

Heidelberg University English Department
Lecture Series: Another Place, Another Time

Introduction

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(2021-10-25)

Welcome to the Heidelberg University English Department's lecture series *Another Place, Another Time*. My name is Annika Elstermann and I will be hosting this lecture series podcast throughout the semester. Each week, I'll be speaking to a different colleague and/or fellow researcher about a topic from their area of expertise, all under the overarching theme of "another place, another time": stories which differ from the lived experience of their authors, and sometimes their recipients.

The original inspiration for this topic came from the question of what literature and other media might emerge from these past two years – and whether the pandemic itself would play a significant part in that. While previous movies about pandemics (like *Outbreak* (1995) or *Contagion* (2011)) had a bit of a renaissance recently, more recent ones like the 2020 movie *Songbird* and 2021's *Locked Down*, both of which reference the current pandemic, received overwhelmingly negative audience reviews. One explanation for this is, of course, that production was rushed, and that an artistic treatment of the pandemic will require some reflection and retrospection – which, in fact, also fits with the theme of this lecture series. Another reason, however, might be that after experiencing everyday life during this pandemic for months on end, people generally don't want to encounter it in their entertainment as well. Recent escapist hits, on the other hand, have included *Ted Lasso*, a show about an American football coach training an English soccer team, which has received very high audience ratings and critical praise, and been called "warm", "hopeful", and generally "feel-good" watching.

Not similarly at all in themes, but certainly in effect, the documentary series *Tiger King* was a cult hit in streaming during the early days of the pandemic – not least, I'm sure, because the drama of its larger-than-life characters was loud enough for many people to momentarily push aside the stressful uncertainty of life during a global pandemic.

This already marks two sides of the escapism-coin. One is that escapism distracts from real problems – if everyone withdraws from a world which they perceive as bad, chances are that things are not going to change for the better. On the other hand, most people seem to need a break from reality once in a while, to a fictional world where things are not quite as bad as they are in ours; or are bad in a different way; or a world where things can be put right and conflict can be resolved.

In some way, escapist literature might – in perhaps a slightly exaggerated form – be seen through a similar lens as that through which Karl Marx viewed organised religion (the opium of the people, or opiate of the masses). It might alleviate pain and suffering in an acute situation of distress, but ultimately itself does nothing to change the circumstances at the root of the problem.

Marxist critique of organised religion of course includes other aspects as well, but don't worry, I won't go into any more detail on this here. What is, in my opinion, pertinent to this small analogy is this idea of substituting an illusion of potential happiness for the demand for real happiness, which blocks

revolutionary and subversive impulses. I want to give you a brief quote from Marx; this comes shortly after the famous “[religion] is the opium of the people”-line in the introduction to *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. [...] Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation, but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower.

So this is not a pessimistic take, but a fundamentally optimistic one: We can actually make the world a better place; but the drive to do that stems from bearing the discomfort of the current condition. Which makes it an argument against escapism.

However: If we assume that there is no ideal, *static* form of society, then anything which approaches an ideal society needs to retain the ability to change, and in order to do that, the ability to imagine alternatives to our current state of being. You are welcome to disagree with me on that – and on anything else – and if you do, I would love to debate this with you. But just to clarify my point about stasis briefly: If you've read *Brave New World* and or listened to last year's episode on that topic, you'll see how this is a direct illustration of this. A society which functions like a machine, in which there is no history and no fiction which would inspire dreams of other ways of living. Escapism takes the form of literal opiates, which soothe and stabilize, but which are never creative, and definitely not subversive.

Literature, on the other hand, and in some way especially literature which is set in another place or another time, has the potential to imagine alternative forms of society, and thus to subvert the status quo, established hierarchies, and so on. In “Of Other Spaces”, Michel Foucault says: “In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.” And while there is a literal meaning to this as well, the boat here is, of course, also a metaphor, as are the pirates. Foucault calls the boat, quote, “the greatest reserve of the imagination.” I won't go into more detail on this here because we will come back to this later in the semester, but in essence, for now, this is about the difference between free, imaginative, potentially rebellious thinking and disciplined, static stability, which from my point of view is a clear argument in favour of escapism.

An overlapping point to all of this is that literature which is set elsewhere needn't in the least be purely escapist, but can in fact transport implicit criticism of real-life circumstances, and often more effectively so than strictly realist or non-fiction writing. One reason for this is political: There have been and are times and places in this world where it was easier to get (and keep) a play on stage that criticises mythical heroes or ancient rulers rather than the current head of state. Another reason is that abstraction can help us get to some kinds of truths far better than precision, and that a story can resonate more strongly if it has the room to do so.

There are many different ways from which this can be approached theoretically. I want to quote from Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay “The Storyteller” here, because for me, this really captures the heart

of it.

This makes strikingly clear that it is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. The intelligence that came from afar – whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition – possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself.' Often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this it proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words: by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it.

[...]

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.

So, just to clarify this: Benjamin distinguishes between "information", which means precise, verifiable facts, and "intelligence" – in the original German, this is "Kunde" – which is much more vague than that, and which we might also perhaps translate as "wisdom". While information is only relevant in that moment in which the data is transmitted and absorbed, intelligence or wisdom can stick with you for a long time, and resonate at different points in your life, and maybe in different ways. To Benjamin, abstraction and elision are essential parts of effective storytelling. To use one quick and simplified example (and, quick disclaimer, not necessarily what Benjamin had in mind, but something we can extrapolate from his argument): A story about hobbits, elves, and orcs might teach us more effectively about trauma, friendship and hope in the face of the perils of mechanised warfare and loss of identity than a textbook about World War One and Industrialisation.

All fiction requires a suspension of disbelief, but to varying degrees – some stories, depending on genre, tone, and context, much more so than others. And sometimes, the audience's expectation of authenticity does not match the fictionality of the work. There are countless examples of this, including James Frey's memoirs in the early 2000s, but some particularly notable recent ones.

In December 2017, Kristen Roupenian published a short story titled "Cat Person" in the *New Yorker*, which instantly became widely shared and discussed. The story is about a relationship which begins and grows through texting, peters out during an awkward date and a not-quite-wanted, uncomfortable

sexual encounter, and ends with some ghosting and misogynist insults. The story resonated with many people at the time, and also, as a story about the grey areas of questionable consent, with the cultural moment in the middle of the #MeToo-movement; but it also slipped off the radar after a couple of months. Until earlier this year, July 2021, when Alexis Nowicki published a (non-fiction) article titled “‘Cat Person’ and Me” in which she recounts how she found out that many details of the short story matched her life and a relationship she had between 2012 and 2015, and reveals that Roupenian – whom she had never met before – found out about her through mutual acquaintances, researched details of her life on social media, and used that as well as her own experiences as a, quote, “jumping-off point” for “Cat Person”.

Roupenian published this as a short story, as fictional; she did not claim it to be autobiographical – though she hinted in interviews at having had similar encounters –, and she didn't claim for it to be true to anyone else's lived experience either. And yet something about this clearly sits wrong with readers, as evidenced by the renewed outburst of debate after the publication of Nowicki's article. And while some of that has to do with the partial appropriation of someone else's experience, the revelation that Roupenian's writing was neither autobiographical, nor authentic to the experience of the person who inspired it, seems to have somehow lessened its impact for some readers. There is, to a degree, an expectation, or even assumption of autofiction and authenticity in certain styles of writing.

The widespread popularity of “Cat Person” also meant that many of its readers were not regular short story readers, and during its initial wave of popularity, the story was also often referred to as an “article”, and that can be an easy mistake to make. Even though we generally separate authors from narrators quite strictly, in practice, it's not always as easy as that, and the line between personal essay, autofictional short story, and short story with a first person narrator can be blurry.

A similar case received a lot of media attention earlier this month through a New York Times article titled “Who is the Bad Art Friend?”. I won't go into this here, but if you are interested in this question of who can tell whose story, or whether there should be limits on writers' inspiration, you might want to look into that as well.

The idea of “write what you know” and drawing from own lived experience seems pervasive in contemporary literature. Similarly, the “#OwnVoices”-movement promotes writing about the experiences of marginalised groups by authors who identify as belonging to that same group. While this can be empowering and bring more diversity to the literary field, “write what you know” can also have isolating effects, in line with its roots in the ideology of American individualism. And in its more extreme forms, even a well-intentioned call for diversity can lead to policing who is and isn't allowed to write what kind of story and who's expected to share their lives above all else.

None of the points I mentioned today are clear-cut at all, and all of them are open for debate, which is one of the things I find so appealing about the topic and about the format of this lecture series. Writing and reading about what we don't know raises many different questions, regarding expectations of authenticity, the very complex matter of truth, the conservative or subversive effects of escapism, the potential for fostering empathy, the risks of appropriation or isolation, and many others which we will explore over the next couple of months.

Next Monday, November first, is a public holiday, so we'll pick up again on the 8th of November, when David Eisler and I will dive deeper into the matter of authenticity, and have a conversation about the concept of authenticity across different genres.

Throughout the semester, if there's ever anything you would like to add or ask or discuss, you are very welcome to do so, and I would love to hear from you. Students who are registered for this lecture series can use the forum on Moodle. Everyone else can reach me and my colleagues via email. My email address as well as the programme for the semester can be found on our website at: www.as.uni-heidelberg.de/lecture

Thank you very much for listening.