

Thresholds: Contexts of Rupture, Change and Adaptation – Conference Report

By Maika Nguyen – March 25 2022

Talk of 'before' and 'after', as well as 'during', has become commonplace since the outbreak of COVID-19, underlining the ways in which the pandemic had created a rupture in our lives, destabilising how we governed the everyday. In light of the radical transformation of the old into the 'new normal', and the ways in which we have come to adapt, question and transform our practices as a result, the annual Humanities Institute PhD Conference invited postgraduates from various disciplines to engage with concepts of rupture, change, adaptation under the theme 'Thresholds'.

This conference, the first hybrid conference to be hosted by the Humanities Institute, took place in the O'Brien Centre at University College Dublin on Friday 25th March, during which participants were able to attend and interact with each other in-person as well as virtually. Professor Anne Fuchs, Director of the [Humanities Institute](#), began the conference with her opening address.

The first panel of speakers, grouped under the theme 'Digital Thresholds & Methods', was chaired by Lauren Cassidy, and commenced with Holly Parker's (University of Lincoln) 'Escape from The Stacks: Negotiating Affective Membranes and Virtual Reality in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*'. Parker examined the processes by which the main character of *Ready Player One* (2011) seeks to maximise his escape from the dystopian environment of his material life into virtual reality. Engaging with twenty-first century science fiction, Parker's paper explored the effects of technology on the relationship between bodies in virtual and material contexts. She argued that demarcations between virtual and material affect, due to the porosity of zones between the virtual and the material, is blurred. As a result, acts of 'entering' or 'logging off' no longer fully create nor destroy barriers, but negotiate them.

'The Somatic Thresholds of Palestinian Activist Videos on Instagram', presented by Cáit Murphy (Trinity College Dublin), aligned itself with Parker's explorations by using Instagram videos of the Israeli-Palestine conflicts as a study for the relationship between the body, suffering and concepts of public or personal testimony in an age of contestable and contested media coverage. Murphy's paper looked at the touchscreen smartphone as a tactile threshold, focusing on recent smartphone video activism on the Instagram page @eye.on.palestine, which depicts daily confrontations between the law and protesting civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. She compared this embodied activism to pre-existing film theories and film movements, such as Vertov's 'kino-eye' theory and Bégin's 'somatic image', or the traces of movement on the video surface.

Orla Delaney (University of Cambridge) followed this presentation with 'Data encounters: towards a theory of databasing in the museum'. She outlined the processes by which data on museum collections passes through different hands, identifying the changes that have transformed material data preservation into digital formats and arguing that this is an ethnographic process. Her examination of databasing under this lens sought to look at assemblages of digital museum archives as communities in order to understand how data centres, machines and interfaces – along with people – are agentic.

In the final paper of the opening panel, Fatma Kargin (Justus Liebig University of Giessen) outlined her study of how spectators constructed and narrativised their responses to exhibitions, presenting an example of one such response. The presenter argued that the

spontaneous response, recorded via a GoPro camera, was self-referential as well as creative, exemplifying the ways in which the normally-seen-as-responsive act of spectating is a performative and constructive act. Thus, the recorded and spontaneous response allowed access to an understanding of the installation that was built around the spectator's experience.

Clare Kelly chaired the following panel, entitled 'Historical Breaks: Befores and Afters', whose first paper was presented by Noble Shrivastava (Jawaharlal Nehru University). The paper 'Tradition and Transition: Courtesans and the Early Colonial State in 19th Century Delhi' looked at the ways in which the perception of courtesan women in Delhi shifted during the 19th century. Shrivastava examined the ways in which the civilising mission of the British Empire, as well as its fall, contributed to the ways in which the courtesans, from being viewed as cultural luminaries, were then considered immoral; furthermore, the presenter looked at the resultant effects on urban, cultural and political spaces that had previously been occupied by courtesans, resulting in a change in social as well as spatial relations.

In 'The 4th Block Triennial of Eco Poster and Dealing with The Trauma of Chernobyl In Ukrainian Graphic Design', Viktoriia Grivina (University of St Andrews) presented the history of the International Triennial 'The 4th Block,' a festival of eco poster design that has been taking place in a Ukrainian city of Kharkiv for the past 30 years. A cultural phenomenon that emerged to commemorate victims of the Chernobyl tragedy, the festival has responded to the biggest challenges of the country. Grivina analysed how, in the face of war, the festival is using its international recognition to amplify the voices of locals, decolonizing the narratives around both Chernobyl and Ukrainian identity.

The next presenter, Jacob Miller (University College Dublin), focused on Brexit in fictionalised narratives and the ways in which narrative form is integrated in political ideology. In 'The First Rule of Brexit is Don't Talk about Brexit: "Liberal Nationalism" in Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet', Miller argued that Ali Smith's polyvocal novels (2016-2020), in spite of being lauded for changing British literary canon, suggest that Britain used to be a cohesive society prior to the referendum, thereby claiming a liberal notion of diversity and still reinforcing popular sovereignty. He argued that the novels contribute to a liberalist approach of change within a wider ideological framework, rather than a radical overturning of the canon.

The final presenter of 'Historical Breaks', Luke Watson (University College Cork), addressed the impact of the French Revolution on Irish political life in 'A Break from the Past: Adapting and reacting to the French revolution in Ireland, 1789-1798'. The paper argued that the politics of 1790s Ireland were fundamentally different from the politics of the previous decades on account of the dramatic influence of the French Revolution; the Revolution reignited a political climate that had become stagnant in the wake of the failed Reform campaign in the early 1780s, but in doing so it also created a more volatile political scene than had existed previously. Through both the real and imagined influence of the French Revolution, the 1790s saw the advancement of both radicalism and conservatism in the political discourse, which consequently led to a stark crystallisation of opposition and ultimately, rebellion, in Ireland.

The third panel, 'Identities in Flux', was chaired by Suchismita Dattagupta and opened by Fernando Alejandro Remache-Vinueza (University of Glasgow). In the paper 'Changes and interactions between the mainstream narrative and alternative identities: The case of Lithuania', Remache-Vinueza explored the main national identity discourse of modern-day

Lithuania through the ways in which contesting identity narratives have emerged in the 21st century. He looked at material culture in Lithuania, both in its support of the mythologised, official narrative of Lithuania's development into a nation, as well as in terms of its contribution to counter-narratives that question claims of ethnic homogeneity or unity in Lithuania.

In the second paper, entitled 'Probing the Transformation of Devadasis in *The Undoing Dance*', Esha Nadkarni (Goa University) examined Srividya Natarajan's *The Undoing Dance* (2018) as a response to the transformation and silencing of devadasis within Indian culture and history. Beginning with an outline of the upheavals to the social and cultural positions of devadasis due to British colonial rule, Nadkarni then argued that *The Undoing Dance* contests accepted views of devadasis, brings to light the ways in which their roles in society and culture have been dismissed, and counters homogenous viewpoints through the polyphony of voices represented.

The panel continued with, Dr Yanli Xie's (University College Dublin) 'Finding a place for the 'modern/new' Chinese women in Republican domestic kitchens: gender norms and the cooking-related writings published in the 1920s to 1930s'. She discussed how social changes had complicated the categories of 'new'/'modern' Chinese women, demonstrating that the periodical articles about food and cooking have played a part in reconciling the tension between 'new/modern' Chinese women and kitchen spaces. These periodicals thus encouraged readers to see that kitchen spaces and cooking duties were not in contrast to the 'new'/'modern' women's pursuit of being productive and independent.

The panel's concluding paper, 'Overcoming Everyday Constraints: Agency and Identity in Diaries of Child Refugees from National Socialist Germany', was presented by Monja Stahlberger (Institute of Modern Languages Research, University of London). Stahlberger's paper examined diary entries written by unaccompanied child refugees from Germany and Austria during WW2. Focusing on the constraints of everyday life in exile such as the reality of war, rules and regulations for refugees, and further migration, she highlighted the active role of the children in shaping their exile experience as well as in negotiating identities and belonging. With this, Stahlberger also contributed to an ongoing debate on subverting dominant narratives which regard the Kindertransport scheme as a success story of integration and cultural assimilation of the children who often are portrayed as passive beneficiaries of British hospitality.

Dr Bianca Cataldi chaired the final panel of the conference, 'Artistic Responses to Thresholds'. This panel began with 'Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Jan Vercruyssen's questioning of a place for Art', presented by Anton Pereira Rodriguez (Ghent University / University of Verona). Pereira Rodriguez discussed the Belgian artist Jan Vercruyssen's (1948-2018) reexamination of art's ontological conditions in the early 1980s, after the exhaustion of Modernism and at the beginning of Postmodernism. He focused on Vercruyssen's sculpture series 'Chambers' (1983-1986), monumental, box-like constructions with empty frames, stairs leading nowhere and mirrors reflecting emptiness. Examining the 'Chambers' as places from which life has withdrawn, Pereira Rodriguez argued that Vercruyssen rejected art's utopian aspirations and instead proposed an 'atopic' place for art.

Hattie Idle (University College Dublin) then presented "On the Outside Looking in": Romantic comedy, awkward (sub)urban aesthetics, and US-Aotearoan encounters in Taika Waititi's *Eagle vs Shark* (2007)', in which she analysed the strategies of quirkiness that appear in Waititi's filmic oeuvre, concentrating in particular on *Eagle vs Shark*. She drew out

the ways in which the film diverges from the comfortable position of romantic narratives in Hollywood cinema. Accepted Americanised retro aesthetics become unsettled as they take place in a New Zealand context, where the landscape of Aotearoa moves away from Hollywoodian spaces, placing at the forefront the tension between indigeneity and settler identities. *Eagle vs Shark*, by concentrating on provinciality and the ways in which New Zealand awkwardly attempts to, and fails at, accommodating mainstream American culture, exists on the periphery of Hollywood rom com and interrogates the power structures that are maintained within the mainstream genre.

In the following paper, 'Travelling through grief; elegy crossing thresholds in "Sailing Home from Rapallo" and "A Procession at Candlemas"', Rory Clarkson (Durham University) explored the role of elegy, in the act of mourning, in grappling with the threshold between life and death. Looking at passing away as an irreversible crossing from two mutual exclusive spaces, life and death, Clarkson examined Robert Lowell's "Sailing Home from Rappalo" (1954) and Amy Clampitt's "A Procession at Candlemas" (1985) as movements of mourning. In this paper Clarkson argued that, whilst the speaker of Lowell's elegy attempts to cross the divide of death in his elegy, the speaker in "A Procession at Candlemas" seeks to delay death, returning to her mother through memory.

Annemarie Iker delivered the final paper, 'Books and Secrets in Catalan Modernisme', in which she explored the elaborate labyrinth of secrecy that Catalan modernistes attempted to create in their art. The question of artwork keeping secrets fascinated Santiago Rusiñol (1861—1931) and the Catalan modernistes, a group of artists, writers, composers, architects, and designers active in turn-of-the-century Barcelona. In "Books and Secrecy in Catalan Modernisme," Iker examined the illustrated book, an art form vital to the modernista conviction that art must both evoke and elicit secrets.

Finally, Dr Caroline Bassett's (University of Cambridge) ['The Light Under the Door: Technology and the Ends of Worlds'](#) closed the conference day. In the keynote speech, Dr Bassett examined the concept of 'threshold(s)' as portals, doors, barriers and endings. Whilst movement into the future can be conceptualised in terms of speed and progress, due to technological advancements, ideas of risk and voidness have also emerged: risk through the acceleration of AI beyond human intelligence; as well as the terminal threshold of apocalypse, the arrival of which is contributed to by technology in the age of the Anthropocene. The talk concentrated on the role of the humanities and literature in a time when focus seems to lie on data, AI and efficiency via the technical as a means of examining digital futures. Using Derrida's concept of nuclear criticism, Dr Bassett explored literature's ability to understand fabulation, to think about its relationship to the materials of the technological, and, therefore, to form an expanded and responsible digital humanities.

The excellent interdisciplinary panels and contributions raised important questions about the boundaries, definitions, and permeability of thresholds, sparking conversation around the theme of 'Thresholds' beyond the conference day itself. This topic was revisited in a related panel later in the year, with an October 2022 panel entitled ["Imperceptible Thresholds: New Heuristic Approaches"](#). The Humanities Institute's research strands progress with these discussions in mind, while the Thresholds of Knowledge ECR Network has also taken up this conversation. We continue to explore the ways in which thresholds operate on a multidisciplinary and increasingly complex scale.

Conference Organisers (UCD Resident Scholars): Louisa Carroll, Lauren Cassidy, Suchismitta Dattagupta, Prolet Decheva, Clare Kelly, Annie Khabaza, Maika Nguyen.

