

# IWL, SOCIOLOGY AND WORLD LITERATURE, COLLOQUIUM GROUP 8

(Group leader: Lisbeth Verstraete-Hansen, University of Copenhagen)

## Session 1, July 6<sup>th</sup>

We started with a short tour of introductions, followed by a discussion on the topic of our colloquium: What do we understand by Sociology and World Literature? The topic has, of course, numerous facets, but the main issues we identified were: Literature as a social institution (e.g. Bourdieu, Moretti); Literature in society; Society in the literary text. We then moved on to the discussion of papers.

### **Lu Xun and Brecht on Display: The Making of World Literary Heritage**

*Emily Mae Graf (Heidelberg University)*

Emily presented a chapter of her PhD thesis in which she examines author museums from a global perspective. Methodologically, she did a diachronic reading of the display of Lu Xun and Brecht. How are images of these authors created? Two important aspects: 1) the power of materiality and visuality in the making of a writer, 2) the agency of objects, human actors and institutions. With the aid of selected examples (e.g. Brecht's Standing Desk with the pictures of Marx and Engels) she showed to us that objects that seem straightforward in a first reading could also be read against the grain. Marx and Engels, apart from the rather obvious interpretation as "Brecht's heroes", can also be read as an illustration of the dilemma of the popular/privileged left wing writer.

### **Journey to the Utopia Realms of the East: Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Ismail Gaspirali's Lady Lands**

*Hande Altar (Eskişehir Osmangazi University)*

Hande asked us, if we think of utopias as universal or as products of "the west"? Nobody thought of utopias as a western genre, but we were surprised that this debate apparently still exists. The works – both short stories – examined were Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's utopia *Sultana's Dream* (1905) published in Bengal and İsmail Gaspirali's dystopia *Kadınlar Ülkesi* (Women's Land) (1890) published in Crimea. Both examples are outcomes of the crisis of the time they were written in and they present different approaches to the women question. We discussed a little, if there can or cannot be utopias today and why (not)? The consent was, more or less, that utopias, especially in religion (e.g. The Bible) are still of great importance; that it is not a booming contemporary genre might be related to the fact that we do not have faith in a teleological story of progress anymore.

### **The Current Situation and Reflection of Chinese Folktales Study in Terms of World Literature.**

*Lidan Li (Tianjin Normal University)*

Lidan first talked about early 20th century translations of Chinese folktales (e.g. S. A. Plevoi, Antoine Mostaert) and the different actors involved (e.g. scholars, churchmen, foreign ministers, editors, translators, rewriters, story collectors...). Another topic was the spread of Chinese folktales through literature (e.g. Little Red Riding Hood → Chiang Mi: *Goldflower and the Bear*; *Cinderella* → Duan Chenshi: *Youyang Zazu*) and also through film (e.g. *The White Snake Lady*, *Mulan*). She further elaborated on the question, if such wide travelled folktales are essentially all the same or if there are substantial differences between the specific versions. Although there are, of course, differences (e.g. the image of the heroine, the symbolic meaning of the tale's plots...), she emphasized that in folktales

research the similarities are of greater importance, because they allow a comparison between the stories and the cultures they were produced in. Therefore they constitute an important part of world.

## Session 2, July 13<sup>th</sup>

We began our session with a brief discussion about Sara Danius and her lecture on the Nobel Prize in Literature. Even though Danius denies the political and the Eurocentric aspect of the Nobel laureates, we agreed that it is difficult to disregard the political aspects in/of the selection of the Nobel laureates. Rather than taking a scholarly approach to the discussion, Danius appeared rather as a spokesperson for a governmental organization, providing very diplomatic answers to critical questions and demonstrating an unwillingness to account for the institutional politics of Swedish Academy.

### **Immigration and spatial elements in Orhan Pamuk's novel *Kafamda Bir Tuhaflik*** *Veysel Lidar (Eskişehir Osmangazi University)*

Veysel presented an engaged discussion of the politics and aesthetics of Pamuk's work more broadly. By providing an account of central aspects of sociology of migration and clarifying migration in conceptual terms, he made a strong case for reading literature through a sociological analytical framework. Pamuk's characters embody the social forces of migration, such as the economic pull factors of Istanbul, and his novels demonstrate how the city, through its urban "buffer zones," accommodates the contradictions between rural and urban life. Veysel presented a stimulating take on Pamuk oeuvre, suggesting that his novels have taken a sociological and political turn since he was awarded the Nobel prize. Whereas his earlier works can be conceived as *Künsterromans*, Pamuk's most recent novels, as exemplified in *A Strangeness in my Mind*, register the recent history of Turkey in terms of migration and the socioeconomic infrastructure along which millions of people migrate.

### **Trends in Children's Books about Refugees, Asylum-seekers, and Immigrants in scope of Sociology of Children's Literature**

*Ezgi Goksu Kok (University College London)*

In her presentation on the topic of bibliotherapy, Ezgi introduced us to a field of study that was little known to many of us. Although the use of books and literature in psychotherapy is a growing interdisciplinary dimension of literature, few literary scholars are knowledgeable about the therapeutic use of literary works. In bibliotherapy, the proper selection of books is of great importance for the therapeutic purpose, and Ezgi sketched out the criteria for identifying books for bibliotherapeutic use. Focusing on publications for children and youths, she explained principles through which literature can be therapeutic—identification, catharsis, and insight—and how books can promote self-awareness and change patterns of behavior or attitude. Ezgi also explained how bibliotherapy, through its focus on gender, queer, race, disability, and refugee status, often intersects with the political promotion of inclusion. Due to the refugee crisis, children's and youth literature have demonstrated an increased interest in these topics recently. Thus, across the world, there is a wide variety of literature addressing the difficulties of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Through an assessment of a range of books, Ezgi pointed out how literature can, with empathy and humor, address the problems people face in difficult conditions.

### **An Ethical Study on English Children's Literature**

*Shengzhen Zhang (Jiangsu Normal University)*

In her presentation Shengzhen asked the question: how does children's literature affect the social formation of national community? Taking her cue from British children's literature—from Gulliver's Travels to The Chronicles of Narnia and Harry Potter—she asserted that children's literature

promotes patriotism and teaches ethical belongingness to a national community. In their focus on community and identity, children's books often establish ideals of desirable forms of national community. Shengzhen suggested that authors of children's literature be aware of their authority in the formation of national communities, and that Chinese authors could learn a lot by familiarizing themselves with the British tradition. In relation to these concerns, we discussed which other social formations impact the production of children's literature through different periods, such as colonialism and imperialism.

### Session 3, July 20<sup>th</sup>

#### **Ruminations on Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf***

*Jasmina Slisko (University of Berne)*

With a framework of inquiry structured by language and place, Jasmina took us through an exploration of van Niekerk's 1994 novel, a dark tragicomedy which follows the struggles of a 'white trash' Afrikaners family in postcolonial South Africa.

She began with the local concerns of *Triomf*: Situated in the lead up to the first democratic election, the novel satirically highlights the political propaganda and exploitation employed, thematising information/misinformation. This opens up issues of mythmaking and alternative histories. Themes of urbanisation interact with environmental concerns: the family – white, supposedly members of the oppressors - sifts through an urban wasteland, alienated from agriculture rootedness. Their poverty ironically suggests that Apartheid has even failed those it was designed to benefit. Indeed, the consequences of Apartheid are both palpable and erased in the novel, with echoes of the past recurring, unbeknownst to the characters, who are blind to such re-enactments. With overarching issues of mythmaking, histories and alternative histories, the question of what it is necessary to remember is posed by both Jasmina and the novel.

The presentation then moved into the issue of language, where discussion of *Triomf* brought to the fore some of the big debates in translation theory and world literature. Jasmina discussed what it meant for a language to be integrated and replaced, particularly in the aftermath of Apartheid. With its history of inequality and cultural oppression, what are the specific ethics of translation in South Africa? More generally, Jasmina drew our attention to a key debate in World Literature - what is lost when a language is translated? World literature is constantly faced with the paradox that we should step outside of our own national literature, but the translations we read are always already domesticated.

#### **Chick Lit: A Comparative Distant Reading of a So-called Global Genre**

*Sandra Folie (University of Vienna)*

Sandra shifted the discussion to a generic (re)investigation. She began with a methodological overview, reviewing some of the strategies and controversies of World Literature, and drew upon Franco Moretti's definition of distant reading.

Sandra then explained the accepted parameters of the Chick Lit genre, which begins in 1996, with Bridget Jones as the prototype which then spread throughout the world. However, in this framework, 'ethnic' Chick Lit is relegated to the periphery, both positioned as a subgenre and broadly homogenised by the binary of West vs Rest. Seeking to shift this problematic paradigm, Sandra's research looks at comparative strategies for research on a global scale, particularly following Friedman's imperatives of re-vision, recovery, circulation and collage. She revises the Chick Lit formula, expanding conditions of the category. This has led to recovery of pre-1996 Chick Lit prototypes. Addressing issues of circulation, this research encourages tracing of networks in 'other' culture capitals of the world.

Sandra then demonstrated her approach, destabilizing Eurocentric claims that African women's writers had not reached a necessary post-feminist level to produce Chick Lit, tracing the genre's emergence in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. However, despite her project's impetus of demonstrating the translatability of genres, Sandra ultimately cautions against homogenisation of texts, following Friedman's mantra: 'the likeness affirmed, the equivalence denied'.

## **Technology, Progress and the Literary Form of Counter-Narratives**

*Martin A. Jensen (City University of New York - CUNY)*

Martin guided us through some of the key intersections of technology, politics and culture in a global framework, looking at cultures and institutions within which technology works, at the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion. His presentation hinged on the premise that technology acquires meaning in a social realm, and cannot be abstracted from its social use. It is also associated with a central paradox: philosophically, technology is associated with freedom, but too much technology can change who we are as human beings – how we feel, interact, and understand ourselves. For example, writing as a technology of memory – however over time, its use can actually worsen our memory. Technology as both 'remedy and poison'.

Martin then moved on to a more specific question: How does technology's role unfold unevenly, providing freedoms to some at the cost of unfreedom to others? The narrative of modernity sees technology as neutral, transcending race and class; however, Martin observed that this is an ideological narrative. His research looks at how literature engages with technology and counter narratives – how it can contest the ideological narrative of technology as progress, in a manner specific to identity (gender, class, etc).

Martin then explored how these issues play out in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*. The novel poses the possibility of technology as outside of human perspective, something other than a means to an end. Would this enable it to transcend gender, race and class? However, even designed from this perspective, technology would still be political, operating as it does in a social context. Ultimately, Martin contends, counter-narratives such as *The Intuitionist* seem to take a dialectic form between resignation and utopia.

### **Session 4, July 25<sup>th</sup>**

## **The Spread of Postmodernist Literature Theory in China in the 1990s**

*Zhang Jingjing (Tianjin Normal University)*

Zhang investigated the intellectual change which occurred in China after the Reform and Opening Period (since the early 1980s) in China. She argued that the 1980s and 1990s brought about much change in China, not only in the economic field through the gradual development of a market economy, but also intellectually through the introduction of a "spirit of postmodernism". Representative for the rise of a debate on "postmodernism" (and its "applicability" to China), were Chinese scholars such as Dong Dingshan and Yuan Kejia, who published articles in the early 1980s on postmodern theory. Established scholars of postmodern theory from abroad also introduced their theories at Chinese universities. Ihab Hassan spoke at Shangdong University (1983), Frederic Jameson at Beijing University (1985) and Douwe Fokkema at Nanjing University (1987). As a result, this new theoretical framework was later adopted by researchers such as Wang Yichuan (Beijing University) who "confirmed" that "the third" period of Western postmodernism was taking place in China in the years between 1990 and 1999. Universities further introduced classes and seminars in China teaching postmodernism, such as Xi'an University (1994), which further led to an increase of publications and teaching frameworks dealing with this newly "introduced" concept in the mid-1990s.

The controversy mainly revolved (and continues to revolve) around the applicability of postmodern theory to China or whether Chinese literary production would indeed require different theoretical

frameworks, arguing that “China has no soil for postmodern production”. Scholars were furthermore separated into “camps” a) researchers actively promoting the concept b) researchers investigating the concept as such and c) harsh critics of postmodernism, arguing that the concept failed to grasp the realities of Chinese literary production or the “complexity” of Chinese culture. While Chen Xiaoming (Beijing University) is largely regarded as an advocate of postmodernism in China, Tao Dongfeng (Capital Normal University) is seen as its critic. Zhang Qinghua (Beijing) is an example of attempting to go beyond this stalemate situation by speaking of Chinese and “Western” postmodernisms, setting the concept into the plural.

### **‘Catching Time’: A Cognitive Investigation of Temporal Synchronization in Literature** *Isabelle Wentworth (New South Wales, Australia)*

Isabelle introduced a chapter of her thesis which addresses temporal synchronization, inspired by cognitive neuro-scientific approaches. Her premise rests on the fact that the human mind synchronizes with the subject it engages with in its perception of time, no matter if the encounter or engagement is physically, described in literature or depicted in a work of art. As an example, a young reader reading about an average day in the life of an elderly person experiences time differently during the reading process; the reader’s perception of time thus synchronizes with that of the literary figure described. Isabelle’s analysis does not, however, approach literature from a reader-response perspective, but dives into the implicit or explicit processes of temporal synchronization between characters within the plots of novels. These characters can be people and objects alike. In the plot, the object regularly becomes anthropomorphized. Here, Isabelle asks: How does the reading of an object change the character’s perception of time?

In her chapter she looks at one example from the novel *La Casa de los Espiritus* by Isabel Allende, in which she analyzes two characters’ perception of time: a house and a young woman named Alba. This magic realist text provides Isabelle with the opportunity to analyze a “closed universe”, which has proven helpful to her phenomenological approach. The house’s both physical and emotional presence is shown to have had an impact on Alba. The house is an agent (is active, is alive) and its perception becomes entangled with that of the human character Alba. The house’s and the inhabitants’ time perceptions are synchronized during the plot, moving in and out of linear and non-linear concepts of time. In this process of temporal synchronization, the divisions between subjective and physical time collapse. Isabelle thus includes biological time as encompassing a “bonding power” into her literary analysis where in the past the focus has solely been on the spiritual or emotional connection of human characters to objects.

### **Expanding the World through Literary Philosophical Textualities: Nietzsche and Joyce** *Reinhard Müller (University of Texas at Austin)*

Reinhard introduced the main concepts he plans to investigate in his thesis, titled “Innovation of Thinking between Philosophy and Literature: Nietzsche and Joyce”. Firstly, he asks: How do the two writers conceptually connect “World Literature” with the “World”? Here, he sees Nietzsche and Joyce as both expecting (or even demanding) to become canonical and thereby creating institutional change and even an international and professional Ausrichtung of scholarship towards their main works of literature. They intentionally inscribed themselves into a genealogy of classics perceived as “World Literature” (in the sense of classics and master works) by re-writing a number of canonical texts, thus inscribing themselves into “World Literature”, but simultaneously also revealing its contingency and constructedness. Through this inscription they could overcome their biographical backgrounds coming from the “semi-periphery” of world literary production (colonized Ireland/ Basel, Switzerland).

Secondly they connected philosophy and literature with the “physiological needs” (Nöte) of their times. Here Reinhard compares their methods of addressing these “physiological needs” they believed

their readers to be subjected to (or even suffering from) and to which past literary production catered. Both Nietzsche and Joyce were disillusioned with “science” (claiming progress and constructing an implied optimism), but also its counterpart taking shape in romanticism (or its predecessors in religion). They approached the values these “solutions” provided critically, asking how “physiological needs” have blindly demanded the creation of (a particular form of) past literary and artistic production and thereby satisfied an unwitting readership.

Nietzsche seeks alternatives from the philosophy of “romanticism” by differentiating between “reduced” vs. “overflowing vitality” in all aesthetic values. Joyce on the other hand saw the ills of his time in the symbolical “paralysis” which features in his work *The Dubliners*. His form of overcoming the paralysis as a Not of his time was to focus on texts as communicating the “music of life”. He argues that no text can be reread in the same way twice, that our desire to control the text (or dissect it scientifically) would fail to acknowledge its ability to evade our desire or need (Not) to pin it down to fixed meanings and values.

### **“The Sociology of Dance: Social, Cultural, Political, Economical, historical Contexts & Implications”**

*Monika Kajal (Simon Fraser University, British Columbia)*

Monika’s project approaches the globalization of dance culture in North America. The film industry (with *Dirty Dancing* as one of its most well-known productions) increased the public visibility of a dance culture, yet arguably did not do it justice, as it failed to show the multifaceted histories of various dance cultures which developed in the course of history. Monika in particular addresses the Hip-Hop Dance Culture, introducing us to a number of standardized dance moves through which dances are composed, or assembled. Hip-Hop in its beginnings was and performed itself as an “anti-mainstream” dance culture, a counter-culture providing an alternative space to “mainstream” norms and values. It critiqued a sociological landscape of a specific historical time, and arguably proved a largely cosmopolitan approach to dance as an art form. As a more specific example, Monika pointed to *Save the Last Dance* (2001). On the surface, the film deconstructs a number of traditional dualities (gender, race, class, etc.). Yet as part of a by-then market-driven production it results in the dance tradition touched upon in the film thematically being pushed into the background or arguably even being devalorized.

*A warm thanks to all participants for active participation in the discussions and for constructive comments and suggestions. A special thanks to Sandra Folie, Martin A. Jensen, Isabelle Wentworth and Emily Mae Graf for taking minutes at the four sessions.*