

Seeing Danger: Risk, Security and the Visual Schedule

25/04/24:

12.00 Arrival

12.30 Welcome/Introduction

13.00–14.15. Dr. Tom Allen.

14.30–15.45 Dr. Avigail Moss. Presenting online.

16.00–17.15 Dr. Joe Luna. Presenting online.

18.00– 19.30. Hannes Becker.

26/04/24:

9.30–10.00 Welcome / Introduction.

10.00-11.30. Jakob Schnetz.

Catering / Lunch

12.45-14.15 - Prof. Geoff Gilbert.

14.30–15.45 Matthias Grundig.

Abstracts and Bios

Tom Allen: The American University of Paris

My Little Man* or when risk becomes fate in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity

This paper presents part of a wider research project on the representation of insurance within the 20th and 21st North American cultural imaginary. It focuses specifically on Billy Wilder's 1944 noir film *Double Indemnity* in which an insurance salesman, Walter Neff, engages in an elaborate murderous plan whereby he first arranges for the husband of the woman he loves to sign a life insurance policy and then manipulates events to realise the maximum pay out one this husband is killed. I pay attention both to the visual representation of the Pacific All Risk Insurance Company and to the character of Keyes, the intuitive genius of the film who can instinctively spot a false claim and whose obsessive attention to detail leads to Neff's downfall. I argue that *Double Indemnity* presents actuarial reasoning as a kind of totalising power, against which Neff's struggle fails and that the film blurs Keyes' ethical disposition and his knowledge of statistics in a way that makes insurance itself the bulwark of the social order. I will suggest that this presentation of life insurance follows two centuries in which American insurers presented themselves simultaneously as underwriters of state power and as speculators on the nation's success. I will also suggest that Wilder's presentation of the actuary as both moral conscience and detective anticipates developments in policing and population management which culminate in so-called "big data policing" and the still developing actuarial turn in law enforcement.

Bio: Tom Allen is a Leverhulme visiting scholar at the American University of Paris. He was previously an International Fellow at the KWI and has held teaching and research positions at the University of Sussex, Paris 3 Sorbonne-Nouvelle and the University of Paris, Nanterre. Recent academic publications include work on European cinema and contemporary anglophone poetry. He is currently at work on his first monograph speculatively entitled: *Care for Trapped Things: Insurance and the American Century* and has published non-academic essays, translations and other pieces in a variety of places.

Hannes Becker

Is anyone else seeing this? A visuality of risk in Jeff Nichols' Take Shelter (2011)

When Jeff Nichols released his feature film *Take Shelter* in 2011, the effects of the 2007/2008 financial crisis were still very much palpable in US-society while effects of climate catastrophe started to increasingly impact everyday life. Nichols' film has Curtis LaForche, a young working class father in rural Ohio, experience a number of disquieting visions that point towards the coming of a storm of unseen dimensions. Apart from the unfolding of the film's impressive iconography regarding Curtis' visions, the narrative focuses on the socially disruptive effects of Curtis' self-sabotaging strategy to handle those visions. Through the film's elaborate point-of-view technique, we experience how visual representations of catastrophe may work as a direct and almost visceral call to action – especially when the outcome and success of those actions are all but certain. In my reading of Jeff Nichols' feature film *Take Shelter*, I argue that the visual representation and fictional logic of Curtis' struggle resonate with the powerful, century-old narrative of *Self Reliance* (and other forms of what Lauren Berlant termed *Cruel Optimism*) as a specific form of socially advised risk-taking in US-culture and history. The film addresses the recurrent failure of said narrative for addressing collective challenges such as economic disruption and climate change. Drawing from Niklas Luhmann's differentiation between risk and danger, I interpret Curtis La Forche's defective course of action as an example of Self Reliance gone awry, where those devoid of real decision-making power or communal support end up being burdened with responsibilities beyond their reach, or grasp.

Bio: Hannes Becker is a German and American studies scholar. He studied modern German literature, literary writing, American studies and history in Berlin and Leipzig. In 2021, he received his doctorate from Humboldt University with a cultural studies thesis on fantasies of prevention using the example of the motif of securing the future in contemporary literature. Together with Benjamin Bühler, Sandra Pravica and Stefan Willer, he edited the anthology *Zukunftssicherung: Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven* published by transcript verlag in 2019. He also writes theatre and radio plays as well as short stories, and works as a translator of plays and poems by Pamela Carter, Caryl Churchill, Lucy Kirkwood, Matthew Lopez, Charles Reznikoff and Rosmarie Waldrop, among others. In addition to other productions for theatre and public radio, he was one of 12 authors involved in the radio play *Mein hohles Herz singt Lieder der Versammlung*, which was nominated for the ARD Radio Play Prize in 2020.

Geoff Gilbert: The American University of Paris
Love nor money: Statements, sentences, and fictions of loss

This paper explores contemporary instances of literary ‘realism’, as a kind of writing that models and mediates the functioning of reality, particularly when the real is imagined as a space of risk and loss, and where the address to reality is therefore urgent. I’ll look at two texts that offer models for how fiction can engage the reality of climate change. The first is Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Ministry for the Future*, a work of ‘hard science fiction’ that caught the liberal imagination when it was published in 2020. It was, in the words of one reviewer, ‘the novel we need’. The second is Juliana Spahr’s 2015 collection of poetry, *That Winter the Wolf Came*, which inhabits ‘the time of the oil wars’ and of the Occupy movement. In both cases, I’m interested in the abstraction of reality into the form of numbers, and in the ways in which fictions manage that data. In Robinson’s novel, data emerge from the sciences, and offer points of attachment for plausible economic and political statements in which loss is accounted for. In Spahr’s work, they delimit a reality which is always a political-economic terrain for social life, and they are positioned in sentences, utterances of irreducible loss.

Bio: Geoff Gilbert is Professor of Comparative Literature and English at the American University of Paris. He writes on modernist literature, queer theory, and literature and economics, and is currently completing a new book on realism.

Matthias Gründig

Confusion largely ruled out: Guidebooks and Their Poisonous Doppelgangers

If you're looking for images that, in a completely non-metaphorical sense, mediate between life and death, those in mushroom identification books probably won't immediately come to mind. They take a central position in these guidebooks to enable aspiring collectors to distinguish between edible mushrooms and their "poisonous doppelgangers." In the first part, the talk focuses on the example of one photographically rich identification book, looks at it in the sense of a photo book, analyzes its functionality and the associated idea of authorship. A second part looks at the AI-generated "poisonous doppelgangers" of these identification books as they can be found in the chaotic online jungle of Amazon.

Bio

Matthias Gründig is a photo historian and also works as a freelance lecturer and curator. He studied art history and visual studies in Jena and Rome. From 2015 to 2022, he was a research assistant for the theory and history of photography at the Folkwang University of the Arts in Essen. His research focuses on historical perspectives on social image practices around 1860, uses and conceptions of photography as a commodity and currency, as well as photography and game theory and more contemporary approaches to photographic images. In 2022 he was honored with the C/O Berlin Talent Award in the category „Theorist“, . In addition to his dissertation, he is currently curating the 14th edition of the Wüstenrot Foundation's Documentary Photography Awards, which can be seen at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, the Haus am Kleistpark in Berlin, the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart and the Museum für Photographie Braunschweig.

Joe Luna: The University of Sussex
The Continuous Trading of Thought

This paper will present a modest coda to Peter Hallward's critique of Quentin Meillassoux's book of speculative realist philosophy, *After Finitude* (2008). I suggest that Hallward's commentary on Meillassoux's project can be fleshed out with reference to the work of the idiosyncratic derivatives trader and financial philosopher Elie Ayache. Ayache's *The Blank Swan* (2010), which is best described as an ontology of the market, is indebted to Meillassoux's philosophy in several important ways, particularly his idea that 'the existence of things is derived as a consequence of the necessity of contingency'. For Ayache, the market is the perfected 'medium of contingency', and the trader in contingent claims its author or poet. But Ayache also extrapolates from the trading pit a broader existential and literary dynamic that relies on Meillassoux's central thesis. Ayache writes: 'By travelling across the world with the necessity of contingency in our hand, we may verify no possibility and no necessity [...] we make market of the world [...] we exchange its unexchangeability against the unexchangeability of writing; we exceed it; we become at once posterior and original in it. We instate another order of thought in it. We price it.'

My paper suggests that that Ayache's bizarre arguments about price, reality, and contingent claims in *The Blank Swan* are relevant for understanding the nature and historical significance of Meillassoux's work. Ayache is helpful for reading Meillassoux not because he wants to grasp philosophy's contribution to an emancipatory project, pace Hallward, but because he wants to make money by trading derivatives. Unlike critiques of Meillassoux's work by philosophers working in the continental tradition, such as Ray Brassier, Ayache's reading of Meillassoux does not discover within *After Finitude* latent, unthought presuppositions that necessarily derive from the philosophical tradition the book seeks to escape. Instead, Ayache develops Meillassoux's critique of metaphysical necessity into a trading technology. By doing so he accentuates the essentially competitive character and motivation of *After Finitude*. Whereas Hallward argues that Meillassoux's claim that 'we might abruptly be other than we are' is evidence of an historical impatience 'with a more modest but also more robust conception of social and political change', I argue that Meillassoux's very vision of transformation is more appropriate to the trade in abstract risk that constitutes the market in derivatives than it is to the world in which (most of us) live.

Bio: Joe Luna writes poetry and literary criticism. His most recent book is *Old News* (Slub Press / Erotoplasty, 2023).

Avigail Moss: L'Institut catholique de Paris
Weapon in terrorem: museums and insurance, in and out of conflict

This paper explores how modern insuring practices that were balanced between state and private interests underpinned a British and international art world from the late nineteenth century into the First World War. In this period, museums like the National Gallery of British Art (Tate Britain) and the Victoria & Albert Museum emerged as centralizing institutions for circulating art risks that travelled between the metropole and provincial outposts. Working in tandem—and sometimes at odds—museum administrators, state representatives, and commercial insurers struggled to fit the insurance of art works into shifting risk-assessment regimes: campaigns that became more acute when the war introduced the threat of air bombardment and land invasion. The paper asks how art insurers adjudicated upon and communicated their willingness (or unwillingness) to underwrite artworks, exhibitions, and collections, and it shows how art insurance came to be seen as a disciplinary technique. Using the archives of conventional premium insurers, including syndicates and agents with Lloyd's, a cartel called the Fire Offices' Committee, and the archives of boutique art insurers like the Fine Art and General Insurance Company, Ltd, this paper reveals how art insurance crystallised into a regulatory mechanism before and during the First World War.

Bio: Avigail Moss is a writer and art historian who researches histories of institutions, exhibitions, and science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She is a 2023-24 Postdoctoral Fellow with the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (London) where she is working on a monograph about art and insurance. She received her PhD from the University of Southern California in 2022. With Matthew Hunter she is the co-editor of a forthcoming special issue of the Oxford Art Journal on art and insurance: 'Art and the Actuarial Imagination' (2024). She is also the co-editor of *Painting - the Implicit Horizon*, a volume of conference proceedings on painting after Conceptual Art (with Kerstin Stakemeier, published by the Jan van Eyck Academie, 2012). Her other writings have appeared in *Kunst und Politik*, *caa.reviews*, and *Texte zur Kunst*. She is Reviews Editor for *SELVA: A Journal of the History of Art*.

Jakob Schnetz: KWI

Cases of falls: Stunt work, masculinity, and injured bodies between visibility and risk

In the production of body visibility in film, or more precisely in the depiction of spectacular, mostly male mastery of danger, as it has been cultivated in Hollywood in westerns, thrillers, thrillers or action films since the 1920s at the latest, stunt doubles play a peculiar role between invisibility and affectedness: In the mode of a double 'as if', they appear on the scene when fictionalized danger threatens to become too real for stars, only to be affected by this danger not as themselves, but very much on their own bodies. On the one hand, stunt doubles are excluded qua function from cinematic representation in the star system, not least in order to produce heroic images of masculinity. On the other hand, however, stuntmen (in particular) have themselves become cinematic heroic figures in which an image of the more or less 'tough doer' is negotiated. One perspective on images of masculinity, risk and visibility that has not yet been examined is that of the injured stuntman, which is discussed using the example of the independent movie *The Fall* by Tarsem Singh (2006).

Bio: Jakob Schnetz is a photographer and visual studies scholar. He studied photojournalism in Hanover and Tomsk as well as theory and history of photography in Essen. Since 2015, he has been working as a freelance photographer for newspapers, magazines and theaters, including Zeit Magazin, Die Zeit, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin. He also works on exhibitions and freelance photo book projects that deal with cultural stereotypes, the spectacle of product marketing and new workplace concepts, among other things. His work "Ort der Verheissung", also published as a book in 2019, has won several awards. He is currently a doctoral candidate at KWI and the Folkwang University of the Arts, where he is working on the social fabrication and negotiation of digital photographic technology and its political implications, in particular on the representation of skin colour.