

Comparative Humanities

Stockholm University|Södertörn University

27-28 October 2011

Organisers: Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback
Stefan Helgesson
Anna-Pya Sjödin

1

Comparison is not what it used to be. Historicist thought, in the lineage from Herder, Hegel and Humboldt, proposed that cultures follow unique and separate trajectories. Thus, comparison was predicated on incomparability. In the twentieth century, by contrast, structuralist thought insisted that cultural differences were epiphenomenal. Given the deeper, universal structures of human cultures and languages, comparison would ultimately confirm the comparability of all human cultures.

Today, the preconditions for comparison in the humanities are significantly different. Globalisation has simultaneously intensified processes of cultural homogenisation, hybridisation and fragmentation across the world. Within the academy, exchanges between different research traditions and theoretical vocabularies have likewise increased. Calls for “global” and “transnational” approaches to literature, history, philosophy, and aesthetics are rife. The historicist and structuralist legacies provide however insufficient or compromised means to deal with this challenge. What are, then, the available theoretical and methodological paradigms for comparative endeavours? What can the various humanities learn from each other? Postcolonial theory, world literature studies, world history, anthropology, comparative philosophy, translation studies and related fields all deal with this question. The conference “Comparative Humanities” wants to bring these fields of investigation into dialogue with one another.

Welcome to Comparative Humanities! This programme should contain all the relevant information for the two conference days. If you have any further questions do not hesitate to approach the organisers or the assistants.

Comparative Humanities

Stockholm University | Södertörn University

27-28 October 2011

Thursday 27 October

8.30	Registration			
9.15-11.00	<p><u>Opening</u> Welcome address: Rebecka Lettevall First keynote: Barbara Cassin, <i>On translation as paradigm: in praise of a consistent relativism</i> Chair: Cavalcante Discussant: Wallenstein</p>			Venue for entire conference: F-11, Moas båge Södertörn University
11.00-11.30	Coffee			
11.30-13.00	<u>First session</u>	<p>Panels: <i>Comparative philosophy (I)</i> (Davis, Lawrence, Wirth) Chair: Cavalcante</p>	<p>Panels: <i>New comparativities in literature</i> (Horta, Alvstad) Chair: Helgesson</p>	
13.00-14.00	Lunch			
14.00-16.00	<u>Second session</u>	<p><i>Slave memory and oceanic paradigms: the Indian Ocean/the Atlantic</i> (Kullberg, Olausson, Ekelund) Chair: Thomsen</p>	<p><i>Time, memory and representation</i> (Ericsson, Fareld, Karlholm, Sandomirskaja) Chair: Cavalcante</p>	
16.00-16.30	Coffee			
16.30-18.00	<p>Second keynote: Andre Gingrich, <i>A new pluralism in comparative methods</i> Chair: Sjödin Discussant: Finnström</p>			
18.00	Buffet dinner			

Friday 28 October

9.30-11.00	Third keynote: Naoki Sakai, <i>The locale of comparison and the microphysics of power</i> Chair: Helgesson Discussant: Ghose			
11.00-11.30	Coffee			
11.30-13.30	<u>Third session</u>	<i>Comparative philosophy (II)</i> (Ovens, Svensson, Liu) Chair: Sjödin	<i>Comparisons In an empire: universalisms and the particular</i> (Cederlöf, Goodall) Chair: Olaussen	
13.30-14.30	Lunch			
14.30-16.00	<u>Fourth session</u>	<i>Concepts for comparative humanities</i> (Thomsen, Rider, Attwell) Chair: Kullberg		
16.00-16.15	Break			
16.15-17.30	<u>Closing discussion</u>			
19.00	Dinner (at a restaurant in central Stockholm)			

Participants and titles

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

Barbara Cassin, CNRS, Paris

On translation as paradigm: in praise of a consistent relativism

Andre Gingrich, University of Vienna

A new pluralism in comparative methods and their relevance for critical research today

Naoki Sakai, Cornell University

The locale of comparison and the microphysics of power

CONFERENCE DELEGATES (in alphabetical order)

Cecilia Alvstad, Stockholm University

Translating voice: voice as a travelling concept in the humanities

David Attwell, University of York

Stilted conversations: postcolonial mimesis and postcolonial theory

Gunnel Cederlöf, Uppsala University

International mercantile commerce, law and nature; Bengal, Burma, Yunnan: reframing regions, early 19th century

Bret W. Davis, Loyola University Maryland

The unavoidable dilemma of (comparative) philosophy: toward a middle path with the Kyoto School

Bo G. Ekelund, Stockholm University

The production of ambivalent space in anglophone Caribbean fiction: comparing spaces, comparing scenes

Staffan Ericsson, Södertörn University

Why compare media?

Victoria Fareld, University of Gothenburg

History compared

Heather Goodall, University of Technology, Sydney

Intercolonial interactions: comparative strategies for understanding decolonisation in Australia, India and Indonesia in the eastern Indian Ocean

Paulo Lemos Horta, NYU Abu Dhabi

World literature as a distinctive mode of comparison

Dan Karlholm, Södertörn University
Levels of comparability: art history as a comparative discipline

Christina Kullberg, Uppsala University
Caribbean ethnographic poetics

Joseph Lawrence, College of the Holy Cross
In search of the strangely familiar

Quanhua Liu, Gonzaga University
On the comparability of cross-cultural comparison

Maria Olausson, Linnaeus University
Finding the future in the archive: South African expressions of slave memory

Martin Ovens, Oxford University
Interpreting Śamkara: creativity and scepticism in comparative philosophy

Sharon Rider, Uppsala University
Comparison, crisis and critique

Irina Sandomirskaja, Södertörn University
Comparativity: illuminating or imperialising

Martin Svensson, Södertörn University
Methodology and screen memories in comparative studies

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, Aarhus University
Cultural intimacy and global dominance: the troubles of finding new grounds for comparison in literature studies

Jason Wirth, Seattle University
What is comparative philosophy?

DISCUSSANTS

Sverker Finnström, Stockholm University
Sheila Ghose, Södertörn University
Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Södertörn University

Welcome address by **Rebecka Lettevall**, pro-vice-chancellor, Södertörn University

ABSTRACTS

Keynotes

Barbara Cassin, CNRS, Paris

On translation as paradigm: in praise of a consistent relativism

“If I had to risk, so help me God, one single definition of deconstruction, brief, elliptic, economical as a command, I would say, without a sentence, ‘more than one language’”, Jacques Derrida writes in *Mémoires pour Paul de Man*. In what way can the consideration of the plurality of languages help deconstructing the philosophical universal, complicate it, and serve as a paradigm for comparativism? And what comparativism, by the way? I would like to reflect, from out of the both philosophical and political gesture of *Vocabulaire européen des philosophes, dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, (*European vocabulary of philosophers, a dictionary of un-translatables*) on what the difficulties of translations teach us. Departing from the use of homonymy implied in the translation of a simple sentence, I shall try to propose, in connection to the relativity of translation, a model of consistent relativism, comprehending also the political.

Andre Gingrich, University of Vienna

A new pluralism in comparative methods and their relevance for critical research today

Epistemological, methodological, and institutional factors continue to indicate a growing interest for comparative perspectives and procedures in the humanities and the social sciences - and a rising awareness in their relevance for critical academic research today. As a transnational and cross-cultural discipline, socio-cultural anthropology is in a good position to contribute to some of these

debates by addressing the interrelation and the differences between various important dimensions of comparison. Comparison as a general aspect of human cognition, for instance, intersects with but is not identical to comparative approaches in research; qualitative comparative methods do not exclude quantitative comparison yet have a rationale of their own; a priori comparative projects face different problems than comparing research results a posteriori. In addition to such refined concepts and techniques designed for a new pluralism in qualitative comparative methods, the respective connections to different epistemological horizons require debate and reflection. Beyond the extremes of radical universalism and radical empiricism, the anthropological experience suggests to privilege versions of “soft universalism” as especially fertile grounds for acknowledging, analyzing, and theorizing similarities as well as differences among the phenomena we subject to our critical comparative enquiry.

Naoki Sakai, Cornell University

The locale of comparison and the microphysics of power

Two moments – one logical and the other political – can be discerned in the act of comparison in the Humanities.

The first is the postulation of the class of *genus* among compared items. Comparison is performed between or among individuals identified as *species* while comparison is conducted and constitutive of the logical dimension of *genus* where *species difference* is measured, judged or discovered. Attributed to the class of *species* are particular cultures, languages, economic systems, political ideologies, and so forth, each of which is postulated as an indivisible unit (individual) and as a particular (*species*) example of the general class (*genus*). Thus, we compare the English language with the German language, for instance. Insofar as

English is assumed to be a systematicity, it is an individual, but as one of many languages, it is a particular *species* of the general *genus* of language.

The second moment is the occasion or locale where we are obliged to compare. Comparison takes place because the determination of *species difference* is needed. For instance, language difference causes a situation where we need to know why we are at a loss with one another. It is also possible to imagine another situation where we need to know how we are different from one another, why certain people are not subjugated to one's norms or commands, why some of us are free from a set of proscriptions while others are not. Thus we compare ourselves to find where we are situated vis-à-vis one another. Comparison is indispensable precisely because we want to know how we are related to one another, who is better among us, who should follow whom among us, who should work for whom among us, and so on. It is through the act of comparison that we comprehend the configuration of our positions in which we apprehend our identities in terms of gender, race, social class, nationality, civilization, religion, culture, professional qualifications and so forth.

The range of objects of comparison in the Humanities is wide. In this paper, therefore, I focus on the types of comparative objects: culture, nationality and civilization. What I want to undertake is an examination of how the second moment of political maneuver predetermines the scope of deployment for the first moment of logical categorization. Particular attention is paid to identity politics in Comparative Humanities because the comparative aspect of identity politics is often erased, despite the uncontested fact that the process of identification is premised upon comparative operations.

I will also examine the ambiguous concept of the individual in relation to the logical economy of the *species* and the

genus. When it is in conjunction with personality and subjectivity, the term 'individual' manifests conceptual instability; it is at the same time regulated by the economy of specification and absolutely beyond (incommensurate with) the *species*. I would like to introduce this conceptual ambiguity of the individual into my understanding of the locale of comparison, a topos where we are articulated to one another.

Papers (grouped according to panels)

Comparative Philosophy (I)

Bret W. Davis, Loyola University
Maryland

The unavoidable dilemma of (comparative) philosophy: toward a middle path with the Kyoto school

The enterprise of philosophy qua comparative philosophy presents us with an unavoidable dilemma: either we presuppose a universal discourse into which others are reductively translated, conflating in advance the universal with a particular; or we abandon the quest for universality out of respect for differences, in effect forsaking the philosophical quest for universal truth or presuming to have satisfied this quest with a (self-refuting) relativism. The dilemma of comparative philosophy is nothing new. In its specifically Greek inception, philosophy was unmistakably comparative: philosophical *logos* was conceived in the ancient Greek world as a "neutral" and "universal" adjudicator between the variety of *mythoi* which were coming into contact in the Aegean and Mediterranean region at that time. Insofar as the Greeks thought that their particular world was alone defined by its universality, or at least, as Husserl will assert much later, by its monopoly on the quest for universality,

they impaled themselves on the first horn of the dilemma. Alternatively, we impale ourselves today on the other horn if we either retreat into our cultural-traditional shell or in some other way abandon the comparative philosophical endeavor which, in the West, started with the Greeks. How then should we respond to this dilemma? I propose that a middle path through its horns can be navigated only by pluralizing the perspectives from which (comparative) philosophy is done. This entails varying the place in which the dialogue between cultures and their philosophies takes place, alternating, so to speak, the world which hosts the meeting of worlds. Among Japanese philosophers, those associated with the Kyoto School are most remarkable for their commitment to engaging in and reflecting on comparative philosophy from their own Japanese-intercultural standpoint. In this paper, after discussing the unavoidable dilemma of comparative philosophy in general, I will address this issue from the specific perspective of the Kyoto School, focusing on the thought of the central members of the School's first three generations: Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), Nishitani Keiji (1900–1990), and Ueda Shizuteru (b. 1926). I will introduce their attempt to respond to the dilemma of comparative philosophy with the idea of “absolute nothingness.” Only if the ultimate universal is conceived in terms of absolute nothingness, they suggest, can cultures be allowed to dialogically interact without being either alienated from or reduced to one another. In this way, the Kyoto School has not only engaged in comparative philosophy, they have also reflected on its very sense and possibility, providing us with a non-Western philosophical reflection on comparative philosophy that Western philosophers ignore at the expense of being impaled yet again on one of two horns.

Joseph Lawrence, College of the Holy Cross

In Search of the Strangely Familiar

Comparative forays are defined by both a *need* and a *danger*. The need can be glimpsed both in the way members of displaced and endangered cultures seek orientation by investigating the dominant culture (which is, after all, their future) and in the way the more sensitive members of the dominant culture seek to revitalize lost roots through an encounter with the endangered other. What these “more sensitive” ones correctly sense is that domination is itself the perversion of culture and thus the withering of all rootedness. These double investigations are at the same time fraught by the danger that the comparative impulse can itself be absorbed into the drive for domination. This is the case to the degree that “comparison” is an attempt to render familiar the strange. The proper spirit of comparative inquiry lies in a moment not of rendering, but of simple recognition: recognizing in the strange the strangely familiar. One could well speak here of an enthrallment. The search for command has to be countered by a search for enthrallment.

Jason Wirth, Seattle University

What is Comparative Philosophy?

This is a seemingly innocent and straightforward question, but I will contend that it is not. *Prima facie*, its innocence derives from the simple assumption that we are asking what type of the genus philosophy is indicated by its specification as *comparative*. This reading assumes that we know we already know about philosophy in general and that we consequently seek to know or debate something new about it in particular. I will argue that this image of philosophy is, at best, a false composite, that is, it generalizes about images of thinking that are irreconcilably different in kind. To ask about comparative philosophy is first to ask more fundamentally about the *nature*

of philosophy itself. Since the genuine differences about what is at stake in philosophy are flattened in the uni-dimensional assumption that all of philosophy partakes in a shared nature, I will attempt to retrieve and articulate some of these differences. In so doing, I will argue for an image of comparative philosophy that originates in a strange experience of what is of value and how it becomes meaningful in philosophy as such. After retrieving comparative philosophy as a new image of philosophy itself (already at stake before one brings different traditions into dialogue and already in play in reading any text in any tradition of philosophy), I will explore a particularly pointed case study by bringing three of the greatest T'ang Dynasty Chan Masters (Huang-Po, Linji, and Chao Chou) into dialogue with Nietzsche and Deleuze.

To summarize more schematically:

1. I will argue against the image of comparative philosophy as an application of philosophy itself.
2. I will do so first by retrieving repressed differences within philosophy as such.
3. In this liberated space of thinking, I will argue for another image of philosophy, that is, another assessment of what is at stake (of value) in philosophy and how it is related to what meaningfully belongs by right to philosophy. What evaluation and what interpretation of the act of interpretation (operating sense of what makes concepts appropriate and meaningful) gives to thinking what it is entitled to think? How does philosophical thinking decide what rightfully belongs to it? Hence, I will develop both the thought of the “image of thought” (which I largely borrow from Deleuze) and its development as what we are calling provisionally

“comparative of philosophy” as more properly an image of what belongs to philosophy as such.

4. This broad analysis shall then be studied *in concreto* (the only place it really escapes the generalities that it is attempting to transcend) through an experiment with the case study indicated above.

New comparativities in literature

Paulo Lemos Horta, New York University
Abu Dhabi

World literature as a distinctive mode of comparison

For writers like Milan Kundera, Goethe’s proclamation of the advent of world literature remains a testament betrayed. Observing that “national literature no longer means much these days,” Goethe had ventured that “we are entering the era of *Weltliteratur*” or world literature. Yet world literature, Kundera lamented in an essay reprinted for a global Anglophone readership in the *New Yorker* in 2007, has always been presented as a juxtaposition of national literatures, the large context of its art forsaken for the small context of the nation. Kundera damns departments of foreign literature for adopting the opinions, tastes and prejudices of whichever national literature they teach (“it is in foreign universities that a work of art is most intractably mired in its home province”). With the revival of world literature as a critical approach in the academy, in which Goethe is sometimes invoked as a guide to what needs follow postmodernism and postcolonialism, it proves timely to ask if the object of inquiry transcends the small context of the nation derided by Kundera. Against a skepticism that would dismiss this revival as the latest variant of the imperialism of theory or of global English, or merely the expansion of the project of national literature or comparative literature

understood as ‘juxtaposed literatures’, this paper argues there are indeed literary phenomena that call for the comparison afforded by world literature as a distinctive and necessary approach.

Cecilia Alvstad, University of Oslo

Translating voice: voice as a travelling concept in the humanities

In her seminal *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002), Mieke Bal claims that interdisciplinary research in the humanities should focus on concepts, and not so much on methods. Good interdisciplinary research, she says, travels with a rich concept to many sorts of case studies, thereby engaging several disciplines, and it comes home with an even richer concept and with cases that are now related through the enriched concept. The central concept this paper will explore is *voice*, which loosely indicates that words are discourse involving agents with intentions, norms, identities, agency. *Voice* is especially important in literary studies and linguistics, two disciplines that are steadily growing apart, despite the conference call’s claim that “[w]ithin the academy, exchanges between different research traditions and theoretical vocabularies have [...] increased”. *Voice* can be a meeting point between literary studies and linguistics and it should also travel—in its multidisciplinary richness—to Translation Studies, as it may enlighten and relate—and be further enriched by—case studies in the translation of culture. The translation of culture may thus be explained as constellations of voices: authors’, translators’, publishers’, characters’ voices; peripheral, official, counter-cultural voices; etc. Already a rich concept, *voice* will become an even richer one, “translated” for Translation Studies and by translation scholars.

Slave memory and oceanic paradigms: The Indian Ocean/The Atlantic

Christina Kullberg, Uppsala University

Caribbean ethnographic poetics

Some have argued that the “literary turn” of ethnography that followed in the wake of Clifford Geertz’ and James Clifford’s publications in the 1970s and 1980s have led to an epistemological shift within the discipline. In comparing the account of the ethnographer with that of the fictive work of a writer, the very constructiveness and processuality of anthropological knowledge replaced “classical” anthropological claims to truth. Likewise, notably French authors, from Michel Leiris to Annie Ernaux, have used ethnography not to explore the out-side world or the culture of the Other, but the self. It looks as if literature and anthropology are domains that are easily transposable from one another; almost too easy one could argue. Drawing from the presence of ethnography in the writings of French Caribbean authors, this paper questions this easily given comparison between the two domains. Coming from a culture that has been subjected to the gaze of the ethnographer, their re-appropriation of this particular discourse puts ethnography into question. In other words, as much as they transform ethnography when integrating it into fiction, French Caribbean authors highlight the difference between fiction and ethnography. I argue that in the split that separates the claims of ethnography with those of literature authors such as Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau develop a poetics, which at once interrogates self and the representation of culture.

Maria Olaussen, Linnaeus University

Finding the future in the archive: South African expressions of slave memory

This paper focuses on different strategies employed by present-day South African narratives of slavery in their articulation of slave memory. Rayda Jacob's novel *The Slave Book* (1998), Therese Benadé's family history *Kites of Good Fortune* (2004), and Yvettë Christianse's *Unconfessed* (2006) are based on sources from the colonial archival and related to the present by authors who identify themselves as descendants of slaves. In this presentation I will address the question of competing voices, particularly in relation to how the texts deal with the issue of assimilation. The paper will focus on the function of the literary text in complex transnational contexts.

As many historians have pointed out, slavery at the Cape was not connected to the Atlantic trading system but formed an integral part of the slave-trading network of the Dutch East Indies. The social barriers which came about as a result of the strict slave-free divide in the Atlantic World were much less distinct in slave societies of the Indian Ocean world and the assimilation of slaves into slaveholding households included both religious, cultural and linguistic assimilation. As a direct consequence of this lack of clear cut social divisions, slaves did not necessarily develop a class consciousness and identify themselves as slaves with the aim of abolition but, in the words of historian Gwyn Campbell, were more inclined to "secure a niche within the dominant society" (xxii). While the question of emancipation and manumission depended on particular definitions of individual freedom based on the ideals of European liberalism, Indian Ocean slavery evolved in entirely different contexts within complex systems of dependency and obligations encompassing all members of society. In South Africa, however, structures of oppression were perpetuated through the use of labour legislation following emancipation (1834-38) and the processes of assimilation effectively cut short by increasingly racialised access to

land and political power. Descendants of slaves articulate the past from vastly different positions, depending on how they were positioned racially through the processes of apartheid classification.

Slave narratives are generally concerned with the question of voice. From the very beginning the slave narrative in the Atlantic tradition were framed within a Christian tradition of confession and conversion and used different techniques of authentication in order to show that, in spite of heavy restrictions on slave literacy, this particular slave narrative was in fact written by a slave. The connection to the discourse of emancipation is central here and determined the conditions for the subject constitution of slaves. South African novels of slavery differ from the Atlantic ones in this respect. There are no South African slave narratives written by a slave and the use of historical and archival material in the recreation of the experiences of slavery takes place within a context where the problems of appropriation and the presence of power structures between author and subject are highly visible. Placed within the context of post-apartheid South Africa, the slave narratives articulate a suppressed part of South African history with complex relations to colonial and apartheid power structures.

Bo G. Ekelund, Stockholm University
The production of ambivalent space in anglophone Caribbean fiction: comparing spaces, comparing scenes
 Caribbean writers are not alone in having had to negotiate the link, imposed on them by history and geography, between concrete local places and an abstract global, or at least transnational, space. West Indian novels and poems have often met that challenge while keeping faith with the dynamics of the favored local space: the street of the village or the urban slum. Those streets have typically been presented as places of struggle, but also

sites for a learning process. As such, they have constantly been related, by implicit or explicit conjunction, to schools and school-rooms. In this way, the local has been confronted with the spuriously universal.

In their mapping of exemplary lives and situations, West Indian fiction and poetry can be explored for their production of this conflicted relation: the constraints and ambiguous horizons of the street contrast with the seemingly limitless social space of English-language education, in a broad sense. Socially and culturally, this relation is itself a significant spatial phenomenon that emerges with West Indian society, from the introduction of colonial schooling, through independence and after.

The literary production of space is emergent, I assume, from the spatial relations of the social and physical world, but also from the literary conventions that are available for this labor. Comparison across different narrative traditions would have to take into account these separate histories. But the groundwork would have to start with the “distant” reading of a host of narratives.

In my study of this particular case of a favored space, it is the scenic form of its narrativization that has come into sharper focus. The scene, as analyzed by Genette and other narratologists, is a half-way house between description (of statically apprehended objects, setting etc) and summary (of rapidly unfolding events). As a formal, analytical unit, it makes comparisons possible, and enables a tracing of lineages. At the same time, it invites questions about its validity as a cross-cultural unit. Is the narrative scene a product of the European novel? Is the narratological analysis, likewise, limited by the Western apparatus it derives from?

A comparison of the narrativization of space must start with the local production of space, but with formal units that can be articulated translocally. The scene that captures a tension between a conceived space of formal schooling and a lived

space of alternative learning may provide a testing ground.

Time, memory and representation

Victoria Fareld, Gothenburg University

History Compared

Since the beginning of historicist thought there has been a constitutive tension in the historiographical operation grounded in the non-historicist presupposition at the core of historicity’s claim: only by comparison does the incomparable itself appear. In the light of this tension I will reflect upon what it might mean to historicize the past, to make a phenomenon become historical. What kind of incomparable comparison is at work in the process of historicization?

Irina Sandomirskaja, Södertörn University

Comparativity: illuminating or imperialising

“To illuminate one language by means of another, to explain the forms of one through the forms of the other...”, this is how de Saussure describes comparative language studies. Even in this generous statement of the purpose of comparison, this latter reveals itself as a hierarchical and hegemonic relation. It is based on the general presupposition of inequality and asymmetry between self and other and is therefore a powerful alienating device. De Saussure’s “illumination” suggests a response to this exploitative capacity of comparison and sounds unexpectedly Benjaminian. Benjamin suggests practicing relatedness as mutual illumination of languages in translation, instead of calculating it as “abstract areas of identity and similarity” between “us” and “them”, whether across space or across time.

Staffan Ericsson, Södertörn University

Why compare media?

The central question of 20th century medium theory was, it has been suggested, the following: "What are the relatively fixed features of each means of communication, and how do these features make the medium physically, psychologically, and socially different from other media and from face-to-face-communication?" Some of the most influential theories on the impact of the media from this period - say Benjamin on the work of art, McLuhan on electronic media, Barthes on photography, Williams on television, Manovich on the computer - did no doubt raise this question (in some version), and provided answers that were grounded in the *comparison* of different media. Today, however, focus seems to be less on such differentiating features, more on how they are overcome: through concepts like "remediation" (describing how different media always refashion one another historically) or "convergence" (describing the current flow of content across multiple media platforms). At the end of this road, one could imagine a state in which the very object of medium theory - one ontological concept of "the media", as observable aesthetic formation, institution or technology - would lose much of its sense. "There are no media" has already been suggested as the catchphrase of new, German medium theory, after Kittler. If so, what are the uses of comparing media today?

Dan Karlholm, Södertörn University

Levels of comparability: art history as a comparative discipline

In my paper, I would like to trace a handful of key moments of comparability within the discipline of art history. These relate to how the disciplinary meta-reflection and identity formation have developed since the nineteenth century; whether the comparative endeavor was motivated by a scientific pursuit of knowledge, or whether it was merely a

branch of connoisseurship in advance of such knowledge, or part of a more relaxed aesthetic pastime, etc. Infamous examples range from colonial exhibits to efforts, in a mode of aesthetic deterrence, to display the negative flipside of an invisible comparison. I would like to distinguish and compare different comparative strategies, and reflect upon the respective points of comparison, despite apparently identical methods or practices. The extent to which art history has understood itself as a critical discipline is central here, and closely related to the states of comparison within an increasingly global(ized) discipline today. Is the comparative paradigm in decline, since the empirical terrain and subject area that once defined art history is extended beyond any comfortable compartment of "works of art", or has it, by contrast, gained in importance and unavoidability due to the widening horizons between cultures and "times" co-existing in our contemporary world?

Comparative philosophy (II)

Martin Ovens, Oxford University

Interpreting Śamkara: creativity and scepticism in comparative philosophy

One of the best-known and influential Indian philosophers, Śamkara (c.700 CE) has been a significant focus for comparative and interpretive work. Aspects of his Advaita Vedānta have been compared with, or understood and discussed in relation to, aspects of the thought of a wide range of western philosophers and theologians, including Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Emerson, Bradley, Husserl, Bergson, Schopenhauer, Bosanquet, Whitehead, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Sartre, Derrida, Habermas, Lacan and Barth. Śamkara has been characterized variously as a transcendental idealist, an absolute idealist, a philosopher

of language, a philosophical theologian, a transcendental phenomenologist, an Analytic philosopher and so on. Advaita has been related to disciplines such as aesthetics, environmental philosophy, ethics, contemporary physics and consciousness studies; and interpretations of Advaitic thought have influenced modern European poets and scientists.

Taken as a whole, the diverse and growing body of Śamkara-West comparative and interpretive literature might imply a radically pluralist or relativist hermeneutic: an anarchic “anything goes” approach to Advaitic texts. The colourful comparative corpus invites us to envision an apparently polychromatic Śamkara. Is it the case that peculiarly fictile Advaitic texts have been moulded and manipulated to represent, mimic and conform to a succession of modern and contemporary intellectual trends, movements, ideologies, paradigms and preoccupations? Are Śamkara-Europe comparisons evidence of useful, creative understanding of Śamkara’s texts, or do they represent a collection of incompatible, conflicting or incongruent readings? Does “Śamkara” emerge as an unending process of diverse scholarly interpretation?

This paper outlines suggestions for possible critical schema in response to ongoing and diverging philosophical and interdisciplinary readings of Advaitic texts. This approach affords a structured means for exploring and assessing tensions between sceptical attitudes (that seek to undermine the intelligibility, validity or usefulness of modern and contemporary readings of Śamkara’s texts) and constructive modes of engagement that seek creative applications of Advaita.

As a starting point, the role and relevance of historical analysis are highlighted and contested. For example, several themes emerge upon tracing the origination of Śamkara-West comparative philosophising in the broader context of the trajectory of early Indology and India-West comparative studies. These include

the influence of William Jones, Schopenhauer’s encounter with Oupnek’hat, Kantian perspectives of nineteenth century pioneers of Indian philosophical studies, the development of the comparative method in the scholarly disciplines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and motives for Advaita-West philosophical comparison (apologetics, inclusivism etc). From crude Śamkara-West identities of concepts (and subsumptions of European ideas under “Advaita”) to authentic, more sophisticated “creative encounters,” it is possible to determine the nature, grounds, development and range of particular projects that inform and perpetuate the phenomenon of Śamkara-West philosophising.

By applying prescribed critical schema to the existing body of Śamkara-West literature, we engage in a discourse of evaluation: we attempt to distinguish the “satisfactory” and “successful” kinds of comparison and application from the philosophically superficial, misleading or inadequate. For example, in the case of many comparisons that construct lists of conceptual similarities/parallels and differences, the philosophical imagination of the reader must be engaged to bear upon the details presented in order to entertain possible or potential philosophical value or benefit. Although not immune from negative critique, some comparisons offer an inventiveness and sophistication that yield philosophical value in specific respects.

Even if readers of Śamkara’s Sanskrit texts must employ their cultural and personal perspectives in order to find what they read intelligible (i.e. there is no neutral, “objective” access to his texts in order to determine or recover their “meaning”), does the mode of explicit philosophical comparison provide the only possible significant means in the quest for a creative understanding and application of Advaita? The central task becomes: how do we engender maximum creativity in

Śamkara studies while optimising critical and hermeneutic awareness? The apparent scepticism/constructive engagement dichotomy offers, in practice, potential for a balanced perspective and an attitude of “cautious creativity.”

Quanhua Liu, Gonzaga University

On the comparability of cross-cultural comparison

The rivalry between historicism and the structuralism described in the announcement of this conference imparts that both parties have accepted a pair of confusing connections in cross-cultural comparative studies including comparative philosophy: Structuralism connects the comparability (commensurability) of two or more cultures to their commonality or similarity, whereas the historicist ties the incomparability (incommensurability) of two or more cultures to their uncommonality or dissimilarity. With emphasis on rigorous interpretation of a philosophical work in its original context, the historicist tends to reject universal schemas of interpretation and has eyes for uncommonalities and dissimilarities in comparative studies. Seeking the theoretical underpinning for philosophical works in different cultures, the structuralist attempts to penetrate the surface meanings and differences of philosophical works in different cultures and discover their common structure.

Martin Svensson, Södertörn University

Methodology and screen memories in comparative studies

How do likenesses and differences between one culture and another appear? As sporadic overlaps between heterogeneous discourses, or as an extended series of symmetrical correspondences and disjunctions? And within a certain traditions, do grand philosophical narratives, such as Platonic Metaphysics or Chinese Correlative Cosmology, necessarily determine and

delimit all “smaller narratives”, such as those concerning language or literariness?

The distinction made is thus between macro-level and micro-level analyses in Comparative Studies, with the implication that the macro-level approach may lead to skewed interpretations that function in analogy with Freudian screen memories: they are impressions that do have a counterpart in reality but are unconsciously foregrounded by the theorist to hide more pertinent, complex and traumatic facts.

Comparisons in an empire: universalisms and the particular

An empire, with its inherent cultural, natural, political, etc. diversity provides excellent grounds for comparisons. Yet the dominant focus of studies of the British Empire tends to remain either continent specific or framed in an Anglo-American birds perspective.

These four contributions all relate to India as a nodal point, a point of reference or one of the points of a larger network of relations. At the same time and in different ways, they challenge presumptions taken for granted about the framing of regions, whether for the study of policy, ideology, law, or the social economy of commercial networks.

Gunnel Cederlöf, Uppsala University

Commerce, law and nature: Imperial negotiations and legal practices, Bengal in the early 19th century

In recent decades, academic debates on the character of British imperial or colonial encounters in India have changed focus. Arguments have tended to move away from claiming that colonial governance was inflexible and enforcing synoptic, permanent administrative solutions, to characterising the same encounters as

mobile, adaptable, flexible, and contextual. Instead of a diffusionist argument, that is, a spread from center to periphery causing a global or imperial legal-judicial homogenisation, empirical studies in India have critically targeted assumptions about imperial practice as having reflected policy statements, regardless of ground realities or of the decisive influence of local practices on administrative principles. Yet there is now an inclination to end up in complete relativism.

As an immediate consequence of territorial conquest, the EIC was forced to engage with indigenous legal systems. There were political reasons for this which is commonly discussed as ‘adopt and adjust’. The Mughal Diwani grant included not only revenue rights but also duties to exercise justice according to Mughal law. The British also needed to establish trust among a significant segment of the population in a situation of inadequate European presence—therefore the orders to follow ‘native custom’. Hence there was a duality of practice: one of homogenization and another of diversity (Kaviraj 2000). In addition, there were also commonalities between Mughal and British legal system—a congruence of practice and a comprehension of custom based law, until recently largely overlooked (Wilson 2008).

This paper takes the exercise of justice and the making of law in India under early British rule as a case and an opportunity to discuss the interplay between core legal principles and regional practices of legal jurisdiction within the British Empire. Focusing land rights, the paper revisits a period of eastward British East India Company expansion in Bengal towards Burma and China in the early 19th century. It shows the constant negotiation and collision of immutable principles with negotiated regional practices. In northern east Bengal and the regions bordering on Burma, most critically, environmental and climatic conditions brought such contradictions to a head.

Heather Goodall, University of Technology, Sydney

Thinking beyond the nation: comparative methodologies on empires, power and subaltern networks.

Recent work in Indian Ocean and wider histories has re-visited 'empire' history and reinterpreted it in the light of current desires to understand globalisation and cosmopolitanism. New definitions of empires see them not as unified structures under tight, metropolitan control but instead as looser bodies extended more as networks linked through nodes of high activity and interchange, like port cities. (Pearson 1998; Lester 2001; Bayley 2002; Frost 2002, 2003; Ballantyne 2002, 2005) In such nodes, communication flows in all directions: while it moves along the conduits established by colonial powers, like shipping routes and telegraph cables, such communication is not always under metropolitan control. We need far more than the conventional tools of the historian, consisting mainly of archival analysis, to understand these situations. I will review two cases of intercolonial historical comparisons in which I have been involved, which have drawn on methodologies not only from history but from geography, linguistics and anthropology. One considers the movement of knowledge about water between India and Australia as a flow of Indian knowledges rather than its current interpretation as arising from British “expertise”. Drawing on spatial and linguistic evidence, this study proposed instead that the agents of “empire” acted as conduits for colonised people's knowledge even as they tried to impose British practices and policies on a new environment. The other case study will consider the interactions between the working people of colonies, in this instance in the seafaring industries based in Australia and India. These subaltern interactions of mobile populations are often ignored completely in both

“national” histories and in “empire” histories, yet they allowed interactions which were not limited by either national or empire identities. They become accessible not only through documentary archives but through oral histories and images. Recognising the dynamics of empires and drawing on a wide range of methodological approaches is a more productive way to think about history and change than to be confined within the limits imposed either by national borders or disciplinary boundaries.

Concepts for comparative humanities

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, Aarhus University

Cultural intimacy and global dominance: the troubles of finding new grounds for comparison in literature studies

In the development of theory of world literature, the impact of Pierre Bourdieu and Franco Moretti has provided perspectives that have shown to be difficult to integrate. Moretti’s focus on cultural transfer through the spread of genres that produce dominant waves in global culture is countered by Bourdieu’s description of the intricate and intimate constructions of national and local fields. Whereas debates of authenticity no longer seems viable, there are new challenges to literary and cultural studies that adhere to the theories of Moretti and Bourdieu: 1) The push for making area studies in literature have opened for a new construction that is supposedly based on intimate knowledge of literature, but with little resonance in the national traditions. 2) The pull for literature by migrant writers that embody a compromise between cultural intimacy and cosmopolitan narratives.

Sharon Rider, Uppsala University
Comparison, crisis and critique

I take the challenge of making the humanities relevant, even important, today to be the same problem as trying to overcome the gaps engendered by manifold theoretical orientations, disciplinary specializations and cultural assumptions to be a question related to the philosophy of language. What we are looking for is a common tongue—common in both the sense of “shared” and “everyday”-- a language in which we can actually mean something and be able to say it in such a way as to make that meaning (potentially) transparent. I do not think that what is needed is new methodological or theoretical paradigms so much as the willingness to do without one’s favored scholarly methods and academic theories. Rather than suggesting that we engage in some sort of conceptual “translation” practice, I think that the humanities would benefit from a renewed effort at “vernacularization”, a specification of meaning at the most local level, where the very fact of difference (“dialects”) amounts to a humble confession of particularity which opens for genuine curiosity across intellectual, linguistic and cultural borders. This means taking the idea of “critique”, so often associated with the humanist project, as first and foremost a form of self-critique (in the singular and plural), or, as Wittgenstein calls it, “work on oneself” (or again, in Hadot’s term, a “spiritual exercise”, rather than an academic one).

David Attwell, University of York
Stilted conversations: postcolonial mimesis, postcolonial theory

In a recent intervention in *Theory After Theory*, Simon Gikandi argues that in retrospect, postcolonial theory “has been defined by a radical gap between its central conceptual claims, often focused on issues of cultural hybridity and difference, and its objects of analysis or reference, including the histories, texts and social

worlds of former European colonies in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia.” A consequence of this aporia is postcolonial theory's difficulties in accounting for “the literature of decolonization as a distinctive event in literary history.” In dialogue with Gikandi, I will argue that his account of the failures of communication between postcolonial literature (with its roots in the mid-twentieth century literature of decolonization) and postcolonial theory (located primarily in the metropolitan academy) fails to take into account the institutional difficulties that postcolonial criticism from the former colonies has had, in developing a discourse that is properly independent and responsive to the claims of the literature. The decolonization of theory and critical discourse is arguably much more difficult than the decolonization of literature itself, as the institutional and ideological history of postcolonial criticism reveals. In the first few years after independence, the national-cultural imperatives that underwrote the disciplinary “rise of English” in Britain could be replayed without much difficulty in the former colonies, but this configuration was unable to articulate the loss of direction brought about by the failures of nationalism.