

IRISH CENTRE FOR TRANSNATIONAL STUDIES



Workshop on Questioning Intercultural Literature in Europe

Summary

While one could argue that intercultural literature has become nothing less than an extension of national identities, rethinking questions of sociological, linguistic, legal and cultural emancipation of people throughout Europe, the literary phenomenon remains conceptionally indistinct and leaves often more questions than answers to those engaging with it. In order to shed light on a number of those questions, the Irish Centre for Transnational Studies (ICTS) dedicated the two-day symposium *Questioning Intercultural Literature in Europe* to the phenomenon. Organised by Helmut Grugger and Szilvia Lengl the symposium gathered scholars from Ireland, Germany, Austria and Spain in mid-April 2013.

Prof. Dr Carmine Chiellino (University of Augsburg) dedicated his keynote address, “Change of Language – but how?” to the overarching question how – and not why – people become intercultural authors and which role the change of language plays in the process. In his address Chiellino located the origin of intercultural literature in the moment an author begins to write in a language he/she does not have a personal or cultural history in. The ‘intercultural novel’ constitutes, according to Chiellino, nothing less than an attempt to re-negotiate one’s own cultural memory within a new language. The separation of memory and language resonates in turn in a realignment of the aesthetical and the ethical authority. The phenomenon of intercultural literature is, therefore, not a matter of an author’s ethnicity, but of a process of revision and re-negotiation. However, while the revision of the aesthetical and the ethical authority offers the intercultural author unknown liberties, it does contain existential risks as well. The double-sidedness of a re-negotiation might be the reason why such an overwhelming majority of intercultural authors choose first to engage with a new language in form of autobiography.

Subsequently, **Dr Ana Ruiz** (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid) took a closer look at the role of ‘latent language’ in intercultural literature and the way it inscribes the author’s cultural memory into the new language. By analysing the works of Jorge Semprún, Ruiz illustrated how the shift towards intercultural literature enabled the author to face latent conflicts with Spain’s past and his own national identity. Taking a closer look at Semprún’s *Federico Sánchez vous salue bien* (1993), *L’écriture ou la vie* (1994) and *Adieu, vive clarté...* (1998) Ruiz illustrated how the author drew on the acoustic similarities between Spanish and French (“Lautstimme”, resp. latent language) and on metaphors in order to build an intercultural memory. One example for the combination of these aspects is the “face of a bull” which symbolises the “radical evil”. A survivor of Buchenwald, Semprún stated once that in order to control evil “one must not invert one’s eyes from the face of the bull”. The statement corresponds with paintings of Velazquez, Goya and Picasso and refers to the cultural tradition of the bullfights in Andalusia thus introducing cultural memory into the French language.

Prof. Dr Beate Eder-Jordan (Univ. Innsbruck) then provided insights into works by Roma authors. After explaining the historical, social and political context of the Roma (who have been defined as the largest minority in Europe while often not being recognised as a group), Eder-Jordan focused her analysis on the construction of humanness in relation to the subject position of the narrating self.

Eder-Jordan discussed the challenges faced by a number of Roma women authors when writing about their experiences with the Holocaust. The challenges originate in the Roma definition of humanness and relate thereby to Roma identity. Eder-Jordan explored the taboos in Roma literature written by women in this context. She examined how Roma women authors frequently break with the conventions and norms of the male dominated narrative tradition in Roma culture, which does not voice or represent Roma suffering during the Third Reich.

Prof. Dr Monika Albrecht (University of Limerick) discussed her research on migrants and minorities in German-language cinema. After a short overview of the overall neutral presentation of minorities from the 1970's to the 1980's Albrecht turned her attention to the change in perception of Arab and Muslim communities in Western Europe and around the world. Even though the oil crisis of the 1950's, the Islamic revolution in Iran 1979, and the fatwa of Khomeini Aiatollah on Salman Rushdie were topics of public discussions, the religious background of these events came only into focus after 9/11. Since Muslims became first visible as spouses and children of immigrants in German society and were therefore first and foremost perceived as exotic enrichment of the communities, the religious aspect of Muslim culture was usually dismissed. Taking Helma Sanders-Brahms' film *Shirins Hochzeit* (1976) as an example Albrecht demonstrated, that the protagonists' clothing, the patriarchal society of the village of her origin and the forced marriage were aspects which represented a rural community rather than the characteristics of a religious culture. In fact the solidarity between the female characters of the film indicates that the feminist director Sanders-Brahms saw in the Anatolian culture an alternative, matriarchal society to the capitalistic culture in Germany, which was at the time highly questioned by the generation of '68. While creating a similar alternative society, Christa Wolf's novel *Kassandra* (1983) displays a certain awareness of the negative consequences and problems of such patriarchal communities and does not idealize it into a utopian matriarchal society. In other words, both Wolf and Sanders-Brahms projected their ideas of a utopian, more equal society on a minority, yet dismissed its religious aspect. In doing so, both of them created a more positive image of light than contemporary publications, which focus almost exclusively on the religious aspect and project fear and negativity.

Exploring Annette Kolb's *Das Exemplar* and Richard Bermann's essay 'Irland' (both 1911/13) **Dr Gisela Holfter** (University of Limerick) shed some light on the question whether travel literature also represents a form of intercultural literature. Holfter gave a fascinating account of the depiction of Ireland in Kolb's novel, which deals with a young woman who travels to London to meet a man, but when he is delayed, continues her travels through England and Ireland. Holfter then contrasted Kolb's description of Ireland as magical ("verwunschen") with Bermann's account of Ireland as magnificent ("herrlich"), which nevertheless got to him, because of its sadness and the still palpable suffering of generations of Irish families.

Dr Natalia Shchyhlevska (University of Mainz, Alfred Krupp Fellow, Greifswald 2012/13) analysed and critically discussed Wolfgang Welsch's popular essay "Transculturality – The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today" (1992) in light of a close reading of the works of Herder and his understanding of culture. Shchyhlevska reviewed in detail the title and some quotes of Welsch essay and emphasised multiple questions which stay unanswered by Welsch's reading of Herder. Particularly because it proclaims a rather traditional view of the term "culture" and is historically not quite accurate. Shchyhlevska pointed out that Welsch's programmatic title – in German original "Lebensformen nach der Auflösung der Kulturen" – declares the demise of the concepts "interculturality" and

“postcolonial studies” and suggests an amalgamation of these into a restorative theory of transculturality, and questioned the usefulness of such unifications.

Following Shchyhlevska **Dr Helmut Grugger** (MIC, University of Limerick) then offered a comparison of the Czech and the German version of Ota Filip’s autobiographical novel *The Seventh Vita* (2001), in which he examined the differences in the way Filip constructs and positions his narrative self and its memory vis-à-vis the Czech and the German audience. Grugger pointed out that the German version of the novel is on no account a translation of the Czech version but a different staging of the autobiography. Furthermore the classification as autobiography has also to be considered with precaution as the novel may claim to be based on a Czech document in the Stasi-archives, yet the document itself remains inaccessible for the readership. The novel must thus be considered as a fictionalisation of Filip’s live. This emphasizes a new position of the writer, who is competent in both languages and does not use either the reduction of the language nor an interim language of expression, but creates instead a symbolic parallel between an individual’s live and the social history of a country. Based on these assumptions, the difference between the two novels – e. g. the final part about the death of the author’s son – accentuates the differences of the implied readers in both languages, who listen in the “conversation” of those.

In the last talk of the symposium **Dr Szilvia Lengi** (MIC, University of Limerick) examined the literary motif of incest in the novels of Aglaja Veteranyi and Andreï Makine – defining incest as an experience of violence rather than “Geschwisterliebe” (the love between siblings), as a topos prevalent in many national literatures. In Veteranyi’s novel, the father abuses his authority and repeatedly violates his two daughters. Examples of such depictions of incest are numerous in German as well as English speaking literatures, two of the more famous examples being Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* (1992). Yet, Veteranyi uses this display of violence as an anchor to feminist literature from the 1960’s onwards and demonstrates the implosion of a minority under repressive circumstances. Makine’s novel on the other hand portrays the story of a Russian duchess who is drugged and then sexually abused by her own son. The sexual assault in the novel is the trigger for remembrance, which introduces the cultural memory of not only Russian literature and culture but of Russian immigration into France in the first half of the 20th century. The aesthetic value of the language allows Makine to interpret the violent act as an act of love and to rescue his protagonists into French speaking literature.