

Counterfactual Thinking, Counterfactual Writing

FRIAS

ABSTRACTS

Jan Alber (Freiburg)

Impossible Storyworlds: An Extreme Case of Counterfactuality

This paper looks at extreme manifestations of counterfactuality, namely physically or logically impossible events or scenarios in fictional narratives. First, it develops a list of impossible scenarios. Second, it addresses the moral significance of such scenarios.

Georg Christoph Berger Waldenegg (Heidelberg/Vienna)

“What if?”: Counterfactuality and History

Many historians still claim counterfactual writing to be an “idle” endeavour. Nevertheless, they can’t avoid practicing it. By means of a concrete historical example, I will analyze the epistemological problems of counterfactual historiographical writing, concentrating on three topics: First, “theorizing counterfactuality,” second “biographical and historical counterfactuals,” third “cultural functions of counterfactuality.”

Michael Brenner (Freiburg)

“If Androids Dreamt of Electric Sheep”: Counterfactual Reasoning in Artificial Intelligence.

This talk gives an overview of Artificial Intelligence research on counterfactual reasoning and explains how artificial agents may use it to learn from experiences they did not quite have. In particular, I discuss the role of counterfactual reasoning in narrative intelligence, i.e. for automated story generation and interpretation.

Patrizia Catellani (Milan)

Counterfactuals in the Social Context: The Case of Political Interviews and their Effects

The presentation will focus on some theoretical and methodological issues related to the study of counterfactuals in social psychology. To illustrate them, reference to a series of studies on counterfactuals in political interviews, as well as on their effects on citizens’ perceptions of politicians and political reality, will be made.

Birte Christ (Freiburg/Bonn)

“If I Were a Man”: The Counterfactual as Feminist Analytic.

The presentation engages comparatively with feminist utopias of the 1910s (Gilman) and 1970s (Gearhart, Russ, Wittig) as instances of counterfactual writing. What insights can be gained by the counterfactual as a feminist analytic, and how can the category of the counterfactual be re-conceptualized through a discussion of the literary (feminist) utopia?

Lutz Danneberg (Berlin)

Use and Misuse of Counterfactuals in Certain Arguments in the History of Science:
The Case of Ex-Post-In/Determinism

Three uses of counterfactuals in the history of Physics and Biology outlined and analysed in the paper are related to general questions of evaluation.

Daniel Dohrn (Constance)

Counterfactual Explanation in Literature and the Social Sciences

According to the unified account of counterfactual explanation in literature and the social sciences I propose, counterfactual thinking (i) sustains explanations of actual facts and (ii) plays a role in “possible explanations.” Parallels between the cognitive functions of literary fiction and of such possible explanations are explored.

Rüdiger Heinze (Brunswick)

A Sound of Thunder: Time Travel, Possible Worlds and Counterfactuality

If one key feature of literary fictions is the projection of possible worlds, the theme of time travel compounds the complexity of these projections by exploring the question of what could or might have been. Accordingly, this paper will use the idea of time travel in fiction and film to theorize counterfactual thinking and possible worlds in literature.

Martin Hilpert (Freiburg)

The Cognitive Linguistics of Counterfactuals

In this talk, I will review linguistic evidence pointing to the idea that counterfactual thinking is, contrary to common perception, a truly basic mode of human reasoning. One piece of evidence for this claim is cross-linguistic: Many of the world's languages have developed grammatical means for the expression of counterfactuals. Another piece of evidence concerns the cognitive process of conceptual integration (Fauconnier & Turner 2002), which lies at the heart of counterfactual thinking. The ability to mentally overlay different scenes does not only give rise to counterfactuals, but also to seemingly mundane linguistic categories, such as comparatives, noun-noun compounds, and attributive adjectives. Since counterfactual reasoning permeates virtually all aspects of language, I will argue that it should be regarded as an epistemological given, not as a flawed way of reasoning that should be avoided.

Tobias Klauk (Göttingen)

Thought Experiments and Literature

It is often implied or even explicitly stated that in writing or reading literature we conduct thought experiments. I will examine the thesis by applying experiences from the philosophical debate on thought experiments, which include findings as well as typical errors, to literary theory.

Christoph Klauer (Freiburg)

Psychological Research on Counterfactual Processing

Counterfactual processing departs from a factual event. Aspects of the event are changed in a mental representation, and the consequences of these changes are assessed in a mental simulation. Psychological research has addressed the antecedents and psychological functions of counterfactual processing, the rules that counterfactual simulations obey, and the psychological outcomes.

Bernhard Kleeberg (Constance)

Retrospective Prognoses. Modelling Historical Counterfactuals

Though they differ as to how fruitful insights provided by counterfactual thought experiments really are, most historians agree that they might help to answer questions about necessary or sufficient causes of events, historical contingency or inevitability. Sometimes counterfactual thought experiments are regarded as epistemic tools to substantiate historical facts, validate theories, and thus produce certainty, since they seem to provide something essential for historical knowledge: an experiential basis. The implicit ideal behind the technique of retrospective prognosis, I argue, would not have taken shape, if 19th-century historiography had not tried to match with the standards of the nomothetic sciences.

Ned Lebow (Dartmouth/London)

Counterfactual Case Studies and Experimental Research in International Relations

Counterfactuals are increasingly used in case studies to probe historical contingency and causation. The success of the studies rests on robust protocols for their use in evidence rich environments. Counterfactuals surveys and experiments are useful in discovering how policymakers, historians and international relations scholars think about causation and exposing the extent of their cognitive and motivational commitments to preferred theories and explanations.

Richard Saint-Gelais (Québec)

How To Do Things With Worlds: From Counterfactuality to Counterfictionality

This paper examines “counterfictionality”, i.e. the literary practice of taking a pre-existing fiction (e.g., a novel) and altering its course or its denouement. More specifically, it will address the questions of the truth-value, the pragmatic status and the narrative construction of such texts.

Robyn Warhol-Down (Columbus, Ohio)

“What Might Have Been is not What Is”: Dickens’s Narrative Refusals

The novels of Charles Dickens are full of examples of what I call “narrative refusals,” instances of “unnarration” (where the narrator explicitly refuses to tell something) and “disnarration” (where the narrator tells something that did not happen, in place of telling what happened). Through negated and subjunctive narration, Dickens's narrator gestures toward a shadow world that contrasts sharply with the world represented in his fiction.

Andreas Martin Widmann (London/Mainz)

Plot vs. Story: Towards a Typology of Counterfactual Historical Novels

The presentation introduces a typology of counterfactual history, based on E.M. Forster's distinction between plot and story. Thomas Brussig's *Helden wie wir* (1995) and Christian Kracht's *Ich werde hier sein, im Sonnenschein und im Schatten* (2008) are discussed as representatives of the plot-type and the story-type, thus providing a narrative analytical model to classify two basic modes of counterfactuality.