Changing Cultures: Cultures of Change

The ATACD research network, with 20 partners from 9 European countries, has explored the potential of intensive or topological approaches to the study of culture. But in December 2009, more than 160 delegates attended the conference Changing Cultures: Cultures of Change to develop, expand and test the value of such approaches for thinking about cultural change. The relevance of foregrounding the question of change at such a time was immediately apparent: many of the papers focused on the increasing importance of calculation and complex technical systems, not only in specialised sites of scientific enquiry but also in everyday life. In contemporary society, numbers do not just describe but they construct and - in topological thinking - take on virtual properties, building abstract spaces of calculation and opening up the possibility of new perspectives on the questions of cultural predictability and innovation. But the conference did not simply describe these developments but also provided a variety of responses to them.

Many of the papers considered the tools, techniques and artifacts of thinking topologically about cultural change, asking: What spaces do they make? How can the current development of material culture of topological thinking be taken into account, reflexively, as a research topic? What are the cultural implications of the growth of technical systems, quantitative calculation and ideas and procedures concerned with number, counting, and logic, the increase in lists and registers, and the rise of logistics, of innovations in thinking about linkages and technologies of address, and the combination and organisation of these operations into systems in everyday life? What kinds of engagement are adequate to the task of thinking and acting in response?

One of the most illuminating aspects of the conference was the way in which representatives of different disciplines engaged with these questions. There were, of course, both examples of the application of topological techniques and methods across disciplines and critiques of their uses in this way, but also many examples of the exploration of methods that employ techniques of modeling, visualization, and mapping in ways that allowed a practical, situated interrogation of the potential of topological thinking. This then fed back into discussions of whether topology is in fact best understood as offering a method that works across disciplines, and/or whether the ‘operative turn’ associated with topology is an opportunity or a threat to disciplinary epistemologies.

The topics of the conference were diverse: from ‘self-organisation and

emergence in social systems' to 'technologies of prediction' to 'the spatial organization of rituals' to 'a topological approach to psychology' to 'postcolonial topologies'. And the disciplines represented were many, with scholars from physics, artificial intelligence, mathematics, architecture, urban planning, sociology, anthropology, digital media studies, cultural studies and philosophy. From the very beginning, it was clear that the conference was not going to adopt or develop a synthetic, unified definition of topology, nor cede privilege to any single disciplinary understanding of topology. Instead, the independent roots and diverse trajectories of topological thinking identified within disciplines or in relation to specific problems demonstrated that multiplicity is not simply a theme in topology but also, a mode of operation, and that this is what makes it both useful and challenging for the study of culture.

Perhaps the single theme that united delegates was an interest in thinking about change: in developing tools to understand, measure and manage change; in thinking about why understanding change – adaptation, evolution, innovation, movement – is the explicit focus of concern in contemporary society; and in changing 'change', what the values of change might be.

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