

Spinning in circles – structuring the circulation of techno cultural imaginaries

Author: Wenzel Mehnert

Contribution to the conference:

STS-Hub

„Circulating futures: On how to analyze, evaluate and shape the circulations of sociotechnical futures and their impacts for the demands of technology assessment“

Keywords:

#Technoculture #Imaginaries #Neurointerface #Technofutures

Abstract:

“For decades, the shape of things to come has remained the same. The hi-tech utopia is always just around the corner, but we never get there. (...) The future is what it used to be.” (Barbrook 2007, p. 6)¹

Sociotechnical Futures (SF) are mediated visions of emerging technologies and how these technologies might change society in the future. As various contemporary authors from science and technology studies point out, these visions are shaped by the culture from which they originate. For example, visions of mind upload show similarities to Christian believes of immortality or the promise of artificial life becomes repeatedly attributed to new technologies throughout western history – without ever fulfilling the promise. It appears as if SF is not about the technology, but rather a steady renewal of culturally shared imaginaries.

¹ Barbrook, R. (2007). Imaginary futures: From thinking machines to the global village. Pluto.

Thinking with Cornelius Castoriadis, imaginaries are the building blocks from which culture is constructed. For a hermeneutic reflection of SF, the concept of the social imaginary can be helpful to structure a deconstruction process of the future visions at hand, to understand where the often-overhyped promises of emerging technologies come from and to trace how they circulate in different arenas of society. From this perspective, SF merge culturally shared imaginaries with new technologies, institutionalize them and shape the imaginative and associative space of new technologies before the technologies exist.

In this paper, I want to present an approach for a hermeneutical reflection of SF building up on the concept of the imaginary. Following different approaches and definitions, I will present an epistemological heuristic for a structured analyses of imaginaries and their circulation within the temporal and cultural ecosystem of emerging technologies.

Biography

Wenzel Mehnert is a cultural and media scholar. He worked as a researcher at the University of the Arts and currently employed as a futurologist at the Austrian Institute of Technology and the Berlin Ethics Lab at TU Berlin. His research focuses on sociotechnical imaginaries of new and emerging technologies. In addition to the analytical study of technological futures in various discourses, he develops qualitative methods to reflect on contemporary futures using creative means from design and literature. His doctoral thesis is dedicated to the science fiction subgenre neuropunk and analyses the present and past imaginaries of the neurointerface in popular culture.