

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Culture Theory

Approaches to Culture Theory
Volume 8

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The Approaches to Culture Theory book series focuses on various aspects of the analysing, modelling, and theoretical understanding of culture. Culture theory as a set of complementary theories is seen to include and combine the approaches of different branches of science, among them the semiotics of culture, archaeology, environmental history, ethnology, cultural ecology, cultural and social anthropology, human geography, sociology and the psychology of culture, folklore, media and communication studies.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Culture Theory

Edited by

Anu Kannike, Katre Pärn, Monika Tasa



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Acknowledgements

The making of this volume has been an arduous although interesting journey. As the final chapter to the collaboration within the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT) it is rooted in the preparatory stages of this extensive project and the strengthening ties over seven years between the eight research groups and some 200 people. However, it was specifically planned as the summary of the project's research at the annual meeting in Põhjaka manor on November 20, 2013. It is only now, in 2020, a number of years after the project ended, that we can finally present our work.

Considering the history of this volume it is impossible to name all to whom we owe our gratitude. This volume presents not only the research of the authors, but also other research group members who open-mindedly and curiously participated in the experimental nature of CECT collaboration in the 2008–2015 period. We owe particularly heartfelt thanks to our tireless leaders Valter Lang, Hannes Palang, Kalevi Kull, Ülo Valk, Art Leete, Halliki Harro-Loit, Riho Altnurme and Raili Nugin (& Aili Aarelaid-Tart).

The authors of the chapters in this volume deserve much appreciation for their venturesome writing, which was tested time and time again. We are grateful for their trust and patience. We would like to thank all who contributed at the different stages of preparing, writing, discussing, reviewing and editing the chapters. Our final thanks go to the team responsible for producing the series of which this book is part.

Introduction. Expediency of interdisciplinary cooperation and experimentation

Anu Kannike, Katre Pärn, Monika Tasa

Dedicated to the loving memory of CECT (2008–2015).

The present volume was set in motion during an annual meeting of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT) in November 2013. While discussing the plans for the final publication of the CECT (2008–2015), an idea was proposed: in order to highlight the collaborative and interdisciplinary spirit of CECT, the articles ought to be written in cooperation between the members of the centre's research groups.

At the aforementioned meeting the board members reflected on the outcomes of the activities of CECT, noting that over the years the awareness of each other's research as well as the dialogue between research groups had grown extensively. However, collaborative articles were still rare, pertaining to individual researchers with overlapping research topics. The previous experiences within the CECT had shown ample cooperation among research groups, members of the groups were successfully co-organizing conferences and seminars, coediting publications, etc. This indicated that CECT had become a seminal and inspirational environment for interdisciplinary collaboration. Now it was proposed to take a step further by initiating an experimental collaborative writing project that would lead to cross-disciplinary research and joint writing among the members of the research teams.

The initiative aligned with the aims of CECT as well as the book series *Approaches to Culture Theory* which was launched by the centre in 2011: both aimed to bring together the various disciplines that study culture and develop culture theory across disciplines by providing a cordial space for bold thinking and experimentation. As the editors of the series announced in their foreword to the first volume:

Kannike, A., Pärn, K. & Tasa, M. (eds) (2020) *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Theory*. *Approaches to Culture Theory* 8, 17–26. University of Tartu Press, Tartu.

We strive towards significant improvement in both the self-understanding of disciplinary fields and in the comprehension of general theoretical models by juxtaposing and comparing data, theories, and the methods of research in an interdisciplinary environment through crossdisciplinary cooperation. (Lang et al 2011, 5)

Although the crossdisciplinary cooperation between research groups was rather intense, research articles were nevertheless mostly written within the bounds of one's own research group and, as a rule, individually. The latter is, of course, characteristic to humanities in general, where collaborative writing is far from usual practice. To a lesser extent this applies to social sciences, included in the centre, as well. Yet the exceptionally dialogical space between researchers within CECT offered a favorable environment for changing this habitual practice.

The proposed experimental project was open to all members of the eight research groups of the centre. The aim was to gather, accordingly, at least eight collaborative papers that would develop further the topics that had been, over the years, central for CECT, but would also be venturesome with theoretical ideas and forms of interdisciplinary collaboration. The ambition was to create additional possibilities for polyvocal discussion by including discussants and commentators from within as well as outside of CECT.

The process concluded with ten collaborative papers published in this volume and the authors of the chapters, indeed, represent all eight of the CECT's research groups:

- **Archaeology:** Valter Lang, Pikne Kama, Maarja Olli, Maria Smirnova, Kristiina Johanson
- **Cultural Communication Studies:** Halliki Harro-Loit, Triin Vihalemm
- **Contemporary Cultural Studies:** Raili Nugin, Maaris Raudsepp, Franz Krause, Kadri Kasemets, Tarmo Pikner, Anu Kannike
- **Ethnology:** Art Leete, Kristin Kuutma, Toomas Gross, Ester Bardone, Kirsti Jõesalu, Kristel Rattus, Kristi Grünberg
- **Folkloristics:** Tiiu Jaago, Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, Helen Kästik, Pihla Maria Siim
- **Landscape Studies:** Hannes Palang, Tõnu Viik, Marju Kõivupuu, Helen Sooväli-Sepping, Marek Tamm, Anu Printsman
- **Religious Studies:** Anne Kull, Lea Altnurme, Roland Karo, Atko Remmel
- **Semiotics:** Kalevi Kull, Peeter Torop, Kati Lindström, Tiit Remm, Andreas Ventsel, Ott Puumeister, Timo Maran, Katre Pärn

The experimental project was integrated into the traditional event cycle of CECT. Thus, before the next incubator of theory, an annual event that took place in the

beginning of the year, all research groups of CECT received an invitation to prepare a list of topics their group would propose for the collaborative project.

During the first day of the incubator that was held in February 14–15, 2014 all research groups made a short presentation on their proposed topics. The presentations were followed by a joint discussion during which compatible propositions were converged into themes serving as an initial basis for potential articles. Subsequently, provisional collaborative teams were formed of the researchers interested in a particular theme. During the remainder of the incubator, the teams developed the themes further, arriving at a working title and keywords of the proposed collaborative paper.

By the end of the incubator of theory, further benchmarks of the project were set in place, all of which, in hindsight, were realised more or less as planned during the first meeting. However, no restrictions or guidelines were set for the format of the collaboration, so that each of the teams could find the approach most fitting for them.

Although the makeup of the teams changed slightly over the course of the collaboration, and the topics were developed further, the core conceptions of the finalised papers remained close to the initial outlines. It should be noted that not all of the collaborative teams were put together during the incubator – some joined the project later, which itself is an evidence of the enthusiasm towards the opportunity for interdisciplinary collaboration and openness for experimentation within CECT.

The next benchmark for the project was the 7th autumn conference of CECT (October 29–31, 2014), the topic of which was “Deep Mechanisms of Estonian Culture”. The title refers to Juri Lotman’s and Boris Uspenskiĭ’s conceptions of mechanisms underlying cultural dynamics, such as (self-)organisation, boundedness, cultural polyglotism, cultural memory, autocommunication, etc., but also to the central role of Estonian culture as distinctive research material for CECT. The conference, held in Estonian, was dedicated to the work in progress. The aim of the conference was to provide constructive feedback to the research papers of the collaborative teams, to support them in moving towards the final articles as well as to contribute to the overall aim of polyvocality via discussion. For this purpose, each team chose one to three discussants for their papers, to whom the draft version of the paper was provided before the event. During the conference, each team’s presentation was followed by an extensive one-hour discussion with their discussants as well as questions from the audience. Preliminary synopses of the collaborative articles were published in the book of abstracts of the conference.

The format of the conference was fairly innovative for the centre as in this field of research such extensive discussions, particularly at the stage of writing in progress are not common for conferences. For the authors, the situation was adventurous, since instead of the final, clean version of their paper, they had to present their draft versions. This itself resulted in interesting observations about and debates on the differences in metalanguages of different disciplines as these came to the fore in the unpolished drafts. These, at times heated discussions were fruitful for the final developments of the papers.

The shift in language posed additional difficulty for the process. It was decided from the start that although the final papers will be published in English, the presentations and discussions during the autumn conference were to be held in Estonian, to take full advantage of thinking, expressing and debating over the work in progress in researchers' native language (mostly so, with some exceptions). However, in the end, the shift in language, or working on their topic in two languages in parallel, proved to be rather arduous.

In order to share the project and its outcomes with colleagues and general public in Estonia, the topics of the conference and contents of the collaborative research articles were communicated via various local cultural newspapers and magazines. After the conference, two discussion panels were organised and the discussions were published in *Sirp*, a weekly cultural newspaper. First panel, organised among members of CECT, was published in October 24, 2014, discussing the notion of deep mechanisms of Estonian culture (see Kull et al, 2014). Second panel, discussing the value and specificity of Estonian culture as research material for culture theory, was published in the same newspaper on January 23, 2015 (see Kull & Lang 2015). Later that year, versions of some of the collaborative papers were published in Estonian in a special number of *Akadeemia*, journal of Estonian academic culture, no 4/2015 dedicated to the outcomes of research within CECT. In addition, synopses of the collaborative projects were published in *Horisont* (no 4/2015), a magazine devoted to the dissemination of scientific knowledge (see Tasa et al 2015).

Looking back at the experiences gained through the large-scale interdisciplinary project of CECT, number of our colleagues saw the main value of the centre in offering an opportunity to enhance contacts with representatives of other disciplines. It took a few years for centre's research community to genuinely overcome the sense of estrangement and preconceived notions about other disciplines, a wonted side effect of a lack of day-to-day interaction between research groups. However, by the end of the seven-year period the centre had achieved to establish a lively and congenial environment for academic dialogue and an exceptionally active interdisciplinary network. The papers presented in the

volume attest the willingness of the researchers to step outside their habitual boundaries and into unexpected dialogues, to look for new viewpoints and to experiment with novel approaches.

The approaches to interdisciplinary collaboration taken by the authors of the chapters are diverse. Some of them juxtapose or combine several disciplinary perspectives on common issue in order to bring forth its multifaceted nature that escapes the purview of any one discipline. In some instances, these juxtapositions reveal similarities or complementarities between the disciplines despite the apparent differences in their metalanguage and theoretical apparatus. Others take a more integrative approach and aim to present a more holistic interdisciplinary theoretical or methodological framework.

Several of the chapters re-evaluate or re-interpret existing data or case studies from new theoretical or conceptual vantage points afforded by other fields, prompting to ask questions that are not usually asked within their own field. This further allowed to discover new patterns or even gaps within existing data/studies, habitual limits of disciplinary modes of data description or analysis. But the experimental collaboration offered also a space for exploring issues located in the borderlands, in-between disciplines, issues whose relevance or even reoccurring presence becomes evident precisely when diverse disciplines and studies are brought in dialogue.

As such, the process provided context for disciplinary self-reflection as well as for emergence of novel research objects for culture theory; it prompted discussions over epistemological underpinnings of humanities and social sciences as well as questions about the ontological statuses of their objects of study. In many cases, the collaboration revealed, once more, the ambiguous and dynamic nature of the cultural field.

In the end of the collaborative venture we can wholeheartedly agree with Art Leete's and Peeter Torop's assertion (Leete & Torop in this volume, p 121): "the diversity of the object-level must be countered by a diversity of theories or disciplines." Complexity and heterogeneity of culture necessitates from scholars the degree of diversity that can, perhaps, be properly achieved through interdisciplinary collaboration and juxtaposition.

In order to extend the dialogue between researchers and fields even further and add to the polyvocality on the topics, each chapter in this volume is accompanied by a short comment. The authors for the commentaries were suggested by the authors of the chapters and/or chosen by the editors, on the account that their research area intersects with the topic of the chapter, thereby their comments and notes would add a valuable complementary dimension to the discussion. The format of the comments was free, the guiding idea was to reflect on the

approach that was taken in the article or on its outcomes, to provide additional context and/or propose alternative perspectives or possible further trajectories for the research.

Furthermore, adding short comments to the chapters was intended to emphasise that there are no final answers or ultimate truths on the issues and, more importantly, the articles do not represent the end of collaboration. Instead, the process continues in the discussions had in between the covers of the current volume as well as outside them.

Contributing chapters

The variety of contributions in this volume gives evidence of the diverse approaches to cultural theory tackled across disciplinary boundaries within the CECT. The phenomena under scrutiny range from broader conceptual issues concerning the history and philosophy of cultural theory in Estonia to methodological problems and more specific analyses of local cultural heritage or days of celebration, for example.

The first chapter by **Marek Tamm** and **Kalevi Kull** examines the philosophical foundations of Estonian theory as well as its main epistemic facets, testing the hypothesis according to which a certain coherence and continuity can be identified in the tradition of theoretical thought in Estonia. The authors focus on the older layers of Estonian theory, mainly from the beginning of the 19th to the middle of the 20th centuries. They argue for conceiving of it as a separate local episteme – “a territorialised web of epistemological associations and rules” and underline a coherence and continuity in the Estonian cultural-theoretical tradition, based on common sources of influence and similar basic attitudes.

In their comment **Jaanus Sooväli** and **Margus Ott** challenge some aspects of the territorialisation of culture theory presented in the chapter, while agreeing with the claim that culture theory is in need of greater historicisation and its territorialisation could bring about interesting discoveries.

The complex issues of culture-dependent meaning formation are dealt with by **Tõnu Viik**, **Peeter Torop** and **Maaris Raudsepp**. Building on hermeneutics, semiotics, phenomenology and cultural psychology, they compare the theoretical models of meaning formation developed in these four sciences and highlight their common features, also exposing their culture-dependent character. They ask how the collective mechanisms of meaning formation operate within individual consciousness, how are the contents of individual experience communalised between subjects, and how are these contents socially validated. The authors argue that all the theories examined postulate the existence of a particular

collective or intersubjective meaning structure, by virtue of which subjective states can become meaningful and intersubjectively understandable.

In her comment to the chapter, **Katre Pärn** elaborates on the epistemological underpinnings put forward by the authors who extend, via Cassirer, the Uexküllian idea of plurality of species-specific umwelts to culture-specific realities. She emphasises the role of dialogue and translation as means for overcoming the monadic tendencies of human, cultural as well as disciplinary umwelts, leading towards dialogical epistemology.

In their contribution “Cultural theory and the ethnographic field: methodological views” **Art Leete** and **Peeter Torop** discuss the relationship between theory and empirical data in semiotics and ethnology. They suggest a hybrid methodology for combining broader analysis of cultural semiotics and interpretative ethnography in order to reach a joint metadisciplinary conceptual framework for cultural theory. Examining classical approaches to the relationship between the ethnographic field and cultural theory, especially Geertz’s concept of the thick description, they tackle the changing understandings of this association. They claim that recent developments in cultural theory require a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the ethnographic field and hybrid methodology.

In his comment, **Toomas Gross** contextualises the issues tackled in the chapter within the broader trends in anthropology, among them the perils of anthropological methods and changes in ethnographic fields that have led to increased self-awareness within the discipline and affirm the continuing relevance of theory in anthropology.

Franz Krause, **Tarmo Pikner**, **Maaris Raudsepp**, **Kadri Kasemets** and **Anne Kull** dedicate their chapter to the concept of the unnatural. They proceed from the idea that cultural theory must transcend its traditional limitation to the ‘unnatural’ and grapple with reframing its analyses to include the total world, including the ‘natural’. The authors approach the unnatural from six different angles, each of which is illustrated through an excursion. Consequently, the unnatural emerges out of specific, materially and semiotically situated practices and discourses and can be approached as a rich source for empirical studies into its production, negotiation, and the assumptions and projects articulated through it. The chapter suggests that ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ are in dynamic tension as categories that emerge from people’s situated experiences and strategic uses.

Timo Maran offers in his comment additional perspective on the ‘unnatural’ that goes beyond viewing it as an ambiguous concept or an issue of framing. Instead, he proposes to view it as having its own ontological status and particular role in the cultural dynamics that culture theory should take into account.

As a starting point for further discussion, he provides a rough sketch of the ontology of the Unnatural.

In the next chapter, **Maaris Raudsepp** and **Andreas Ventsel** turn to the problem of systemic power and autonomy from the social, semiotic and psychological perspectives. They discuss the different approaches to interrelations between habitus, social representation and semiotic autonomy, conceptualizing them in the context of power relations. Building on these discussions, they demonstrate the most significant preconditions for the realisation of specific power relations. Their study allows describing specific power relations as dynamic and context-dependent, constantly recreated or transformed in the process of collective and individual meaning-making.

In his comment, **Peeter Selg** locates Raudsepp's and Ventsel's approach within the relational sociology, seeing it as radical or 'deep' relational perspective to power. He perceives the value of their approach in establishing a dialogue between semiotics and various approaches to power in social sciences, the lack of which has been one of the reasons for the marginal position of semiotic power analysis.

Power relations in vernacular and institutional discourses on religion are the subject of analysis in the chapter by **Andreas Ventsel**, **Atko Remmel**, **Lea Altnurme**, **Kristiina Johanson**, **Roland Karo** and **Maaris Raudsepp**. The authors tackle the interdependent meaning-making of different institutional and vernacular discourses, drawing on examples from the Estonian cultural context, mainly associated with religion. As a result of their study, they suggest a typology of power relations based on Norbert Elias' conception of functions that allows to conceptualise meaning making in religious phenomena.

Ott Puumeister observes in his comment how religious discourses operate within the complex of knowledge–power–identity. While every discourse has its “will to truth”, to be recognized as legitimate knowledge, its epistemic status depends on power relations between discourses. However, the will to truth is stronger when the discourse is related to issues of identity, and the latter becomes additional dimension of power relations.

The contribution by **Ester Bardone**, **Kristi Grünberg**, **Helen Sooväli-Seping**, **Marju Kõivupuu** and **Helen Kästik** considers three Estonian cases of heritage management looking at them from the community perspective. They outline the different roles given to communities in the process of heritage management, as well as the impact of heritage politics in shaping communities. This allows them to highlight the problem that alongside with democratization, community is understood quite differently in varied policy discourses and practices. Thus,

the question arises who represents the community and how to preserve the multivocality in heritage processes.

In the comment to the chapter, **Kristel Rattus** brings out the problematics of understanding ‘community’ in the context of democratization of heritage management that advocates the inclusion of communities into the management process. While the real-life situations discussed in the chapter are revealing, she calls for further theoretical reflection on the use of the concept of community.

Halliki Harro-Loit, Triin Vihalemm, Kirsti Jõesalu and Elo-Hanna Seljamaa address celebration practices in Estonia and their influence on societal rhythms. They are applying an actor approach to the understanding of holidays, anniversaries and festivals, combining a sociological approach with ethnological and folkloristic studies. The authors focus on various catalyst actors that have the power to create days of importance as well as introduce and disseminate celebration practices. They pay particular attention to the bodily and sensory aspects of celebrations as well as to the multi-ethnic context in Estonia, revealing the variety and controversial nature of these practices.

Pirjo Korkiakangas commends the innovative and experimental analysis of celebrations of anniversaries and holidays presented in the abovementioned chapter. The national and socio-political changes and disruptions in Estonia turn holidays and forms of their celebration into an interesting material for approaching cultural, national, ethnic, generational, gender, etc. relations to days of celebration.

In the chapter “A plurality of pasts and boundaries: evidence from Estonia’s last one hundred years” **Raili Nugin, Tiiu Jaago, Anu Kannike, Kalevi Kull, Hannes Palang, Anu Printsman, Pihla Maria Siim and Kati Lindström** investigate how temporal boundaries are experienced and how everyday lives have been shaped in Estonia over the last century. Aiming to raise awareness of the complexity of cultural boundaries, they use multidisciplinary examples to illustrate how borders are perceived, constructed, negotiated and contested, as well as how everyday practices maintain the borders vanished in other spheres. The authors argue that people make sense of space by creating boundaries that are tightly tied with boundaries of time. Thus, a change of regime does not necessarily create sharp boundaries, but rather provides an environment for change in which a crucial role is also played by continuities based on memory, disposition and practice.

Tuulikki Kurki observes in her comment that the conceptualised understandings of border that arise from multidisciplinary approaches enable to account for different aspects of borders (e.g. social, cultural, territorial) on various levels (e.g. micro and macro level). She sees the chapter by Nugin et al as valuable

contribution to the theorisation of border, its dimensions and its ontological nature.

The final chapter by **Pikne Kama**, **Valter Lang**, **Maarja Olli**, **Katre Pärn**, **Tiit Remm** and **Maria Smirnova** analyses the problematic notion of archaeological culture and discuss the boundaries in cultures of the past. They present an innovative exploration of the potential of semiotic model of culture for reconstructing past cultures, particularly their boundaries, based on archaeological material. The authors use the archaeological cultures of *tarand* graves and long barrows to enquire into the prospects of re-evaluating the internal and external boundaries of these cultures from the semiotic point of view. This enables them to interpret archaeological artefacts as signs of the self-model of past culture and provide a theoretical and methodological framework with which to re-evaluate existing archaeological data and interpretations.

In his comment, **Daniele Monticelli** notes that the semiotic analysis presented in the chapter shows how various functions of boundary – e.g. differentiation, integration and indifferentiation – may have been activated in parallel in burial sites, demonstrating that boundary offers a valuable theoretical tool for interdisciplinary experimentation.

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