

Conference Report on the 2012 Hermes Summer School "Literature and Intervention. The Relevance of Literature in a Changing World"

The Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies, Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies, Universiteit van Amsterdam Oudemanhuispoort & Bushuis, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 10 – 14, 2012

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The Hermes seminar 2012 on "Literature and Intervention. The Relevance of Literature in a Changing World" took place in beautiful Amsterdam, Netherlands, and was organized by the Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies. It was an interdisciplinary summer school for doctoral students of ten different countries. Parallel to the inspiring insights into the research of renowned scholars in the field of cultural studies, the doctoral students had the opportunity to present and discuss their own research projects. Taking into account the link between literature and society, the seminar aimed at discussing the way literary studies have changed as well as the impact of literature and literary studies.

The three keynote lectures and the 24 papers by doctoral students addressed a wide variety of issues, ranging from Plato to television fiction. Yet, there were several common themes to which many of them referred. As stated in the call for papers for the summer school, literary culture is changing rapidly and drastically, as it reacts to developments such as the diversification of culture or the (assumed) vanishing of print culture. As a result, the question of what literature nowadays actually is was addressed by several participants.

What Counts as Literature?

In her keynote lecture, ANNELEEN MASSCHELEIN (University of Leuven) discussed a variety of 'new' text types by authors primarily known for their theoretical work in the humanities. These texts do not belong to the theoretical oeuvre of the theorists, yet, they are linked to it. Masschelein coined the term "residual oeuvre" for them and raised the question of how to deal with them. She elaborated on the context in which these kinds of texts appear and what light they throw on the theoretical oeuvre and the author, as well as how they are critically

received. As her main lead, she talked about Roland Barthes' *Journal de Deuil* and his position between creative writer, scholar, and public intellectual.

Another case was discussed by TYTTI RANTANEN (University of Tampere), who talked about Monique Wittig and her writings *Le Guérillères* and *Le Corps Lesbien* as manifestations of aesthetics. They are explicitly not called 'novels' in Wittig's bibliography. Rantanen stated that these works, additional to being classic examples of 'weird pronoun narration', can not merely be read as pamphlets, but also as belles-lettres.

JUDITH HOFMANN (University of Giessen) argued for the integration of animated films into the notion of literature, since they, on the one hand, are closely related to literary genres such as fairy tales or graphic novels, and, on the other hand, can be analysed by adapting and expanding means of literary studies. She described and explained some exemplary means of how animated films tell stories, using Pixar's *Up* as a concrete illustration.

TOM VANDEVELDE (University of Leuven) also talked about the expansion of the means of literary studies. With the help of literature, he stated, one is able to rediscover the sounds of the past. Using fiction at the beginning of the 20th century as a case in point, he suggested a collaboration of literary studies and sound studies and provided a theoretical framework for the study of narrative sound.

In addition to expanding the scope of what counts as literature, addressing the relevance of literature in a changing world (as it is put in the summer school's subtitle) is inextricably linked with the question of the functions of literature: Which functions is literature able to fulfil? Have these functions changed, and if so, in which respect? With regard to which functional premise can literature be regarded relevant?

What Functions Does Literature Serve?

These and similar questions were raised in a number of presentations, and their discussion shed light on fundamental issues each literary scholar feels confronted with in their research from time to time. ANDREW GIBSON (Royal Holloway University of London), to give an example, argued for the relevance of literature by way of provocation. In his illuminating keynote lecture entitled "Contemporary Misanthropy and/as Ethics: The Provocation of Michel Houellebecq" Gibson took Houellebecq's oeuvre as a case in point, thereby showing that Houellebecq and other contemporary writers pursue "one of the most serious ethical tasks of major literature, undeception, in the teeth of the so-called 'death of critique'". Houellebecq, according to Gibson, uses literary means in order to provoke ethical discussions, and it was the very conception of provocation that was being discussed: Can literature be regarded as a means to provoke, or doesn't it do even more than that? How could the notion of provocation be conceptualized more palpably? Which social, cultural or aesthetic functions can be ascribed to literature? Or, asked differently, what does provocation imply in the first place?

GREGERS ANDERSEN (University of Copenhagen), whose presentation revolved around the connections between literary fiction and global warming, claimed that literary imaginaries on the future of our planet (and humankind in general) can be regarded as important informative

sources. Literature, he argued, has the potential not only to depict and imagine a future with climate change and the consequences this might have, but also to provide scientific knowledge on the serious challenges climate change causes. In this respect, by confronting humankind with both hardcore scientific facts and possible future scenarios, literary fiction (and other fiction such as Hollywood movies) proves relevant when treated as a source of knowledge as well as an entity that is able to create awareness.

It was the very last presentation of this year's summer school that wrapped up the diverse notions of literature's functionality, thereby offering a number of general remarks on the relevance of literature in the 21st century. CLAUDIA WEBER (University of Giessen) introduced television fiction as an emerging literary genre and pointed to one leitmotif characteristic of novels dealing with contemporary television genres/formats, i.e. death as a televisual form of entertainment. Arguing that television fiction draws on social, cultural, and ethical questions related to 21st century forms of entertainment, Weber proposed to regard this literary genre as a platform for social critique arising from an environment often characterized as media society. Rather than being replaced by other, ever new emerging media (genres) and by way of discussing up-to-date issues going along with our multimedia environment, she concluded, literary fictions have already found their ways to remain relevant.

These and other presentations that addressed the question on the functions of literature also tended to touch upon possible political implications of literary texts: Can literary texts, be it poems, novels or dramas, be considered politically charged, and if so, how to approach them? How can the literary scholar not feel trapped when trying to legitimize a political literary reading? While most of the contributions touched upon the issue of the political relevance of literature in some way or the other, several presentations distinguished themselves by elaborating on this in more detail.

Can Literature Promote Political Change?

To begin with, JENNIFER CH. MÜLLER (University of Giessen) explored interdependencies between literature and society by means of an exemplary analysis of the ways in which social inequalities are represented in German naturalist drama in the late 19th century. Her profound analysis of the protagonists in three naturalist plays – *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (Before Sunrise, 1889) by Gerhart Hauptmann, *Die Ehre* (Honour, 1889) by Hermann Sudermann and *Die Familie Selicke* (1890) by Arno Holz and Johannes Schlaf – led her to the conclusion that, despite the pity the depiction of the underprivileged in these dramas evokes in the reader's mind, these plays are by no means intended to instigate the audience to outright rebellion against the injustice of capitalist society, because unmistakable triggers for a politicization are absent from their overall composition. It is thus justified to say, Müller argued, that, while these authors' intention to depict the miserable living conditions of the lower classes in 19th-century Germany is clearly visible in these texts, they are not committed to triggering an explicit solidarization of the audience with the destitute protagonists. Hence, Müller concluded that they are unlikely to generate a palpable political impact, because they do not

exploit literature's potential to actively promote a genuine transformation of 19th-century society.

In her discussion of three interventionist poems from different historical periods, MATHELINDA NABUGODI (University College London) voiced a pronounced scepticism on the question of to what extent literature does actually possess the capability to transform society. Based on the recognition that creating a fruitful relationship between the poet and his audience is one of the touchstones of any art devoted to political commitment, she analysed Percy Bysshe Shelley's political satire *The Mask of Anarchy* (1819) in comparison to two of its rewritings, namely Bert Brecht's *Der Anachronistische Zug oder Freiheit und Democracy* (1947) and Andy Bennett's *The Masque of Apathy* (2011). In conclusion, Nabugodi drew our attention to the fact, while each of these three texts can be classified as interventionist literary acts, they take disparate positions in relation to the audience to be encouraged to act politically. On the one hand, this testifies to a rising degree of pessimism about literature's potential to actively promote social and political change. On the other hand, however, this very cynical scepticism itself can also be interpreted as a provocative trigger meant to push the reader towards active political commitment.

In his presentation on the role of contemporary British Asian Fiction for the renegotiation of postcolonial spatiality, ALEXANDER MATSCHI (University of Giessen) highlighted a different conceptualization of the functions literature can perform in a political context: instead of assuming a direct involvement of literature in political matters by inciting its audience to immediate political action, his analysis of the ways transcultural journeys are represented in contemporary postcolonial fiction pointed to more indirect, subtle ways in which literature is able to influence people's political opinions, notably by thematizing conceptual alternatives to traditional, narrow-minded concepts of space easily accusable of parochial Eurocentrism. Instead, these British Asian novels come up with innovative transcultural contact zones, third spaces and spaces-in-between, respectively. By sketching the historical development of this world's geopolitical macrostructure – from bipolarity in the Cold War era to multipolarity in the 21st century – narratively, Matschi showed that these literary texts actively contribute to processes of cognitive mapping. Their aim is an adequate understanding of our contemporary world marked by the complex interactions of pervasive issues like globalization, migration, postcolonialism, and transnationalism. The literary retracing of the metamorphosis of this macrostructure by means of corresponding narrative topologies of the story space, which develop from a bipolar postcolonial constellation into multipolar transcultural topologies, makes the novels interventionist insofar as they contribute substantially to the dissemination of models suitable for making sense of our present-day lifeworlds which, to an ever-increasing extent, are marked by interdependent cross-cultural relations, so he stated.

The Subtle Effectiveness of Literature and the Research on It

What all contributions have in common with regard to the question of political impact and implications of literature is the fact that – rather than engaging in simplistic enthusiasm celebrating the great interventionist powers of literary texts – they are committed to a

sophisticated, realistic and terminologically precise analysis of the actual modes in which literary texts are indeed endowed with the capability of promoting progressive visions of social change. Although these specific capabilities of literature may seem humble and subtle at first glance (especially when compared to those of state-of-the-art communication and information technologies), this does not mean that they are altogether devoid of effectiveness.

The Hermes summer school 2012 was an excellent opportunity for early career researchers to develop and discuss their PhD projects beyond disciplinary boundaries. In a professional and cooperative atmosphere, stimulating presentations and fruitful discussions took place. The selected papers show the variety of research on literary topics in relation to its impact on society. The chance to discuss their own research projects in an international and interdisciplinary context helped the participants to locate individual research in the field of literature in a changing world and enabled them to take other perspectives on their own research beyond the respective discipline. Furthermore, the attractive and well-planned additional activities as well as the charming surroundings turned the whole week into an unforgettable and valuable experience.