

Historicizing Concepts of the Humanities

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Abstract:

Each essay in *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture* introduces a concept that has substantially travelled in the humanities and beyond, such as gender, performance or narrative. The volume shows how these concepts travel through time and space as well as through different disciplines and how they are transformed on the way. While Cultural Studies and Kulturwissenschaften are the focus of the book, it is in continuous dialogue with other disciplines of the humanities, such as history and literature, that remain crucial points of reference in the journey of concepts.

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Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (eds.): *Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture*. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2012. 417 pages, 116,99 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-11-022761-1, 116,99 EUR

Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture, edited by Ansgar Nünning und Birgit Neumann, appeared as part of de Gruyter's series *Concepts for the Study of Culture*. In its title it refers to Mieke Bal's crucial work, *Travelling Concepts for the Humanities* in which she outlined in 2002 the approach of what she calls cultural analysis, a field that, as she says, "does not study culture" (2002: 9, emphasis in the original), but the existence and contribution of its objects in and to culture. To Bal a "variety of concepts are used" in the cultural disciplines "to frame, articulate, and specify different analyses" (25) and she inspects a number of them (e.g. image, tradition, and intention) to test their interdisciplinary potential as analytic tools.

This background information on Mieke Bal's book is important for understanding the entirely different nature of the book by Neumann and Nünning. Each essay in the collection establishes a linear travel narrative, tracing its object of interest to its academic root and then observing its movement throughout different times and disciplines. Anita Traninger's contribution, "Emergence as a Model for the Study of Culture," for example, traces emergence as a concept beginning with its etymology, its introduction to scientific discourse by George Henry Lewes in the mid-nineteenth century, and its use by the British Emergentists. She proceeds to discuss Émile Durkheim as emergentist, and then Luhmann's redefinition of the concept. The essay furthermore differentiates between German and English discourses of the concept and between its use in the humanities and the natural sciences. While stressing the diachronic form of travel, the synchronic journey between national academic cultures is also of interest.

As in many essays in the collection, Traninger's contribution is a good introduction to a concept with a focus on the concept's genealogy. This historical approach enables the authors to define a point of departure for the concepts and then trace the journey from that point of academic (or other) origin; see for example the contribution by Hans-Rudolf Velten about performativity and performance which traces different models of the concepts, thus describing a "double history" and "asymptotic relation" (255) that may lead to misunderstandings but are also proof of the "creative power of the field" (255). Many essays are devoted to such concepts as performativity that have become central to cultural disciplines in the last decades, causing a shift of focus and methodology that is often called a "turn." In a series of essays, Doris Bachmann-Medick deals with the translational turn, Ansgar Nünning with the narrative turn, Hans-

Rudolf Velten with the performative turn, Silke Horstkotte with the visual turn, Leora Auslander with the material turn, and Stephan Günzel with the spatial turn. The issue of the turn is never the main focus of each essay, but it becomes evident how turns and travel are connected, which has also been observed by Doris Bachmann-Medick in her book *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (2006).

The German discipline *Kulturwissenschaften* is indeed the main focus of the book, all of its contributors, with the exception of Leora Auslander, being based at German universities. It may be helpful to readers from non-German contexts to be introduced to the differences between *Kulturwissenschaften* and cultural studies that is inevitably mentioned in most essays, thus also becoming a travelling concept itself, since the idea of concept as such is very flexible in the context of this collection. Understood as concepts here are not only metaphors (such as 'network,' in a contribution by Alexander Friedrich), practices (such as translation; Doris Bachmann-Medick), constructs (as narrative; Ansgar Nünning), gender (Greta Olsen), and identity (Wolfgang Müller-Funk) and perspectives (such as the transnational and global described by Frank Bösch and Hubertus Büschel), but also larger fields of inquiry such as media (in contributions by Ingo Berensmeyer and Martin Zierold) and materiality (Leora Auslander).

The essays are divided into two parts: models and key concepts. The models being translation, cultural transfer, and emergence, it is evident that all three are concepts that not only travel metaphorically between disciplines, but are also based on the actual practice of travel and/or encounter throughout space and time. While the three essays (by Doris Bachmann-Medick about translation beyond language, Anna Veronika Wendland about cultural transfer as a practice of exchange, and Anita Traninger about emergence as a counter-concept to agency) proceed in the same manner as the following contributions, tracing their concept/model throughout time and space, they may also be read as suggestions about how concepts travel and change.

Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture is a valuable inventory of ideas that prove to be successful and persistent in the humanities (it is not clear why the title and the essays in the book suggest the study of culture as an umbrella term, when in fact no anthropologist contributes and cultural analysis would not fit into that term). The essays provide good overviews of the genealogies of each concept and can be read as a history of ideas. Every scholar needs to be aware of the luggage a concept carries and this book might be a good starting point on an analytical journey. It is also evidence of the many turns in the humanities and thus meta-academic literature that the academy needs to reflect on its own tendencies and the dynamics of those tendencies.