

Alexandra Wagner and Thomas Wagenknecht

**Practices of Literary and Cultural Theory
Examples from American Studies**

- **Approaching Literary and Cultural Theory – with a Special Session on Age and its Metaphors. 9th Annual Students and Graduate Conference, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 11.-13. November 2010, Berlin.**

What does it mean to work with literary and cultural theories? Literary and cultural studies are often confronted with the question of how theory and research practice relate toward each other. What theories can be used – nowadays when ›everything is possible‹ and a seemingly uncountable number of theories and methods is available? What kind of theoretical hypotheses and assumptions are currently at stake in American Studies? Those were some of the questions raised at the 9th Annual Students and Graduate Conference at the Department of English and American Studies of Humboldt University Berlin.

The conference had two foci. While under the first focus contemporary applications of literary and cultural theory were discussed, the second invited contributions to the category of age – a phenomenon less extensively studied so far.

Organized by Thomas Wagenknecht and Alexandra Wagner, doctoral candidates in American Studies at Humboldt University, Berlin, the conference brought together quite a large number of graduate students not only from Humboldt University but also from Berlin's Free University, from Halle, Leipzig, Hamburg, Potsdam and Oregon. From Thursday, 11 November 2010 until Saturday, 13 November 2010 twenty-six presentations were delivered and accompanied by lively discussions.

The presentations were organised in eight panels, four of them concerned with questions of literary and cultural theory and four of them on the category of age. All contributions showed an immense variety in their distinctive approaches to theory, which the following report tries to do justice in pointing out the intersections and interrelatedness of the presentations.

1. Approaching Literary and Cultural Theory

Stefan Schubert (Leipzig) and **Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich** (Hamburg) showed that one way to approach theoretical concepts is to return to the original theoretical texts without applying them to an object of study. Stefan Schubert's revisionist analysis of Donna Haraway's »A Cyborg Manifesto« questioned the commonly assumed applicability of Haraway's essay for reading science fiction films. Schubert showed several thematic or narrative misreadings in some scholars' approaches that use Haraway's essay for analyzing cyborg films or texts. Schubert pointed out that Haraway's text is not unequivocally applicable to science fiction texts although the essay's dominant metaphor might suggest this. Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich focused on another theoretician that is often discussed nowadays: Jacques Rancière. Büscher-Ulbrich spoke about the implications of Rancière's critical genealogy for the study of avant-garde poetry. In his elaborate paper, Büscher-Ulbrich pointed out that – with regard to Rancière's ideas – it might be useful to study the discursive practices employed by artists/authors

and to focus on the said and unsaid of texts, what can and cannot be seen – as Rancière describes in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Both papers exemplified how another close reading even of already applied theoretical texts may lead to thoughtful discussions and new findings.

Several other papers addressed concepts and whole fields of study in a more general but no less intriguing way. **Toni Müller** (Halle-Wittenberg) questioned the relevance of disability studies for literary and cultural theory. In his paper, Müller argued that disability studies have the potential to alert us to oppressive structures and remind us of what is usually not represented. **Claudia Ulbrich** (Halle-Wittenberg) and **Milena Roggenkamp** (Berlin) focused on indigenous approaches to contemporary literary and cultural studies. While Milena Roggenkamp spoke about different concepts of time in western and indigenous cultures, Claudia Ulbrich focused on Craig Womack's theoretical writings, especially on his *Red on Red* and elaborated how hegemonic practices often exclude indigenous and native cultures from ›theory-making‹. Therefore, Ulbrich proposed to turn the turns into indigenous ones. Media studies and mediality are other fields that were discussed, especially by **Christoph Raetzsch** (Berlin) and **Magda Albrecht** (Berlin). Christoph Raetzsch, in his paper about early American penny papers, pointed out that journalistic practices usually anchor other practices such as marketing and promotion. Raetzsch explained that the media also serve as framing devices and he put forward the idea of a stronger focus on the social uses of journalism and on each medium's relationships and possibilities for interaction. In contrast to Raetzsch, who focused on early American media practices, Magda Albrecht questioned recent media practices in the web 2.0. In her paper, she argued that the Internet is not as egalitarian as one may think. Looking at feminist blogs, Albrecht discussed the benefits and downsides of feminist blogging and explained that the virtual reality of the Internet, too, is not free from social structures and that there is no bodiless interaction even in social media practices. Raetzsch's and Albrecht's contributions highlighted how power inequities underway in social discourse transfer into media practices, whereby they can both consolidate and challenge power constellations.

While Albrecht was concerned with the gendered sphere of blogging, **Katja Linke** (Berlin) dedicated her presentation to the more general question whether categories such as lesbian or woman are troubling categories. In her analysis of Diane DiMassa's comic book *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*, Linke showed how common notions associated with these categories are complicated through DiMassa's graphic novel.

›Space‹ turned out to be another crucial theoretical and aesthetic category. **Philipp Kneis** (Potsdam), **Marius Henderson** (Hamburg) and **Dustin Breitenwischer** (Berlin) all applied concepts that might be put in the broader context of the so-called spatial turn. In his presentation, Philipp Kneis asked how society and democracy are represented in the science fiction genre. Obviously, the utopian or dystopian spaces depicted in this genre lend themselves to discussing questions of how a society can or cannot function. Marius Henderson identified a ›dark place‹ in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and suggested to look more closely at the novel's textuality and what he calls ›the space of writing‹ as a generally open space which does not narrow the number of possible interpretations to, for example, psychoanalytical readings. Dustin Breitenwischer's paper on the aesthetics of neoliberal space in literature put forward the idea that the artistic representation of neoliberalism is a spatial practice. As an example he chose Don DeLillo's novel *Cosmopolis* and he convincingly showed how the characters in the texts can be regarded as subjects that move within certain spaces and that the market in DeLillo's text functions as an aestheticized space that is constructed within the novel.

While many presentations concentrated either on theoretical texts (Haraway, Rancière, Womack) or on fictional texts (DeLillo, Morrison), another group of presenters focused on texts between fact and fiction – on autobiographical texts by Nicole Krauss, Mary Antin and David Shields. **Martin Kindermann** (Hamburg) emphasized a crucial aspect to any kind of life writing: memory. He argued for memory as world-making. Narrative accounts of lives – as presented in Krauss' *The History of Love* – are selections of memorable events and exactly this process of selecting certain episodes is problematized in Krauss' novel. **Michael Duszat** (Berlin) discussed the selective nature of autobiographical writing with regard to David Shields' short story »Life Story« that simply is a list of bumper stickers arranged in an order that can easily be read as a life story. Duszat explained how this short story not only shows the limits of any kind of life writing but also the text's collage technique as a mirror of contemporary life. A life story in bumper stickers also questions and reinstalls the notion of a unified self that might be the ideal of many autobiographers or readers of autobiographical texts. **Alexandra Wagner** (Berlin) asked for the uses of autobiographical theory. With regard to Mary Antin's autobiography *The Promised Land*, Wagner argued that autobiographical narrators themselves use theoretical assumptions and metanarrative discourses about the genre to authorize their speaking positions and to legitimate their autobiographical accounts. Therefore, autobiographical criticism and the theory of life writing not only have its uses in academia but also in the practice of writing your life's story.

2. Age and its metaphors

Cultural studies scholars have rather recently started to address the study of age. Hence, age in all its manifestations and attributed qualities opens up a vast epistemological array for cultural studies. Accordingly, the presentations on age covered a variety of topics and texts which discussed the category of age in inspiring ways. One guiding question articulated in the welcome address was to explore the potentials and limitations of age as an analytical and critical category. The presentations and subsequent discussions revealed that age can serve as a powerful heuristic device to extrapolate so far unacknowledged mechanisms of age discrimination but is far from becoming established as a category of critical cultural inquiry. For one, it seems that the category's overlap with aspects of socio-economic status, gender and racial discrimination might complicate the challenge of disentangling the coordinates of oppression involved in representations of age. Another challenge lies in the context-dependency and variability of age oppression which can easily change its signs and significations. Wisdom as a positively and commonly connoted attribute of old age, for example, can thus be transformed to serve an oppressive scheme.

Age obviously seems to be a topic that is especially suited to discuss questions of crisis and death. **Maria Gliege** (Berlin) and **Stella Zion** (Berlin) both dealt with gendered notions of midlife crisis. Maria Gliege took representations of male midlife crisis in American movies as her example to show that these representations are driven by the mechanisms and preferred storylines of the Hollywood film industry. Gliege showed that these representations do not change very much over time by comparing *Middle Age Crazy* (1980) and *City Slickers* (1991) – two movies in which the male midlife crisis is marked as a white, male, heterosexual middle-class problem. Stella Zion compared Judith Guest's *Ordinary People* and Dan Harris' motion picture *Imaginary Heroes* – two texts that depict the effects of the death of the oldest son on the families and especially on their fathers and other brothers.

Speaking about age not only means speaking about older and old people but young age proved to be an interesting discussions point, too. **Jade-Yasmin Tänzler** (Berlin) gave an in-

triguing talk about graffiti and street art as territorial markers of youth. Tänzler explained that since the 1970s youth gangs mark their territory with graffiti and since then co-design urban spaces with their art. Tänzler argued that for graffiti artists site and surface of their art are important and she presented several new forms and ways of graffiti, for example an eight-mile-long line drawn on the streets and sideways all through Manhattan by an artist called Momo. Furthermore, Tänzler raised the question if graffiti is a rather male ›genre‹ and if especially young men use this artistic form of claiming a space for themselves. Another talk around the issue of young age and its artistic representations was given by **Fionn McGuire** (Berlin), who spoke about the Punk movement as a creation of adolescent (sub-)cultural space within the economic confines of the 1970s. Not only did McGuire's talk illustrate yet another dimension of the spatial references of the artistic representations of young people, he also vividly showed the economic aspects of Punk as a youth movement. He argued that the Punk movement provided a cultural space for the creation of ›new grand narratives‹ in the 1970s when Britain suffered from a severe economic crisis.

Melanie Grzywatz (Berlin) focused on age as an analytical category and provided the audience with many fundamental aspects of age. Grzywatz elaborated, among other things, on the opposition between young and old as an institutionalized practice in western cultures. She vividly illuminated in how far especially old age as a source of social inequality in Western societies goes along with the loss of income and, for example, the social devaluation of old people. She further spoke about the oppression of aged bodies and illustrated the differences between male and female age. A similar line of thought was presented by **Djamila Sharipova** (Berlin) who deemed many Disney cartoons to be ageist. Sharipova presented numerical data showing the one-sided representations of aged characters in Disney cartoons. Her quantitative analysis suggested that stereotypical perceptions of old people might also result from these one-sided presentations of old people in the extensively consumed cartoons of Disney.

The remaining six presentations on ›Age and its metaphors‹ can be summarized as discussions of different representations of age. **Anika Rust** (Berlin), **Engin Çagatay** (Berlin) and **Vu Hoai Thu Nguyen** (Berlin) all took literary texts as examples. Anika Rust identified the stereotypes in the depictions of age and wisdom in Mitch Albom's best-selling novel *Tuesdays with Morrie* in which ›the young‹ are presented as manipulated by media while ›the old‹ are those who have the wisdom to transgress such manipulative strategies. Engin Çagatay presented his thoughts on the companionship between old and young people as presented in Truman Capote's »A Christmas Memory« and Eudora Welty's »A Worn Path«. The discussion evolving around Çagatay's talk conceived of age as a category loaded with oppositions and dichotomies. Vu Hoai Thu Nguyen provided yet another example of the opposition between young and old in her portrayal of the nine-year-old Oskar Schell, protagonist of Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and his grandfather. Nguyen argued that grief is different for old and young people and both age and gender influence the process of mourning. She suggested reading Foer's novel as a multi-faceted dialogue about grief. **Edward Barry** (Berlin) in his talk explained how medievalist perceptions of the aged persevered in the modern era. As an example he chose *The One and Future King* by T.H. White and described that especially a postcolonial reading of such a text can draw our attention to the colonizing and hegemonic ideologies at work when aged characters and their knowledge is presented. **Antje Czudaj** (Berlin) instead spoke about a very recent representation of very young age in Miranda July's movie *Me and You and Everyone We Know*. Czudaj critically questioned the representations of children and sexuality in this film and discussed July's choice not to present children as innocent and un-knowing but as being in possession of an active sexuality which allows these children to be agents instead of objects. July's film gives us as both viewers and adults insights into how children interact with the Internet by be-

coming active participants in the virtual world. **Allison Davis-White Eyes** (Oregon State University) presented yet another specific representation of a particularly aged group of people: College students of color in the U.S. As practitioner in the study abroad program of her university, Davis-White Eyes adopted a critical view of the recruiting practices of students interested in studying abroad which privilege non-colored applicants. She called for a critique of cosmopolitanism as it is practiced and performed as a policy goal of higher education. She argued that especially post-national and intercultural understandings of selves are at work in this context and need to be discussed.

3. Summary

In sum, the combination of two topical foci – one being an everlasting challenge to young and senior researchers alike and one inciting new perspectives and fresh thought – has proven to be a profitable synthesis. All papers revealed the continued need to engage with the theory-practice-complex. The wide range of close readings presented in the context of literary and cultural theory showed ingenuity in challenging theory through texts, films and other aesthetic representations. Close readings of theoretical texts highlighted the merit in revisiting theories to question or to widen their applicability and thereby render new perspectives. After all, the presentations at this conference not so much showed that ›anything goes‹ – as the oft-cited credo states – as they illustrated the need to weigh the choice of a particular theoretical concept carefully against the specificities of the context in which American Studies scholarship is exercised. Given the fair amount of political contestations inherent in American Studies, the conference presentations pointed to the repercussions a choice of theory can have on the study object.

The contributions to the topical focus ›age‹ gave partial answers and raised new questions. The leverage of age as an epistemological category still remains to be answered. As of yet it seems the category of age can inform the knowledge base of cultural and literary studies. Thinking about age, ageism and culturally inflected characterizations of age does not so much serve as an independent theoretical device but as an auxiliary lens for critical approaches to texts. Especially the category of age seems to be an intersectional category which cannot be regarded independent from other markers such as gender, ethnicity or social status.

Once more we would like to thank all those who assisted in the conference's organization, the presenters and everybody who contributed to this forum to be what it was – a wonderful learning experience.

Alexandra Wagner and Thomas Wagenknecht
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

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