

British Association for Modernist Studies Conference – BAMS 2019:

Troublesome Modernisms, Thursday 20 - Friday 22 June 2019, London (King's College and the St Bride Foundation)

Italian Thought Network (ITN) Panel



Panel title: Modernism/Italian Theory

Panel organizer: Mena Mitrano (Loyola University Chicago, JFRC)

1st Paper

Vittoria Borsò, "Beckett and Blanchot: Rewriting Nihilism – at the Threshold of an Affirmative Poetology of Life"

2nd Paper

Tim Christiaens (Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven), "Bare Life's Redemptive Potential from Agamben to Grossman"

3rd Paper

Mena Mitrano (Loyola University Chicago, JFRC), "Re-reading Poggioli"

Abstract of the Panel

The aim of our panel is to bring into conversation Italian Theory and Modernist Studies. We explore Italian Theory in its emphasis on life, considered as always in relation with history and politics, and its attention to practices that elude socio-political commands, to propose that it marks the exit from a dynamics of humanization which consists in the struggle "to be human and make the other desire us" (Esposito, *Third Person*). The exit consigns us to a plane of separate singularities that ask to be connected (Agamben *Coming Community; What is Philosophy*), and our panel situates Italian Theory among other critical forces in the current Anglophone debate, arguing that, while it bears affinities with new ontologies (Latour; Harman), it neither rejects modernism (Felski and postcritique) nor fights the spectral returns of the past (intellectual/masses divide) with the critic's suspended "sovereignty" (Weak Theory). Our authors – Beckett, Blanchot, Russian writer and journalist Vassily Grossman – amplify the exit, and take modernism outside its own name, so to speak, foregrounding the notion of forms of life necessarily in relation and

tension with their context as a founding paradigm of the field (Poggioli), thus indispensable to any theorization, especially after the most advanced planetary expansions.

In "Beckett and Blanchot: Rewriting Nihilism – at the Treshold of an Affirmative Poetology of Life," Vittoria Borsò reads Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953) and Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980) against the grain, as prime examples of modernist aesthetics understood as the performance of an ontological condition that has inspired a philosophy of life as relationality (Simondon, Deleuze). She then proceeds to argue for the displacement of this philosophy through the reception of *Italian Thought in terms of affirmative biopolitics*, and outlines the points of contact between the latter and recent "New Ontologies" which conceive life beyond the authority of humans.

In "Bare Life's Redemptive Potential from Agamben to Grossman," Tim Christiaens draws on Vassily Grossman's "The Road," the story of a mule degraded to the status of bare life during the Second World War, which is also an allegory of the situation of concentration camp inmates, to further Agamben's notion of resistance by developing the redemptive potential of care (in Grossman's story, by a fellow animal). Christiaens builds on Grossman's paradigm of care, the maternal care of the Madonna for her child in "The Sistine Madonna," illuminating it through Massimo Cacciari's and Adriana Cavarero's writings.

My contribution, "Re-reading Poggioli," follows up on the consequence of Esposito's redefinition of European philosophies as a series of geographical-conceptual displacements, and that is to say, the convergence of critique with a diasporic plane of ideas, to approach the troublesome modernism at the core of Renato Poggioli's foundational *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1962). Discussion revolves around Poggioli's dismissal of modernism as an "anodyne" term in his attempt to name the relation to a type of text—"difficult to find, to understand, and to defend" -- which simultaneously corresponds to a type of sociality: "an unforeseen diaspora of isolated singularities."

Keywords

Italian Theory

Modernism

Samuel Beckett

Maurice Blanchot

Vassily Grossman

Renato Poggioli

Panelists' scholarly biographies

Vittoria Borsò (University of Heinrich Heine, Duesseldorf (Germany))

Vittoria Borsò is Full Professor of Romance Literatures at the University of Heinrich Heine, Duesseldorf (Germany). Her research fields are Biopolitics, Ontology and poetics of life; Theory of memory and media; Visual Cultures, Theory of "World Literature", French,

Italian, Spanish and Latin American Literatures. Recent publications include: *Lateinamerika anders denken. Literatur - Macht – Raum* (The ‘other’ Thinking of Latin America: Literature, Power, Space, 2015) and *Bio-Poetics: Wissen und Leben - Wissen für das Leben: Herausforderungen einer affirmativen Biopolitik* (Ed.) (‘Bio-Poetics’: Knowledge and Life – Knowledge for the Living: Challenges of an affirmative Biopolitics,” 2014).

Tim Christiaens (Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven)

Tim Christiaens is a PhD-researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven, Belgium. His research focuses on contemporary critical theory in France and Italy with a PhD in progress about neoliberal governmentality in the works of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. He has published in, a.o., *Theory, Culture & Society*, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, and *Rethinking Marxism*.

Mena Mitrano (Loyola University Chicago, JFRC), panel organizer

Mena Mitrano is Adjunct Professor of Literature at the John Felice Rome Center of Loyola University Chicago. She is the author of *In the Archive of Longing: Susan Sontag’s Critical Modernism* (Edinburgh University Press 2016; Paperback edition 2017), *Gertrude Stein: Woman Without Qualities* (Ashgate 2005), *Language and Public Culture* (Edizioni Q 2009). The ideas she presents in this panel are part of a new book project whose proposal has been favourably examined by external readers for Edinburgh University Press. At the John Felice Rome Center, she founded and convenes the Discourses of Modernity Seminar.