

Abstracts: mimesis, transmission, power

June 3, 2011. 9.30 – 18.00

**One day seminar co-organised by
the UCL Department of Anthropology,
the Institute of Archaeology and the Centre for Museums,
Heritage and Material Culture Studies**

Department of Anthropology - Daryll Forde Seminar Room
14 Taviton Street, London WC1H 0BW

Further details: <http://www.inmaterial.com/ucl/mimesis>

Alicia Jiménez (a.jimenez@ucl.ac.uk)

9.30-10.00

Alicia Jiménez (UCL/Universidad Autónoma de Madrid)

Introduction: mimesis, transmission, power

Ancient Greeks used the term 'mimesis' to refer to the ability to simulate the appearance of something or somebody. Mimesis is central to theories investigating the relationship between nature and its representation through the work of art, the theatre play or the literary text. The link between mimesis and material culture remains, however, less explored. For this reason this conference aims to bring together archaeologists, anthropologists, social scientists and experts on visual culture to explore new ways of understanding the production and consumption of mimetic material culture.

Acknowledging the fact that the replica is never an exact reproduction of the original introduces the possibility of conceptualising the act of imitation as a transformative –a therefore, creative- process. Imitation can be understood in that sense as 'cultural translation' and the 'original copy' as a source of innovation. This claim is one of the starting points of debate during the one-day seminar, which intends to question the widespread platonic assumption that opposes a "true original" to a "fake copy" and think anew the relation between centres and peripheries.

10.00-10.30

Richard Bussmann (UCL)

Materiality and imitation in provincial Egypt (3000 – 2000 BCE)

Egyptologists have been blamed for focusing only on those features of ancient Egypt defined as belonging to a distinct high culture, such as writing, art, and monumental architecture. Research over the past two decades increasingly revealed the diversity of Egyptian culture beyond elite modes of representation. Provincial Egypt is an ideal setting to understand the relationship between local traditions and an emerging central power from an archaeological point of view. Similar to a colonial context it is a breeding milieu in which models of representation are being created, imitated, and transformed. The central government penetrated into this milieu using bureaucracy as the most important tool of establishing power. However, text based approaches have failed to analyze the adaptation of bureaucratic practices in provincial contexts and the way in which authority was imposed on objects. Interestingly, provincial communities started to develop new administrative media over the 3rd millennium drawing on models intimately linked to the body and the local horizon. The

aim of this paper is to demonstrate that imitation is a strategy of appropriation and negotiation in thick cultural contexts. Rather than analyzing the relationship between an original and the copy the focus is placed on the diverse dynamics behind imitation practices. Provincial administration in 3rd millennium Egypt provides a case study on the interrelationship of imitation and power in the material world.

10.30-11.00

Dimitri Karadimas (CNRS, Paris)

The devil and the «Dueño»: ritual masks and images of masters of the animals between Andean pre-Columbian iconography and contemporary amazonian ritual.

The Master of the game and animals is a major figure among the actual *Miraña* of Colombian Amazon. The model of reproduction taken in nature to give account of the behaviour of this Master is in the parasitic way that some solitary wasps capture, paralyze and use as prey some spiders and caterpillars to feed their offspring. When entering in ritual the Master of the animals is personified by a costume-mask featuring an aggressive anthropomorphic being with an erected phallus (the wasps sting), and, due to his peculiar behaviour, sometimes named “Diablito” –little Devil– in Spanish.

Various ethnographic accounts on Northwest Amazonian groups (Makuna, Barasana, Cubeo, Desana, etc.), show that a local mythological figure called *Yurupari* is in fact the same anthropomorphised wasp that is taken as a model. In the initiation process that young male adolescents have to go through, they are presented with flutes and trumpets that are supposed to be incarnating the body of the mythological hero. The instruments are sacred and thus prohibited non-initiates (women and children).

In pre-Columbian times, various objects of Peruvian and Colombian archaeological provenience picture the same thematic of the anthropomorphised wasps, mostly as images on tapestry and ceramics but also as golden ornaments. The purpose on my presentation is to focus on the possibility that these variations occurring on the same referent (the parasitic wasps) take a multiplicity of forms (in images, myths and rituals) due to the modality of transmission thanks to the modification of a perceptual pattern based on anthropomorphism.

11.00-11.30

Alex Bentley (Durham University)

Tipping points and unpredictability in complex social systems

We often sense uncertainty in a complex world of cascading events from unexpected, seemingly minor, causes - from the financial crisis of 2008 to the continual flux in the popularity of material culture, language and other popular phenomena. Phrases like “tipping point” have become commonplace in describing modern events. Tools are being developed for looking predicting probable tipping points from a time sequence of events, such as climate records and ecological populations. Unpredictability and flux are the essence of evolution, however, and accepting some degree of unpredictability may be inevitable. Thinking more probabilistically, we can also explore models that consider the full multitude of possible options among collections interconnected agents, which naturally bring about an essential flux and unpredictability in collective behaviour. Applying these models to case studies provides a basis for understanding flux and uncertainty in cascading events, and resolving

whether may ever predict them. Here I will discuss a generalised approach to how things spread through populations, and anthropological approaches to cultural change and evolution. Starting with archaeological case examples, I will move to modern social systems in which the magnitude of globalised interconnection often introduces an element of fundamental unpredictability to collective behaviour.

13.00-13.30

Christopher Pinney (UCL)

What hell looks like: representation as infection

Provoked by what Joseph Koerner (in relation to Hieronymous Bosch) terms “the paradoxical thing-ness of devilish deceit”, this paper explores the nature of popular Hindu punishments in hell via early modern European depictions of witchcraft and J.M. Coetzee’s “The Problem of Evil”. The Indian images, known variously as Karni bharni (‘reap what you sow’) or Karma ke phal have a long history as manuscript illustrations and reached a mass public through lithography in the late 19th century. They attempt an iconic replication of (mis)deeds through the form that punishments take, demonstrating one of the ‘concrete’ dimensions of mimesis, and in the process ally themselves to very specific practices of power. Coetzee’s investigation resonates with Koerner’s comment on the manner in which Bosch “engineers his own figurations to seem potentially like the idols they vilify”. This is their power and their danger. For Coetzee the additional danger lies in the impossibility of returning to the off-stage what has been brought on-stage. We might think of this as the signature of the visible: its ratchet effect, the permanent effect of the positivity of mimesis which can never be deleted. Coetzee also locates a danger and positivity in our demand to see (those things as he puts it that “we want to see because we are human”). There is a whiff here of the magical qualities of sfumato, of the “smoky” enhanced technique of illusion developed by Leonardo which as Gaudio notes demonstrated and infected “the artist’s ‘magical’ ability to manipulate his medium”. It could be a cure, and it could be a poison, as in the “frenzied smoke” which offered a pictorial meditation on the idea of artistic creation as demonic possession” (2004:59) but these were both aspects of the same pharmakon. Infection is here the by-product of mimesis’ excess and the paradoxes of the need to see what hell ‘looks like’.

13.30-14.00

Timothy Webmoor (University of Oxford)

Algorithmic alchemy or making things link for digital mimicry

What is the status of visualisation in the age of computerization? What are the relations between models and simulations *in silico* and real things? Representation based upon notions of mimesis or the philosophical pedigree of correlationism has been complicated by the acknowledgement of transitive translation, of exhibiting the work of making representations and the work done by representations. Now that imagery is increasingly born-digital or digitized, what are the mechanics involved in digital mimicry? And how are the capacities for action similar to or different from analog visual forms?

In this paper I conduct a pragmatology of digital imagery. That is, an examination of how particular visualisations are stabilized and made real. I present an ethnography of a distributed lab developing web-based visualisations and middleware platforms for enabling participatory spatial analysis (‘neogeography’). My examples range from scraping internet sites to produce real-time visualisations of ‘Boris Bike’

schemes in London, to using Twitter's API to develop 'Tweetographies' of major international cities. I suggest that researchers are merging 'traditional' lab/field based studies and 'in house' data with the 'open data' of the internet-as-database to create "knowledge ecologies." In these ecologies, network effects become more important in terms of evidence, acceptance by peers and reception by the publics. By unpacking how ontologies of digital media are stabilized in networks, I conclude by offering a more general insight into debates concerning ontology. Rather than abiding 'thingliness' or inherent affordances, I suggest that ratios of relations, or the number, durability and temporality of connections, are a better metrology for understanding things.

14.00-14.30

Chris Gosden (University of Oxford)

English ancestors and the logic of substitution.

I start with a proposition or contention: archaeology and anthropology arose in Europe and the US during the nineteenth century due a loss of belief in ancestors on the part of the middle classes in particular. People mistook other people for their own ancestors, giving rise to the notion of the primitive from which more civilized forms of society developed. As Tylor wrote 'Few would dispute that the following races are arranged rightly in order of culture: Australian, Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, Italian' (Tylor 1871, vol. 1: 27). The Englishman 'may yet claim for himself a general condition above any of these races' (Tylor 1871, vol. 1: 28). In this paper I do not want to examine the staggering ethnocentrism of such claims, which is now embarrassingly obvious, but to think a little about the psychological roots of the move to mistake other people as one's own ancestors. Notion of ancestry were not irrelevant to nineteenth century thinkers in Europe and elsewhere, but merely displaced onto other people. It is usually the emphasis on progress that is emphasised when people look at the work of Tylor and his contemporaries, but there is also a deeply backward looking element deriving from ideas of loss. Unless the complex psychological roots of archaeology and anthropology are explored it will be hard to understand the construction and use of those disciplines in the present. I will use Tylor's thought as a thread to follow through complicated intellectual and emotional terrains, looking also at the collections of the Pitt Rivers Museum with which he was connected from its foundation in 1884 through to the beginning of the twentieth century. I want to make the point that identity is an issue for all and those apparently most secure may be wrestling with a range of insecurities concealed even from themselves. The notion of mimesis is extended through a notion of substitution - where the global Other came to stand for Western ancestors.

15.30-16.00

Ludovic Coupaye (UCL)

Mimesis? Repetition, Reproduction, Replication and yams as social forms in Melanesia

In many Melanesian societies, yams seem to embody qualities powerful enough to be selected by people as central images and metaphors. My presentation will be an experiment in thinking sociality through yams, instead of the reverse, using the Abelam case and moving to other Melanesian settings. The question is what is it that makes yams, and not for instance shell rings, pigs, or taro, so socially central?

One of the reasons might be found, not in the realm of sociality, but in the "artefact" itself. The botanical properties of yam tubers allow them to reproduce themselves through cuttings, and specific techniques are employed to bring forth a single massive

tuber. Yams replicate the same vegetal individual throughout many instantiations, all differences being mainly the result of the capacity of the cultivator to manipulate the required relationships, and to objectify them. Their display corresponds to the single moment when such sociality is revealed and evaluated, before being exchanged.

The partibility and capacity to propagate itself in such a way might not have escaped those who have had a *longue durée* familiarity with tuber crops. Could the result then be interpreted as sociality given shape, or a social form? To what extent these replications of an elusive same (in several parts of a whole), repeat, in different shapes, different manifestations of underlying metaphysical processes? Could these processes be connected to the ancestral power at work behind the reproduction of (in)dividuals, lineages, clans, or perhaps even villages and hamlets? To what extent could the replication itself be the delineation, in a figure-ground reversal, of an *original* principle, perhaps revealing, negating and transcending time?

16.00-16.30

Michael Rowlands (UCL)

Taking the outside in: materialising the visible in Cameroon

For the mobile amongst Cameroonians, the city and the “world out there” are perceived as hunting grounds or distant farms. With economic downturns, pressures mount for migrants and diasporic Cameroonians to return home with game and fodder, or to make bank or electronic transfers. The home village remains however the ultimate conferrer of social recognition and is the place of return at the end of the day. Fear of social invisibility amongst kith and kin compels individuals to disappear and subject themselves to the vicissitudes, whims and caprices of worlds and forces untamed during hunting and farming expeditions into distant undomesticated lands. Investing in one’s home village materially and through relationships is generally perceived as the best insurance policy. Fulfilling obligations also demonstrates a certain level of success and guarantees survival and social visibility, even if one has lost everything in the city and abroad. Though successful urbanites or diasporic Cameroonians may not permanently return to rural areas, most remain in constant interaction with their home village in various ways, including active participation in development initiatives and instructions to kin for burial or re-burial in their home village. In Capetown, Cameroonian rural migrants maintain these links in ways that can be described using Taussig’s two layered notion of mimesis that involves both ‘copying’ and ‘sensuous contact’. Migrants maintain ‘home’ through the decisively corporeal and physical aspects of contact. In their relations with and on their return home, however, it is the sensuous contact with the ‘world out there’ – the copying of difference- that they must bring with them. The spatialisation of similarity and difference -of making the invisible visible and the visible material- that shapes mobility and connectivity.

16.30-17.15

Anne-Christine Taylor (Musée du quai Branly, Paris)

Concluding remarks: copy, invention and individuation among Amazonian groups

This paper explores various areas of practice that seem to be commonly associated with the production of non-individualised copies (of bodies and/or artefacts), and contrasts them with forms of creation that emphasize individualization; further, it develops an analysis of the forms of agency and of power involved in these modes of creation.