Unexpected Agents: Considering agency and subjectivity beyond the boundaries of the human (1800 - the Present)

- One-day postgraduate symposium at the University of Birmingham
- Friday 24 June 2011
- Keynote Speaker: Sarah Kember (Goldsmiths, University of London)

> 'Anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor - or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant'

(Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 2005)

Whilst questions of human subjectivity and/or identity remain a persistent focus in literary and cultural studies, this one-day postgraduate symposium aims to consider how we might explore and account for agency from unexpected sources. Papers, plenaries and discussions at this symposium will place the non-human, the object, the supposedly 'lifeless' at the centre, with a view to casting new light on and rethinking definitions of human agency and identity from an unconventional, askance perspective.

Bruno Latour and the Actor Network Theory (ANT) to which his work is seminal have interrogated the ways in which our reified notion of 'the social' has obfuscated the role and potential agency of apparently inanimate *objects*. When we consider 'the social,' Latour argues, emphasis overwhelmingly falls upon the agency of intentional human actors. That objects too might be considered as actors or agents has not been granted due attention, since from 'the very definition of actors and agencies most often chosen, if action is limited *a priori* to what "intentional", "meaningful" humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer […] could act' (71). In other words, because the ways in which an object might be considered to 'act' appears so incommensurate with the apparently purposeful, intentional and highly thought-out actions of human beings, the idea that objects might be considered as agents in their own right has suffered much neglect in sociological discourse. ANT is largely concerned with attacking this imbalance.

This symposium aims to acknowledge and yet exceed Latour's and others' focus upon the agency of *objects* to envision how authors, theorists and cultural producers have imagined and re-imagined the potential agencies of a wide range of entities, to which and to whom access to power is conventionally seen as foreclosed. It will explore how this over-looked but fascinating trope persists across genres and historical boundaries, from Romanticism to Science Fiction, and from 1800 to the present day.

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Organisers: Paul Horn (**PMH487@bham.ac.uk (mailto:PMH487@bham.ac.uk)**), Sarah Parker (**SLP883@bham.ac.uk (mailto:SLP883@bham.ac.uk)**) and Holly Prescott (**HXP823@bham.ac.uk (mailto:HXP823@bham.ac.uk)**).

Information about our plenary speaker:

Dr Sarah Kember (Goldsmiths, University of London)

Sarah Kember's research focuses on digital media, questions of mediation and feminist science and technology studies. She is currently investigating the possibilities of life after new media (studies), and has engaged in debates on artificial life and other aspects of the convergence between biology and computer science. She also works on imaging technologies and the relationship between photography and the digital and is developing an innovative approach to the question of remediation and the 'fusion' of science and literary fiction.

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