

New Romantics:

Performing Ireland and Cosmopolitanism on the Anniversary of Human Rights

4-5 July 2019

Queen's University Belfast

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Keynotes:

Professor Stephen Wilmer, Professor Emeritus of Drama (Trinity College Dublin)

Dr Drew Milne, Judith E. Wilson Reader in Poetics (University of Cambridge)

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The conference will be held on 4-5 July in the year of the 230th anniversary of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (26 August 1789).

Much of modern Irish drama and performance has been concerned with political and social issues related to human rights in Ireland and within a wider European context, and there is a substantial body of contemporary literature, theatre, performance and life art concerned with human rights activism in Ireland. Since the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment which conceived the concept of human rights, literature, drama and theatre have become strongly associated with ideas of moral philosophy and cosmopolitan humanism. The powerful role of drama in 18th century French and British society led to theatres being a space of public performance for the political and social reforms of the Enlightenment. Plays such as Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) and Diderot's *Le Père de Famille* (1758) explored the connections between class and wealth. During the tumultuous events of the French revolution the dramatists and theatres were profoundly engaged with revolutionary ideas around social reform. British and Irish theatre also battled with the impact of socially restrictive laws on class, religious and gender divisions in the Georgian era (1714-1837). During the Enlightenment and Romantic period European dramatists such as James Thomson; G.E. Lessing; Denis Diderot; R. B. Sheridan; and Samuel Taylor Coleridge developed plays and dramaturgical theories designed to create human empathy across cultural and religious divisions. Their dramatizations of empathy were influenced in particular by Scottish enlightenment concepts of moral sentiment and sympathy as well as theories of the good passions. These ideas can also be read within the context of a European-wide 'Celtic' literary romanticism. This conference will examine a trend towards a

'new romanticism' with a growing cosmopolitan dimension in contemporary literature, performance and live art that explores Ireland's role in Europe.

The conference asks in what ways a 'Celtic Cosmopolitanism' (Le Coadic, 2000; Wulff, 2008) and an 'Irish Cosmopolitanism' (Wulff, 2008; Pearson, 2017), emerging from humanist Enlightenment and Romantic traditions, inform human rights activism in contemporary theatre, performance, literature and the arts. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006) the contemporary cosmopolitan philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah defines Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism as a combination of 'obligations to others', and a 'shared citizenship' with respect for the differences of individuals and the rich potential to 'learn from our differences' (10). In *Cosmopolitanism* (2002) Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, Carol A. Breckenridge, and Dipesh Chakrabarty argue that 'in contemporary cosmopolitical thinking', 'Refugees, peoples of the diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of the cosmopolitical community' (6). The conference will explore how international contemporary frameworks of critical theory such as New Materialism relate to human rights activism and cosmopolitanism in Irish literature and performance and in what ways they continue, critique, or challenge humanist moral philosophy and enlightenment thought. Can contemporary performances be said to dramatize their own 'Compositionist Manifestos' in Bruno Latour's terms as they reimagine humanism on stage in new compositions created from a range of intercultural influences? Does theatre, poetry, and live art perform a kind of 'radical solidarity' as conceptualized by Judith Butler in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015)? How do we engage in research and analysis of these works? Are methodologies such as Karen Barad's diffractive readings encouraging us to imagine a 'working model of wholeness' (Stewart Parker) of the interconnection of all life on this planet? What is the role of the Environmental Humanities, Ecocritical Theory, and the extension of sentiment and affective empathy for non-human life forms arising from the 'good passions'? In *Bodies that Matter* (1993) Judith Butler describes performativity as 'that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains' (2). What are the implications for communities and bodies recast as the marginal, precarious, migratory, foreign, female, minority or racialized other?

Topics may include but are not limited to:

- Human Rights activism in the arts.
- Conflict and peacebuilding.
- Intercultural understanding, Transcultural exchange and cosmopolitan communities.
- Performativity, myth-making and the nation-state/Performing the State/Statelessness.
- Environmental histories of migration as told through the arts.
- Precarity in everyday life/State power and control in incidents such as the evacuations of refugee camps/deportations of immigrants.
- Identity politics and contested spaces/Borders/Border States/marginalised communities
- The impact of climate change on human rights and non-human life forms.

- Freedom of speech, thought, movement, religious expression – restrictive versus liberal laws from the eighteenth century until now.
- Comparative analysis with 18th century/Enlightenment political satire – such as a comparative examination of the 1737 Licensing Act (Britain) and The Chapelier Law of 1791 (France) or anti-Walpolean British satire and contemporary censorship.
- Brexit and the rise of populism/alt right marches.
- Sex and gender, reproductive and social rights.
- Performance and the power of the public (and political) gesture/Site-specific theatre/Ranciere’s Emancipated Spectator.
- Social division in the theatre space – Impact of Boal, Schechner etc.
- Material Memoirs (Alaimo) – the body as a site of environmental precarity and control.
- Border States/Contested Spaces – marginalised and peripheral communities.

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