Martina Krebs

Hotel Stories

Representations of Escapes and Encounters in Fiction and Film

Gerd Stratmann (Hg.)

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HARRY (*closing his eyes; pressing his forefingers against his temples*): It's all coming back to me now. The Hotel Existence. […] The sole purpose of a hotel was to make you happy and comfortable, and once you signed the register and went upstairs to your room, all you had to do was ask for something and it was yours. A hotel represented the promise of a better world, a place that was more than just a place, but an opportunity, a chance to live inside your dreams.

[…]

TOM: I still don't follow. You invent a place called the Hotel Existence, but where is it? What was it for?

HARRY: For? Nothing, really. It was a retreat, a world I could visit in my mind. That's what we're talking about, no? Escape.

(Auster 2006: 101-102)

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I dedicate this book to my family, to my parents Christine and Günter Iske in particular, and to my husband Christian Krebs, with love and gratitude.

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1. Hotel Fascinations – An Introduction

"Hotels are many things", Eddystone C. Nebel states in the first chapter of his hotel business guide *Managing Hotels Effectively* (Nebel 1991: 1). This sentence indicates the vast range of meanings associated with hotels and of material that could be analysed in a study on hotels. Nebel specifies some of these meanings, explaining that hotels to him are glamorous places of history, comparable to theatres or even whole cities, and definitely represent his true vocation in life (cf. *ibid*.: 1-9).

Hotels, then, are special places. They can be perceived in different ways – associated with both work and leisure, they carry distinct meanings for everyone concerned with them. These meanings will vary from individual to individual depending on their socio-cultural backgrounds and relations to the respective hotel(s), but a certain attraction hotels seem to hold for everyone. This raises several questions: who comes to stay at a hotel, either as guest or member of staff, and for what reasons? What does the place 'hotel' represent for guests and staff, and what constitutes its particularities and makes it an individual space for the people? Moreover, why and how are those hotel spaces frequently represented in fiction and film?

These last questions imply my basic theoretical background and cultural studies approach. This study is located in the context of British Cultural Studies in Germany, an academic field which has largely developed from the more literary-studies-affiliated discipline of English Studies and pursues the use and integration of new and inter-disciplinary approaches to cultures and cultural products (cf. German Association for the Study of British Cultures 2001). It therefore uses theoretical approaches from both literary studies and cultural studies for its analyses which understand the concept of 'text' in a wider sense, including both written texts (fictional or non-fictional) and other cultural products (such as films and paintings) which can all be regarded as representational signs (see below). Thus, I will analyse hotels and hotel fiction from a point of view which is shaped by the definitions of culture, space, identity and representation which cultural studies discuss today. In Stuart Hall's terms, culture in this context is defined as

> not so much a set of *things* – novels and paintings or TV programmes and comics – as a process, a set of *practices*. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and the exchange of meanings – 'the giving and taking of meaning' – between the members of a society or group. (Hall 1997b: 2)

Since the cultural turn, the negotiation of meanings, which are not inherent in things but "constructed" and "produced" through "signifying practice[s]" (Hall 1997c: 24), therefore has been accepted as central to the communication and interpretation processes which constitute cultures. The process of the production and consumption of meanings constructed by "the practices of representation" has been illustrated by Paul du Gay *et al*. in their 'circuit of culture', which shows how representation, production, consumption, regulation, and identity belong together and depend on each other (Hall 1997c: 15; cf. du Gay *et al*. 1997; Hall 1997b: 1).

As Hall argues, "[r]epresentation connects meaning and language to culture. […] [It] is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture." (Hall 1997c: 15) This shows the basic constructionist approach of this field of cultural studies which can be subdivided into two models, the semiotic approach and the discursive approach (cf. Hall 1997; Baldwin *et al*. 2000: 27-35; Giles & Middleton 1999: 56-80). Meanings are constructed and negotiated through signs and symbols, using semiotics as the "general approach to the study of signs in culture, and of culture as a sort of 'language'" (Hall 1997c: 36). Cultural products that people circulate and consume, such as clothes, texts, or music, can therefore be read, decoded and interpreted by those who understand the signs and share the same cultural and linguistic codes, i.e. belong to the same culture (cf. Hall 1997b: 4, 22). These processes are embedded in the knowledge, ideas and ideologies of various discourses which determine the relation of negotiated meanings to questions of power.

Cultural studies, then, analyses cultural products and phenomena and their constructions. Therefore, representations of phenomena like travel and tourism, institutions like hotels and cultural products like hotel stories in literature and film can be objects of cultural analysis. In their article on the development of tourism in Britain, Berghoff and Korte illustrate how tourism can be treated as a "semiotic and media-based phenomenon" (Berghoff & Korte 2002: 7):

> What all the […] types and phases in the history of travel have in common is that we would know nothing about them, and they would mean nothing to us, if they had not been translated into signs, if travel experiences had not been written about and represented in visual images. Indeed, for most tourists, travel experience crucially entails a mediation through texts and images. (*Ibid*.: 6)

These texts and images, i.e. these cultural signs, need to be treated as systems of representation and to be decoded and interpreted to discover their meanings and cultural importance. John Urry, however, in his book on tourism and the tourist gaze (1990), is critical of the use of representation processes and signifying practices in postmodern times, arguing that representations and the 'reality' they represent can no longer be clearly distinguished and categorised, particularly with reference to visual signs:

> Postmoderism problematises the distinction between representations and reality. This results from a number of processes. Signification is increasingly figural or visual and so there is a closer, more intimate, relationship between the representation and the reality than where the signification takes place through words or music (without the advantage of a film, TV, video, pop video and so on). Further, an increasing proportion of the referents of signification, the 'reality', are themselves representations. (Urry 1990: 85)

In Urry's opinion it becomes more and more difficult to discover 'reality' and 'authentic' phenomena (cf. Harrison 1997: 240) since representations have come so close to the 'original', sometimes have become originals themselves, so that they are hard to read and decode. The borderlines between the objects and concepts involved in the representation process are no longer discernible. Similar doubts with reference to the