

## Colloquium 9: Production, Circulation and World Literature

### Participants:

Iman Al Kaisy, Juan Alvarez Umbarila, Gülşin Çiftçi, Francisco Faura Sanchez, Chang Liu, Yu-yen Liu, Christabel Marrama, Michael O’Krent, Olga Springer, Dipsikha Thakur



Our colloquium on Production, Circulation and World Literature brought together academics engaging with World Literature from diverse perspectives in terms of genres, epochs and theoretical approaches, as well as methodological approaches to textual study.

We started with a presentation on “Instapoetry” by Gülşin Çiftçi (Georg August University, Göttingen), which explored the relatively recent phenomenon of short poems published on Instagram, a social media platform dedicated to sharing images and short messages on a regular basis with followers. The medium determines the appearance of the poem, restricting it to the length of an Instagram frame. Poems are sometimes combined with images.

The most widely read ‘instapoet’<sup>1</sup> is @rupikaur with 3.7 million followers, a number which immediately draws attention to the fact that there can be a quasi-commercial aspect to publishing poetry this way, possibly influencing its content, format and presentation. @rupikaur usually re-publishes her ‘instapoems’ in book form, taking into account readers’ comments in the editing process. The phenomena of personality cult, stardom and influencers are moreover related to the production and circulation of instapoetry, with the poet as entrepreneur and the publication of his/her poetry as a business, since a high number of followers will attract potential sponsors.

---

<sup>1</sup> Many ‘instapoets’ reject the term as belittling.

Beyond these special circumstances of production and circulation, there is moreover the question of whether this poetry, which by its very name is associated with the medium rather than the message, will stand up to close textual analysis: Often appealing to a young female readership, the poems typically deal with themes of love, identity, sexuality, etc.

The next presentation was likewise concerned with the circulation of texts, in a material as well as virtual sense: Iman Al Kaisy's (American University of Beirut) talk on "Shadows of Private Libraries: World Literature and Feminist Dissent" focused on lost libraries of Arab women writers, exploring the dynamics of ownership as well as loss (or, in one case, even destruction as a mark of protest) of books, and the creation of a (political) counter-culture by means of the act of collecting books and by holding literary salons. The primary focus was on Syrian writer Ghada Samman's private library; other Arab women writers' private libraries that were either burnt or destroyed include Lebanese writer Emily Nasrallah's, Yemeni writer Amal Muhammad Ali Shami's, and Syrian writer Hamida Na'na's.

The fact that these libraries are often physically scattered and are only partially or not at all documented poses a difficult reconstructive task for the researcher, and underlines the often fragmented nature of the circulation of ideas and the restrictions on intellectual freedom.

The presentation moreover linked the literary salon, the private library and cyberspace as *loci* of dissent.

Juan Álvarez (University of Lisbon) presented on "Planetary Space: The World in Climate Fiction - Climate Fiction in the World", starting with the observation that climate-change fiction (abbreviated as "cli-fi" analogous to "sci-fi") has been booming as an emerging genre in its own right over the past ten years, indicating the need to give it scholarly attention and to develop a set of criteria to analyse this global intercultural phenomenon.

Reacting to environmental and ecological realities of today, climate-change fiction has a (maybe deceptively?) clear connection with its extratextual surroundings, the 'real world'. The presentation focused on this special situatedness of the genre, stressing the importance to consider both the representation of the world in this literature and the interactions of the texts with the world.

The attempt at identifying a set of conventions for cli-fi (while bearing in mind that no unifying pattern may emerge) must take into consideration such qualities as form, extension and tone as well as formats, material media and circulation methods. The framework within which cli-fi is produced and circulated is not a static one but characterized by various changing agents and agendas in dialogue with each other, among these publishers, booksellers, media, academics, and readers. The Amazon-sponsored "Original Stories" under the heading of *Warmer* elicited some debate, with participants pointing out that a globally acting, multi-million-dollar corporation sponsoring climate-change fiction has an ironic ring. The popularity of the topic is also linked to current medial discourses about societal developments, for example to the "Fridays for Future" movement, and the heightened public interest in environmental issues will have influenced Amazon's engagement in such projects.

Olga Springer's (Dublin City University) presentation on "Narrative Space in Ngaio Marsh's Detective Fiction" approached the detective novels by New Zealand author Ngaio Marsh (1895-1981) with a focus on space and its textual representation, in particular the (often literally) theatrical settings which serve as the scenes of crime. Marsh's settings comment on the conventions of the genre, for example the village or the country house as the "Great Good Place"<sup>2</sup> which is disrupted by the murder. By presenting the scene of crime in a histrionic way and imparting to it a larger-than-life, almost artificial quality, Marsh creates an ironic distance

---

<sup>2</sup> The term was first used by W.H. Auden in his seminal essay "The Guilty Vicarage" (1948).

to the very genre and its conventions. This effect can be seen in close readings of various parodies of the country house setting, for example in *Final Curtain* (1947), and in numerous other examples of her use of narrative space.

Yu-yen Liu's (Huafan University, Taipei) presentation on "Place-basedness and Multi-scalarity in Ming-yi Wu's *The Stolen Bicycle*" (the novel was published in 2015 and translated into English by Darryl Sterk in 2018) focused on the influence of hegemonic practices on literary production and circulation, for example in the form of translation and the English language as part of tacit, institutionalized practices. Hegemonic practices were defined as "[t]he practices of articulation through which a given order is created and the evaluation of literary texts is fixed." The differentiation between Chinese and Sinophone literature is vital for the debate surrounding hegemonic practices: Sinophone literature has the potential to undermine the totalizing impetus of these practices. The presentation moreover examined if the discourses surrounding World Literature can help reconfigure literature written in Chinese.

The concept of multi-scalarity in the encounter with translated Chinese-language texts was introduced to negotiate and call into question the issue of "World Literature as a problem of scale", to turn it into a site in which social contradictions can be articulated and analysed.

Taiwanese writer Ming-yi Wu's *The Stolen Bicycle* in its English translation served as a case study to demonstrate the relevance of scalarity and the need for critical focus on area studies and comparative literary studies.

Michael O'Krent's (Harvard University) presentation on "The Chinese 1920s and the Possibility of a Cosmopolitan Silent Cinema" discussed silent cinema as a cosmopolitan artform in the context of Chinese culture in the 1920s. Mariano Siskind's definition of cosmopolitanism, in which the periphery can be conceptualized as the centre, was a theoretical starting point, juxtaposed with the notion of transculturation, which rejects the idea that there is a centre altogether. The presentation moved in the tension between these theoretical concepts when considering the intersection between China and other parts of the world. This intersection manifests itself geographically in a strong European presence in Shanghai (predominantly English and French) during the 1920s.

The first film screening having taken place in 1895 in Paris, Shanghai followed suit in 1896, indicating that there is an international element to film as a medium.

Central questions about film and cosmopolitanism that were raised are: What does it mean for a Chinese film to be cosmopolitan? Does film emphasise local particularity or does it present its world as part of a broader nation state? Which stance toward the nation do filmmakers adopt? Are they participating in the construction of a national identity or are they challenging it? Who is the intended audience of these films?

The last question in particular underlines the relevance of language politics: Intertitles often were in both English and Chinese, so there was potential of the films to be shown abroad, and filmmakers indeed imagined a multilingual audience. The same mixture can be found in the use of register: Sometimes the vernacular dominates, sometimes Classical Chinese. The presentation included a close reading of the first film by Zheng Zhengqiu, one of the founding fathers of Chinese cinema, *Laborer's Love* (1922), which was analysed as a satire of the rigid political system of the time, and with a particular consideration of the use of written characters in the setting itself.

Francisco Faura Sanchez (University of Barcelona) explored the complex intertextual effects and links between plays spanning the time from the Renaissance to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in his presentation on "Leaving aside the national theater: Keys to talk about a Western theater", tracing networks of authors and themes across Europe and the world, from Enrique Jardiel Poncela to Samuel Beckett, or Thomas Bernhard to José Sanchis Sinisterra, to name but a few.

The presentation was concerned with our central themes of production and circulation, stressing the dynamic interaction of tradition and revolution in connecting various writings. The speaker proposed that characteristics that would make a 'national theatre' identifiable have disappeared from European and North American theatre, resulting in a Western theatre that draws its themes and images from a collective imaginary based on both historical and recent political, economical and social events and parameters. In our discussion, the performative aspect of a play and the essential role of spectators were mentioned, which gave rise to the question whether a play can be performed in two different cultural contexts and still be the same play.

Chang Liu (University of Heidelberg) presented "On the Afterlife of American Musical Waste in China" and the *dakou* generation. *Dakou* is the term for cut music cassettes and CDs which were sent to China as waste, musical garbage, but found their way into the cassette- and CD-players of the young generation in the 80s and 90s. The presentation analysed this phenomenon from a sociological and ethnographic as well as an ecopolitical perspective - sources referenced included *Plastic China* (2016) by Jiu-Liang Wang, Susan Strasser's *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (2000) and Bullard's theory of "environmental racism" (1993).

Yan Jun is considered the figurehead of the *dakou* generation, and has underlined the formative influence of this music and the way it reached his generation: "Dakou is as beautiful as a scar, our youth is fragmented."

Dipsikha Thakur's (University of Virginia) presentation on "The Body Metamorphosed: Reading the Uncanny of the Anthropocene in *The Vegetarian* (2015)" took the work, which was first published in Korean in 2007, as an example of the transnational Gothic and the uncanny (with links to ecofeminism, ecogothic and plant horror) and read the act of border-crossing as a cause of terror, in the case of the novel's protagonist the metamorphosis from human to plant. Both author Han Kang and translator of the book into English Deborah Smith won the Man Booker International Prize 2016 for their work, which is an acknowledgment of the importance of the translation. The presentation moreover considered the reception of the English-language translation of the novel in India, where to eat meat is a political act, and how the meaning of a text changes depending on the cultural context in which it is read.

The novel's protagonist Yeong-hye decides to become vegetarian, and ultimately to stop eating altogether, causing conflict with her family and society, who label her as mad and hospitalize her. A main topic of the novel is thus the political nature of consumption and its psychological intricacies, the latter for example evoked in a scene in which the narrator eats a soup cooked from her pet dog after it bit her.

Christabel Marrama (University of Luxembourg) presented on Moroccan French-language writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, who won the prestigious Prix Goncourt 1987 (title: "Tahar Ben Jelloun, a world writer transcending barriers and poet of a thousand voices and pasts"). A common theme throughout his writing is criticism of the social order and transgression of taboos. He tends to attack feudal structures of the Arab-Muslim world, including fanaticism. He is a Maghrebian writer participating in two languages and cultures, whose interaction creates both rupture and synthesis in his works. The presentation focused on a trilogy of books which are united in the exploration of the space of a language and the language of space: *L'ange aveugle* (first published as 12 short Italian prose pieces in the newspaper *Il Mattino* in 1989/publication in French in 1992), *L'auberge des pauvres* (1997), and *Le Labyrinthe des sentiments* (1999). *L'ange aveugle* was discussed as a politically committed travel narrative exploring the insoluble problems of the omnipresence of the Mafia in Southern Italy, where impotence and potentiality meet. This theme is reflected structurally in the representation of the hostile Italian city as a book, a system of echoing and opposing spatial signs.

It is noteworthy that Ben Jelloun has never published in an Arab country or in Arabic, only in France, and refers to his writings as a “travel notebook”. He has been criticized for his portrayal of Morocco and accused of participating in a discourse of self-exoticisation.

Report by Olga Springer