

Michael Basseler, Daniel Hartley, Ansgar Nünning (Eds.)  
in collaboration with Elizabeth Kovach

# Emergent Forms of Life in Anglophone Literature

Conceptual Frameworks and Critical Analyses

Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning (Hg.)

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## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume sets out from the assumption that forms of life are not only entwined with our everyday use of language – a thought that Ludwig Wittgenstein made famous in his *Philosophical Investigations* –, but also that emergent forms of life find some of their most complex and challenging expressions in literature. Arguably, literary forms have always played an important role in giving form to life, raising important questions about which forms of life are desirable or valuable, imagining alternative life-forms, and aesthetically playing out and thus making visible the tensions between conflicting forms of life. Covering a wide range of Anglophone literary texts, the essays in this volume strive towards a critical analysis of the links between stylistic devices, formal procedures, and narrative techniques, on the one hand, and emerging or changing forms of life, on the other hand. By reframing and theorizing the concept ‘forms of life’ from a decidedly literary-critical perspective, the volume aims to enlarge the conceptual and interpretative repertoire of literary and cultural studies and furnish the study of narrative fiction as well as of other genres with new descriptive and analytical resources.

As some of the previous volumes in the ELCH series, this collection of essays is based on the papers and discussions held at a preparatory conference, which took place from 23-24, April 2014 at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (GCSC) in Giessen. The conference was jointly organized by the European Phdnet Literary and Cultural Studies, the International PhD Programme Literary and Cultural Studies (IPP), the English Department of the Justus Liebig University, and the GCSC. We express our gratitude to the contributors who made both the conference and the work on this volume such an intellectually stimulating and pleasurable experience. We are very grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for their generous publication grant without which this publication would not have been possible. Moreover, we would like to thank Dr. Erwin Otto and his team at *Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier* for their unflinching support and efficient processing of the manuscript. Finally, our very special thanks go to Elizabeth Kovach, who once again did a marvelous job with copy-editing and language proofing, and to our student assistants Melanie Mihm and Katharina Gräf for their excellent assistance in preparing the manuscript.

Giessen, May 2015

Michael Basseler, Daniel Hartley, and Ansgar Nünning





# ‘FORMS OF LIFE’ AS A TRAVELLING CONCEPT IN LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

MICHAEL BASSELER, DANIEL HARTLEY, ANSGAR NÜNNING

## 1. On ‘Forms of Life’: Introducing the Topic and Objectives of the Volume

Though there is widespread agreement that life-styles have undergone far-reaching changes in the past few decades, little sustained effort has been made in literary and cultural studies to explore the role of literature in articulating emergent forms of life. We live in an age in which numerous scientific, economic, political, and social developments exert an immense influence on our shared forms of life and on our very understanding of them. The life sciences have begun to alter our conception of life by disconnecting it from humanist ideals grounded in Enlightenment philosophy, promoting instead a new ‘culture of life’ (Knorr Cetina 2005) that promises the perfectibility and enhancement of human life through the super-powers of bioengineering and nanotechnology. In close connection with this, neoliberalism and late capitalism have come to shape and control our forms of life by penetrating deeply into the private realm in a manner that is perhaps historically unprecedented. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2009) has used the brilliantly polyvalent term ‘consuming life’ to describe the large degree to which contemporary forms of life are centered on the paradigm of consumption, transforming a society of producers into a society of consumers. Contributing to a transformation of the consumer into a commodity, digital and social media arguably play a central role in the process of reconfiguring forms of life, effecting the very basics of life.<sup>1</sup> As cultural critics and philosophers such as Jonathan Crary (2013) or Byung-Chul Han (2010) write, we are beginning to sacrifice sleep to a market-place that operates 24/7, resulting in a collective fatigue that increasingly characterizes our dominant forms of life.

The question that arises from such discourses and developments for our volume is the following: How does literary fiction deal with such ‘emergent forms of life’? Perhaps even more importantly, what is the role and cultural work that literature may perform in this context? And to what extent do emergent forms of life constitute a catalyst for the transformation and innovation of literary fiction? Taking its key concept and cue from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s suggestive observation that the speaking of language is an integral part of a form of life (cf. Wittgenstein 2009: § 23), this volume attempts to move beyond the analytic philosophy and philosophy of language traditions in which the concept of forms of life originated, in order to gauge the theoretical and heuristic potential of the philosophical, anthropological and sociological notions of forms

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<sup>1</sup> On commodification as a problem of forms of life, cf. Jaeggi 2013: 24-26.

of life in literary and cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> While Wittgenstein was mainly interested in the role of natural languages, this volume intends to shift the emphasis towards the interface between style, aesthetic forms, and genres, on the one hand, and forms of life, i.e., the totality of social practices and kinds of human relationships which are subject to historical change and cultural variation, on the other. Wittgenstein's pregnant statement that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (*Philosophical Investigations* § 19) can be read as an invitation to tease out the manifold affinities between language, style, aesthetic forms, genres, and forms of life.

Taking Wittgenstein's analogy between language and form of life several steps further, the volume proceeds from the assumption that not only the language, but also the narrative techniques and aesthetic devices of literature bear a similar affinity with forms of life: they do not merely mimetically represent traditional, more recent or emergent forms of life, but actually serve to form and generate our notions about individual and collective life-forms. World-views and forms of life are not just a matter of content; they are constituted by language, style, texture, narrative, viewpoint and genres. There exist several salient conceptual frameworks that are interested in exploring the nexus between content and form, for instance, the notions of 'the politics of style' (Daniel Hartley), 'the content of the form' (Louis Hjelmslev, Hayden White), 'the ideology of form' (Fredric Jameson), 'an ethics and politics of form' (Terry Eagleton), and, more generally, the approach known as 'cultural narratology' (Gabriele Helms, Ansgar Nünning) and recent attempts to reconceptualize literary studies as a form of life-science (Ottmar Ette, Michael Basseler, A. Nünning). What these various frameworks share is the assumption that aesthetic forms can themselves be seen as the bearer of ideological and moral meaning, that "the formal features of an artwork are quite as ideologically eloquent as its content" (Eagleton 2012: 181). This means that, in literary representations, forms of life are indissociable from their verbal and formal embodiment.

More specifically, the present volume pursues four main goals: First, it attempts to adapt, reframe and theorize both the concept of forms of life and philosophical typologies of various kinds of life-forms (cf. Pieper 2003) such that the concept and typologies can be fruitfully used as theoretical frameworks and analytical tools in literary and cultural studies. Secondly, it intends to explore how changing cultural contexts (e.g., rapid technological innovation, new media, ongoing acceleration, globalisation, world-

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life has attracted the unbroken interest of numerous scholars throughout the past decades, as this selected bibliography suggests: Hunter (1968), Studhalter (1973), Gier (1981), Creadon (1984), Sharrock/Anderson (1985), Emmett (1990), Track (1992), Barry (1996), Scheman (1996), Jacquette (1998), Lütterfelds/Niesen (1999), Majetschak (2000), Pradhan (2001), Hanfling (2002), Botz-Bornstein (2003), Hutto (2003), Blair (2006), DeAngelis (2007), Höhler (2008), Denker (2009), Litwack (2009), Nida-Rümelin (2009; 2012), Volbers (2009), Cometti (2010), Kishik (2010), Marques/Venturinha (2010), Munz et al. (2010), Padilla Gálvez (2010), Römpf (2010), Padilla Gálvez/Gaffal (2011; 2012), Gaffal (2011), and Bossart (2013).