

Sibylle Baumbach, Beatrice Michaelis, Ansgar Nünning (eds.)

in collaboration with Katharina Zilles

Travelling Concepts, Metaphors, and Narratives:

Literary and Cultural Studies
in an Age of Interdisciplinary Research

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Sibylle Baumbach
Beatrice Michaelis
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May 2012

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INTRODUCING TRAVELLING CONCEPTS AND THE METAPHOR OF TRAVELLING: RISKS AND PROMISES OF CONCEPTUAL TRANSFERS IN LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

SIBYLLE BAUMBACH, BEATRICE MICHAELIS AND ANSGAR NÜNNING

1. Doing Literary Studies in an Age of Cross-Disciplinary and Transnational Literary and Cultural Theory: The Role of Travelling Concepts and Metaphors in Literary and Cultural Studies

During the last three decades or so the study of literature, and culture, has become increasingly diversified. Given the plethora and diversity of new approaches and methods in the burgeoning field of literary and cultural theory and the concomitant proliferation of textual analysis, it may be argued that doing literary studies in an age of cross-disciplinary and transnational literary and cultural theory differs in many ways from what literary criticism and literary studies used to be before the heydays of theory. What once looked like a more or less unified disciplinary enterprise has branched out into different directions and fields, producing a great diversity of new approaches, methods, and readings, many of which display little if any family resemblance to their eminent ancestors of ‘lit. crit.’ and ‘close reading’.

More often than not, the development of new theoretical approaches and forms of textual analysis in literary studies has resulted from the importation of theories, concepts, and insights from disciplines and fields other than literary studies. Cases in point include Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault’s historical discourse analysis, Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of language, Pierre Bourdieu’s sociological theories, and Niklas Luhmann’s sociological systems theory. More recently, many literary theorists and critics have displayed great interest in the writings and concepts of philosophers like Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, Jacques Rancière, and Alain Badiou (cf. Lecerle 2010), all of whom have had, and continue to have, wide-ranging impact on critical theory and the ways we do literary studies. The same holds true, albeit in a completely different disciplinary and theoretical context, for the transfer of knowledge from the sciences to the study of literature, with the salient concept of ‘mirror neurons’ as a recent example (cf. Koepsell/Spoerhase 2008). In

* We are very grateful to our colleague Wolfgang Hallet for giving us permission to use the model he devised for visualizing the complexities and frameworks involved in conceptual transfers (see paragraph 3). For this introduction we have drawn on ideas and formulations that two of the editors used in two companion articles, viz. Nünning/Grabes/Baumbach 2009 and Nünning’s chapter “Transnational Approaches to the Study of Culture” (2012).

each of these cases, theories and concepts that had originally been developed in disciplines concerned with other phenomena than literature were eagerly adapted, and often transformed, by literary theorists and critics.

Another reason for the reconfiguration of the academic landscape in literary studies that the ongoing boom in literary and cultural theory has served to enhance is arguably the trend towards internationalization. Although there are still marked differences between various national research cultures and traditions, the development of literary and cultural studies, just like other disciplines in the humanities, has been characterized by an ongoing trend towards internationalization and globalization. On the one hand, the differences can hardly be overlooked when comparing, for instance, the ways in which literary criticism as practised in British universities differs from the German tradition of *Literaturwissenschaften* (see Zima 2002; Nünning/Nünning 2011) as well as from the Dutch notion of *literatuurwetenschap*. Such differences serve to show that national practices of studying literature and culture are characterized by a number of distinctive features: the study of literature is itself very much culture-bound. These differences in critical approaches as well as in what Johan Galtung (1981) has called 'intellectual style' manifest themselves in a number of concrete and tangible ways, shaping both prevalent research agendas and scholarly practices. On the other hand, however, theories and concepts have not only travelled between disciplines, crossing (and challenging) disciplinary boundaries, but also between "geographically dispersed academic communities" (Bal 2002: 24). Literary and cultural theory and the dynamic exchange of concepts and critical practices have arguably served to foster and enhance the development of transnational approaches to the study of literature and culture.

With the move towards both greater interdisciplinarity and internationalization, the dynamic exchange of concepts between different disciplines and academic research cultures has become ever more important for the humanities in general and the study of literature and culture in particular. Through constant appropriation, translation, and reassessment across various boundaries and fields, concepts, as well as metaphors and narratives, have acquired new meanings, triggering a reorganization of prevalent orders of knowledge and opening up new horizons of research. To the extent that their meaning must be constantly renegotiated between different disciplines and academic communities, travelling concepts, just like travelling theories (cf. Said 1983), metaphors, and narratives, can foster a self-reflexive approach to both the study of literature and the interdisciplinary study of culture.

In the current age of inter- or cross-disciplinary research, a common, shared language has become an indispensable prerequisite for discussion and exchange across disciplines and for the dialogue and collaboration between scholars from different (national) cultures of knowledge. Concepts such as 'performance', 'narration', 'space', 'media', 'communication', 'identity', 'body', 'intertextuality', and 'knowledge' (cf. Bal 2002) have at least partially succeeded in establishing a transdisciplinary contact zone, providing the foundation for such a common language. Like metaphors and nar-

ratives, they shape and structure the ways in which we discuss literature and culture, engage in interdisciplinary research, and order our experiences and knowledge of the world.

Especially nowadays, in an age of interdisciplinary and increasingly transnational research, concepts, metaphors, and narratives are ‘on the move’, travelling across different cultural contexts, gaining access to new fields of investigation while promoting their continuous re-negotiation and re-adaptation. ‘Travelling’ back and forth between disciplines, historical periods, and (national) cultures of knowledge and research (see sections 2 and 3 below), answering the demands of the time, and adhering to paradigms dominant in a specific field of research, their cultural ‘baggage’ is continuously checked and contested and might be expanded or modified as new meanings are added or old ones lost.

The present volume invites readers not only to trace the journeys of concepts, metaphors, and narratives across different boundaries in the fields of literary and cultural studies, but also to explore the challenges, impediments, and transformations that occur in their academic, literary, and cultural trajectories and transition(s): What happens when concepts, metaphors, and narratives travel across disciplinary, historical, and national boundaries? How do these ‘travellers’ change, what do they leave behind or gain on their way to new territories? What role does literature play in these journeys, especially in the establishment of newly adapted concepts, metaphors, and narratives, and are there any hazards, dangers, or even limits to the travelling of concepts that may be unearthed through analysing the metaphor of travelling?

2. Coming to Terms with the Exchange of Concepts: Introducing ‘Travelling Concepts’

How can we come to terms with the dynamic exchange of concepts between disciplines and academic communities? Several key concepts, or meta-concepts, present themselves as possible models for framing the processes that are involved in such exchanges and that may foster the development of transnational approaches to the study of literature and culture. They include the notions of ‘travelling concepts’ (Bal 2002), translation (cf. Bachmann-Medick 2006: ch. 5), cultural exchange or cultural transfer, and emergence. While the focus in this volume will be on the potential of ‘travelling concepts’, recent insights from the other fields and approaches, i. e. translation studies, cultural exchange, and cultural transfer, converge in a number of ways that impinge on any attempt to account for the dynamic exchange of concepts.

Though all of these approaches are concerned with the dynamic processes involved in the traffic between academic cultures and disciplines, and are thus closely intertwined, they focus on different aspects. One of the most promising ways of fostering the development of transnational approaches to the study of literature and culture was suggested by Dutch narratologist and cultural theorist Mieke Bal in her book *Travel-*

ling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide (2002). Her project proceeds from the assumption that concepts are indispensable for the study of culture because they are “the tools of intersubjectivity” and “key to intersubjective understanding” in that “they facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language”. Bal suggests that concepts “offer miniature theories” (Bal 2002: 22) or “shorthand theories” (ibid.: 23), a claim borne out by many influential concepts that metonymically represent, or evoke, a more complex theory, such as, for instance, deconstruction (as a metonymy for particular kinds of poststructuralist approaches inspired by Derrida).

Insofar as Bal’s cross-disciplinary project of ‘travelling concepts’ is mainly concerned with the development of a “concept-based methodology” (Bal 2002: 5) and with fostering interdisciplinary research projects in the humanities, it is of particular importance for the questions at hand, i. e. the role of concepts and metaphors in literary and cultural studies. The approaches developed in translation studies, cultural exchange, and cultural transfer look much more closely at the historical and social contexts, the actual people and institutions who adapt concepts, goods, or practices from another context or country, the multilayered processes involved in the acts of translation, or appropriation, and the transformations that theories, concepts, or other cultural phenomena (including goods) undergo as they are transferred from one (e. g. academic) context into another.

What the notions of travelling concepts, translation, cultural exchange, and cultural transfer have in common is that they share at least two central epistemological assumptions: first, the assumption that concepts are ‘operative terms’ (cf. Welsch 1997), i. e. that they are never merely descriptive but “also programmatic and normative” (Bal 2002: 28) and that they construct and change the very objects they analyse (cf. Welsch 1997: 20), “entailing new emphases and a new ordering of the phenomena within the complex objects constituting the cultural field” (Bal 2002: 33); second, the assumption that there are no universal concepts for the study of culture, society or politics, and that no approach or theory can ever claim any universal validity.

Approaches and concepts in literary studies, as well as in the humanities at large, are not only heavily imbued with, and shaped by, very particular historical, intellectual and national traditions, they also come with ideological freight and unconscious biases, as the insights of postcolonial theory and globalization studies have amply demonstrated. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown in his influential book *Provincializing Europe*, every case of transferring a cultural, economic or political model or theory from one context to another is always “a problem of translation” (Chakrabarty 2008: 17) – a translation of existing worlds, their “conceptual horizons”, and their thought-categories into the context, concepts, and horizons of another life-world (cf. ibid.: 71). He draws attention to the fact that any seemingly “abstract and universal idea” can “look utterly different in different historical contexts”, that no country is “a model to another country”, that “historical differences actually make a difference”, and that “no human society is a *tabula rasa*” (ibid.: xii). What Chakrabarty observes about the “universal concepts of political modernity” is also true of every approach and concept