

Workshop, June 06-07, 2014 at the University of Innsbruck:

**Mightier than the Sword?
The Countercultural Agency of Literary Fiction**

Timothy Leary proposes a fundamental difference in the functions of cultural and political action: “the focus of counterculture is the power of ideas, images, and artistic expression, not the acquisition of personal or political power. ... the seizure and maintenance of political power requires adherence to structures too inflexible to accommodate the innovation and exploration that are basic to the countercultural *raison d’être*.” This workshop would like to take up the idea of the centrality of innovation and exploration to countercultural agency and zoom in on the specific countercultural possibilities and functions of literary fiction.

Literature delivers a running commentary on contemporary society across genre boundaries: utopias/dystopias, fantasy and science fiction, or the pastoral, to name just a few, easily lend themselves to countercultural thinking, whereas genres such as the epic, the satire, or mythopoeisis seem to stabilize established values, but can be appropriated to serve countercultural purposes, as well. Fiction, it seems, offers foils to and variations on received perceptions of this world and creates a playground for innovation and exploration, ‘what if’ scenarios and thought experiments, be it in form of prose tracts in the manner of Thomas More, Jonathan Swift's satiric attacks on dogmata, or Margaret Atwood's dystopian tales, to mention just a tiny Anglocentric selection.

Yet how exactly can, to use Frank Kermode's phrase, fictions be ‘agents of change’? As Mark Turner points out in *The Literary Mind*, one of the most common devices in literary production – the parable, where an action sequence is created and then projected onto a different action sequence – actually serves as the brain’s very function for evaluation, prediction, and planning, where our past experiences are projected onto future possibilities in an act of narrative imagining. Fiction’s medium, language, too, is mankind's fundamental tool for communicating and negotiating models and positions and thus instrumental in synchronizing mind sets and action plans within a complex social group. Language performs this function by accessing and modifying cognitive structures and conceptualizations: literature’s innovative use of language via imagery and metaphor tries to tap into this source and break open and reshape the scope of concepts and connections, how we order and make sense of the world. Regarded as speech or text acts, language seems to possess a power complementary to that of physical action: philosopher John Searle claims that all of social interaction is defined by the status functions that humans impose on objects and people through declarative speech acts.

If we take all of this into account, how can the role of literary fiction in counterculture be specified? Topics that could be discussed at this workshop include, but are not limited to:

What are the countercultural possibilities of language and literature?

- What is the epistemological 'power' of countercultural fiction? Can literature, as discourse within the system, reframe our understanding of reality, expand the limits of our language/world and establish alternative alleyways in our thinking?

What is the relation between activism and fiction?

- How and to what extent does countercultural literature have an impact on hegemonic/dominant culture? Can the author be regarded as a countercultural agent? Is a differentiation between 'hard' countercultural activities such as protest and activism and 'soft' countercultural writing in order and if so, why? What are the relations between mainstream and countercultural modes of literary production?

What are (specific) countercultural modes, images, and forms in literature?

- Of interest are, amongst others, obscurantism and arcana, appropriations of established symbols, metaphors and myths, activist modes, the appropriation and subversion of established genres, or genres that lend themselves to countercultural writings.

What is the role of literary fiction in countercultural movements?

- To what extent do countercultural agents fictionalize? To what extent do they draw from and employ literary fiction in order to convey a countercultural agenda?

We invite contributions – papers, participation in round table discussions, or suggestions for different formats –, in English or German, from scholars and postgraduate students in literary studies and all related disciplines, such as linguistics, philosophy, psychology, history, or ethnology.

Please send abstracts (of max. 300 wds.) to friederike.wolfrum@uibk.ac.at by December 06, 2013. For information and updates see: <http://www.uibk.ac.at/fsp-kultur/dk-figuration-gegenkultur/ccandliterature/>

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