

Institute's Colloquium Abstracts

30.09.2009

Zur Shalev (Haifa University): *Quantification and the Pilgrim Experience*

Measurement in various forms was a prominent feature of the Jerusalem pilgrimage since its very early stages. Pilgrims count distances and steps, measure monuments, mark time, and record all these activities in textual and visual forms. My paper attempts to understand this often ignored phenomenon by placing measurement during pilgrimage within a performative and liturgical framework. The broad cultural shift in the 14th and 15th centuries towards systematic and accurate measurement, often linked to the rise of a scientific outlook, may be reconsidered in light of this long tradition.

04.11.2009

Harriet Ritvo (History Faculty, MIT): *The Animals' Turn?*

Animal-related topics once occupied the fringes of research in the humanities and social sciences, but in recent decades they have become almost mainstream in many disciplines, enjoying the full panoply of academic institutionalization (journals, conferences, book series, etc.). As is often the case, however, success at one level has revealed a new set of issues. Some are organizational: for example, should "animal studies" attempt to establish itself as an independent discipline? Some are definitional: for example, how broadly should the category "animals" be understood? My talk will survey these changes and challenges, with special emphasis on history and the history of science.

16.12.2009

John Tresch (University of Pennsylvania): *"La Technésthétique": A Physico-Spiritualist Reading of French Romanticism*

In his *Essai philosophique sur la classification des sciences* (2 vols, 1834-1843), physicist André-Marie Ampère introduced a number of new sciences, including "La Techneshétique," which would study procedures for "recalling ideas, sentiments, passions, etc., and giving birth to new ones in the spectator of an art object, the hearer either of a piece of music or a speech, or, finally, in the reader." This notion of the application of explicitly technical reflections to the arts might seem to be sacrilege for romanticism, whose refusal of rules and conventions, emphasis on creative inspiration, and hostility towards mechanism are critical commonplaces. Yet Ampère's announced science points toward a neglected side aspect of romanticism, particularly visible in France before 1848, in which the arts appear as concrete, rationally masterable means of producing effects-- emotional, intellectual, or even physical-- on their audiences. In addition to examples from romantic literature, visual arts and music, this paper will suggest close connections between this view of the arts and contemporary theories of scientific observation, focusing in particular on a set of "minor" readings of one of Ampère's interlocutors, the philosopher Maine de Biran.

13.01.2010

Herta Wolf (Univ. Duisburg-Essen): *Snow-Crystals, for instance. Aspects of the chemical and optical differentiation of the photographic recording process from 1839 through 1900.*

My presentation grapples with the complex differentiation of a photographic recording method. Focusing on the period from 1839 to 1900, I explore the various applications of the chemo-technical process known today simply as “photography.” My presentation seeks a contrast (or perhaps addition) to the concept of photography as mechanical objectivity as described by (among others) Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison in their 2007 study on objectivity. Instead, in my presentation I will analyze the photographic process via an approach that might be described as microscopic. Through an examination of snowflakes generated in different natural science contexts, I aim to explore the medium itself, i.e., to establish the chemical and optical relativity of photographic images as essential to their scientific use and ability to generate scientific meaning. My aim is to explain that the conditions surrounding the generation of photographs alone do not – nolens volens – account for the quality of an illustration. Rather, these conditions in fact lead the illustrations themselves to fade in importance. My aim is to show that the representational quality of a scientific photograph can only be assessed with recourse to its specific media constitution, coupled with a meticulous reconstruction of the discourses it both conditioned and generated.

24.02.2010

Peter Schöttler (CNRS, Paris): *From Comte to Carnap. Fresh Perspectives on the Vienna Circle in France*

In recent years the philosophy of the Vienna Circle has garnered more and more attention in France, and in this context interest has come to focus on the historical reception of the Vienna Circle during the 1920s and 1930s. Although nearly all important French representatives attended the Circle’s two Parisian congresses (in 1935 and 1937 respectively), contemporary response to the Circle’s ideas among French thinkers appears to have been by and large negative. The philosophical traditions, it seems, were too incompatible, preventing reception of the Circle’s contributions in French intellectual circles. Personalities also played a role, though here it’s worth mentioning that the literature to date has focused almost exclusively on Louis Rougier; to this day, Rougier is regarded as the first and most important “ambassador” of the Vienna Circle in France. As it happened, Rougier was not only a philosopher, but was also politician. And, in contrast to many members of the Vienna Circle, Rougier’s political allegiances belong to the right, later to the radical right. In my presentation I intend to challenge the current state of scholarship on the Vienna Circle in France in several respects. These new aspects have emerged from my study of an entirely new strand of reception. My line of analysis does not emerge from academic philosophy, but rather surprisingly from the classic, organized positivism of Auguste Comte. As it happens, the first thinker to import the Vienna Circle to France was not Rougier, but rather a physicist and organized positivist named Marcel Boll. Promoting the Vienna Circle in a variety of publications, Boll regarded the new scientific philosophy as the best, most modern continuation of Comte’s ideas.

24.03.2010

Thomas Schlich (McGill University, Montreal): *The "Ballet of the Crutches": Photography, Body Function and Rationalized Fracture Care (WWI and 1920s Vienna)*

When the Austrian surgeon Lorenz Böhler created his machine-like system of rationalized fracture care behind the trenches in WWI, he documented the outcome of his treatment in a striking way. He took photographs of his patients, lined up naked, and performing synchronous movements. In my talk, I am going to explore the rationale of this unusual way of representing bodies. I will put Böhler's images in the context of contemporary orthopedic photography and discuss parallels and possible cultural resonances with scientific management, Vienna Modernism and revue girls shows.

21.04.2010

Staffan Müller-Wille (University of Exeter): *Annotating the System of Nature: Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and the Uses of Writing Technologies*

Early modern naturalists were faced with what has been termed the 'first bio-information crisis'. A key figure in resolving this crisis was the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1788), who in 1751 introduced "trivial names" which provided a universal and stable index of plant and animal species. This paper will present first results from a study focussing on Linnaeus's day-to-day working routines on the basis of manuscript material held at the Linnean Society (London). What this material shows is that Linnaeus had to manage a conflict between the need to bring observations into a fixed order for purposes of information retrieval, and the need to keep that order flexible for purposes of comparison and integration of new information. One way out of this dilemma was to keep information on particular subjects on separate sheets, which could be complemented and reshuffled. Another was to use preliminary print publications as a template for collecting additions and amendments. It was only very late in his career, however, namely in the mid 1760s, that Linnaeus came up with what in hindsight seems to be the perfect solution to the dilemma: index cards. The long and tortuous route that led Linnaeus towards this innovation reveals a number of interesting issues relating to the history of scientific publication and authorship.

05.05.2010

Susanne Bauer, Alexandra Widmer and Veronika Lipphardt (MPIWG): *From Field Surveys to Biobanks. A History of Knowledge about Human Biological Diversity*

Throughout the 20th century, human biological diversity has been a challenging research topic for life scientists. Its political implications constantly undermined the ideal of scientific objectivity, while at the same time the social situatedness of empirical research on human test objects made it difficult to approach human variation with the same analytical tools like variation in other mammals. Parallel and interwoven with its being an epistemic object for the life sciences, human biological diversity also served as an instrumental object in medical research, in genealogy and other fields of application. In our paper we take a broader perspective on this issue than the conventional historiography of race science allows for: Investigations of human biological diversity are contextualized in transnational, (post-) colonial, and social constellations and within discourses on health, reproduction and population.

09.06.2010

Nick Wilding (Georgia State University/American Academy in Rome): *Euripus: on the limits and instabilities of Early Modern knowledge*

One version of the biography of Aristotle has him commit suicide in the Euripus channel, despairing at his inability to resolve the problem of tides. The topos of Euripus, as a site challenging natural philosophical order, emerges in the Early Modern period not only in tidal tracts (most noticeably, those of De Dominis and Galileo), but also in unrelated fields, such as Harvey's work on blood circulation. As a counterpart to the Pillars of Hercules, Euripus provided Early Moderns with another Mediterranean model which was simultaneously an object of scientific scrutiny and an epistemological challenge. In this paper, I will explore the meanings and uses of Euripus.

07.07.2010

Carlo Ginzburg (Scuola Normale di Pisa): *Three Variations on Moses. A Study in Reception (sec. XVI-XVIII)*

My presentation, related to a work in progress, will focus on the long-term impact of a well known passage in Strabo's Geography (written at the beginning of 1st century AD). I will argue that the reception of this passage played a major role in European intellectual and religious history.