

Conference Report on "The Ethics and Politics of Representation"

International Conference, University of Bergamo, 25-27 October 2011

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"Representation is never innocent" and yet it is at the heart of any cultural and literary practice. From Aristotle to Deleuze the notion of representation and its political and ethical implications constitute a major field of interest in both philosophy and literature. Values, so the organizers of the conference argue in their call for papers, are by no means stable entities but are continuously "created, negotiated, proposed and disseminated in culture". But how is this effected? What mechanisms are at work? Invited by ANGELA LOCATELLI (Bergamo), professors and doctoral researchers from the PhD-Net "Literary and Cultural Studies" partner institutions in Bergamo, Lisbon, Helsinki, Stockholm, and Giessen, as well as scholars from universities in Padua, Pisa, and

Bielefeld, explored the diverse modes and purposes of representation in literature, the visual arts, and media, and presented theoretical and philosophical approaches to the notion of representation.

In the opening keynote lecture entitled "'I am a man': Aesthetic Experience, Religious Experience and the Judeo-Christian Idea of the Subject" WOLFGANG BRAUNGART (Bielefeld) traced the development of the idea of the unique human subject in religious, philosophical, and literary traditions. A focus was laid on the Judeo-Christian concept of the self as well as on 18th century enlightenment conceptions of aesthetics and poetics. Using Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's play *Minna von Barnhelm* as a case study, Braungart discussed the importance of self-reflection, sympathy, and the opening up to the Other as preconditions for individual freedom.

The first panel of the conference was dedicated to "The Politics of Cultural/Political Theory". It encompassed discussions on the notion of representation in Marxist, postcolonial and postmodern theory and literary practice as well as in visual cultural productions and in development aid. In his talk, "Representing the Misrepresented: Edward Said's Orientalism and the Politics of Representation", FARZAD BOOBANI (Giessen) pointed to a critical predicament in Said's argumentation: on the one hand, Said condemned the discipline of

orientalism for its false representations of Asian peoples and cultures, thereby implicitly arguing for representing it correctly instead; on the other hand, Said argued that all representation was misrepresentation. Hence, Boobani addressed the question of how to represent the Bergamo Panoramamisrepresented.

The conference's host and organizer, ANGELA LOCATELLI (Bergamo), gave an enlightening presentation entitled "Reading Literature: An Ethical Gesture in the Postmodern Context?" in which she countered the thesis that postmodernism was radically unethical. Instead, she argued that the question of ethics ran through and through the culture of post-modernity, with literature and theory having a definite ethical bearing on postmodern culture. Literature's capacity to create empathy was regarded as but one example of its ethical implications.



In her paper on "The Ethics of the Neighbour: Ambivalent Enmities and the Homecoming Film", ISABEL CAPELOA GIL (Lisbon) examined the underlying mechanisms of representation in the genre of the war film. Drawing on the concept of ambivalence in binary constructions of friend/foe and love/hate as proposed by thinkers like Kierkegaard, Freud, Lacan, and Žižek, she argued that "film enacts community by presenting the Other's radical difference as sublimation of similarity", thus reassuring the viewing subject of its own identity. In an analysis of Oliver Stone's homecoming movie *Heaven and Earth* (1993), she exemplified the concept of "neighbourly ethics" by showing how enmity is visually constructed and performed and how hospitality is turned into trauma by the Othering of the guest.

The ethics of aid, and, more precisely, the dynamics of written and visual representations of participatory and humanitarian ways of helping, were the focus of HUBERTUS BÜSCHEL's (Giessen) talk. Looking at brochures, archival material, and photographs from the fields of social and development work, he illustrated how discourses and practices of aid create "an untouchable power structure of constructions of evidence, global validity and adaptability, which could also effect social pressure, violence and social exclusion".

Under the headline "Ethics and Poetics", the presenters took up the question of what representational mechanisms are at work in literary texts. JONAS PERSSON (Stockholm) devoted his presentation to the Romantic legacy and the ethics of representation in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* while ENRICO ZUCCHI (Padua) addressed issues of ideology and ethics in the works of the Italian poets Mario Luzi and Franco Fortini. Finally, ROSSANA BONADEI (Bergamo) elaborated on the construction of the city of London as spectacle in William Wordsworth's *Prelude*. She paid particular attention to the walking and gazing approaches of representation as foregrounded in the flâneur, the poet's gaze, and the "participant spectacular gaze" which

followed the opening of various collective and performing spaces (e.g. the Crystal Palace) and turned London into a city of wonder and a "world show".

Other papers of the Wednesday morning session focused on the representation of the sublime. REINHARD MÖLLER (Giessen) provided a survey of the sublime as aesthetic concept in the 18th century. Contrasting, among other positions, Kant's ethics and aesthetics of distance with Burke's idea of approximation, the paper discussed the ethical dilemma of representing the sublime in literature, and, in the course of a lively discussion, pleas were sounded for a consideration of metaphor and genre as ways of approaching phenomena of sublimity in literary texts. GÜL BILGE HAN's (Stockholm) close reading of Don de Lillo's *Mao II* tied in with the theoretical reflections provided by Reinhard Möller by revolving around the representation of terror as sublime in de Lillo's novel. Through the protagonist of *Mao II*, so she argued, de Lillo raised questions about the affinity between the act of writing and the act of terror, and about the problematic role of media as a "regime of art" (Rancière).



After lunch, the next part of the second day started off with an illuminative keynote lecture by VERA and ANSGAR NÜNNING (Heidelberg and Giessen), entitled "Aesthetic Form as the Key to the Ethics and Politics of Representation". The lecture's aim was to propose a systematization of different approaches to the conference topic. Vera and Ansgar Nünning argued that representation was never neutral or innocent but culturally determined. Hence, the pressing question

would be how to address the mechanisms and/or strategies of representation: how can these strategies be identified and further specified?

In order to answer these questions, the two presenters introduced the notions of Ways of Worldmaking and Aesthetic Form as narrative strategies. Nelson Goodman's philosophical concept of the Ways of Worldmaking was therefore translated into literary theory. Nünning and Nünning argued that conceptualizing narrative as a way of worldmaking implied paying attention to the narrative's style, genre, the metaphors being used, and further aesthetic forms. This was drawn back to Jerome Bruner (1991), who maintained that people organized their experiences only in the form of narratives. Hence, the lecturers continued, narratives themselves were ways of making sense of the world; naturally, different kinds of narratives had different ethical implications. Understanding narratives as a means of making sense of experience – here, Nünning and Nünning referred to David Herman (2009) – it became evident that narratives were important for enabling individuals to grasp their experiences.

This argumentation was exemplified by taking a look at the narratological representation of catastrophes. These representations were claimed to have ethical and political implications and to present distinct cultural norms and values; they were discursively created, medially represented, culturally specific, and historically mutable constructs.

Before their conclusion, Nünning and Nünning stressed the importance of the analysis of aesthetic form – rather than limiting narratological analyses to content only. Aesthetic form and ways of worldmaking should be regarded as keys to the ethics and politics of representation, and, more than that, as a paradigm for the study of literature and culture.

The third section on "Literature as Political Critique" incorporated diverse presentations, from street art on the West Bank Wall to auto-representations of migrants in contemporary Spanish fiction and to the ethics of the everyday in writings of Virginia Woolf. Focusing on street art and the symbolic deconstruction of the West Bank Wall, ANA CRISTINA PIRES CACHOLA (Lisbon) took the British graffiti artist Banksy as a case in point, thereby regarding the relationship between art and location. She argued that the notion of a wall of security was exposed as an exceptionally dubious simulacrum, configuring an ambiguous and asymmetric exercise of power by depriving people of such basic rights as walking around freely. Hence, she broached the issue of graffiti as political activity, interpreting sprayers as both artists and warriors. In her opinion, sprayers like Banksy used military strategies which resulted in their art being regarded as a clearly political statement. ELISE NYKÄNEN (Helsinki) gave a presentation entitled "Habit and the Ethics of Everyday in V. Woolf and M.-L. Vartio". Claiming that choosing the everyday as an issue was itself a political act, Nykänen took, among others, Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway as an example to demonstrate how the literary representation of the everyday is determined by ethical and political implications.



The last day of the conference was characterized by the section "Representing Cruelty"; presenters were dealing with the animal, murderous women, the Holocaust in comedy films, and French thrillers. CLAUDIA EGERER (Stockholm) started the auspicious programme for this Thursday with her presentation "The Mute, Ethical Body: Towards an Ethics of Environment". Stating that ecological and environmental criticism had brought the animal to the front, Egerer

dedicated her talk to human-animal relations, considering the way these were dealt with by, among others, Derrida and Heidegger. Drawing on the former, who had pointed to the rather complex relationship between the animal and the human, she elaborated on rethinking-strategies of how to approach the animal in both philosophy and literature. With the help of scientific documentaries on apes and their human-like behaviour, Egerer proved that it is, at least, the body that humans and animals share. Hence, concluding with Heidegger, Claudia Egerer advocated ethics that also include the animal.

OTTILIE KLEIN (Giessen) caught the audience's attention with women who kill. In her presentation "The Politics of Women's Murder in Modern American Drama: A Question of Ethics?" she elaborated on the different standards of morality in terms of gender, claiming that there was an ethical discrepancy with regard to murder and gender. More than that, she

pointed to the question of how to deal with the fact that although feminist criticism has always stressed its relation to ethics and politics, feminists have neglected the issue of women's murder.

Is it acceptable to laugh at the Holocaust? And is it ethical to make a comedy on that topic? These questions were addressed by MARIJA SRUK's (Giessen) presentation "Ethics of Memory – Ethics of Laughter? Representation of the Holocaust in Comedy Films". Stating that almost all public discussions on satirical or comic Holocaust films had ethical implications, she analysed selected genre films and discussed whether comedy threatened the collective memory of the Holocaust and destabilized its reference system by putting an ethical concern upon remembrance of its victims. Also, she argued that the comic modes in use had the potential to evoke critical inquiry of the values, representations, and knowledge of the subject matter.

The closing keynote lecture by PIRJO LYYTIKÄINEN (Helsinki) on "Imagining Animals: Ethical and Ecocritical Considerations" paid tribute to the rising interest in the field of animal studies in recent years, and provided a concise survey of the ways animals have been represented in literature. Starting out from the postcolonial approach of "zoocriticism" as developed by Huggan and Tiffin in their work on Postcolonial Ecocriticism, she identified two dominant strands of interest within animal studies: the representation of animals in literature and philosophy and the political discussion about animal rights. She continued by tracing the various literary traditions of animal representation – providing examples from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* – as well as theoretical approaches by Cavell/Diamond et al. (*Philosophy and Animal Life*), Philip Armstrong (*What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*), and John Berger (*Why Look at Animals?*). A major focus was laid on the depiction of cruelty and the ethics of reading, which opened a discussion centred on the question whether it was possible to move beyond a mere objectification of animals in literature, and the role animal studies could take in this regard.



The conference "The Ethics and Politics of Representation" provided an open platform for international scholars to mutually work on a venerable and equally up-to-date field of research. As diverse as the presentations were and as differently as they dealt with the conference issue, all presenters concluded that representations were always culturally charged and therefore politically and ethically determined. Whether taking the example of graffiti on the West Bank Wall as a piece of art with political and ethical implications or analysing the way

animals were and still are depicted in philosophical accounts or in literature – representation is never innocent.