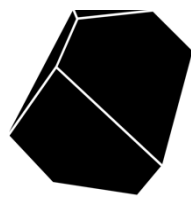




**CfP: Perceiving Forces. Dynamics of the Senses in Science, Art and Literature /  
Wahrnehmungskräfte – Kräfte wahrnehmen. Dynamiken der Sinne in Wissenschaft,  
Kunst und Literatur.**

Conference of the DFG Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies »Imaginaria of Force«,  
9-11 June, 2022 (Hamburg)



## Imaginarien der Kraft

Since the philosophy of ancient Greece, perception (*aisthesis*) has been fundamentally understood as a force (*dynamis*). Thinking about how the perceptive faculty functions opens onto tensions between the capability of truth and the susceptibility to deception; between passive impression and active imagination. Moreover, the problematic relationship of hidden cause to perceptible effect, and of latency to manifestation, is characteristic for reflections on force in general.

In Aristotle's description, the faculty of perception is situated between passivity and activity, insofar as it actualizes the intelligible forms (*morphe*) contained in things that have an effect on perception. In the late Middle Ages, Aristotelian *aisthesis* is transformed under the influence of Arabic theories of transmission and reception; increasingly, it describes the process of perception as the reception of qualitative intensities. The carrier of the *aisthesis* is the ethereal spirit, through which changes in the perceptual apparatus or the instances of cognitive processing are set in motion.

In the neoplatonically-influenced Renaissance teachings on *eros*, perception is described as a sympathetic dynamic that oscillates between harmony and overwhelming of the object and subject of perception; the effective power of 'magical' emissions is paradigmatic, but so are the power of images and the power of speech. The topical equation of femininity with sensitivity (in the sense of passive imprintability), but also with active aesthetic power to imprint, continually accompanies this discourse. Physical and physiological optics gradually detach themselves from these notions, culminating in Johannes Kepler defining perception as a point-by-point

transmission of impulses of light that must be (re)assembled beyond the 'wall' of the retina by cognitive processing. The question to what extent perception is based on such a (re)construction, or whether the (pictorial) 'entireties' of reality are perceived directly, is the source of a debate mainly fueled by the Jesuit optics of the Baroque era.

In addition to this discourse on the active and passive parts of perception and the question of the intensity of *aisthesis*, there is also a discussion about the hierarchy of the senses dating back to antiquity, which is also based on the category of force. In this context, eyesight is generally ranked as supreme thanks to its power to grasp forms adequately, even over greater distances. This conception shapes considerations of the hierarchy of the arts this in the emerging art discourse of the Renaissance. The question of the various sensory capacities, meanwhile, instigated a centuries-long tradition of comparative psychology that contrasted the senses of animals and humans, and which - following Aristotle - only conceded to humans the greater sensitivity of the sense of touch. This shaped the later career of the *tactus* as a paradigm of perception in general, while the sense of touch itself increasingly paradoxically receded from the modes of reception of the arts.

In thinking about the *vires repraesentativa*, the question of the faculties of perception and imagination has since the 18th century followed the model of Newton's concept of force. Perception, as understood in 19th-century physiology and psychology, should thus become measurable and calculable. With the quest for abstract entities, such as 'sensory energies', one no longer asks for perceptual qualities but for quantitative values. In striving for maximum objectivity, one aimed to answer not only old questions about perception's susceptibility to interference and deception, but also the reference to the reality of what is perceived. With the integration into experiments, theories of perception also became situated within the larger context of the empiricization of a metaphysical concept of force. The philosophical school of phenomenology, on the other hand, reactivates dimensions of a genuine bodily experience that not only lead to a quantified and mathematically determinable concept of force of physics, but also make force describable as *dynamis*, i.e. as a faculty of living beings. However, the specificity of human perception gains clarity not least through its embedment in (evolutionary) biological questions concerning the peculiarities and developmental potentials of human and non-human perception.

Under the title "Perceiving Forces", this conference addresses these issues not only with regard to philosophical or scientific, but above all to artistic approaches to the processes and possibilities of perception. When is sensory perception treated as a mere object of acting forces, and when as an active or activating force itself? To what extent does perception conceptualized in this way correspond to reality? And how do conceptualizations of perception as sensory forces relate to the problematic perceptibility of forces? Starting from the basic concepts of sensory physiology and epistemology, the conference aims to open up three fields of research. (1)

Biological concepts of perception of human and non-human animals, (2) Approaches to a cultural and media history of the senses, (3) The arts and their implicit and explicit theories.

(1) Attempts to determine the relationship between perception and consciousness raise questions around the position of humans in their natural environment. While the pre-Socratics ascribed the capacity of perception to all living organisms, Aristotle made it the feature that distinguishes humans and animals from plants. As a decidedly critical faculty with an inherently reflexive structure, perception requires that the perceiver be distanced from the perceived. Unlike animals and humans, plants seem to be directly subjected to the effects of matter. Their unique status sparked Early Modern debates about forms of vegetal perception (paradigm: sunflower), which threatened to undermine the gradations of the Aristotelian *scala naturae* by way of an equally Aristotelian emphasis on natural continuities. Here it should be explored how the question of a supposedly genuinely human perception is linked to specific practices of setting and dissolving boundaries between humans and environments.

(2) Looking at the cultural and media history of perception, the conference not only deals with classificatory schemes within nature. It also addresses hierarchies of the individual senses, theories of transmission and reception, the parallel existence or co-existence of their respective objects of perception, their (further) processing, as well as efforts to shift or transgress boundaries of perception. To what extent can we assume a given peculiarity of the senses, and how are their modes of translatability or interaction shaped? What role do media and technical augmentations play in this context? In addition to sensory perception, stagings of “extrasensory” perception (epiphanies, miracles, mediumism, etc.) would also need to be addressed. Last but not least, the conference considers exemplary trajectories or shifts of direction in history such as the heightening and atrophy of perception, its technical enhancements and adjustments, or artistic ‘sensitization’ (or sensitivity) and societal-social-civilizational ‘anesthesia’.

(3) Finally, the conference will investigate the relationship of human faculties of perception to modes of the production and reception of art. Can artistic methods of representation be interpreted as adaptations of the knowledge of human perception? What influence do visual and linguistic modes of representation exert on the conceptualization of perception in general, but also on conventions of perception? The attributions of senses and arts and the competition of senses derived from them shape the *paragone* from the Early Modern period to the 19th century. Along the way old and new terms arise that describe attitudes of perception and qualities of sensation, such as emotion, movement, stir, stimulus, irritation, shock, atmosphere, attention, or mindfulness. The reconstruction of these and other perceptual concepts prompts the consideration of the reflexive aspect of an aesthetics anchored in the power of perception. Is art conceived as an irritation and disruption of well-trodden paths of perception, as a training ground for perception, as activated, heightened, and last but not least, perhaps as perceived

perception? What about the implied potential of the arts to question or change perceptual practices and conventions?

Contributions to the conference can be submitted in German or English; it is planned to publish the conference papers as a volume in the book series "Imaginarien der Kraft" (de Gruyter).

Please **submit** proposals for papers in the fields of art, literary and media studies, history of science, cultural studies, philosophy with a **1-2 page abstract by 15 October, 2021** to: [imaginarien.der.kraft@uni-hamburg.de](mailto:imaginarien.der.kraft@uni-hamburg.de)

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