

Afterlives of the Transcendental

Conference

October 27, 2022 10.30 am – 6 pm
October 28, 2022 10.30 am – 7 pm

University of Applied Arts Vienna

Hörsaal 1
Oskar-Kokoschka-Platz 2
Ferstel-Trakt

Concept and organization:
Antonia Birnbaum, Helmut Draxler

The concept of the transcendental forms the basis of Kant’s critical project. Kant’s effort to reform philosophy by delimiting the field of speculative metaphysics from the transcendental made possible both the critique of theoretical cognition and ethics. Even if this project did not succeed in providing a critical foundation of a post-metaphysical worldview, the conceptual potential of the notion of the transcendental has not been exhausted. For the transcendental is by no means opposed to speculative metaphysics; rather, it is itself a speculative concept that promises to put an end to all speculation. This is how post-Kantian philosophy and literary theory received the concept. They grasped the transcendental as the condition of possibility of both speculative and perceptible or intuitive knowledge. The transcendental was the means by which concept and object, immediacy and reflection, the finite and the infinite or universal could be related to one another or even intertwined.

If we grant the thesis that at its core the concept of the transcendental includes a speculative moment, the concept’s afterlives as they are inscribed in contemporary philosophy from Heidegger to Adorno, Foucault, and Deleuze raises two primary, correlated questions. On the one hand, one has to clarify how the conceptual problem of drawing boundaries can be related to the semantic, dynamic-transcending dimension of the concept, and on the other hand, how the transcendental can be understood as an interface between a “groundwork” and its constructions from which the major categories of the modern symbolic, such as science, politics, or art, first emerge. It is thus a question of the status of the “transcendental idea“ of science, art and politics and their respective relation to their empirical objects, to the field of their shared condition, and to the dynamics of their development as particular symbolic forms of modernity.

Accordingly, the conference will be divided into three sections dedicated to the epistemic, the artistic-aesthetic, and the political transcendental. The common ground lies in the significance of their respective relations to a “transcendental idea“ and the resulting theoretical and practical consequences.

The importance of the epistemically transcendental has reemerged with the attempt to completely abandon the transcendental in the name of a New or Speculative Realism. To hold on to the concept of the transcendental in its epistemic dimension necessitates neither aligning oneself with the idea of a being “in itself” of reality nor conceiving of it as a mere subjective or social construction. The term itself implies a reference not only to a limit but to its dissolution. Paradoxically, the subjective and the social (the scientific community) delimitation of science is itself the condition of possibility for the massive dissolution of the limits of knowledge, which not only allows us to imagine an absolute, external and objective reality, but also constantly shifts the limits of its cognizability. The idea of science can therefore neither be identified with its particular ideals of knowledge, which – in the sense of an eliminative materialism – will sooner or later prevail, nor be dismissed as a socially constructed ideology. Rather, it is a matter of reflecting the epistemological moments of modern science, for instance in their quantum-physical, molecular-biological or ecological dimensions, not only in their psycho-social implications, but moreover of accepting them as a challenge to philosophical thinking, in which the „ontological incompleteness“ of reality itself, as Slavoj Žižek formulates it, becomes apparent.

For the artistic transcendental, the early reception of the concept in Schiller, Schelling, Hölderlin, and Friedrich Schlegel is already decisive. The focus here is less on the aesthetic categories of the beautiful and the sublime, of taste and genius developed in the *Critique of Judgment*, and more on the notion of a transcendental aesthetics stemming from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This concept, however, is radically reinterpreted in its idealist and early romantic reception: from the ideas regulating every empirical perception to the specific qualification of an idea of art. In this process, not only the concept of aesthetics changes from a theory of perception to a philosophy of art, but also the concept of art itself. It becomes simultaneously truthful and experiential, assertive and reflexive, and thus capable of representing an unlimited in the limited, an absent in the present, a negative in the positive. It will be discussed how this transcendental idea of art can continue to be asserted in the face of all attempts to overcome or abolish it in the name of purely material, medial, or performative-activist determinations, and how it can be positioned as a critical boundary and basic term of a conceptual or post-conceptual understanding of contemporary art.

Finally, the political transcendental poses the question of whether the idea of politics is to be grounded in an orientation to principles or axioms, or precisely in a critique of them. On the one hand, there are conceptions in contemporary political theory that emphasize the necessity of deriving politics from a central principle, that of equality or justice (such as Badiou’s “axiomatic politics”). On the other hand, there are approaches that argue that such a derivation is impossible, advocating a politics without principle and beginning. Reiner Schürmann’s an-archic approach, formulated in reference to Heidegger, or Deleuze’s “nomadic politics” stand for this above all. By traversing this field of tension between axiom and anarchy, the transcendental idea of politics might make it possible to distinguish between the imaginary, symbolic, and real dimensions of every empirical form of politics.

The concept of the transcendental in its epistemic, artistic, and political dimensions, therefore, makes it possible to think a differential field that puts into relation the concepts of boundary and dissolution, principle and phenomenon, the empirical and the conceptual. Addressing the tensions and dialectical entanglements between these terms thus constitutes the prerequisite for thinking not only the conditions of the possibility of science, art, and politics, but what it could mean to move beyond them.

(AB/HD)

Thursday, October 27, 2022

10.30 am – 11.30 am
Helmut Draxler: Introduction
The Polis as a Transcendental Principle. About the Public as Ground and as Boundary

Critical thinking usually wants to prove itself in opening existing dogmatic structures in order to bring a non-privileged or non-canonized being to the fore. This presupposes the assumption of a public relevance of any philosophical, political or artistic speech. For the most part, however, the public is understood not as a precondition but as an effect of one’s own claims and activities, which in turn easily leads to the idealization of empirical facts such as social assemblies or communicative, deliberative, or participatory practices. Precisely in this, the very idea of the public becomes a dogmatic principle in which the subject positions, the procedures of recognition, and the social effect factors are already predetermined. In contrast, it is important to understand the polis – as the epitome of an idea of the public – as a transcendental principle, i.e. as an always already presupposed condition of possibility of any epistemological, political, or artistic speech, anchored in the structural split between public and private modes of being. Only from here can the questions of a possible ground of critique and of how to deal with its boundaries between immanence and transcendence, positivity and negativity be posed. (E)

11.30 am – 12.45 pm
Rado Riha
The Transcendental and the Reflective Power of Judgement

In the contribution it shall be traced whether, and if yes, then which changes the concept of the transcendental elaborated by Kant’s philosophy, i.e. the concept of an a priori grounding of the possibility of every experience and cognition, undergoes in Kant’s third critique, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. The paper sees these changes or innovations in the third Critique in the notion of an irreducibly singular that takes the place of the particular case of reflective judgment. The paper will try to demonstrate that it is precisely the conceptualization of the irreducibly singular case that makes possible the universal claim of reflective judgment in various fields of human thought and action. (G)

12.45 pm – 2 pm
Stella Sandford
Transformations in/of the Transcendental: Lévi-Strauss and Freud

In *How Do We Recognise Structuralism?* (1972), Deleuze famously claimed that ‘structuralism cannot be separated from a new transcendental philosophy, in which the sites prevail over what occupies them.’ In this talk, in the light of Deleuze’s claim, we will ask how Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the ‘totemic operator’ (*La pensée sauvage* [1962]) can be understood as a transcendental, or as a central aspect of a philosophy of transformations in and of the transcendental. At the same time we will explore whether, and if so how, this Lévi-Straussian picture is related to the structures of the dream-work in Chapter VI of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* and whether this implicates Freud, too, in Deleuze’s claim. (E)

Break

3.30 pm – 4.45 pm
Jan Völker
The Divided Modernity: Plurals of the Transcendental

The transcendental in Kantian tradition, as limitation and grounding of the possibilities of experience, is exposed to the challenge of its immanent pluralization: The possibility of different subjects with different experiences. But if orders of experience are not to be subordinated to a general law and yet are to serve as foundations of knowledge with full justification, then the transcendental limits must be multiplied in order to think different subjects with different experiences at all. However, the conditions of possibility can only be multiplied by showing the realization of the transcendental itself, that is, by showing that the transcendental order unfolds its own temporal-spatial reality. But this is precisely the effect of Freud’s realization of psychoanalysis in the midst of the Kantian order of space and time as conditions of experience. Here, in the midst of the transcendental, psychoanalysis has its place, which it turns inside out and multiplies, thus instructing modernity its plurality. (G)

4.45 pm – 6 pm
Zeynep Türel
„and even if my saying is for nothing, / I still speak“.
Hölderlin’s *Antigone* as a Poetics of Negativity

Hölderlin’s theoretical writings in the context of Sophocles’ translations, especially the *Notes to Antigone*, can be understood as a poetics of negativity insofar as they reveal the negation, or rather the absolute negation, of death not only as a principle and movens of action, but also, and above all, as the supreme principle of the representation of that very action. Considered under the aspect of negativity, the moment of caesura, which is central for the understanding of Hölderlin’s theory of tragedy, proves to be the experience of negativity on the one hand, and the representation of negativity on the other hand, in the form of the „pure word,“ which appears as the idea itself, interrupting the succession of ideas – a constellation that allows us to understand language as the actual sphere of negativity. (G)

Friday, October 28, 2022

10.30 am – 11.45 am
Nathan Brown
Metamorphosen: On the Transfiguration of Politics by Aesthetic Experience

Schiller situates the domain of the aesthetic between nature and the state, between the immediacy of material impulses and the operations of political power. Thus culture occupies a position between nature and politics, with aesthetic experience at once mediating and suspending their intersection. This paper will address Schiller’s framework through a case study: the performance of Richard Strauss’s World War II threnody, *Metamorphosen*, by Teodor Currentzis and musicÆterna at the Wiener Konzerthaus on April 11, 2022 – the same day their subsequent benefit concert for Ukraine was cancelled due to the involvement of Russian musicians. The concert program and performance will exemplify how the political content of aesthetic experience, and of aesthetic ideas, lies precisely in their suspension of moral judgment. Defending the autonomy and universality of the aesthetic through an account of how it intervenes in politically saturated contexts, we will argue that only a transcendental theory of the aesthetic (grounded in an understanding of its subjective conditions of possibility) can articulate the specificity of the relation between beauty and politics. Moreover, we will ask how the politics of culture may be dialectically related to the politics of nature in this instance – how the political immediacy of concert hall cancellations might be viewed in relation to contradictions and intractable difficulties bearing upon the politics of fossil fuels. (E)

11.45 am – 1 pm
Peter Osborne
Art’s transcendental?
Towards a (negatively universal) historical ontology of contemporary art

After a brief overview of the fate of the transcendental in the double movement of Hegel’s critique of Kant and existential and materialist critiques of Hegel, this talk will take up the question of the residual yet insistent place of the formal structure of the transcendental within the philosophical frameworks that displaced it, via the concept of art. What role remains for a transcendentially critical function within the radically distributed and rapidly shifting terrain of contemporary art? (E)

Break

3 pm – 4.15 pm
Antonia Birnbaum
Cosmic Experience

Our context – wars, climate change, changes in the global balance of power – changes the way we look at works. Walter Benjamin is a thinker of the urban, but his materialism also questions cosmic experience. This highly abstruse feature of his thought testifies to a difficulty that arises whenever one attempts to incorporate humanity’s relations to nature directly into the historicity of social logics. One of the concise figures of this difficulty is the following: When one deals with humanity’s relation to nature, it is mostly assumed that collective logics refer to the world as a whole and to all humanity, which is the de facto basis of the religious. However, when one deals with these collective logics themselves, their divisions, antagonisms, and splits between individuals and collectives, subjects and objects, come into play. This double-bind characterizes many discourses in the contemporary situation. Thus the motivation to turn to Benjamin’s cosmic experience. His materialism seeks to capture the dependence of historical experience on a surplus of nature, and this surplus as a driving force for revolutionary politics. His approach of the cosmic inquires into the distortion of the coordinates of space, time, and the world itself. These shifts are represented in various modalities: the drunkenness of forces in the context of technology, the intelligible tension that triggers the happiness of a “messianic nature,” political nihilism. In the cosmic, as Benjamin repeatedly approaches it, the transcendental experience coincides with the experience of its transformation, and thus becomes problematic itself. (G)

4.15 pm – 5.30 pm
Marc Rölli
Cosmopolitanism and Racism. Reflections on the Colonial Status of the Transcendental in Kant and Others

In the currently widely received recent post- and decolonial literature, the idea of cosmopolitanism developed by Kant appears as one that is unable to emerge from the epistemic relations of coloniality. It does indeed make universalist claims – but at the same time these seem to be derived from a particular, European-limited horizon of enlightenment. How can Kant’s anthropology of „races“ be compatible with transcendental politics or with the idea of a general history with cosmopolitan intentions? Can it be possible, in recourse to more recent critical voices, to hold on to a philosophy of the transcendental without reproducing colonial structures in thought? (G)

Break

5.45 pm – 7 pm
Jelica Šumič Riha
Interrogating the Dialectics of the Transcendental, the Real, and Truths

Traditionally, emancipatory politics is a question of knowing which parts of society are capable of counting for something, and which ones are not, which parts of society are allowed to exist and which are condemned to inexistence. Formulating the question of emancipatory politics in terms of existence, more specifically, in terms of the inscription of “the count of the uncounted” (Rancière) or the appearance of the “inexistent” (Badiou), means acknowledging that the proper place for emancipatory politics is the very terrain in which the system of domination operates. At present, however, this question of the affirmation of the inexistent or of counting the uncountable, crucial for emancipatory politics, cannot be raised at all to the extent that the globalization of “capital-parlamentarism” is characterized by the absence of the structuring principle which determines what counts and what is of no account, what is visible and what is not, in the final analysis, what exists and what does not. One of the major consequences of the impossibility of constructing the transcendental of a common world can be seen in the fact that the exclusion of the uncounted is necessarily obscured, indeed, it has become invisible. Taking as its point of departure the Badiouian slogan for prescriptive politics in the present situation of worldlessness: “there is only one world”, this paper shows the difficulty for a philosophy that considers the elaboration of a theory of change as its task, to explain that not every transcendental organization allows for its global transformation. The task of philosophy is thus to provide a theory of the multiplicity and incommensurability of worlds, due to the contingency of the transcendental organizations of the world, and the possibility of the contingent evental interruption, which occur within a given world, yet is capable of the transcendental modification of that world, and, lastly, the articulation of the multiplicity of worlds with the invariance of truths. (E)



Antonia Birnbaum is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. She works on the concept of critique and on problems of political emancipation, and is currently writing a book on the detours of the object in critical theory. She is the author of various books, including *Egalité radicale. Diviser Rancière* (2018).

Nathan Brown is Professor of English and Canada Research Chair in Poetics at Concordia University, Montreal, where he directs the Centre for Expanded Poetics. He is the author of *Rationalist Empiricism: A Theory of Speculative Critique* (2021) and *The Limits of Fabrication: Materials Science, Materialist Poetics* (2017), as well as *Baudelaire’s Shadow: An Essay on Poetic Determination* (2021) and a complete translation of Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil* (2021).

Helmut Draxler is Professor of Art Theory at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Recent publications: *Die Wahrheit der Niederländischen Malerei. Eine Archäologie der Gegenwartskunst* (2021); *Abdrift des Wollens. Eine Theorie der Vermittlung* (2017).

Peter Osborne is the director of the CRMEP Kingston University. He works on historical ontology and on the contemporaneity of art. He is the author of *Anywhere or Not At All. Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (2013), *The Postconceptual Condition. Critical essays* (2017).

Rado Riha is a lead research associate at the Institute of philosophy ZRC SAZU, Slovenia. His work centers on Kant and Lacan, and he is the author of *Kant in Lacan’scher Absicht. Die Kopernikanische Wende und das Reale* (2018).

Marc Rölli is Professor of Philosophy at the Academy of Visual Arts (HGB) in Leipzig. Until 2015 he was head of the research focus „Theory and Methods“ at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) and Full Professor of Philosophy at Fatih University in Istanbul. Current research on decolonization of philosophy, political aesthetics and epistemology, methods in the history of philosophy and art. Recent publications: *Anthropologie dekolonisieren* (2021); *Macht der Wiederholung* (2019); *Immanent Denken* (2018).

Stella Sandford is a Professor at the CRMEP Kingston University. She has published widely in Philosophy of gender and sex, including *Plato and Sex* (2010) and *How to Read Beauvoir* (2006). She has an upcoming book, *Vegetal Sex. Philosophy of Plants*.

Jelica Šumič Riha is a lead research associate at the Institute of philosophy ZRC SAZU, Slovenia. She works on lacanian psychoanalysis and politics, questions of ontology, with a particular accent on Rancière, and Badiou, and has written numerous works. She is the director of the journal *Filozofski Vestnik*.

Zeynep Türel studied medicine, biochemistry, classical philology and finally philosophy at the University of Vienna. 2012 Diploma thesis on Plato (*Gestalten des göttlichen Wahnsinns. Ein Versuch über das Verhältnis von Dichtung und Philosophie bei Platon*), supervised by Arno Böhrer; since 2016 PhD studies in philosophy at the University of Applied Arts Vienna on Hölderlin (*Der Fürst des Fests. Hölderlin als Dichter der intellektuellen Anschauung*), supervised by Helmut Draxler and Antonia Birnbaum.

Jan Völker is Associate Professor at the Institute of Philosophy of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Ljubljana. Recent publications: Alain Badiou/Jean-Luc Nancy, *Deutsche Philosophie: Ein Dialog* (ed./transl., 2017) and *Badiou and the German Tradition of Philosophy* (ed., 2019).