

ABSTRACTS:

Mette Leonard Høeg: *Sustained Productive Undecidability: An Analytical Concept*

Undecidability is a fundamental literary quality, yet it appears particularly predominant in modernist literature. With literary modernism undecidability is foregrounded in an unprecedented way as it comes to function as a structuring and meaning-producing principle and is established as a criterion of authenticity and truth in the representation of reality and human experience (a position undecidability still holds today where it has arguably also come to function as a criterion of quality).

Based on notions of undecidability from poststructuralist theory (Iser, Hartman, Derrida, de Man) and on types and modes, uses and strategies, and functions and effects of undecidability found in modernist literary narrative, I propose the term *sustained productive undecidability* as a designation for a predominant form of undecidability in modernist literature as well as an analytical concept for the investigation of modernist and contemporary narrative. Central to the concept is the assumption of the difference between a productive and unproductive form of uncertainty of meaning and the concept thus draws on Derrida's distinction between undecidability and indeterminacy.

In this paper I will offer a definition of the concept and attempt to illustrate its analytical potential with reference to an undecidable work of the modernist period par excellence: Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*.

Mette Leonard Høeg is a third year PhD fellow at the English department at King's College London. In her Arts & Humanities Research Institute-funded project she investigates the concept of undecidability in modernist literature, in particular in the works of Robert Musil and Ford Madox Ford. She has published articles on undecidability and the blending of fiction and non-fiction in contemporary literature.

Patrick ffrench: *Suspended Sentence*

As a mode of undecideability, *suspension* hovers or oscillates uncertainly between the decision and its other: it is both the suspension of a decision and a decision to suspend. The motif of the suspended sentence also invokes a troubling proximity between the thematic and lexical regimes of the law, death, language and mobility, a proximity that has been exploited by poststructuralist theory (Derrida among others), but which also draws on a range of literary examples. In these, the motif of *suspension* is given a physical and bodily expression, in which the linguistic and conceptual trouble of suspension is translated into spatial and affective forms. In this paper I address the legacies of poststructuralist theory through attention to the consistent issue of suspension and its double nature, while also pointing (back) to literary manifestations – in Bataille and Genet – which foreground the sense of suspension as a negative critique of groundedness, of meaning and subjectivity alike.

Patrick ffrench is Professor of French at King's College London. His publications include *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel* (Oxford University Press, 1996), *The Cut: Reading Georges Bataille's Histoire de l'œil* (British Academy, 2000), *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community* (Legenda, 2007) and *Thinking Cinema with Proust* (Legenda, 2018). He has published widely on 20th-century French literature and thought.

Christopher Norris: *Poetics, Verse-Practice and Undecidability: Some Formal Overtures*

My talk will combine theoretical discussion with a reading of poems in the formal (i.e., rhymed and metrical) mode which in various ways foreground, instance or thematize the concept of undecidability. My aim is to specify – or at any rate get clearer about – the status of such ideas when they are transposed from a broadly scientific or logico-mathematical context to that of literature, the arts or humanities. Should 'undecidability' then best be thought of as a theme, a concept, a suggestive analogy, a metaphor, or just a substitute for more familiar literary notions like ambiguity or aporia? Central here is Derrida's frequent but often ignored insistence that deconstruction, properly so-called, has to do with undecidability as concerns the logical syntax and not (or not primarily) the over/under-determined semantics of texts. This is the relevance of Gödel's Theorem in those few but crucially load-bearing passages where it is invoked by way of more-than-analogical support for Derrida's deconstructive readings.

On the other hand there are clearly legitimate (non-abusive) extrapolations from the *topos* of undecidability that don't purport to meet any such rigorous logico-mathematical standard and which instead earn their keep by various, more or less complex analogical (including literary) means. In this context I shall take some of my own quantum-physics related poems to demonstrate how such a claim might (or of course might not!) work out. Undecidability here functions both as a theme and as an operative formal strategy involving elements – such as rhyme and meter – that involve a strictly undecidable interplay of chance and necessity, freedom and constraint, creativity and certain structural limits on invention. Those antinomies have been foregrounded in Derrida's writing from the outset and have large implications for the theme of this conference.

Christopher Norris is Emeritus Professor in Philosophy at the University of Cardiff. In his early career he taught English Literature, then moved to Philosophy *via* literary theory, and has now moved back in the direction of creative writing. He has published widely on the topic of deconstruction and is the author of more than thirty books on aspects of philosophy, literature, the history of ideas, and music. More recently he has turned to writing poetry in various genres, including – unusually – that of the philosophical verse-essay. He has published several collections of poems including *The Winnowing Fan*, *For the Tempus-Fugitives*, and *The Matter of Rhyme*.

Christopher Fynsk: *Receiving Antelme's Word*

In a letter to Dionysos Mascolo of June 21, 1945, which is to say a little over a month after Mascolo had helped rescue him from Dachau, Robert Antelme evokes a singular form of undecidability linked to his experience with language in this period of deliverance and recovery. "Undecidability," here, relates to an unsettling freedom in speech. As Antelme explains to Mascolo, he no longer commands a sense of propriety with respect to "what is said and not said." The problem is especially grave in the context of this written address which seeks to preserve for Mascolo what it means to "save" a human being while claiming the right to address the difficulty Mascolo will experience in retaining this meaning.

As it happens, Antelme's letter to Mascolo provokes a form of repression so severe that Mascolo loses all track of it for four decades; the obligation it carries cannot be borne by him consciously. In confronting it after its rediscovery, however, he recognises that it has in fact shaped his life and his commitments over the last forty years.

Mascolo's effort to understand the import of Antelme's letter carries him into a reflection on language that is of considerable interest (for this colloquium) in itself. But Mascolo was not alone in receiving the obliging testimony it carried in its unsettled and unsettling freedom. Maurice Blanchot appears also to have known its obligation, producing in response a stunning meditation on its ethical import. For Blanchot, the undecidable in this speech conferred a right and afforded decision. This paper will explore what Mascolo and Blanchot give us to understand about the nature and ethical import of a speech that was "true" in its very undecidability.

Christopher Fynsk is Dean of the Division of Philosophy, Art, and Critical Thought at the European Graduate School. He is also Chair of the University Executive Board of the EGS. His published work is in literature and philosophy, with a special concentration in the area of philosophy of language. He has written monographs on Martin Heidegger and Maurice Blanchot, and has addressed various topics in a cross-disciplinary fashion such as infancy, pedagogy, and the politics of academic institutions (particularly as they bear on the humanities). He has recently published a short monograph on Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Phrase*, and is completing a longer project on the topic of rhythm.

Julia Ng: *Undecidability and Reversibility*

At the opening of "The Double Session," while reflecting on the "decapitation" with which the opening of a session devoted to the practice of reading necessarily begins, Derrida writes of "the 'semantic reversal' for which [he] will determine the law of indecision." Such reversal refers to the complicity of discourse and inscription that Mallarmé's mime, in mimicking nothing, marks in the condition of possibility of the text – lifting "the decidable exteriority of differing terms" and permitting difference to inscribe itself "without any independent, irreversible terms." Elsewhere, in *Of Grammatology*, reversibility is itself modelled after a degree zero of writing, imagined, following Pound's and Fenollosa's account of the so-called Chinese ideogram, as a non-phonetic "graphic poetics" capable of de-centering the transcendental authority of *epistémé*. What sort of textual space, reading, or indeed "acting," emerges from conceiving of the act that "aims at no form of verisimilitude" as a reversible function? To arrive at an answer, this paper tracks several instances of the co-implication of the two terms, undecidability and reversibility, as they range across discussions of form, de-authorization and the ends of language, with and beyond Derrida and his interlocutors.

Julia Ng is Lecturer in Critical Theory and Co-Director of the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought in the Department of English and Comparative Literature, Goldsmiths, University of London. She specialises in the links between modern mathematics, political thought, and theories of history and language in the 20th century, particularly in the work of Walter Benjamin.

Ian Maclachlan: *Autobiographical Undecidabilities: Life's Limits and the Genres of Life-Writing*

This paper considers the role of undecidabilities in the theory and practice of autobiography. Its principal focus is on recent writing in French, where there has been a particular discrepancy between critical work that tends to underline the fixity of limits in relation to genre and identity (especially in the wake of Philippe Lejeune's influential contributions), and autobiographical practice, where the transgression of such limits has often been essential to the most vibrant writing in the genre. This paper will argue that a series of key undecidabilities are, in fact, intrinsic to autobiography, and will draw principally on the example of Louis-René des Forêts (particularly, his *Poems of Samuel Wood* and *Ostinato*), but also, more passingly, on the writing of Maurice Blanchot, Roger Laporte and others, to make its case.

Ian Maclachlan is Professor of French Literature at the University of Oxford, where he is a Fellow of Merton College. He has written on Derrida, Blanchot, Nancy, Laporte and others, and is currently working on a study of Louis-René des Forêts's autobiographical writings.

Hannah Vinter: *Collage Forms and Undecidability in the Work of Emine Sevgi Özdamar*

This paper investigates how Turkish-German author Emine Sevgi Özdamar uses the undecidability inherent in collage to destabilise the fixed categories of 'past' and 'present' and engage with the experience of temporal flow. In a pictorial collage work inspired by Thomas Brasch's 1978 play *Lovely Rita*, and in *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (2003), an autofictional novel which thematises her own theatre work in 1970s Berlin, Özdamar pieces together several different artistic and documentary formats (photography, theatre, prose text, diary entry). Her work also touches on multiple histories, including the Second World War, the Cold War in divided Berlin, and her experience of military rule in Turkey. I explore Özdamar's fragmented forms, drawing both on writing about visual collage and on Deleuzian theories of 'assemblage'. My analysis suggests firstly that her undecidable images, which hover between multiple contexts, show a haunting of the present by the past. Secondly, and more significantly, her mobile forms disrupt the labels 'present' and 'past', as they make clear that neither the means through which Özdamar engages with histories, nor the histories themselves, are fixed entities, but rather fluid constellations caught in the flow of time.

Hannah Vinter is a third-year PhD candidate in the German department at King's College London. Her AHRC-funded project investigates the work by contemporary female German-language authors who use collage and assemblage to write about traumatic histories.

Max Saunders: *Temporal Undecidability: in Retrospect and Prospect*

TBC

Bruce Robbins: *No-Fault Murder*

It is a well-known and a predictable gesture: as Barbara Johnson notes in her essay "Bad Writing," deconstruction is expected to take any matter on which others are confidently deciding and declare it undecidable. One thing that can be learned from the antithesis of this position, Carl Schmitt's decisionism, is that it depends on who is doing the deciding. It seems likely that some of the new or newly perceived undecidability that brings us back to this familiar topic with fresh enthusiasm results from the socio-political circumstances in which we now find ourselves: for better or worse, confidence in sovereignty has been shaken, and with it confidence in the authority of the deciders. This is a contextual or relative undecidability, not a philosophical one. I propose to consider it by discussing (partly in honor to our convenor) a Danish example of Nordic noir. In this novel and others like it, one might say that the so-called Stockholm syndrome has become decisive. Even assigning responsibility for murder, a task that is basic to the state as well as to the genre, along with responsibility for doing something about the murder, has succumbed to a somewhat unrecognized but to my mind significant and indeed in some ways perhaps even beneficial sort of Scandinavian undecidability.

Bruce Robbins is Old Dominion Foundation Professor of the Humanities in the department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. His most recent book is *The Beneficiary* (Duke, 2017). His other books include *Perpetual War: Cosmopolitanism from the Viewpoint of Violence* (2012), *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* (2007), *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (1999), *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (1993), and *The Servant's Hand: English Fiction from Below* (1986). He has edited *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics* (1990) and *The Phantom Public Sphere* (1993) and co-edited, with Pheng Cheah, *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (1998) and (with David Palumbo-Liu and Nirvana Tanoukhi) *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World* (2011). His essays have appeared in *n+1*, *The Nation*, *Public Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *LA Review of Books*. A collection of essays entitled *Cosmopolitanisms*, co-edited with Paulo Horta, came out from NYU in July 2017. He is the director of a 2012 documentary entitled "Some of My Best Friends Are Zionists," available at bestfriendsfilm.com. He is working on another documentary about the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand as well as a book on the literary history of atrocity.

Nicholas Royle: *Between Cat and Wolf*

This presentation will consider the question of twilight in contemporary literature, focusing on work by Hélène Cixous and others. In particular it will attempt to explore the relation between literature and dreams, and to illuminate Cixous's conception of literature as 'the uncertain which does not lie, the scene which gives the undecidable its rights'.

Nicholas Royle teaches at the University of Sussex where he is director of the Centre for Creative and Critical Thought. His books include *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (1991), *After Derrida* (1995), *The Uncanny* (2003), *Jacques Derrida* (2003), *How to Read Shakespeare* (2005), *In Memory of Jacques Derrida* (2009), *Quilt* (2010), *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (2011), *An English Guide to Birdwatching* (2017) and (with Andrew Bennett) *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Fifth edition, 2016). He is currently completing a book entitled *Hélène Cixous: Dreamer, Realist, Analyst, Writing*.