

**Observing Nature – Representing Experience.
Practices and Concepts 1800-1850**

Workshop des

Teilprojekt A2 – SFB 626 „Ästhetische Erfahrung im Zeichen der Entgrenzung der Künste“,

Freie Universität Berlin und des Department II,

Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte/MPIWG Berlin

Gefördert von der Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG)

Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte/MPIWG, Berlin, 28. bis 29. Januar 2005

The workshop was organized in cooperation with Department II of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science – MPIWG Berlin by Erna Fiorentini, head, with Lorraine Daston, of the Research Unit/Teilprojekt A2 (*Protomodern Vision and Representation Between Aesthetic Experience and Scientific Objectivity*, <http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/VISION/>; http://www.sfb626.de/pages/teilprojekt_A2.html), which is one of the founding projects of the Cooperative Research Center/Sonderforschungsbereich SFB 626 *Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits* of the Freie Universität Berlin (<http://www.sfb626.de>), funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – DFG.

The participants were:

Charlotte Bigg, ETH Zürich (*The Panorama, or La Nature à Coup d'Oeil*)

Lorraine Daston, MPIWG Berlin (commentator and discussant)

Erna Fiorentini, Freie Universität Berlin/MPIWG Berlin (*"An Inexhaustible Source of Pure and Exciting Contemplations": John Herschel's Priorities in Observation and Depiction*)

Bettina Gockel, Universität Tübingen (commentator and discussant)

Bernhard Kleeberg, MPIWG Berlin (*Ideal Geometrical Types and Epistemologies of Morphology*)

Charlotte Klonk, University of Warwick (*Theoretical Change and Visual Depiction. Artists and Geologists on the Isle of Wight in the Early Nineteenth Century*)

Annik Pietsch, MPIWG Berlin (*"Gottes Natur empfunden und erkannt". Carl Blechen's 'Naturgemälde'*)

Regina Schubert, Freie Universität Berlin (*Natur re-konstruieren. Perspektive als Erkenntniskonzept und künstlerische Praxis*)

John Tresch, University of Chicago (*Estrangement of Vision: Edgar Allan Poe's Optics*)

Vladimiro Valerio, Università IUAV di Venezia (*Cartography, Art and Mimesis*)

Friedrich Weltzien, Freie Universität Berlin (*Describing Landscape – Experiencing Nature: A. W. Schlegel's conception of "Selbstthätigkeit" and aesthetic judgement*)

Nino Zchomelidse, Princeton, NJ (*H.C. Oersted und die Königlich Dänische Kunstakademie in Kopenhagen im frühen 19. Jahrhundert*)

The workshop brought together international experts from different historical disciplines (History, Art History and the History of Science) in order to discuss and pinpoint the relationship between the observation of Nature and its recording in the early 19th century, focussing in particular on the analysis of the peculiar, ambivalent quality of this relationship in this period. This peculiar quality expressed itself as a sort of complementarity and interdependence of the expectations associated with processes of observation and

representation. These expectations oscillated between aims of exactness, quantification, reproducibility and the attention to the observer's momentary, individual, eventually aesthetic experience of Nature.

To investigate the intriguing complexity of this correlation, the workshop opted to analyse the practices of observation, recording and representation, assuming that they must be considered historiographical categories of their own.

The contributions examined these practices and their meaning and standing in heterogeneous fields of interest of the early 19th century, discussing examples related to epistemology and aesthetics from literature and philosophy (Tresch, Weltzien), painting (Klonk, Pietsch, Schubert), natural history (Fiorentini), geography and cartography (Bigg, Valerio), microscopy (Kleeberg) and the context of the Academies (Zchomelidse). These diverse fields shared a preoccupation with approaching nature and assessing this approach in terms of significative representation. However, they varied in the understanding of the role of the observer's sentience and of the degree of its interference in these processes.

So put in context, practices of observation and recording promised to be particularly suitable as keys to the general concepts underlying them and the field in which they were exerted. From the concepts so deduced we hoped then:

- 1) to infer generally valid theoretical stances about the ambivalent quality of the relationship between observer and Nature when observation was associated with representation and recording;
- 2) to evaluate if and in what terms the translation of the observed into quantifying recordings was considered a process of experience's communication being both cognitively and aesthetically determined; and eventually
- 3) to question the parameters framing 'romantic' attitudes towards nature in current research, calling for further differentiation and attention to nuances in the investigation of these attitudes.

The workshop was structured in three sections:

Section I - Recording the experience of nature was focussed on practices of observation and representation closely related to the personal, direct exposure of the observer to the experience of nature, and examined the diverse motivations informing these practices.

Section II - Beyond Experience? The Value of the Senses vs. Nature's Construction investigated procedures which were rather concerned with conveying experience through representation, in order to explore the intriguingly concurrent incorporation of epistemological and aesthetic questions in these practices.

In *Section III - Translations of Experience? Images of the observed, cognition and the aesthetic appreciation of Nature* there was general agreement that the term 'image' must be expanded to 'representation', more generally understood as the recording or construction as such, in whatever genre, medium or form. This session of discussion aimed at an overall evaluation of the conclusions drawn in the preceding sections. The central question was whether starting from the analysis of the modes of observation and recording in the early 19th century we could infer a historicised definition of the ambiguity inherent in these procedures. Moreover, we asked, with this ambiguity defined as a historical category, could we relate it to a specific concept of aesthetic appreciation of Nature in this time? And could we draw on this specific concept to particularise the blurred general concept of romantic *zeitgeist*?

From the individual and general discussions several traits emerged which make the complex and variegated character of the period under investigation more palpable. Moreover, it was acknowledged that these traits may not only describe the period under investigation more precisely in its peculiar variety, but that they are themselves ideal objects of further enquiry as characteristic phenomena of the period.

For instance, regardless of the epistemological or aesthetic end of the approaches to Nature, and whether the moment of production or reception of recording and construction was considered, there was a general programmatic attention to affects, both rational and emotional, be they accompanying nature's direct

observation or awakened in the beholder through representation. Consequently, with the representations themselves considered capable of generating both knowledge and emotion, they should be regarded historically not only as indicators, but also as agents of the changing modes of viewing, judging and appreciating natural phenomena.

In methods, a tension between the interest in totality and the attention to details as complementary keys to cognizance and pleasure dominated the practices explored. Accordingly, both in observation and representation, the process of selection was crucial in producing an appropriate frame to deepen the knowledge and/or enjoyment of the observed occurrence, as well as to apprehend its general meaning. Cross-checking this statement in light of the prevailing concepts of totality and their related approaches to nature (the Humboldtian approach, the inductive methodology of the Neo-Baconist and Goethe's alignment), the attention to detail, in its turn, was considered a useful tool for grasping totality. This interest in detail, however, cannot be considered a persistence of the enlightenment's commitment to refined description, which was intended to unveil the invisible systematics of nature's phenomena. The new interest aimed, in fact, less at the abstraction than at the specification of the visible, in which the discriminating observer singles out features with the aim of detecting significant connections to general rules governing the observed phenomena. Here the qualitative novelty of the approach in observation and representation already becomes palpable, and in light of the examples discussed it turned out to be an avowal of the necessity of a complementary deployment of sensory receptivity, mechanical-numerical registration and judgement.

Hence it was no surprise to find, as a *basso continuo* affecting the standards of seeing and representing, a continuous preoccupation with the value and the role of instrumental aids. Significantly, this preoccupation did not point to the replacement, but rather to the assistance and enhancement of the eye's and imagination's capacities and the observer's individual recording or constructing ability. Accordingly, new techniques of observation (e.g. camera lucida) and representation (e.g. lithography) played a major role in generating the "crisis of perspective" (Valerio) which is recognised as a main characteristic of the period.

In this light, the discussion placed much emphasis on the peculiarity of the concept of 'exactness'. It revealed itself to be multifaceted, and therefore it was agreed that it should be dealt with very gingerly when studying the considered period. As an overall definition of the demands of representation in this regard, the quality "Naturgemäß / in accordance with nature" (Weltzien) seemed to be more specific to the claims of the period than "Naturgetreu / faithful or accurate to nature" (Daston).

In their social dynamics, the investigated practices revealed new qualities, as well. As regards the character of the relationship between aesthetic and epistemological attitudes in observation and representation, shared efforts toward conciliation and implementation in scrutinising and communicating the experience of the observed crystallized as a typical feature. Such tendencies toward programmatic cooperation emerged not only in cases of individual private exchange, but also in the general shift to institutionally supported mediation. This was put into practice in the context of the academies, which, through mutual acknowledgement and reciprocal support and exchange, provided the context for transfer activities involving points of view, motivations, intentions and practices. In addition, this institutional turn indicates an ongoing process of intellectualisation of handiwork and craftsmanship, in which practices of observation and representation had to be related to the epistemological and aesthetic convictions informing their adoption. This most notably applies to practices of drawing in terms of significant note-taking. Here the actual procedures and instrumental techniques, in fact, had to account for the problematic relation between word, number, image, and the selection and adjustment operated by the observer.

The discussions following each discrete contribution enabled us to come closer to the general aim of the workshop, which was to reformulate and particularise the rather blurred general conception of the romantic *zeitgeist* in relation to the approach to Nature. Although we were not able to articulate an explicit formula,

even though “mechanical romanticism” (Tresch) could possibly be an adequate working concept, the workshop nevertheless succeeded in putting forward a more comprehensive and discriminating notion of ‘romantic’ attitudes towards nature, nature’s observation and its recording.

A major outcome was the general agreement that both the basic approach and conclusions of the main streams of current research should be challenged, because they only insufficiently account for the variety of phenomena with which we are confronted in the first decades of the 19th century. On the one hand there is a conventional and common-sense notion of a polarity of attitudes, wherein ideas of contemplation and aesthetic rapture vis-à-vis Nature’s sublimity are opposed to the striving for a ‘scientific exactness’, which is itself only fuzzily and mostly simplistic defined; on the other hand, we find attempts to reformulate this dichotomous view of the romantic approach to nature either positivistically, emphasising ‘scientific’ aspects in art (which are often described using terms like precision, objectivity, painstaking record, etc. in the meaning these terms assumed much later), or conversely, by highlighting the poetical stances in science. Maintaining that the different attitudes so addressed are intrinsically connected with the romantic approach to nature, it should be recognized, we argue, that their relationships were more far-ranging and complex than these scholarly orientations admit.

According to our results, in fact, the different attitudes displayed a dynamic, osmotic character, in which various positions on reality and experience and on the significance of inner and outer world continuously were exchanged, reverberating on the practices of observation and representation (or vice versa). Concepts of permeability and mutual implementation, therefore, seem much better suited to describe this character than the positivistic concept of a unidirectional striving for a scientific foundation of the arts or the notion of an artistic commitment of science.

Confirming our conclusion are the processes of implementation of art through science and vice versa that we came across, as well as the occurrence of the complementary training of vision, reason and instruments that can be traced both in the individual and the institutional context. Moreover, the communication of experience (meant as institutional and disciplinary expertise, as well as emotional and rational response) turned out to be central, informing indeed many practices and attitudes of observation and the construction of spaces of experience in representation.

Thus the investigated practices reject an oversimplifying dichotomy of epistemic and aesthetic commitments, pointing instead to a crucial simultaneity and interlacement of aesthetic and physical space in processes of observation and representation.

All these aspects confirm the peculiar character initially proposed for the period under investigation, at least for the first three decades of the 19th century. In fact, the results seem to corroborate the idea of a fundamental shift proceeding at the end of the 1830s, at a time in which institutional and disciplinary specification as well as increasingly disembodied processes of mechanical recording and representation began to modify the character we attempted to describe.

Provisionally, these first three decades of the 19th century can be termed an interface period between late enlightenment and modernity, since they bear many elements of both orientations. This appellation, however, calls for more accuracy, because the period displays a unique and independent character in the arrangement and evaluation of these elements. The major example of this novelty is the notion of observation itself as it emerged from our investigation. In the period at stake, in fact, the concept no longer refers to a passive observer overwhelmed by the sublimity of Nature, but rather to a process growing into an active encounter with the natural world, and based on training, enhancement and control of receptivity. Moreover, observation seems to have become here a foundational concept for many genres and disciplines attending to Nature and concerned with the first-person experience of its manifestations and representations, proving to be a term with multiple connotations that demands a closer multidisciplinary analysis. Thus, in order to evaluate and

understand more extensively the approach to nature and representation in the first three decades of the 19th century we hold that an “ontology of observation” (Daston) is needed.

For this purpose, the adopted ‘kaleidoscopic’ method of bringing together different historical disciplines was successful: discussing the examples and the resulting terms from multiple points of view was felt to lead to a more extensive and more critical evaluation of the issues at stake.

The workshop’s programme and abstracts of the presentations are available on the web under http://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/VISION/ws_observing_nature/ws_observing_nature.html.

A preliminary publication of the papers and results will appear in the spring (Erna Fiorentini, ed.: *Observing Nature – Representing Experience. Practices and Concepts 1800-1850. Preprint, Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte. Berlin 2005. ISSN: 9848-9444*), while work proceeds on the final book on the topic, to be published at the end of the year.

Erna Fiorentini

fiorentini@mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de

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AHF, Aldringenstraße 11, 80639 München
Telefon: 089 – 13 47 29, Fax: 089 – 13 47 39
E-Mail: info@ahf-muenchen.de, Website: <http://www.ahf-muenchen.de>

Empfohlene Zitierweise / recommended citation style:

AHF-Information. 2005, Nr.014
URL: <http://www.ahf-muenchen.de/Tagungsberichte/Berichte/pdf/2005/014-05.pdf>