Crossing Thresholds Abstracts

Crossing Thresholds Panel 1: Threshold Spaces

Teresa Ludden (Newcastle):
Towards a decolonial uncanny: Anna Kim’s ‘Greenland’ novel Anatomie einer Nacht

The concept of Das Unheimliche expounded by Freud in his 1919 essay is often read as an encounter with the instability of the threshold between familiar and strange. As it pivots on the semantic ambiguity of the word heimlich, which ‘develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite unheimlich’\(^1\), the uncanny is also taken to exemplify the suspension of binary oppositions. In this paper I will explore what political role the uncanny plays in the non-European context of East Greenland in a novel by Austrian writer Anna Kim. The text centres on descriptions of the environment and the events of one night during which eleven characters commit suicide, and thus potentially activates perennial uncanny themes such as the monstrous, the spectral and ‘das Einsame’. However, I argue that Kim re-works the uncanny in the encounter with the Greenlandic night which is redolent not of temporary unsettling or blurring of boundaries but of an opacity with agency. The characters’ relations with the night, the fjords etc. articulate a radical re-working of the idea of a self-identical subject to which an equally unified object must correspond. When Greenland’s natural landscape appears in the text as neither united with itself nor in synch with human characters, ‘knowledge’ gives way to a type of un-knowing. This has important implications for the treatment of ‘colonised others’ beyond the confines of representational thought. To write the landscape by listening to its immanent rhythms is to intervene in colonial oppositional frameworks which, as Rachel Jones argues, thinks the ‘foreign terrain’ variously as exotically beautiful, sublimely threatening in its strangeness, or a resource to be exploited.\(^2\)

---

\(^1\) Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’.

Isabella Engberg (Aberdeen):
Abort Mission: Alexander von Humboldt’s Failed Attempt at Climbing Chimborazo in the Environmental Imagination

This paper investigates Alexander von Humboldt’s first published essay which fully describes his climb of Mount Chimborazo in the Andes: ‘Über zwei Versuche den Chimborazo zu besteigen’ (1837).\(^3\) Bestselling historian Andrea Wulf portrays the celebrated event as the climax of the naturalist’s journey to South America (1799-1804), where the cognitive realization of Nature as holistic and interrelated manifested before him.\(^4\) Considering, rather, the anti-climax of failing to reach the summit, this paper discusses what it means not to cross a physical threshold in depicting, understanding, and seeing oneself as part of the natural environment. Through Humboldt’s use of the sublime, self-experimentation, and open-endedness in his writing, notions such as humility towards Nature and the limits of human knowledge shine brightly through in the text.

Regina Schmid (Heriot-Watt Edinburgh):
Grenzüberschreitung als narzisstische Kulturetüde: Auguste Suppers Welschlandfahrt (1908)


Sie suchte indes nicht künstlerische Vervollkommnung dort: Vielmehr instrumentalisiert sie die Schwellenerfahrung zur Inszenierung nationaler Überlegenheit im Kontext völkischer Strömungen zur Zeit des Kaiserreichs.

Crossing Thresholds Panel 2: Thresholds and Others

Elisabeth Boa (Nottingham):
The German-Jewish Threshold in Gabriele Tergit’s novel Effingers (first published 1951; reissued 2019)

*Effingers* is a *Familienroman* and an exceptionally ambitious *Zeitroman* covering 1878 to 1942 with an epilogue in 1948. Thresholds marking historical shifts proliferate. The gap between 1942 and 1948 is not a threshold, however, but an abyss, the final end of the German-Jewish symbiosis heralded by the 1871 constitution granting full citizenship to (male) German Jews.


This paper looks at historical thresholds to urban and industrial modernity, then at thresholds as traditional rites of passage securing Jewish identity in tension with secularisation and German-Jewish acculturation. In 1968, Peter Gay wrote of Weimar culture as 'the creation of outsiders, propelled by history into the inside.' In 'Exkurs über den Fremden' (1908), Georg Simmel instead advocates internal space for the stranger as an intrinsic social good. In Effingers, in 1907 a family member invites Berlin's elite to a festive viewing of his art collection. Is he crossing over into the majority community? Is he a stranger enriching German culture? Or is he an alienated 'marginal Jew', escaping into an eclectic aesthetic realm?

Anja Rekeszus (King’s College London):
‘Fairy Kingdoms’ and ‘Romantic Wilderness’: Women’s fairy tales navigating borderlands between ‘East’ and ‘West’

Over the course of the 19th century, the fear of loss of ‘authentic’ cultural narratives became increasingly prevalent within German-speaking lands; as a result, nationalist ideas on the one hand as well as a need for the cultural appropriation of neighbouring regions witnessed a concurrent rise. This was particularly the case with regards to Eastern European countries, which were often perceived as borderlands between culturally ‘Eastern’ and culturally ‘Western’ territories (Goldsworthy, Inventing Ruritania, 1998). This paper will show how two women writers of the time, Karoline von Woltmann (Volkssagen der Böhmen, 1805) and Carmen Sylva (Pelesch-Märchen, 1886), engaged with these Othering and appropriating discourses in their Bohemian and Romanian fairy tales. By painting these lands as ambivalent spaces that oscillate between the fantastical and the real, the authors partially indulge, but also destabilise images of what is German and what is Other, often from a viewpoint that is informed by their role as women within patriarchal structures.

Maria Marino (King’s College London):
Motherhood as threshold in 19C women’s writing – the transition towards the modern woman

In this paper, I will investigate the representation of motherhood as a liminal space between patriarchal constructs and subjective self-affirmation and the notion of Übergangsgeschöpf in the 1896 novel Sibilla Dalmar: Roman aus dem Ende unseres Jahrhunderts by author Hedwig Dohm.

I will explore how Dohm addresses the repression of maternal selfhood (Liu, 2015) and the embodied experience of the mother embedded within the binary model of relations that crystallizes the maternal self into a state of epistemological and phenomenological otherness (Beauvoir, 1949; Kristeva, 1984).

Thereby, I will read my case study through the prism of Luce Irigaray’s theory of motherhood as a phallogocentric Western cultural construction normativised through the isolation of women within biological capacity (Irigaray, 1984), exploring the depiction of the maternal body between repression and liberation as a site of transformation (Söderbäck, 2011), situated within the historical transition into the 20C and into organized German women’s emancipation movements.
Crossing Thresholds Panel 3: Thresholds and Learning

Beate Müller (Newcastle):
War-induced threshold experiences and imagined communities: Autobiographical West German school essays on legacies of the Nazi years

This paper is about the ways in which West German students of the Adenauer era portrayed their wartime memories in their school essays. These essays, held in the Roeßler Archive (FernUniversität Hagen), hail from a national exercise conducted in 1956. They were largely written by students aged between 16 and 18 – the youngest experiencing war child generation, many of whom had been profoundly affected by the war and its aftermath. They had lived through multiple threshold experiences: from war to peace, from dictatorship to military rule through to a young democracy, from destruction to reconstruction, from personal loss to rebuilding their lives. Despite their often traumatic, life-changing experiences, many of these young students presented their life-stories as success stories. They did this by carving out morally grounded communities of responsibility, by relating their own fate to that of their peers, and by constituting their cohort as a generation intent on transitioning to a brighter future. Their essays are neither examples of the so-called ‘sceptical generation’ (Schelsky), nor do they amount merely to predictable hardship narratives resulting from bombing raids, flight and expulsion, Allied occupation, or post-war shortages. Instead, their narratives can be read as attempts to exonerate their elders by deflecting culpability onto other 'communities of responsibility' in an effort to maintain positive trans-generational relationships with their nearest and dearest in a climate of ideological re-orientation and new beginnings.

Lea Heim (Viadrina Frankfurt/Oder):
Literary Means of Expanding a Genre: German-Turkish Rewritings of the Bildungsroman and Their Transformative Potential

The 2004 immigration law marks a crucial threshold in Germany's hesitant official recognition as a country of immigration. The renegotiations of what constitutes German society and culture are mirrored in the academic discussion about whether so-called 'migrant literature' is part of the national canon. While recent scholarship tends to include respective texts to the national literature, the literary means of claiming space in the canon and the participation of these texts in shaping and transforming the dominant discourse and society have not been studied exhaustively. The paper addresses this matter by exploring how German-Turkish women writers of the 1990s rewrite the Bildungsroman – a genre historically linked to the emergence of a sense of German national identity – and thereby appropriate and subvert familiar narrative strategies in order to voice pluralistic national and cultural identities. Finally, the transformative potential of crossing and thereby modifying the thresholds of German national literature is to be discussed.
Sabrina Link (Aberdeen):
COVID-19 as a threshold in teaching German – the start of a new era?

COVID-19 had and still has an impact on everyone's life, privately as well as in our work environment. From one day to the next, the whole university system was transferred from in-person teaching to a virtual set-up. Especially when it comes to teaching language and culture, where real-life experiences play an important role, this entailed great changes.

One year on, it is time to value the chances that the new setup has given us. In my paper I will present various (creative) approaches that have been put into practice within the German Department at the University of Aberdeen over the last year to adapt to the new situation and make use of new methods and resources, that could also be used in the future. The approaches aim to put the students into situations with authentic German language use, as well as to motivate them to engage with the German language and culture outside of the virtual classroom.

Keynote Lecture

I. M. Nick (Germanic Society for Forensic Linguistics):
Ein letztes Lebewohl: A Thematic Content Analysis of Suicide Letters Written by Jewish Germans During National Socialism

Within forensic psychology, a classificatory distinction is routinely made between intra- and extra-psychic forces which serve as primary motivators to end one’s life (Bagley and Jacobsen 1976; Lester et al. 2004; Logan et al. 2011). This distinction is key as descendants who end their lives after prolonged illness differ from those who make the same decision after political radicalization (Townsend 2007). In forensic linguistics, such distinctions are often overlooked in suicide-letter-analyses (SLA) either because pre-death information about the deceased is unavailable or unclear; or investigators themselves may be unaware of or insensitive to the potential interpretative importance of such factors. To help address this methodological oversight, the talk presents the results of an original small-scale corpus linguistic investigation of 40 authentic letters written by German Jews and non-Jews during National Socialism (NS). The corpus was compiled from the criminal records of the German Federal Police archived in the NS collection of Germany’s National Archives in Berlin. After providing background information about suicide during the NS period (Kwiet 1984; Goeschel 2007; Goeschel 2011; Lester 2006), this presentation offers the results of the thematic content analysis pioneered by suicidologist, David Lester (Lester et al. 2004/2007). Using this method, several significant patterns in form, content, and expression will be presented. These patterns are compared against those from contemporary SLA investigations (Lester 2010a/ et al. 2010; Leenaars 2010). This work underscores the need to consider pre-death factors in SLA research and demonstrates the benefit of applying today's forensic linguistic techniques for the analysis of yesterday's criminal cases.
Crossing Thresholds Panel 4: Thresholds and East(ern) Germany

Helen Hughes (Surrey):
A choice of thresholds: Volker Koepp’s *Die Wismut* and the transition to the new media landscape in Germany.

Volker Koepp’s *Die Wismut* (1993) is a film about a social and physical environment that was transformed during the Cold War. As a film it enacts the adjustment to a new media environment in Germany where it had recently become possible to show images of uranium mining in Saxony and Thuringia. This paper discusses the hesitations in the film as the narrative moves from space to space quietly exploding the idea of a cohesive community. Filmed in black and white, and focussed on the first generation of miners who began work in Soviet Zone of occupation, there is no discussion of the remediation process about to begin. Instead, the film is a threshold work that attempts to acknowledge in public an internal historical process before a new outwardly oriented transformation overtakes it. To gesture towards the Benjaminian conceptual framework for the conference – the crackling image of uranium ore is juxtaposed with flashes of light underground.

Lauren Cuthbert (Aberdeen):
‘Ich hatte Befehl’: Multidirectional memory and the Vietnam War in the films of Heynowski and Scheumann

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, East German documentarians Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann produced a varied collection of films protesting the US war in Vietnam. Their four-part documentary *Piloten im Pyjama* (1968) consisted of interviews filmed in the threshold space of a camp for American bomber pilots who had been shot down and captured by the Vietnamese. In these interviews, Heynowski and Scheumann highlighted similarities between the pilots’ assertions that they were not personally responsible for any destruction caused during their bombing campaigns over Vietnam, and the familiar ‘just following orders’ defence used by Nazi defendants in the Nuremberg Trials. I argue that these connections between Nazi German and contemporary American defences of war crimes were Heynowski and Scheumann’s attempt to generate a ‘multidirectional memory’ (Rothberg) between East German and North Vietnamese citizens, by making links between popular anti-Vietnam War sentiment and Germans’ burgeoning process of reckoning with their recent Nazi past.

Florian Read (Bristol):
Resentment or rejoicing? The emotional atmosphere in eastern Germany following unification

This paper presents the early findings of my research project on the intertwining political, economic, and social upheaval in eastern Germany immediately after unification (1990-1994). By using case studies of workplaces in three areas of Thuringia (Jena, Eisenach and the Eichsfeld), the project focuses on the *emotional* responses of eastern Germans to post-unification changes.
Despite many contemporary narratives portraying a positive image of unification, mass protests, primarily against the huge waves of unemployment, were commonplace. As a result, this paper, by taking a bottom-up approach, emphasises the extensive levels of dissatisfaction in eastern Germany towards the nature of unification.

Recent memory of these transitional years also plays a role. This helps to explore the impact of the unification period on modern-day eastern German society – the initial ideas for a potential PhD project of mine. As the recent rise in popularity of right-wing extremism in Germany is more significant in the neue Bundesländer, a closer look at the disruption caused by unification is crucial in understanding ongoing political, economic, and social trends – many of which are mirrored across Europe.

**Crossing Thresholds Panel 5: Thresholds and Memory**

**Paul Leworthy (Manchester):**
**Making thresholds: memory and pierced surfaces in Grass’s Die Blechtrommel (1959)**

At once acclaimed and arraigned upon its publication, Günter Grass’s provocatively irreverent debut novel, Die Blechtrommel (1959), is often taken as itself marking a threshold moment in West German culture, not least in terms of attitudes towards the Nazi past. Thresholds play a central role within the narrative too. Perhaps most memorably, Oskar stops growing and starts drumming at the moment of his fated fall upon crossing the threshold from flat to cellar. As well as considering the wider role of thresholds in Die Blechtrommel, I will focus on thresholds that are brought into being by acts of incision, demonstrating the prominence of the act of cutting and exploring the significance of ruptured surfaces in the novel. Introducing an original reading strategy, sensitive to the spatial semiotics of memory, I will show how such slashed surface spaces are central to the conception of cultural memory that the novel calls for.

**Rebecca Wismeg-Kammerlander (King’s College London):**
**On the edge – ‘broken’ bodies as liminal objects**

Advances in medical technology have made the use of devices such as prosthetics, pacemakers, or artificial heart valves a part of our everyday lives. These developments have expanded the scope of medical procedures on ill or maimed bodies with the aim of repair and improvement. This, consequently, means that those bodies are positioned at a multitude of thresholds: they move between the spheres of health and illness, wholeness and brokenness, or even those of humans and non-humans. Taking these divides into account, I seek to examine how contemporary literature positions bodies that have been subject to such medical interventions. Which thresholds do these bodies cross? Does the application of medical devices entail a permanent positioning on either side of a divide or can multiple, even frequent transgressions occur? Do visible interventions in the human body have a different impact than invisible ones? To answer these questions I will examine texts by Valerie Fritsch, David Fuchs and others.
Jenny Watson (Edinburgh):
Circling the Abyss: Eastern European Space and the Limits of German Holocaust Memory

Although German cultural production has been preoccupied with the events of the Holocaust for many decades, the ongoing ‘discussion’ of this history is variable in its intensity or depth. Looking at literary representations, this paper considers several of these mnemonic ‘shallows’ – aspects of Holocaust history that have remained relatively unexplored – and the longer patterns of representation that might contribute to their continued marginalisation. Holocaust-era mass shootings prove resistant to representation in German literature both because they entail behaviour that is especially challenging to German identity, and because their location in the imagined ‘East’ places them out of bounds. Drawing on historical representations of Eastern Europe as vast, dangerous and unknowable, I will discuss how the figure of the ‘abyss’ or ‘dark continent’ play out in depictions of the Eastern Front and of mass killing during the Holocaust. This boundary reasserts itself even as post-2010 historiography and literary texts seek to bring the history of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe to Western audiences.

Katya Krylova (Aberdeen):

Schwedenreiter (2018), the second novel by Hanna Sukare (1957-), focuses on the eponymous grandson of an Austrian Wehrmacht deserter and his quest to rehabilitate his relatives’ story in his home village in the Salzburg region. The narrator’s attempts to counter the falsification surrounding his grandfather and great-grandmother come in the wake of the official rehabilitation of Wehrmacht deserters in Austria in 2009. Ultimately, while Schwedenreiter underlines the significance of developments in memory culture at the central level, there is implicit criticism of the extent to which these filter through in the communities from which deserters actually originated. As such, Sukare’s novel both comments on and – as can be gleaned from the reception of Schwedenreiter upon its publication – intervenes in Austrian memory discourses. Informed by memory studies scholarship, I argue that Sukare’s novel presents the memorialisation of Austrian Wehrmacht deserters at a transitional stage, which is symptomatic for deeper fault lines in Austrian history.