

Conference Report on "New Horizons in the Trans/National Studies of Literature and Culture"

Justus Liebig University Giessen, Summer School 5–9 September, 2016, International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC), Giessen

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Hosted by the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) and funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the international summer school "New Horizons in the Trans/National Studies of Literature and Culture" brought together more than thirty aspiring PhD students from nearly a dozen countries to engage critically with new avenues of research that have arisen in cultural studies and cultural theory after the "transnational turn". Three keynote lectures and seven workshops given by senior scholars and postdoctoral researchers from Giessen and beyond made for an intellectually challenging programme. Over the course of four days a wide range of recent and emerging approaches and methodologies were discussed in a lively and stimulating environment.



Emerging Topics: From Visual Culture to the Study of Cognition

Heralded by a welcome reception the previous evening, the summer school opened on September 6 with a wide-ranging survey lecture by ANSGAR NÜNNING (Giessen) on "Emerging Research Topics and their Challenges in Trans/National and Interdisciplinary Research in the Studies of Literature and Culture". As Nünning argued, in the twenty-first century the study of culture is increasingly confronted with transdisciplinary challenges that require explanatory frameworks broader than those offered by traditional, discipline-specific methodologies. Drawing on analytical philosopher Nelson Goodman and his notion of processes of "worldmaking", Nünning sketched the outlines of a model of cultural analysis that aims at synthesizing cultural studies and literary studies in a "narrativist study of culture" that is interested in providing thick descriptions of culturally specific narratives and modes of storytelling. Nünning continued with remarks on the changing functions of narratives (including, but not limited to, literary ones) in contemporary culture and society. He concluded his lecture with a lucid overview of emergent fields of cultural research beyond the "cultural narratology" approach, ranging from the study of cognition to the medical humanities.

Nünning's inspiring opening lecture was followed by a workshop on "Visual Culture and Globalization: Politics and Practices", which ISABEL GIL (Lisbon) began by introducing the participants of the summer school to the disciplinary history and research methodology of visibility studies. In contrast to primarily text-focused semiotic theories, Gil suggested an approach she calls "visual literacy" as a means of studying the distinctly visual construction of the social, the cultural, and the political. Where Gil had focused primarily on the non-textual, ANGELA LOCATELLI (Bergamo) – in an equally rich and theoretically challenging workshop – turned to investigate links between "Literature and Cognition". Literary texts, Locatelli suggested, generate and give access to kinds of "living knowledge" that other discursive practices fail to provide, the main field of literature's production of knowledge being life itself. Drawing from neuroscience and the study of cognition, Locatelli developed a definition of literature as a space that provides privileged access to different modes of consciousness – and is hence also crucial to the understanding of cultural alterity.

Cultural Transfer and Translation



The highlights of the summer school's second day (September 7) included two afternoon workshops organized by postdoctoral researchers of the GCSC. In his session on "Cultural Transfer and Cultural Identities", TOM CLUCAS (Giessen) approached the semantically elusive concepts that formed the title of his workshop with a number of case studies in modernist poetry. Through readings of carefully selected texts by Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Paul Valéry, and Cecil Day Lewis, Clucas suggested understanding modernism as an intrinsically diverse intellectual and cultural constellation shaped by contacts between different cultural spheres, geographical spaces, media forms, and linguistic systems. Far from painting an irenic transnational picture of modernism, however, Clucas explored such moments of boundary crossing with an interest in the cultural politics of appropriation and in problems pertaining to the idea of textual ownership. In the workshop that immediately followed Clucas's, PAUL VICKERS (Giessen) encouraged participants to think about "Cultural Translation and Travelling Concepts" in similarly concrete terms. Over the course of a highly engaging ninety minutes, Vickers aptly questioned the heuristic potential of concepts derived through metaphorical extensions of terms such as "translation" or "travel" and instead argued for an empirically grounded, quasi-Geertzian analysis of cultural phenomena based in a conceptually and terminologically pragmatist approach.

Extending Frames of Reference: Ecology, Planetary, World Literature

Thursday, September 8, opened with a keynote lecture by HUBERT ZAPF (Augsburg), who spoke on “Literature as Cultural Ecology”. As he suggested, with a reference to the general topic of the summer school, the environmental humanities as a genuinely interdisciplinary project are an inherently transcultural and transnational field of enquiry that asks questions whose investigation inevitably transcends the borders of the nation-state. A distinguished scholar in the environmental humanities, Zapf presented his audience with a brief outline of major stages in the development of ecocritical thought before entering on a more extensive discussion of his understanding of “cultural ecology”, in which literary texts take centre stage. It is literature, Zapf argued, that negotiates the boundaries between order and chaos, matter and mind, and between the local and the global.



Before the participants of the summer school embarked on an afternoon excursion to nearby Wetzlar, NATALYA BEKHTA (Giessen) invited them to reflect on current questions in the fields of “World Literature and Postcolonial Studies”. Through a discussion of readings by Eric Hayot, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova, Bekhta approached world literature as both an epistemological and a methodological problem and provided a concise history of critical approaches to it, ranging from comparative literature via postcolonial studies to more recent theories global or planetary in scope. Bekhta used Hayot to subtly interrogate the disciplinary semantics of the “world” metaphor and went on to juxtapose Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems theory with Moretti’s evolutionary morphology and Casanova’s structural model of “world literary space” as competing paradigms.

Reconsidering Practice(s)

The final day of the programme featured two further workshops, a roundtable discussion, and another excursion. In “Learning and Unlearning in the Fields of Literary and Cultural Studies”, the last of the two workshops, HETA PYRHÖNEN (Helsinki) focused on the practice of close reading as a key competence in the study of literature and developed a genealogy of close reading methodologies from New Criticism to deconstruction and beyond. Exemplifying close reading with essays by Paul de Man, Barbara Johnson, Jonathan Culler and others, Pyrhönen contrasted New Critical close reading – as the quest for semantic closure and hermeneutic coherence – with a deconstructive notion of the practice as primarily centring on displacements of meaning and the ambiguities of form. With an interactive case study of a poem by William Carlos Williams, Pyrhönen emphasized differences between various kinds of close reading and demonstrated ways in which culturally specific knowledge impacts what practitioners of close reading read (or fail to read) into (or out of) texts.

Immediately before the final item on the summer school programme – a group excursion to Frankfurt – NORA BERNING and NATALYA BEKHTA (Giessen) concluded the Friday morning session with a roundtable discussion on “How to Write an Exposé”, in which participants of the programme – most of them either in the final stages of their M. A. studies or already embarking on individual PhD projects – were introduced to the genre of the dissertation

proposal and given helpful advice both on how to develop challenging topics for postgraduate research and on how to present them in a formally and stylistically appropriate manner.