

## **Emergent Forms of Life in Contemporary English and American Fiction Conceptual Frameworks, Cultural Contexts, and Aesthetic Explorations**

International Graduate Center for the Study of Culture (GCSC) 23-24 April 2014

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## Emergent Forms of Life in Contemporary English and American Fiction Conceptual Frameworks, Cultural Contexts, and Aesthetic Explorations

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Forms of Life within philosophy and beyond



Taking its key concepts and cue from Ludwig Wittgenstein's suggestive observation that the speaking of a language is an integral part of a form of life, the conference attempted to move beyond the traditions of analytic philosophy and philosophy of language. Its main purpose was to gauge the theoretical and heuristic potential of the philosophical, anthropological, and sociological notions of forms of life in literary and cultural studies. Exemplary

discussions of a wide range of contemporary English and American novels and short stories strived for critical analysis of the interlinkage between stylistic devices, formal procedures, and narratives techniques on the one hand, and changing forms of life on the other. By reframing, developing, and theorizing Wittgenstein's concept of "forms of life" the conference aimed to enlarge the conceptual and interpretative repertoire of literary and cultural studies and to furnish the study of narrative fiction as well as of other genres with new descriptive and analytical resources.

The conference gathered researchers interested in conceptual frameworks, cultural contexts, and aesthetic explorations in the field of contemporary English and American fiction. Entitled "Emergent Forms of Life in Contemporary English and American Fiction", Wittgenstein's multi-applicable concept of 'forms of life' was addressed with relation to autobiographical end-of-life stories, contemporary Caribbean and Nigerian Anglophone literature, Mennonite writing, politics of style, globalization, collective voices in narrative fiction, as well as new social and human 'forms of life'.

In the following report we intend to give an overview of highlights of the conference; for the variety of issues addressed, please have a look at the conference outline.

## Narratives, literature, and cultural phenomena

On Wednesday, April 23rd, Professor ANSGAR NÜNNING, the director of the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), opened the conference with a kind welcome to all the distinguished speakers and numerous participants who came from within Germany, as well as from other European countries, such as Austria and Spain. Professor Nünning also expressed his gratitude to MICHAEL BASSELER, who organized the conference with great professionalism and dynamism, and succeeded in creating a truly inspiring and productive working environment. Michael Basseler, as the Academic Director of the GCSC, and Professor Nünning then together provided an overview and a framework of concepts with specific focus on forms of life as cultural phenomena (cf. Jaeggi 2014).



Professor MARGIT GAFFAL (Toledo) followed with a brief yet insightful overview of possible readings of Wittgensteinian philosophy, with particular focus on the dynamics between language games and forms of life. Following Gaffal's speech, Michael Basseler's presentation on narrative techniques and genres in literature initiated a thought-provoking discussion on the relationship between forms and life in literature, only to ultimately lead to

the conclusion that "it is not a human form of life that serves as the reference pattern to understand and interpret other more distant forms; on the contrary, it is by the representation of other fictitious, unlikely or even unreal forms that it is possible to reconstruct our specific human form of life" (Marques 2010: 147). The first section ended with an equally interesting presentation on autobiographical end-of-life stories given by NORA BERNING (Giessen).

After the coffee break – during which numerous participants engaged in an informal discussion of the issues presented with the above-mentioned speakers – three doctoral students, IOANNA KIPOUROU (Giessen), SNEZANA VULETIC (Giessen), and JULIA MICHAEL (Giessen) shared their thoughts on Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life in specific literary case studies. Namely, they discussed emergent forms of life present in contemporary Caribbean literature, contemporary Nigerian Anglophone literature, and Mennonite writing respectively. As the first day of the conference came to an end, the participants continued the discussion over an enjoyable dinner at the center of Giessen in a friendly atmosphere.

## Literary case studies



On the second day, April 24th, two visiting scholars, STELLA BUTTER (Mannheim) and PHILIPP LÖFFLER (Heidelberg) contributed to the discussion on the role of literature in the process of modernization and the production of American postwar intellectual life respectively. Afterwards, ELIZABETH KOVACH (Giessen) addressed the issue of globalized labor, life, and letters in Dave Eggers' *A Hologram for the King*

(2012), while CHRISTINE SCHWANECKE (Giessen) discussed the notions of 'artifice' and 'emergence' in Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992). The conference proceeded with DAN HARTLEY (Giessen) conceptualizing the relationship between the politics of style and changing forms of life in George Saunder's *Tenth of December* (2013) and NATALYA BEKHTA's (Giessen) innovative talk on collective voices and dystopia in Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014). It was SABINE SCHÖNFELLNER (Graz) and ALEXANDER SCHERR (Giessen) who brought the conference to an end with their contributions on emergent forms of human life in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake Trilogy* (2003) or social forms of life in A.S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia" (1992) and E.O. Wilson's *Anthill: A Novel* (2010).



## Conclusion



At the end of the two-day conference, Michael Basseler invited the participants to a roundtable discussion on the challenging points that surfaced during the conference; and he wrapped up the discussion with concluding remarks on specific papers and future contributions, particularly regarding the forthcoming publication of the articles presented. The volume will attempt to adapt, reframe, and theorize both the

concept of forms of life and philosophical or sociological typologies of various kinds of life forms. Furthermore the volume applies the concept/typologies as theoretical frameworks and analytical tools in literary and cultural studies, as well as finally exploring how changing cultural contexts (including, e.g., rapid technological and biological innovation, new media, ongoing acceleration, globalization, worldwide migration, terrorism as well as specific events and developments like catastrophes and crises) have inflected all forms of life in contemporary societies. In the end, all contributions gathered within the upcoming book will enlarge the conceptual and interpretative repertoire of literary and cultural studies, and furnish the study of narrative fiction as well as of other genres with new descriptive and analytical resources.