

Hermeneutical understanding and the transcultural challenge: Reflections on the theoretical development and its literary relevance¹

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Abstract

Deriving from the assumption that there is no such thing as a 'pure' culture, since culture is always mixed and hybrid, this article defines and discusses the concept of transculturality (Welsch 1997, Ette 2005, Iljassova-Morger 2009) in the context of other theoretical models of cultural encounters, interactions and demarcations, such as multiculturalism and interculturality. Theories of transculturality, however, are not primarily to be understood as merely literary theories. Rather, these concepts contribute to a scholarship concerned with a more comprehensive interpretation and understanding that problematises the basis of what we normally refer to as 'culture.' Looking at the use of notions of transculturality in literary studies, however, it becomes apparent that this approach is mostly applied in the analyses of so-called migration literature, which is problematic from an epistemological point of view. In light of this, my article inquires into the relationship between transculturality and literature in general in order to consider the significance of theories of transculturality for literature that is not normally understood as migration literature.

Keywords: hermeneutics, transculturality, transnationality, spatial turn, globalization

1 Introduction

Hermeneutics, as it was defined in Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* in 1960, using theories introduced by Schleiermacher and Dilthey as well as Heidegger's existential philosophy, is above all concerned with the question of understanding and its historicity. The central issue in hermeneutics is how we, in the present, can understand past times, époques or works, and thus, understand the other. One aim of interpretation is to initiate the hermeneutical circle in order to bridge the historical distance by highlighting and reflecting on the historicity of all 'contemporarities.'

Since the end of the 1970s, a shift of focus within the liberal arts can be noted, from the question of the historical other to that which is regarded as other or foreign in a cultural and spatial sense. This development is accompanied and nourished by the advancement of theories of post colonialism in the Anglo-American context and of interculturality in the Germanic area. The so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* were redefined as *cultural studies*, a field that increasingly strived to capture and

¹ I would like to thank Linda K. Hammarfelt (LKH), who translated this text and quotations that could not be found in English translation from German to English.

problematize issues related to space.² This epistemic shift is accompanied by corresponding societal phenomena: Europeanization, increasing migration, the disappearance of the opposition between East and West, and globalization. In this context, a 'globalism' concerning trade and finance can be separated from the 'globalization' of knowledge, attitudes and life styles. The question of 'transnational' and 'post-international' (cf. Beck 1997) societies is nowadays, in one shape or the other, present in all disciplines, as it affects politics, economy and ecology, but also media and public life. Our conception of space and our 'mental maps' are in motion, not only due to globalization, but also because of developments reflected in the German Unification, the discourse on Central Europe (cf. Schlögel 2008; Ulbrecht & Ulbrechtová 2009) or the Balkanist discourse (cf. Previšić 2010).

The development outlined above has also led to attempts of (re-)localization, as Robertson's (1992) neologism 'glocalization' suggests; however, this rediscovery of the importance of local environments does not change the fact that we no longer live and act in limited and easily understandable spaces. Instead, we are increasingly interconnected through travels, media and the flow of goods and capital and thus constitute a 'global society'. This raises the question of how individuals live, act and navigate within a changed and rapidly changing world (cf. Safranski 2003: 24). Due to the changed composition and shape of culture in our present (cf. Welsch 1997), each individual must search for new possibilities of orientation and self-localization in an increasingly globalized world. Obviously, these attempts of self-localization and orientation are no longer restricted to only one cultural area or spatiality (*Heimat*, village, nation, culture). Instead, the individual of our present is on the move and thereby contributes to the reconstruction and reconfiguration of global space(s). These processes are addressed and discussed in numerous contexts, discourses and scholarly publications, where they are often referred to as economic, political, ecological and other border crossings, but the issue of the self-positioning and orientation of individuals within these processes of globalization remains unsolved. Are the only alternatives a total loss of orientation and a placelessness of the self or a cultural neo-racism (cf. Balibar 1990) that is dependent on establishing and upholding stable borders between the familiar and the foreign?

The theoretical development of the last decades that is outlined above constitutes the background against which the concept of transculturality was coined and introduced within the German research tradition. This background consists of different theoretical discourses of globalization since the early 1990s. The term appears in other contexts within other language communities, i.e. within the setting of postcolonialism in the writing of Mary Louise Pratt, or in the Afro-Cuban studies of Fernando Ortiz in the 1940ies. Even in more recent discussions on 'world literature', the term 'transnationalism' is used for describing similar phenomena.

² This process is often referred to with the term *spatial turn*. Cf. Günzel 2010, who gives an overview and also makes clear that these spatial or topographical turns within cultural studies are not as new as the Anglo-American theory formations assume.

2 Transculturality: The theoretical development in the Germanic context³

The processes outlined above has also affected literature and literary studies. This is not surprising, considering that the problem of understanding and thus the question of how to engage with the other lies at the core of both literature as well as literary studies: This question appears in different shapes; at times, it emerges as a question regarding the relationship between the literary text and its reader, at others as the traditional hermeneutical problem of how to overcome the ‘historical distance’ between a historical text and its contemporary reader, or formulated as the question of understanding literary texts and cultural utterances perceived as foreign. Especially the last question is closely linked to the issue of cultural difference and diversity and has gained momentum in the last decades in the light of increasing migration, but also in the context of the spatial turn.

Since the seventies, German literary scholarship has tried to apprehend this phenomenon using theoretical models of ‘interculturality’ that are based on a polarization of familiar and unfamiliar, self and Other (cf. Wierlacher 1985), and the study of interactions between these two.⁴ These attempts are not only dubious from a theoretical viewpoint (cf. Zimmermann 1991 and Ndong 1993), but also practically inapplicable. The fact that the relationship between self and Other has since the end of the 1990s increasingly been regarded as an interrelation rather than an opposition does not solve the problem that is inherent in the presupposition of a familiar and a foreign culture, because “there is no longer anything absolutely foreign. [...] Accordingly, there is no longer anything exclusively ‘own’ either. [...] We are cultural hybrids” (Welsch 1999: 5).

In order to grasp this phenomenon, the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch introduces the concept of transculturality in a dialogue with texts by Nietzsche, Wittgenstein and Lyotard. He explicitly argues against concepts of multi- and interculturality, stating that they hold on to an understanding of cultures as homogeneous, ethnically defined and separatist, an assumption that – according to Welsch – does not lead to a multicultural togetherness, but rather to an isolated side-by-sidedness, that, in contemporary sociology, is considered in terms of parallel societies.

Instead, Welsch argues that we cannot (anymore) compare a French to a German, a Swedish or a Japanese culture, as all of these cultures are not homogeneous (the way Welsch understands Herders concept of culture), but hybrid on both a macro (globalization) as well as a micro (individual) level, which means that an individual

³ In other fields such as social sciences, pedagogy, medicine etc. a similar development can be observed, that is not discussed in this article.

⁴ In the Swedish context, theories and concepts of interculturality were not introduced in the 1990ies, when these theories developed, but later. The productive attempts of renewal of these theories by for example Gutjahr (2005) and Hofmann (2006) are, as far as I know, not known in Sweden or have at least not been used in a productive manner.

can no longer be regarded as defined and shaped by only one culture.⁵ At about the same time, the sociologist Wolf Lepenides (1995: 62) states that there are in the present only hybrid cultures, which leads Rolf-Peter Janz (2012: 21, transl. LKH) to the assumption that “the seemingly stable categories of self and Other are obsolete. The fact that each culture contains many unfamiliarities” cannot be ignored, which shows that the homely and the familiar only exist as homogenizing constructs, often related to certain speech communities or nations. One mode of constructing commonalities of this kind can be seen in debates such as the German *Leitkultur* discourse (cf. Hellström & Platen 2014) or the Swedish discourse on a ‘cultural heritage’ or ‘basic values’.

Welsch relates the concept of transculturality to that of globalization, while at the same time stating differences, especially the difference between his understanding of transculturality as complex tendencies of hybridization and an understanding of globalization as a process of a world-wide homogenization. In our days, when scholars tend to separate globalism from globalization and when the term glocalization is used to describe the simultaneity of universalizing and particularizing tendencies, this difference appears as insignificant, and instead the common ground of the two concepts becomes visible.

Next to the concept of globalization, another term that seeks to describe the hybridization of culture and life, and that, thus, in a way ‘competes’ with Welsch’s terminology, can be found under the label of postcolonial theory. Issues of power, powerlessness and overpowering also play a role in transcultural interactions (and Welsch explicitly refers to Wittgenstein’s idea of how “practices in life are shared” [Welsch 1999: 9]); however, postcolonial theory is in the eyes of Welsch too intimately linked to the historical, cultural and political situation of colonization to be transferrable to other contexts. One can also ask whether postcolonial thinking really goes beyond the postmodern, or if the first is only a part of the latter. These doubts play into the hands of Welsch, who became famous as a theoretician of postmodernity in the 1980s.

Within German academia, Welsch’s concept and theory of transculturality raised new questions and opened up for new ways of understanding culture. The most prominent example of this within literary studies is the Romance philologist Ottmar Ette, who refers to Welsch in a critique of the concepts of multi- and interculturality

⁵ One vivid example of this can be seen in discussions on ‘the multicultural classroom’ within pedagogy. The leading idea here is that the teacher should address and make didactical use of different cultural, often national characteristics and particularities. However, what belies this idea is the model of cultures as isolated spheres that Welsch places in question. In the classroom, students do not act and identify solely as Turks, Syrians, Spanish etc. but, to different degrees, as students of a specific cultural heritage *who live in Sweden*. These students are thus cultural hybrids and, in the classroom, they interact with other hybrids (as well as with those who are supposedly culturally ‘pure’). Already here, we can see how concepts of multi- and interculturality fail to grasp the complex reality of the students who do not identify only with one culture, but are culturally ‘mixed’. It is not one culture that interacts and negotiates with another, but hybridizations with other hybridizations. These hybrid identity formations cannot be compared and understood from an inter-cultural perspective.

and the cultural side-by-sideness that they imply, and instead focuses on transculturality as praxis and movement: “The *transcultural* level differs [...] from the other two, since it implies diverse movements and practices of criss-crossing through cultures: a permanent leaping between cultures that cannot be identified as a stable and fixable relation to one culture or cultural group” (Ette 2005: 20f., transl. LKH).

In Ette’s view, Bhabha’s *third space* as an interstitial space between two cultures, where an ‘arrival’ of sorts is possible, is therefore unusable: If we can search for and find a space in-between cultures, then we have only found yet another culture that we expect to be able to compare and contrast with others. Instead, Ette argues for a “poetics of mobility” (Ette, 2005: 19f.) that does not strive at arrival in one space or the other, but at movement and criss-crossing between them. Ette in this context quotes the following passage from André Aciman’s foreword to *Letters of Transit*: “With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they’re also seeing – or looking for – another behind it. Everything bears two faces, everything is shifty because everything is mobile” (Aciman, 1999, 13). Ette then illustrates his concept of a ‘poetics of movement’ using examples from German-Jewish, Caribbean and Arabic literature, thereby adopting the model of the migrant. Instead only as an example, since in times of globalization we are all more or less nomads and migrants who cannot find a stable (third) space, we are permanently on the move in and through “mobile worlds of the in-between” (Ette 2005, 9-26, transl. LKH). Thus, a new, third space is not regarded as the ‘solution’, but instead movement in the in-between is regarded as a central dimension of life in times of globalization (cf. Böhme 2005, Hallet & Neumann 2009, Kimmich & Schahadat 2012).

Of course, the doubling of perception and memory that is described in Aciman’s *Letters of Transit* and that Ette refers to can be regarded as a characterizing trait of what is in the German literary discourse referred to as ‘migration/immigrant literature’. The double view can probably be found in texts by all authors who are regarded in this context. But isn’t this literary category itself problematic? No one has yet defined in a satisfactory way what ‘migration/immigrant literature’ is. Arguments that refer to the biography of the author are not tenable, and they are often criticized by authors with ‘foreign’ names. For instance, Anna Kim regards ‘migration/immigrant literature’ as a “pseudogenre”, and an attempt to “ghettoize [...] art” (Kim 2011: 105, transl. LKH), and Catalin Dorian Florescu describes authors of the so called ‘migration/immigrant literature’ as “*Brotbeschaffer* [feeders] of the literature scholars”: “Without us, the ‘migrant authors’, there would be less conferences, workshops, publications. We have become a financial factor; publishers, literature scholars, journalists, bookstore keepers live off our existence” (Florescu 2012: 96, transl. LKH). At the same time, it remains unsolved, how ‘migration/migrant literature’ can be defined. Also, this argument will not solve the problem; more important here is, instead, Ette’s observation that ‘migration/migrant literature and literature of exile are only examples of a phenomenon that affects us all, that is the movement in and through ‘mobile worlds of the in-between’.

After Welsch and Ette, a third impulse of the development of concepts of transculturality can be found in Olga Iljassova-Morger. In *Von der interkulturellen zur transkulturellen literarischen Hermeneutik* (2009), she criticizes the universalism and relativism of how culture is defined and conceptualized within the intercultural paradigm. She states that these concepts are insufficient when it comes to understanding globalization and hybrid identity constellations. Instead she reinterprets Gadamer’s hermeneutics and the subsequent development of reception aesthetics in order to work out a theory of transcultural understanding and interpretation. Although a more concrete and in-detail analysis of Gadamer’s theory of understanding (especially regarding dialogue and application) would have been desirable, Iljassova-Morger’s project is commendable as it returns to and foregrounds the hermeneutical question how our understanding of the Other is conditioned. At the same time, she regards the literary and linguistic composition of the concrete text as a model of understanding the Other:

And if one would search for the *true* place of a transcultural literary hermeneutics, then one should search within each human who reads literature, who is open to other cultures, who at least in the process of reading does not have to account for his cultural background, and who without noticing crosses borders with every new book page: a reader of this kind is a wanderer between the foreignness of the “real” world and the *homeliness* of the fictional text. (Iljassova-Morger 2009: 234, transl. LKH)

Iljassova-Morger not only illustrates the didactical relevance of transculturality, but also re-connects transcultural situations and practices with the question of hermeneutical understanding. At the same time, this approach liberates itself from the use of the problematic construction of a cultural Other. When referring to the Other within this approach, the aspect of fictionality is always considered, and the reader is regarded as someone who ‘wanders’ between the world of fiction and that of reality.⁶

3 Transculturality and literature

The theoretical development that is outlined above shows with clarity that literature and art are and have always been transcultural. Already the early essay by Welsch, mentioned above, describes the history of art as a transcultural sphere of experiences: “For someone who knows their European history – and art history in particular – this historical transculturality is evident. Styles developed across the countries and nations, and many artists created their best works far from home. The cultural trends were largely European and shaped a network linking the states” (Welsch 1999: 6). The development of concepts of transculturality is thus more than just a way of addressing topical issues such as globalization and migration. Instead, according to Welsch, all art and thus also literature is characterized by transculturality, even though the established works of literary history assume the existence of – and are structured according to – nations or ‘national languages,’

⁶ This could be linked to Iser’s theory of fiction (1991), especially his thoughts on a “literary anthropology”, but also his reader-response-criticism.

often considering ‘migration/immigrant literature’ as an exception from the rule, as something that differs from ‘normal’ literature.

This tendency of literary history writing is most probably a result of the standards and requirements that traditionally define this genre as a national one. But the format of national literary history writing only developed after the French Revolution and the establishment of modern nation states in the 19th century. A nation state of this kind relies on tradition, language, and thus also on the idea of a common literary history. Of course, we know these German, French, Spanish, Swedish etc. literary histories and no European one. But what would the German *Artusroman* be without its French influences? How could literary romanticism or modern literature ever be understood without regard to their international character and their cosmopolitanism? Obviously traditional literary histories only capture one national development within the transnational sphere of literature. Thus, in the Germanic tradition we not only find a *Wiener Moderne*, but also a *Prager Moderne*, a *Züricher Moderne* (dadaism) and a *Berliner Moderne* (expressionism), that were – despite the regional implication of their respective names – not ‘originally’ regional developments, but international ones, that were interpreted in different ways in different regions.

This, however, does not make the above mentioned literary histories superfluous. They offer orientation but the image of cultural processes that is created by these works should not be regarded as an authentic reflection of (literary) history, and should neither be used to support the idea of ‘original’ nation states as a ‘natural condition’ that is in our days confronted with increasing migration. From a historical perspective, the nation state is not the ‘normal case’. Instead, it can be argued that the nation states emerged through cultural diversity and movement.

This is also the perspective we can find in literature itself, when Hans Magnus Enzensberger (who can hardly be described as a ‘migrant author’), in his *Die Große Wanderung* (1992), asks for the “origin of *homo sapiens*” and locates this origin “in a complicated and risky chain of migrations across the planet”, concluding that “sedentariness does not belong to the genetically fixed character traits of the human species”, meaning that human history is a history of “nomadism” (Enzensberger 1992: 10, transl. LKH). According to Enzensberger, migrant movements can be found at the very beginning of the history of man as it is depicted within the Western, Christian tradition in motifs such as the expulsion from paradise, the “myth of Cain and Abel”, whose “main point is [...] how the sedentary after having killed the nomad is himself dispelled”: ‘You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth’” (Enzensberger 1992: 10, transl. LKH). This leads Enzensberger to the conclusion that nomadism and wandering, thus movement, is the only constant trait of our human history.⁷

Hence, all of us, also those who regard themselves as sedentary, can be said to have a nomadic background of wanderings and migrations. Therefore, it would be

⁷ This is not a new opinion of Enzensberger and thus not a view that derives from the sense of an increasing migration in our present. Instead, similar ideas can be traced back to the early works of the author (cf. Platen 2014).

problematic from a methodological, but also a societal and political perspective to regard transculturality as a concept only suitable for describing phenomena and problems related to "special group[s]" (Amann 2010: 159, transl. LKH) such as refugees, exiles or other migrants. A reduction of this kind would mean that only authors with a multicultural background could write transcultural literature. It would also further confirm the status of the mentioned groups as "special group[s]".

The challenge of transculturality, however, is a different one and is analogous to Armin Nassehi's suggestion in relation to the challenges of postcolonialism:

The real assignment and challenge [...] is not to expose the post-colonial Arab, the black or the Indonesian as a hybrid – that should not be too difficult. It would be more challenging to do the same [...] in the case of a Westphalian, Bavarian, a German, a French and a Welsh, a Scotsman, an Andalusian and a Lombardian, a confederate. The world society and its changes motivate an ethnological view also of ourselves. (Nassehi 2003: 207, transl. LKH; cf. Platen 2019)

Whether post-colonial theory can meet this challenge remains to be seen. At least a transcultural mindset can lead to a change of perspectives: Can also groups and individuals that have since generations been 'sedentary' be regarded as culturally hybrid? Is there no such thing as a 'purely' German, French, English, Swedish etc. literature?

In order to return to the above-mentioned problem of how authors and literary texts in literary history writing are often classified as either representatives of a 'national' culture or as an 'exception' from it (as in the case of the so called 'migration/immigrant literature' in the German context), we will now turn to Günter Grass. The literary production of the latest 'German' Nobel prize laureate in literature, Grass, is normally not regarded in the context of 'migration/immigrant literature', except by Salman Rushdie.⁸ Rushdie's "affinity" (Rushdie 1991: 277) for Grass is not only motivated by his flight from Danzig at the end of the Second World War, an experience that Grass himself shares with his literary character Oskar Matzerath from the *Blechtrommel* (1959). According to Rushdie, the migrant is characterized by a loss of "roots, language and social norms", which is why he regards Grass as "only approximately half a migrant" (Rushdie 1991: 277f.). But Rushdie takes his argument one step further by not only regarding the migrant experience as a spatial one – flight from Danzig to the bosom of the West – but also taking historical ruptures and transformations into account. First of all, the end of the Second World War meant the disappearance of Danzig and the transformation into Gdansk, which not only meant a lingual change, but rather also implied a cultural reconfiguration of the city, as "the contemporary Danzig has a completely different point of reference, another background" (Grass in Arnold 1978: 11, transl. LKH). Second, not only does the experience of exile mean a loss of contact with the "Kashubian dialects of his youth" but also the German language had to be

⁸ This issue is discussed in more detail, especially with regard to the transcultural space of Danzig in Platen 2020.

‘rebuilt’ and ‘reinvented’ after the “Nazi period [...] pebble by pebble, from the wreckage” (Rushdie 1991: 278f.). Third, Rushdie compares the transition from “Nazi Germany” into the German post war period with the migrant’s transition into “another country” and thus into new “social codes”: “Grass had to unlearn that country, that way of thinking about society, and learn a new one” (Rushdie 1991: 280). Grass can thus be regarded as “a migrant from his past”, but here, Rushdie not only refers to the historical ‘space’ of Danzig, which also means that “migration across national frontiers is by no means the only form of the phenomenon” (Rushdie 1991: 278f.).

Rushdie here not only sheds light on the multicultural or ‘migrant’ biographies of Grass, but also, and more importantly, on Grass’s migrating movement between different realities, between author and artist, between imagination and reason, between micro- and macrocosms. These movements do not end with an arrival in a *third space* (Bhabha), but are instead to be regarded as continuously ongoing border crossings.

According to Ette, a “poetics of movement” of this kind can be regarded as a characterizing trait and an expression of transculturality. In Rushdie’s account, this movement is referred to as migration, but the word has a broader meaning to Rushdie than just the traditional migration across national borders: “We all cross frontiers; in that sense, *we are all* migrant peoples” (Rushdie 1991: 279; italics added). Thus, Rushdie’s migrant becomes a symbol of our cultural movements and, as such, s/he is “the central or defining figure of the twentieth century” (Rushdie 1991: 277). In German post war literature, the tourist appears in the writing of Alfred Andersch, as “a key character of the [20th] century”, and, for the historian Karl Schlögel, the 20th century is the “century of refugees” (Schlögel 2008: 83). The common trait of all these characters, to whom also nomads, wanderers, flâneurs and others belong, is that they are on the move and that the movement itself, rather than a specific destination, means everything.

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