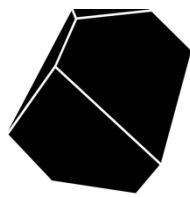




**CFP: Perceiving Forces. Dynamics of the Senses in Science, Art and Literature /
Wahrnehmungskräfte – Kräfte wahrnehmen. Dynamiken der Sinne in Wissenschaft,
Kunst und Literatur.**

Conference of the DFG Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies “Imaginaria of Force”,
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Imaginarien der Kraft

Since ancient philosophy, perception (*aisthesis*) is fundamentally determined as force (*dynamis*). Thinking about the functioning of the perceptive faculty not only stands in tension between the capability of truth or susceptibility to deception and between passive impression and active imagination. There is also the problematic relationship of hidden cause and perceptible effect, latency and manifestation, which is characteristic for reflections on force in general.

In Aristotle's description, the faculty of perception is situated between passivity and activity insofar as it actualizes the intelligible forms (*morphe*) contained in things that have an effect on perception. The late medieval transformations of Aristotelian *aisthesis* are under the influence of Arabic theories of transmission respectively reception and increasingly describe the process of perception as the reception of qualitative intensities. The carrier of the *aisthesis* is the ethereal spirit, through which changes in the perceptual apparatus or respectively the instances of cognitive processing are set in motion.

In the neoplatonically influenced Renaissance teachings on the *eros*, perception is described as a sympathetic dynamic that oscillates between harmony and overwhelming of the object and subject of perception; paradigm is the effective power of ‘magical’ emissions, but also the power of images and the power of speech. The topical equation of femininity with sensitivity (in the sense of passive imprintability), but also with active aesthetic power to imprint, accompanies this discourse continuously. Physical and physiological optics gradually detaches itself from these notions culminating in Johannes Kepler defining perception as point-by-point transmission of impulses of light that must be (re)assembled beyond the ‘wall’ of the retina by cognitive processing. The question to what extent perception is based on such a (re)construction or

whether the (pictorial) 'entireties' of reality are perceived directly is the source of debate, which was mainly fueled by the Jesuit optics of the Baroque era.

In addition to this discourse on the active and passive parts of perception and the question of the intensity of aisthesis, there is also a discussion about the hierarchy of the senses dating back to antiquity, which is also based on the category of force. In this context, eyesight is mostly given a top rank, because it has the power to grasp forms adequately, even over greater distances. Considerations of the hierarchy of the arts are derived from this in the new art discourse of the Renaissance. At the same time, the question of the respective sensory capacities triggered over many centuries a comparative psychology that contrasted the senses of animals and humans, which - following Aristotle - only conceded to humans the greater sensitivity of the sense of touch. This shaped the later career of the *tactus* as a paradigm of perception in general, while paradoxically the sense of touch itself increasingly receded from the modes of reception of the arts.

In thinking about the *vires repraesentativa*, the question of the faculties of perception and imagination is modeled on Newton's concept of force since the 18th century. Perception should become measurable and calculable as shown in 19th-century physiology and psychology. With the quest for abstract entities, such as 'energies of the sense', one no longer asks for perceptual qualities, but for quantitative values. In striving for maximum objectivity, not only old questions about the susceptibility to interference and deception of the perceptual process as well as the reference to reality of what is perceived were to be answered. With the integration into experiments, theories of perception are also situated in the larger context of an empiricization of a metaphysical concept of force. Bodily phenomenology, on the other hand, reactivates dimensions of a genuine bodily experience, which not only lead to a quantified and mathematically determinable concept of force of physics, but also make force describable as *dynamis*, i. e. as a faculty of living beings. However, the peculiarity of human perception gains contour not least through its embedding in (evolutionary) biological questions concerning the peculiarities and developmental potentials of human and non-human perception.

These are the questions that will be addressed under the double title "Perceptual Forces – Perceiving Forces" and should be answered not only by philosophical or scientific, but above all by artistic approaches to the processes and possibilities of perception. To what extent is sensory perception treated as a mere object of acting forces or as an active or activating force itself? To what extent does perception conceptualized in this way correspond to reality? And how do conceptualizations of perception as sensory forces relate to the problematic perceptibility of forces? Starting from the basic concepts of sensory physiology and epistemology, the conference aims to open up three fields of work. (1) Biological concepts of perception of human and non-human animals, (2) Approaches to a cultural and media history of the senses, (3) The arts and their implicit and explicit theories.

(1) Attempting to determine the relationship between perception and consciousness, the explanation of the process of perception addresses the question of the position of humans in

their natural environment. While the pre-Socratics ascribed the ability of perception to all living organisms, Aristotle makes the faculty of a perceptive relation to the world the distinguishing feature that differentiates humans and animals from plants. As a decidedly critical faculty, which also has an inherent reflexive structure, the distancing from the perceived is the indispensable prerequisite for perception. Unlike animals and humans, plants seem to be directly subjected to the impacts of matter. Precisely this sparked the Early Modern debates about forms of vegetal perception (paradigm: sunflower), which were considered threatening to undermine the gradations of the Aristotelian *scala naturae* by the equally Aristotelian emphasis on natural continuities. Here it should be explored how the question of a supposedly genuinely human perception is linked to specific practices of setting and dissolving boundaries between humans and environments.

(2) Looking at the cultural and media history of perception, it not only deals with classification schemes within nature, but also with the hierarchy of the individual senses, theories of transmission and reception, the parallel or co-existence of their respective objects of perception, their (further) processing, as well as the effort to shift or transgress boundaries of perception. To what extent can we count on a respective peculiarity of the senses, and how are their modes of translateability or interaction shaped? Which role do media and technical augmentations play in this context? In addition to sensory perception, stagings of “extrasensory” perception (epiphanies, miracles, mediumism, etc.) would also need to be addressed. Last but not least, exemplary trajectories or shifts of direction in history that are described as heightening and atrophy, technical enhancements and adjustments, or artistic 'sensitization' (or sensitivity) and societal-social-civilizational 'anesthesia' are to be considered.

(3) Finally, the relationship of human faculties of perception and modes of the production and reception of art could be investigated. Can artistic methods of representation be interpreted as adaptations of the knowledge of human perception? What influence exert visual and linguistic modes of representation on the conceptualization of perception in general, but also on conventions of perception? The attributions of senses and arts and the competition of senses derived from them shape the paragon from the Early Modern period to the 19th century. Along the way, terms focussing on attitudes of perception and qualities of sensation, such as emotion, movement, stir, stimulus, irritation, shock, atmosphere, attention, or mindfulness, gain contour. The reconstruction of these and other aesthetic concepts prompts the consideration of the reflexive aspect of an aesthetics anchored in the power of perception. Is art conceived as an irritation and disruption of well-trodden paths of perception, as a training ground for perception, as activated, heightened, and last but not least, perhaps, as perceived perception? What about the implied potential of the arts to question or change perceptual practices and conventions?

Contributions to the conference can be submitted in German or English; it is planned to publish the conference papers as a volume in the book series “Imaginarien der Kraft” (de Gruyter).

Please **submit** proposals for papers in the fields of art, literary and media studies, history of science, cultural studies, philosophy with a **1-2 page abstract by 15 October, 2021** to: imaginarien.der.kraft@uni-hamburg.de

Contact:

DFG-Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe »Imaginarien der Kraft«

Gorch-Fock-Wall 3, 1. Stock (links)

20354 Hamburg

Deutschland

imaginarien.der.kraft@uni-hamburg.de

<https://www.imaginarien-der-kraft.uni-hamburg.de/>