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The "Net"

> "Weaving was already multimedia: when spinners, weavers and sewers sang, hummed, told stories, danced and played games in their work, they were also and indeed networkers."[1]

In the context of migration, the textile metaphor of the net is often used, be it migration or refugee networks. They play a central role in this discourse, which I would like to elaborate a little in the following.

The knotting of networks

In the systematics of textile techniques Annemarie Seiler-Baldinger defines nets as perforated knitted fabrics made of one thread by entangling or knotting. Out of this garments with great elasticity and strength were made such as turbans, veils and caps. The knotted fabrics also served as hunting or carrying nets or respectively for fishing. The wide-meshed textiles were made by hand or since 1867 by machines.[2] The special thing about nets is that they can be stretched in all directions. They can be extended or reduced at any time. This flexibility is possible because all linking points are equally distributed over the surface. Therefore, there are no superordinate fixed structures.[3]

At the latest since the development of the World Wide Web, the metaphorical use of this fabric structure to describe relationships in society, politics and culture has been more than obvious. Through globalization and digitalization (Industry 4.0) everything seems to be interrelated or in exchange with everything else. Today, the network is the epitome of universal connections, as the exhibition "Netzwerk" (network) at *ifa* Stuttgart 2018 also emphasizes—a symbol that explains the world. This old familiar textile

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[1] Sadie Plant, *Nullen und Einsen. Digitale Frauen und die Kultur der neuen Technologien* (Berlin: Berlin, 1998), 73.

[2] *Brockhaus' Konversations-Lexikon. Neue revidierte Jubiläums-Ausgabe*, vol. 12 (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1908), 259.

[3] Annemarie Seiler-Baldinger, *Textile Strukturen versus Techniken. Die Systematik auf einen Blick*, 213-224, 218 - http://www.fk16.tu-dortmund.de/textil/07_publikationen/pdfs/kulturanthropologies-des-textilen.pdf.

pattern makes the new complex interconnections of today's global social and technical processes understandable. It becomes conceivable that networked structures can be limitless combined and changed.[4]

A historical review

The net is used worldwide in many mythologies and religions as a metaphor for capture. People, demons or even the sun can be subdued with it. However, in the meaning of networking to create relationships it is rarely used. This begins only with industrialisation and the mass movements of capital, people and goods caused by it. Instead of being trapped in the net, people now associate equal contacts, temporary affiliations and wide-ranging connections in a positive sense. Networking suggests decentralization and a worldwide democratization of the most diverse areas of society with a previously unknown variety of possible cooperations. Or in the words of Günter Fröhlich: "The new net terms (which have largely lost the meaning of the safety net) assume flatness, equally strong threads, evenly knitted stitches, equality of knots, and at the same time convey a feeling of (not too restrictive) belonging. The net is a metaphor for effortless and at any time reversible socialization; "networking" stands for socialization 'light'."[5] Fröhlich therefore considered that it is also a strong ideological and illusionary idea that denies both the costs and the compulsory nature of socialization. The only realistic gaps in the network are those resulting from wide-meshed relationships and disparate living environments, the lack of knowledge concerning the surrounding areas and the close-meshed acting of society, politics and the economy.[6]

In the 1970s and 80s, the net metaphor was regarded as an expression of social changes in the name of revolution. In protest and alternative movements transnational networks were established to provide moral support through expressions of solidarity and to strengthen actionism. At that time networking became the key term for resistance against the establishment, but was also used in economic and military actions.[7]

The installation La Bruja 1 (1979-1981) by Cildo Meireles, which was created at the time of the military dictatorship in Brazil, is part of this discourse. In one corner there is a broom, from whose bristles black wool threads first flow into the room only to become

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[4] Gabriele Mentges, "Für eine Kulturanthropologie des Textilen. Einige Überlegungen," in *Kulturanthropologie des Textilen,* ed. Gabriele Mentges (Bamberg: edition-ebersbach, 2005), 11-56, 34.

[5] Günter Fröhlich, "Netz-Euphorien. Zur Kritik digitaler und sozialer Netz(werk)metaphern," in *Philosophie in Österreich 1996*, ed. Alfred Schramm (Wien: Hölder – Pichler – Tempsky, 1996), 292-306, 292-294 and 300.

[6] Fröhlich "Netz-Euphorien".

[7] Fröhlich "Netz-Euphorien," 297.

intertwined in a tangled web, which changes the character of the room through its haptics. The net spreads like a [carpet over several rooms](#), which the visitors have to walk on. Their steps are softly cushioned, the sound of their stamping partially swallowed. As you walk through the work one could take up different points of view. Threads also come from above ready to form [new connections](#) and to thwart predetermined ways of looking at things. The broom reminds us of the process of sweeping to create cleanliness and order. The jerky and sweeping action could tear the net or the broom could get caught in it and come to a standstill. This symbol can be understood in relation to Brazil as an expression of solidarity and resistance in the struggle against a political order of oppression. The black net stands for the silent, secret underground team spirit. It can come from anywhere to overthrow the system of injustice.[8]

"We live 'in the metaphor' of the net."[9]

[Ancient textile techniques](#) have been incorporated into language as pictorial ideas. Again and again they illustrate complex relationships. Net metaphors influence thinking and acting through numerous images and chains of association, thus creating realities. If the contents change new realities can be created.[10] The net metaphor serves as a projection for great hopes to democratize the world. In view of the prevailing confusion in a virtual and fast moving world with anonymous umbrella organisations, the reference to textiles, crafts and manual work promises that there is still room for shaping society.[11]

The metaphorical use of textile techniques and structures in communication is also known as the "mythopoetics of textiles".[12] It refers to the knitting of stories. Every narrative construction always produces a little myth. The question thus rightfully presents itself: which one is created by the migration net or migration network. The metaphor connects the representation of migration with textile production. But if metaphors also structure the sphere they characterize, then the question arises which realities the imagery of the net in today's talk about migration represent or even create.

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[8] Cf. Jochen Volz, "Cildo Meireles," *Frieze* (2005) https://frieze.com/article/cildo-meireles; Claire Bishop, *Installation Art. A Critical History* (Tate Publishing 2005, reprint 2010), 37-39, 64, http://amper.ped.muni.cz/~jonas/knihy/10_instalace_jako_strategie/Claire%20Bishop,%20Installation%20Art.pdf.

[9] Birgit Schneider, "Verfangen im Kabelsalat der Netze. Zu einer Geschichte der Netzwerkmetapher," in *Textil-Kunst*, exh. cat., ed. Markus Bürderlin (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje-Cantz, 2014), 328-241, 329.

[10] Hans Blumenberg / Olaf Eigenbrod, "Textnetze – Netztexte," in *Textil – Körper – Mode*, ed. Gabriele Mentges et. Al. (Berlin: Ebersbach & Simon, 2003), 89-175.

[11] Fröhlich "Netz-Euphorien," 298.

[12] Blumenberg / Eigenbrod, "Textnetze – Netztexte," 103.

One example of myhtopoetic entanglements in view of migration is shown in the art installation Uncertain Journey (2016) by Chiharu Shiota. Red networks spray out of iron boat skeletons. They spread out vaporously in the space of the Blain Southern-Gallery in Berlin and connect the rowboats with each other. On the ceiling and the walls the filigree net forms wave arches that surround the visitors. For the woman artist, who grew up in Japan and lives in Berlin, the red yarn symbolizes life. That is why she associates it with blood streams. In Asia this imagery has a central meaning. The whole life runs along a red thread. In a way, it draws the path of life and is a symbol of fate. This idea is continued in the boats that symbolize travel.[13] According to Shiota, the installation is an expression of the uncertain drifting in times of great change. New technologies of mobility and communication are modifying everyone's life so fast that no one really knows where the journey is heading.[14]

In Europe these and similar works by Shiota are often received in connection with migration. The red net and the boats remind many people of simultaneous reports on refugees in public media, of the catastrophic shipwrecks and tragedies during the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. In the nebulous structure of the net human lives evaporate, but are also tied together, enmeshing the audience and, in a sense, taking them on board.[15]

Much earlier, Marcel Duchamp used a net of threads mythopoetically to redefine an institutionalized space based on his exile experiences. With the intervention Mile of String on the occasion of the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism* in New York in 1942, he broke with the usual strolling through the gallery space. He stretched a long thread crisscross so that the way to the exhibits was blocked and they could only be viewed from a distance, in sections or not at all. This situation as well as playing children who were able to slip through the spaces in between caused irritation and disorientation among gallery visitors.[16]

Many interpretations associate this art work with the Surrealists' fascination for myths and relate it to Ariadne's thread and the labyrinth of the Minotaur.[17] In a film Duchamp reports that as an immigrant in the USA he led a deviant lifestyle, if only because he

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[13] See *The Theatricality of Chiharu Shiota's Art*. Brilliant Ideas Ep. 52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULpxdHy0eZc [07.06.2020]

[14] Cf. Joseph Nechvatal, "Mapping Migrant Journeys onto Boats of String," in *Hyperallergic* (New York: February 2 2017), https://hyperallergic.com/355873/mapping-migrant-journeys-onto-boats-of-string/.

[15] On reception in the context of migration, see, for example, note 14 and https://www.artberlin.de/chiharu-shiota-and-the-uncertain-journey-at-blain-southern/; https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/wnp3v9/red-string-installation-connections-shiota.

[16] Cf. David Hopkins, "Duchamp, Childhood, Work and Play: The Vernissage for First Papers of Surrealism, New York, 1942," *Tate Papers*.22 (Autumn 2014), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/22/duchamp-childhood-work-and-play-the-vernissage-for-first-papers-of-surrealism-new-york-1942.

[17] Cf. David Hopkins, "The Politics of Equivocation: Sherrie Levine, Duchamp's "Compensation Portrait" and Surrealism in the USA 1942–45', in *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no.1, 2003, 45–68, 45–7.

covered other routes mostly on foot, because he did not drive a car. In this way he experienced the city in a completely different way than the locals.[18] Assuming that exile did indeed have a serious impact on Duchamp's artistic design, as T.J. Demos assumes, the net is also an artistic expression of the migrant's re-orientation and experiencing of spaces anew when the familiar is lost. In this sense the net is not the connecting, but rather the bulky, even though it keeps views and passages open.[19]

Migration Networks / Migration Network Theory

In the context of migration, the social network that has been built up over time through moving from one place to another is of interest. Ernest G. Ravenstein, who is one of the classicists of migration theory, spoke as early as 1885 of migrant networks as infrastructures, which make migration possible in the first place through information, transport, accommodation and employment agencies. These connections extend over long distances and generations.[20] More recent approaches in migration theory focus on the networks rather than on the regions of origin or arrival. This brings transit zones, interspaces, transnational relationships and the life journeys from generation to generation into focus.[21]

The German Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Politicial Education) defines migration networks as the processes of strong interactive communication between people from different places in order to support the decision for a change of residence. "The totality of all social relationships with knowledge relevant to migration is then referred to as the migrant's social network." It uses the material and immaterial resources of its members and their contacts to the now established migration industry, which offers corresponding services, travel and goods. However, migration networks are not only conducive, but may also prevent emigration if existing risks and costs are pointed out. "And finally, scientific studies have shown that migration networks become all the more important the more political, institutional and economic barriers opposed the migration project."[22] They are indispensable for a transnational lifestyle with its flexible mobility. These networks play a particularly important role in labour migration, triggered by the global income gap. Through the exchange of information, ways of subversion can be found, i.e. the circumvention of

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[18] Cf. *Marcel Duchamp: 'Jeu d'échecs'* (a portrait of Jean-Marie Drot, 1963), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9Ad3uzjPMo.

[19] Cf. T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press 2007), 190–242.

[20] Ernest George Ravenstein, "The Laws of Migration," in *Journal oft he Statistical Society of London* 48, 2 (1885), 167-235.

[21] Helen Schwenken, *Globale Migration zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2018), 95f. und 100.

[22] Tim Elrick, "Netzwerke von Migranten," in *Kurzdossiers – Zuwanderung, Flucht und Asyl: Aktuelle Themen* (01.10.2008) http://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/kurzdossiers/57320/netzwerke.

control and steering by the immigration countries.[23] On the one hand local practices within a migration society have a high potential for innovation because different ideas and modes of action mix and thus change the local society.[24] On the other hand, states like the Philippines use migration networks as a development strategy. Thus, through focused training, protection agreements and reintegration assistance, migrant workers are sent abroad so that their wages can flow back to their country of origin and support the economy.[25]

So what lies behind the new mantra that holds the world together? Network metaphors in the field of information technologies prove to be ideological: what is celebrated as equal access to knowledge for all turns out to be primarily a military and economic control ideology. Power is not decentralized—on the contrary, it is made possible by efficient remote control from a few centers.[26]

Just a mouse click away, *Google* shows us images of institutionalized migration networks on which hands of different skin colors interlock and signalize human togetherness. Shaking hands as a gesture of helping and holding together—of solidarity. The notion "Networking" here stands for the longing for a reliable community with social support, especially in times when this is increasingly being lost in the consumer society due to wars, economic agitation and alienation. Pictures of interconnectedness are possibly utopian images for the search for a new, locally unbound way of life in the face of the threatening insecurities, problems and crises of modern times. By suggesting security they correspond to the traditional cliché of motherhood, according to Heiner Keupp.[27] The art works mentioned above contrast with this. Here, nets are an expression of the fragile and bulky that can easily be torn apart. The mythopoetic of the net communicates with the spaces in which the art installations are shown, each in a specific way.

Falling through the net

The network myth of non-hierarchical spaces and democratic community must be treated with caution. In the network society, according to the sociologist Manuel Castells, power, capital, technology and information enter into wide-meshed relationships in order to organize flexibly hierarchies, production locations, values and the mobility of people. Although the idea of subversion associated with migration

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[23] Schwenken "Globale Migration zur Einführung," 128pp., 134.

[24] Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley / Los Angeles: UC Press, 2001).

[25] Schwenken "Globale Migration zur Einführung," 184p.

[26] Fröhlich "Netz-Euphorien," 294.

[27] Heiner Keupp, "Soziale Netzwerke – eine Metapher des gesellschaftlichen Umbruchs?," in *Soziale Netzwerke*, ed. Heiner Keupp et.al (Frankfurt a.M. / New York: Campus, 1987), 11-53.

networks evokes something new, it remains anchored in the frame of these neo-capitalist structures and can only be seen as *new* in demarcation from a national way of thinking still stuck in either-or categories.[28]

Not to be forgotten are the smuggling networks, criminal associations with an infrastructure to bring refugees illegally to the particular countries of destination. The transport takes place under extreme life-threatening and expensive paid conditions. Net metaphors thus also characterize precarious and criminal milieus.

And if necessary relationships of any kind are missing, then it is called "Durchs Netz gefallen" (fallen through the net).[29] Thus, in fact, the care reform of the German coalition in office since 2017 also lets those immigrant population groups "fall through the net" who previously could not acquire any entitlement to care insurance benefits—and in this way demonstrates the far-reaching consequences of an understanding of the term "net" that has long since extended across all cultural, socio-political and everyday practical areas.

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[28] Manuel Castells, *Der Aufstieg der Netzwerkgesellschaft. Das Informationszeitalter, Wirtschaft Gesellschaft, Kultur,* vol. 1, (Opladen: Springer VS, 2004).

[29] Timo Stukenberg, "Durchs Netz gefallen. Migration und Pflegebedürftigkeit," in *Deutschlandfunk* 01.04.2017 - https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/migration-und-pflegebeduerftigkeit-durchs-netz-gefallen.724.de.html?dram:article_id=382845 (27.09.2018).

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