10 Similarity, Identity, and Difference
What Does it Mean to Identify Oneself or Something?

1. Intro

As announced in the introduction, I now come to the core of my argument: The present tenth chapter provides what I consider the real innovation of my book; I will examine what it means that similarity has its place between identity and difference; and I will show that here – in the interplay between identity and difference, similarity and schema formation – is hidden one of the basal mechanisms that determine media.

This, I admit, is a far-reaching thesis. All the more reason, I would argue, to give the unfolding of the individual steps some time. While the present chapter seeks to clarify identity and identification, the following one, the eleventh, will focus on difference. In my concluding chapter, I will sum up the yield specifically for the field of semiotics.

Let us start again with the basic scheme I have outlined above. If two things or events are similar to each other, they are neither identical nor completely different; between the poles of identity and difference spans the wide area of similarity.
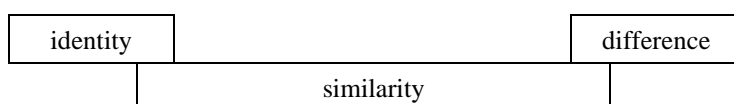
Things that are similar may differ in many respects, but some peculiarities they must have in common, they must be comparable.[1]
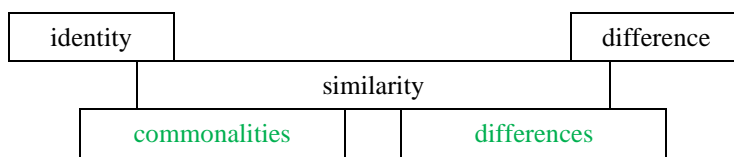
The same is true for repetition. It, too, connects identity and difference.

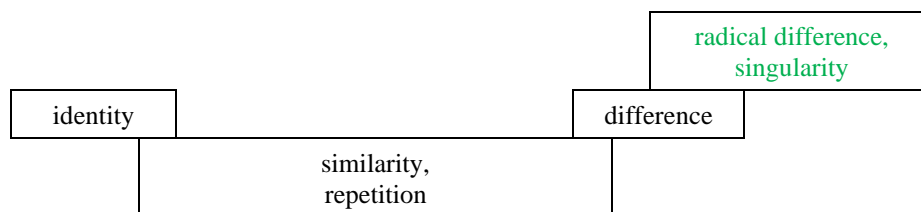[1] I have discussed this aspect in Chapter 7: Similarity - in what way.

2. Identity?

The concepts of identity and difference are initially used here colloquially; but if one looks more closely, the pole of identity in particular proves to be treacherous; and it turns out that there are completely different types of identity, which in turn has some consequences for the question of similarity.
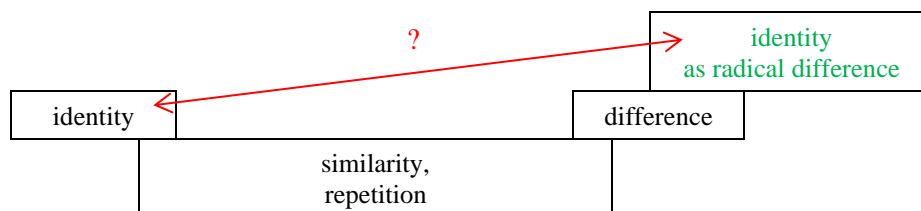
Our idea of similarity is tied to the practice of comparison. Two things are confronted with each other and turn out to be more or less similar.[2] So if it is always about at least two things: Can they ever be 'identical'? In the strict sense, certainly not.

One could almost say that exactly the opposite is the case; because a first type of 'identity' would bring it close to individuality. Persons/individuals in particular are identical with themselves and identifiable as individuals insofar as and to the extent that they are radically different from each other. And the same is true of other things; if a thing or event is unique – one might think of a work of art or a great catastrophe – it would be called incommensurable. In this case, neither something 'similar' nor a repetition are conceivable.[3]

In this way, identity would be radical difference or singularity. Both, however, would precisely not fall on the left side of my sketch, but – somewhat astonishingly – on the right.

		radical difference, singularity
identity	difference	
	similarity, repetition	

Or rather:

	? →	identity as radical difference
identity ←	difference	
	similarity, repetition	

So how can this be possible? Obviously, there must exist another type besides identity as radical difference, and 'identity' on the left must mean something else. All considerations that are to follow serve to come closer to this question.

3. Intermediate Consideration

If one compares two things with each other and finds commonalities/similarities, these things will never coincide completely, never be completely 'identical.' Accordingly, 'identity' can only be the most extreme point of the spectrum in which similarity varies. So one would first of all have to assume the existence of a pragmatically reduced identity.

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[2] ...or it is the other way around: In a mass of heterogeneous material, two things stand out as similar.

[3] Whether or not there are actually completely incommensurable things is another matter.

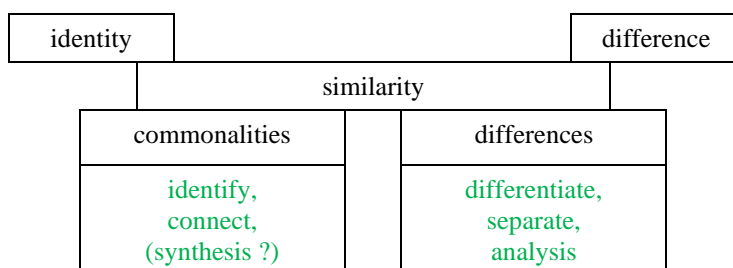Second, one will have to realize that similarity itself is by no means a neutral concept that would be positioned midway between identity and difference; rather, the term similarity has a clear bias insofar as it increases on the left while it recedes on the right:
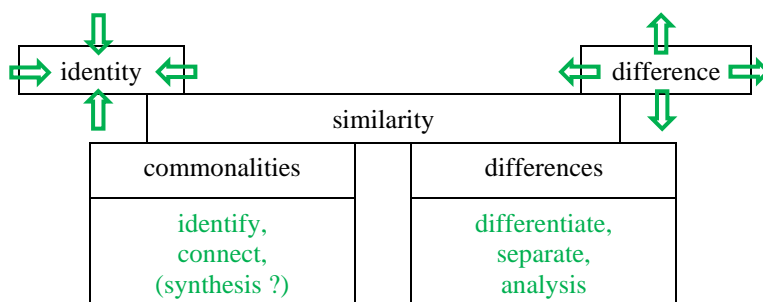
identity		difference
similar		*dissimilar*
commonalities	differences	
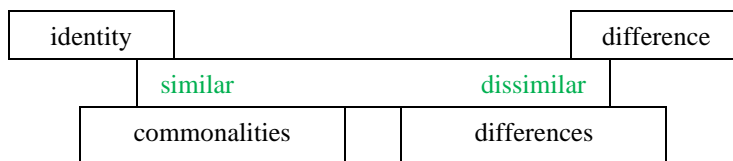
In addition, and this would be a third point, one should realize that everyday language has a much finer gradation:

		incomparable, singular
identical		different
the same	unequal	
similar	dissimilar	
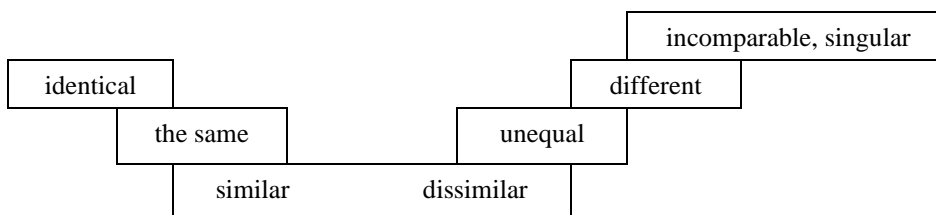
Finally, it may be worthwhile to take a look at the concrete activity of comparison and to use the corresponding verbs instead of nouns:

identity		difference
	similarity	
commonalities	differences	
identify, connect, (synthesis ?)	*differentiate, separate, analysis*	

Now it becomes clear that at the pole of difference, centrifugal forces, forces of repulsion, are at work, at the pole of identity, however, centripetal forces:

identity		difference
	similarity	
commonalities	differences	
identify, connect, (synthesis ?)	*differentiate, separate, analysis*	

And this actually changes the picture. For possibly more important than identity is the action of *identifying*. One can identify oneself by showing an identity card, one can identify oneself with a group or with an actor, one can identify one thing with another, and finally one can identify a thing *as something,* and this means recognizing it.[4]

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[4] Cf. Ritter, Joachim (ed.): Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie. Vol. 4, entry: Identifikation [Identification]. Basel: WBG 1976, p. 140.

All of this suggests that the discussion on similarity is possibly about much more than the comparison of two things, that the question pursued here takes on a completely new significance. For what does it mean when – mediated by similarity – two of the most basic and possibly most far-reaching cultural techniques, separation and connection, analysis and synthesis, confront each other? At this point, my reflection relates to a whole field of traditional questions of cultural studies.

4. Identifying Something, Identifying Oneself

Thus, to choose a particularly prominent witness, Adorno discusses the problem of identification by using the example of conceptual thinking.[5] He wants to distinguish – quite basally – the concepts from the things that are to be comprehended. While things are always concrete in a radical way, it is also for Adorno the main characteristic of concepts that they subsume, that is, that they always encompass a number of intrinsically heterogeneous things. Concepts therefore have a necessarily abstract character. This abstractness has two faces: On the one hand, it is inevitable because without it there would be no conceptual thinking; on the other hand, the abstractness distances the concepts from the concrete individual things. The abstraction of concepts thus *wrongs* that what is to be comprehended – this is the really unusual thought in Adorno's 'Negative Dialectics.'

In my sketch, the concrete things would fall on the side of difference,[6] the concepts on the side of identity. And at the same time, the concept of identity has also changed: If one follows Adorno, the hallmark of identificatory thinking would be that one identifies a thing or an event *with something else* or *as something*. Comparing two things would be a special case. The more general case would be that on the side of identity there is an already established *concept* or *pattern* against which the respective individual concrete is measured.

And the same would apply to all types of patterns and schemata; for example, to those that govern the *image media,* as Horkheimer/Adorno make clear in the Dialectic of Enlightenment[7] when they criticize the strict schematism of the culture industry and accuse it of ultimately producing *das Immergleiche* – unending sameness – in repetition.
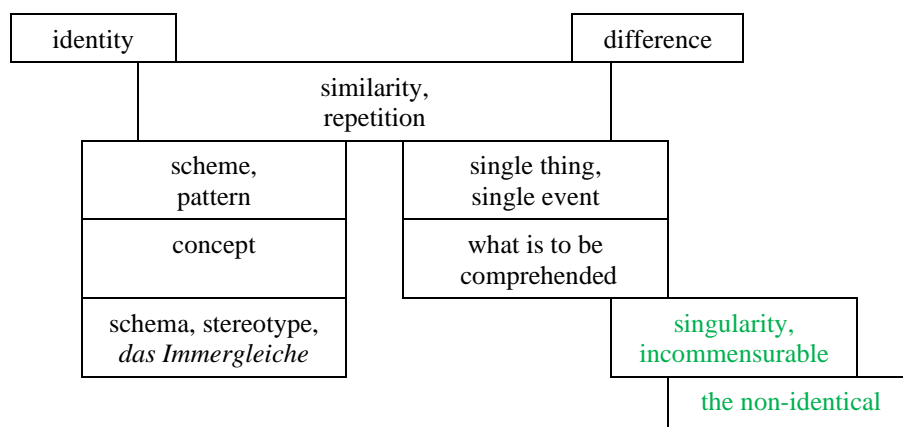
identity		difference
similarity, repetition		
scheme, pattern		single thing, single event
concept		what is to be comprehended
schema, stereotype, *das Immergleiche*		

[5] Adorno, Theodor W.: Negative Dialectics. New York: Continuum 1973, pp. 11, 135ff. [1966].

[6] ...at least in case one considers the single things as single in a radical way, as (initially) singular...

[7] Horkheimer, Max; Adorno, Theodor W.: Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments. Stanford: UP 2002 [1947].

And finally, Adorno coins – as a counter concept to identifying thinking – the concept of the 'non-identical,' which is supposed to capture that which eludes schematization.[8] For Adorno, the exponent of the non-identical is art,[9] and above all twelve-tone music, which taboos repetition and seeks to push back schema formation in a systematic way.

| identity			difference	
	similarity, repetition			
	scheme, pattern	single thing, single event		
	concept	what is to be comprehended		
	schema, stereotype, *das Immergleiche*		singularity, incommensurable	
			the non-identical	

The singular/incommensurable and the non-identical resemble what above has been called radical difference.

5. Derrida, Butler

Twenty years later, Derrida argued in a similar vein.[10] Derrida focuses not on similarity but entirely on repetition, and he emphasizes more strongly than Adorno that it is *heterogeneous* individual events that repetition chains together. In Derrida, repetition results in *differance* (and precisely not in unending sameness). Derrida is critical in the extreme of any notion of identity. (He largely excludes the obvious objection that repetition necessarily contains a moment of similarity and thus of identity).

And another twenty years later, Butler takes up Derrida's argument.[11] She makes the political point that repetition, by causing *displacement*, performatively produces the new. And this argument, too, would fall entirely on the side of difference.

identity		difference	
	similarity, repetition		
		single thing, single event	
		displacement	
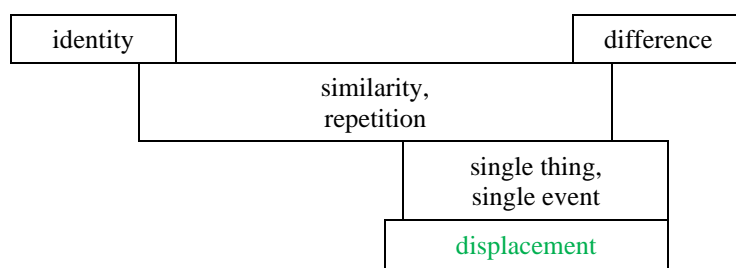
What is new about Derrida's and Butler's concepts is that time now plays a greater role; on the one hand, insofar as repetition, unlike similarity, is always processual, always bound to time; and on the other hand, insofar as both Derrida and Butler focus on displacement and change.

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[8] Adorno, Negative Dialectics, op. cit.

[9] Cf. Adorno, Theodor W.: Aesthetic Theory. London: Routledge 1984 [1970].

[10] Derrida, Jacques: Of Grammatology. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 1995 [1967].

[11] Butler, Judith: Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge 1990; pp. 16-34, 121ff., 140ff.

And equally new is that it is now definitively no longer a matter of comparing only two things or events. Repetition, rather, can effortlessly chain together a very large number of individual occurences.

In Derrida as in Butler, however, this would be my objection, the concept of pattern is missing. Patterns, schemata, and stereotypes have a fundamentally different status from single events. If it was said that it is patterns that individual events confront and by which similarity (identity and/or difference) is measured, then it follows that these patterns have a disproportionately greater weight of their own, a greater stability and persistence.

So how can all this be thought together? Are identity and difference, similarity, comparison, single event, and pattern connected in a regular mechanism? I think that – again drawing on schema theory – one can indeed show such a mechanism, and that it offers a key to an extended understanding of similarity.

6. Intermediate Consideration: Is the Single Thing or Single Event Only Different?

Before this is possible, however, I think it makes sense to modify the idea I have just developed in one point: In my sketch, schema and single event opposed each other, the schema on the side of 'identity,' the single event on the side of difference. The single event, then, seemed to fall entirely on the side of difference. Derrida and Butler would indeed see it this way, because in the end, they consider the single event singular and incommensurable;[12] and differently/similarly Adorno, because he sees in the respective individual the counterpart of schematization.

This choice, however, seems to me by no means obligatory. Therefore, I propose to detach the single thing or single event from difference and to position it – even if provisionally – in the neutral middle between identity and difference:
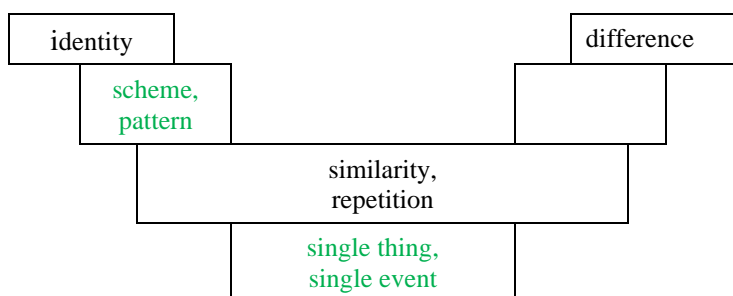

This has the advantage that it initially remains open in which way single event and schema interact and which role 'identity' and difference play in this interaction.[13]

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[12] This view was also held by other poststructuralist authors; an example is Deleuze, for whom the concept of 'singularity' is of great importance and who – similar to Derrida – wants to exclude any moment of identity even from the concept of repetition (cf. Deleuze, Gilles: Difference and Repetition. London/New York: Continuum 2001 [1968]).

[13] And there is a second argument in favor of this: One of the results above has been that the single thing or event is also not simply given, but that it detaches itself from the context as a single one only in the play between identity and difference (cf. chap. 5). So, if there is indeed a 'mechanism' that relates single event and schema to each other, then one will have to take this into account as well.

7. Schema Formation

Now, I think, all that is needed is ready. As far as the mechanism is concerned, I would like to start again with the question of how the formation of patterns or schemata comes about in the first place. I have described it in my consideration of schema formation: All theories dealing with pattern emergence would here refer to repetition.[14] Accordingly, the answer can only be that it is nothing else than the (repeated) detection of similarity which – cumulatively – leads to the formation of patterns.
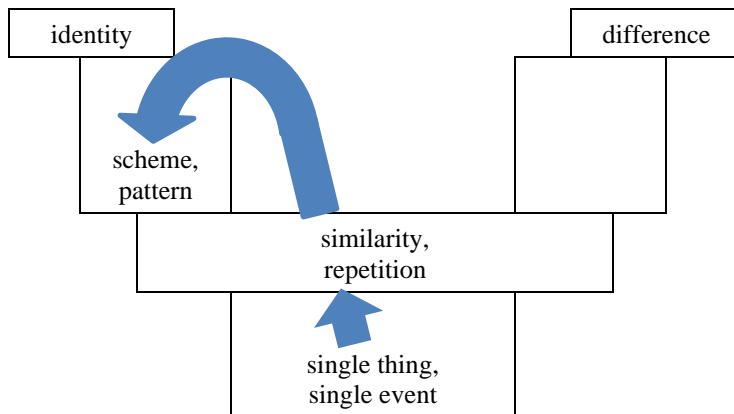

Elsewhere I have made the suggestion to bring into play the concept of condensation in correspondence to the concept of displacement.[15] If it is repetition that produces schemata and patterns, then it has a quantitative aspect; for surely a great many individual events are necessary for this to happen. The concept of condensation retains this quantitative relationship; patterns and schemata are the product of condensation. Each case of similarity strengthens the schema and writes back into the schema.
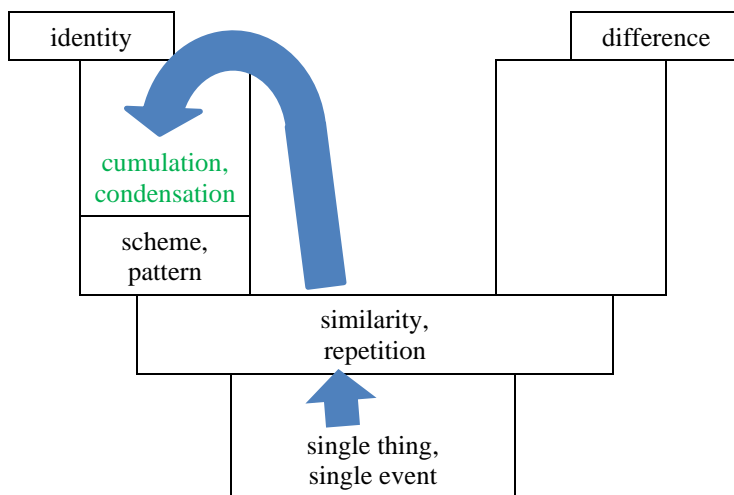
Finally, this provides the opportunity to remodel the whole context as a temporal process. And since it is about repetition, the idea that it is a *cycle* imposes itself – again:

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[14] This applies to schema theory as well as to cognition theory, theories of habitus, social memory, theories of perception such as Gestalt theory, and, finally, theories of individual socialization.

[15] Winkler, Hartmut: Docuverse. Zur Medientheorie der Computer. Munich: Boer 1997, pp. 13-184 (https://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/Winkler--Docuverse.pdf); W., H.: Diskursökonomie. Versuch über die innere Ökonomie der Medien. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2004, pp. 110-130 (https://homepages.uni-paderborn.de/winkler/Winkler--Diskurs%C3%B6konomie.pdf).
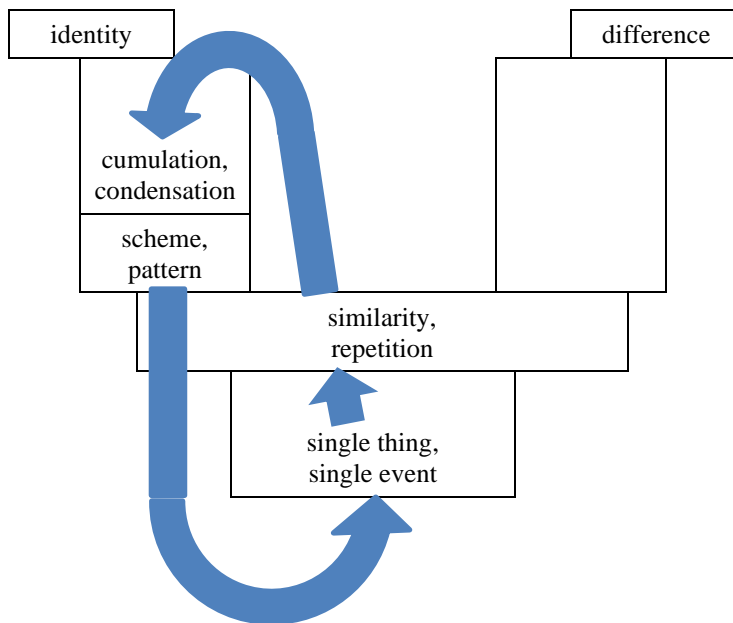
Thus, not only is the schema dependent on repetition (dependent on what resembles each other and repeats itself in the individual things and events), but the schema also exposes itself to the shift that the individual event, insofar as it is always also different, causes. Schemata are stable *and* changeable, and themselves subject to shifts. (In schema theory, as I have mentioned in a previous chapter, this adaptation is called 'tuning').

What my sketch captures only in the concept of condensation but what it cannot really show is the difference in weight: the fact that something like inertia (and thus resistance to adaptation) develops on the scheme side.

8. Intermediate Consideration: Aren't the Schemes Always Already There?

And yet another objection suggests itself at this point: For what does it mean to ask how it comes to the formation of patterns in the first place? Is it not part of the concept of schema that it is prior? *Aren't schemata always already established?* When we learn to speak, do we not adopt the vocabulary and rules of the language we inherit? And is this not ultimately true of all schemata, patterns, and rules? Aren't we socialized into stably established codes of behavior that existed long before us and that will effortlessly outlast our lifetimes?

All this is true. And yet we must insist that patterns and schemata do not fall from the sky. As fixed and predefined as they appear, it is also clear that they have developed in the course of the historical process. And within the historical process – through repetition.

If the schemata and patterns appear 'fixed,' it is because they have become *solidified* in numerous cycles of repetition. This is especially clear in the case of stereotypes; no one wants stereotypes to emerge, no one invented them, planned them, or consciously brought them into the world; only in a long chain of 'Westerns' does the fact emerge that it is a genre at all, i.e., an organized set of stereotypes.

First of all, therefore, repetition affects products; that is, what can be observed in texts, images, or films. Exactly the same, however, applies to the recipients: They go through an individual media socialization, and it takes a whole chain of individual media experiences for them to identify genres or stereotypes as such. On both levels – discourse and media socialization –

individual events turn into repetition, and repetition turns into structure formation. This is exactly what metaphors like 'solidification,' 'condensation,' or 'hardening' want to show.[16]

So both are true: The schemata are antecedent *and* the result of repetition. They appear as antecedent if one considers only a single event, a single repetition cycle. If, on the other hand, we look at the chain of repetitions taken as a whole, it becomes clear that the repetition itself produces the schema.[17]

9. Competing Patterns, Formation of New Patterns, and Schemata

So let us return to the outlined path and again take up the problem of similarity, identity, and difference; for one thought is still missing which can complement and round off what has been said – in my eyes somewhat perplexingly. Namely, what happens, one will have to ask, if difference prevails instead of similarity (or within similarity not the moment of identity, but that of difference)? When the single thing or event is similar but not sufficiently similar to fit the schema in question?

In this case, I think the fact comes into play that there is not just one pattern, but that each pattern competes with a large number of other patterns.
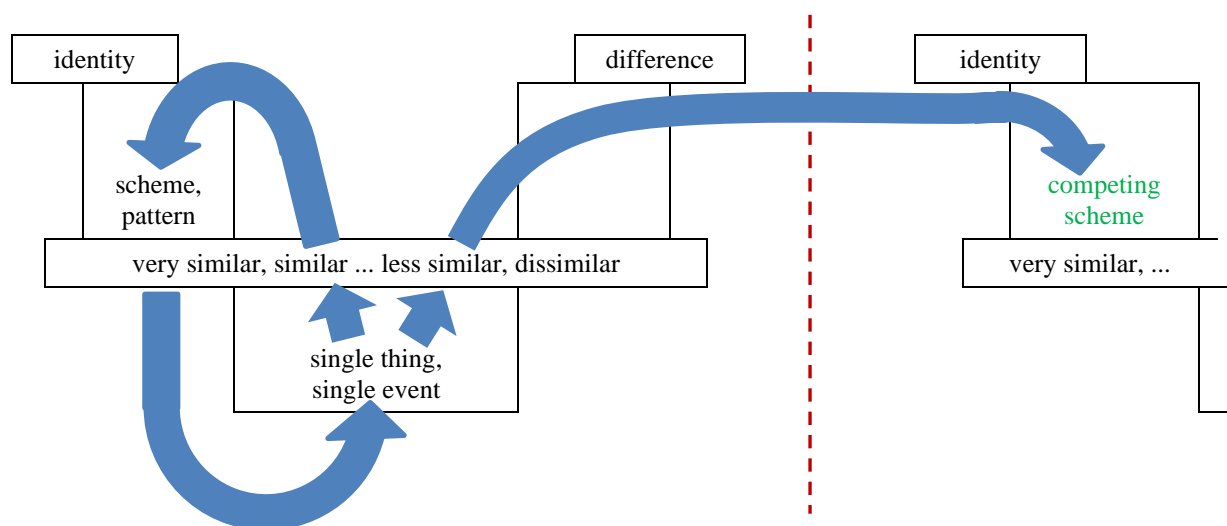

In this respect, similarity is a sorting machine that makes decisions according to the measure of similarity: If the similarity is sufficient, the single event enters the schema in question via condensation; if there is a competing schema to which the single event is more similar, the single event enters the cycle of the competing schema.[18]

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[16] The notion that fluid practices turn into structures has a somewhat difficult time gaining traction in German media theory; one reason for this might be that one cannot assess the incalculably large area of practices, and cannot observe the transformation, the emergence of the patterns and schemata themselves.

[17] Goldstone, who examines the connection between similarity and categorization in 1994, passes the core of the matter with his head held high because he obviously cannot imagine a circular connection in any way. When he says: "Similarity cannot explain categorization if it is dependent on categorization for definition", one can only reply: Sorry, exactly that is the case, exactly this circularity has to be comprehended. (Goldstone, Robert L.: The role of similarity in categorization: Providing a groundwork. In: Cognition, 52 (1994), pp. 125-157, here p. 132).

[18] Ramscar/Port refer to a text of Anderson's that argues in a completely parallel way: "[T]he RATIONAL model of categorization (Anderson 1991) [...] creates hybrid representations in which a new item may either be used to update an existing cluster of similar examples [...] or, if unique enough, it may initiate a new cluster. Which choice is made is a function of the probability that the new item belongs to an existing cluster. When this probability is

This can be visualized via the image of a hilly landscape through which balls are rolling:[19]
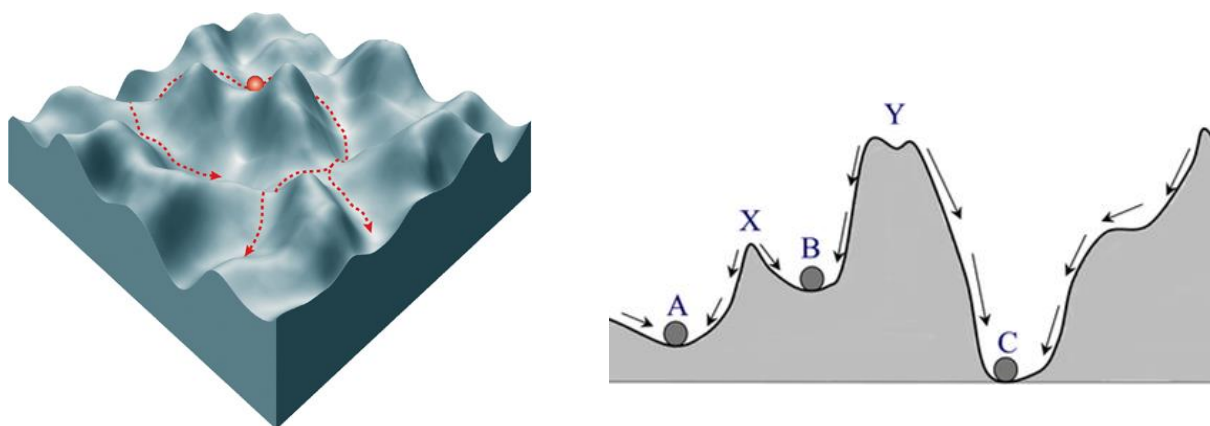
Here, gravity ensures that the balls gather almost automatically in the valleys (where the balls stand for the individual cases and the valleys for the schemata, patterns, or categories). The peaks operate as points of 'repulsion' (centrifugal forces act here), the valleys as attractors (they act centripetally).

The treacherous peculiarity in the case of the schemata would be that the mountains and valleys are not predetermined but that they also change; although very slowly, depending on the course of the rolling balls.

10. Conclusions

All these are no more than ideas or models, and they are – I readily admit – themselves somewhat model-like/schematic/abstract. So what, one will have to ask, is the yield?

I argue that the outlined 'machine' – let me get away with the metaphor – is of absolutely fundamental importance for understanding cultural and semiotic processes. One of the crucial puzzles seems to me to be in what way schemata, patterns, concepts, or categories emerge, in interrelation with the concrete discourses – textual universes, visual worlds… – that are the main object of cultural studies. The discourses themselves are material; they may be complex and ramified, making observation notoriously difficult, but at least in principle they are – de Saussure says: in praesentia – exposed. Exactly this is not true for schemata, patterns, concepts, and categories.

A part of them, the concepts, are visible as words on the surface of the discourses. But already those who ask for their 'meaning' find themselves referred to such obscure things as the competence and the memory capacity of the language users. The situation is even more precarious in the case of image schemata or stereotypes, which have no undoubted material counterpart in the manifest images. In this respect, whether an image fulfills or even materially contains a certain stereotype must always remain debatable.

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below a given threshold, a new cluster is created. If above the threshold, the existing cluster that it is most similar is updated to reflect the new exemplar." (Ramscar, Michael; Port, Robert: Categorization (without categories). In: Dabrowska, E.; Divjak, D. (ed.): Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton 2015, p. 85 (emph. H. W.)). However, the aspect of condensation is also missing here.

[19] Fig. 3d: © Nature Reviews Molecular Cell Biology, reprod. authorized; https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Cellular-reprogramming-as-navigation-through-a-complex-attractor-landscapeIn-a-complex_fig1_26797458, 12. 2. 19; Fig. 2d: © Ghaderi, Ali: A mathematical theory for mixing of particulate materials, PhD thesis, University of Surrey, 2006. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/5-A-Heterogeneity-landscape-the-arrows-denote-the-directions-in-which-the-mixture_fig9_262876747, 12. 2. 19; reprod. authorized.

How does one deal with such a situation? No one would deny that there are schemata and patterns. And likewise that patterns (schemata and stereotypes, regularities, genre laws...) have great power insofar as they structure the discourses beneath their surfaces. But how – to ask the question again – do schemata and regularities emerge?

The answer lies in similarity and in the machine outlined above. At the pole of 'identity,' there is accumulation; the centripetal force of similarity ensures that individual things and individual events are layered and condensed. The price, that was Adorno's point, is generalization. With each run, with each new individual event, each new case of similarity, each individual repetition, the schema moves further away from the individual events; it becomes more abstract. And at the same time, it gains independence and stability.

And conversely, each individual case, insofar as it is also different, questions the schema and – as a tendency – wears it away. That stabilized schemata exist at all, that they can hold their own against the gnawing entropy of difference, shows that both sides do not simply balance each other out. This, I think, is because as similarity diminishes, there is always another schema available that is more 'similar.' The leap to this alternative relieves the original schema and diminishes the force of the difference it would erode.

That is why I called the whole thing a sorting machine. In a last, somewhat bold step, I would therefore like to assign the 'And' and the 'Or' to the two possibilities. The 'And' on the side of the accumulation, the 'Or' on the side of the jump to the alternative.
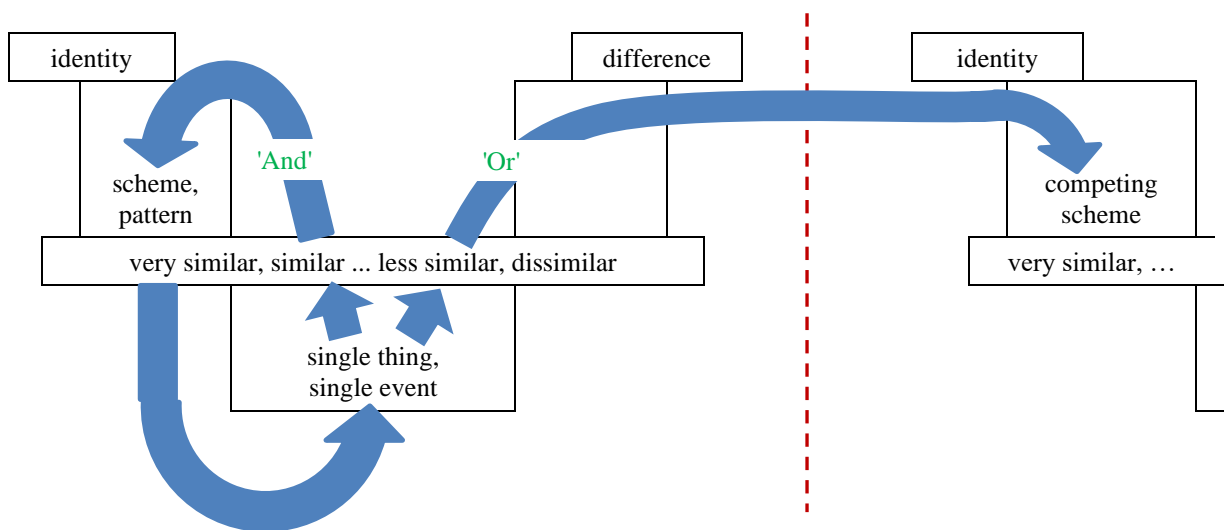
I am referring here to the colloquial, not the logical And and Or. The 'Or' provides the distinction, boundary, or repulsion, which, as has been said above, acts as a second force in the field.
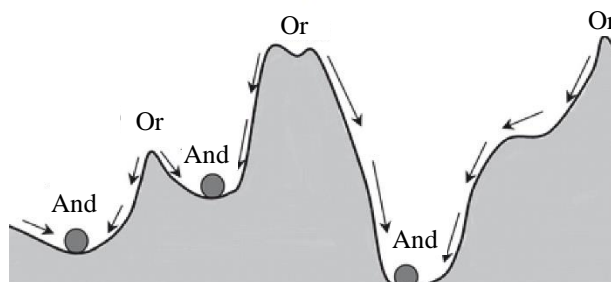
Bhatti/Kimmich follow a similar idea when they refer to prototype theory[20] and to the so-called Voronoi diagrams, a type of algorithm used for pattern recognition:[21]
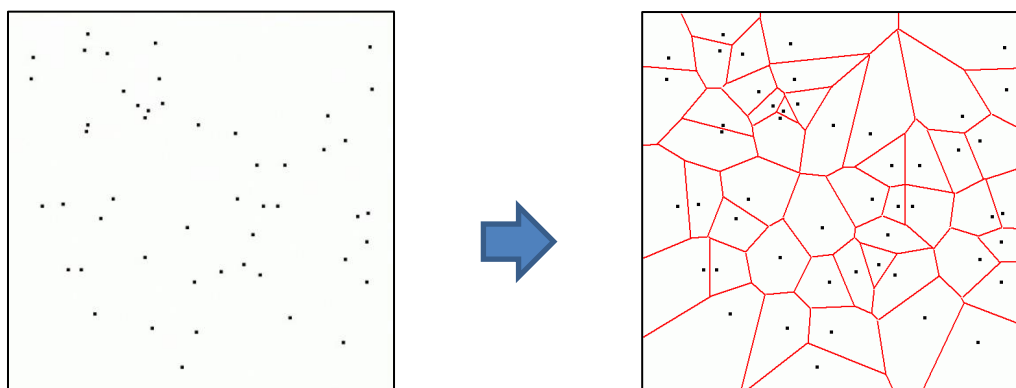
Voronoi algorithms start from a given set of points and calculate what the boundaries of the surfaces surrounding them look like.[22]

All this suggests that distinction, delineation, and repulsion are as important for the constitution of the schemata as the centripetal forces of the 'And' that provide accumulation and condensation. Apparently, the schemata must *move apart*, must differ, so that condensation can take place within them. Apparently, then, *condensation and distinction condition each other*; they are to be thought of as equally strong and as symmetrical, systematically intertwined in a common mechanism.[23]

And now, at the very end, it becomes possible to refer also back to the first type of identity mentioned above, identity as radical difference. Identity as radical difference singles out the moment of repulsion from the described interaction in order to favor it in a unilateral way. This is possible (and plausible), as already stated, in the case of the identity of individuals. Unlike in the case of collective products (patterns, schemata, concepts, or group identities), difference and distinction are conspicuously dominant here; and what delimits an individual does not seem to emerge in the process of identity formation, but – in the case of human individuals – is always already given in the closedness of the skin bag. (To what extent the 'And' of condensation also plays a role in the case of individual identity formation would have to be proven by recourse to, e.g., socialization theories).

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[20] Bhatti, Anil; Kimmich, Dorothee: Einleitung. In: Bh./K. (Eds.): Ähnlichkeit. Ein kulturtheoretisches Paradigma. Konstanz: UP 2015, pp. 11ff.

[21] Ibid, p. 12; Fig.: Illustration of Voronoi algorithms; I have taken the right part of the figure from: http://www.algorithmic-solutions.info/leda_guide/images/voronoi_diagram.gif, © Algorithmic Solutions; reprod. authorized.

[22] The boundary is chosen so that each point within a surface is closer to its 'center' than to any other center. The result is a kind of tile pattern called Voronoi tessellation. (Cf.: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voronoi-Diagramm); moreover, it is important to know that the graphical representation is only an illustration; the algorithm itself is not bound to the two dimensions of a sheet of paper.
My objection would be that in the case of identity and schema formation, which I am concerned with, the points/ centers are not predetermined at all. The task would rather be to describe the process in such a way that centers ('and') and boundaries ('or') take shape simultaneously and in interaction. Particularly interesting in this context are algorithms which allow a so-called 'mean shift clustering';
(see, for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evc53OaDTFc).

[23] Within the framework of other basic ideas and concepts, other authors have also recognized this connection: "Rosch et al. (1976) argue that *the distribution of features among concepts results in natural clusters that maximize within-category similarity and minimize between-category similarity*." (Ramscar/Port: Categorization, a. a. O., p. 81 (emph. H. W.)).

What emerges from all of this, then, is the sketch of a general theory which, starting from schema formation, will – I am convinced – shed a genuinely new light on the established questions of semiotics. *The main result of my consideration is that behind or below semiotic processes, a dialectic of separating and connecting is in progress.* And it seems to be this dialectic that sustains and gives rise to schemata and signs. My concluding chapter, as I have said, will sum up the results specifically in terms of semiotics.

I think it is somewhat astonishing that between identity and difference, separating and connecting, And and Or, single thing and repetition, something like a dynamic connection can effectively be shown. And I think it is even more astonishing that *similarity* is at the center of all this. Of all things, this 'soft' category that philosophers consider unfit for theory.