and critical proximity. There is the spatial proximity of things, temporal proximity of events, numerical proximity of quantities, as well as





the qualitative proximity of, for example, colours, tastes or smells. Of course, there is also the emotional proximity of humans and animals. The consequences of an ontology of nearness can be significant. Nearness excludes a certain hierarchical distance and draws a field of planar interconnectedness. This ideal will lead us to some actual debates and link the early modern discourse of similarity thinking to questions of nearness and environment, the proximity and similarity between human beings and their fellow beings in the world. In recent debates about the relation between humans and non-humans, the impacts of similarity and proximity as a method of thinking and acting become obvious.

Similarity in Space: New Ontologies

One could probably not find a theorist who is politically more distanced from the conservative Catholic Robert Spaemann than Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, but in her book, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, she offers some important insights to the theoretical and political role of proximity and similarity. She points out that the proposition of 'besides' is underestimated: 'Invoking a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial positionality of beside ... seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which beneath and beyond turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos.'¹¹ Beside is not 'from above' and connotes an embedded situation, a certain point of view:

Beside is an interesting preposition also because there's nothing very dualistic about it; a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them. Beside permits a spacious agnosticism about several of the linear logics that enforce dualistic thinking: noncontradiction or the law of the excluded middle, cause versus effect, subject versus object. Its interest does not, however, depend on a fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations, as any child knows who's shared a bed with siblings. Beside comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivalling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations. (Ibid.)

Spatial thinking helps us to imagine and recognize environmental situatedness: 'Spatializing disciplines such as geography and anthropology do, though, have the advantage of permitting ecological or systems approaches to such issues as identity and performance' (ibid.). Bruno





Latour – together with Peter Weibel – follows the same path and states: ‘The challenge is not how we indicate a distance from the situations that require judgement, but how we with critical attention strive to “gain a new proximity with the situations we have to live in”’ (Latour and Weibel 2020: 9; Smithson 1996).

With his concept of hybrid things, Latour provided the decisive impetus for a new approach to the question of the relationship of modern man with the things that surround him, as well as his relationship to nature. Latour’s thinking starts from the collective, not from separated singularities.¹² Entanglement, for him, is not a result of some kind of interaction, but the prerequisite of existence, so is proximity for living and similarity for recognition.

The concept of collectives does not approach being in terms of two separate domains, but rather as a single plane in which, to use Karen Barad’s apt term, objects are entangled with one another. In this regard, society and nature do not form two separate and entirely distinct domains that must never cross. Rather, collectives involving humans are always entangled with all sorts of nonhumans without which such collectives could not exist ... they are also populated by all sorts of signifying entities such as animals, crops, weather events, geographies, rivers, microbes, technologies, and so on. (Bryant 2011: 25; Schiffrers 2023; Lloyd/Vilaça 2023)

Instead of a world in which entities inter-act, Karen Barad invites us to speak about ‘intra-action’:

The physics of diffraction not only forces us to reconsider what an entity ‘in its essence’ is, but brings the entire distribution of subject and object, knower and known, words and things, words and world under reconsideration. The relation between knower and known can no longer be described as one of distant gaze. To engage in a process of knowing is to be part of the equation, to be entangled in intra-action as Barad points out in her reading of twentieth century physicist Niels Bohr. Epistemology and ontology can no longer be kept apart. (Sehgal 2014: 189)

The Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers would not only refer to Niels Bohr but to his contemporary Alfred North Whitehead and his extremely influential criticism of subject–object thinking: ‘The field is now open for the introduction of some new doctrine of organism which





may take the place of the materialism with which, since the seventeenth century, science has saddled philosophy. ... Such a displacement of scientific materialism, if it ever takes place, cannot fail to have important consequences in every field of thought' (Whitehead 1967: 125; Stengers 2011: 129).

Stengers comments on the notion of 'organism' and insists on the argument that organism is not an object of thinking nor of nature itself:

It is important to emphasize once again that Whitehead does not envisage any 'theory' enabling the definition of both the (quantic) vibratory organism and of the living organism. His proposition has no ambition to provide a unifying point of view, as was successively proposed by the notions of energy, system, or information. The organism does not designate a possible object of knowledge, it does not constitute an answer around which the sciences would converge, but it is rather, as we shall see, what should oblige us to think about the divergence of their questions as a reflection of the 'living values' that constitute the order of nature. ... In the vocabulary of *The Concept of Nature*, the organism is what will prevent nature from bifurcating and will articulate what modern thought opposes: the free subject, assigning itself goals that affirm the supremacy of final causes, and the indifferent objective world, which affirms the supremacy of physical causes. (Ibid.: 130)

Modern physics, biology and philosophy have permanently disrupted the order of nature and mankind: 'Thanks to Darwin and modern physics, however, the tidiness of the natural world was disrupted. Plants, animals, and humankind had not been fixed in a hierarchy of relations since the beginning of time, but had evolved. Objects were not fixed or solid; they were "events," full of whirling atoms' (Moore 1986: 899; James 1977: 113).

Conclusion: Why We Are Similar to Lions, Rats and Diamonds

But it is not only Charles Darwin, Niels Bohr, Alfred N. Whitehead and William James who deserve credit for 'disruptive' disorder. The texts of William Carlos Williams, Franz Kafka, Francis Ponge and many others such as Gertrude Stein, Robert Walser and Charlie Chaplin's films also make the world seem less tidy. It is always about disrupting the hierarchies of things and people, dead matter and living organisms, and creating new connections, distances and proximity,





similarities and differences. To conclude, I would like to give a literary example from a modern French poet, Francis Ponge, 'Je tiens à dire quant à moi', is how Ponge introduces himself,

que je suis bien autre chose, et par exemple qu'en dehors de toutes les qualités que je possède en commun avec le rat, le lion, et le filet, je prétends à celles du diamant ... sans préjuger de toutes les qualités dont je compte bien que la contemplation et la nomination d'objets extrêmement différents me feront prendre conscience et jouissance effective par la suite.¹³

Ponge sketches a world in which people and things share characteristics, or to put it another way, he describes similar characteristics that connect things and animals and people.

What may sound a little strange at first glance has far-reaching consequences: '[J]e me fais tirer, par les objets, hors du vieil humanisme, hors de l'homme actuel et en avant de lui' (ibid.: 536). This humanism is 'old', we can conclude from the notes and brouillons of the years 1929 to 1944, because it sees itself trapped in an obstructive ontological perspective that attempts to separate matter and spirit, body and soul, objects and living beings and therefore does not seem to be up to date with modern physics. He explicitly acknowledges humanistic values, such as '[f]raternité' (ibid.: 211) – which, however, must apply to all beings. He is therefore not an anti-humanist in the ethical sense of an absurd, senseless world. On the contrary, he emphasizes that his works are not purely aesthetic gimmicks but are written in the spirit of a 'responsabilité civile' (ibid.: 210); and that is precisely why he has taken 'le parti pris des choses' (ibid.: 211): Taking the side of things stems from a responsible position which, however, involves not only the happiness of humans, but also that of things and animals. It is an ecological trans-humanism avant la lettre.

Le Parti pris des choses is the title of a collection of prose texts that Ponge published in 1942, although some of them were written earlier. Translated, it means 'to take sides with things', 'to take their side'; 'in the name of things' has also been suggested. Ponge describes pebbles, oysters, pins, candles and an apricot. It is always about touch, contours, sensing and dissolving surfaces and boundaries. The coexistence with things is expressed through the sensual proximity to them and a specific feeling of similarity – via transformation. Where something begins and ends is, remains and becomes unclear. Dissolution of contours, perforation of surfaces, resistance and adaptation, demarcation and transitions, hard





and soft, elastic and plastic are described, felt and palpated, whereby every touch entails a change.

The last major section of *Parti pris des choses* is dedicated to the pebble, 'Le Galet' (ibid.: 49–56): 'Si maintenant je veux avec plus d'attention examiner l'un des types particuliers de la pierre, la perfection de sa forme, le fait que je peux le saisir et le retourner dans ma main, me font choisir le galet.'¹⁴ In the end, it is about stone and water, the soft and the hard. Nothing could better evoke the idea of a hard 'dead' thing than a stone: it is 'aveugle, solide et sec' (ibid.: 56), blind, hard and dry. Slowly, slowly, however, the pebble disappears, changed by the touch of water. It is transformed into sand, washed up on the shore, carried on by the rain, compressed back into rocks and washed out again into pebbles. There are no stable objects, nothing concretely existing, but only a constant transformation that involves everything and everyone.

Similarity helps us to give up the concept of a tidy world that provides our perception with containers for objects and subjects, humans and animals, nature and culture, materials and symbols. The different approaches to a thinking in and with similarity teach us to live with the untidiness of the world, the dynamic of metamorphosed, planar interconnectedness of collectives.

From classical modernity in the first decades of the twentieth century to recent debates, we can identify an important tradition of philosophical troublemakers and supporters of fundamental untidiness who are concerned with disrupting the hierarchy of things and people, material and organisms, the narration of origin and telos and the hierarchy of cultures.

To sum up, similarity is found between the poles of completely identical and radically different; it cannot be a binary code, it marks a third component. Similarity belongs to the figures of the continual, of the transitional, the scalar, recursive and granular. It requires the marking of differences but never represents an opposition.

Similarity has a specific affinity to spatial concepts, especially to all forms of critical proximity. The spatiality of the concept is not to handle without an ethical implication that gives up the idealistic view of critical distance from above and adopts an embedded point of view – always being aware that this is not the perfect perspective to solve the problems of the planet, but the only one we can choose without pretending to adopt a 'god's view' (Haraway 1988: 581. Similarity seems to become an indispensable figure of thought, especially in those areas





where it is necessary to find a place for humans besides their fellow animals, plants and objects.

Notes

- ¹ The term was defined by Gayatri C. Spivak (1985).
- ² Hustvedt (2011): 187. One part of the essay consists of a commentary on Vittorio Gallese's concept of embodiment (Gallese 2014: 196ff).
- ³ A central concern of his work is a critique of idealistic history models in the form of specific spatial constellations as in the Arcades Project (Menninghaus 1980; Weigel 1997).
- ⁴ Foucault remembers the first lines of Descartes' *Regulae* to identify the changing orders of things: "It is a frequent habit," says Descartes, in the first lines of his *Regulae*, "when we discover several resemblances between two things, to attribute to both equally, even on points in which they are in reality different, that which we have recognized to be true of only one of them" (Foucault 2005).
- ⁵ De Landa (2006). Alfred North Whitehead (2014) also uses this term for a non-essentialist philosophy. 'Assemblage is the usual English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's term *agencement*' (Shaviro 2009: 148 n3). Nonetheless, my association of Whitehead's assemblage with Deleuze and Guattari's *agencement/assemblage* is justified in that both involve the construction of relations among heterogeneous terms that remain heterogeneous to one another even within these relations (Shaviro 2009: 147 n3; see also Phillips 2006: 109). The translation of *agencement* by *assemblage* might have been justified as a further event of *agencement* (*assemblage*) were it not for the tendency of discourses of knowledge to operate as statements about states of affairs. The statement, as Deleuze and Guattari tirelessly insist, tends to undo assemblages, to take things apart, to divide things from each other, to divide, fundamentally, the subject of the statement (the sense and reference of a statement) from its enunciation (the conditions on which one can make a statement at all) (Phillips 2006: 109; Tsing, Mathews and Bubandt 2019).
- ⁶ 'Sociologists followed this argument transferring it to societal questions: For modern society, the acceptance of vague communication and fuzzy systems should not be seen as an "evolutionary step back". For the opposite is true! From the perspective of fuzzy systems one can discern that the special benefit of a functional differentiated society is that it can deal with the endemic vagueness of communication without feeling a need to resolve it' (Kron and Winter 2005: 391; my translation).
- ⁷ Hampton (2007): 377. As Rosch and many others have noted, we use our conceptual system to reduce the complexity of our environment to a manageable level by focusing attention on the relevant dimensions. See, furthermore, Kluck (2014).
- ⁸ Vagueness is not a figure of differentiation but one of 'continuity' (Descola 2013: 3). It is part of the realm of vague speech that we must master in order to not become 'muet' – mute and 'malheureux'





– unhappy, as Paul Valéry states, ‘Ceux qui ne savent pas dire ou répugnent à dire des choses vagues sont souvent muets et toujours malheureux’ (Valéry 1957: 373).

- ⁹ When Lakoff states that all this was newly conceived within a very short span of time, he is overlooking the significant preliminary work of not only Ludwig Wittgenstein, but also of Carl Stumpf and the ‘Gestalt psychology’ of the 1920s.
- ¹⁰ Robert Spaemann was a Christian conservative thinker who held highly controversial positions, spoke out against euthanasia, advocated a modern proof of god and sharply criticized the global ethic thinking of the Tübingen theologian Hans Küng. At the same time, he was also regarded as one of the first representatives of modern animal ethics. I can neither understand nor support many of his arguments in the field of moral and religious philosophy. It is therefore not without risk to take up some of his comments on similarity and proximity in this context.
- ¹¹ Sedgwick (2003): 8; see also Felski (2015). I owe the hint to Ingrid Hotz-Davies.
- ¹² Delanda (2006); ‘Whitehead presents us with a highly systematized philosophy, and he seeks after “the most general systematization of civilized thought” (1929/1978: 17). But he also insists that, before any work of systematization can even begin, the “primary stage” of philosophy is a process of “assemblage” (1938/1968: 2).’ Also see, Shaviro (2009: 147). Shaviro mentions that similar ideas can be found in the work of Deleuze and Guattari: ‘Deleuze and Guattari, no less than Whitehead, practice the art of philosophical assemblage’ (ibid.: 148); ‘Assemblage is the usual English translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s term *agencement*’ (ibid.).
- ¹³ Ponge (1999): 202. ‘For my part, I would like to say that I am something else, and for example, that apart from all the qualities I possess in common with the rat, the lion and the net, I claim those of the diamond ... without prejudging all the qualities of which I fully expect that the contemplation and naming of extremely different objects will later make me aware and effectively enjoy’ (my translation).
- ¹⁴ Ibid.: 54. ‘If now I want with more attention to examine one of the particular types of stone, the perfection of its form, the fact that I can grasp it and turn it over in my hand, make me choose the pebble’ (my translation).

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