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Making Sense of Peter Weiss

- Ana Margarida Abrantes, *Meaning and Mind. A Cognitive Approach to Peter Weiss' Prose Work*. Frankfurt a.M. u.a.: Peter Lang 2010. 374 p. [Price: EUR 65,80]. ISBN: 978-3-631-59593-0.

How do we make sense of literary texts? What goes on in the mind of the author and his audience while writing and reading? How are mental processes reflected in the composition of a text and instantiated through the narrative? And how is the aesthetic meaning conveyed by literary texts integrated with the way our mind frames experience in everyday life? These are but some of the guiding questions when approaching literature from a cognitive perspective. In her challenging study *Meaning and Mind*, submitted as PhD thesis to the Catholic University of Portugal in 2007, Ana Margarida Abrantes tackles the task of bringing together cognition and literature in an analysis of selected prose works by Peter Weiss. Based on cognitive semiotics, her interdisciplinary case study provides an original approach to Weiss' oeuvre and an insightful contribution to a relatively new branch of literary studies.

The introductory chapter of Abrantes' book surveys the history, developments and cross-disciplinary influences of ›cognitive poetics‹ (Reuven Tsur). In a comprehensive way, it familiarizes the reader with the main features and methods of the field by exploring the interaction between cognitive poetics and other cognitive sciences like cognitive psychology, evolution psychology, cognitive linguistics and cognitive semiotics. According to Abrantes, the aim of the cognitive approach to literature is »to study the correlations of literary rhetoric, cognition and aesthetics« (51), thereby seeking »to describe *how* a text is cognitively understood and *why* it is cognitively (and existentially) relevant« (55). As a consequence, the purpose of a cognitive reading is not to replace existing paradigms of literary studies but to complement them in a broader sense by relating literature to the perspectives of human sciences. In a subsequent step, the general objectives underlying the study are unfolded. Abrantes structures the analysis around two specific questions: The first one addresses the production of meaning involved in the processes of reading and interpreting texts on the basis of their properties, the second question is concerned with the way cognitive processes are represented within the texts themselves. Methodologically, a cognitive semiotic perspective is adopted which takes the language of the text as a point of departure in order to examine the enunciation structure of the narrative, content of reference and presentation. Subsequently, the semantic content and rhetorical structure of the text are examined before relating them to an aspect of human life in the interpretation. The relevant descriptive tools and terminology of the study are systematically described, exemplified and illustrated by figures.

The application of this cognitive method to some of Weiss' prose works constitutes the core of Abrantes' analysis. The selected texts are classified and analysed according to sub-genres in three individual chapters: *Der Schatten des Körpers des Kutschers* (experimental novel), *Abschied von den Eltern* und *Fluchtpunkt* (autobiographical novel) and *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (historical novel). The scrutiny deployed when examining the deep structure of the texts is impressive; Abrantes repeatedly makes use of schematic tables and diagrams to illustrate her analysis. The experimental *Kutscher*-novel which induced Weiss' late breakthrough on the German literature scene is read as a narrative illustration of an abnormal unfolding of elementary cognitive processes. It deals first and foremost, as Abrantes observes, »with the process of perception and reasoning and it is an account of the failure of this pro-

cess« (135) which is also conveyed through its rhetorical qualities. In consequence, the reader's dominant experience of estrangement becomes closely related to the narrator's irregular perspective, thereby shifting the focus of attention away from the content itself to its presentation. Literary autobiography is perceived »as a stage where cognitive processes such as memory, object awareness and self-representation unfold« (171) in a structured and universally comprehensible way. Abrantes' cognitive approach pays due attention to the contextual circumstances of autobiographical recall and the constructive implications of literary self-representation. Her examination of Weiss' autobiographical narratives elucidates a contiguous correlation between the different memory contents and their respective presentations. Whereas personal memories of childhood and adolescence in *Abschied von den Eltern* are portrayed »as a more impressionistic and unfiltered flow of recall«, the reconstitution of the self in *Fluchtpunkt* follows a pattern that is »more analytical and critical« (252) and takes the social environment into account. Peter Weiss' magnum opus *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* is generally perceived as an alternative account of history from the perspective of the oppressed that questions established representations. Abrantes traces this interpretation back in the enunciation structure of the three volumes which reserves the task of historical narration to the protagonists of the historical events while the first person narrator remains a discrete chronicler. Simultaneously, her reading exposes the novel's dynamic narrative schema recurrent in all the stories of resistance which she identifies as one of the reasons for the text's time-transcending influence: »What enables this permanent actualization of the work in whatever contexts [...] is the same underlying dynamic schema, the same tension between reality and utopia.« (338f.)

While Abrantes examines the different texts individually, her conclusive transversal reading bundles her overall observations and reveals the development of certain textual features throughout Weiss' work. With regard to the narrative structure, she determines »a progressive externalization and de-psychologization of the *I* through these novels, a reverse zoom«, accompanied by a »reversion of figure and ground« (350) and a progression of the narrative dynamic models. Her survey does not provide any new interpretations of Peter Weiss' work, yet does not claim to do so. Instead, its primary purpose is to »explain how the existing ones are made possible on account of the present knowledge about the mind« (59). The strongly text-orientated, meticulous approach of her cognitive perspective yields insights into how mental processes are textually conveyed and constitutes a novel, certainly fascinating way of studying Weiss' oeuvre.

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