



The Humanities through the eyes of the School's academics



*Ocean View Direct Provision
Centre, Tramore, Ireland (image
courtesy of Vukašin Nedeljković)*

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Interview

What is the significance of the Humanities today?

The need to reimagine concepts such as “asylum” in the wake of the international intensification of the carceral state was at the centre of Judith Butler’s recent lecture at UCY, having been awarded an Honorary Doctorate by the University, entitled “The Humanities and Democracy: A Critical Relationship”, Butler spoke about the importance of the university being “porous” if we wish to fully participate in the “complex melody” of voices that constitutes a democracy. Within Humanities disciplines – such as literary, theatre and performance studies – that focus on the making of creative works, and how these works then circulate within society, it is indeed crucial that we and our students can benefit from voices with different experiences of participating in artistic production (such as Nedeljković’s) if we want to better understand these creative works and their role in society. In this way, the Humanities can serve as a two-way bridge between university research and the society it reflects, studies and plays a key part in.

Some weeks later, at the Annual Lecture of our Faculty entitled “Cosmopolitanism and the Mission of the Humanities”, Galin Tihanov addressed the importance of welcoming voices from outside the academy in order to “expand [...] the limits of the human” at the core of the Humanities. Speaking of the Humanities as being “under siege”, Tihanov provided a timely reminder that in order to expand these limits, and to protect the place of the Humanities in the public sphere, we need to expand the range of agents we interact with and listen to. As long as this broader sense of the human still exists, the Humanities will play a role in bridging research and various kinds of lived experience, and will be needed in order to better understand and address the key social challenges we face.



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Interview

What is the focus of your research and how can we understand our world through your research topic?

My current research focuses on the cultural history of coercive confinement in twentieth-century Ireland. In recent decades, Ireland has been prompted by human rights activists to commission a series of major state reports, north and south of the border, which have revealed systemic institutional abuse in former “care” settings run by the state and church (industrial schools, Magdalene laundries, mother-and-child institutions, etc). I’m now writing a book that explores how writers and other artists were representing Ireland’s carceral institutions long before they became a topic of major public concern in the late twentieth century. Drawing on previously unseen archival material, I analyse plays, poems, prose works as well as TV dramas and documentaries in order to trace Ireland’s “carceral memory” over eight decades, across genres, forms and languages. On an island where incarceration has for centuries played a key role in nationalist cultural memory, and which then proceeded to incarcerate no fewer than 1% of the entire population after its southern 26 counties gained independence from the United Kingdom, I ask the following questions:

- From nationalist prisoners to marginalised women and children to asylum seekers, which inmates have held “memory capital” in Irish culture, and how has that capital shifted over time?
- Which artistic critiques of confinement managed to circulate across the twentieth century, and how were they prevented from circulating?
- How can a better understanding of Ireland’s “carceral memory” contribute towards an undoing of current carceral structures which target those seeking asylum on the island?



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Describe an important aspect of your research and its significance.

At a talk hosted by the UCY Irish Studies Collective in January 2025, the artist Vukašin Nedeljković spoke about a “carceral continuity” in Irish culture. In 1999, they noted, the same year in which the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) issued a formal state apology to survivors of institutional abuse, a system of Direct Provision was established by that same government, whose effect was sequester and confine those seeking asylum in Ireland. Though multiple reports have recommended the abolition of this system, it is now expanding. Having spent two years and seven months held in Direct Provision, Nedeljković sees this system as a direct descendant of the carceral regimes so prevalent in twentieth-century Ireland (their artistic work on the topic can be viewed at <https://www.asylumarchive.com>). From the lack of knowledge of locals about the carceral regime operating in their midst, to the huge profits for private-sector companies running the accommodation, to the othering and racialisation of those seeking international protection, these historical and cultural continuities are being traced by those working in the Arts and Humanities, in collaboration with other disciplines. In coalition with other advocates for the rights of those held in carceral centres around Europe and beyond – on which important research is being done in UCY by scholars such as Ana Ricchiardi, and by Cypriot artists such as Evi Savvides – the Arts and Humanities can help to create a better understanding of the societies we inhabit, including the “carceral continuities” that underpin the carceral state(s) still propagated today.