Introduction
The Contours of Thought

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The purpose of this feature topic is to ponder how a concept, an idea, or a line of thinking may have to rely on figurations for its concretization and elaboration. By *theoretical figuration*, we mean the form or shape of a theoretical proposition.

A theoretical figure may be a metaphor or analogy that fleshes out a concept. From the cave to suture, thinkers across epochs resort to figures to illustrate the deceptive mechanism of sight: the light/shadow contrast in Plato's allegory about the illusion of appearance, or the (oftentimes gendered) power play of presence/absence through the manipulation of the camera (for the latter, see Silverman, ch. 5). One may, of course, add the mirror image to this list about the faulty vision.

Sometimes the mediation of thought is more evidently facilitated by a particular technical medium. For instance, the proliferation of the term *phantasmagoria* in philosophical, literary, and cultural narratives at the turn of the nineteenth century is attributed to the introduction of the magic lantern: the visual medium mesmerizing the European continent around 1800 serves as a figure for unreliable ways of knowing (Andriopoulos, ch. 1, 2).

At other times, the figure literalizes the proposition into form. In his explication of the new social studies methodology he helps to create, Bruno Latour proposes that this Actor-Network Theory (ANT) be modeled, unmistakably, on the ant, referring to the insect's myopia as an exemplar of an earthbound, two-dimensional approach to the social and rejecting any overarching scope such as "context" or "structure" (Latour 170-72). In fact, Latour proves to be one of those rare

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thinkers appreciative of the importance of figuration for thought. According to him, any sociological account, however abstract it may appear to be, is embedded in some sort of "flesh and features that make them have some form or shape" (53). Of the new key players he brings into ANT, *actor* is defined as "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" whereas *actant* is something quite similar except that "it has no figuration yet" (71). The primacy Latour puts on figuration of thought is such that he would distinguish between *intermediary* and *mediator* in studies of the social: "An *intermediary* . . . is what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs. . . . *Mediators*, on the other hand, . . . transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (39).

Taking the cue from Latour, we may find that some theoretical figures indeed assume a much more dynamic, if not convoluted, life. Henning Schmidgen's *Horn, or the Counterside of Media*, for instance, is a book about the heightening of the tactile sense in the digital age. While this may not be a surprising discovery, Schmidgen's use of the horn as the central figure is. His main claim is that today's media technologies touch us as much as we touch them. The meaning of the horn turns out to be wide-ranging: a medium of communication in such forms as postal horns, foghorns, and horn antennas (though the author also suggests that what the postal horn carries is but an empty message since it merely announces the imminent arrival of the mail, not the message proper); the natural horn; variations of the natural horn in numerous eminent artists' renditions, including Salvador Dalí (who was obsessed with the rhinoceros at some point in his career), Rebecca Horn (who literally bears the name and has not shied away from playing with it in her art), and William Kentridge (who likes to make use of similar-looking wind instruments in his installation works); and the etymological origin of words referring to skin-related organisms like calluses, hair, and nails (the word for *keratin* is from the Greek root *keras*, denoting "horn"). Schmidgen thus argues that the horn, a figure for both the surface and the interface, is telling of a time of intensified haptic experiences (Schmidgen, *Horn*, Introduction).

There are figures that do not look as exciting as something growing out of the rhino, and yet they help to materialize a concept nonetheless, usually by providing a "positioning" for our imagination, be it *arche-* (arche-writing, arche-cinema), *hyper-* (hyperreality, hypermedia), *meta-* (metacommentary, metamodeling) or *ur-* (ur-history, or *urszene* for "primal scene").

More broadly understood, theoretical figures also include those methodological devices that function as the decisive driver of the theoretical narrative; to adopt a different methodology is then to yield a valuatively different result (rather than simply a difference in degree). In their seminal work on the emergence of

objectivity in the mid-nineteenth century, historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison turn to the practice of image making and image reading manifest in the abundant atlases produced at the time. This leads them to a conclusion markedly different from received accounts of modernity: unlike those seeing the birth of objectivity as coextensive with the inception of modernity in seventeenth-century scientists' application of mathematical knowledge to nature, Daston and Galison's story of objectivity is about how a scientific self as maker and reader of images comes into existence side by side with scientific objectivity (Daston and Galison, ch. 1).

Not only does something as neutral-looking as *objectivity* have a history, but a concept as innocuous as *concept* also has colors and sounds. Many critics have responded fondly to the "philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts" proclamation in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *What Is Philosophy?* (Deleuze and Guattari 2). Henning Schmidgen reminds us that on the part of Deleuze, "concept" starts to take on a vivid and graphic look ever since his collaboration with the psychoanalyst. Schmidgen suggests that conceptions of "body without organs" and "imageless thought" (*pensée sans images*) are likely to be derived from physiology and experimental psychology, respectively (Schmidgen, "Cerebral Drawings" 125). What is more, the proposition of seeing philosophy as an art of creating concepts, according to Schmidgen, probably first appeared in an exhibition catalogue published in 1973 for the Polish artist Stéphane Czerkinsky. In their dialogue, the artist asks, "What precautions should be taken when producing a concept?" Deleuze answers, "You put your blinker on and check in your rearview mirror to make certain another concept isn't coming up behind you; once you've taken these precautions, you produce the concept" (qtd. in Schmidgen, "Cerebral Drawings" 133). Schmidgen brilliantly reads this as follows: "Philosophy is not a quiet activity undertaken within one's own four walls but a motorized race, best of all on a stretch of road without speed limits" (133).

In his 1973 rendering of concepts, Deleuze would also add, "Concepts are not in your head: they are things, peoples, zones, regions, thresholds, gradients, temperatures, speeds, etc." (qtd. in Schmidgen, "Cerebral Drawings" 133). Perhaps this alone is enough to account for the rationale of this feature topic.

In this issue, we are graced with contributions by some of the hardest-working theory scholars in the local community. The two research articles respond sagaciously to the theme of the topic by each focusing on a prominent thinker. Pei-yun Chen's article teases out Georges Canguilhem's writings on health and illness, showing how Canguilhem's exposition on the living experience not only influenced later generations of thinkers including Foucault and Deleuze but is intensely relevant today, when the ethical side of medicine has been complicated by new

technologies and new discourses. Chien-heng Wu's article engages with the work of Bernard Stiegler, a pioneering philosopher who has created some of the most thought-provoking theoretical figures of our time. Stiegler's writings on the Neganthropocene are clearly meant as an intervention in conversations about algorithmic capitalism and climate change, but Wu further understands his work in terms of utopian thinking, the kind that aims to break out of the aporetic condition we inhabit.

Hung-chiung Li's interview with Chaoyang Liao squarely puts our project into perspective by starting with where it all began: the emergence of the personal computer. Being one of the very few humanities people in Taiwan versed in computer programming, Liao tells us how the earlier development of the personal computer was much more conducive to the user gaining knowledge about the machine and about the potential of such knowledge. Their conversation then revolves around the crisis of the humanities in the age of generative AI, with them debating whether it is more productive to develop a theory of posthuman "making" (making knowledge, for instance, as opposed to merely "adapting to" or using AI), or to opt for inhuman "decreation" and "inoperation" à la Bartleby. The last part of their exchange brings us to something close-by: the figure of the tourist put forward by the Japanese scholar Hiroki Azuma as a possible solution to the current predicament of humanity.

Finally, Julian Chih-wei Yang's short commentary echoes nicely with Pei-yun Chen's article by returning to Canguilhem's work as well, within the context of the recent Chinese translation of Canguilhem's 1947 talk, "The Living and Its Milieu." More importantly, Yang's essay helps to drive home our theme once more by demonstrating how every single concept speaks to a specific backstory, a specific chronotope, even in its translated afterlife.

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