



Multistable Figures: On the Critical Potential of Ir/Reversible Aspect-Seeing, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 8 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2014), pp. 07–21

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Introduction

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ABSTRACT: Multistable figures offer an intriguing model for arbitrating conflicting positions. Moving back and forth between the different aspects under which something can be seen, one recognizes that mutually contradictory descriptions can be equally valid and that disputes over the correct account can be resolved without dissolving differences or establishing a higher synthesis. Yet, the experience of a gestalt switch also offers a model for radical conversions and revolutions – that is, for irreversible leaps to incommensurable alternatives foiling ideals of rational choice while providing the possibility and necessity of decision. Accentuating the temporal dimensions of multistable figures, this multidisciplinary volume illuminates the critical potentials and limits of multistability as a complex figure of thought.

INTRODUCTION

Christoph F. E. Holzhey

‘It’s a duck!’ – ‘It’s a rabbit!’ As long as interlocutors see only one aspect, they will engage in an endless dispute without approaching agreement. Once they recognize that the same image allows for different, equally valid descriptions, they can quickly settle the dispute without dissolving differences between conflicting accounts or establishing a higher synthesis. The experience of multistable figures or so-called *Kippbilder* – the sudden and repeated ‘kippen’ (tilting, toppling, tipping, or flipping over) of perception as the same object is seen under different aspects – is fascinating in its own right. However, what animated the year-long discussion leading to this volume was a critical exploration of the proposition that such figures may offer a helpful model for thinking through the intercultural and interdisciplinary effort of productively negotiating between conflicting positions.

Here, in contrast to simple multistable figures, not only are we not limited to two aspects, but we also do not begin with well-circumscribed objects. Instead, the starting point consists of divergent descriptions without prior knowledge as to whether they are equally valid. One or several descriptions could just be wrong or they could turn out to be referring to different objects or situations, so there is no contradiction between them. An answer can only be found through sustained conversations and explorations, by recognizing different aspects and continuously going back and forth between them – and not simply once and for all, but separately for specific situations and contexts. In this process, one might expect that false alternatives get eliminated, that differing positions get modified to approach each other, or that the conversation breaks off, leading to a differentiation of objects and approaches – that is, to different (sub)disciplines or (sub)cultures.

Arriving at a strict multistable figure with incompatible but equally valid descriptions is at best a rare and unexpected prospect. Maintaining it as a possibility can help keep the conversation going and stop us from prematurely jumping to the conclusion that in being convinced of the validity of one position we must deny and reject the validity of conflicting positions. Positions that appear to be mutually exclusive may

just turn out to be different aspects of the same object or situation. However, *assuming* the applicability of this model to situations of conflict is equally problematic and risks leading to indifference – becoming at best indifferent to other perspectives, and at worse oblivious to forms of violence veiled and sustained by conciliatory equivocation.

Multistable figures can thus function in more complex and contradictory ways than the initial scenario of conflict resolution may suggest. While we rarely seem to be confronted with situations where we can easily move from one aspect to another, imagining other ways of seeing, experiencing and living, making such alternatives visible, and realizing them in an irreversible manner is the task of revolutionaries – not only in politics, but also in art and even science. ‘What were ducks in the scientist’s world before the revolution are rabbits afterwards’, says Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, thereby indicating that metaphoric uses of multistable figures are not bound to quiet coexistence but can also provide a model for turbulent, perhaps violent, and at any rate rationally uncontrollable transformations.

A large distance no doubt separates the rather small subset of optical illusions from the kind of epistemological, scientific, aesthetic, and political conflicts and tensions invoked by the contributions in this volume. The aim is certainly not to collapse the gap and to suggest, for instance, that social conflicts could be reduced to optical illusions and mere perceptual, subjective differences, let alone that they could be explained and resolved by multistable figures. The point is rather that thinking with multistable figures can have a critical potential when conflicts get redoubled on a perceptual and conceptual level. While conflicting groups may agree on the reality of conflict, they may also engage in a *mésentente* on a different level, mishearing one another and replicating their conflict in a disagreement over how to conceptualize the conflict and its elements.¹ Furthermore, conflict may reappear within each group not only because there is disagreement over political strategies, but also because the constitution of conflicting groups, possible alliances, and necessary exclusions are at stake. Such multiple replication neither challenges the reality of conflict nor softens it, even if the lines of conflict keep shifting. On the contrary, it arguably points to the ‘Real’ understood as the ‘traumatic core of some social antagonism’² and questions the possibility of coming to an understanding even among those who agree to rely on the force of the better argument rather than physical violence to deal with tensions and conflicts. What

should be cannot follow from what *is*, but also with similar aims and values, no agreement can be reached when one cannot even settle on an account of the situation and on a conceptualization of its problems.

Modern science seems to offer a model for rational progress even if it arguably seeks to secure its progress by agreeing to limit itself to that which it expects to be able to describe. The argument that even with this self-limitation, science faces incommensurable alternatives – such that science undergoes revolutions that have less to do with leaps of knowledge than with contingent choices of an ultimately social and political nature – resonated well with poststructuralist, deconstructive, and social constructivist approaches. After the end of the Cold War's bipolarity, this argument played an important role in the so-called Science Wars, which at their height reached public visibility through the Sokal affair in 1996.³ Later presented as an attempt to rescue the political Left from a postmodern epistemic relativism that was supposedly dominating the human and social sciences,⁴ the Sokal hoax, it might be argued, struck a nerve, and its reverberations continue to be felt because the pluralization of incommensurable alternatives is increasingly perceived to be complicit with a global neo-liberal capitalist order. Since then, the critical investment of questioning, destabilizing, and pluralizing categories of construction easily appears as scientifically soft and politically ineffective, and it seems to have given way to a yearning for the kind of solid answers that the hard sciences promise and religious fundamentalisms posit. In addition to a return to Marx, recent years have seen numerous post-linguistic turns – such as the emotional, affective, material or ontological turns – which allow the humanities and the social sciences to dialogue again more closely, though often defensively, with science and technology.

In this all-too-roughly sketched and certainly contestable context, multistable figures may offer a helpful model to think through the possibility of having incommensurable alternatives without promoting a radical constructivism, subjectivism, or relativism.⁵ They problematize fixed dichotomies between subject and object, reality and construction, epistemology and ontology, and natural and conventional categories; but rather than reducing, conflating or bridging them, they also make their discontinuities and ruptures both palpable and intelligible.

In proposing multistable figures as a model with which to explore a situation of conflicting positions, the term 'model' is not meant in a normative sense as something to be emulated, but in the sense of a sci-

entific model, which like a metaphor, provides an ‘instrument of re-description’ and thus ‘belongs not to the logic of justification or proof, but to the logic of discovery’.⁶ The articles collected in this volume are thus especially concerned with critically exploring the implications of transposing specific moments in the remarkably complex and multilayered phenomenology of multistable figures. They share a particular attention to temporal dimensions and collectively show how these figures can inspire thinking about multiple temporal figures – such as the *now*, the anticipated future, the reactivated past, or the always-already – and help conceptualize manifold temporalities, be they circular, eternal, suspended, discontinuous, reversible, or irreversible.

The first chapter highlights the *Kippunkt* of *Kippbilder* (the moment of tilting, flipping, or toppling over – or indeed the tipping point – of multistable figures), but it also provides a vivid illustration for the complex entanglement of different temporalities, dimensions, moments, and registers of nested *Kippbilder*, which later chapters will individuate and analyse in other contexts. In ‘KippCity’, Christine Hentschel explores the potential of multistable figures for conceptualizing urban change. This potential, she argues, lies in inspiring a particular way of looking, which manoeuvres between proximity and distance, complicates the relationship between fragment and whole, and allows for a strategy of estrangement and of searching for a critical perspective in the irreducible gap of the flip-moment itself. In Berlin-Neukölln, a neighbourhood long branded as poor and failing, multiple and partly conflicting flip-scenarios have begun to inspire and haunt the neighbourhood and its self-reflective talk. KippCity Neukölln is thus a flickering figure. But unlike an artefact *Kippbild*, which flickers between duck and rabbit, for example, KippCity Neukölln does not simply tip into a new pre-fabricated form, but rather wavers between different future scenarios. Neukölln’s flickering urbanity is thus nervous, full of uncertainty, frustration and enthusiasm. The article shows how the neighbourhood seeks escape from the dystopia of two dominant flip scenarios of ghettoization and gentrification by digging its claws into its *now*. While here the *now* may be enjoyed as a *Kippbild* that has two equally dystopic flip scenarios as its aspects – and that stays exciting as long as it is reversible and neither of its aspects is fully and irreversibly realized – ‘KippCity’ also highlights the fact that flips along axes other than the ghetto-gentrification pivot are necessary in order to do justice to the neighbour-

hood's diverse realities and address the complex factors that shape urban (im)mobility.

From the flickering *now* to timelessness: in the second chapter, Beau Madison Mount focuses on the 'seeing-as' structure of multistable figures, which he argues are distinct and independent from the phenomenon of aspect shifts – even if it may be empirically impossible to acquire the concept of aspect-seeing without having experienced aspects shift. His chapter 'Aspects and Abstracta' starts with a brief history of the philosophical interest in multistable figures since the nineteenth century, suggesting that this 'seeing-as' structure is central in the most important philosophical treatment of multistable figures – Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* – and can be generalized beyond concrete perception to the contemplation of abstract objects under an aspect. After a discussion of multistable figures in general and a few observations about concrete instances of seeing-as, Mount presents examples of the aspect-relative cognition of mathematical abstracta (thinking about a set of complex numbers as the base set of a group; conceiving of a series of sets under a number-aspect) and artefactual abstracta (understanding a sonnet in Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* under the aspects of two distinct artworks; interpreting poems based on homophonic translations under the aspects of two different languages so that 'Un petit d'un petit', for instance, would be read in French, but understood also as 'Humpty Dumpty' in English). The chapter concludes by suggesting that the possibility of the aspect-relative cognition of both mathematical and artefactual abstracta is important for realists about mathematical objects – that is, as the appendix further elucidates, for a mathematical platonism that insists on the existence of numbers, for instance. The appendix also further motivates the view that literary works are abstracta (abstract types of which specific copies are concrete tokens) and thus nonspatial and causally inert, even if they are ontologically dependent on human activities and thus in some sense also temporal.

The coming into existence of artefactual abstracta is perhaps as intricate to conceptualize as what can only improperly be called the first aspect change in the experience of a *Kippbild*. Strictly speaking, there is no first change of aspects, since it is only after this event that aspects are recognized as such. The so-called first aspect change introduces a double split – between two aspects, but also between seeing and aspect-seeing – and it does so irreversibly, while all subsequent aspect changes can

be understood as an endless chain of reversible changes. In the third chapter, ‘Splitting Images: Understanding Irreversible Fractures through Aspect Change’, Luca Di Blasi argues that this complex combination of an eventful moment and an undirected repetition of the same makes *Kippbilder* an interesting model for understanding better dramatic, existential, and even religious events and their consequences. After discussing the specificity of the Rubin vase and its (inversional) aspect changes, which distinguish it from the duck-rabbit figure, he focuses on the eureka moment when a *Kippbild* is for the first time seen as a *Kippbild* and a ‘second’ aspect splits the originally perceived integrity or wholeness, relativizing it as a partial aspect. Consciously dramatizing the genealogical structure in view of a translation into an existential realm, he highlights the asymmetry between the first and second aspects, which may stand, respectively, for a lost wholeness and a divisive split. The subsequent, reversible aspect changes ensure that one avoids the totalitarian temptation of overcoming the irreversible split by taking one aspect for the whole. However, Di Blasi argues that being satisfied with an endless series of ultimately banal changes between mere aspects would be but another attempt – one that is more paradoxical, but ultimately just as reductive – to get rid of the split as it was introduced by the first aspect change. The full complexity and potential of multistable figures as a model for radically transformative events, he insists, only comes out when one recognizes the difference between the first aspect change and subsequent changes, *and* keeps both the split and the desire to get rid of it. In the final section, the chapter elaborates this claim by discussing the conversion of Paul and his *hōs mē* (‘as if not’).

A kind of conversion scene with a *Kippbild* structure is also the focus of the fourth chapter, but the approach is in several ways flipped around, as it were. Pascale Gillot starts her chapter ‘The Munchausen Effect: Subjectivity and Ideology’ by situating her argument within a philosophical tradition that opposes philosophies of consciousness and rejects any supposed primacy of an originary subjectivity that would get transformed only subsequently through social interactions with others. Her focus lies on Louis Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation and specifically the apparent *Kippbild* structure of the famous police-hailing scene that Althusser describes in order to illustrate how the subject – far from being primary – is constituted as the result of being interpellated as subject. The multistability linked to this event does not have to do with the outcome (which appears instead as a stable, integrated

subject), but rather with a logical circularity that makes reason oscillate between two sides of an antinomy: the subject is said to be constituted through the hailing, but one would think that there must already be a subject that recognizes itself as being hailed. Gillot proposes two ways of addressing this circle with the model of multistable figures or, following Michel Pêcheux's Althusserian analysis, with what has been described as the *Munchausen effect* in allusion to the story of Baron Munchausen pulling himself out of a pond by grasping his own hair. On one reading, the permanent oscillation between mutually exclusive positions – the subject as constituted versus the subject as pre-existing and constituting – is a symptom for ill-conceived premises, but these do not concern Althusser but rather the approaches for which he offers a radical critique: subjectivism, psychologism, and the idealist theory of the subject, which insist on the question of origin and paradoxically posit the subject as a cause of itself (*causa sui*). On another reading, the *Kippbild* structure does apply to the subjectivation process insofar as it points to an irreducible contradiction upon which the subject is built. While subjectivism seeks to arrest the *Kippbild* structure through a reduction to the side of the constituting subject (but then re-encounters the structure in the paradoxical notion of *causa sui*), one might say that Althusser and Pêcheux perform a reduction to the side of the constituted subject, but at the same time account for the subject-effect as a *necessary* illusion that is produced in a complex temporality of anticipation, retroactiveness, and the necessary obliteration of the conditions of subject constitution. As result, both the subject's split and its forgetting are emphasized here even more strongly, but also differently, namely as necessary and with an emphasis on constitution, causality, and freedom rather than on integrity, wholeness, and the desire to overcome the sense of their loss.

While the *Kippbild* structure of a split subject may appear timeless and universal – regardless of whether it is linked to an individual's contingent conversion or to the necessity of ideology and to Althusser's provocative assertion that 'ideology has no history' – the subsequent chapters turn to more specific historical and socio-cultural contexts. Benjamin Dawson suggests in the fifth chapter, 'Cognition and Volition: Two Aspects of the Human in the Age of Experimental Systems', that it is only in modernity that the human subject appears as a strict *Kippbild* with no mediation between its aspects. The transition to what he also calls the 'age of anthropolarity' is irreversible insofar as modernity can-

not properly think of the process of its becoming, let alone of what came before. However, Dawson describes in a necessarily speculative manner the emergence of a *Kippbild* anthropolarity as a process of impoverishment and diminution rather than as a momentous event, and links it to an increasing indistinction of thought and life. In the first section of the chapter, he sketches the complementary twentieth-century trends of ‘biologizing epistemology’ (especially Georges Canguilhem’s approach to a science of life, where life is both the object and subject of research) and ‘epistemologizing biology’ (especially the emergence of differential systems theory through an intertwining of biology and cybernetics) as a theoretical background for exploring the deeper implications of Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s determination of experimental systems as living systems. In the second section, the chapter argues that the disappearance of the distinction between cognition and life has deeper roots going back to the eighteenth century. Dawson highlights in particular Kant’s temporalization of self-consciousness and cognition, which ultimately reduces science to life, or more precisely to a de-ontologized understanding of life as immanent and self-grounded on the operational management and reproduction of internal differences. As a result, the subject of knowledge is no longer a substance, but a transcendental difference reduced to managing and endlessly reiterating differences. The only substantial subjectivity left in Kant is the subject of practical reason (volition), but it is entirely ineffectual and eclipsed by the biological imperative that the chapter’s last section links to Michel Foucault’s theory of governmentality, which relies on a biological epistemology to conceptualize the shifts in society that took place around 1800. However, Dawson finally suggests in reference to Giorgio Agamben that rather than disappearing, volition absently remains and forms part of a ‘bipolar machine’ in which neither side – volition and cognition, being and practice, substance and effectuality, theology and administration – is possible without the other, even if there is no longer any relationship of mediation between them.

If the *Kippbild* once again offers a model for a split subject, its structure appears here as an ‘emaciated dialectics’, that is, it appears as the result of a historical process that may well have started with Paul’s Christian conversion and have reached by now the point where a *Kippbild* structure passes as a necessary effect of any ideology. Of course, the frameworks of chapters three to five are too different for them to be simply fitted together as highlighting three moments of the same his-

tory. Although they are all to some extent concerned with a split subject, the axes of splitting differ, running between volition and cognition, between a constituting and constituted subject, or initially between different relativized identities but ultimately between a desire for integrity and a repetition of splitting. Nevertheless, a certain similarity can be discerned insofar as an asymmetric split is privileged, with one side being of the order of substance and the other of insubstantial identities or appearances that are non-originary, contingent, unstable, and relativized within a web of differences. Such a privileging does not contradict the possibility of multistability on the ‘insubstantial’ side, which is where one might expect the *Kippbild* model to be most directly applicable. A reversible flipping between ontologically homogeneous aspects is indeed as conceivable for the subject as it was for the urban and abstract objects discussed in the first two chapters, but the other three chapters presented thus far more or less explicitly consider it as unsatisfactory and as something to be escaped through an axial shift towards substantiality (conceived perhaps as a necessary illusion or desire). One possible background and historical context for this stance can be found in the debates about identity politics since the 1960s and the view that they are too caught up in pluralizing insubstantial differences, regardless of whether identity categories are politicized at the risk of essentializing them or whether their instability and fluidity is celebrated. These debates could now seem to have been decided and identity politics discredited on account of its substantialization of socially contingent constructions. However, while one avenue is then to seek a better conception of the register of substance, another is to pursue other understandings of identity politics through a re-examination of its history and the concerns it addressed.

The sixth chapter, ‘Identity Politics Redux’, focuses on a case study of queer feminist pornography to show that identity politics and its debates continue to be relevant in contemporary queer activist practice. K. Heintzman begins by reviewing some key aspects of the debates, including controversies with coalition politics, the role of language, labelling, and bodily materiality, and queer theory’s distinction between identity and identification. The argument here is that the manifold criticisms of identity politics collectively appear contradictory, and that advocates and critics of ‘identity politics’ may ultimately disagree primarily over the term’s definition, while having much in common in terms of political strategies and concerns. There is, for instance, the

sense that problems of exclusion and of wrongly presuming similarities that would unite people hold for either side of the debates, as does the danger of participating in the oppression that is attacked; and conversely, there is the sense that those who defend identity boundaries are as right as those who seek to mobilize and dismantle these boundaries. With regard to the position emphasizing processes of identification and the fragmented, fluid, and always provisional character of all identities, Heintzman suggests that it may just as well be considered a case of anti-identity politics as of identity politics. One could add here that while these debates may be thought of in terms of multistability and include a critical reflection on the proliferation of differences, a subject's reversible switching between different identities does not seem to play a role, nor, for that matter, does a substantialization of identity. Rather, it is identity politics that appears multistable; or more to the point, it is experiences of difference, oppression, and marginalization, as well as strategies for responding to them effectively that appear multistable when representation and conceptualization are attempted. Turning to Shine Louise Houston's 'pomo-homo-docu-mockumentary', *The Wild Search*, the chapter offers a close and subtle reading that individuates the multiple and shifting aspects under which viewers may see naked bodies on screen, depending on their cultural literacy of queerness, and on the way they filter information from the visual and linguistic field. The chapter argues that the film intervenes in queer theory through strategies of misappellation and silence (for instance, through the unreliable self-identified heterosexual documentary filmmaker within the film, who aggressively marks bisexual, gender-variant, and raced bodies as lesbian) that play with the audience's persistent investment in conversations on identity politics, while offering a critique of identity categorization and allowing for the possibility of reappropriating and reimagining desire.

A multistable and persistently relevant kind of identity politics is also at issue in the next chapter, which moves to quite a different discursive context, and extends the historical horizon to World War II, shifting the focus from individual to national identity. Against the historical revisionism launched by the former Yugoslav republics since the 1990s, Gal Kirn insists on the importance and complexity of maintaining the radicalness of the revolutionary event that was the partisan struggle during World War II. He criticizes the dominant approach to nation building, which supplements nationalism with an anti-totalitarian

humanistic ideology that seeks reconciliation by placing Yugoslav communists as well as World War II fascists, local collaborators, and partisans on the same level – that is, as merely different aspects of totalitarianism and war. Against the mobilization of such a conciliatory *Kippbild*, which remains compatible with a rehabilitation of fascist collaborators and an amnesia of the anti-fascist legacy in post-Yugoslav memory politics, Kirn insists on the partisan difference. He argues for a partisan return to the partisan struggle and for the necessity for researchers to recover the political history of the oppressed in a partisan way, that is, by taking sides. The partisanship of the seventh chapter, ‘Multiple Temporalities of the Partisan Struggle: From Post-Yugoslav Nationalist Reconciliation Back to Partisan Poetry’, is not due to a privileging of something of the order of substance. On the contrary, the chapter faults not only the memory politics of nationalist reconciliation but also that of Yugonostalgia for seeking and mythologizing national substance in a unified archive. It suggests that they form a *Kippbild* with equally objectionable aspects, and argues that both discourses share Romantic assumptions about the temporality of the Nation and history as a closed process. The partisan struggle, by contrast, manifests a ruptured and open temporality, as the main part of the chapter shows through a close analysis of partisan poetry that emerged during the partisan struggle in World War II. The special, multiple temporality of this poetry hinges on the productive and tensed relationship between the ‘not yet existing’ – a new society that is not only free of foreign occupation, but also radically transformed – and the contemporary struggle during the war. Moreover, this temporality of a ‘futur antérieur’ is marked by the fear that the rupture of the struggle might not be rightly remembered, or not remembered at all. The memory of the struggle is thus a task to be realized, not only for poets, but for everyone participating in the struggle.

While also highlighting the necessity of deciding and taking sides, the eighth chapter emphasizes that this necessity keeps arising and is central for an understanding of political agency and its conditions. Entitled ‘Figuring Ambivalence, Capturing the Political: An Everyday Perspective’, it focuses on the notion of ambivalence to explore the intricate conditions and dynamics of everyday decision-making. In the first part, Brigitte Bargetz sketches how Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Homi Bhabha, and Antke Engel use different figures of ambivalence in order to critique assumptions of political coherence, closure, and deter-

minism. With different emphases, these approaches mobilize ambivalence as a figure of multiplicity that highlights political potentialities and the possibility of agency beyond identity politics. At the same time, the authors discussed go beyond an uncritical affirmation of multiplicity insofar as they highlight the role of power relations and structures, and problematize, for instance, the privatization of ambivalence, the burden of having to decide, and the simultaneous demands of freedom and responsibility imposed on the neoliberal subject. Bargetz suggests that the model of multistable figures captures this double aspect of ambivalence insofar as this model evokes multiplicity but is more constrained and structured, involving a situation of undecidability but also the *necessity* to decide – if only temporarily. Noting that in paradigmatic *Kippbilder* the structural constraints go too far, she suggests combining the figures of multiplicity and multistability. The second part of the chapter explores the double aspect of ambivalence by turning to Henri Lefebvre's theory of the everyday and his emphasis on praxis as the requirement for making decisions. In particular, Bargetz works out a distinction between ambiguity and ambivalence, which are often used interchangeably, such that the complex structure and temporality of decision-making may be captured by the formula 'ambivalence = ambiguity + decision'. Ambiguity here denotes a plurality of potentialities that can co-exist with indifference. Ambivalence, by contrast, is tightly bound to practice and to the (imposed) need to decide. The two notions are part of a tightly interrelated assemblage with an intricate temporality that goes beyond joining the reversible flickering of possibilities with the necessity of making an irreversible decision: ambiguity keeps returning but cannot endure, and it therefore appears to be constantly interrupted through decisions and actions; ambivalence, in turn, is both the suspension of ambiguity and its unfolding, and it is only through ambivalence that ambiguity and the power relations underlying the whole assemblage become manifest. The chapter concludes by suggesting that such a theorization of ambiguity and ambivalence as an interrelated assemblage constituted through practices reflects a materialist, process-oriented understanding of the political, and accounts for the contradictory conditions that subjects both encounter and shape.

Bargetz's chapter could be said to respond to the Munchausen effect of the subject's constitution by partially shifting it to social conditions so as to arrive at a mutual constitution through practices without turning either the subject or the socio-political into a determining,

always-already pre-existing stable ground of the order of substance. The emphasis on (insubstantial) multiplicity, which is perhaps stronger than in the chapters highlighting the persistence of historical contingencies and the necessity for a partisan recovery of singular historical events, indicates the limits of taking the *Kippbild* as a model for decision-making. However, the model of multistable figures may once again regain a productive potential if one decides to flip axes to construct a *Kippbild* oscillating between conceptual aspects that one considers to be in conflict but equally indispensable, such as multiplicity and multistability, potentiality and structure, or possibility and constraint. There is no need here to link one of the sides with a substantial dimension that would lead to an ontological splitting, but the alternatives can be conceived precisely as aspects. In this case, they are aspects of the interrelated assemblage of ambivalence and ambiguity, which unfolds a certain doubling of ambivalence – one could also say ‘an ambivalence of ambivalence’ – and is bound up with an intricate semi-circular temporality of retroactively constituted conditions, of anticipated realization in the mode of the ‘futur antérieur’, and of suspense.

In this spirit, the ninth and final chapter reflects on the multistable use of multistable figures, and maps out some of the possibilities that are discussed with different emphases throughout the volume. It seeks to think through the possibilities of transposing specific moments in the phenomenology of paradigmatic *Kippbilder* – such as the duck-rabbit – to other phenomena while disregarding other moments. The point is not to be content with an analogy – as if it could explain anything – but rather to make the transposition productive by suggesting possibilities in the field of analogy that one might not otherwise imagine, and thereby to raise questions for further exploration in that field. Like any other toy model, the *Kippbild* model can certainly not be expected to do justice to the full complexity of the phenomena of interest, but at most to a particular aspect or only after some extension – such as abstracting, for example, from the psychophysiology of grasping one visual gestalt rather than another to a more generalized sense of comprehending something under an aspect. Entitled ‘Oscillations and Incommensurable Decisions: On the Multistable Use of Multistable Figures’, the chapter starts with Joseph Jastrow’s ‘The Mind’s Eye’ (1899), which highlights an active, subjective dimension of seeing and is a source for Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous conceptual analysis of the duck-rabbit figure. After some reflections on multistable physical systems, where multista-

bility is not a matter of perception but of material processes with complex, non-linear dynamics, Christoph F. E. Holzhey focuses on the multifaceted and ambiguous uses of multistable figures in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in order to identify and explore different temporal moments in multistable figures. In addition to a period of reversibility, there is also an initial, irreversible aha-experience and the possibility of making different kinds of decisions about how to act – irreversibly – upon reversibility in particular contexts: committing to one aspect at the expense of others, deciding whether to engage in such a forced choice at all rather than suspend the oscillation and/or move in an altogether different direction, or admitting an irreducible multistability.

This volume is an outcome of the research project 'Kippbilder/Multistable Figures as Models for Tension/Spannung' conducted in 2010–11 at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry. It is the result of an intensive year-long exchange among the contributors, other ICI fellows (Catherine Diehl, Giovanni Frazzetto, and Aaron Schuster) and staff members (Claudia Peppel and Manuele Gagnolati), as well as conversations with associate members (Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, Sara Fortuna, Agnese Grieco, Liora Lazarus, Fatima Naqvi, Hania Siebenpfeiffer, and Ming Tiampo) and fellows who came to ICI Berlin for the subsequent project 'Multistable Figures and Complementarity' (Anaheed Al-Hardan, Bobby Benedicto, Zeynep Bulut, David Kishik, Sandrine Sanos, and Volker Woltersdorff). In addition to numerous lectures, workshops, and conferences organized within the framework of the research focus 'Multistable Figures' and the overarching core project 'Tension/Spannung' (for an overview, see the Institute's website at www.ici-berlin.org), two further volumes in the series *Cultural Inquiry* belong to the same research context: Sara Fortuna's *Wittgensteins Philosophie des Kippbilds: Aspektwechsel, Ethik, Sprache* (2012) and *The Scandal of Self-Contradiction: Pasolini's Multistable Subjectivities, Traditions, Geographies*, ed. by Luca Di Blasi, Manuele Gagnolati, and Christoph F. E. Holzhey (2012).

NOTES

- 1 Cf. Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente: Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995); in English as *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. by Julie Rose (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 2 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), p. 26. Drawing on Levi-Strauss's reflection on 'the Winnebago discrepancy' – which could be considered as a kind of multistable figure: the dual representation of a village's dual organization – Žižek here develops his notion of the 'parallax Real' as 'that which accounts for the very *multiplicity* of appearances of the same underlying Real' (ibid.).
- 3 A short account of the Sokal hoax can be found in the introduction to Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998). In 1996 the physicist Alan Sokal submitted an article on the social construction of quantum gravity to the renowned journal *Social Text*. He wrote it as 'a parody of the type of work that has proliferated in recent years [...] chock-full of absurdities and blatant non-sequiturs' (pp. 1–2). After the article was accepted and published, he revealed the hoax, unashing a fierce debate that is partially documented in *The Sokal Hoax: The Sham That Shook the Academy*, ed. by the editors of *Lingua Franca* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000).
- 4 Sokal and Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense*, p. 206.
- 5 Multistable figures may thus form a useful model for re-thinking 'post-constructivism' or 'post-constructionism', which engages in 'a *double* – embracing and critical – approach to constructionism', with the prefix 'post' signifying 'both "transgressing" and "including"' (Nina Lykke, 'The Timeliness of Post-Constructionism', *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 18.2 (2010), pp. 131–36 (p. 133)). For the notion of post-constructivism, see for instance Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, 'Visual Representation and Post-Constructivist History of Science', *Historical Studies in the Physical and Biological Sciences*, 28.1 (1997), pp. 139–71 and the review essay by Joseph Rouse, 'Vampires: Social Constructivism, Realism, and Other Philosophical Undead', *History and Theory*, 41 (2002), pp. 60–78.
- 6 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 284. Ricoeur here refers to Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962) and Mary B. Hesse, 'The Explanatory Function of Metaphor', in *Models and Analogies in Science* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), pp. 157–77.

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