



Troubling Universalisms: Politics and Aesthetics in Critical Theory Symposium

9-10 June 2023, University of Amsterdam

Location:

University of Amsterdam

Organizers:

Ben Moore (University of Amsterdam) | **Marc Farrant** (University of Amsterdam) | **Steyn Bergs** (Utrecht University)

Keynote speakers:

Kandice Chuh (CUNY)

Monique Roelofs (University of Amsterdam)

DAY 1: FRIDAY, JUNE 9

PC Hoofthuis, Spuistraat 134

13:00 – 15:00 **Graduate workshop with Kandice Chuh (PCH 1.15)**

15:30 – 16:00 **Registration (PCH ground floor)**

16:00 – 17:30 **Welcome and keynote lecture 1: Kandice Chuh, “Wanting Universalisms” (PCH 1.05)**

18:00 – 19:00 **Drinks reception at Café de Jaren (all registered participants welcome)**

19:30 **Conference dinner at Kantjil en de Tijger**

DAY 2: SATURDAY, JUNE 10

University Library, Singel 425

9:15 – 9:45 **Registration & coffee (Doelenzaal anteroom)**

9:45 – 10:00 **Welcome & introduction (Doelenzaal)**

10:15 – 11:30 **PANELS 1 & 2 (parallel)**

Panel 1: Saving, Salvaging, and Loosening the Universal (Doelenzaal)

- Kirwan, James. “The Aesthetic Will Not Save Us”
- Stan, Corina. “Loosening the Hold of Western European Universalism: Dostoevsky, Chaplin, Gombrowicz”

Chair: Marco de Waard

Panel 2: Connection, Consensus, Dissensus, and the Aesthetic (Belle van Zuylenzaal)

- Van Amelsvoort, Jesse. “Cosmopolitanism and Connection”
- Van den Eijnden, Tamalone. “The Aesthetics and Politics of Agreement: An Illiberal Humanities Approach for Pluralist Commoning Methods”
- Glavas, Zvonimir. “The Catachrestic Ties that Bind: The Literariness of Politics in Laclau’s and Rancière’s Theories”

Chair: Monique Roelofs

11:30-11:45 **Coffee Break**
11:45-13:15 **PANELS 3 & 4 (parallel)**

Panel 3: Populism, Platforms, and Unexceptional Art in Digital Cultures (Doelenzaal)

- Azharuddin. "Towards a Flawed Model—Negative Judgment and the Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction"
- Miller, Michael. "(Un)Critical Platforms and the Problem of Homophilic Universalism"
- Schober de Graaf, Anna. "Facing Everybody: Political Popularisation and Populism in Post-Universalist Times"

Chair: Marc Farrant

Panel 4: Autonomy, Totality, Subjecthood (Belle van Zuylenzaal)

- Feiss, EC. "Autonomy Without Individuality: Norman Lewis' Materialist Abstraction"
- Khazam, Rahma. "Art and Universalism"
- Woo, Stephen. "The Impossible Object of Memoria"

Chair: Steyn Bergs

13:15 – 14:15 **Lunch**
14:15 – 15:30 **PANELS 5 & 6 (parallel)**

Panel 5: Literary Forms and Genres on a Global Scale (Doelenzaal)

- Yanota, Erin. "Yeats's Celtic Universal and the Problems of Lyrical Epic"
- Ramu, Kaushik. "The Fossil Counterfactual"

Chair: Ben Moore

Panel 6: The Politics and Aesthetics of (Non-)Identity (Belle van Zuylenzaal)

- Hettinga, Lieks. "Minoritarian Aesthetics and the Visual Practice of 'Making Sense'"
- Stopford, Richard. "The Shudder: Eeriness and Non-Identity"

Chair: Kandice Chuh

15:30 – 16:00 **Coffee break**
16:00 – 17:30 **Keynote lecture 2: Monique Roelofs, "Aesthetic Relationality and the Imagination of a Public 'We'" (Doelenzaal), followed by closing remarks**

This symposium is made possible with the generous support of ASCA (Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis) and NICA (Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis).

ABSTRACTS AND BIOS

Keynote Lecture: Kandice Chuh, “Wanting Universalisms”

Is it true, as Anna Tsing has proposed, that we cannot not want the universal? Despite the fact that the universal and universalism have been so roundly criticized -- so thoroughly troubled, to use the idiom of this symposium's theme -- how and why does this proposition hold true? Or, perhaps more generatively, what might we learn from focusing on the *wanting-ness* -- the desire, but also, the inadequacy of -- universalism? Amplifying aesthetics that help us apprehend and dwell in the wanting-ness of universalism in this doubled sense, this talk considers such entangled matters as imagination, vitality, erotics, and pedagogy as key to recognizing and thinking-feeling in difference from a cruelly optimistic (to borrow from Lauren Berlant) attachment to the universal. By doing so, Kandice Chuh hopes to open collective space for considering what stands at the horizon -- what ways of being and knowing, what social arrangements, what modes of making life -- in our desire for and of the universal.

Kandice Chuh is Professor in the PhD program in English at The Graduate Center, CUNY, and is affiliated to the Mellon Committee on Globalization and Social Change. The author of *Imagine Otherwise: on Asian Americanist Critique* (Duke UP, 2003), which won the American Studies Association's Lora Romero Book Award, Chuh is also co-editor, with Karen Shimakawa, of *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Duke UP, 2001), and has published across the fields of Asian American and American studies, literary studies, and critical theory. Her book *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* brings together aesthetic philosophies and theories and minority discourses and cultural texts. Chuh is broadly interested in the relationship between intellectual work and the political sphere; disciplinarity and difference; and U.S. culture and politics as matrices of power and knowledge.

Panel 1: Saving, Salvaging, and Loosening the Universal

Kirwan, James. “The Aesthetic Will Not Save Us”

This talk will attempt to throw into question one of the basic premisses both of the present symposium and of Kandice Chuh's *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*. It will begin by arguing that it is not universalism per se that has been ‘debunked’ but rather only certain appropriations of it in the service of an ethnocentrism that is itself the ideological rationalization of motives that are far from ideological. It will further argue that universalism, while sometimes the cover/justification for oppression and marginalization, has far less potential as a tool for those purposes than the relativism that the wholesale rejection of universalism entails, and thus that, historically, it is far easier to point to

examples of oppression and marginalization arising from relativism than from universalism. The paper will then turn to a distinction to be drawn between fixed and open-ended universalism, and ask whether what Chuh calls ‘liberal universalism’ is the expression of the first or the second of these forms of universalism, that is, whether or not it does embody a form of universalism intrinsically suited to serving the ends of ‘imperialism and colonialism, White supremacy and capitalism, environmental devastation, patriarchy, and compulsory normativization of multiple kinds’ as she claims. The paper will end by reflecting on the role of the aesthetic within the nexus of these concepts of universalism, relativism, and humanism.

James Kirwan is a professor cross-cultural studies at Kansai University, Osaka. He is currently a guest researcher at the University of Amsterdam, attached to the ASCA project ‘Significance of Phenomenology’. His publications as sole author include *Literature, Rhetoric, Metaphysics: Literary Theory and Literary Aesthetics* (Routledge, 1990), *Beauty* (Manchester University Press, 1999), *The Aesthetic in Kant: A Critique* (Continuum, 2004), *Sublimity: The Non-rational and the Irrational in the History of Aesthetics* (Routledge, 2005), and *The Futility of Philosophical Ethics: Metaethics and the Grounds of Moral Feeling* (Bloomsbury, 2022).

Stan, Corina. “Loosening the Hold of Western European Universalism: Dostoevsky, Chaplin, Gombrowicz”

This talk focuses on three fictional texts that engage critically with the promise of universal freedom at the core of Western modernity, all three coming from the margins of Europe: Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Demons* (1871-2), Aleksander Wat’s “Lucifer Unemployed” (1927), and Witold Gombrowicz’s *Ferdydurke* (1937). These texts construe universalism as a form of captivity from which protagonists struggle to break free through suicide, aesthetic subversion, and radical irreverence. In Dostoevsky’s world, the Westernizer Stavrogin has a demonic power over others and ends up committing suicide as a way of breaking God’s hold over human choices and establishing an example of radical freedom, thus playing—hubristically, in Dostoevsky’s view, critical of European decadence—into the Western universalist credo. “Lucifer Unemployed”, by the co-founder of Polish futurism Aleksander Wat, features a series of interviews between an increasingly despondent job-seeking Lucifer and the smug representatives of the institutions of Western civilization, a self-sufficient iron cage that has “incorporated miracles into the system.” After a failed suicide, Lucifer uses his “panoramic view of world history” to become a film artist: Charlie Chaplin. Wat thus offers a formal *deus-ex-machina* solution that plays into the iconic scene of the “demon in the machine” in *Modern Times*. But whether Chaplin’s subversive pantomime is an effective aesthetic of resistance remains an open question: can a creature of culture spit out of the entrails of mechanical civilization loosen up the tight screws of Western modernity? Perhaps only by removing itself from the universalist fiction of the subject and reclaiming one’s position as an integrated reject. It is the strategy embraced by Witold Gombrowicz in *Ferdydurke* (1937), the story of a thirty-year old man kidnapped and held captive in an infantilizing school, an allegory of the hold that European “Form” (progress-oriented humanist culture) has had historically over its Eastern—internal and external—“others.”

Gombrowicz's disdain for the idea of literature written about and for "humanity" chimes with Fanon's remark in *The Wretched of the Earth* that the latter consisted of five hundred million "humans" (or Western European subjects) and 1.5 billion others (*indigènes*). I will read the sublime irreverence of the face-pulling duel scene in *Ferdydurke*—a pantomime again!—for signs of a way out of the universalist straitjacket, possibly towards a different kind of Europe.

Corina Stan is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Duke University. She is the co-editor of *The Palgrave Handbook of European Migration in Literature and Culture* (forthcoming 2023), and the author of *The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in Twentieth Century Literature* (Northwestern UP, 2018), as well as of essays published in *New German Critique*, *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Modern Language Notes*, *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Arcadia*, *English Studies*, *Critical Inquiry*, *NOVEL*, *The Point*, *Aeon*, *LA Times*, *Public Books*, among others. She is currently writing a book on the European self-understanding after decolonization, entitled *After the West*.

Panel 2: Connection, Consensus, Dissensus, and the Aesthetic

Van Amelsvoort, Jesse. "Cosmopolitanism and Connection"

Throughout cosmopolitanism's long history, as well as in its modern theoretical resurgence, its proponents often claim a universal application. It is seen to involve both a person's embedding in a local polity, yet also their belonging to 'humanity's greater commonwealth' (Elias and Moraru 2015, xxi). From the 1990s on, theorists trying to grapple with global inequalities and uneven development considered older articulations of cosmopolitanism too utopian and abstract. In order to mitigate these shortcomings, a variety of adjectival variations have sprung up in recent decades (see Ponzanesi 2020).

In this contribution, I argue in favour of a different model that maintains cosmopolitanism's admirable emphasis on belonging to a wider community but evades its totalizing emptiness. Thinking with notions of location, identification, and connection allows us to see different, 'more-than-national' feelings of belonging that are open and hospitable, but not universal. My starting point is Zadie Smith's novella *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013), which asks ethical questions about people's sympathies and allegiances. From my analysis of Smith's novella I build my argument to favour connections over cosmopolitanism.

Jesse van Amelsvoort is a lecturer in modern European literature at the University of Amsterdam. His research focuses on the social role and function of literature in contemporary society, and on literature as a form of knowledge. Specifically, his interests are in environmental humanities, postcolonial studies, theories of world literature, minority studies, and European studies. He has published in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, *Global Perspectives*, *Dutch Crossing* and *Politique européenne*, and has co-edited a special issue for *parallax* on "Imagining Communities, Multilingually."

Van den Eijnden, Tamalone. “The Aesthetics and Politics of Agreement: An Illiberal Humanities Approach for Pluralist Commoning Methods”

As commoning initiatives proliferate in a world that is increasingly recognized as pluralist (Viveiros de Castro 2004, de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, Escobar 2018), there is a need for a new aesthetics and politics of agreement. Democratic decisions based on majority rule or the Dutch polder model of consensus making, fail to care for minority voices. We need new ways of listening, deliberating, and making agreements that are shared and capable of holding incommensurable difference.

In this paper, I will reflect on my participatory action research with the activist initiative Foodpark Amsterdam that aims to turn the Lutkemeerpolder into a commons for urban agriculture. More specifically, I will evaluate an ongoing series of workshops, during which we facilitate conversations between people from the neighbourhood of Nieuw West, agroecological farmers, and civil servants. During these workshops, a variety of methods are employed, ranging from conversations based on visually mapping the area, to more experiential and multisensory methods such as walking, to more creatively engaging methods involving art and design. These methods, I will show, address participants in aesthetically and politically vastly different ways. These different modes of address then provoke different possibilities for co-creating visions for a commons. More relevantly, they allow for different forms in which these commons are able to emerge from the cultural diversity and pluralism that characterizes the neighbourhood of Nieuw West.

In order to evaluate the aesthetics and politics of these different conversation methods, I will take my cue from Chuh (2019) and what she has termed the illiberal humanities. Following Chuh, the illiberal humanities provide us with an understanding of being human that is based on a strong understanding of relationality, multisensorial and experimental ways of knowing, encounter and entanglement. In my paper, I will analyse to what extent the different methods of Foodpark Amsterdam allow for facilitating conversations that are able to nurture a spirit of illiberal humanities and foster a pluralist commons. With this, I hope to offer conceptual understanding of the aesthetics and politics of agreement and practical insight into moderating conversations that envision a commons without dismissing the plurality of those involved.

I am a PhD candidate at the Knowledge, Transformation, and Society (KiTeS) section at the University of Twente (Netherlands), where I am doing my research as part of the BIOTraCes project. I examine processes of transformative change that aim at a more just society in which biodiversity flourishes. My case study is an activist initiative that seeks to introduce the model of the Community Land Trust to the Netherlands and turn a piece of land into a commons area for urban agriculture. Before, I was doing research at Utrecht University (Netherlands) at the humanities faculty for an international research project on imagining sustainable futures with regards to food, fashion and transport.

Glavas, Zvonimir. “The Catachrestic Ties that Bind: The Literariness of Politics in Laclau’s and Rancière’s Theories”

This paper focuses on the relationship between the universal and singular in at the crossroads between political and literary theory in the works of Ernesto Laclau and Jacques Rancière.

Although the two theorists were contemporaries whose theoretical positions shared similar lines of development (in the sense of a departure from Althusserian Marxism), their works are rarely brought together. Even in the rare cases where comparisons are made, they usually remain within the confines of political theory, and hardly consider its literary counterpart.

The intertwining of the literary and the political is a common theme when discussing the aesthetic part of Rancière's oeuvre. Yet his generalized conception of literariness as not a particularity of literary language but the radical democracy of writing accessible to everyone, as the core principle of the redistribution of the sensuous in Rancièrian politics of literature, is also echoed in his political theory. Laclau's oeuvre, on the other hand, is rarely associated with literary theory. However, in his last book, *The Rhetorical Foundation of Society* (2014), he explicitly acknowledged the continuous and decisive influence of certain literary theorists on his work and fully (re)formulated his theory of hegemony in tropological terms. Moreover, Laclau, much like Rancière, has greatly generalized the concept of literariness by detaching it from the disciplinary boundaries of literary studies and relating it to question of representation in general.

By taking Laclau's tropological framework as a starting point, the paper will thus argue that the political theories of the two authors in question are characterized by what we would call – as a hiatic complement to Rancière's politics of literature – the literariness of politics. This understanding of politics as re/disarticulation of differential (discursive) systems of equivalent elements will, moreover, be considered crucial for the conceptualization of another common preoccupation of the two theorists: their focus on the troubling relationship of particular and universal, i.e., on the ever-inadequate embodiment of the universal in particular, which Laclau recognizes as an example of catachresis.

Finally, the literariness of politics and the centrality of catachresis will be examined not only in relation to the two theorists but also as features that potentially position them within the broader context of various post-isms (post-Marxism, poststructuralism, post-foundationalism etc.).

Zvonimir Glavaš was born on 25th August 1989 in Osijek, Croatia. In 2013 he graduated from the Faculty of Philosophy in Osijek, majoring in Croatian language and literature and history degrees. In October 2014 he was employed as a teaching and research assistant at the Department of Croatian of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. In June 2020 he defended his doctoral thesis titled "Literature, the Literary Theory and post-Marxist Theory", obtaining his PhD degree. Since October 2020 he has been employed as a postdoctoral researcher in the same Department at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. He has published more than 20 papers in various journals and participated in more than 15 scientific conferences in Croatia and abroad. At the moment, he is an associate on two research projects: *Literary Revolutions* (funded by Croatian Science Foundation) and *The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe* (funded by Horizon Europe

program). His research is mostly focused on contemporary literary and cultural theory, revolving around topics such as politics of literature, post-Marxist (literary) theory, contemporary narratology, trans-medial narratology and critical analysis of discourse.

Panel 3: Populism, Platforms, and Unexceptional Art in Digital Cultures

Azharuddin. "Towards a Flawed Model—Negative Judgment and the Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction"

A precarious phenomenon is rising in countries of the global south where singers, painters, and amateur actors are not just bursting into stardom but have become the new trendsetters who are followed and copied by established star artists. Cheaply available mobile phones and widespread 4G technology have shattered the universal monopoly of stardom flattening the hierarchy which divided the idol from the worshipper, the follower from the followed, and the producer from the consumer. Conservative notions of 'genuineness', 'authenticity', and 'originality' in reference to an art object hold no relevance in the labyrinthine digital ecology of YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. Every song or painting can be bent unto itself and made into something anew. The so-called 'original' merely becomes a model for unending varieties.

In the book *The Game* (2020), Alessandro Baricco accurately noted the spirit of the contemporary era of digital assemblage wherein the distinction between the producer and consumer is blurred, "put everything in motion. Cross over. Connect. Superimpose. Contaminate. You have cells of reality at your disposal: [...] you can build and demolish, over and over again. All you need is speed, superficiality, and energy [...] never stay still: going down in depth slows you down [...] you are in many places at the same time, and this is your way of inhabiting one of them whichever one you are looking for" (152-153). That's the zeitgeist of the new age, where the memory of the original escapes from your being, just as folklore and songs of the remote past or contemporary popular music becomes a blueprint for creating new compositions regardless of the original giving way to unending variations. In this sense, the passive consumer of yesterday has become an active participant in the artistic production process today, suspending the original art object and its copy in a state of eternal flux.

There's nothing original that remains of an artwork in the digital mediascape rather what remains is a perpetual configuration and reconfiguration of the original and the copied art. Umberto Eco identified the nature of such artistic process as "open works" in which the alleged original artist merely produced a part of the work that is left for the consumers to finish, create, or recreate making it a truly participatory and democratic process of artistic creation. Therefore, this paper will explore the subversive role of algorithm-based technology in democratizing artistic practice and aesthetic judgment notwithstanding their authoritarian tendencies. To do so the paper will closely read Walter Benjamin's 1935 seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* particularly focusing on the ideas of *aura* and *distance*. The two ideas will be repositioned in the paper to estimate the value of digitally produced *unexceptional art* that pushes against prevailing aesthetic

exceptionalism as an act of self-serving autonomy and move towards a flawed, yet participatory, democratic, and inclusive model of aesthetic production and sensibilities in the age of digital reproduction of art.

Azharuddin is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature from Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge (USA). Before joining the PhD program, he held an adjunct position as Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Motilal Nehru College (Evening), University of Delhi. He received his M.Phil. degree from the Department of English, University of Delhi writing his dissertation on the topic, “Imagining the Fall- Role of Images and Mediation in the Fictions of 9/11”. His research interests include contemporary postcolonial and diaspora studies, Critical Theory, Conflict Literature, Media Studies, Indian Writings in English, and contemporary Totalitarian Literatures.

Michael Miller. “(Un)Critical Platforms and the Problem of Homophilic Universalism”

This brief presentation argues that there is no epistemological outside to the constitutive structures and systems that comprise our twenty-first century media ecology. Drawing on media theorist Wendy Hui Kyong Chun’s recent work, I show how the ontological figure of the network reconstructs hierarchies of infinite particularities and proliferating series of individual universalisms that nonetheless adhere to the cybernetic logic of “homophily,” or “love of the same.” Rigidly opposed to constitutive decisions and the dialectical movement of thought, the network forecloses the possibility of the system/environment distinction from ever taking formal and epistemological hold. For systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, this distinction is formally necessary for understanding the difference between hetero- and self-reference. The problem of homophilic universalism cashes out in a theoretically-impooverished account of self-reference. By cross-mapping critical philosophies of technology with insights from what Erich Hörl describes as “the environmental turn” in theory, I argue that the production of “difference” once valued by earlier generations of cultural theorists has now become a homophilic by-product of digital ontology and its attendant technical programs, platforms, monads, and interfaces.

Michael F. Miller teaches literature and literary theory in the Department of English Language and Culture at the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands. He is co-editor of the collection *Understanding Flusser, Understanding Modernism*. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Literary History*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Arizona Quarterly*, *symplokē*, *boundary 2 online review*, *Modernism/modernity Print Plus*, and *The Journal of Film and Video*, among others. He is currently finishing a monograph titled *Proximity by Proxy: Contemporary Literature in the Age of Social Media*.

Schober de Graaf, Anna. “Facing Everybody: Political Popularisation and Populism in Post-Universalist Times”

Political, public life needs presentation and exposition in order to live, to be able to engage in discussion and conflict and to initiate further political action. In today’s world, images and

visual stagings often take on the role of creating presence, mediating, setting counter-positions and expressing political imagination in a variety of ways. In this context, showing faces and bodies is particularly important in addressing the widest possible audience. In tension with this role of visual creations, which always link the universal and the particular in a unique and new way, is the fact that the universal has not had an easy time of it since around the 1960s. It is deconstructed, accused of legitimising forms of power and domination of various kinds and of imposing views as it were by force. The particular, even the singular, is placed in the foreground or even celebrated.

The lecture presents a genealogy and iconology of visual presentations that attempt to address “everyone”, referring to image examples of contemporary populist movements (Lega Nord, Fratelli D' Italia) as well as popularisation strategies of NGOs and environmental activist groups. In the process, long lines of iconological tradition as well as ruptures and transformations will be presented. Special attention is paid to the role of visual representations in contemporary society characterised by the multiplication of political agents of image use and distribution (for example on new social networks and populist political parties), which always bring certain particular-universal constructs of ‘the people’ to bear against an elite. It is shown that in doing so, images and visual presentations trigger transition, but can also be overpowering and generally act as ambivalent agents: they mediate between the particular and the universal and the self and the other, but also between the private and the public. They convey or deepen desire as well as hatred, indignation and resentment and are thus agents of social and political processes of polarisation, re-politicization as well as reconciliation, communion and solidarity.

Anna Schober de Graaf is Professor for Visual Culture at Klagenfurt university. She studied history, art history and political theory in Vienna, Frankfurt am Main and Colchester/UK. She was a fellow at various scientific institutions such as the IFK (International Research Centre for Cultural Studies) Vienna; the Centre for Theoretical Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Essex, Colchester; the Jan Van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, the Kuenstlerhaus Buechsenhausen in Innsbruck, Visiting Professor and Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Verona and Mercator Visiting Professor at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Giessen. Main Publications (selection) are: *Ironie, Montage, Verfremdung: Aesthetische Taktiken und die politische Gestalt der Demokratie* (2009), *The Cinema Makers: Public life and the exhibition of difference in south-eastern and central Europe since the 1960s* (2013) and *Popularisation and Populism in the Visual Arts: Attraction Images*, London and New York: Routledge (Arts and Visual Culture Series) 2019 (editor).

Panel 4: Autonomy, Totality, Subjecthood

Feiss, EC. “Autonomy Without Individuality: Norman Lewis’ Materialist Abstraction”

This paper utilizes unknown works by the U.S abstract painter Norman Lewis (1909-1979) to elucidate a theory of autonomy absent the individual. Lewis’ politics of aesthetics insisted on painterly autonomy as a coordinate of anti-racist and anti-capitalist struggle, and he made

paintings that center Black labor well into the 1970s. I focus on a series uncovered through archival research which reference the mechanization of farming in the American south as an origin point of the early 1970s unemployment crisis. I posit this work in line with Adorno's writing on modernist painting, artistic autonomy, and critical negation, while locating Lewis historically on the internationalist Black Left during the long Cold War. Alongside activists like W. E. B. Du Bois, Harold Cruse, James Haughton, and Paul Robeson, Lewis participated in a decades-long debate about the role of Black labor in the formation of global capitalism. I show that, in part, Lewis' aesthetic abstraction emerged as a mode of history painting capable of, not illustrating, but describing the dynamic process set out in Du Boisian Marxism and its articulation of historical materialism. Du Bois' theory reconditioned Marxism (and its universal narration) to encompass processes of racialization. Specifically, I argue that Lewis' well-known development of non-gestural mark making – in which he used a wide variety of tools (rags, stencils, and later, spray paint) to remove the trace of his hand – serves as a painterly manifestation, and engaged critique, of Du Bois' employment of historical materialism in his book *Black Reconstruction* (1935). Lewis likely attended Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* lectures and was an interlocutor and friend of the theorists for several decades. What I term Lewis' "autonomy without individuality" generates a formidable role for aesthetic abstraction in the representation of racial capitalism: as a historical process beginning with slavery, involving not only the division of labor but subordination based in racial hierarchy. Lewis' realization of autonomous form spectacularly without individual trace predates contemporary theory by Fred Moten and others which articulate a politically mobile universality, one which might encompass shared experience of dispossession and collective resistance while remaining immanently opposed to hegemonic narratives.

E. C. Feiss is a writer and a postdoc in the History of Art department at the Ohio State University. Her work has recently appeared in *American Art* and in an essay for *Blank Forms*.

Khazam, Rahma. "Art and Universalism"

What does art history have to say about universalism? Do certain artistic movements endorse or reflect the totalizing approaches of philosophers such as Hegel? Do other types of art challenge universalism, favouring the particular instead? This talk will explore different ways in which art approaches the particular/universal opposition, at times undermining, and at others bearing out, the philosophical positions on which the opposition is based. In the first instance, I will look at how Hegel and Habermas's totalizing approaches to modernity are reflected in the no less totalizing assumptions of high modernist art, which avoids the contextual and the particular. In the second place, I will look at how philosophical postmodernism's move against totalizing grand narratives is reflected in postmodern art and architecture's embrace of the fragmented and piecemeal. Finally, I will explore current philosophical and artistic developments. These suggest that universalism today coexists with particularism: certain contemporary philosophers are taking the relational route – relationism being a form of universality – while yet others are challenging relationality in favour of autonomy, non-relationality, the specific and the particular. Contemporary digital art reflects this tension, propounding a loose relationality that approaches, as I hope to

show, what Fred Moten calls a non-exclusionary whole. Art, like philosophy, has alternately endorsed and challenged totalizing moves, and today both are forging non-exclusionary stances of their own.

Dr. **Rahma KHAZAM** is a Paris-based researcher, critical theorist and art historian affiliated to Institut ACTE, Sorbonne Paris 1 and ENSADLab, Paris. She studied philosophy and art history and received her Ph.D. from the Sorbonne in aesthetics and art theory. Her research spans the fields of modernism, image theory and contemporary speculative aesthetics. Recent publications include: “Son et Image: Face au Réel”, in *L'écho du réel*, Editions Mimésis, 2021. “Ikonische und spekulative Wende: Von Visualität zu Realität”, in *Nach der ikonischen Wende. Aktualität und Geschichte eines Paradigmas*, Kadmos, 2021. “Clement Greenberg's Modernism: Historicizable or Ahistorical? » in *Historical Modernisms*, London : Bloomsbury, 2021. *Objets vivants*, ed. Rahma Khazam, Editions Mimésis, 2023.

Woo, Stephen. “The Impossible Object of Memoria”

This paper offers a close reading of the Apichatpong Weerasethakul film *Memoria* (2021). At the expository level, *Memoria* follows the circuitous struggle of protagonist Jessica to identify a loud booming noise that only she can seem to hear. At a thematic level, because she and the filmmaker visit the region of Colombia, where a history of settler colonialism seems collectively repressed, many viewers read *Memoria* as an oblique account of coloniality, and the traumas buried therein. Whether and how a foreign director, nonetheless, reckons with an ostensibly local trauma remains significant here. To what extent does the aesthetic form of the film, and not simply its narrative or location, speak to issues of trauma and coloniality? To what extent does cinematic form universally implicate the particular subjects both within the diegesis and those who spectate it? To grapple with such questions, this paper interrogates the aesthetic of “slow cinema” operative in *Memoria*, including the off-screen space that universally structures and haunts particular claims to filmic (neo)realism. By analyzing the ways in which the noise Jessica strives to locate is not just sonic but visual, the argument links the psychoanalytic gaze to the constitutive gaps within, and the latency of, not only subjectivity, but personal as well as collective trauma. The film reflects upon such issues as Jessica, a Scottish expatriate to Bogotá, encounters two different men who both go by the name Hernán. A shared experience of the impossible and its traumatic nature surfaces during these encounters, as the pair discloses painful yet hazy memories to one another. The impossible attempt to understand such memories, this paper contends, must again be understood through formal reading. As the film persistently stages the negativity that disturbs neorealist form, whereby this negativity in turn exposes something about reality, *Memoria* confronts an impossibility that universally plagues subjective experience. It nonetheless works toward the potential for subjects who are constitutively foreign to their own histories and foreign to one another to find common ground.

Stephen Woo is a Ph.D. candidate and Collaborative Humanities fellow in the department of

Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. His research, which engages the politics of global cinema as well as cinematic form, pairs film theory with questions of trauma, race, coloniality, and sex. Before coming to Brown, he received a bachelor's degree in Film Studies and American Studies from Cornell University, where he was a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow. He was the 2021 recipient of the Albert Spaulding Cook Prize in the Department of Comparative Literature at Brown and the 2022 recipient of the Student Writing Award by the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. His essay on the U.S. invasion of Panamá and its remediation is forthcoming in *The Journal for Cinema and Media Studies*. In addition to his scholarship, he is also a curator for Magic Lantern Cinema in Providence, RI.

Panel 5: Literary Forms and Genres on a Global Scale

Yanota, Erin. "Yeats's Celtic Universal and the Problems of Lyrical Epic"

Responding to the writing of French philologist Ernest Renan on Celtic poetry, in his early essay "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1897; rev. 1902), Irish poet W.B. Yeats asserts a permeable boundary between matters of national and "universal" significance, between the legends passed down from the "old Irish" and the cultural knowledge inherited from "all ancient peoples." In this paper, I take Yeats's late lyrical sequence, *Meditations in Time of Civil War* (1928), as case study for exploring the troubling, and troubled, universal. Using historically informed close reading and genre analysis, I show how Yeats treats the relationship between the particular and the totality as one of dialectical unity. He thereby creates a lyrical epic of distance and disaffection, which stresses the fundamentally provisional status of human knowledge and the limitations of human action. The poem's title signals the vexed relationship between an individual's thinking mind and the broader social and political realities in which they live; all we know with certainty is that "meditations" and "civil war" inhabit the same moment in time. But the poem proceeds to unfold further such relationships across different planes of experience—between, for example, the ancient tower in which Yeats actually lived and the "ancient tower" of his poetry's symbolic system, or between owls nesting in the tower's masonry and owls operating as mystical symbols of cosmic history. In doing so, *Meditations* suggests a model for approaching accusations of "escapism" leveled at a number of modernist occultists like Yeats himself, who actively seek the universal, and for approaching the Anglophone literary modernists' attempts to mythologize contemporary history more generally.

Erin Yanota is a PhD Candidate in the Department of English at the University of Texas at Austin, with academic writing on poetic form in twentieth-century poetry forthcoming in *Modernism/modernity* and *Journal of Modern Literature*. Her dissertation research, supported in part by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, reads the late, long, and mystical works of W.B. Yeats, H.D., Jean Toomer, and Hart Crane against the literary epic tradition.

Ramu, Kaushik. "The Fossil Counterfactual"

In this talk, I take up the tension between fossil fuels in their immediate sense as objects of extraction, and fossils in their paleontological sense. What does this split temporality imply for the economic overdetermination of the fossil as a form of carbon energy that, as Timothy Mitchell puts it, concentrates in a liter of petrol “twenty-five metric tonnes of ancient marine life”(2011)?

I pursue the question by placing Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative use of critical naïveté in his *After Finitude* (2006)—in which the fossil stands at the limits of our post-Kantian frames of thinking and reading—in conversation with Uzma Aslam Khan’s novel, *The Geometry of God* (2005), which describes a quest in Pakistan for evidence of a transitional species of whale from the Eocene. Khan’s novel uses the analytical distinction between deep time and the contemporary to unsettle a 1980s nexus between religious fanaticism and oil geopolitics during the Cold War. The literary fossil, I argue, is counterfactual: it allows us to imagine the deep history of life *as if* that history spoke to an evolutionary commons—*as if* we could delay our own recognition that colonial violence gave sciences like paleontology their conditions of possibility.

Touching on other examples of literary fossils from and beyond South Asia, I sketch the possibility of a privileged global genre that we might call ‘the fossil novel’. The counterfactual fossil of this genre, I suggest, maintains a respectful distance from indigenous theories of the planetary commons, in an ethical refusal to appropriate such alterities in a global bourgeois template; at the same time, fossil novels stage a methodological playfulness in suspending the critical insistence (and the truth) that objects of deep time are always, in materialist terms, artifacts of colonial histories. Two possibilities, both entirely fictional, are at stake: (a) that universalisms can also be categories of desire defined by their impossibility (b) that the postcolonial novel, a genre so often framed in cultural-historical terms, can use flashes of such desire (“the earth”, “the ‘Eocene’”) to return to literary theory its cause of methodological heresy.

Kaushik Ramu has a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature & Critical Theory from the University of Pennsylvania. He’s interested in the concept of naïveté, its figurations in the modern novel, its anachronism in frames of postcolonial development, and its possible value to defenses of lives that are ordinary, wasted, lost, or non-dialectical. His research and teaching span Global Modernism, Fiction Theory, Narratology, South Asia Studies, and Environmental Humanities.

Panel 6: The Politics and Aesthetics of (Non-)Identity

Hettinga, Lieks. “Minoritarian Aesthetics and the Visual Practice of ‘Making Sense’”

This presentation discusses the relation between the particular and the universal through an elaboration of ‘minoritarian aesthetics’, in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari’s (1986) notion of minor literature, José Esteban Muñoz’s (1999) work on minoritarian performance, and Candice Chuh’s (2019) theorization of aesthetics as a method for apprehending “uncommon sensibilities.” I suggest that minoritarian aesthetics can offer alternative

modalities for seeing and sensing non-normative embodiment through a close reading of the video *In My Language* (2007) by autism activist Mel Baggs (U.S., 1980-2020). The video draws on Baggs's experience of the world as a non-verbal autistic and contemplates if and how their 'native language' is translatable for a majoritarian neurotypical audience. I examine the relationship between the video's formal qualities and Baggs's experience of the world, suggesting that the video dislodges the possibility for traditional visual-semiotic modes of interpretation. As a consequence, the video positions us/me to reflect on what it means to do the labor of 'making sense' while it simultaneously refuses transparent access to the minoritarian (trans-crip) subject.

Lieks Hettinga is an Assistant Professor in Gender and Sexuality at Leiden University. Their research is situated at intersections of transgender studies, disability studies, critical race theory, and visual culture. Lieks Hettinga's research examines ways in which artists and activists visualize, represent and/or enact non-normative embodiment, more specifically looking at the intersection of trans and disability visual politics and poetics of the body. Their research interests include trans-crip affinities in critiques of (neo)liberalism and debates about how race and disability underpin and/or trouble contemporary Western consolidations of 'transgender' as an identity category. They are currently preparing a monograph titled *Appearing Differently: Trans-Crip Aesthetics of Refusal*.

Stopford, Richard. "The Shudder: Eeriness and Non-Identity"

As is well-known, Adorno's theory of non-identity is a way to theorise a dialectical relationship between subject and object. In a non-dialectical relationship, the former dominates the latter. He argues that this dominating subject is, in various respects, 'universal': all particular experiences are rendered as always already amenable to universal conceptualisation in judgment. This results in the liquidation of particularity in universality. Against this, non-identity has two crucial vectors of resistance: the non-identity of the object to itself; and the excess of the object to subjective identifications of it in judgement. It is in light of this idea that art is a critical vehicle of non-identity for Adorno. The *Rätsel*-character, or 'engimaticalness' of art, consists in its non-identity. Crucially, experience of artworks becomes a plenipotentiary for Adorno to think through moments of critical resistance to the universal subject.

A critical category in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1969) is the idea of The Shudder. Initially, this Shudder stands as a mythic experience: the subject is confronted and confounded by the pure materiality of primal nature. In the face of such excessive materiality, the subject feels an existential quake in the possibility of its being—a kind of overwhelming sense of raw non-identity. This shudder is sublated in a critical, post-enlightenment aesthetics which reconfigures the subject's *unmediated* primal fear of dissolution in matter through the experience of *mediated* socio-historical non-identity in art.

In this paper, I want to put Adorno's idea of the Shudder in conversation with my recent work on eeriness. With Cattien ('Eeriness: Deformations and Fascinations', *Angelaki* 2022), I have argued that experiences of eeriness arise when objects appear spatio-temporally underdetermined. This underdetermination rebounds in the subject as a

destabilisation in the sense of its own bodily stability and integrity. In this talk, I want to think through the prospects of eeriness as a persistent echo of the mythic shudder without being a regression of the (alienated) modern subject seeking some fantasised union with unmediated nature. In other words, I am interested in what use eeriness might have in theorising a critical aesthetics concerned with the problematics of non-identity.

I am an Assistant Professor in Philosophy at Durham University. I have published on aesthetics and critical theory. I am currently working on a project, inspired by the work of Mark Fisher, thinking through strange phenomena such as eeriness, weirdness, and creepiness.

Keynote Lecture: Monique Roelofs, “Aesthetic Relationality and the Imagination of a Public ‘We’”

Philosophy faces the task of theorizing the entwinements of aesthetic experiences and values with formations of coloniality, race and gender. In decolonial scholarship by theorists such as Wynter, Glissant, and Anzaldúa, aesthetic practices serve both oppressive and liberatory purposes. By recognizing the ways in which aesthetic relationships take shape around forms of address, including promises and threats, I offer a framework for theorizing the ambivalence of the aesthetic and its centrality to the field of culture. Aesthetic promises point to what cultures can be and become. In the context of the workings of multimodal forms of address, they tie into practices of aesthetic racialization and racialized aestheticization. I indicate how they gesture toward the kinds of values and social arrangements cultures can instantiate. I then show how artworks by Clarice Lispector, Wangechi Mutu, and Claudia Llosa retool the promise of a generalized public, envisioned by enlightenment scholars such as Kant and Hume, into the promise of a differently constituted “we.” Contemplating the role of aesthetic callings in inciting imaginaries of aesthetic collectivity, I consider what this implies for a decolonial aesthetics and the notions of aesthetic publics and normativity through which we can advance its goals.

Monique Roelofs is Professor of Philosophy of Art and Culture at the University of Amsterdam. Her main research areas include aesthetics, feminist philosophy, and critical race and decolonial theory. She has special interests in the aesthetics-politics relation, the notion of the aesthetic, and Black and Latinx/Latin American aesthetics. Roelofs is the author of *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and The World* (Columbia University Press, 2020) and *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (2014). She has recently completed a new book manuscript, *Aesthetics, Address, and the Politics of Culture*. She is also co-editing the anthology *Black Art and Aesthetics: Relationalities, Interiorities, Reckonings*, which will appear with Bloomsbury in 2023.

