

## Litteraturvetenskap, miljö och hållbarhet, GU 3–4 dec. 2020

### Panel proposal

#### **Freethinking, Passivity, Weirdness: Reconsidering the Anthropocene Through Literary History**

This panel consists of four papers offering a historical perspective from the 16<sup>th</sup> century until today on how philosophy, literature and art explore questions around the Anthropocene, ecologies, climate change, and sustainability. The main question is how artistic works and experiences might transform our understanding of these issues in ways that can help us overcome a widespread sense of alienation and intangibility (Neimanis, Åsberg, Hedrén 2015). The panel focuses on historical contexts as well as on aesthetic and philosophical concepts and narratives in order to discover and create alternative modes of understanding and living on a transformed planet. Hence, the aim is partly to historicize the current notion of crisis by turning to contemporary and historical fiction and aesthetics as well as to philosophical works.

#### **Reactualizing Early Modern Challenges of Human Exceptionalism in sixteenth century women's fairy tale**

The notions that humans are masters and possessors of nature and that animals are soul-less machinelike creatures unable to reason famously goes back to Descartes. In light of human threats to the environment, the Cartesian understanding of the human subject has understandably become the target of much criticism. In recognition that if we are to reverse the trajectory into ecological disaster, new definitions of the human are needed as is surely acknowledged in the Environmental Humanities. In this important effort, the presence in Descartes' era of alternative perceptions of more animal-like humans are however too often neglected, as this paper argues. Among sixteenth century French female freethinkers, such divergent perceptions flourished. In specific, the paper turns to the fairy tales written by these freethinking women because fairy tales were an important genre to explore the fluidity of boundaries between humans and animals. Especially tales by the genre's inventor, Madame d'Aulnoy (ca 1650-1705) call for scrutiny because her use of animals in metamorphosis tales is preeminent. As the paper lays out, the tales unsettle the Cartesian idea of human exceptionalism. They renew more ecosystemic views on man as never entirely separate from animals in pre-Cartesian thinking, thus challenging the rise of a modern divide between humans and animals (Seifert 2011, Shannon 2012). By bringing the questioning of human exceptionalism in sixteenth century fairy tales into the discussions in the Environmental Humanities, the paper aims at making history enrich new definitions of humanity across the human-animal divide.

Nan Gerdes, [gerdes@ruc.dk](mailto:gerdes@ruc.dk), Roskilde University

#### **Early Modern Freethinking as Posthumanism *avant la lettre***

If the constitution of the modern subject is indebted to Descartes' self-grounding and self-positing of the subject of thought and knowledge this paper discusses how 17<sup>th</sup> century freethinking in the wake of Montaigne articulated a counterdiscourse to this dominating form of subjectivity. Special attention will be given to the reception of Montaigne's critique of human sovereignty by focusing on the discussion about the animal-human relationship in Descartes and La Fontaine. I more specifically discuss how the speaking animals in La Fontaine's fables can be read as explorations of the boundaries of human identity actualized by the epistemic shift that marked the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which was also a confrontation between two different forms of reason. Focus will be on the theories of language that can be detected in Montaigne and La Fontaine on the one side and in Descartes on the other and how they give rise to divergent "*anthroptechne*" (Siegert). The purpose is to highlight the plurality of early modern subjectivity and its relevance for current theories of posthumanism and the crisis of the modern subject.

Carin Franzén, [carin.franzen@littvet.su.se](mailto:carin.franzen@littvet.su.se), Stockholm University

#### **The Hesitation of the King: Subjectivity and Agency in Johannes V Jensen's *The Fall of the King***

The paper is a part of a bigger project on hesitation and passivity in a series of novels written 1860–1920. Since the novel was the ideal form to codify the modern subject, it is tempting to read these moments of hesitation as points where progress hesitates on itself. And this is interesting, given the urgent need to rethink agency today. In this paper I will discuss a scene in the Danish writer Johannes V Jensen's classic novel *The Fall of the King* (1901). The king is about to cross the channel between Jutland and the island of Fyn, after an attempt to gather the Danish people. Now he is giving up, returning to Copenhagen. However, when they reach the other shore he

changes his mind and asks his men to turn around. Before reaching Jutland he changes his mind again, and turns back towards Copenhagen. And thus he continues, back and forth over the dark water, unable to reach a decision. I will try to read this scene both inspired by Jane Bennet and Bruno Latour, arguing that the agency is not only situated in the King's mind, but spread out over the whole situation, and in a more dialectical way, inspired by Adorno, maintaining the distinction between subject and object. In that way I hope to be able to say something about our situation today, about hope and hopelessness, agency and powerlessness.

Anders Johansson, [SvenAnders.Johansson@miun.se](mailto:SvenAnders.Johansson@miun.se), Mittuniversitetet

### **“Weird Words, Epidemic Silences: Environmental Change and Mutations of Language in Recent Post-Apocalyptic Fiction”**

“Is language not the anthropological tool *par excellence*?” asks Rosi Braidotti in her analysis of the posthuman. If so, how are we to understand recent fiction that tells of a world where silence takes over and spreads like a disease, where voices become toxic, or where language has turned into an eerie and partly alien flow of sounds? This paper addresses this question while reading a set of novels – e.g. Ben Marcus’ *The Flame Alphabet* (2012), *Silent History* (2014) by Horowitz et al, and Nils Håkanson’s *Ödmården* (2017) – in which climate change, pollution, forms of extraction, and capitalism concur radical transformations of language and communicative practices. Taking place in a near or far future, these novels evoke future pasts and interrogate present ways of living and acting. But they also imagine other modes of knowing and sharing, which will be discussed here in terms of ‘posthuman media ecologies’, taking a cue from works by Braidotti (2015, 2019) and Hayles (1999, 2017), but also from recent analyses of techno-ecologies and ecologization by e.g. Hörl (2017) and Parisi (2017). In focusing on language and the voice, the pillars of a humanist vision of the planet, the novels problematize an insistent anthropocentrism and pave the way, to quote a recent observation by Bignall and Braidotti (2018) for the construction of a framework for “the elaboration of alternative values and new codes of inter-relation that extend beyond human influence and cognizance, but do not discount it”.

Jesper Olsson, [jesper.olsson@liu.se](mailto:jesper.olsson@liu.se), Linköping University