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Variantology 1

On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies

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Contents

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Depth of Subject and Diversity of Method
An Introduction to Variantology

1.

The world – as it appears on the monitors of the globalised cultures – is colourful and scintillating. Beneath this beautiful and ugly surface of appearances, however, powerful paradigms operate that increase standardisation. Violent conflicts, which we witness erupting daily at the beginning of this new century, are one form in which the resultant tensions are expressed. Anything that does not fit into the concepts of universalisation must be isolated or eradicated. Such things are not part of civilisation. That this primarily affects those cultures, which in the deep time of history were to a large extent responsible for laying the foundations of the contemporary hegemonial orders, is not even recognised as bitterly ironic.

Processes of standardisation, modularisation, and "cluster" formation are not only being established in the domains of the economy and technology. Such processes can be observed in the arts, sciences, and media, as well as the fields connected with them that formulate theory and develop methodology. Currently, research is only considered excellent if it is committed to some programme or main focus and serves common denominators that are based on contracted political agreements. To this end, key terms are defined and, under their banner, individual researchers come together and draw on the funds earmarked for the specific project. All of a sudden, for the space of five or ten years – the usual half-lives of such political agreements – projects appear in large numbers, which are devoted to performativity or theatrality, trans- or intermediality, the relation between analogue and digital, the nature of contemporary images, texts, and music as agglomerations of vast quantities of numbers, or, recently, to cultural techniques, including computing. These terms, as in the examples cited, have often been around for a long time, are used as analytical categories in the disciplines concerned, and taken for granted. Then, for a limited period, they are promoted to the status of leitmotifs on the national theory markets, which –

naturally – must be conceived of in an internationally networked context because the respective project or programme's guidelines say so.

The modest meetings and work processes for *Variantology* try to react naively to this culture of bloc formation and programmatic standardisation. The concept is denoted by a neologism with the advantage that it does not lend itself to the purposes of standardisation.[1] It contains a paradox, which we encounter in other coinages, such as Georges Bataille's "heterology" or Michel Foucault's "heterotopies": phenomena that are diametrically opposed, that rub each other up the wrong way, where there is friction between them or even mutual repulsion, congregate beneath a provisional roof[2] in such a manner that at any time they are able to drift apart again and operate autonomously. These are mixings of the type where re-separation remains conceivable and a constant option. The invocation of the *logos* in the concept serves not so much to establish or feign a unified systematic relationship, but more the ongoing irritation of the term's inventors and those who engage with the concept for a given period. Variantology research is conceived of as an offer of hospitality, which expects nothing more of the invitees in return than heightened presence of mind[3] in their physical presence, which the annual meetings organise in varying constellations.

2.

In contrast to the heterogeneous, with its ponderous oscillations in ontology and biology, we are interested in the variant both methodologically and epistemologically as a mode characterised by lightness and ease. As such, the variant is equally at home in experimental science and various artistic and media praxes, especially music. Variations on or different interpretations of an initial theme are integral to

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1 According to our researches, the term *Variantology* is only being used in two other places in the world, which are geographically very far apart. At the University of Vladivostok, a group of linguists gather under this heading that study the multitude of variants of Russian dialects. At the Academy of Sciences of Iran in Teheran, the language researcher Ali Ravaqi also works with the term.

2 Like the nature researcher and anthropologist Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert we are not thinking here of a solid roof, but rather of "tents with holes", which merely provide "peaceful places for temporary stopovers" (cf. the Appendix to the 1840 edition of his *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Natur- wissenschaft*).

3 Walter Benjamin used this lovely expression (*Geistesgegenwart*) in his famous essay The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility to characterise the attitude that he deemed necessary for the perception of artworks modified by modern technologies. The philosopher Dietmar Kamper liked to pair it with "body-thinking" (*Körperdenken*).

the vocabulary and everyday praxis of composers and musicians. In a specific usage, the word variant means sudden changes from major to minor (and vice versa) by changing the intervals, that is, diminution or augmentation of the third.

The semantic field to which the concept of variantology belongs possesses for us positive connotations in principle. To be different, to deviate, to change, to alternate, to modify – these are alternative translations of the Latin verb *variare*. They only slide into the negative when the speaking or writing human subject uses them as a means of discrimination.

To vary something that is established is an alternative to destroying it – a strategy that played a prominent role and was favoured by many avant-garde movements in the twentieth century. Obviously, the concept also has associations with a media format: long before the advent of cinema, variété, or the variety show, experimented with combining diverse stage praxes into an iridescent construct that only took shape for the space of a single performance.

3.

Research that is not also driven by wishes and hopes, belongs to the Hades of academe; it is anaemic and lifeless. The experimental field of variantology seeks to open up a playing field, an area where there is latitude and scope. This space, however, is not in the least arbitrary. Similar to the fortuitous finds one makes in the course of the (an)archaeological quest,[4] the variantological approach relies on certain consistencies that must always be implemented anew.

Basic requirements are: curiosity about other disciplines and their thinking, research, and arguments over and above any immediate points of contact with one's own subject, plus the will and readiness to be enriched by what is "other". *Curiositas et necessitas*, curiosity and necessity, were already closely tied in classical natural philosophy. The first academy that was devoted to experimentation in natural philosophy, the sixteenth century *Accademia dei segreti* in Naples, had only two criteria that prospective members had to meet. One had to bring in something original, and in this sense new, about the world, and one had to be prepared to share this knowledge generously with others.

To the necessary flexibility between disciplines belongs openness toward national and regional characteristics. The academic metropolises of the West

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4 See the chapter on method (Chapter 2), Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*, transl. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, in press).

and the northern hemisphere are not necessarily where, or from where, the most exciting processes in knowledge or know-how come. Both in the deeper historical time strata and in contemporary research impetus for change has often come from the provinces and the periphery before the major cities take over and shape this into standards and products. To draft a cartography of research that deviates from the familiar map of established and well-known centres is one goal inherent in variantological activities.

That artefacts for generating, investigating, and disseminating knowledge, for elaborating arts and crafts, for manufacturing pleasurable pastimes of all kinds play a special role in this first variantology collection is not coincidental. It is an original interest of the strange construction that an academy of media and the arts represents that long-established concepts should be generously thrown open for re-consideration, both in art and the media as well as their inter-relationships.

Contemporary concepts of media are either under-determined to the point of complete triviality or, from a historical perspective, much too narrow. We have become accustomed to viewing the origin of the media in connection with technical reproducibility of visual and acoustic phenomena; that is, in connection with the development of photography and phonography in the nineteenth century, or to connect the origins of media arts with the Fluxus movements after World War II. Yet since classical antiquity in Europe and before – in the Byzantine, Arabic, and Chinese civilisations – there have been both artistic and scientific praxes of technical experimentation realised with and through media. Code systems, channels for transmitting and receiving messages, apparatus for producing special visual or acoustic effects, devices for generating, transforming, and modulating texts, images, and sounds are part of the rich legacy of generations of philosophers, medical doctors, engineers, physiologists, and mathematicians before their categorical split from the performing and fine arts. Only then these praxes were not labelled media, or media practice, because the latter did not yet exist as prestigious, politically, culturally, and economically attractive institutions.

This changed considerably in the course of the twentieth century – not that anything more originated in this period in the field of media that was profoundly original. However, techniques of production, distribution, and consumption of images, sounds, and texts that had formerly been separate were now bundled together. This is what made the media into a central phenomenon. In recent decades the arts, too, entered into a tactical alliance with them. At the beginning of this new century we have now also reached a new situation in which mechanical, electronic, and digital techniques are integrated as a matter of course into

creative processes, just like the electricity and water supply in our houses. Media are no longer attractions; they have become ordinary and normal and are even beginning to become repellent. The avant-garde movement after World War II., whose proponents devoted themselves to film, video, electronic music, and programmed aesthetics of various kinds, full of hope that there would arise an endlessly diverse praxis of art free of authority and power, is now confronted by a dilemma. According to individual capability, the machines and programmes can now produce unlimited variants of whatever is fed into them and is processed by them. The basis, however, upon which these variants are produced is no longer recognisable.

Artistic and scientific praxis that wants to remain attractive *after* the integration of media into its various praxes of expression can safely dispense with the prefix or appendage "media", which it often assumed temporarily and without much enthusiasm. To conceptualise and pursue art *after* media, means to write, compute, visualise, and translate into sound in the knowledge and with the experience that the processing, transforming, and shaping energy of technology does not have to be shunned or denied, but neither does it have to be celebrated as a spellbinding event. With the available, and thus limited, variants of historical constellations of the relationship between art, science, and technology, it might be possible to confront constructively the base-less formation of variants by the simulating machines and programmes.

To establish relationships that can be at once diverse, valid, and capable of expanding horizontally, it is also necessary for there to be movement vertically. What connects the researchers who gather for a time period under our roof is their passionate search for the origins and evolution of phenomena in the deep strata of the relationships between art, science, and technology. Archaeology of the media with its individual genealogies is just one *modus operandi* among many others. A classical philology that recognises the media character of poetic forms and content is just as valuable a variant as a history of science and technology that considers the cultural significance of experiments, or a philosophical argumentation that risks the precarious balancing act between ancient and modern mysticism.

To acquire expertise in the depths of a subject presupposes a working method that allows interpretation from a media perspective. The codes, upon which the praxes of expression are based that are discussed here, can only be interpreted if one knows what is unique about them and what their original expressions were, insofar as original testimonies exist in hand-written or printed form. Navigation in the deep times we consider in this volume requires the ability to read and interpret the sources adjudged to be original and to translate the questions aris-

ing into contemporary issues. Translation is certainly not a mechanical activity. Significantly, in spite of fifty years of concerted effort, existing computer translation programmes still fail miserably to deal with even the lowest level of language complexity.

The mathematician, cartographer, astronomer, and alchemist John Dee (1527–1608), who among other things devised the original *Monadology* a century before Leibniz, wrote in 1570 a brilliant introduction to the first translation of Euclid's *Elements* into the language that, 400 years later, has hegemonial significance as the *lingua franca* of the scientific and technical age – English.[5] This event had enormous implications, also with respect to media. It meant that the classical foundations of geometry were no longer only accessible to a mere few, an educated elite, but they had passed into the vernacular and, in the longer term, would be subject to change.

It is our hope and wish that the singular knowledge presented here in the case studies, in this first volume on variantology, will arouse the reader's curiosity. We also hope that our book will serve as a spur to action – to ensure that the arts, sciences, and media and their relationships to one another remain alive, open, and risky.

Translated by Gloria Custance

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5 H. Billingsley translated the text of *The Elements of Geometrie*. See the facsimile of the frontispiece on page 341 in this volume.