

Imperceptible Thresholds: New Heuristic Approaches

By Taylor Follett – December 15, 2022

The Thresholds of Knowledge ECR network hosted a panel on 7 November 2022; this event was developed in part from the UCD Humanities Institute's Conference "Thresholds: Concepts of Rupture, Change and Adaptation" earlier this year. Three researchers, [Anna Derksen](#), [Victoria Oertel](#) and [Alexander Waszynski](#), from the University of Greifswald, and members of the International Research Training Group "Baltic Peripeties: Narratives of Reformations, Revolutions and Catastrophes" (2021-2025, funded by the German Research Foundation) presented on the panel.

Dr. Waszynski took Hans Blumenberg's concept of the "epochal threshold" as a starting point upon which to explore both theoretical and historical engagements with peripety. His discussion of *epochenbruch* or, as he translated, the epochal shift brought about when a threshold is crossed, was a compelling engagement with the theoretical grounding behind the epochal threshold. His paper, titled "Not Yet and Already: Hans Blumenberg on Epochal Thresholds" took up Blumenberg's questions of the gap between testimony and events, asking how to transform 'history' into something graspable. He emphasized the constructed and retrospective nature of an epochal shift, as connecting an event to an epoch is a rhetorical gesture done only once the consequences are understood, with this imperceptibility inevitably complicating any attempt toward graspability.

The consequences of imperceptibility were expanded upon in the second paper, Victoria Oertel's "Emplotment of Thresholds: between Health and Disease". In conversation with both Blumenberg's theories and Aristotle's peripety, Oertel analysed the thresholds produced by the elusiveness of the concept of disease, arguing that there is a semantic instability between 'health' and 'illness' in contemporary legal and social definitions, due in part to the definitions' predication on other nebulous terms. Her discussion of the language in German social laws and two differing sociological definitions of disease was particularly rich. She argued that while these definitions of disease all include a relation to life processes and disruption of traditional life narrative, they differ significantly in their approach and prioritization. Oertel's search for an applicable criteria of comparison in definitions of disease includes examining the degree of function and suffering as associated with the disease in question. Her paper complicated this search by drawing attention to the sociopolitical dynamics of the 'standard life narrative', asking where pathology is located and who gets to decide the criteria of definition. She gestured toward historical examples of pathologized homosexuality, and contemporary pathologized language surrounding gender dysphoria as illustrative of the potential for problematization. Although turning to data and using concrete diagnoses can help in reconstructing historical ideas of pathology, it is not feasible to identify one key nexus: thus, the epochal threshold becomes a semantic threshold in Oertel's work.

Thresholds are made manifest in Anna Derksen's "Thresholds of Self-Reflection: Societal Discourses on Scandinavian Eugenic Pasts". Derksen identified two key thresholds in her analysis: the threshold of biological modernity and Sweden's relationship to sterilization throughout the twentieth century, and the displacement of twenty-two Greenlandic children to Denmark as part of a social experiment in the 1950s, which did not become public knowledge until 1988. Taking Foucault's body politics with a more encompassing understanding derived from biopower, she analysed discourse surrounding the Danish government's formal apology to the six living experiment children from Greenland in 2020, as well as a series of interviews in the 1990s with ethnic Swedes who had been sterilized,

alongside films depicting both thresholds. Derksen suggested that this language indicates a “radical break with the past” involving a re-subjectification of those affected and levels of obfuscation which allow those affiliated with the governments who perpetuated the eugenic pasts in question to disassociate from said past, a drawing of an epochal shift or temporal threshold that absolves responsibility. Derksen argues that this calls for “thresholds of self-reflection,” or a perpetuation of critical social reflections socially re-appropriated from below. Those interested in this work and the historical events being discussed may find one of Derksen’s primary sources, Helene Thiesen’s memoir [*Greenland’s Stolen Indigenous Children: A Personal Testimony*](#) of interest, as it has just been translated into English by Stephen James Minton and published by Routledge this week.

Although all papers presented, and the following question session, were compelling, perhaps the most exciting element of this panel was seeing the way the Baltic Peripeties research group functions as an interdisciplinary and expansive network. With over fifteen postdoctoral and postgraduate researchers across the University of Greifswald, NTNU Trondheim and Tartu Ülikool, the network provides an example of a broad research interest that can be discussed from a number of angles: the difference in methodologies in this panel alone allowed for an expanded and complex understanding of the theories and enactments of thresholds and peripeties being discussed. More information about the Baltic Peripeties research network can be found on their [website](#).