Komparatistik

Jahrbuch
der Deutschen Gesellschaft
für Allgemeine und Vergleichende
Literaturwissenschaft

2018

AISTHESIS VERLAG

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hochaktuellen und bitter notwendigen Medizin im Kampf gegen ein längst überwunden geglaubtes Hordendenken und die Feinde der offenen Gesellschaft" (186).

Zusammenfassend kann dieses Buch als wertvoller und gelungener historischer und methodologischer Beitrag zur komparatistischen Forschung bezeichnet werden.

Michaela Voltrová

Literary Activism. Perspectives. Ed. Amit Chaudhuri. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017. 369 pp.

The volume *Literary Activism* assembles papers by academics, novelists, poets, translators, and publishers presented at the eponymous symposium held in December 2014 in Calcutta. The individual articles are framed by the organizer/editor Amit Chaudhuri's short mission statement and brief background information about the symposium at the beginning of the volume, as well as by an appendix of supplemental material at the end (an email exchange and two blog entry's by Tim Parks that emerged from a follow-up event held in October 2015 at St. Hugh's College, Oxford). The conference proceedings pursue two seminal aims: First, they strive to differentiate literary activism from market activism[1] whose effects depend „on a certain randomness which reflects the randomness of the free market", whereas „literary activism may be desultory, in that its aims and value aren't immediately explicable" (6). Second, and closely linked to this transitoriness, the volume focuses on forms of literary activism not primarily concerned with „activism through literature" (12), therefore providing a forum „that goes beyond what you hear or encounter either at a literary festival or an academic conference" (10). This intermediate or even outsider position is also apparent in the cover design that lacks the obtrusiveness of the former as well as the uniformity of the latter. Its sand-coloured background remotely resembles parchment paper, the dividing line in the middle, vertically splitting the cover,

1 In the volume literary activism is broadly defined as *„an activism on behalf of an idea of literature" (298), whereas market activism is defined as* „a mode of intervention" that emerged from the mid-1990s onwards in the sphere of literary publishing: „The bolder agents and publishers abandoned the traditional forms of valuation by which novelists were estimated, published, and feted, and embraced a dramatic, frontiersman style of functioning that involved the expectation of a reward more literal than any form of cultural capital." (3) The editor further argues that market activism is not limited to agents and publishers acquiring those books that are most likely to earn great profits. Authors too cooperate by choosing (if they are in a position to choose) the economically most efficient agents and publishers: „Andrew Wylie's acquisition of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* and Rushdie's defection from his erstwhile agent" (ibid.) is presented as an example of this „radical break effected by market activism" (ibid.). According to David Graham this development „broke the chain of expertise that led from the author to the reader" (83) and „linked authors to agents, agents to editors, editors to booksellers" (Jon Cook paraphrasing David Graham, 299).

evokes the neat aesthetic of a vocabulary book. The title comes in unpretentious black lowercase letters, whereas the „literary", printed in characters larger than „activism", clearly dominates the cover along with several circles scribbled in black ink. Hence, the front side already conveys a picture of the subsequent miscellaneous approaches to literary activism that are not to be understood as dogmas but as „PERSPECTIVES" as the subheading in red capital letters already suggests.

Focusing on the bi-lingual English-Marathi poet Arun Kolatkar (1931-2004), the first article by Laetitia Zecchini examines India's „Little Magazine ‚Conspiracy'". By collaboratively creating small presses and magazines Indian poets in the 1960/70s cut out several middlemen and gatekeepers of literature and became „the promoters or activists of each other's work" (26) and, via translations, of their predecessors' works written in Hindi, Marathi, and other vernaculars. Zecchini concludes that it is „[i]n the translating practice of so many of these poets, activism *on behalf of* literature and activism through literature become indistinguishable" (38). Translation also plays an important role in the article by Derek Attridge, according to whom translators of minority language literatures like Afrikaans „are among the most important of literary activists" (65). Literary activism is defined as the promotion of literary value which can be pursued by academic critics through what Attridge calls *affirmative* criticism: „to understand, explore, respond to, and judge what is of value in works of literature" (51). Attridge committed himself to the promotion of South African writers like J. M. Coetzee, Zoë Wicomb, and, more recently, Afrikaans-language writers like Etienne van Heerden, Ingrid Winterbach, and Marlene van Niekerk.

The primary motivation of David Graham's article might be referred to as the love of books'. He brings a publisher's perspective to this volume, outing himself as a market activist and, thus, as a bit of an outsider. Graham, however, prefers the label „expert activist" (74). The kind of activism he advocates is operated by experts trying to make the best of „a complex and imperfect collision between the worlds of art and commerce" (75) by introducing innovative and inspiring works like Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* (published 2002 during Graham's time at *Canongate*) to a large number of readers. Graham attributes the demise of expert activism to the increase in market pressure and the rise of online sales, not least because experts are being replaced by algorithms. However, he regards the gradual rise of micro-publishers as one possible advantage of the changed and otherwise hostile market situation. Given the reduced costs of digital publishing that enable publishers to quickly reach large audiences, very small independent houses can afford taking the risk of publishing out-of-the-ordinary works and, therefore, might be able to revive the activist spirit. The hope for a resurgence of an activist spirit also permeates the article by Peter D. McDonald who asks in the words of French critic and writer Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003): „What about Criticism?" To maintain a critical language „which follows no prescribed protocols, effectively inventing itself anew in the face of every new work, or act of reading" (100) is presented as the great challenge for the academic critic, since the institution of the university has been strongly affected by neoliberal

economic policy. However, according to McDonald the fight against the giant windmills, to reproduce his quixotic image, has to go on.

Embedded in a more general history of the professionalization of the humanities, Saikat Majumdar discloses the ideological motivations of the institutionalization of English literary studies: to educate newly relevant groups like women, the working class, and colonized peoples in order to become productive citizens. Since literary studies in India are deeply rooted in this ideological and profoundly bureaucratic enterprise, Majumdar emphasizes the continuous importance of the ambivalent figure of the autodidact and polymath to literary activism. Discussing the famous Indian intellectual Nirad C. Chaudhuri (1897-1999) as well as the poet Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (*1947), he demonstrates that, ultimately, no form of activism can thrive without enthusiasm: „The lover, or the amateur humanist, is the best bet for the university's contribution to any activism that might enhance the importance of literature in the public sphere." (142) To favour specialisms over generalisms is surely one of the great challenges for literary studies within the neoliberal university.

Tim Parks takes a rather pessimistic, almost cynical view of the globalized literary market and the concept of world literature in particular. According to him the latter implies the simplified conjecture that „the best works reach out to everybody" (151). The intention behind world literature – to make good books available to everyone via translation and dissemination – might be called literary activism but it seems to come at a high price, namely, the eradication of complex stylistic elements through translation, if not self-censorship. Parks stresses that an overly personal style „now presents itself as a possible barrier to translation, or simply incomprehensible to those who don't share the same linguistic and cultural context" (163). His conclusion is that this altered situation and the fierce competition it creates among writers has to be taken into account by any form of literary activism.

Rosinka Chaudhuri provides insights into the 19th century Bengali literary sphere. She names Henry Meredith Parker (1796-1868) who lived almost thirty years in Calcutta (1815-1842) as an early literary activist, „militating against the vogue for ‚Orientalising'" (179) while Lord Byron and other clever market activists of the time exploited it to their advantage. Another important figure Chaudhuri discusses is Iswar Gupta (1812-1859), whose fragmentary short poems (*khanda kabita*) about everyday life never quite fit into the modern national Bengali literary canon. He was, moreover, the first and only one to collect and publish songs and poems of his predecessors who alternately wrote in several languages (e. g. Bengali, English, Hindi, Sanskrit, and Persian/Arabic) – „a salutary reminder that the practice of multilingualism in India had its antecedents in normative precolonial conditions" (184). By providing these significant examples of 19th century literary activism in Calcutta, Chaudhuri uncovers the dominant group's, i. e. the British's, construction of cultural production, thereby not merely offering an alternative reading but engaging in literary activism herself.

Dubravka Ugrešić's paper, which is explicitly marked as a translation from Croatian by David Williams, is the first in the volume to address the topic of translation on such a direct and personal level. As she writes in a language used

by a small community of speakers from the „literary *out of nation zone*" (201) of former Yugoslavia, her text was in need of translation. Starting from this personal perspective, she explores the „platitude about literature knowing no borders" (ibid.). On the one hand, she writes that it is not to be trusted, because „[o]nly literatures written in major languages enjoy passport-free travel" (ibid.), and more easily so if written by a male author. On the other hand, she claims that the platitude has to be believed. The phenomenon of transnational literature would according to Ugrešić be a strong argument for this if it were not for the publishing „trend of ‚cultural comprehensibility' – the standardisation of literary taste" (208). Nonetheless, the labelling of her work as national or exile literature is not an option either, since Ugrešić hopes for „a new global literary house that waits to be constructed by us, ‚practitioners', by literary scholars, literary activists and enthusiasts; by young people who migrate, write in two or three languages, who pick their cultural references from the whole world, adopt freely different cultures and live them with passion and understanding" (212).

Amit Chaudhuri elaborates on a personal experience of literary activism as well: his commitment to get the Indian poet-critic Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (*1947) nominated for the *Oxford Professorship of Poetry*. In agreement with his understanding of literary activism, positioning „itself not against the market, but the sense of continuity it creates" (227), Chaudhuri interrogates this continuity which had primarily been constructed by the marketing executives of large bookshop chains and perpetuated by market activist devices like international literary prizes (e. g. the *Booker Prize*). Mehrotra, arguably not exactly a widely circulating ‚comprehensible' poet or typical postcolonial writer, was a rather unconventional choice for the prestigious professorship. But then again, getting him nominated and thus raising awareness of his remarkable writing was the aim, however short-lived the collective memory of this episode turned out to be: „Perhaps it's integral to literary activism that it not be properly remembered or noticed, but experienced, uncovered, excavated, and read?" (244)

Jamie McKendrick draws on a critical blog entry written by Tim Parks, in which Parks critiques a certain culture of ‚free' poetry translation, mostly practiced by poets without knowledge of the original language. Although in general McKendrick is sceptical of translation theories based on poetical intuition, he admits that he rather likes the work by some of these poet-translators (e. g. Seamus Heaney's translation of Dante's *Inferno*): „This aspiration to a deeper kind of fidelity is an attempt to respect not just the alterity of another language and culture but also that of another individual sensibility." (257) In some cases McKendrick refers to such ‚free' poetic translations as acts of literary activism, especially if they manage to bridge large linguistic, cultural, and temporal distances, and „simultaneously preserve that distance and discover proximity and connection" (261) like for example Ezra Pound's Chinese translations or Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's translation of the first and second century CE Mahārāshtrī Prākrit anthology *Gāthāsaptaśatī*.

In his article, which is the last regular contribution to the volume, Swapan Chakravorty introduces a new concept to the discussion: Literary activism can function as a literary surrogacy „in that the ‚programmatic' and ‚final intentions'

of the work or the author [...] may deviate from the ‚active' intentions" (280). The *swadesi* movement in the first decade of the 20th century, intending to use literature as a link between the various peoples and languages of India, serves as his first example. The poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), at first an active supporter of the movement, dealt in his writing with an increasing disillusionment. Accordingly, his novel Gora „starts with a burden of literary activism, but is released into the indeterminate freedom of literary surrogacy" (280). If we follow Chakravorty's interpretation, literature (if it is good literature, one might add) wins because it does not fully merge into a literary activist programme but goes further and is ultimately wiser than its initial cause. It is probably not a coincidence that this message stands at the end of a volume in which considerable value was placed on ‚the literary'.

It is not an easy task to sum up a volume on literary activism, which Jon Cook defines in the epilogue as a topic that „quite deliberately eludes any summary definition" (297). But then again, this ambiguousness serves as a good starting point for a working definition. According to Cook, literary activism designates practices of resistance „to the way the literary marketplace currently operates, but also to how literature is taught, researched, and valued within the academy" (ibid.). One could perhaps draw a comparison with Pascale Casanova's *La République Mondiale des Lettres*[2] in which she analyses the mechanisms of the literary market and the resulting inequality between minor and dominant languages and literatures. *Literary Activism* seems to be written/edited in the same or at least in a similar spirit to Casanova's study, which is also mentioned in the epilogue (299; 304-305). Nevertheless, it differs in two key points: First, it does not try to formulate „a new position in whose name a new set of dogmas and methods can be promulgated" (297) and second, it does not adopt a Eurocentric approach. The central idea is not about a *Greenwich Meridian of Literature* (Casanova's designation for Paris, the literary capital of modernity and, therefore, the baseline from which literary value was measured) but rather about literature's plural modernisms. Jon Cook uses the rather modest expression „sketch" (319) to describe the volume's achievement with regard to the future study of literature. I would argue that *Literary Activism* is already more than a mere sketch, maybe even the outline of a new transdisciplinary (sub)field of research, located at the intersections of sociology of literature, history of science, world literature, and translation studies, and combining three main areas of research: First, the critical observance and evaluation of the global literary market (if it exists) and its market activism, second, the role of universities and literary studies, and third, the role of translators within the globalized literary market.

However, in order to comprehensively outline the wide field of literary activism, the volume's strong focus on the literary – that is on the value of literature – might be a little too narrow. On the one hand, the literary value discussion, although undoubtedly an important one, runs the risk of becoming increasingly

2 Pascale Casanova. *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999; engl.: *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. Malcolm B. DeBevoise. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2004.

elitist at times. This is particularly evident in some remarks in the appendix. When Tim Parks, in an email to Amit Chaudhuri, writes that „[f]oreign writers [he talks specifically about the works of the Italian writer Elena Ferrante that he clearly does not appreciate] are imagined as literary, I suppose..." or „[a]lways hard to imagine Americans reading [Henry] Green" (340) the reasoning about literary taste takes on a rather unpleasant Anglocentric flavour. On the other hand, by focusing so intensely on literary value, the volume misses out on forms of literary activism that consciously distance themselves from aesthetic judgments. Franco Moretti's infamous concept of distant reading started as a form of literary activism once, criticizing close reading's dependence on an extremely small canon.[3] Another prominent and more recent example is the non-profit feminist organization VIDA whose volunteers since 2009 tally „the gender disparity in major literary publications and book reviews"[4] drawing attention to the fact that the neoliberal literary market is not just rather materialistic but also very much gendered as well as discriminatory against writers of colour, writers with disabilities, queer, trans and gender nonconforming writers. While „a criticism that thinks with and about literature" (319), as expressed in the volume, seems of tremendous importance, a criticism that thinks with and about the writers and their conditions might add a further perspective to the discussion on literary activism that has been initiated on an already very high level by Amit Chaudhuri and his fellow contributors.

Sandra Folie

Michael Wetzel. *Neojaponismen. West-östliche Kopfkissen*. München: Fink, 2018. 197 S.

Roland Barthes' *Reich der Zeichen* vergnügt viele Japaner wegen des begeisterten Tons, in dem ein französischer Gelehrter über Tempura (frittierten Fisch und Gemüse im feinen Teigmantel nach japanischer Art) oder Pachinko (die geräuschvollen japanischen Spielautomaten von sehr bunter Gestalt) erzählt. Andererseits wirkt das Bild eines würdigen deutschen Professors, der mit ernsthafter Miene japanische Animes ansieht, auf Japaner etwas irritierend. Denn ehrlich gesagt gehören Animes in Japan eher zu den Hobbies, die Freunden und Kollegen besser nicht bekannt werden sollten. Jegliche Vorurteile gegenüber einem an Animes interessierten Professor schwinden jedoch angesichts der Gedankenfülle, die Michael Wetzel in seiner Monographie *Neojaponismen. West-östliche Kopfkissen* entfaltet. Das Konzept ist so unprätentiös wie einleuchtend: Das Wort ‚Kopfkissen' ist die Übersetzung von *utamakura*, eines Begriffs aus der japanischen Dichtung (Haiku). Es beschreibt die Technik, „besondere denkwürdige Orte, auffällige Landschaften, ausgesuchte Bilder als metaphorische Unterlage zu nehmen" (34). Der Autor zielt mit seiner Analyse nicht darauf ab, außergewöhnliche Thesen zum

3 Franco Moretti. „Conjectures on World Literature". *New Left Review* 1 (2000): pp. 54-68.

4 VIDA. *Women in Literary Arts*. http://www.vidaweb.org. Accessed 7 August 2018.