

Research Project

Sinergia: The Power of Wonder. The Instrumentalization of Admiration, Astonishment and Surprise in Discourses of Knowledge, Power and Art

Third-party funded project

Project title Sinergia: The Power of Wonder. The Instrumentalization of Admiration, Astonishment and Surprise in Discourses of Knowledge, Power and Art

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Organisation / Research unit

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Department

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Status Completed

This sinergia-project, directed by Mireille Schnyder (Zürich, Leading House) and Nicola Gess, aims to provide groundbreaking insights into the social relevance of aesthetic emotions, by showing that the analysis of the deliberate instrumentalization of wonder (Staunen) in political, scientific, social and artistic contexts casts an innovative light onto the structuring of cultural values, the ordering of knowledge and our practices of governance and domination. Further members of the project are Hugues Marchal (Basel) and Ulrich Bröckling (Freiburg i.Br.). The sinergia-project builds upon the results of a previous Sinergia project, Poetics and Aesthetics of Amazement. As indicated in its title, that first phase of research focused on the fabrication, reflection and function of wonder within literature and the arts, with a significant attention to philosophical thought. However, the new project endeavors to research how these practices and the kinds of wonder they induce are used in the fields of power and knowledge. If aesthetics, rhetoric and poetics investigate and conceptualize the artificial production of wonder in the threefold sense of admiration, astonishment and surprise, these closely related emotions are also put in operation in a much broader range of human activities. They are commonly sought, managed and questioned in, for example, politics, pedagogy and education, polemology, ecological and security issues, (popular) science, advertising and media, when issues of hierarchy, legitimacy and risk assessment, but also persuasion, manipulation and entertainment are at stake. The project aims to study these instrumentalizations of wonder and to assess their massive cultural importance in a strongly interdisciplinary perspective that primarily joins cultural sociology and literary studies, as well as the history of science, but that will also rely on the collaboration of scholars of educational science, history, art and architecture, musicology, and security studies, who are involved in supervising the doctoral candidates. That said, our methodology is based on the hypothesis that literature, literary studies and the sociological approach of cultural analysis are key tools to understand processes in which wonder is instrumentalized. Literature has not only reflected on its own fabrication and use of this affect; it has also constantly depicted, analyzed and/or criticized the broader social and anthropological utilization of wonder that we want to study, and it therefore forms a rich diachronic archive of relevant observations and assumptions. Non-literary strategies of inducing and appropriating wonder heavily rely on linguistic, discursive and aesthetic tools: their analysis therefore calls for instruments of literary studies, such as rhetoric, poetics, aesthetics, that are to be applied to a meta-analysis of public discourses of knowledge and power, their practices and arrangement in the public sphere. Finally, the sociological approach of cultural analysis allows us to research wonder as a specific form of elicited and orchestrated interpersonal behavior. Historically, the project focuses on early modern and modern history and contemporary times. This time frame, rang-

ing from 1600 to the present, allows for examining important discursive and historical shifts, which we consider to be crucial for the topic at hand.

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