

» ASSISTANTS, AVATARS, ATMOSPHERES  
Perspectives on animism in media studies and media art«

Transdisciplinary conference

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Faculty of Media, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar

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[www.uni-weimar.de/animismus-maschinismus](http://www.uni-weimar.de/animismus-maschinismus)

More than ever before, our world appears to us as an animistic world, as a reality in which basically everything – things, plants, machines – can be experienced as animate in some form or another, and accordingly as alive. For Walter Benjamin, the »empathy with inorganic things« was already part of the signature of a capitalist modernity in which commodities increasingly appear as active entities, while people increasingly become passive consumers. Today, it is not only a new attentiveness that is postulated and mobilized in order to do justice to the souls of plants or even houses, it is above all the technical objects that increasingly appear to us to be alive.

Certainly, even back in the 1960s, owners talked to their cars, gave them nicknames and spoke well of them. However, under the sign of advancing digitalization, we are facing a new dimension of »techno-animism«. Voice assistants such as Siri or Alexa create the impression that certain devices have an individual character, a kind of personality, while artificial intelligences such as ChatGPT or Midjourney actively participate in processes that were previously considered the specific and exclusive activities of creative people: writing, drawing, painting... Against this background, it seems high time to explore the productivity of animist perspectives in order to understand our present.

The relevance of animist positions and discourses has recently been highlighted in the humanities and social sciences, particularly in the debates surrounding the »anthropocene«. In view of the massive destruction of ecosystems in the anthropocene, it has been argued that it is urgently necessary to develop an »animistic relational

ontology«. Only then could it be possible to abolish the dichotomy between human culture and non-human nature, which is fundamental to western modernity and which manifests itself in the devastation of the earth by certain parts of humanity.

Conversely, Bruno Latour blamed the loss of animistic ideas for the ecological crisis we currently face. According to him, the central problem of the present is the »loss of sense« of materiality through its reduction to abstract matter: in other words, the »rather naïve belief in a supposedly deanimated ›material world««. As a result, it is considered possible to »face Gaia« with a new animism; for instance, as Latour explains, »while you have your back to the future, you flee animism«.

This conference aims to anchor the debate on animism in German-language Media Studies, to locate it more precisely with a view to the ongoing dialog between (media) science and (media) art and to make its aspects and potentials recognizable and usable for a critique of capitalism. In doing so, it builds on references that were already made a few years ago to the relevance of the debate, among other things with regard to the intersectional decolonization of knowledge production. The focus here is on current developments in media technology. Three perspectives, figures or topics are of particular interest here: the new assistants, which include the currently much-discussed chatbots such as ChatGPT; the avatars that accompany us and which we encounter in virtual worlds; and the technical-media atmospheres that smart cities and other developments based on the Internet of Things bring with them.

With contributions from Ruth Anderwald, Volker Bernhard, Jenny Brockmann, Judith Dörrenbacher, Anselm Franke, Leonhard Grond, Moritz Hiller, Angela Melitopoulos, Matteo Pasquinelli, Patrick Urs Riechert, Elisabeth von Samsonow, Ephraim Schott, Erhard Schüttpelz, Henning Schmidgen, Mathias Schönher, Angelika Seppi and Elena Vogman.

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