

SEM19. Reframing human(e) voices: Exploring contemporary British identities through cultural studies and the multimodal toolkit

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, PN 18

Convenors

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Abstract

Drawing on a theoretical paradigm integrating the interpretative tenets of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Cultural Studies, this seminar investigates the complex identity negotiations that permeate the (re)configurations of contemporary Britishness as portrayed in cultural products of the first decades of the new millennium which converse with multimodal textualities and cross-digital platforms (such as TV adaptations, theatre transpositions, song playlists, podcasts, blogs, etc). More specifically, the seminar aims to disclose the transformative role of storytelling in constructing, challenging, and re-signifying British cultural identities within a conflictual glocal sphere so as to foster possibilities for social justice and renewed human(e) relationships.

In this context, the investigation of the interplay of the inherent affordances of the cultural texts under scrutiny through the analytical lens of MCDA reveals how their sociopolitical constructs evolve, are shaped, challenged, and redefined across different media and over time, reflecting broader shifts in the understanding of Britishness in contemporary society. Inasmuch as the multimodal analytical perspective enables the examination of meaning-making practices within complex intertextual and cross-media networks, the critical framework adopted here helps interrogate how cultural products engage with and reframe key concepts such as language, (classed/racialized/gendered) identity, community and belonging. Thus, this seminar explores how the theoretical porosity between the culturalist and the multimodal paradigms provides new opportunities to scrutinize the complexity of today's British meaning-poietic arenas. Against this backdrop, the English language is viewed as a carrier of (oppositional) semiotic resources and a vehicle for decentred/excentric discursive practices, interwoven with performances of cultural identity.

Aiming to reflect on the perceptions and self-perceptions of an ever-evolving Britishness in the context of contemporary socio-political events and historical/cultural shifts, the convenors welcome abstract proposals centred around (but not necessarily limited to):

- revisited perspectives on and intersections of class, race/ethnicity, gender, etc., in contemporary British (multimodal) storytelling, particularly within urban and suburban settings
- the analysis of hybrid narratives and storytelling across transmedial circuits
- the (problematized) depiction of migration, cultural relocation, and multiculturalism in contemporary British cultural products
- the engagement of artistic expressions, such as Artivism, with political and social discourses surrounding British cultural identities.

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SEM19. Papers

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- *Critical crossings: Analysing the mediascapes of Open Water and Sex Education through the culturalist and multimodal paradigm* (Ester Gendusa, Università degli Studi di Palermo / Emanuele Monegato, Università degli Studi di Milano / Anna Pasolini, Università San Raffaele Roma)
- *Migraction. Multimodal storytelling, agency, pedagogy* (Nicoletta Vallorani, Università degli Studi di Milano)
- *Staging resistance and belonging: Cultural identity in the poetic performances of Warsan Shire and Shailja Patel* (Carla Tempestoso, Università della Calabria)
- *Quiet pluralism in print: Entangled voices and multimodal dissent in The Dublin Magazine* (Elena Ogliari, Università degli Studi di Milano)

SEM19. Abstracts

Critical crossings: Analysing the mediascapes of Open Water and Sex Education through the culturalist and multimodal paradigm

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Our paper intends to both cast light on and test, through selected case studies – the productive analytical models that emerge from the often overlooked or insufficiently acknowledged theoretical intersections between Cultural Studies and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA).

Their respective peculiarities have long prevailed onto their critical porosity, with few loci of reciprocal engagement. While some analyses acknowledge this theoretical permeability only partially, others incorporate elements of both paradigms without fully recognizing them as part of an integrated critical approach.

Against this background, we wish to underline that, when brought to dialogue, Cultural Studies and MCDA operate as transformative analytical frameworks, engaging with the ways in which (Foucauldian) discourse shapes – and is shaped by – power relations and disclosing the meaning-making potential of multiple semiotic modes as they intersect in specific media environments. The analysis of the proposed case studies illustrates the extent to which their intersection creates a fertile ground for analyzing how language – be it textual, visual, or performative – can function as an instrument of resistance, subverting power structures within the examined mediascapes produced in contemporary cultural contexts of the British Isles.

Indeed, a close examination of the debut novel *Open Water* (2021) by Caleb Nelson and the TV Series *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019-2023) allows us to unpack the ways in which both Cultural Studies and MCDA interrogate the sociocultural and ideological forces underpinning identities, representation, and meaning-making processes, providing specific methodological tools to dissect the multimodal semiotic resources that challenge – but also sustain – dominant narratives.

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Quiet pluralism in print: Entangled voices and multimodal dissent in *The Dublin Magazine*

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In a present-day Ireland confronting surging xenophobia, arson attacks on refugee housing, and conspiratorial rhetoric such as “The Great Plantation”—a localised adaptation of the “Great Replacement” theory—discourses on nationhood are increasingly shaped by economic anxiety as well as ethnic and cultural protectionism. Even though the most extreme views remain minority positions, their growing influence invites reflection on earlier historical moments of growing isolationism when the boundaries of Irishness were similarly contested. The early 1920s, marked by the foundation of the Free State and the 1922 Irish Race Conference, witnessed the consolidation of a Catholic ethno-nationalist vision that excluded cultural and religious minorities. The continued application of British Aliens legislation, anti-emigration campaigns motivated by concerns over ethnic and moral purity, and laws such as the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) institutionalised this narrow vision. Yet, amid this context of exclusion, literary periodicals played a crucial role in imagining alternatives.

This paper examines *The Dublin Magazine* (1923–1958), edited by Seumas O’Sullivan with the vital collaboration of his partner and later wife Estella Solomons, as a site of pluralistic and multimodal dissent. Focusing on its formative years (1923–1930), I explore how the magazine operated as an entangled artefact—materially and ideologically—within intersecting networks of media, social, and cultural politics. I highlight the editorial and artistic contributions of Solomons and Hannah Berman, two Irish-Jewish women whose works challenged dominant narratives through quiet but sustained resistance.

Berman’s stories and translations, often set in Eastern European shtetls, are steeped in Irish concerns, interrogating antisemitism, marginalisation, and mythologies of tolerance. Solomons’s etchings and editorial labour embedded overlooked urban and social realities into the visual and material archive of Irishness. Aaron Kernoff’s illustrations, particularly his stark artwork for Berman’s “The Charity Box”, further underline the periodical’s multimodal strategies for representing social exclusion and minority experience. Together with contributions from Samuel Beckett, the ‘pagan witch’ Ella Young, and A.J. Leventhal, the magazine became a space where editorial curation assembled voices from across cultural, religious, and aesthetic spectra.

My methodology integrates recent multimodal periodical theory, drawing on the periodical’s role as a “performative” artefact (Ernst *et al.*, 2022, p. 18), alongside cultural studies’ interest in minor archives, affect, and media entanglements. In doing so, I propose *The Dublin Magazine* as a case study in “quiet pluralism”—where multimodality, rather than overt political rhetoric, sustains alternative imaginaries of Irish identity.

At a time when national belonging is again being redefined, this historical instance of media practice offers a model for how visual, textual, and graphic assemblages can foster community, resist homogeneity, and amplify marginal voices not through manifesto or provocation, but through subtle, sustained acts of editorial and artistic curation. This Irish case study also invites comparative reflection on how periodicals across the Anglophone world have shaped—and can continue to shape—inclusive and humane national narratives.

References

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Staging resistance and belonging: Cultural identity in the poetic performances of Warsan Shire and Shailja Patel

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This paper investigates the poetics of identity, belonging, and resistance in the spoken-word performances (Weinstein 2018) and published works of British-Somali poet Warsan Shire and Indian-Kenyan activist Shailja Patel. Against a backdrop of migration, displacement, and contested definitions of Britishness, both poets craft deeply embodied narratives that interrogate the intersections of race, gender, and cultural memory. Rooted in lived experience and political urgency, their work navigates the emotional landscapes of diasporic pain, inherited trauma, and historical silencing, offering counter-narratives that challenge dominant notions of nationhood and global belonging.

Drawing on the interpretive frameworks of cultural studies, this study explores how Shire's and Patel's poetry transcends the printed page to unfold within shared performative spaces—live, digital, and transnational. Through the concept of “worlding” (Di Leo 2024), the paper highlights how their performances enact a “potentiality of the literary act in time” (Spiers 2020, 256) engaging audiences in acts of witness, co-creation, and resistance. Language, in their hands, becomes both archive and action: a site for staging identity not as static, but as performative, relational, and politically charged.

By foregrounding the affective and communal dimensions of poetic performance, this paper situates Shire and Patel within contemporary British cultural production and broader transnational circuits, tracing how their work reconfigures possibilities for solidarity, empathy, and cultural reimagination in an increasingly fragmented global society.

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Migration. Multimodal storytelling, agency, pedagogy

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This contribution is part of my ongoing research on the inflections, modes and value of storytelling in an approach to the issue of migration that is able to produce both theoretical, practical and pedagogical tools to promote a deeper awareness of the tragedy taking place in the Mediterranean Sea. My point is how to transform the observation of a pervasive global phenomenon reaching one of the most visible peaks in the Mediterranean sea into positive action through the tools of art and within the educational framework. Partly following Pulitano's reflection on ARTivism (Pulitano, 2022), I will ground my analysis on the assumption that creative storytelling has to be a political gesture aimed at producing a change: a catalyst that can make new paths to a healthy community (Almaraz, 1976).

I will draw examples from some installations by John Akomfrah (*Vertigo Sea*, 2015; *Four Nocturnes*, 2019; *Listening all night to the rain*, 2024) and from some poems of Warsan Shire, with specific reference to the collection *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (Shire, 2011). In both cases, though in different ways, the artists address the audience directly and potently, exploiting the grammar of different media and offering a representation that is at the same time understandable and artistically sophisticated. Their work may prove perfectly suitable as an educational tool precisely because it is multilevel and multimodal, and it opens the way to a much needed cultural turn on how to act about migration.

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