Foreword

Timothy Mathews[*]

UCL established its School of European Languages Culture and Society in September 2010. Fragile Realities is the result of a group of PhD students in the School determined to contribute to its research identity and to develop it. I would like to thank every member of the group, creatively entitled Thoughtsforward, for all their hard work and for producing such a fascinating set of interchanges: Megan Bradshaw, Pei Sze Chow, Alexandra Hills, Nichola Smalley, Asmaa Soliman and Alicia Spencer-Hall.

Fragile Realities could not have been a more appropriate topic for the inaugural doctoral conference in SELCS. As a school of languages SELCS is dedicated to the idea that no language exists on its own, and that any language exists in relation to others. The conference which gave rise to the following essays drew not only on the range of languages in the School, but on the range of critical enquiry involved in their study. This included literature, film and film animation, TV soaps and televisual reality, photojournalism, translation and its marketing, painting. What is reality, why is realism fragile? The questions are central to the study of languages because central to them is the point of view. In much realist narrative there is an omniscient narrator showing us around like a tour guide or a gallery guide. But does the narrator allow us to see beyond what we expect or does he or she just trade in the expectations of the world that we already have? The message of realism seems to be that we see what we see not what we cannot. Is that the message of involvement in a language, in a culture, or in a discipline? In response that melancholic prospect a fragile reality, and fragilising the point of view start to sound like a breath of fresh air, despite the overtones of anxiety or even trauma that a fragile sense of self might carry with it. But what about the real-time image, images made in the here and now, liberating us perhaps from representation altogether? Or does real-time manipulation of images and information make exploitation seamless and unnoticed, suspending any reflection at all? These were some of the questions addressed by Fragile Realities, and it was a rich confirmation that to engage with cultural artefacts generates the ideas we need to understand the nature of our times and our responsibility to ourselves and others. The conference was also a practical demonstration that interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogues are not a matter of everybody thinking the same ideas in the same way, but of understanding better the limitations and pressures which make the point of view of each one of us.

[*] Professor of French and Comparative Criticism, School of European Languages, Culture and Society, UCL
opticon1826@ucl.ac.uk