

LONDON CONFERENCE IN CRITICAL THOUGHT 2025

Birkbeck, University of London

20th-21st June 2025

Deadline for Proposals: Friday 4th April 2025

The Call for Presentations is now open for the 12th annual *London Conference in Critical Thought* (LCCT), which will be hosted and supported by Birkbeck, University of London on 20th-21st June, 2025.

The LCCT is an annual interdisciplinary conference that provides a forum for emergent critical scholarship, broadly construed. The event is always free for all to attend and follows a non-hierarchical model that seeks to foster opportunities for intellectual critical exchanges where all are treated equally regardless of affiliation or seniority. There are no plenaries, and the conference is envisaged as a space for those who share intellectual approaches and interests but who may find themselves at the margins of their academic department or discipline.

There is no pre-determined theme for each iteration of the conference. Each year the conference's intellectual content and thematic foci are determined by the streams that are accepted for inclusion in response to the Call for Stream Proposals (now closed).

The streams for LCCT 2025 are:

- The Art of the Gimmick
- The Crisis of Experience in the in the Age of Algorithmic Attention
- Critical Thought Maintenance: How to mediate intellectual and organisational form (and get away with it!)
- The Cruellest and Most Bloody Stream Imaginable: What's Left of Warhammer 40,000?
- Cruising as Critical Methodology: Practices and Imaginaries from the Shadows
- Diagramming Digital Image Ecologies: Material Articulations of Invisual Relations
- Ephemeral Resistance
- 'In Theory': Media, Systems and (Re)Conceiving Communication
- Interweaving Embodied Practice and Critical Theory in Transnational Feminisms
- Is Empathy Dead? Understanding and Questioning The Relevance and Significance of Empathy in the Digital Age
- Labour and Liveness in a New Age of Automation
- Margins & Ambiguities: Reflections Between Material and Epistemological Metaphors and Limits
- Masturbatory Reading
- Monstrous Becomings: The politics, aesthetics and contradictions of Monstrosity
- Radical Listening: Collective Practices, Histories and Possible Futures

If you would like to participate in one of them, please send an abstract for a proposed presentation with the relevant stream title indicated in the subject line to hello@londoncritical.co.uk*. **Abstracts should be submitted as Word documents of no more than 250 words** and must be received by **Friday 4th April 2025**.

Please note that LCCT is an in-person conference.

* please note the change of email address and URL from previous conferences, which are both no longer monitored.

The Art of the Gimmick: aesthetic judgement as a window to capitalistic systems

Stream organisers: Oliver Cloke, Patrick Loan and Ziegi Boss

Yet from the stainless steel banana slicer to the cryptocurrency derivative, our very concept of the gimmick implies awareness that, in capitalism, misprized things are bought and sold continuously. Its flagrantly unworthy form can be found virtually anywhere: manufacturing, law, banking, education, politics, healthcare, real estate, sports, art. – Sianne Ngai

A shortcut, a cheap trick, a ploy to convince you that you need something that you really don't, the gimmick chronically promises more than it delivers. And yet, it is also an object of fascination and humour, and can even be a tool of social critique. The gimmick is an aesthetic category first presented by cultural theorist Sianne Ngai in *Theory of the Gimmick*, which reveals our everyday experience navigating capitalistic systems. Ngai describes it as an expression of dissatisfaction "linked to our perception of an object making untrustworthy claims about the saving of time, the reduction of labor, and the expansion of value." In this way, it is an aesthetic based in economic judgement, especially of unproductively spent money or wrongful praise by those duped by the gimmick.

While the gimmick can be found everywhere, the arts are especially prone to this determination. Ultimately, it is an expression of scepticism in the relationship between the labour and time that goes into something and its value. With this understanding of the gimmick, it is no wonder it plagues the arts: from Marcel Duchamp's Ready-made, to Banksy's half-shredded drawing, to Maurizio Cattelan's banana taped to a wall, many artists flaunt the tenuous relationship between the labour involved in production and its value as a capitalist commodity. It offers a glimpse of an alternative measurement of worth that is not determined by labour and time. The gimmick thus indirectly reflects the fundamental laws of capitalism that also make it prone to crisis: a system in which profit (and therefore value) is dependent on labour—all while unceasing technological innovation to stay competitive makes that very labour increasingly redundant.

We encourage submissions from artists and researchers to consider the gimmick, especially within the arts, as a lens to investigate the systems shaping our perception and measurement of economic value. We welcome a combination of (participatory) activities subverting typical conference formats, as well as theoretical presentations.

Topics could include:

- Can the gimmick serve as a tool of political resistance or social commentary (in protest art, satire, or activist movements)?
- Examples of art that people judge to be gimmicks, and/or scepticism of the art market, and what that reveals or implies about how we think about artistic production.
- The "gimmicky" use of technology - especially comically outdated or overly futuristic
- Our fascination with the gimmick and its connection to humour – as Ngai states, "...the exercising of suspicion can be creative, playful, and sometimes queer."
- The ways in which the arts/artists provide examples of alternative ways of measuring value, in contrast to the labour and time involved in production.
- From viral marketing campaigns to influencer culture, how do contemporary gimmicks reveal and manipulate society?

Reference: Ngai, Sianne. *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic judgment and Capitalist Form*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020.

The Crisis of Experience in the Age of Algorithmic Attention

Stream organisers: Nikita McCauley and Daniel Neofetou

In the early decades of the Twentieth Century, theorists, most notably Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno, observed how the temporal registers of capitalism were tendentially severing subjective experience from its structural and historical determinations, reducing Erfahrung—full, accumulated, and comprehended experience—to Erlebnis, wherein temporally atomized subjects merely live through disjunctive moments. As Benjamin put it, consciousness was forced to act ‘as a screen against stimuli,’ as the relentless influx of information did ‘not survive the moment in which it was new’ and impressions, rather than deepening into cumulative experience, increasingly remained confined to ‘the sphere of a certain hour in one’s life.’

In recent years, this crisis of experience has only intensified, with everyday life fundamentally shaped by social media, algorithmic feeds, and digital surveillance. Theorists and philosophers as diverse as Jonathan Crary, Byung-Chul Han, Bernard Stiegler, Yuk Hui, Wendy Chun, and Anna Kornbluh have all stressed how contemporary capitalism deepens the fragmentation of subjectivity, replacing sustained attention, memory, and historical continuity with compulsive immediacy, algorithmic habituation, and the relentless extraction of cognitive and affective labor.

Many of these contemporary theorists call for an effective recovery of Erfahrung—whether through cognitive mapping (Kornbluh), reclaiming shared attention (Crary), rethinking individuation (Stiegler, Hui), or resisting the compulsions of immediacy (Han, Chun). However, for Benjamin and Adorno, any such attempts risked asserting by fiat the recovery of a mode of experience whose social and historical conditions of possibility had been irreversibly dismantled. They instead affirmed that substantive experience must paradoxically be grounded in the experience of Erlebnis, in the form of ‘dialectical images’ for Benjamin, and the wholly reified work of art for Adorno. In this spirit, this stream invites proposals which interrogate whether and how fragmented, immediate, and reified forms of experience could paradoxically become sites of critical mediation in contemporary theoretical, aesthetic, or political practices. Contributions might address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Radical potentials within the modes of being cultivated by the attention economy
- Algorithmic feeds, social media spectacles, and immersive digital environments as possible grounds for critical reflection and historical consciousness
- Experimental cultural forms as dialectical engagements with the loss of Erfahrung
- The autonomy and non-instrumentality of the work of art as a site of resistance in the twenty-first century

Critical Thought Maintenance: How to mediate intellectual and organisational form (and get away with it!)

Stream organiser: Toby Bennett

Collective critical thought takes form in a number of ways. It may take the form of a paper delivered to a conference of peers; written up, submitted to, reviewed and published in a scholarly journal; or otherwise staged, performed, recorded, exhibited, evaluated. Each suggests its own genre conventions - rules, codes, norms - through which critical thought might be shared and made sensible: panel, stream, keynote, land acknowledgment, plenary, screening, Q&A, more-of-a-comment-than-a-question-really, methodology, editorial board, desk-reject, revise/resubmit, reviewer-two, citation, footnote...

Equally, critical thought is typically heavily mediated. Ideas may be formed through an organisation or institution: perhaps one sited in a building – or simply a room, filled with tables (arranged in rows or islands), or perhaps a studio, a “laboratory” (real or metaphorical), a think tank – or with no physical space at all. It may be conferred with a legal status that defines specific capacities on its members, protections for its intellectual assets, and responsibilities to its constituents. Often, formations of critical thought are shaped by a technical or informational architecture, allowing ideas to be uploaded, stored, circulated, validated, located and communicated – prompting them to be later de-formed and re-formed.

Critical ideas may become focused interventions into public life, shared using a wider communications infrastructure, in popular press, on TV, radio, podcasts and social media, while thought collectives may be labelled, or become retrospectively “branded”, as schools, movements or paradigms. Their social value may (or may not) thereby be transformed into financial value, which must in turn be managed and maintained as labour. Elsewhere encounters may be more informal or freeform, in loose-knit collectives or communities, reading and study groups, one-off workshops or campaigns. In such ways, friendships, goodwill and solidarity are also formed - but enabling these to scale up, to endure over time, or to reach across space, is yet another matter.

This stream invites participants to reflect on the array of strategies, techniques and routines by which critical thought is given organisational form in specific contexts and circumstances. As well as the conceptual frames and rhetorical forms in which ideas are materialised and contained, papers will also address the practices through which they are generated, shared and valued, alongside the forms of coordination, administration, funding, mediation and general upkeep by which they come to be maintained.

Given the context of this conference, for instance, members of the London Critical collective are also invited to take part in discussions around their own formation as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO); others might dwell on this year’s location at Birkbeck, a Higher Education Institution specifically targeted at working life. Contributions will no doubt be formulated in dialogue with the broader structural environment – of funding cuts, market pressures, technological hype cycles, political resentments, epistemicide – which places critical thought under systemic attack. Historic models, exemplars, case studies and cautionary tales will be just as welcome as schemes for responding to present-day crises.

The Cruellest and Most Bloody Stream Imaginable: What's Left of Warhammer 40,000?

Stream organiser: Nicolete Burbach

Warhammer 40,000 has come a long way since its 1980s inception. Originally a niche counter-culture adjacent mashup of science-fantasy pastiche, (inconsistent) satire, and direct plagiarism from Michael Moorcock and 2000 AD, it is now a global cultural phenomenon comprising not only a tabletop wargame and hobbycraft, but books, animations, videogames, and a vast associated social media ecosystem - all revolving round a sprawling and instantly identifiable sci-fi IP.

Less felicitously, this ascension has been accompanied by an adoption of the setting by reactionary political groups. Now wider political conflicts are played out over the meaning of the world and its aesthetics. To engage in the hobby today is to navigate a perilous world where debates over Imperial domestic policy are proxies for discussions about real-world authoritarianism, VTubers make their stand before the onrushing hoard of queer mainstreaming, and whatever you do don't mention female Space Marines. In the Grim Darkness of the Far Future, There is Only Culture War.

Additionally, the setting is now a simulacrum of the phenomena it originally represented. Whereas HG Wells' Little Wars pioneered tabletop wargaming as [a humane alternative to conducting real ones](#), now Russian troops go into battle wearing purity seals [blessed by the Russian Orthodox Church](#), while Ukrainian units [named for the Chaos God of War](#) launch drone attacks on North Korean soldiers. In this way, Warhammer 40,000 is a part of the construction and conquest of nations, along with the nationalisms emerging around these activities.

On the other hand, to view Warhammer 40,000 as purely reactionary is to miss the fact that these dimensions are a source of genuine tension. Rather than simply being a way of navigating right-wing fantasies, the hobby unites diverse communities, the setting is sufficiently rich as to generate multiple readings, and its omnivorous, eclectic, and at times incoherent repurposing of ideas and imagery lends itself to multifaceted and genuinely interesting discussion.

This stream seeks to explore Warhammer 40,000 in its contemporary political significance. It seeks to do so by engaging it not only as an object within our tumultuous political situation, but as a tool for engaging with it: for representing it, for inhabiting it, for reckoning with its past, and for imagining or enacting alternative futures. It also seeks to do so in a way that recovers it for more progressive political projects, or at least in a way that frames the dilemmas and challenges facing left politics in our current moment.

Topics of papers might include:

- Queerness in Warhammer 40,000
- Warhammer 40,000 and feminism
- Theopolitical aesthetics in the 3rd and 41st Millennia
- Satire in Warhammer 40,000
- Rogue Trader and the politics of the 1980s
- The changing face of the Warhammer 40,000 community
- Grimdark and political hope
- Representations of masculinity in Warhammer 40,000
- Warhammer 40,000 as a vehicle for fantasies
- Disability in Warhammer 40,000
- Warhammer, war, and nationalism
- Mediatisation and the reception of Warhammer 40,000
- Is the Biscopea stored in the balls?

Cruising as critical methodology : practices and imaginaries from the shadows

Stream organisers: Ezequiel González Camaño and Emmanuel Guillaud

Cruising — a search for fleeting encounters among the shadows — finds itself at a crucial inflection point. This subversive use of public spaces has been drastically relegating them to the margins by surveillance, neoliberal urban policies and explosions of apps, such as Grindr, Sniffies, etc. What was a libidinal transformation of the city has been commodified into safe, regulated, and commercial practices, mediated by applications and businesses. Paradoxically, cruising is now being reinvested as a fruitful site for critical analysis. Its subversive usage of space, its resistance to heteronormativity, its rejection of non-participative surveillance, its potential for triggering the unexpected, its capacity to articulate tensions — at a practical intersection of technology, ecology, visibility, power, and sexuality — have catalyzed a surge of critical discourse and artistic practices.

José Estaban Muñoz's landmark reinvention of cruising as a horizon full of potentiality for Queer Futurity has inspired a flurry of theoretical engagements and artistic interventions, while also serving as the basis for critically engaged art exhibitions and interventions. Cruising has been reconceptualised as a mode of relationality; as a choreography of gazes; as a strategy of cultivating openness towards alterity; as a research methodology and space for artistic experimentation; as poetry; and even as a literary critical method (mobilized for e.g. in the reading of Proust). Cruising as a historico-critical lens can also serve as an unexpected model for a new ecological ethic, as a practice centered on the sensuousness of the body within its synesthetic environment.

These critical strategies have been embodied through a series of politically-charged artistic practices : e.g. David Wojnarowicz's transformation of the New York Piers, an infamous cruising space, into a site of collective creation in the early 1980s; Theodoulos Polyviou's 2021 VR installation converting the museum's architecture into a potential cruising ground; the Cruising Pavilion within the 16th Venice Biennale of Architecture (2018), mobilising cruising to challenge the heteronormativity enmeshed within the logic of the Biennale itself.

Our call for presentations invites novel discussions around cruising as a lens for sociopolitical and cultural analysis, rethinking research methods, and artistic experimentations — imagining a critical engagement with cruising practices that extends far beyond the subject matter itself.

We also welcome dialogues around cruising as a methodology, in order to enlarge the potential of a conference on critical thought. Can we theoretically "cruise" the conference? What would it mean to employ cruising strategies to imagine innovative and relevant forms of intervention (movement-centered propositions, participative workshops, or performance-based talks, etc.) ?

Suggested topics include, but are not limited to:

- Cruising as a form of (counter)visuality
- Cruising as a methodology
- Cruising non human entities, uncovering novel environmental ethics
- Historical analysis of cruising to uncover present-day strategies resisting new waves of conservatism
- The aesthetics of cruising (and its penetration into mainstream culture)
- Cruising beyond the gender binary
- Critical approaches to techno-cruising
- Cruising's mobilization of anti-surveillance strategies
- Cruising as an atmosphere with alchemical potentials for transformation

Diagramming digital image ecologies: material articulations of invisible relations

Stream organiser: Hannah Lammin

The technologies that produce and disseminate images structure visual culture, both as social practice and at the level of individual perception. Digital images, which predominate in contemporary platform environments, have a complex ontology: as digital objects, they are composed of nonsensuous data and metadata, regulated by structures or schemas that formally define them in a computational sense (Hui, 2016); as visual objects, they are instantiated materially in a heterogeneous perceptual form (Drucker, 2001). Trevor Paglen (2016) draws attention to the increasing agency of unseen algorithmic processes in visual culture, suggesting that 'what's truly revolutionary about the advent of digital images is the fact that they are fundamentally machine-readable: they can only be seen by humans in special circumstances and for short periods of time.' He argues that machine-vision and AI image generation systems enact formal abstractions that are alien to human perception, raising both epistemological and ethical questions. Thus, innovative methodological approaches are needed to theorise digital images – if the computational infrastructures that shape networked digital culture resist visibility, then new forms of cognitive mapping are needed to 'augment... our phenomenological experience in such a way as to make clear the structural elements determining it, thereby making them visible and open to transformation' (Srnicek, 2015: 310).

This stream proposes that diagramming can be used as a method to navigate the complexities of this terrain – revealing hidden relational structures (technical, political-economic, social, cultural, etc.) and potentially articulating resistance to them. It departs from Adrain Mackenzie and Anna Munster's (2019) exploration of 'platform seeing' – a mode of algorithmic perception that extracts sense from images by aggregating them into ensembles. This 'invisible' perception renders visibility operative in a computational form that 'operates diagrammatically, re-flowing relations in ... image ensembles, generating materialities and experiences in their wake' (Ibid.: 13). Diagrams are understood, after Deleuze, not as representational figures but as mechanisms that actualise new assemblages (Deleuze 1999, 2005; Zdebik 2012). As Rocco Gangle notes, diagrams are 'essentially iconic', implying a partial blurring between object and sign – they 'represent systems of relations and at the same time instantiate ... those relations directly' (2020: 6). They thus engender a performative immanence. Not located in a common-sense 'visual space' (Vellodi, 2018), diagrams constitute an abstract topology that enables us to articulate the transformations that occur as corporeal and incorporeal elements interact. As such, they are useful for mapping the material effects of algorithmic processes.

Proposals are invited that use diagrammatic approaches to explore any aspect of digital image culture. Contributions may include:

- Theoretical applications of diagrammatology (e.g. Peirce, Deleuze, Châtelet, etc.) to digital image ecologies
- Practice-based mappings or counter-mappings of relational assemblages in platform environments
- Critical visualisations of algorithmic bias, data colonialism, or other ethical problematics in contemporary visual culture
- Artistic research revealing processes or latent spaces of machine-vision or AI image-generation systems
- Methodological experiments in spatialised thinking
- Participatory diagramming workshops
- Performative iterations of diagrammatic transformation/plasticity.

Ephemeral Resistance

Stream organisers: Justyna Struzik and Tomasz Sikora

In numerous analyses across scholarly disciplines, priority is given to large-scale, organized forms of resistance: spectacular events, mass mobilizations, or groundbreaking performances, which not only lay the groundwork for permanent social change, but often constitute that change itself. While less spectacular, everyday or 'hidden' forms of (micro-)resistance have been given some attention (with the work of James Scott often cited as foundational, at least in social sciences), we propose to focus specifically on the notion of ephemeral resistance, understood as fleeting, possibly anarchic, acts of dissent or disruption that leave no lasting material trace, but may have significant symbolic or affective impact. Ephemeral resistance operates in the moment, outside the logic of enduring legacy and institutionalization, and as such it often eludes scholarly debate. Examples include a spontaneous flash mob, a temporary art installation, a symbolic gesture, a silence, an act of absence, a withdrawal.

In this stream, we seek to explore the conceptual as well as empirical implications of ephemeral acts that may not even, at first glance, seem to fit the concept of resistance at all. What happens if, instead of recognized and acknowledged forms of organized resistance, we focus on those that emerge ad hoc, even accidentally, unstructured, appearing as quickly as they vanish? What difference does ephemeral, dispersed resistance make if it does not have tangible, long-term consequences? Following Butler's call to recognize that "under certain conditions, the continuation of life, being in motion, breathing, is a form of resistance" (2016), we propose to discuss resistance as situated and contextualized within specific histories, environments and lived experiences. Single acts of momentary resistance to systemic oppression, state violence, or the exploitative logic of late capitalism may often be considered hopeless and doomed to fail, but we might want to give a second thought to what constitutes a failure (cf. Halberstam 2011). How do such acts, despite their apparent futility, challenge and reshape our understanding of resistance and agency?

Following Sayak Valencia (2018), who reminds us that "subversion begins with a reformulation of our theories about practices of resistance," in this stream, we invite all academics, activists and creators with a transdisciplinary interest in resistance to "cease to see 'pure' and direct resistance as the only possible strategy." We welcome a broad variety of formats, such as theoretical arguments, empirical case studies, auto-ethnography, artworks, performances, art-based research, media analyses, and more.

Specific contributions might address topics such as:

- spontaneous refusal, non-participation or non-cooperation in institutional contexts (prison, school, healthcare, immigration) (cf. Dennis & Pienaar 2023)
- the role/agency of the body in ephemeral resistance
- momentary queer utopias (cf. Muñoz 2009)
- using psychoactive substances as ephemeral/everyday bioresistance (Preciado 2013)
- everyday improvisations (Sangaramoorthy 2019) as a form of resistance in crip and migration studies
- everyday resistance as survival and navigational strategies by those deemed expandable/disposable (Zigon 2019; Wang 2018)
- existence as resistance (persistent strategies of survival, e.g., in the war contexts of Palestine, Ukraine, or Kashmir)
- everyday/spontaneous/momentary resistance in black radical tradition and in critical race theory
- ephemeral aesthetics in/as resistance
- ephemeral resistance in more-than-human contexts
- the role of temporality (moments, intervals, durations) in resistance
- the (non)archivability of ephemeral resistance

'In Theory': Media, Systems and (Re)Conceiving Communication

Stream organisers: Walter Alberto Abalo Navia and Soumyajit Basu

Where do we begin in theory? Media or systems, information or communication, knowledge or data, human or non-human. Are there possibilities of a common ground for material media and conceptual systems? And what place does the alleged anti-humanism of media and system theories have at a forum for critical thought? The points of departure for each conceptual approach have been simplified to questions over the primacy of media hardware against systems software, reanimating debates over materiality from the 'inside' versus observational systems from 'out there'. This stream aims to bring together media theory and systems theory to critically engage ontologies and epistemologies of communication.

Media theory begins within the medium. Not 'just' the message, media in their technically-specific materiality are cultural products that inhabit, negotiate and determine the conditions of communication. Building on Foucauldian archaeology, Marshall McLuhan's media studies and Claude Shannon's information theory, media theory interrogates technologies with a focus on their materialities and mediations of access to power structures. Inscription tools and surfaces are examined in their particular modes of operation that elicit cultural production. Conceived as storage, transmission and retrieval devices, media posit heterogeneous technologies of alphabetic letters and the interface of liquid crystal displays. Further attending to quotidian technologies that mediate all interaction – from doors and files, to microchips and organic matter – media theory probes processual moments that transcribe signals from one medial form to another.

Systems theory in its autopoietic strain controversially takes distance from the humanist tradition as it detaches itself from the subject and embraces communicative phenomenon as the basis for an understanding of society. In this strategic (or tragic) movement, diverse theoretical developments converse productively in Niklas Luhmann's complex edifice, prominently the phenomenological tradition, the sociological theory of differentiation, second order cybernetics, the biology of cognition, and evolutionary theory. Feeding on that mixture, Luhmann's theory of symbolically differentiated media confronts the reader with a series of distinctions that pave the way towards a peculiar understanding of communication and of modern society. Reflecting on the distinction between media/form, the relationship between symbolically generalised media and dissemination media, the materiality of media, the tensions between hardware and software, or the changes brought about by the so-called digital transformation are unavoidable issues for theory in these times.

We invite proposals that seek to discuss media theory and social systems theory, and the impact of the medium's technological transformations on society broadly. The following topics are non-comprehensive and only intended as irritations for the development of research programs:

- The concept of media
- Historical development of media and its relationship to society
- The relationships between symbolically differentiated media
- Media archaeology
- The relationship between media and institutional evolutive developments
- Cybernetics and Information theory
- Cultural techniques and German Media Theory
- Mass media and society
- Digital constitutionalism
- Print culture and law
- Network society and law
- Constitutionalism and media
- Critical legal autopoiesis
- The politics of media

Interweaving Embodied Practice and Critical Theory in Transnational Feminisms

Stream organiser: Marie Theresa Crick

This stream interrogates the potential of embodied practice as a site for radical pedagogical encounters and collective action. Inspired by Luce Irigaray's concept of "shared air" as a medium of relational exchange, this stream asks how theory and practice merge to explore affect, memory, and trauma. As Irigaray asks, "But is air thinkable? Through what transformations must the logos pass in order to think this unthought? Will it survive this operation?" her words invite us to reimagine shared breath as a space for exploring lived experience.

Embodied practice foregrounds thinking with the body—its movements, sensations, and affect—as a site of knowledge production. This approach challenges traditional discursive models, fostering transformative learning and reshaping our engagement with personal and cultural narratives. Foregrounding Sara Ahmed's notion of "histories that hurt," the stream examines how inherited trauma and silence are produced and sustained within cultural imaginaries. It envisions collaborative sessions that create a durational, collective space for shared reflection and transformation.

This stream calls for academics, practitioners, and artist-scholars working at the intersections of theory and practice to explore these themes through radical pedagogy. It aims to expand critical thought on collective practices by investigating how embodied methodologies, archival inquiry, decolonial thinking, and transnational feminisms reconfigure knowledge production and envision transformative futures rooted in shared breath and collective resilience.

This stream invites proposals that examine how embodied practices can move beyond mere theorisation to enact tangible, collective change. Submissions should explore how integrating the relational, political, psychic, and bodily is key to reconfiguring academic discourse and generating transformative learning experiences that extend into everyday life. Proposals might draw on frameworks from Luce Irigaray, Achille Mbembe, adrienne maree brown, Ashon Crawley, Fred Moten and other scholars to interrogate the interplay between theory, embodied experience, and collective resilience.

Starting Points for Workshops, Papers, and Embodied Presentations:

- Exploring Shared Breath: Draw on Achille Mbembe's insights into historical violence and subject formation, Ashon Crawley's exploration of Black Pentecostal breath, or Fred Moten's work on blur and breath, to examine how breath functions as a complex site for negotiating personal and collective memory, serving as a dynamic interface between theory and practice.
- Textual Embodiment: Engage participants in reading sessions where texts are treated as living, breathing entities, prompting shared dialogue on affect and memory.
- Decolonial & Transnational Archives: Facilitate discussions on reinterpreting archival materials through decolonial thinking and transnational feminist approaches, challenging dominant narratives and reconfiguring our understanding of historical trauma.
- Radical Pedagogy in Action: Encourage participant-led, horizontal learning that merges theoretical inquiry with embodied movement to create "brave spaces" for transformative engagement.
- Collaborative Reflections: Promote group improvisation and co-creation to challenge conventional knowledge structures and build collective resilience.
- Exploring Embodied Practice in Academia: Examine what embodied practice means, its potential for eliciting hostile responses in traditional academic frameworks, and propose strategies to overcome these challenges, opening new avenues for critical, collective transformation.

Together, these starting points echo the stream's central inquiry, inviting participants to explore and transform dimensions of affect, memory, and trauma through collective embodied practice.

Is Empathy Dead? Understanding and Questioning the Relevance and Significance of Empathy in the Digital Age

Stream organiser: Gorvika Rao

Is empathy dead? From the cancel culture to trolling to road rage on streets or dancing or listening to loud music in public transport like metros, should we consider the death of empathy? The foundational basis of the concept of civilisation and the existence of society was care of the other. We learnt how communities were established on the principles of sharing and caring. Is it the modern state or our passion for science and technology that murdered the humanistic principles like empathy in us? The whole idea of empathy emerged from non-individualistic character where the existence of the other individual was acknowledged. As we moved from communal societies to individualistic societies, which formed the basic condition of urbanity and modernity, we became part of the competitive, capitalistic society. The capitalistic society propagated the idea of self-care at the expense of being selfish and at the cost of the failure of the other. As nations become capitalist, we witness the absence of empathy in politics, economics and policy making. As an academic discourse, while empathy as a terminology was first invented and explored in psychology, fields like philosophy, arts and literature also embraced it. However, the discussion of empathy as a societal principal is slowly becoming irrelevant and insignificant.

Is it possible to have a society without empathy? Are we going to reach a point where we refuse to tolerate the presence of others? How do we understand the cacophony of derogatory, regressive opinions, abuses or trolling in the virtual space? Is it the anonymity and physical absence of the other that kills human empathy? Should we blame it on the apps that promote physical intimacy without love or surrender? How does a lack of empathy change the concept of love or relationships? Is it a politically correct world that propagates cancel culture and demonises the other?

From where and how does the discussion on empathy start? How do we understand the existence of others? How do we construct a framework based on empathy? How do we create the pedagogy of empathetic practices for society and not just as an academic discourse? These are some of the questions that I would like to explore and discuss from multidisciplinary perspectives.

Some of the themes that can be explored (but not limited to)

- Critical empathy
- Intellectual empathy
- Empathy in philosophy
- Empathy in ethics
- Empathy in literature, arts
- Empathy in history
- Empathy in science
- Empathy in neoliberal societies
- Empathy in critical thinking
- Empathy in medicine
- Empathy in society
- Empathy in love
- Empathy in Relationships
- Empathy as a pedagogy
- Empathy as a classroom practice
- Empathy and sympathy
- Empathy in media
- Empathy as a social practice
- Empathy in affirmative action
- Empathy in democracy
- Cognitive empathy
- Affirmative empathy
- Affective empathy
- Empathy in virtual spaces
- Empathy as gender-specific
- Empathy and Cancel Culture
- Empathy as a framework/discourse
- Empathy as theory
- Empathy as performance
- Empathy in religion
- Empathy and AI
- Empathy and technology

Labour and Liveness in a New Age of Automation

Stream organisers: Dr Richard Allen and Dr Richard Whitby

What happens in live performance when the labour of humans and that of machines intersect? What is the value of bodily labour in our current age of increasing automation in the sphere of cultural production? This stream is for researchers and practitioners in live performance, be that within theatre, contemporary art, sound art, music or other contexts who are identifying instances of liveness specific to the contemporary world, where machines and humans meet or oppose one another.

'Liveness' designates that a performative action is carried out in the same time and space as an audience. In the late nineties, Philip Auslander's book *Liveness* (1999) proposed that liveness was already impossible in theatre and performance. By now, remote, mediated social engagement (and even pedagogy) have been normalised. Lev Manovich has discussed how AI has now entered cultural production to a significant degree; automated production of art seems to bring into question the necessity of human labour within cultural production.

Live work has been a chance for marginalised, female and queer practitioners to emerge; club cultures and extreme noise, for example, require the physical presence of an audience. Art, music, comedy and performance have often cross-pollinated but current conditions in places like London add other reasons for liveness, alongside the political or aesthetic. The long-term effects of lockdowns are still emerging; technological changes and interconnected crises also threaten the arts as they have been practiced. Instances of liveness might be identified in service work and teaching, although labour in these areas are also potentially impinged upon by increasing automation. Is 'live labour' a way of maintaining economic value, today?

Automation may have influenced human labour and performance since its appearance – are we now about to see a deepening of this via AI's influence? Stephen Graham describes music and noise as being 'coextensive dialectical antagonists rather than [...] opposites' (*Becoming Noise Music*, 2023) - can examples of this dynamic be found between remoteness and presence, between the automated and the bodily in contemporary liveness?

Open to proposals for papers, live performances and presentations of documented performances. Basic AV setup with small PA will be provided by stream organisers. Areas of research or practice might include:

- Repetitive Labour: The role of looping and repetition in contemporary performance (music, sound art, performance art, theatre making).
- Post-cinematic Labour: The influence and impact of screen media on the perception of labour in contemporary performance.
- Material Participation as Visible Labour: How material agency operates through the interaction between the body and non-human objects in contemporary performance.
- Theatricality of Labour: The role of theatricality in how labour appears, how labour is 'staged'.
- Distributed Labour: Labour that is fragmented or illusionary, mediated through sound and image.
- The Appearance/Invisibility of Labour: How does Labour 'appear' and 'disappear' in contemporary performance? What are the implications of appearance in how Labour is experienced in this context? Whose labour goes unrecognised?
- Dead Labour: Labour that doesn't 'achieve' anything.

Margins & Ambiguities: Reflections between Material and Epistemological Metaphors and Limits

Stream Organisers: Anna Migliorini & Letizia Konderak

In the current global context, characterised by the perceived intensification and multiplication of environmental, social, and political crises, up to and including polycrises (Morin & Kern, *Terre-Patrie*, 1993; Tooze, *Shutdown*, 2021), the concept of limit is brought to the fore by events that seems to increase the character of urgency, calling for reflection and responses to emergencies (e.g. Agamben, *Where are we now*, 2021). Beyond this specific framework, the concepts of limit, border, and margin appear central and endowed with their relevance, independently from the character of topicality, and raise consistent intellectual attention – already from Kant’s reflection on the limits of reason, which interweaves the geopolitical metaphor of the limit with the possibilities of knowledge and understanding.

Following on from the “Standing on the Edge” stream of the “Midlands Critical 2025” – where we called for an approach to the theme that aimed to valorise, in various fields, the positive, political, epistemic, scientific value of the margin as a place to inhabit rather than as a space and temporality to be crossed and left behind – this call concentrates on aspects that are, if not negative, at least more ambiguous and controversial.

The panel addresses epistemic uncertainty as epistemic (dis)advantage derived from positionings, attitudes, and shifts, namely the uncertainty about the value of situated knowledge. It focuses on a materialist and embedded approach rooted in the materiality of living conditions, power dynamics, inequalities and concrete difficulties, and immersion in contextualised practices and activities. It assumes that knowledge can emerge in less mediated ways and that material situations and embedded practices offer valuable insights, while pointing to the undeniable transversality of limitations and the intersectionality of the struggles to overcome them.

The present call, focused on a critique of the consciousness related to different kinds of transitions (groups, experiences, and even cultures), is open to topics such as:

- What is the relationship between situation and positionality? Does one’s position necessarily define their stance? Also, if it does not, does the original position leave a trace behind as a conscious, unthought, or removed past (Bedorf 2024)?
- Is the double consciousness of moved members of the subaltern classes an advantage? The theme includes examples such as transfuges and transclasses (Bourdieu, Jaquet), the organic intellectual (Gramsci), the author as producer (Benjamin), and discourse appropriation.
- Is meritocracy the currency of the poor? Materialist and situated critiques of spatial metaphors, such as the social elevator and the glass ceiling, can help answer this questions.
- Should the margin be reduced? Do the margin of profit/savings and the concept of quantitative effectiveness/efficiency cover inherently and/or a-historically positive axiological parameters or intrinsic values? The critique may address marginalism.
- Limits as thresholds: what is the relevance, for example in a context of crisis, of a so-called quanti-qualitative switch? What about (ir)reversibility and sustainability? The topic may include limitarianism.
- Logic of pure means (Benjamin, Agamben): (how) can a non-instrumental or non-ultimate goal-oriented attitude, help to (politically) redefine limits and thresholds (Stimilli 2023)?
- Starting from these sample questions, we invite contributions from critical thought in the broadest sense and from diverse approaches and fields of study.

Masturbatory Reading

Stream Organisers: Sticky Fingers Publishing (Kaiya Waerea and Sophie Paul)

This stream explores the liberatory erotics of feminist, queer, disabled and indigenous approaches to interdisciplinary research, foregrounding materialist and embodied processes of knowledge making.

We take this name from Kate Zambreno's book *Heroines*, in which she writes "I wake up and read even though Nietzsche says that's foolish. A sort of narcotic reading, I read with my hands down the front of my pants – my mode of reading is masturbatory." We expand outward from here with the help of Audre Lorde's *Uses of the Erotic*, "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings... having experienced the fullness of depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honour and self-respect, we can require no less of ourselves." Masturbatory reading asks what power and pleasure can be accessed through attending to the erotics of knowledge production; how sites, systems and tools of knowledge making reiterate violent norms (and in turn, erase deviant practices); and what the making (and unmaking) of these systems could allow us to imagine.

This stream proposal builds on our 2023 anthology *Masturbatory Reader*, which through 16 contributions of experimental non-fiction began to scope out this field. Building on this here we want to investigate further erotic research methodologies, as they are entangled with the architectures of public sex and private property, sovereignty and land, and subcultural media and practices. The body and book are both distributary frameworks, and what we are interested in here is how masturbatory reading enables us to access erotic architectures of knowledge.

Mark Rifkin's essay 'The Erotics of Sovereignty', characterises "the reciprocity of place. The land is both desired and desiring, is not that thing that can be priced and traded, is a feeling entity." This also calls to mind Lyónn Wolf's performance text 'Sex in Public': "Practical homonormativity and well-cared-for economic brick walls rewrite the meanings of vulnerability and receptivity and the whole field of sexual and social relations becomes a privatised ethics of fiscal ties." Mass-media becomes a metaphor for how we understand gender technologies and the gendered body. Or, as Paul B. Preciado writes in *Testo Junkie*: "the body is no longer just a means of transmission, distribution, and collection of information, but the material effect of those semiototechnical exchanges."

Themes might explore:

- Sexually transgressive interventions in traditional sites of knowledge production such as the library, archive or university;
- The speculative erotics of historical research;
- Performing power, pain and pleasure through theory;
- The interactions between public sex and private property;
- The sexual agency of land;
- Subcultural erotic media and practices;
- Mass media as a metaphor for how we think of our bodies, or, the body as semiototechnically determined.

We would be interested in opening this call for contributions out to interdisciplinary formats: including film, performance, and experimental texts, as well as academic presentations, and workshops.

Monstrous Becomings: The politics, aesthetics and contradictions of Monstrosity

Stream Organiser: Isabelle Donetch

Monsters are paradoxical beings: they are feared and desired, reviled and revered, condemned and reclaimed. They are figures of control and rebellion, serving as expressions of societal anxieties while also holding the potential to dismantle them. From medieval bestiaries to political propaganda, monstrosity has long defined the limits of the acceptable, the rational, and the human. Yet, monsters are also deeply sympathetic figures—outsiders whose difference is both their curse and their power. Whether misunderstood or intentionally threatening, monstrosity operates as a site of tension, one that reveals the mechanisms of normalisation, discipline, and exclusion. More than a physical trait, monstrosity is a relational and political condition.

Etymologically linked to *monere*—to warn, remind, and teach—the monster operates as both a spectacle and a lesson. Foucault (2003) describes monstrosity as a violation of juridico-biological norms, a site where legal and natural orders collide. Donna Haraway (1990) situates the monster within a posthumanist framework, as a being that disrupts stable identities and forces us to confront the messy entanglements of species, technology, and capital. Asa Simon Mittman (2012) further argues that monstrosity is not defined solely by form or location but by its disruptive impact—by its resistance to classification and control.

Monstrosity has long functioned as an instrument of power, used to justify exclusion, oppression, and violence. Yet, it has also been a site of radical potential, where othered bodies and identities reclaim their space. By unsettling the normal and embracing monstrosity, we create space for new imaginaries, counter-narratives, and radical alternatives.

This stream invites explorations of monstrosity in its many manifestations—cultural, historical, political, psychological, and aesthetic. What makes a monster recognizable? Why do societies create and sustain monstrous figures? How do monsters function as tools of power, discipline, and propaganda? And conversely, how has monstrosity been reclaimed as a site of resistance and empowerment? We welcome diverse approaches, including academic presentations, creative explorations, performance, film, and experimental methodologies. Following Haraway's assertion that monsters are "signs of worlds for which we are responsible," this stream seeks to engage monstrosity as a means of critical reflection. By unsettling the normal and embracing monstrosity, we create space for new imaginaries, counter-narratives, and radical alternatives.

Possible themes include, but are not limited to:

- Monstrosity and the body: disability, queerness, gender nonconformity, and the policing of physicality
- Monsters as instruments of control: bogeymen, Krampus, and the disciplinary functions of fear
- Monsters in propaganda: fear, othering, and political myth-making
- The aesthetics of monstrosity: horror, the grotesque, and beauty in the abnormal
- The psychology of the monstrous: fear, desire, and the fascination with transgression
- Technological and capitalist monsters: AI, cyborgs, financial crises, and neoliberal monstrosity
- The monstrous city: urban spaces, exclusion, and the haunting presence of the abnormal
- Mythological and folkloric monsters: historical fears, symbolic transgressions, and cultural warnings
- Monsters in popular culture: literature, film, theatre, video games, and visual art
- Monster theory and marginality: postcolonial monstrosity, racialised bodies, and othered identities
- Monstrous transformations: hybridity, mutation, and evolutionary anxieties
- Resisting the monstrous label: reclaiming monstrosity as a tool of empowerment and radical redefinition

Radical Listening: Collective practices, histories and possible futures

Stream organiser: Raluca Soreanu & the FREEPSY team

Can 'listening' foster new forms of relationality in a collapsing world? What forms, formats, rituals and infrastructures of listening to one another have made life liveable, enjoyable or, simply, possible in recent times?

This stream invites colleagues from various fields of research and practice to share stories, archival material, ethnographies, speculations or theories around forms of listening to individual or collective experiences that offer a radical mode of witnessing and togetherness, especially in challenging contexts. We welcome papers, presentations and creative interventions addressing listening as an act of ethics and of care, where more than just recognition is at stake, rather, when a joint construction of a world-in-common can unfold.

Psychoanalysis was first called a 'talking cure' by one of its very first woman-patients, Bertha Pappenheim, in the late 19th century Vienna. Since then, practices of talking, dialoguing and expressing oneself have gained space in mainstream clinical settings, grassroots organising as well as hegemonic twists of 'self-care' and 'authenticity'. Less emphasis has been granted to listening, listening to others, listening together, listening to the world, etc. With this in mind - and as a psychosocial research collective - we are interested in ways of listening 'otherwise' or radical forms of listening. What might this radical listening entail? How is it different from established spaces of listening which rely on specific frameworks, methods, epistemologies and ontologies (Olufemi, 2021)? How is this listening bound up to political action? There is a rising interest in forms of radical empathy, or in the notion of 'analysis everywhere' (Caló and Pereira, 2024) and we would like to open this space to consider listening as a crucial political strategy of care and creativity.

Equally, and resonating LCCT's emphasis on criticality, we are interested too in the 'troubles' of listening – ambivalences, struggles, impasses and how these are elaborated and articulated. What does it take, in relating and in infrastructures, to 'listen well', as black feminist Hortense Spillers frames it?

Invited topics include but are not limited to:

- Relationality in the Pluriverse and practice of listening
- Listening in grassroots organising
- Radio, sound and political emancipation
- Community care and listening
- Psychoanalytic listening in the community
- Listening to violence
- Listening to the catastrophe
- Listening to More-than-Human Life
- Listening and mental health
- Listening as witnessing
- Listening, recognition and testimony in contexts of political struggle
- Transgenerational listening
- Listening in/with translation
- Listening to the stranger
- Listening, wounding, overwhelm and repair
- The troubles of listening
- Listening impasses
- Ambivalences in listening
- Listening between life and death