

PhD Project Jordis Lau “Foregrounding the Past – Literary Modernism into Media Art.”

This project is interested in the afterlives of modernist literature in the audio-visual arts. Video art, experimental film, and moving image installation art frequently quote or allude to modernist prose and poetry. The concept of appropriation theoretically frames this practice as an interpretative strategy on the level of the artwork. Moreover, following Paul Ricœur, appropriation is understood as the hermeneutic encounter of the spectator with the artwork. Quite contrary to the etymology of appropriation, media art appropriates not by making familiar but rather by making strange: Media art appropriations do not transparently imitate their source as “a window onto another world” but foreground their opacity. The project is interested in the increased emphasis of the artworks’ materiality, the use of haptic images, and the construction of embodied spectatorship. The aesthetic strategies of media art can be accounted for with the Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of estrangement. The term relates to forms and effects of defamiliarization and deautomatization – strategies that are also pertinent to modernist literature and early film. Estrangement, as proposed by Shklovsky, accounts for a certain aesthetic force that revitalizes perception to make recipients “see in a new light.”

The project further asks for the potential of a diachronic understanding of estrangement. From a perspective of intertextual dialogism, the appropriations circulate discourses across time and space. In so doing, contemporary audio-visualizations of literature from the first half of the 20th century open up a dialogue between past and present cultures. The project asks for the techniques used to remediate and update discourses, to invite spectators to re-read the texts, or to renegotiate the position of modernist “classics” in the canon; it furthermore addresses how modernism itself becomes a device to commemorate the past and shed light on the experience of the present. The appropriations circulate media art’s versions of modernism across national and cultural borders. The project investigates the implications of these repercussions in transcultural memory.