

## CALL FOR PAPERS

XIII International Conference Theme: **“The Virtual Transformation of the Public Sphere”**

15-18 December 2010

Venue: Park View Hotel, Chandigarh, India

The thirteenth International Conference of the Forum on Contemporary Theory will be held in Chandigarh from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> December 2010 in collaboration with the Department of English, Panjab University.

### Thematic Introduction

Ever since the 1989 publication of Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in English, theorists from a wide variety of disciplines have engaged with the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, its relation to bourgeois society and class formation in general, its traction with minority cultures, its conception of gender and its separation of spheres between the public and the private. An important thesis of Habermas's text was what he saw as the degeneration of a rationally based mode of public deliberation into a consumerist society dominated by a mass media that was itself compromised by its relationship with the State. His critics, in turn, have argued that such a transformation was not in fact a degeneration but a marker of a more egalitarian and democratic public culture. This conference seeks to re-examine the contours of this debate in the light of the significant transformations in digital technology and human communication that have taken place over the last few decades.

The rapid expansion of the internet, along with email communications, online forums, social blogging and social connectivity websites have transformed the ways in which individuals interact and communicate with each other in fundamental ways. The transformations have not only been drastic in terms of how internet-connected individuals organize the daily routines of their personal lives but it has also affected in many ways their own self-fashioning as private and public individuals. The rapid changes have also meant fundamental structural changes in the institutions that have traditionally served as key elements of societal communication and deliberation. For instance, as more individuals communicate via email and as more enterprises advertise online, the U.S. Postal service currently faces a severe shortage in revenue and is almost certainly positioned to see cutbacks. As more readers choose to access their latest news coverage online (often at no cost), many local and indeed national newspapers in the U.S. have found their advertising and subscriptions revenues dwindle often resulting in bankruptcy. In the meantime within a decade of its existence, "google" has become a commonly used verb, "friending" someone has become an (almost) competitive sport and the blogosphere has shown evidence of layers of mutually "following" bloggers that can only be described as a rhizomatic array of mutual enchantments. And if the internet has become the base for a newly ordered public and commercial sphere (think online banking and shopping here), corollary devices that use the internet along with advanced GPS positioning technology (think Smartphones and particularly the

iPhone here), have arguably made their increasingly dependent users the cyborgs that visionary theorists in the past had long anticipated.

We have seen, in short, at least in the world of the internet-connected, a "virtual" transformation of the public sphere -- a transformation as "real" as "virtual" can get. This conference seeks to examine the multiple sites of this transformation as well as the many inequities, challenges and silences that it may conceal. Our aim is to cast a wide net on a range of issues: how have digital technologies transformed our engagement with human creativity and communication? How has, for instance, our increased access to electronic texts and databases (whether through Project Gutenberg or Google Books to name only two), affected the ways in which we go about leading our lives, not only as scholars, but also as lay citizens? How have such technologies affected our notion of the "literary" and its genres? To give a specific example: how are our literary theories of the genre of "autobiography" affected by the proliferation of personal web pages and tweets? Or, to turn to a different discipline, how have art historians and other scholars of visual culture reconceptualized some of the foundational theories and methods of their field in the flurry of visual dissemination enabled by new media technologies? What, in short, are the implications and possibilities of the digital humanities? And, to what extent can digital technologies and the new media help foreground the centrality of the humanities and art to public culture and social life?

Our aim in considering the virtual transformation of the public sphere is neither to be uncritically celebratory nor to be unduly cynical. Rather, we hope to gather scholars from a variety of disciplinary and intellectual backgrounds who are interested in reflecting on these transformations and theorizing them in relation to issues of power, justice, privacy, identity, political deliberation, civic society and also of aesthetics, consumption, and pleasure.

The following topics are intended to help those who are interested in participating in the conference in formulating their proposals for submission. However, they are only suggestive, and not exhaustive:

- (a) What are the limits of the public/private divide and how do the new media inscribe them?
- (b) How are the categories of "literature" or "art" affected by the dissemination in the new media of a number of mixed genre texts and new modes of visuality?
- (c) How are patterns and habits of "reading" changed when individuals turn to the new media for access to more conventionally created texts such as novels?
- (d) How are our theories of the "human" revised or modified when human beings increasingly engage in the virtual sphere?
- (e) Do the new media help or hurt the growth of literacy? How does our understanding of "literacy" change when we consider it in relation to new media?
- (f) What is the nature of "imagined communities" on the internet?

- (g) How do issues of anonymity mediate public discourse on the internet?
- (h) How do the still-evolving social conventions of email disrupt or reinforce existing social relations?
- (i) What are the social dynamics of "blogging"?
- (j) Is there a technological divide of access across different communities and if so, how are we to best identify it?
- (k) How does the global nature of internet discourse radically change earlier notions of the Public Sphere?
- (l) How does active participation in online communities affect the ways in which contemporary individuals fashion their identities?
- (m) What are the potential strengths and drawbacks of new digital technologies in the research lives of scholars?
- (n) How can the new media help in the dissemination of the humanities and the arts in the world at large?
- (o) Can the digital humanities "save" the humanities from their allegedly slipping hold on the public imagination?

### Special Session

In conformity with our earlier practice, a plenary session on a regional text will be one of the special features of the conference schedule. This year's choice for the panel is Gurdial Singh's novel *Unhoye* (1966), translated into English by Rana Nayar as *The Survivors* (New Delhi: Katha India Library, 2005). A distinguished Punjabi writer of our time, Gurdial Singh has received numerous awards including the Jnanpith Literary Award for his outstanding contribution to Indian literature. *The Survivors* is a novel about how ordinary individuals in a small town in the Malwa region of Punjab in India strive to maintain their dignity and self-respect against injustice and oppression perpetrated by a hierarchical social order that continues to thrive despite the nation's independence. By focusing upon the disintegration of community life under the pressures of the process of modernization, the novel addresses several connected issues of national importance such as the persistence of the caste system; the widening gap between the rich and the poor under globalization; the disintegration of kinship culture and community life; and the general impact of Western modernity on social and religious practices. While reflecting, like Thomas Hardy and R. K. Narayan, on the life of a specific region in the Punjab in post-independence India, the novel tries to capture stylistically the subtle nuances of the regional dialect in a poetic manner. This could be an indicator of a new direction in Indian literature, which pays more attention to the invocation of a culture through its linguistic resources than to the negotiation of grand themes under the influence of world literature. It is in the creative exploitation of the poetics of the local that the strength of *The Survivors* lies.

### Submission Deadline

500-word abstract or proposal is due by **August 30, 2010**. The abstract should have a title for the presentation along with the name

and institutional affiliation of the presenter and should be mailed as an email attachment to Gaurav Desai, the Convener of the Conference (gaurav@tulane.edu). Complete papers should be limited to 12 pages (approximately 20 minutes of reading time). A longer version may be submitted for possible publication in the *Journal of Contemporary Thought* or in the conference volume brought out by the Forum. The completed paper should reach the Convener of the Conference by **November 15, 2010**.

### Conference Volume

Select papers from the conference and from those submitted in response to the "Call for Papers" will be included in the conference volume, which will be ready for formal release at the 2011 conference of the Forum. Completed papers should reach the Conference Convener as email attachments by **May 1, 2011**.

### Registration Deadline

The last date for receiving the registration fee is **September 15, 2010**. The fee may be paid through a bank draft drawn in favor of Forum on Contemporary Theory on a Bank in Baroda. Overseas participants may pay the fee through checks drawn in favor of Forum on Contemporary Theory. The amount should be sent to the address of Forum on Contemporary Theory mentioned on this leaflet. We encourage participants to register early so that their accommodation at the Park View Hotel is assured. All participants need to be pre-registered. The registration fee is non-refundable. Each participant will be sharing his/her room with another participant, as there are no rooms with single beds in the hotel.

1	Participant from India (member of the Forum)	Rs.5000/
2	Participant from India (non-member)	Rs.6000/
3	Overseas Participant (non-SAARC countries)	US \$400/
4	Overseas Participant (SAARC countries)	US \$150/
5	Local Participant (member of the Forum)	Rs.1500/
6	Local Participant (non-member)	Rs.3000/
7	Student Participant (from Panjab University)	Rs.500/

The registration fee from the outstation participant will cover room rent and breakfast and lunch from 15<sup>th</sup> December to the afternoon of

18<sup>th</sup> December, and cost of the conference volume dedicated to the twelfth international conference held in Trivandrum. The fee from the local participant will cover lunch, conference tea and the cost of the conference volume. The participants should arrive on December 15<sup>th</sup> and stay on until the afternoon of December 18. The conference will begin at about 9 am on the 16<sup>th</sup> and will be over with lunch on the 18<sup>th</sup> December. 15<sup>th</sup> December is reserved for local sight seeing for which an additional fee will be charged.

### Conference Convener

Gaurav Desai teaches in the Department of English and the Program of African and African Diaspora Studies at Tulane University where he has formerly served as Department Chair and Program Co-Director. Author of *Subject to Colonialism: African Self-fashioning and the Colonial Library* (Duke University Press, 2001) and editor of *Teaching the African Novel* (MLA, 2009) he has guest edited a volume of essays on "Culture and the Law" (*South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100.4, 2001), on "Actually Existing Colonialisms" (*Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 24, 2006) and co-edited a volume of essays on "Multi-Ethnic Literatures and the Idea of Social Justice" (*MELUS*, 28.1, Spring 2003). *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism* (Rutgers University Press, 2005) which he co-edited with Supriya Nair has become a standard reference and classroom text since its publication. Among Desai's other publications are articles in edited collections and journals such as *PMLA*; *Genders*; *Representations*; *Boundary2*; *Research in African Literatures*; *African Studies Review*; and *Cultural Critique*. Recipient of a residential fellowship at the National Humanities Center in 2001, Desai has also been awarded a Rockefeller Foundation award for a residency at the Bellagio Center in Italy and an ACLS Burkhardt Fellowship for his research. In 2004, he was made a life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge University. He is currently working on a project tentatively titled *Post-Manichean Aesthetics: Africa and the Indian Ocean Imaginary* and is guest editing a Special Issue of *Research in African Literatures* on Asian writing in Africa.

### Keynote Speaker

Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, Professor in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication, New York University will deliver the keynote address on the topic "Global Visualities in Crisis." He has taught at State University of New York at Stony Brook, University of Wisconsin at Madison, University of Texas at Austin, University of California at Irvine, and University of Warwick, England. His publications include *The Right to Look: A Counter-History of Visuality* (Duke University Press, forthcoming 2010-11); *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture* (Routledge, 2005); *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Routledge, 1999); *Silent Poetry: Deafness, Sign and Visual Culture in Modern France* (Princeton University Press, 1995); *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity, and the Ideal Figure* (Routledge, 1995). He has edited *The Visual Culture Reader* (Routledge, 1998) and *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (Routledge, 2000). His research articles have appeared in such journals as *Culture, Theory and Society*; *PMLA*; *Social Text*; *October*; *The Journal of Visual Culture*; *Radical History Review*; *Eighteenth Century Studies* and as chapters in several critical anthologies.

For further information any of the following may be contacted:

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