

## ABSTRACTS

Margaret Higonnet  
“Borderwork Reworked”

How can we close the gap between what comparatists do and the institutions we inhabit? Comparative Literature was theorized following World War II by Kantian thinkers like Rene Wellek, who inherited an aesthetic concept of the literary, a disciplinary concept of scientific knowledge, and Enlightenment universalism. In a post-modernist, post-financial-crash world, sciences have become interdisciplinary (students start with introductory courses on bio-chemistry), and the disciplines of the humanities are challenged to show their relevance to a vanishing job market. This institutional crisis opens an opportunity for Comparative Literature, where bricolage and combinatory innovation are second nature. The literary work as object of study has evolved into e-texts with digital hypertexts, and graphic novels and film claim our attention as well as popular genres such as the detective story, starting with *Oedipus Rex*. The academy has not evolved at the same pace, although Galway has stressed multi-disciplinary programs on colonialism, Irish studies, interart analysis and the history of ideas. The challenge is to move beyond individual scholarly work across disciplines to institutional structures that support collaborative teaching, centripetal and multivocal research groups, and problem-focused learning that reconfigures the traditional disciplinary boundaries of professions. By structuring learning around intellectual and historical nodal points, as well as around problem solving, and by testing the familiar disciplinary rules of thought, we can enhance academic creativity. The goal, I suggest, should be to propose ways of asking questions by challenging boundaries, in order to open up innovative forms of practice and fresh channels of investigation.

Róisín Healy  
“Trading Places? Ireland and Prussian Poland in the Early Twentieth Century”

Irish nationalists in the nineteenth century frequently indulged in what one might call conjectural cartography. Coining new names for Ireland such as “Poland of the Sea” or “Hungary of the West”, they transposed Central Europe on to the continent’s western periphery. Their purpose was unashamedly political—they sought to persuade western Europeans to extend their sympathy for these more feted subject nations to Ireland. This paper asks to what extent Central Europe really could stand in for Ireland. Part of a broader comparison between Ireland and Prussian Poland from 1795 to 1918, it examines the significance of place in the colonial relationships between Ireland and Britain, on the one hand, and Poland and Prussia/Germany, on the other. It investigates the consequences of Ireland’s

location on the periphery versus Poland's between two major powers in the middle of Europe and also the implications of the sea versus land barrier between the centre of government and the territory of the subject nation. It focuses on the second decade of the twentieth century when these relationships were tested and the very ground that subject nations inhabited fought over in the First World War and its aftermath.

Felix Ó Murchadha

"Home, Violence, Place: the Groundlessness of Belonging and the Necessity of Building".

The nature of the relation to home is expressed well in the French *chez moi* or *chez soi*: among mine or among his. Home is the realm of mine. Making a home is the building of a space which is for mine and not for those outside of mine. The building of a home is essentially the setting up of a place – whether stationary or not – which separates friends and foe, mine and theirs, familiar and strange. The home is a sanctuary, it marks a boundary (*sanctum*) between inside and outside. In this way the home takes as its ultimate validation the fundamental distinction of sacred and profane. The difference between religious and secular architecture is hence a relative one.

The boundary between inside and outside, which is fundamental to the home is however porous. While the making of a home means the building of boundaries a boundary which was impenetrable would make the home uninhabitable. All homes have – in a real or metaphorical sense – doors and windows.

The home is an arbitrary view on the world. This does not mean that there is no good reason why this place rather than that should be the place in which we dwell. But it does mean that such a reason is never good enough. There is never a good enough reason why here and not there. The home domesticates its hinterland, but does so always from a position of arbitrary power. The home relies on what it refuses to identify with, that which must remain foreign to it for home to maintain itself. The home contains like an organism an immune system to the outside, foreign world. But like an organism it is liable to infection, to the intrusion of foreign bodies into it. The setting up of the home makes attacks on it possible and indeed inevitable. The domain of the home remains secret, secreted from the outside world.

Bill Richardson  
“Borges and Space”

The Argentine author, Jorge Luis Borges, tended to emphasise his obsession with time, and perhaps because of this, the relevance of spatial concepts to his work has been overlooked to some extent. Certainly, the many subtle ways in which he comments in his stories, either implicitly or explicitly, on the complex relationship between human beings and space have not been fully elucidated. This paper looks at some of the key stories in the collections *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, with a view to analysing them from a spatial perspective, and drawing on some of the theoretical work carried out in this area in other disciplines, including the ideas of Henri Lefebvre on the ‘production of space’. The stories examined are shown to convey, through spatial reference, important ideas about power and the lack of it, about the nature of knowledge, about subjectivity and objectivity, about issues of identity and the fragile nature of human existence.

Nicholas Allen  
“The Place of Literature and the Real Economy”

The Samuel Beckett Bridge opened in Dublin in December. It joins two sides of the city across the River Liffey, and is the second of two bridges designed there by Santiago Calatrava, the first of which was named for James Joyce and stands outside the house at Usher’s Quay that is setting for ‘The Dead’. Thinking of Beckett through the late twentieth century, it is suggestive that in boom times, Beckett was tragic. Now in recession, he is comic. In Ireland at least this disjunction between economic cycle and cultural reception depends on the formation of a backward dynamic, whereby value registers only at the point of dispersal. It may be that the abrupt disaster of our monetary mess that the resulting retrenchment will encourage a more confrontational consideration of the relations between art and economy. It is at this intersection that I want to read the place of literature today through the language and imagination of exchange. If economy meant development in the late twentieth century Anglophone world, Beckett’s work stood in opposition, stripped down, unusable, waiting. If economy now means collapse, conversely Beckett’s work might be read as participation.

Working from here, I want to suggest the ways in which a post-crisis criticism might ask other questions of culture and economy.

Paolo Bartoloni

“Suspension and the Thingness of Art”

In this paper I intend to illustrate the literary and philosophical category of suspension that more than other poetic concepts has characterized and marked the literary and philosophical production of late modernity, and the ways it might lead us to a reconceptualisation of the thing of art or, perhaps more appropriately, the relation between art and the thing. I argue that suspension is the category through which art discovers the possibility to speak not so much “about” things, as if they were outside it, as “to” things and “with” things which are simultaneously in and outside it. The theoretical discussion passing through Agamben’s notion of suchness, Lacan’s “real”, and Heidegger’s thingness, will be tested against selected texts by the Italian poet Giorgio Caproni and Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni.

Paul Crowther

“Reality as Subversion”

Much contemporary cultural theory is driven by a relativist orthodoxy, with two major axes. The first holds that the nature of signification is such that there can be no knowledge of reality that is independent of language and those class, race, and gender interests which are embedded in it. This relativist epistemology tends to draw its intellectual strength in large part, from poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault.

The second axis, is a scepticism as to the possibility of high culture, and in, particular, that of a canonic structure in the different art forms. It is held rather, that the worth of different cultural practices is relative to the time and places of production and to the groups who do the producing. Indeed, this will often involve cultural forms being used - wittingly or not - as a means for dominant social ensembles to control or repress the cultural aspirations of others (postcolonial thought, of course, centres on this very issue

My paper will reject these two axes of relativist orthodoxy. It's first step will be a critical analysis of the relativist epistemology, based on alternative position that emphasizes the links between embodiment and reality. The position is then extended as a critique of relativist conceptions of cultural practice, and argues for the reality of universal canons based on the semantic scope and structure of cultural practices, rather than their documentary content.

Hans-Walter Schimdt-Hannisa

“Wounds / Signs. Stigmatics in 20th Century Film

The history of Christian stigmatics counts more than 300 cases of stigmatization from St Francis of Assisi to Therese Neumann and Padre Pio. The idea of a violent, allegedly divine writing penetrating and marking human bodies has challenged not only theologians but also film makers, authors and academic/ cultural critics. Using documentary and fictional films (Rupert Wainwright, *Stigmata*; Dominik Graf, *Das Gelübde*; Liliana Cavani, *Francesco*) as a starting point, the paper will discuss the contemporary fascination with this phenomenon.

An interdisciplinary approach will focus on aesthetical, semiotical, religious, psychological and gender-related perspectives of stigmatization.

Maria Scott

“Traces of the Real in French Realist Literature”

Many instances of so-called ‘realist’ literature were produced before the word ‘realism’ had been invented. They appear, at least to eyes accustomed to those realist forms out of which much of our contemporary literature has grown, to conform loosely to realist codes, such as the inclusion of an authoritative third-person narrator, a unified and sequential narrative, coherent character types and the inclusion of reality effects such as historical and sociological data. However, at the time that realism was evolving and before it had settled into an *-ism*, the real was a key reference rather than an imaginary construct. This paper will focus on the interesting case of Stendhal, whose fiction was produced prior to the popularisation of the term ‘realism’, despite being considered foundational to realist literature in its French incarnation. Stendhal’s work bears witness to the slipperiness of the real in a number of ways. Much of its famously unstable irony comes from the fact that conflicting points of views of the same object are presented without being resolved into a unified viewpoint, from the fact that characters behave in unpredictable, unexplained, and even occasionally ‘impossible’ ways; and from the existence of narrative ellipses and narratorial silences, which point to the impossibility of representing the real in any adequate way. There is active resistance, in other words, to the effects of plenitude that Barthes associated with the classical or readable text. The paper will end by contrasting the role of mud in the ‘realist’ work of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Balzac, where it operates purely as a signifier of *reality*, with its function in the fiction of Stendhal, where in two key episodes it appears to signify the radical uncertainty and impossibility that, following Lacan, we associate with the approach of the *real*.