International conference

Which market? Popular Writing between Entertainment and/or Edification
14–15 November 2024, Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach

Call for Papers

Genre literature and serial production: entertaining literature seems to be the future of the book business, according to Dan Sinykin in his recent study “Big Fiction” (2023), in which he traces how the emergence of large publishing conglomerates has changed literature. He argues that it is primarily those authors who use familiar patterns in their work that have successfully established themselves on the market.

This sociological diagnosis of literature aligns with studies conducted on formal aesthetics. In 2022, Moritz Baßler described internationally successful literature as one that fails to exploit its formal possibilities or potential to the full, instead relying on catchy and repetitive plots, easy readability, and familiar genres – from fantasy, thrillers, and detective novels to science fiction. A new “Midcult” has been established as a “sophisticated variant of the popular” (Baßler 2022). Fifty years after American scholar Leslie Fiedler’s rallying cry in his Freiburg lecture to »Cross the Border – Close the Gap«, the chasm between entertainment and sophisticated literature still has not been bridged.

The fact that successful, market-oriented literature is frequently suspected of being not particularly sophisticated or challenging in literary terms is nothing new. In Germany in particular, the distinction between entertaining literature on the one hand and edifying literature on the other, between pleasure and art, has itself, ever since Weimar Classicism, become an almost sacred aspect, a truism of cultural heritage. In England, for example, such a distinction cannot be made in the same way, if only because the intentions behind it are different – and the rigid dichotomy is not historically convincing for Germany, either.

Historically, it appears to be an attempt to (over-)simplify attribution of value, often for the purpose of (self-)canonization, while many texts are characterized by a mixture of entertaining and serious writing styles. August von Kotzebue’s complex and touching plays are just one example.

Has the development of the literary market, the changing cultural needs and concerns of readers, brought literature to a new stage in this discourse? To put it positively: Has the permeability of entertaining literature on the one hand and edifying literature on the other increased? Or, to put it negatively: Has it brought about the decline of edifying literature to
entertainment? Considered from the perspective of aesthetic critique, it is questionable whether contemporary literature can be described at all using these schematic terms and what is meant by them. In terms of text analysis and literary history, how is literature changing in regard to entertaining and serious forms of writing, and how are writing and speaking about literature changing at the same time, chronologically and geographically, in international comparison? What role does the contemporary global market play in this, from a literary sociological perspective? Are there differences between the programmes of patron-sponsored publishers and those of publishers that are owned by profit-making corporations? What gets translated or adapted? What role do literary criticism (reviews, TV programmes) and bestseller lists (in Germany: Spiegel bestseller list, etc.) play? To what extent are readers and a global audience, which is increasingly looking beyond the large-scale, establishment media in the digital world, exchanging information, chatting instead of reading, driving these developments (for example, through reviews in online portals)? How do authors react to this? To what extent does cultural policy intervene when it awards prizes, seeks to promote or prevent the dissolution of the entertainment and edification dichotomy in culture?

Our conference aims to discuss these, and other related, questions both by drawing on current research perspectives and by critically assessing their viability for adequately addressing the inherent nuances of the problematic at hand. Researchers at all career stages in (Comparative) Literature and Culture Studies, Sociology, Book Studies, and related disciplines are invited to submit papers on the questions outlined above. Presentations that combine archive-related research with theoretical and methodological reflection or explore the potential of digital approaches are particularly welcome.

Abstracts of 300 words for a 30-minute presentation in German or English should be submitted via the application portal by 30.04.2024. Please also include a brief CV and selected publications list.

The conference will be conducted in German and English. Travel and accommodation costs for the conference will be reimbursed.

Contact:
Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach, Research Department
Select bibliography


Baßler, Moritz und Heinz Drügh. Gegenwartsästhetik. Konstanz 2021


Baßler, Moritz: Populärer Realismus. Vom Internationalen Style gegenwärtigen Erzählens. Munich 2022


Catani, Stephanie and Christoph Kleinschmidt (eds): Popliteratur 3.0: Soziale Medien und Gegenwartsliteratur. Berlin/Boston 2023

Cornils, Ingo: Beyond Tomorrow: German Science Fiction and Utopian Thought in the 20th and 21st Centuries. Rochester, NY 2020


Norrick-Rühl, Corinna und Caroline Kögler: Are books still ‘different’? Literature as culture and commodity in a digital age. Cambridge 2023


