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**THE FORESIGHT IN HINDSIGHT:  
THE NEW PATHWAYS IN NORTH AMERICAN  
STUDIES CONFERENCE REPORT**

*Jan Čapek and Ivana Plevíková*

THE “New Pathways in North American Studies: Paradigms, Strategies, Developments” graduate studies conference of North American Literary and Cultural studies was organized by the Department of English and American studies at Masaryk University in Brno on the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 2018. The event took place at Gorkého 7 in building G at the top floor, the home of the hosting department. The conference was organized by the hosting department’s doctoral students Mgr. Jan Čapek and Mgr. et Mgr. Ivana Plevíková and was primarily aimed for students of the M.A. and Ph.D. studies as the new wave of emerging scholars in the field. The conference hosted speakers from the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Austria, Spain, and Italy, along with three keynote speakers: Prof. Dr. Volker Depkat from the University of Regensburg, Prof. Dr. Paweł Frelik from the University of Warsaw, and Prof. Dr. Ulla Haselstein from the Freie Universität Berlin.

On the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> of October, after a welcoming speech from doc. PhDr. Tomáš Pospíšil, Ph.D., the vice-dean for international relations, the conference opened with Volker Depkat’s keynote presentation titled “The Visual Invention of the American Presidency.” Professor Depkat focused on the concept of invention as a “theoretical and practical break with the European political tradition,” (Depkat, 12 Oct 2018) that would necessitate a following invention of visual legitimacy. Such a tendency was, then, exemplified by prof. Depkat’s contrast of paintings depicting the coronation of George III with the painting depicting the inauguration of George Washington, pointing to the symbolism behind details in each painting as the practice of political distancing from the lavish glamor of the European monarchy with the sobriety of the American presidential figure. Prof. Depkat’s presentation then continued with analyses of more popular imagery such as newspaper comics in order to further exemplify the visualization of the political sentiments of the era. The presentation set a highly academic and rigorous tone that would prove to be typical of Prof. Depkat’s engagement in discussion for the rest of the conference.

## **1. Pathways of Ecology & Environment**

The panel opened with a presentation titled “Resisting the Lure of Ecotopian Change in Margaret Atwood’s Post-Apocalyptic Fiction” by Parisa Changizi from the University of Ostrava. While Changizi opened her presentation with a somewhat pessimistic proposition of eco-crises as omnipresent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she then moved through establishing the framework via Ralph Waldo Emerson’s vision as essential for the importance of eco-criticism and towards Margaret Atwood’s cultivation of an eco-friendly and revolutionary, redemptive take as a counterpoint to the “postmodern disposition of hopelessness” (Changizi, 12 Oct 2018). The paper proposed a conflict between anthropocentrism and the ecological vision and, through Atwood’s positive employment of human-animal hybrids, presented an emancipation of imagery that was, e.g., in Gothic fiction such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, presented as dangerous and negative. Changizi’s presentation opened up a discussion of the implied perception of apocalypse as something that reaches beyond human control, agency, and responsibility.

The panel continued with a presentation titled “What Else Can Nature Mean: Ecocritical Perspective on Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction” by Kateřina Bártová from Charles University in Prague. Bártová proposed a significant alteration of the perception of McCarthy’s novels by reading them with an environmental awareness or through an eco-critical lens. The presentation identified the path to such reading in the perception of nature in McCarthy as sensual, supported by his aesthetic choices echoing the aesthetics of 19<sup>th</sup> century painting in order to depict nature in a unique way, evoking the engagement of other senses than just sight (Bártová, 12 Oct 2018). Bártová referenced McCarthy’s imagery of a “human disease” in ethical commentary on “buildings as lepers” or “settlement as waste” (Bártová, 12 Oct 2018) and continued to propose that McCarthy’s nature was not presented as pastoral but rather depicted as a dynamic process, ending on the proposition that *Whales and Men* should be seen as his most environmental work (Bártová, 12 Oct 2018). The panel ended with a discussion of the general issues of ecocriticism and its biggest obstacle in the expression of a scholarly position regarding what to consider as “nature” and how to approach it.

## **2. Pathways of Interdisciplinarity**

The second panel started with the paper “Academia’s Ivory Tower within the Worlds of New Media: Approachability, Popularity, Identity” by Ivana Plevíková from Masaryk University. Plevíková’s paper offered a critical viewpoint that engaged in “an investigation of the ivory tower, a reflection on the accessibility of

academia in general” as well as a discussion of the disregard towards the emotional side of identity within academia as the “rational space” (Plevíková, 12 Oct 2018). Plevíková worked not only with Brett Stockdill’s book *Transforming the Ivory Tower: Challenging Racism, Sexism, and Homophobia in the Academy* but also with the image of academia in social media (e.g., the meta-academic Instagram profile @ripannanicolesmith) or in music (in the figure of rapper/doctoral student Sammus) in order to show the omnipresent nature of the critique of academia throughout the media (old and new). The presentation successfully activated the audience towards a self-aware meta-academic discussion.

The following presentation titled “Aporia Undecidable and Undecided in Richard Wagner, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and #MeToo Culprits” by Jan Čapek from Masaryk University included a philosophical angle of the post-structuralist break with set identity. Čapek started by introducing the Greek myth of aporia, the logical paradox, and continued with the discussion of its engagement by Jacques Derrida in accord with his anti-representational, anti-identitarian thought as presented among other writings in *On Grammatology*, *Aporias*, or the paper “Sending: On Representation” (Čapek, 12 Oct 2018). Čapek then continued to apply aporia, an inner logical paradox and impasse, as a concept productive in its undecidability and ongoing discussion and pondering (Čapek, 12 Oct 2018) to controversial figures in various strata of Western culture, effectively solidifying the impasse as one functioning beyond law and morality. As expected, the provocative presentation opening new vistas on the discussion of the division of artist and his art sparked a heated discussion.

The interdisciplinary panel finished with a presentation titled “A Perpetual Crisis: Literary Theory from New Criticism to Cognitivism” by Ivan Čipkár from Palacký University in Olomouc. Čipkár immediately engaged his audience by introducing academic hoaxers such as Alan Sokal. The presentation continued with a discussion of the critique of Theory as the critique of “excesses of Theory” (Čipkár, 12 Oct 2018), invoking examples of such critiques ranging from recent examples (the collection of essays *Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent*) to those within the heyday of Theory (e.g. John Searle’s 1977 response to Jacques Derrida). Čipkár then focused on the split between B.F. Skinner’s behaviorism and externalism and Noam Chomsky’s cognitive turn. Čipkár explored the forking and the specifics of both tendencies, concluding that the cognitive turn has remained productive through its continuation in cognitive literary studies and reader response research methods. Čipkár’s presentation effectively continued the meta-academic discussion on the issues and problems of academia not only through the presentation of past production through dissent but also suggesting currently ongoing processes of production of differing theoretical approaches.

### **3. Pathways of Gender & LGBTQ Studies**

Thomas Castañeda from Freie Universität Berlin started the third panel with his paper “Christopher Isherwood’s Camp,” discussing the concept of “camp” as a system of humor with features of the grotesque, effectively functioning towards empathy derived from the exclusion and marginalization of queer figures (Castañeda, 12 Oct 2018). As Castañeda proposed, the effect of camp is that of a “flamboyant aesthetics of secrecy, evasion, and innuendo” (Castañeda, 12 Oct 2018). While Castañeda ascribed considerable importance to everyday activities and to camp’s relation to urban spaces, he also asserted that camp could be perceived as a political aesthetic that is specific to queer culture. The specificity was further asserted in discussion that invoked the aesthetics of a metrosexual yuppie dandy in *American Psycho* as *not* camp due to its concern with a heterosexual demographic.

The panel continued with another alumnus from Masaryk University, Petra Fišerová, and her presentation “Defying the System: Counterhegemonic Masculinities in *Sense8*.” Fišerová focused on the esoteric science fiction TV show *Sense8*, proposing it be seen as a subversion of hegemonic masculinity through mechanisms of symbiosis, diversity, and the consequential themes of empathy and community (Fišerová, 12 Oct 2018). Her examples, however, uncovered a controversial angle proposed in the discussion of counter-hegemonic tendencies remaining dependent on showing contrasts to hegemonic tendencies. The discussion, therefore, uncovered a deeper complexity and possible obstacles in the rather new field of masculinity studies.

The following presentation “Including Bisexual Perspectives in American Studies” by Agnieszka Ziemińska (at the time in-between affiliations), continued the discussions of identity and academia already touched upon in the interdisciplinary panel. Ziemińska’s paper partly brought the audience “up to speed” on recent developments in the perception of bisexuality but overall focused on providing an insightful probe into deeply rooted sociocultural themes such as the question of choice of sexual orientation and its contrast to the arguments of immutability of orientation (Ziemińska, 12 Oct 2018). Ziemińska did not hesitate to bring up a sharp critique of the unequal application of legal protection of lifestyle choices (e.g., religion), while still admitting the complexity of the issue of bisexuality even within the LGBTQ community and the occasional sidelining of figures deemed “too queer” (Ziemińska, 12 Oct 2018). The provocative paper and a following discussion marked the end of the Queer & LGBTQ panel.

#### **4. Pathways of Life Writing & Autobiography**

The last panel of the first day of the conference started with Katharina Matuschek, who comes from the University of Regensburg, and her presentation titled “(Dis-) Continuous Experience: Writing the Prison Experience into the Life Trajectory.” Matuschek presented a part of her dissertation research into mass incarceration and the prisoner’s rights movements in the US. Following a red line that kept reappearing throughout the conference, the research and the paper are built on the basis of the investigation of the construction of identities within collectives, e.g., of prisoners, and the prison experience as an identity-transforming agent (Matuschek, 12 Oct 2018). The specific case study presented was that of W. E. Laite and his description of the discontinuity of life experience through non-linear narratives and the construction of a fragmented subject. Matuschek contrasted Laite’s approach with approaches of “suspended identity” in Schmid and Jones, and bringing up questions of vulnerability, concluded that the discontinuity expresses a perceived distance from other prisoners and their community (Matuschek, 12 Oct 2018).

Similarly, the following presentation “The Unreliable Narrator and the Post-truth Era: Subjective Personal Memory in the Literary Autobiographies of Eudora Welty and Tom Robbins” by Dorota Bachratá from Palacký University in Olomouc also raised questions of points of view, their inter-relations and the subsequent effect upon the perception of distance and subjectivity in literary autobiographies. Bachratá discussed the concept of “un-truth” as a function in fiction that is written to be believable, is rooted in the real world, but is not at all factual (Bachratá, 12 Oct 2018). Through her discussion of the confluence of framing in Eudora Welty’s writing, Bachratá (and the subsequent discussion) left the audience with the sense that the current tendency in autobiographical writing is towards subjective truthfulness. Still, however, the presentation also accentuated the question as to whether such a move is not merely an admitted one and whether such a tendency has not been already always present in autobiographical literature.

The last presentation of the first day, titled “Negotiating Uneasy Collectives in Life Writings of the US-Nicaragua Solidarity Movement and Contra War” was presented by Verena Baier from the University of Regensburg. Through her tracing of the political discrepancies of the 1980’s and her discussion of collective social movements, Baier proposed that the umbrella term of life writing should be seen therein as uncovering processes of the negotiation of collective national identities (Baier, 12 Oct 2018). Baier showed that the Nicaraguan crisis has been utilized in this way by both the American left and the American right, e.g., by constructing Nicaragua as “a projection surface for social utopias” (Baier, 12 Oct 2018). The

implications of the (de-)construction of collective identities and questions of radicalization towards vastly different visions of utopias stemming from the same event closed the first day of the New Pathways conference with considerable *gravitas*.

The second day of the conference started with the second keynote presentation, this time presented by Prof. Dr. Paweł Frelik from the University of Warsaw. Prof. Frelik's presentation titled "Science Fiction, Video Games, Anthropocene: Emergent Discourses and the Future of the Thing Previously Known as Popular Culture" somewhat picked up the fragmented narrative of meta-academic discussion, this time focusing on the topic of the discrepancy between designations such as science-fiction, sci-fi, sf, syfy, etc., and pointed to a conflict between voices concerned with maintaining face and public image and voices that work on elevating and emancipating the genre as a serious academic pursuit. Prof. Frelik suggested that a designation "climate fiction" and its ties to the concept of "anthropocene" may still express the same controversial split between the two tendencies (Frelik, 13 Oct 2018). Nevertheless, he seemed to favor the inclusive umbrella term while expanding the audiences' views on what may be considered climate fictions and what may be included in their focus, effectively mentoring the audience in exploring the New Pathways of changing disciplines.

## **5. Pathways of Visual Culture, TV & Film Adaptations**

The panel on visual culture started with Martin Ondryáš from Masaryk University and the introduction of his Master's diploma research titled "Aspects of Regional Saskatchewan Feature Films and the Representation of the Canadian Prairie." Ondryáš's interest in minor regional Canadian cinematography stems from the disproportionate concentration of Canadian film production in Central Canada and the fact that marginal cinema, the "margin of the margin" (Ondryáš, 13 Oct 2018) in Saskatchewan does not receive much notice. Based on his hypothesis of "Central Canadian cultural colonialism" (Ondryáš, 13 Oct 2018), Ondryáš proposed that his academic focus was on the expression of influence but also the subversion of regional cinema in films such as *Wheat Soup* or *Corner Gas – the Movie*.

Gabriela Michálková from Palacký University in Olomouc followed with her presentation "How to Uncover Austenmania Untraditionally." The presentation focused on the tendencies in what seems to be a whole industry of the cult of Jane Austen toward adaptations but also in literatures inspired by Austen and their subsequent adaptations. Michálková provided a look into such industries and discussed evolving tendencies not only in textual inspiration from/subversion of Jane

Austen, but also the same strategies in adaptations such as *Persuasion* and its introduction of a public kiss, the sexual tension in the TV series *Pride and Prejudice*, or the controversial addition of gothic features or a “brontification” of Austen’s material (Michálková, 13 Oct 2018). While Michálková mentioned the paratextual dimension only briefly, she has expressed an intention to explore the aspect further, as she stated in the subsequent discussion.

The panel continued with the presentation “Which Moby Dick Do You Hunt? Captain Ahab and the Big Whale in Film and Culture” by Steffi Wiggins from the University of Vienna. Wiggins’s presentation comprehensively mapped out not only the major cinematic adaptations but also the 2011 TV adaptation, “the *Master Commander* version of *Moby Dick*” (Wiggins, 13 Oct 2018). Wiggins explored not only the technical aspects of the three major adaptations as exemplified, e.g., in the 1926 *Sea Beast*’s limited dramatic space due to technical limitations of the age (Wiggins, 13 Oct 2018), but also how the depictions and perceptions of the major characters or even the whole story change in each of them through varying characterization and essential creative decisions of the film makers, e.g., in the 2011 adaptation’s inclusion of Cpt. Ahab’s wife in order to make him seem more human as compared to the famous 1956 adaptation starring Gregory Peck (Wiggins, 13 Oct 2018).

The panel came to a close with a paper suggestively titled “Bad Men as Heroes of American Television” by Lech Zdunkiewicz from the University of Wrocław. Zdunkiewicz’s paper explored the strong tendency toward the portrayal of antiheroes in American television, their opposition to the traditional “Campbellian hero” (Zdunkiewicz, 13 Oct 2018) and the creators’ strategies of evoking empathy for, and engagement with, the character. Zdunkiewicz discussed Zillmann and Cantor’s Affective Disposition Theory and proposed a tendency to deliberately evoke viewer dissonance between a wish to engage and a difficulty to do so on moral bases (Zdunkiewicz, 13 Oct 2018). The author illustrated his approach in relation to the TV show *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, highlighting the show’s wide range of emotions and its narrative structure as carefully constructed in order to challenge traditional TV schemas and “moral justifications for emotional side-taking” (Zdunkiewicz, 13 Oct 2018).

## **6. Pathways of Race, Ethnicity & Cultural Appropriation**

The last panel started with an alumnus from Masaryk University, Marcel Koníček, currently pursuing a doctorate in Japanology at Charles University in Prague, and his paper “Japanophilia in the Western Society.” Koníček presented an investigation of the long-standing tradition of waves of Japanophilia, based in Japonism



(Koníček, 13 Oct 2018). He presented Japanophilia not so much as a type of Orientalism but rather a “becoming Japanese,” a partial taking-on of a Japanese identity, primarily by philanthropists such as Lafcadio Hearn (Koníček, 13 Oct 2018). Koníček identified the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> wave of Japanophilia with the start of the Russo-Japanese War and the subsequent rise of Japanese imperialism and the start of the second, still on-going, wave starting with the 1960’s influence of Zen Buddhism on the Beat Generation (Koníček, 13 Oct 2018). The current form of Japanophilia is, according to Koníček, characterized by cross-cultural inspirations and miscegenation of, mainly, popular culture in the form of film, fashion, music, and in the gaming industry (Koníček, 13 Oct 2018).

The panel continued with another student of Charles University in Prague, Františka Zezuláková Schormová, and her presentation titled “Black Bodies White Translations: Cold War Journeys of African American Poets.” Zezuláková Schormová’s presentation touched upon not only the concrete issues of the translation of African American activist poetry, its visceral bodily imagery and its functioning as an afterlife or resurrection (Zezuláková Schormová, 13 Oct 2018), but also on the more abstract notions of translation as a “transfer of Saint’s relics,” a “transnational travel and circulation of literature” (Zezuláková Schormová, 13 Oct 2018). Further, the author also tied the tactics of cultural appropriation to the perceived whitewashing of current African American issues, e.g., in the case of Kenneth Goldsmith’s controversial performance “The Body of Michael Brown,” likened to an abstract cultural lynching (Zezuláková Schormová, 13 Oct 2018). The following discussion further problematized the question of the authenticity of translation and, following Zezuláková Schormová’s use of Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on translation, investigated the problem of translation from the standpoint of Benjamin’s concepts of the aura and authenticity of technologically reproduced art in general.

The following presentation, “From Literature to Testimonies, Reflection on Trauma in Indian School Days” by Kamelia Talebian Sedehi from Sapienza University of Rome, created a remarkable controversy by discussing the so-called “American Holocaust” of the residential schools in Canada focused on “educating the perceived Indian savages” through forceful seizure of children and the consequential Christianization, starvation, diseases, and institutionalized pedophilia (Talebian Sedehi, 13 Oct 2018). Talebian Sedehi presented the proposed ties between trauma and mental trauma as both resulting in bodily responses and mental trauma as “a wound that cries out” (Talebian Sedehi, 13 Oct 2018). The main controversy, as discovered during the discussion was, however, related to the designation of the phenomenon of Canadian residential schools as an “American Holocaust.” The heated debate uncovered the importance of caution tied to the use of the word “Holocaust,” due to its cultural resonance for the members of the audience who came

from countries that lived through the Jewish Holocaust. The discussion of the specificity of the term and assertions of its non-relativity could be considered one of the most thought-provoking moments of debate throughout the whole conference.

Coincidentally, the following speaker, Tamara Heger from the University of Regensburg presented her paper “Remembering the Liberation of the Flossenbuerg Concentration Camp – The Perspective of the US Soldiers,” as if asserting the significance of the term Holocaust in Europe once again. While Heger mentioned that her presentation dealt with her freshly begun research, she has presented a rather convincing basis for a formidable dissertation by introducing the Bavarian Flossenbuerg camp as being significant as one of the last concentration camps liberated by the Allied forces at the end of World War II. Heger offered a look into the potential for extensive archival work concerned with letter collections kept for the “longevity of the legacy of the liberation” (Heger, 13 Oct 2018) and also touched upon the controversy surrounding the American perspective and tendencies for an “Americanization of the Holocaust” and the establishment of “veteran tourism” (Heger, 13 Oct 2018). Heger’s proposal of “a transnational memory study” once again energized the debate on the significance of the Holocaust and research into it in a very productive manner.

The final paper of the panel, titled “From Ethnic Nationalism to Revolutionary Poetry: Langston Hughes’ Literary and Ideological Transformation on the 1930’s,” was presented by Alba Fernández Alonso from the University of Burgos. Fernández Alonso focused on questions of the poet’s identity and self-development, the processes of retelling and meaning-making, and the essential mechanisms of poetry and prose that serve those functions. Her presentation centered the issues on the figure of Langston Hughes and his 1930’s turn to the American communist party as a vehicle against racism (Fernández Alonso, 13 Oct 2018). Fernández Alonso proposed that Hughes’s radicalization was the result of his disillusionment with the Harlem Renaissance and that he continued to exemplify such notions in poems which turned to anti-capitalism or anti-consumerism, e.g., in “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria” and the rejection of religious moral codes, e.g., in “Goodbye Christ” (Fernández Alonso, 13 Oct 2018). Hughes’s increasing class consciousness was also analyzed in “Good Morning, Revolution” and, although admitting that the turn put his career in jeopardy, Fernández Alonso concluded that Hughes’s production of discourse can be read as “ahead of its time” and important and influential due to his meaning-making through enduring goals (Fernández Alonso, 13 Oct 2018).

The final presentation of the conference belonged to the third keynote speaker, Prof. Dr. Ulla Haselstein from Freie Universität, Berlin. Prof. Haselstein’s presentation “Progressivism, Normalization, and the Novel” dealt primarily with Gertrude

Stein, proposed as a “theorist of performativity” of Americanization as “a process constantly at work” (Haselstein, 13 Oct 2018). Despite the length of the presentation, prof. Haselstein unfolded an incredible web of transnational causalities and influences constituting a critique of American modern society, tying Stein’s literary work to other writers (Mark Twain, Ralph Waldo Emerson) but also to endeavors in early psychology (William James), or philosophical works preceding (Henri de Tocqueville), contemporary (Frankfurt school) and following (French post-structuralism) Stein’s literary socio-cultural project (Haselstein, 13 Oct 2018). At the same time, the presentation managed to propose Stein’s formidable engagement in anti-narrativity, and subversions of seriality through propositions of singularities and her stress on individualities. By way of discussing Gertrude Stein’s concept of suggestion and its ties to e.g., Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation (Haselstein, 13 Oct 2018), prof. Haselstein’s presentation concluded the conference in an uncannily meta-performative way. There could not have been a better send-off towards the new pathways than through the final keynote speech, a confidential manual to becoming a scholar, a thinking individual.



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