

A treasure trove of approaches to generic change

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Abstract:

The present volume tackles complex issues of contemporary genre theory. It provides overviews of such important topics as the evolution of genres, metaization, hybridization, cognitive approaches, and medialization as well as Bakhtin's genre theory. Apart from summing up the most important points of a variety of theoretical approaches to genre, it opens up perspectives for further research. In addition, a wide range of case studies provides insights into how theoretical frameworks can be applied to the analysis of specific texts.

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Basseler, Michael; Ansgar Nünning and Christine Schwanecke (eds.): *The Cultural Dynamics of Generic Change in Contemporary Fiction: Theoretical Frameworks, Genres and Model Interpretations*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2013. 399 p., paperback, € 45.00. ISBN: 978-386821-491-8

The 56th volume of the by now well established series 'Studies in English Literary and Cultural History' (ELCH) is the second book in the series that tackles the complicated issue of genre theory. While its 'predecessor' (vol. 28, Marion Gymnich, Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning (ed.): *Gattungstheorie und Gattungsgeschichte*, Trier 2007) dealt with general problems of genre theory, the present volume is focused on the question of how genres change over time and implications for cultural dynamics. In the introduction, the editors specify their aim as "to explore the processes that are involved in the cultural dynamics of changes, developments and innovations within and between literary genres" (p. 1). This threefold goal poses the gigantic task of solving an equation with many variables: tracing changes in an object whose contours are notoriously hard to define, bridging the gap between the history and criticism of individual genres and genre theory, and situating these findings within the wider context of cultural dynamics. According to its subtitle, the volume chooses a threefold approach to tackle these issues: "Theoretical Frameworks, Genres, and Model Interpretations". The first part is devoted to the former two, the second part gives a wide variety of model interpretations.

Of the eight chapters which form the part on theoretical-frameworks, five deal top-down with key issues of genre theory, such as the evolution of genres, metaization, hybridization, cognitive approaches and medialization: Starting with the 'simple' questions how, why, when and where generic changes occur, Michael Basseler gives a succinct critical overview over the answers that the last hundred years of literary criticism have provided. By tackling these seemingly simple questions he not only succeeds in systematically presenting the answers genre theorists have found so far, but also in pointing out their respective shortcomings, paving the way for further research. With metaization, hybridization, and medialization Janine Hauthal, Ansgar Nünning & Christine Schwanecke as well as Ansgar Nünning & Jan Rupp tackle three concepts that are closely linked to the contemporary novel. These authors convincingly demonstrate that these phenomena play a crucial role as 'catalysts' in generic changes, even beyond the limited range of the contemporary novel.

Two of the chapters of the theoretical framework approach the matter at hand from a different angle: Jan Baetans tests hypotheses about hybridization with reference to the 'photo-

graphic' novel and gains some valuable insights; Heta Pyrhönen convincingly shows that, given a certain dominant, hybridization does not necessarily destabilize a genre.

Last but not least, there is a chapter which is completely dedicated to the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. To devote an individual chapter to a single genre theorist might seem an overemphasis in a field with so many contributors. However, Jan Rupp correctly points out that, though there is a lively (if somewhat separate) community of Bakhtin scholars, his genre theories are all but neglected. Rupp sums up and systematizes Bakhtin's disparate remarks on genre theory and thus unlocks Bakhtin's work for those who want to integrate his important thoughts into new genre theories.

The ten chapters in the second part of the volume contain model interpretations on individual, on occasion even two or three works of contemporary fiction. These case studies provide a wide range of examples of emerging genres and manage to show the many facets of the cultural dynamics of generic change. However, one of them highlights the problems one encounters when trying to solve an equation with too many variables: Elizabeth Kovach's (otherwise well wrought) paper traces the fantastic in Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). In order to do so, she uses Todorov's seminal definition of the fantastic. Her choice of Todorov provides her with a framework that is not only very narrow, but is also contested by other theories of the fantastic. Only by leaving these aside is she able to unfold her argument. This emphasizes a dilemma of Heisenbergian proportions genre theorists have to face: in order to tackle generic change, one has to use a definition as a foil. However, genre definitions usually arise from a specific context, such as, in Todorov's case, the *conte fantastique* of the nineteenth century. They are themselves subjects of debate and change, and of course, the genres themselves continue to change after they have been defined, always following Derrida's "Law of Genre". Though Kovach carefully negotiates this problem, she cannot wholly escape from it.

However, even if the present volume has a few shortcomings, it is nevertheless a treasure trove filled with gems: It contains concise overviews about some of the most notorious problems of genre theory, discussing and sorting disparate genre theoretical approaches and placing them in relation to other phenomena of cultural change. Thus, it provides a good starting point for embarking on further research. Unfortunately, it requires a lot of sifting, i.e. reading and re-reading, to discover all the hidden treasures in this densely packed (and small-printed) volume; too much will remain hidden for lack of an index. Sloppiness in some of the bibliographies that on the whole impressively document the wide scope of works that are synthesized in this volume might frustrate someone who looks for further reading material. Nevertheless, the book is a must-read for anyone who wants to study generic change in depth and it is only to be hoped that it will give rise to a wide range of interesting and fruitful research.