



Materiality and its others: the sacred, the immaterial and the transcendent

Gregynog Theory School 2019

March 5-6 2019



ESRC Wales Doctoral
Training Centre
Canolfan Hyfforddi
Ddoethurol Cymru ESRC

Welcome to Theory School 2019

The annual *Gregynog Theory School* has been funded by the ESRC Cohort Development Fund to provide a forum for post-graduate students throughout the UK to engage with theoretical topics in a supportive and collaborative setting. The Theory School is organised and sponsored by the Wales DTP but is open to all post-graduate students wishing to take part in the event.

DELEGATES

DTP Postgraduate Researchers:

XXXXX

DTP Academic Staff:

XXXXX

Guest Researchers:

XXXX

Guest Academic Staff

XXXX

Schedule

Tuesday March 5th

12.15 – 13.15:	Lunch
13.15 – 14.30:	Welcome and Key Note
14.30 – 16.00:	Seminar 1
16.00 – 16.30:	Tea break
16.30 – 18.00	Seminar 2
19.00	Dinner

Wednesday March 6th

8.00 – 9.00:	Breakfast
9.00 – 10.30:	Seminars 3-5 (student choice)
10.30 – 11.00:	Coffee break
11.00 – 12.30:	Seminars 3-5 (student choice)
12.30 – 13.30	Lunch and Farewell

Materiality and its others: the sacred, the immaterial and the transcendent

Rather than seeing modernity in terms of a process of secularisation, I will claim that the history of political forms can best be viewed as a series of metamorphoses of sacralisation

~Simon Critchley

The past two decades have seen a renewed interest in religion, the immaterial, and the transcendent, as topics of investigation and debate. From the so-called ‘theological turn’ in many branches of theory (ontological, ethical, deconstructive, phenomenological, political), to the alleged transition of Western societies to a ‘post-secular’ moment, to the questioning of secularism as a particular Judeo-Christian inflection by post-colonial and indigenous scholars and peoples, to the emergence of new sets of ‘not-quite’ objects (affects, atmospheres, ghosts) with their own imperatives and callings, to the rise of new forms of vitalism and their complex non-reductive accounts of materialism, panpsychism, and the pervasive role of non-human, non-organic and uncanny agents in the composition and decomposition of worlds. What do these admittedly heterogeneous and potentially irreconcilable movements signify?

The 2019 Gregynog Theory School begins by noting that what we commonly refer to as the ‘sacred’, in the West at least, never in fact went away; that the narrative the West so often told itself and others – of increasing rationalisation, disenchantment, secularism, demystification – was only ever half the story. Moreover, it was a story bound up with its own exceptionalism and violent impositions. A ‘White Mythology’ (Derrida 1972) with its own economy of dogmatism, faith, belief, and transcendence. Most notable amongst these: the divisions between Nature and Culture, Mind and Matter, Human and Non-Human, Modern and non-Modern, those with History and those without. While many may, with good reason, bemoan recent ‘theological turns’ as a turn too far, a turning back to irrationalism and the unscientific, such a stance must find a way to account for the catastrophes which lie in modernity’s wake and which lie ahead. None of the movements we discuss advocate a return to a theologically centred politics or thinking. Rather each, in its own way, emerges from a concern over the cynicism that has beset secularism: the chauvinistic and exclusive humanism it so often enables and emboldens, its complicity with an empty and oppressive liberalism and an unlimited and unchallenged capitalism. Over a century since Fredrick Nietzsche announced the death of a certain God, we confront more urgently than ever the spread of nihilism that he sought to overcome. In such a context, an interest in the immaterial is anything but a retreat but rather, as Donna J. Haraway (2016) puts it, a way of ‘staying with the trouble’. It is to ask, as Achille Mbembé does, how we may:

“problematize religion – or to be more specific, to interrogate the old category of the theological-political – in such a way as to render politically fruitful the critique of religion, while taking ever-more seriously religion itself as a critique of the political in our times” (in Spivak 2007).

The topic is divided into five separate seminars which will be explored over four sessions. While all attendees will participate in seminars 1 and 2 on Day 1, students can choose from seminars 3, 4 and 5 on Day 2. The schedule for the Theory School, along with seminar themes and readings is presented below.

Seminar sessions and readings

1. **Religious experience as such:**

While the return to the question of religion can be traced to a number of theoretical and philosophical influences, there is a marked pivot towards questions concerning the sacred, the infinite and transcendence in existential phenomenology. Work by Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray, Marion and others raised such questions in fresh terms that forced philosophical engagement outside the terms of faith or belief. Indeed, even if those raising such topics, such as Derrida, gave no hint in being religious per se, they were interested in the problems that religion posed and worried about the ethics of a world defined primarily (if not wholly) through materialist terms. The work presented here is challenging and requires a close read, but it lays the groundwork for understanding a number of the key terms we will use throughout the School.

Readings

- Butler, J. 2005. *Giving an account of oneself*. New York: Fordham Press. Chapter 3
- Caputo, J. 1996. *Deconstruction in a nutshell: a conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham Press. Chapter 6 (Chapter 1 also recommended for background).
- Levinas, E. 1996. Transcendence and height in *Emmanuel Levinas: basic philosophical writings*, eds. A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi. Bloomington: Indiana Press pp. 11-32

2. **The corporeal and the sacred:** what does it mean to be corporeal? For well over a decade geographers have sought to extend our understanding of the body to illuminate its potential. Working from Spinoza's well-known dictum that we do not yet know what a body can do, the body has perhaps become the site whereby the sacred could be supplanted by an expanded conception of imminent material capacities. It is precisely the body's ability to affect and sense in a manner that extends beyond our fleshy form that has granted the body its own wondrous endowments. And yet, not yet knowing what a body can do does not refer only to its capacities. While bodies indeed surprise us in terms of their abilities, they equally surprise us in terms of their failures. Bodies get ill, they need rest, they break or are broken for many reasons or for no reason at all, and they readily die if not protected or cared for. Thus, while we may 'live from good soup' as Levinas tells us, we have no claim on such gifts. The balms that the world provides vanish as easily as they arrive. The readings below question the sacralisation of the body and the limits of corporeality.

Readings

- Barga, B. 2017. The silent exception: hunger striking and lip-sewing, *Law, Culture, and the Humanities*, 1-28
- Harrison, P. 2008. Corporeal remains: vulnerability, proximity, and living on after the end of the world. *Environment and Planning A*, 40(2), 423-445
- Lingis, A. 1996. We Mortals in *Sensation: Intelligibility in Sensibility* New Jersey: Humanities Press International pp. 1-12
- Mbembé, J-A. 2003. Necropolitics, *Public Culture*, 15:1, 11-40

3. The material and the immaterial

The arrival of the New Materialisms would, in many ways, seem to signal the end of an interest in the sacred, the immaterial and the transcendent. Indeed, if there is a common thread that links the work gathered under this name it would seem to be a commitment to imminence and a non-reductive apprehension of materialism. Conceptual genealogy appears to affirm a similar message, e.g., key theoretical moments are derived from Nietzsche, Deleuze, and developments in various branches of the contemporary sciences (most notably, though by no means exclusively, studies of complexity, the various geo-sciences, biosciences, neuroscience, and particle physics). And yet, such work does not lead naturally to ‘radical atheism’ or a ‘neo-nihilism’. As inherited and institutionalised divisions between idea and matter, mind and world, body and soul, sacred and profane, form and content, ontology and ethics, are being dissolved anew, all that was held apart by these divides comes to interact in unforeseen ways. Hence, we find magical and enchanted materialisms, the rise of new forms of vitalism, animism, panpsychism, and a search for new ‘onto-ethics’, ways of thinking and doing community, identity, and politics. And perhaps unwittingly, the sacralisation of new concepts and objects.

Readings:

- Bennett, J. 2001. *The enchantment of modern life : attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton: Princeton Press. Chapter 7
- Gergan, M. D. 2015. Animating the Sacred, Sentient and Spiritual in Post? Humanist and Material Geographies. *Geography Compass*, 9, 262–275
- Grosz, E. 2017. *The Incorporeal. Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*. New York: Columbia Press pp. 249-262
- Ingold, T. 2011. *Being alive : essays on movement, knowledge and description*. London: Routledge. Chapter 5

4. The post-secular: the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has claimed that we are living in a post-secular age and he no doubt has a point. The promise of modernity was to sweep away the mythology of Medieval times and bring every question about the nature of our world, being, bodies and universe into the cold light of scientific scrutiny – a light in which everything knowable would be revealed and there would be no place for mystery or superstition to hide. Yet, this has not been the case. Not only does religion continue to shape many of the contemporary conflicts and social concerns of our age, but questions about the mysterious, the unknowable and the non-representable have forced themselves into many areas of intellectual inquiry. Far from dwindling, questions concerning religion seem to be stronger than ever: is secularism, like modernity itself, only a European concept? Have we yet again found ourselves associating religion with the native and secularism with the enlightened colonist? Does religion have anything to teach a secular society? How does religious experience as such invade, permeate or insinuate itself (perhaps unknowingly) into various everyday geographies?

Readings

- Habermas, J. 2008. Notes on post? Secular society. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 25(4) 17-29
- May, S., Wilson, E. K., Baumgart-Ochse, C., & Sheikh, F. 2014. The religious as political and the political as religious: Globalisation, post-secularism and the shifting boundaries of the sacred. *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 15(3) 331-346
- Tse, J. K. 2014. Grounded theologies: ‘Religion’ and the ‘secular’ in human geography. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(2) 201-220
- Spivak, G. 2007. Religion, Politics, Theology: A Conversation with Achille Mbembe. *boundary 2*, 34(2) 149-170

5. Geographies of the apocalypse

What is the legacy of God's death? For Sloterdijk the evacuation of religion in Europe left Western culture with a desperate desire to fill that vacated space. Whether it be through Heidegger's authentic caring, Marx's permanent revolution or Deleuze's stoicism, one could argue that Western thought remains in a perpetual search for new social, moral and political coordinates. As Nietzsche's mad man asked "is there still any up or down?" It is perhaps no wonder that we are headed towards the apocalypse and that the death of God was its herald. Is this what Heidegger meant when he declared that 'only a God can save us?' The aim of the readings below are to explore different modalities of faith – faith in humanity, faith in the future, faith in the Other, faith in nothing – and the forms of cynicism and hope they engender. It is to explore whether the apocalypse should be feared or welcomed and to ask questions about the kinds of loss it promises.

Readings

- Brassier, R. 2007. *The Truth of Extinction in Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave pp. 205-239
- Danowski, D. and Castro, E.V. de., 2017. *Humans and Terrains in the Gaia War in The Ends of the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press pp.79-108
- Moten, F., 2017. *The Universal Machine*, Durham: Duke Press. Preface ix-xiii.
- Sloterdijk, P. 2013. *You must change your life: on Anthropotechniques*. Cambridge: Polity pp. 1-15

Further Reading: (ones that didn't make the cut!)

- Asad, T. 2003. *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford Press.
- Berlant, L. 2011 *Cruel Optimism*. London: Duke Press. Chapter 1
- Chakrabarty, D. 2009 'The Climate of History: For Thesis', *Critical Inquiry* 35, 197-222
- Cloke, P., & Beaumont, J. 2013. Geographies of postsecular rapprochement in the city1. *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(1), 27-51.
- De Leon, J. 2015. *The land of open graves: living and dying on the migrant trail*. Los Angeles: of California Press.
- Derrida, J. 1995. *On the name*. Stanford: Stanford Press. Essay 2: Sauf le nom pp. 35—85
- Descola, P. 2013 *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: of Chicago Press. Intro and epilogue.
- Esposito, R. 2011 'The katechon' in *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press pp.52-79
- Freud, S. 2010 *Civilisation and its Discontents*. London: Penguin Classics. Chapter 1
- Haraway, D.J., 2016. *Staying with the trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, London: Duke Press. Chapter 8
- Lynes, P. 2018 'The Posthuman Promise of the Earth' in *Eco-Deconstruction. Derrida and Environmental Philosophy*, eds. Fritsch, M., Lynes, P., and Woods, D. New York: Fordham Press pp.101-120
- Marion, J.-L. 2008. *The visible and the revealed*. New York: Fordham Press. Essay 2: The saturated phenomenon pp. 18-49
- Nancy, J.-L. 2007 'The Judeo-Christian' in *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida*, eds. Bergo, B., Cohen, J., and Zagury-Orly, R. New York: Fordham Press.
- Povinelli, E.A. 2017 'The Ends of Humans. Anthropocene, Autonomism, Antagonism, and the Illusions of our Epoch' *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116(2), 293-308

- Saldanha, A. 2017 'Geophilosophy, Geocommunitism. Is there Life After Man?' in eds. Weinstein, J. and Colebrook, C. *Posthumous Life. Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*. New York: Columbia Press. Chapter 10
- Tsing, A.L., 2015 *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton Press. Chapter 1
- Taussig, M. 2006 'Viscerally, Faith, and Skepticism. Another Theory of Magic' in *Walter Benjamin's Grave*. Chicago: of Chicago Press pp.121-155
- Thacker, E. 2017 'Darklife: Negation, Nothingness, and the Will-to-Life in Schopenhauer' in *Posthumous Life. Theorizing Beyond the Human*, eds. Weinstein, J., and Colebrook, C. New York: Columbia Press pp.295-323