

“Connecting the dots”: Conceptualising “Trace” in the Nexus of Novels and Readers’ Sensory Imaginings

International Workshop, 24-26 September 2020,
Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

Trace has played a central role in human culture in multiple forms ranging from animal trails essential in tracking and orienting practices first cultivated in hunter-gatherer societies to the investigation of clues in detective fictions and forensic science. On the one hand, its ubiquity lends this concept the semiotic elasticity necessary to accommodate relationality and connectivity beyond the dualisms of inside and outside, body and mind, text and real world, as well as nature and nurture. On the other, trace unites a number of specific intertwined opposites that allows for conceptual delimitation: Crucially, trace can refer to both a discursive practice and a perceived object and thus comprises active and passive elements.



Picture Source: <https://events.criparis.org/e/526/connecting-the-dots-a-cri-network-workshop> <https://qephi.org/>

How can “trace” inform our understanding of novel-induced reading experiences? The importance of physical contact in the formation of traces foregrounds the sensory interaction of objects and agents with their surroundings. This, in turn, reinscribes corporeality as a central feature when bodies leave traces behind in their movements through the world. These sensory underpinnings encompass characteristics of traces that promise to enhance our understanding of the phenomenology of novel-induced reading experiences, specifically, the process of readers activating all their sensory imaginings (including past sensory perceptions) in a way that brings the narrated events, figures and settings to life. In brief, trace has the potential to shed new light on the viscosity involved in connecting the dots when (lay and professional) readers interpret novels.

This workshop investigates the interaction between trace and reading as facets of interpretive processes actively engaging the recipient in creative acts of sensory imagination. Just like our detection and pursuit of footprints in the sand, blood drops in the snow, or rose petals in the grass entails the combined effort of visual and haptic input, reading novels attentively involves intertwining certain cues with our sensory perception, imaginings and memories. As such, the concept of trace opens a host of conceptualisations and investigative opportunities in relation to readers’ visceral interaction with novels.

The main objective of this workshop is to unravel and theorise the complexity of trace within the framework of hermeneutic phenomenology as a relational concept uniting dualities such as materiality and impermanence, intentionality and coincidence, as well as presence and absence.

We invite contributions from interdisciplinary research in reader reception and aesthetics, literary and narrative theory, and cultural studies, especially concerning the history of the novel and reading. Culturally and historically situated contributions in areas ranging from the early eighteenth century until literary Modernism are particularly welcome. Key theoretical interests include experientiality, intermediality, analogue remediation, materiality, (inter-) sensoriality, hermeneutics of suspicion, postcritical reading, homo interpres, eco-criticism and environmental humanities, and medical humanities.

Abstract submission: Please submit your abstract for a 30-minute presentation (no more than 250 words) and a brief biography (max. 100 words) to apply_VNR@uni-mainz.de

Deadline for submission is 8 February 2020.