

What Matters in the Humanities
HERMES summer school
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Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3
St. Charles Campus

Organising team

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Keynote speakers (provisional) :

- Guillaume Le Blanc, Université Paris Cité, France,
- Stephen Ross, University of Victoria, Canada.

Call for papers

In the wake of the previous HERMES Summer Schools, that addressed such issues as vulnerability, hospitality, sustainability, among others, this session will investigate problems of visibility and invisibility and their ethical resonance in the field of literary and cultural studies. It also aims at interrogating the contribution of the research produced in the humanities to the central question of "What Matters."

Counting

Most readers may associate the question "What Matters" to the "Black Lives Matter" movement that emerged in the USA and has spread in many parts of the world over the last decade. And clearly, the summer school will be concerned with issues of visibility, justice and equity that are at the heart of the BLM movement. Still, we aim to address the question of "What Matters" from a more general and flexible point of view, finding our original inspiration in the field of US pragmatism and analytical philosophy, and perhaps more particularly in what is known as Ordinary Language Philosophy (Laugier 2013). However, we intend to widen the methodological and theoretical scope by raising a series of issues that are relevant to the fields.

We aim to view "What Matters" as an invitation to reevaluate the significance of habits, established structures, and accepted categories. Arguing for the importance of someone or something challenges the typical economic, or financial accounting methods, which are often tools of dominant powers that meticulously track, compile, and control. "What Matters" encourages us to acknowledge what appears insignificant, unconsidered, or invisible (Fricker 2007, Le Blanc 2009).

"What matters" is a question that addresses the nature of the crisis it reveals or even provokes. In crises where the manifestations are directly observable, the question of "What matters" is not immediately relevant because it assumes we are questioning what does not naturally appear important. "What matters" points to the hidden or hollow presence, perhaps a default-presence, of a problematic aspect. It is associated with identifying blind spots and seeks to establish the theoretical, ethical, and political significance of what matters, even

when it is not directly perceptible (Laugier 1999). This question thus underscores the critical existence of a crisis defined by a form of negative phenomenology (Le Blanc 2009).

To respond to "What matters," one must be able to perceive what counts even when it is not visible, audible, or tangible, thereby addressing the harm caused by this invisibility or inaudibility. Asking "What matters" involves examining the frames of perception and intelligibility to recognize their existence and question their relevance. It is crucial to avoid an approach that prioritizes the visual over the acoustic or the haptic, in order to prevent perceptual bias and the dominance of visual detection of vulnerabilities.

Caring

From this emerges the remedial function of asking "What matters," which addresses the lack of perceptibility that contributes to the harm done to individuals or groups and aims to rectify it. Confronted with a problematical perception deficit, the ethical and political subject who inquires about what matters takes on the responsibility of healing. In this context, the affinities with the ethics of care should not be overlooked (Tronto 2015). Asking the question of what matters (Diamond 1996) involves recognizing and addressing the vulnerability of others, paying close attention to specific situations, and acknowledging the uniqueness of others—a task particularly suited to literary and artistic production. Inquiring "What matters" signifies a desire to be concerned or responsible, reflecting a profound ethical stance with significant political implications.

Considering the affinity between "What matters" and the ethics and politics of care, it becomes evident that the question of the body is central (Butler 1993, Pfeifer & Pitti 2012). This perception and exposure of suffering and injustice are linked to an ontological, embodied, and situated vulnerability. The body is not seen as sovereign but as entangled in a web of interdependencies (or embeddings and entanglements, drawing from post-human, neo-materialism, and environmental humanities perspectives) (Braidotti, Alaimo, Barad). Thus, asking "What matters" emphasizes the relationality of subjects, including, and especially, that of the observer, the citizen, and the researcher.

Narrating

What matters is not so much about understanding as it is about listening to what is inaudible or invisible in the world, or what is too little highlighted in research, especially within the humanities, or too visible and familiar to be recognized. The issues raised by "What matters" invite us to rethink what sometimes eludes social perception and what it is the researcher's task to reveal (Diamond 1995, Laugier 1999, Putnam 1996). This calls for a change in approach, engaging all modalities of attention, particularly listening and its effects, in which both mind and body are inevitably involved (Epstein 2016, Lanham 2007, Ganteau 2023).

The power of language in general, and narrative in particular, across various forms and genres, is crucial for changing the world. It can obscure one part of reality to expose another more visibly. This power is essential for understanding what counts (for whom and for what purpose), making one's words count, and attempting to break free from pre-established cognitive schemas.

Revealing what counts also involves delving into the intimate stories of suffering, deprivation or frustration from the internal perspectives of those directly involved. It means exploring the power of narrative to address injustices and hold people accountable (Mbembe 2006), "narratives" being taken here in a wide acceptance that welcomes a variety of forms like poetry, drama, visual arts and film, among others.

In this sense, testimonies and archives depend on what has been documented and what has not. They prompt questions about what should be considered important when examining the histories of individuals or social groups and enable the reconstruction of the priorities asserted by these groups in the social world (Boltanski 1990). At a time when literary and artistic forms are becoming increasingly immersive and participatory (Moslund et al. 2021), there is a need for a phenomenology of reading and spectating that underscores the connections between authors, actors, readers, researchers, and the public (Caracciolo 2012). Is literature a counter-archive? Do the new possibilities for blending different forms, such as poetry, prose, drama, visual arts, and other types of narratives, provide the key to a new understanding? If the traces of past violence left in the present are deciphered through investigative methods like those of anthropology or history, literature and the arts also offer an ethical commitment that accompanies, supports, and even initiates political action rooted in the past but oriented towards the future.

Acting

The question of testimony leads to the issue of timeliness. As a research topic, "What matters" also needs to be examined from a temporal perspective, highlighting the urgency of social and environmental crises, as well as their historical causes and potential effects. However, the temporality of "What matters" may not adhere to a strictly linear logic; it involves latency effects, aftermaths, loops, and repetitions. What should also be taken into account is the recurrence of such crises through history: writers, artists and critics were also alert to environmental issues and dramatic climate changes in the Enlightenment age (Buffon), Romantic (Shelley) and Victorian times (Ruskin) as well as the early twentieth century (Kalaidjian).

One notable aspect of the subject revolves around adopting a particularly nuanced approach, as discussed by philosophers like Wittgenstein (1953, 1958), Cavell (1964), and Laugier (1999, 2013). The question "What matters" entails not only identifying unique aspects and elucidating them but also involves a personalised approach that invokes the ethical responsibility of the individual, whether a citizen or a researcher. This approach diverges from rigid frameworks, as noted by Butler (2009), allowing the inquirer to contribute to ethical and innovative perspectives. Furthermore, it necessitates a move towards experiential understanding, as emphasized by Caracciolo (2012), aiming to grasp the intricacies of individuals' daily lives as closely as possible.

In conclusion, "What matters" serves as a response to the pressing issues confronting research in the humanities, urging its practitioners to actively shape shared spaces and foster a world that is conducive to coexistence. It prompts us to consider how research can inspire action and evoke reactions, fostering a sense of awakening. It also provides an essential ethical impulse and methodology to counter the omnipresent effects of denial that are at work in many fields of contemporary experience and in almost all (contemporary) crises. From this point of view, cultural narratives help us fight against the biases and limitations of perception and understanding inherent in our reaction to cognitive dissonance, and hence get us to detect the narratives based on alternative truths that condition many of our responses to contemporary crises (Bardon, Cohen, Conway).

We are expecting papers in various fields including literature (fiction, poetry, graphic novels, etc.), drama, film, serial studies, visual studies, etc. and more generally cultural studies. Here is an open outline of the issues we interested in, along with potential topics for papers:

- **Visibility and Invisibility:** Exploring the dynamics of making lives, individuals, and groups visible or invisible. Investigating the political and artistic struggles aimed at recognizing marginalized voices.
- **Mechanisms of Selection and Discrimination:** Investigating the mechanisms, operations, and levers involved in selecting, prioritizing, and discriminating between what counts and what does not in various contexts.
- **Conditions for Questioning "What Matters":** Exploring the conditions and contexts that lead to the emergence of the question "What matters". Examining frameworks of perception, attention modalities, and the intelligibility of what is audible, visible, and tangible.
- **Power of Language and Narrative:** Analyzing the transformative power of language and narratives to shape the world, obscure realities, or expose truths. Exploring how narrative can address injustices in storytelling.
- **Cultural Narratives:** Examining how cultural narratives contribute to individual and collective awareness and mobilization against denial in social and political spheres.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Discussing the ethical dimensions of questioning "What matters", including attention to otherness, singularity, and vulnerability. Exploring the interdependencies and relationality of subjects, including observers, witnesses, and researchers in the humanities.
- **Temporal and Contextual Dimensions:** Examining the temporal and contextual aspects of questioning "What matters" and how it challenges existing categories of thought and research methodologies.

These topics provide a broad framework for potential papers that delve into the complexities of understanding and addressing and investigating "What matters" in various cultural, social, and political contexts.

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We expect 300-word abstracts (with title) and a short bionote (50-100 words), including the PhD student's email address by 1 December 2024. These should be sent to jens.kugele@gcsc.uni-giessen.de