

Digital Modernities: America and American Studies in an Algorithmic Age

Chairs: Alexander Dunst (Paderborn)/Dennis Mischke (Stuttgart)

Since the 1980s, debates around modernity and modernization in the United States have been dominated by the promise and potential threat of computation. From William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) to the current wave of mobile and wearable technology, contemporary society has imagined itself in ever closer proximity with our "intimate machines" (Sherry Turkle). Responses to the omnipresence of computers in our everyday lives range from dystopian visions of surveillance and social sorting to utopic celebrations of free knowledge or new forms of social participation. In Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990), algorithmic calculation spells the end of political resistance, a theme to which he returns in *Bleeding Edge* (2013), his latest novel set between the dot-com bubble, the events of September 11, and the paranoid abyss of the deep web. In contrast, the Obama administration has seen the promotion of Silicon Valley's high-tech companies over more established industries and a president whose youthful image stems in part from his skillful use of social media.

As technology mutates with increasing speed and cultural production moves online, academic discussion may struggle to keep the pace. Most scholars today engage in digital scholarship, without necessarily doing so consciously: personalized searches on Google or in academic databases draw on complex forms of data mining and user profiling that produce results whose genesis we rarely understand. Similarly, the promotion of novels or the success of the newest TV show depends on algorithms that drive online bookstores and streaming sites. This workshop asks how we can analyze an American culture determined *by* and obsessed *with* computation, a society in which the algorithm has become a historical actor. What is the place of literature and literary criticism in digital society? Can formats like the novel, the feature film, or the photograph provide insight into an algorithmic age? One of the signature developments in academia over the last decade has been the arrival of the digital humanities (DH). Do quantitative methods provide the answers posed to scholars by ever larger archives and born-digital culture? Can DH deliver an emancipatory critique of contemporary society – program or be programmed, as Douglas Rushkoff has warned? Or do they threaten to subsume the humanities in a digital logic that is alien to their hermeneutical tradition and facilitates "a neoliberal takeover of the university" (Allington, Brouillette & Golumbia)? We invite contributions that answer these and related questions on the intersection of algorithmic culture and criticism in any aspect of US politics, literature, and culture. Papers that focus on transnational aspects, examine earlier historical periods with the help of digital methods, or engage with questions of race, gender, disability, and class are particularly welcome.

Speakers:

Frank Mehring (Nijmegen): "Mapping Late Modernism: Digitizing and Clustering New Deal and Marshall Plan Photography"

Regina Schober (Mannheim): "Networks, Algorithms, and the Quantified Self: New Models for the Humanities?"

Melvin Wevers (Utrecht): "Beyond Criticism: A Pragmatic Approach to Computation in American Studies"