Writing Technologies' Study Day

Maison Française d'Oxford, Friday 28th October 2022

Abstracts

Panel I: Hands, touch, and gesture

John Gagné (University of Sydney), *Mechanism/Organism: The Premodern Iron Hand*

This presentation explores the uncanny realities and implications of the prosthetic iron hand between the 14th and the 17th centuries in Europe. It explains the function of these prodigious hands using examples from Milan, Florence, Cambridge, Paris, Stockholm, and London. Once the body could be visibly remade by art, certain medical and cultural presuppositions of humanness opened themselves to reformulation. The organism could itself be reconceived as a mechanism. But this mechanism could also long outlive its host. As a prodigious independent object, the iron hand attracted new forms of attention and representation. It became a secular relic that demanded fresh modes of display, whether in medical treatises or early modern museums. It also became a metaphor in itself: the iron hand came to describe unstoppable, impersonal forces. Detached from its body, the iron hand lived on.

Rachel Hindmarsh (Trinity College, Oxford): *'Imagining Touch: Medicine, Literature, and Prosthesis'*

"You can see the body part and you know what to expect, how it should feel, and you act accordingly": these are the words of a surgeon in the Churchill Hospital, Oxford, explaining to me, during a two-day observation trip, how he imagines his sense of touch when navigating the challenge of robot-assisted surgery, in which he must operate prosthetic fingers, via a console, that give no haptic feedback. This paper uses this reflection on the modern surgical haptic imaginary as a prompt to consider early modern prosthetic touch in a memorable medical scene in Rabelais's fictional writing: Gargantua's birth, in which narrator Alcofribas asks the reader to imagine both the misplaced touch of midwives and our own faculty of touch. Early modern literature does not just reflect (enduring) elements of medical practice, this paper argues, but radically amends or extends how we (still) imagine our bodies and those of others.

Joe Moshenska, (University College, Oxford) *The Jaguar's Hand*

This paper will consider the implications for early modern touching, handling, and gesturing of a recent body of anthropological scholarship often described collectively as the 'ontological turn,' and especially the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: both his rich and complex account of 'perspectivism' in Amazonia, and his historical work on contacts between Europeans and Amerinidians in the sixteenth century. My focus will be Viveiros de Castro's discussion of 'multinaturalism' as an inversion of the standard Western nature-culture dyad. In Amazonia, all persons (a category which included animals and spirits as well as humans) experience the world in

the same (cultural) *way*, but *what* they experience differs according to their distinct bodily natures; the worlds of ancestral spirits, tapirs, jaguars and others are thereby differently inhabited. I will ask how Viveiros de Castro's principally ocular and gustatory account of this 'multinaturalist' ontology might expand to include a tactile dimension, and end by considering the resonances of his account with the handling and gesturing that occurs in Edmund Spenser's poem, *The Faerie Queene*.

Panel II: From *maniera* to virtuosity: early modern embodied ingenuity

Vittoria Fallanca (New College, Oxford): 'Montaigne's *maniera*'

If, as has been argued, Montaigne is a Mannerist, what would that mean for our understanding of the Essais?
I approach this question by constructing an extended dialogue with Hélène Cixous's notion of a 'stigmatext'. With in mind the etymological meaning of stilus as that of a writing (or drawing) instrument that leaves traces or tracks in parchment or wax I consider the marks made by/through/on the writing hand in connection with the fraught question of Montaigne's writerly manner or style.

Pascal Brioist (University of Tours): '*The "mechanics" of birds according to Leonardo da Vinci'*

The fantasy of a possible hybridity between man and bird has excited the Europeans imagination since the antiquity. Leonardo was nevertheless aware of a technical problem: the physiology of men and that of birds were so different that man's muscles were probably inapt to enable him to fly, even equipped with wings. At the beginning of the 1480's, he started to work on a mechanical solution to enhance man's ability to fly. This paper will first try to explain the basic experiments which were his starting point to solve the problem. Then it will examine the mechanical elements the Tuscan engineer first indexed before imagining different kind of machines. Then we shall discuss the kind of improvements Leonardo devised with the help of a bio-imitative approach.

Mélanie Traversier (University of Lille): *'The enchanting virtuosity of machines and mechanisms of artistic virtuosity in the Enlightenment period'*

Encountering the history of technology, the history of spectacular practices and sensibilities and sound studies, this presentation questions the polysemy of the notion of 'virtuosity' and its effectiveness in describing the technical practices and the spectatorship of the Enlightenment elites. Based on the observation and reception of acoustic automatons (bird-organs in the domestic space, musical automatons in the public space), which were particularly appreciated and perfected in the 18th century, the aim is to understand what they reveal for the Enlightenment period about the relationship between life and technology, nature and artifice as they are sublimated and surpassed in musical performance on stage.

Panel III : Unruly elements and environments

Phillip John Usher, (New York University): *"Inventing Botany"*

Botany, clearly, was not *invented* in the early modern period. It dates back at least to Ancient Egypt, with key stopovers in Greece (Anaximander, Empedocles, Aristotle, Theophrastus, etc.) and Rome (Pliny, Columella, etc.). Brian Ogilvie has argued however, in his *The Science of Describing*, that only in the sixteenth century did naturalists come to think of themselves "as practitioners of a discipline that, though related to medicine and natural philosophy, was distinct from both." As Ogilvie further argues, the period saw the birth of *phytography*, i.e. a "technical descriptive language" that would take precedence over pictures. Against this general background, *phusis* brought under *techne*, I would like then to ask some open-ended questions about what kinds of technologization of the vegetal we might find in sixteenth-century France.

Tina Asmussen (Deutches Bergbau-Museum, Bochum):
'Unruly Entanglements: Elemental Powers in Early Modern Mining Landscapes'

This presentation explores the relationship between people, labour and the elemental powers in European mining in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. As in hardly any other occupation, the extractive industries show a characteristic entanglement of humans with air, water, fire and earth above and below ground on many layers. The elements are a basic requirement for the miners' work (as can be seen, for example, in the practices of ventilation, draining, fire setting or extraction), but at the same time they also represent a constant threat, they evoke anxiety and fear. Current studies in environmental humanities, history of science and technology and economic history often address the destructive powers of natural forces, such as natural hazards and the practices and technologies of risk prevention. My study seeks to provide a more holistic view of how humans and nature interacted in the envirotechnical sites of mining. I will trace the productive interweaving of the technical-economic, scientific-rational, mythical-religious and emotional-moral implications of human interactions with air, water, fire and earth. Further, this broad perspective enriches the discourse on the "Anthropocene" by understanding it not just as a consequence of technical innovation and changing energy regimes, but as the process by which human beliefs, experiences, worldviews and affects emerge through interaction with nature's elemental powers.

Jerôme Baudry (EPFL Lausanne): *'Science in the Mountains: Reconstructing the Scientific Expeditions of the 1770s to Mont Buet'*

On September 20, 1770, the brothers Jean-André and Guillaume-Antoine Deluc, two scientists from Geneva, finally reached the summit of Mont Buet (3096m) after two unsuccessful attempts. From this vantage point overlooking the Alps and Mont Blanc, they performed several physics experiments and accumulated meteorological, geological, and ethnographic observations. The picturesque account of their ascent sparked further vocations: in the 1770s, the Genevans Marc-Théodore Bourrit, Horace-Bénédict de Saussure and Marc-Auguste Pictet also traveled to Mont

Buet to replicate the Deluc's experiments and to make their own observations. These expeditions contributed to transform the mountain into a “laboratory of nature,” in Saussure’s own words.

In September 2020, August 2021 and September 2022, two hundred and fifty years after the first ascent, a group of historians of science followed several paths to the summit of Mont Buet to reconstruct the historical expeditions of the Genevan scientists. They took with them two replicas of the barometer designed by Jean-André Deluc, they replicated the experiments of the 1770s and they documented their ascent with the help of a photographer, a draughtswoman, and a sound artist.

In this talk, I will discuss the implications, the outcomes and the limits of this experience of historical reconstruction, focusing on three initial proposals of the project: 1) reconstructing scientific activity *in the field*, rather than in the controlled context of the laboratory; 2) capturing the mountain as a *lived milieu* rather than as a geographical location; 3) *integrating historical research and scientific mediation* by producing a contemporary archive that dialogues with the historical actors’ inscriptions (texts, engravings, drawings, and paintings).