

Section 5

What Form Knows: The Literary Text as Framework, Model, and Experiment

Dr. Natalie Roxburgh (Siegen), Dr. Irmtraud Huber (Bern), Dr. Wolfgang Funk (Mainz)

Programme Outline

Monday, 24 September 2018, 13:30-15:15

Rainer Emig (Mainz)

“They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care”: Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* as an Exercise in (Un-)Doing Knowledge through Form

Nina Engelhardt (Köln)

What Form Knows and How It Is: Form, Knowledge, and Being in Mathematics and Literary Fiction

Monday, 24 September 2018, 15:45-17:15

Theresa Schön (Halle-Wittenberg)

The Inventory, the Dissection, and the Literary Character Sketch

Anne Rügemeier (Freiburg)

Illness and the List: The Knowledge of Illness between Medicine and Literature

Tuesday, 25 September 2018, 15:00-16:30

Anna Auguscik (Oldenburg)

Knowing Antarctica: Expedition Novels as Forms of Literary Re-Enactment

Jolene Mathieson (Hamburg)

“Water is a burned body”: H₂O, Monstrous Materials and What Form Doesn’t Know in Weird Fiction

Abstracts

Rainer Emig (Mainz)

“They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care”: Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark* as an Exercise in (Un-)Doing Knowledge through Form

Lewis Carroll’s long poem *The Hunting of the Snark: An Agony in Eight Fits* (1876) is conventionally categorized as a nonsense poem. The term relates directly to the theme of the proposed section, since it connects the presumed opposite of knowledge with a literary genre. Yet neither is nonsense merely the absence or opposite of knowledge nor is *The Hunting of the Snark* simply its humorous rejection or parody. The illustrator of the first edition, Henry Holiday, indeed considered the poem a tragedy. Carroll himself hinted that it might depict an existential quest for happiness.

The proposed paper will argue that, in keeping with Carroll’s background as a mathematician and logician, the text employs form in order to create an alternative universe of meaning. Eight portmanteau words from Carroll’s poem “The Jabberwocky” reappear in it and meet ten protagonists, whose names all start with the letter “B” and whose skills and outlook are at the same time prototypical (e.g. the Banker holds the purse strings of the endeavour) and strangely limited or even antagonistic (e.g. Butcher and Beaver eye each other suspiciously). Together they embark on a typical colonial adventure, yet their guiding map is a blank page. What this hints at, together with the goal of the quest, the capture of a “Snark” (a creature that can be identified by five signs yet turns out to be a “Boojum”, another creature that makes its hunters disappear) is a fictional experiment in poetic form that is concerned with epistemology, the theory of the grounding of knowledge. As such an experiment, the poem makes the possibilities of knowledge appear in poetic form – in the same way that it makes them disappear again at its very end. One can read this as a Victorian prefiguration of Structuralism as well as Poststructuralism and Deconstruction. Yet far from being a mere exercise in form for form’s sake, the poem’s formal structure as well as its ingredients and protagonists produce as the fallout of their eventual collapse critical views of dominant ideological discourses, from those of economy via biology, social class, even Empire, all the way to the existential questions of meaning and happiness that Carroll himself spotted in his text.

Nina Engelhardt (Köln)

What Form Knows and How It Is: Form, Knowledge, and Being in Mathematics and Literary Fiction

Mathematics is a formal science. Concerned with formal systems and sometimes understood to ‘be’ form, maths can help us investigate ‘what form knows’ and also ‘how it is’, i.e., how it produces being. Modernist writers Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce engage with

mathematics in their searches for new literary forms, and a view to maths also plays a role in establishing formalist literary criticism in the 1920s. At the same time, twentieth-century developments suggest that maths becomes modernist: it shares with modernist literature a sense of crisis and uncertainty, a departure from a direct representational relationship to the world, and a self-referential turn. As it became clear that attempts to rid modern maths of paradoxes, and thus uncertainty, are bound to fail, questions about what, and how securely, maths knows, yielded to investigations into what this formal science ‘is’ and in how far counterintuitive concepts such as imaginary numbers can be said to ‘exist’. Brian McHale argues that such a shift from epistemological to ontological questions distinguishes postmodernist from modernist fiction, and literary engagements with maths support this notion: where modernist writers tend to draw on maths to explore the relationship of form and knowledge, postmodern texts use maths as an ontological model. For example, novels by Thomas Pynchon explore how maths produces being and compare the process to literary world-making, and Alain Badiou argues: ‘mathematics = ontology’ (*Being and Event* 6).

This talk examines how modernist works by Woolf, Eliot, and Joyce and Pynchon’s postmodernist novels employ maths as a model for innovations in literary form. It thereby interrogates intersections of mathematical and literary forms of knowing and world-making and traces a change in the role of – both mathematical and literary – form for epistemological and ontological concerns.

Theresa Schön (Halle-Wittenberg)

The Inventory, the Dissection, and the Literary Character Sketch

Rooted in Greek Antiquity, the literary character sketch represents a traditional means of producing and communicating knowledge on the moral, ethical and social nature of men and women. In their periodicals *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele make extensive use of the character sketch, representing, reflecting on and, importantly, ordering knowledge on early eighteenth-century London morals and manners. Among the large number of character sketches, there is a small group of texts that combines character writing with forms of producing and ordering knowledge usually associated with other contemporary (naturalist) fields. In these texts, Addison and Steele represent morally flawed types of men and women with the help of (pseudo-)musicological, geographical, anatomical, economical and sociological means. In my paper, I shall discuss how Addison and Steele’s character writing joins these different forms and frameworks productively by examining two of these phenomena in detail. Listing, and especially the inventory, represents an economic form of notation, a form that is adopted in *The Tatler* and that serves the purpose of capturing a type of woman, the Coquette. Anatomy, and particularly the anatomical dissection, offers a specific analytical method and suggests an approach characterised by very close observation with a focus on minute details. Two papers, published in a kind of mini-series in *The Spectator*, present the (metaphorical) dissections of a Beau’s brain and a Coquette’s heart. Although these texts and the moral types sketched therein

are explicitly coupled, the two sketches reveal distinct approaches that seem to reflect on gender differences (extending from the moral types to the texts' readers). A (comparative) reading of the texts, particularly those delineating the same type of woman, allows us to consider what these forms (can) achieve, in how far the texts raise the same questions and arrive at the same conclusions.

Anne Rügge-meier (Freiburg)

Illness and the List: The Knowledge of Illness between Medicine and Literature

This paper examines the specific literary engagement of contemporary illness narratives with the formal device of the list. Drawing on (not only) contemporary illness narratives, this paper will show how medicine's epistemology, represented by diagnostic checklists, case histories, and lists of medication is critically taken up as a practice and a tool of knowledge production. At a first glance, the inclusion of lists in novels about illness might just be understood as a realistic detail that captures the everyday experience of being a patient. Yet, the contrast between the wounded individual and the impersonal collection of data provokes further questions: To what extent is the patient's body conceptualised as a 'thing' and thus regulated and objectified by the analytical discourses of medicine? How does this lead to a potential silencing of individual expressions of pain and personal attempts to find meaning in supposedly meaningless situations? Literary illness narratives reveal the nature of clinical checklists as professional devices that create a 'compliant patient', whose own narrative is silenced for the sake of medicine's methods and routines.

At the same time, literary illness narratives go far beyond the critical description of medical/scientific practices of list making. They also adapt and transform the formal device of the list and poetically recharge it as a narrative strategy for self-expression and cultural critique. It is especially via the open spaces of the list, a form that forces attention on its own gaps, that readers (and viewers) are encouraged to see through the list as a tool for categorizing, ordering and managing the contingent experience of being ill. Readers are cognitively activated to engage with the list's absences (the empty spaces between the individual items of enumeration) that point towards the things not represented but equally meaningful and significant. In the patients' narratives, the listed items become the building blocks of meaning construction in a situation that defies more linear types of narration. It represents the careful construction of possible futures and of potential understanding when certainty and wholeness are denied.

Anna Auguscik (Oldenburg)

Knowing Antarctica: Expedition Novels as Forms of Literary Re-Enactment

The history of scientific exploration is intricately linked with its written accounts. At the least, one should not underestimate the role played by scientific journals (published by scientific societies such as The Royal Society), which were promoting scientific research based on

empirical observation in creating the need for far-away exhibits. In fact, it was with the rising possibilities of publishing the results of one's findings that particular expeditions have been dared in the first place. The demand for various forms of expedition narratives – especially in the Heroic or Golden Age – which went far beyond scientific reports and comprised logbooks, diaries, journals, memoirs and monographs, stands proof for the promise of an array of knowledges which they purport to convey.

Fictional expedition narratives are especially conscious of the 'putting into narrative' of the (oftentimes tragic) events: explorers are shown to begin their travel with the idea of writing a book about it (at times even realized as a publishing contract), to read and study the accounts of previous explorers, to contemplate the image which posterity might attach to them – based on their own or others' accounts of their accomplishments and/or failures. But it is particularly through experimenting with literary form – multiple narration, changing focalization, mirrored character constellations, plot layering – that these novels explore how (experiential) knowledge can be conveyed through literary 're-enactment.'

Based on three accounts of Robert Falcon Scott's 'Terra Nova Expedition' (1910-13), also known as his last, this paper aims to show how the experience of the expedition is conveyed through such literary 're-enactment': Kim Stanley Robinson's *Antarctica* (1998) – with a main female protagonist who actually leads 're-enactment' expeditions – provides a framework for the various experiences of Antarctica through changing focalization. Beryl Bainbridge's novel *The Birthday Boys* (1991), which offers not one account of 'The Worst Journey' (cf. Apsley Cherry-Garrard, 1922) but five narrative voices sharing the final journey, simultaneously refers to and questions the memoir genre and thus emphasizes the subjectivity of knowledge. Finally, in Rebecca Hunt's *Everland* (2014), a team of explorers 're-enacts' a centenary expedition of a journey which bears some resemblance to Scott's but as the 2013 team learn about the events of the 1913 expedition, the text seems to question the possibility of actually knowing the past.

Jolene Mathieson (Hamburg)

“Water is a burned body”: H₂O, Monstrous Materials and What Form Doesn't Know in Weird Fiction

Water is weird. It behaves radically different than other liquids. It is both a simple molecule and a complex, joined force of immense oceanic power. It is the basis for planetary life but is a potent killer of massive proportions. It is necessary for human survival but the oceans it creates are supremely inhospitable for our species. It is a cosmic juice with healing abilities but gives birth to abject materials of disease like brine, mucus and slime. And it is the only natural substance that can effortlessly reflect an image. The weirdness of water, of the oceans it forms and the marine creatures that live in it have long served as a source for the literary imagination, especially in the fantasy and 'weird' genres: Jules Verne's *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1869) and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), for instance, are just two of many prominent examples that represent the ocean, its animals and the qualities of

water as monstrous, as mucosal, as the aliens in our midst. Exactly what generic mechanisms are at work to make literature ‘weird’ has long been under theorization, and while this paper may not offer any definitive answers to what China Miéville has called “the trauma of genre,” it will examine the relationship between literary form in weird fiction and forms of knowledge in the marine and biological sciences. By looking at Jeff VandeMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* and Peter Watts’ *Starfish* within a larger framework of new materialism, this paper is interested in understanding how weird fiction attempts to use the tropes and fuzzy logic of the gothic, fantasy and science-fiction genres to model human confrontations and interactions with water and the natural environment and to offer text-specific (post)epistemic mechanisms for conceptualising the relations between the knowable and the unknowable.