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Conference Report on “Literature and Institutions” International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) Justus Liebig University Giessen, 20-21 June 2017

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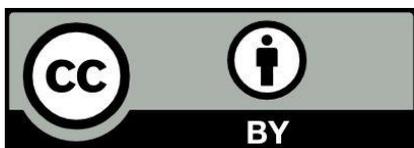
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The two-day symposium investigated the entanglements between literature and institutions, offering examples and case studies from a broad range of historical and cultural contexts. The first day opened with a welcome address by ANDREAS LANGENOHL (Giessen) in which the speaker stressed both the “interdisciplinary embrace” of the conference and the link between literature and social practices. According to Langenohl, literature as an institutionalized form of expression plays a key role in constituting the social imaginary. Institutions are nothing else but modes of imagining futures, since modern societies exist precisely through imaginaries. Within this constellation, literature represents a key medium of expression, in that it conveys “the difference between reality and something else”.

Histories of Literary and Institutional Entanglements

The first panel, dedicated to literature in early modern Europe, opened with KERSTIN DICKHAUT’s (Stuttgart) rendering of theatre as a courtly model in 17th century France. The theatrical institution functioned along the logic of simulation and dissimulation and required both social and political support. Especially within the Baroque culture of appearances, the State held a big role in theatre prestige. Additionally, theatre acted as a reflector of the Court. When it came to the authorship praxis, there was no copyright and no printing before a performance, which required authorization by the King. INGO BERENSMEYER (Giessen) then moved on to the English setting, approaching literature as a social institution that mediates literary texts. The 16th and 17th century saw a weak institutionalization, within which social prestige and honor networks played a key role. The existing institutions were rather controlling than enabling, being relatively strong in themselves, as was the case with the Church, the Law, schools, the Royal Court and the London playhouses. In contrast, the concept of literature was characterized by fluidity; it was viewed rather as a set of skills than a body of texts, and a wide variety of literary forms was cultivated. Being a writer was not yet considered a profession – many literates were supported by rich patrons of the arts.

The second panel examined the 19th century, during which literature began to emerge as an institution. In his talk, TOM CLUCAS (Giessen) outlined the involvement of writers in public issues and debates – or, to put it with Isaac D’Israeli, the impact of literature on the public mind. During the 19th century, poets and novelists campaigned for making changes in the law, becoming increasingly involved in public issues and debates. When it comes to the link between class and institutions, Clucas argued, it could be said that literature equipped people with values that allowed them both to understand and change the country. Thus, literature began to establish itself as a herald of institutional change, gaining critical mass throughout the 19th century. FLORIAN SEDLMEIER (Berlin) started his talk with the assumption that literature cannot be understood separately from the market any longer. The market in itself establishes literature as an institution in the US, offering the epistemological preconditions for imagining the field of literature in that particular context. Unsurprisingly, literary realism lay at the center of this field, while the 19th century also witnessed an explosion of magazines. Against a European foil, US literature appears as a belated phenomenon.

The third panel was dedicated to literature as an institution of criticism in the 20th century. In her talk on Gregory Corso’s *Bomb* (1958), SONJA SCHILLINGS (Giessen) raised the questions: How can we create institutions that are just towards all humans? What foundational premises do 20th century institutions need in order to be just? Seeing as there are no words to describe human mass destruction (other than “never again”), one is forced to ask who is in control. Gregory Corso’s poems and performances are an unconventional attempt to deal with human mass destruction, for which there are in truth no words. ANETTE SIMONIS’ talk (Giessen) focused on literature as a critical voice for examining ecological and sociopolitical questions, exemplifying her approach with poems by Durs Grünbein. His collection of pieces dedicated to animals show how the ecocritical framework can be made productive in contemporary poetry.

Consumerism, Canonization, and Media Change

The first conference day culminated in a keynote lecture by MARK MCGURL (Stanford), in which the speaker shed light on the role and status of literature within the consumerist economy in the age of Amazon. Starting from the neoclassical concept of opportunity cost, which operates on a fundamentally temporal level, McGurl explained how today’s consumer economy is primarily driven by consumer psychology. Because of human finitude in time, fast delivery has become a key element even when it comes to one’s own reading preferences. He then zoomed in on works by Henry James and Virginia Woolf to illustrate the functioning of opportunity cost.

On the second day of the conference, two panels dealt with central issues pertaining to the relationship between literature and institutional settings. THERESA STREISS’ (Giessen) talk focused on gendered

reading, offering an overview of literary education projects specifically designed for boys. In her presentation, she showed how literary institutions can become a means of perpetuating stereotypes and social norms. DOMINIC ZECHNER (New York City) then moved on to the genre of prize acceptance speeches. Taking the recent case of Bob Dylan into account, awards seem to be an instrument of literary classification, whereas the Nobel lecture functions like a trade-off for the prize, which is being publicly claimed by the performance of a speech. A few of these speeches were even canonized, which further advances this argument. TIM SOMMER (Heidelberg) drew on the examples of Robert Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson to illustrate the tension between literature and institutions from the late 18th century onwards. Both writers were known lecturers and gained popularity as intellectuals, while however suffering organizational restrictions and fearing the institutional entrapment.

The following panel was dedicated to literature and media change. MELANIE STRALLA (Wuppertal) approached the genre of textual edition as “soft media change”. Referring to the German translation of Frédéric Mistral’s *Mirèio* and its numerous re-editions, she analyzed the transformation that the original undergoes during translation – a transformation not only characterized by the linguistic alterations, but also by cultural contextualization. She then linked her argument to the institutional dimension, concluding that each new edition developed along with institutional requirements and demands. ANN-MARIE RIESNER (Giessen) focused on the negotiation of new aesthetics brought about by the new media in the core periods 1995-99 and from 1999 onwards. She gave an overview of the new configurations and representation modes in the genre of hyperfiction, which has by now become institutionalized. In her interpretation of Joshua Ferris’ *Then We Came to an End*, MICHAELA BECK (Dresden) examined the industry of advertising as media and its relationship to the novel as a genre.

Literature in/and Institutions: Between Affirmation and Subversion

The vivid concluding discussion gave rise to further questions. Over the course of the two conference days, literature proved to be an institution and a disruption of institutional settings at the same time, demonstrating a subversive and revolutionary potential. BURCU ALKAN (Giessen) stressed that academics are part of major institutions and should permanently reflect their own position as such. She then proceeded to question the problems of globalization and the geographies of translation that ensue. According to Alkan, there is a certain imbalance of the global voices that needs to be further addressed, since economic and ideologic decisions play a key role within this context. In reply, NATALYA BEKHTA (Helsinki) drew attention to the significant advances in the study of world literature, as proven by the work of David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova and other scholars who are increasingly focusing on the aforementioned dynamics. The hierarchies and dynamics present within the publishing system constituted another important discussion topic. Mark McGurl addressed the potential problems of open access, stressing that it makes a large number of texts available without

guaranteeing the necessary attention and ensuring that these texts are found online. This is where institutions are able to come in, saving us time through preselection of contents.

Program

Panel 1: Literature and Institutions in Early Modern Europe

Chair: Alexander Scherr

- Kirsten Dickhaut (University of Stuttgart): "Instituting Theatrical Culture: The Example of the Court of Louis XIV"
- Ingo Berensmeyer (JLU Giessen): "Manuscript, Print, Performance: Institutions of 'Literature' in Early Modern England"

Panel 2: Literature as an Emerging Institution in the Nineteenth Century

Chair: Isabel Kalous

- Tom Clucas (JLU Giessen): "Unacknowledged Legislators'? Literature and the State in Great Britain"
- Florian Sedlmeier (Freie Universität Berlin): "The Field Imagination and the Market in the United States"

Panel 3. Literature as an Institution of Criticism: The Twentieth Century

Chair: Elizabeth Kovach

- Sonja Schillings (GCSC): "Rescaling Reality with Gregory Corso's *The Bomb*"
- Annette Simonis (JLU Giessen): "Ecocriticism and Poetry: Durs Grünbein's Poetry as Institutional Criticism"

Keynote Lecture

Chair: Alexandra Effe

- Mark McGurl (Stanford University): "Being and Time-Management: Fictions of Opportunity Cost in the Long Age of Amazon"

Panel 4. Organizing Principles: Forms, Context, Canons

Chair: Wibke Schniedermann

- Teresa Streiss (GCSC): "I Am a Reading Hero: The Gender Discourse in German Literary Education"
- Dominik Zechner (New York University): "A Ruhm of One's Own: Prize-Granting and Institutional Exposure"
- Tim Sommer (Heidelberg University): "19th-Century Lecture Culture and Literary Historical

Narratives of the 'Fall into Institutionalality'"

Panel 5. Literature and Media Change

Chair: Laura Schlichting

- Melanie Stralla (Wuppertal University): "Editing and (Con)textual Changes: A Provençal Epic in Germany"
- Ann-Marie Riesner (GCSC): "From Early Hypertext Experiments to Contemporary Internet Novels: The Search for Internet Aesthetics in German-speaking Literature"
- Michaela Beck (TU Dresden): "Repositioning the Novel in the 21st Century: Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End* and the 'Rise of Creative Industries'"

Concluding Discussion with Burcu Alkan (JLU Giessen), Mark McGurl (Stanford University), Tom Clucas (JLU Giessen)

Chair: Natalya Bekhta (Helsinki University)

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