

An den Rändern der Literatur. Dokument und Literatur in zentral-europäischen Kulturen. Tracing the Edges of Literature. Documentary Fiction in Central European Cultures. Edited by Milka Car, Csongor Lőrincz, Danijela Lugarić, and Gábor Tamás Molnár. Vienna: Böhlau, 2024. 277 pp.

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Holding this book in my hands, I am looking at the annotation on the back cover, which describes its topic through a paradoxical observation:

“[...] the documentary gesture is at odds with what structuralist and semiotically informed theories generally identified as the foundational principles of literature. This violation, however, turns out to be vital to the growth of the contemporary literary field in Central European cultures.”

One may recognize here three focal points, a combination of which forms the subject of the volume. First, there is a regional focus on Central Europe, involving a combination of essays on Austrian, Croatian, German, Hungarian, and Romanian literatures. Second, historical emphasis is put on the “contemporary” era, which is understood as post-1989, according to the introduction by Danijela Lugarić (p. 11). Concepts such as “new sincerity” and “new realism” serve as references to a broader contemporary tendency “to reinforce reliability as a literary category,” also including documentary writing (p. 12). Finally and most importantly, the annotation shows that the core subject of this volume is a theoretical one, as it deals with nothing less than our definition of literature, since documentary techniques seem to violate and stimulate literature at the same time. Given the contemporary rise of documentary aesthetics, the title *Tracing the Edges of Literature* also refers rather to the periphery of the common concept of literature than to the margins of the literary field.

In her introduction, Danijela Lugarić characterizes literary texts analyzed in the volume as “non-binary” ones (p. 9), thus continuing a long poststructuralist tradition of overcoming thinking in binary oppositions. Regarding documentary writing,

a question arises as to what terms would be the opposite of “document.” In recent research, there has been a tendency to juxtapose document with fiction and thus link it to the concept of fact so that a non-binary concept that combines two categories would be “factual fictions” (Flis, 2010) or “docufiction”—originating in film studies.¹ Against this background, one peculiarity of the present volume is striking. Comprising nine papers in German and nine in English, it has a German and an English title that differ slightly. While the English title identifies the book’s subject as “Documentary Fiction,” the German one speaks of “*Dokument und Literatur*” (“Document and Literature”). In my eyes, the German version corresponds better to the theoretical approach of the volume, which offers a new perspective on documentary writing by locating it between the categories of ‘document and literature’ as such.

In previous research, there have been attempts to analyze documentary texts or docufiction as a genre.² In this collection, the documentary is considered not as a genre but as a “documentary technique” (p. 189) and even more generally—as “documentariness,” a word used in paper titles by Gábor Tamás Molnár, Marina Protrka Štítec, Ágnes Balajthy and throughout the volume. Accordingly, two key concepts here are documentariness / *Dokumentarizität* and literariness / *Literarizität*. Literariness is understood as “the self-referential verbal utterance,” according to Roman Jakobson (p. 24). In contrast, documentariness stands for referentiality since “document” is defined as a certification of reference to reality. One of the editors, Milka Car, writes in her essay: “[T]he real exists if it can be documented, or vice versa; it is the document that first guarantees referentiality” (p. 25). Sets of binary oppositions overcome in this volume thus include reference and self-reference, reality and construction, along with literature and non-literature.

Danijela Lugarić describes all texts analyzed in the present collection as “prose fictions that refer to documentary material (archival and ethnographic material, photographs, eyewitness testimonies etc.), and intentionally and actively probe and expose their literariness” (p. 9). In this kind of writing, both literature and non-literature are transcended within a double transgression. On the one hand, literature oversteps its boundaries; on the other, documents take on literary features. In many of the texts that are analyzed, this tension becomes a subject of inner-textual self-reflection. Such self-reflexive documentary literature plays a political, critical role by drawing attention to the fact that our perception of reality is “discursively produced” (p. 29) and that “authenticity” can be seen as a rhetorical strategy (p. 11).

Along with Danijela Lugarić’s introduction and Milka Car’s essay on the typology of documentary literature, the volume consists of sixteen case studies that are

1 Bidmon and Lubkoll, eds, *Dokufiktionalität in Literatur und Medien*.

2 Cf. Wiegandt, *Chronisten der Zwischenwelten*.

united by a common approach to documentary writing. This approach, which results from the theoretical perspective described above, may be exemplified by the title of Marina Protrka Štimec's essay "Literariness and Documentariness in Daša Drndić's Novel *Trieste (Sonnenschein)*." More or less following this pattern, other case studies focus on the relationship between literariness and documentariness in a variety of texts: Marcel Beyer's *Water Level Report* from 2003 (Csongor Lőrincz), Imre Kertész's *Protocol* from 1991 (Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó), Péter Esterházy's *A Novel of Production* from 1979 (Gábor Tamás Molnár), Kristian Novak's *Gypsy, but the Fairest of Them All* from 2016 (Marijana Hameršak), Szilárd Rubin's *Holy Innocents*, published posthumously in 2012, and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* from 1965 (Robert Smid), Péter Esterházy's *Revised Edition* from 2002 (Morten Nissen), Péter Nádas' *Bright Details* from 2017 (Tamás Lénárt), W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* from 1995 (Ágnes Balajthy), Sten Nadolny's *Ullstein Novel* from 2003 (Ágnes Hansági), Günter Grass's *Crabwalk* from 2002 in the context of contemporary German-language historical prose (Marijan Bobinac), Kathrin Röggla's *we never sleep* from 2004 (Hajnalka Halász), Ratko Cvetnić's *Short Field Trip* from 1997 (Zvonimir Glavaš), Marko Gregur's *Vošicki* from 2020 (Dubravka Zima), Stjepan Lojen's *Memoirs of an Immigrant* from 1963 (Maša Kolanović) as well as two graphic novels from 2014, *Parents' Earth* by Annemarie Otten and *Dolki-n trei strai*e by Petra Dobruská and Ileana Surducan (Ferenc Vincze). As I cannot discuss each of these highly interesting case studies in detail, I will continue to reflect on the volume as a whole, which is quite homogeneous in its theoretical focus and approach.

The list of texts that are discussed shows that the main corpus (texts from Central Europe after 1989) is expanded both chronologically and regionally in some of the essays. Among those analyzed are three books from the 1960s and 1970s, one of which represents American New Journalism (Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Stjepan Lojen's *Memoirs of an Immigrant*, and Péter Esterházy's *A Novel of Production*). The introduction also mentions Svetlana Alexievich's receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, which "assisted in the proliferation of documentary literature globally" (p. 12). Milka Car's essay looks back to the history of documentary techniques, mentioning the usage of verifiable quotations from political speeches in Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death* (1835) as an early example (p. 28). In my eyes, this volume is not only an excellent study of contemporary Central European literatures, but also an important contribution to the theory of documentary writing in general, being relevant to other historical and regional contexts as well.

The present collection is an extended reflection not only on literariness being at the same time violated and stimulated through documentary techniques but also on documentary writing as "a political gesture," questioning the supposed "objectivity of a document" (p. 12). This double perspective resonates with an influential philosophical

concept of interaction between the arts (including literature) and politics by Jacques Rancière. According to him, since the end of the eighteenth century, “art is art to the extent that it is something else than art.”³ He locates the dynamic “life of art” in a space “between two vanishing points: art becoming mere life or art becoming mere art.”⁴ Modern art constantly tries to overcome its own boundaries, which paradoxically leads it to acknowledge and shape its own autonomous aesthetic form. This is the same kind of paradox as a fruitful interplay of literature and non-literature in documentary aesthetics. In light of Rancière’s concept, non-binary documentary writing – as it is analyzed in the present volume – appears to be a particularly productive case of the constitutive contradiction between referentiality and self-referentiality in modern literature and art in general. For Rancière, this contradiction also involves an inherently political semantics as an aesthetic mode of dissensus. According to him, the “essence of politics resides” in revealing “a society in its difference to itself.”⁵ This epistemic model of dissensus as a contradictory identity is shaped not only in social life but also in art revealing its own difference to itself through self-reflexive, critical gestures. This critical potential of art results from a “negotiation between the forms of art and those of non-art,” leading to creative “combinations of elements capable of speaking twice over: on the basis of their legibility and on the basis of their illegibility.”⁶ The present volume shows that it is the concept of “document,” originating from the Latin *docere* (to teach), that stands for the referentiality, objectivity, and thus legibility of text, which enters into a productive contradiction with artistic self-reference, insisting on its own right of being to some extent illegible.

This dissensual dynamic comes to the fore most explicitly in Csongor Lőrincz’s essay on Marcel Beyer’s *Water Level Report*, being a legible report and an illegible non-report at the same time. Lőrincz analyzes this text against the background of a larger question of “internal difference” in literature (p. 35), which resonates directly with Rancière’s concept of society’s and art’s “difference to itself.”⁷ In Beyer’s *Report*, “the very foundations of testimony turn against itself and make its impossibility manifest,” which is at the same time an “indicator of literature’s self-presentation” (p. 48). Through this example—as well as in the other case studies in the volume—we see that documentary writing is an important form of “critical art,” understood in line with Rancière as “an art that questions its own limits and powers,”⁸ including the limits and powers of language, representation, and authenticity.

3 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 118.

4 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 132.

5 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 42.

6 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 46.

7 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 42.

8 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 149.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize the outstanding coherence of this volume that allows me to discuss it not as a compilation of separate essays but as a collective monograph. Its composition confirms the argument of Romanian scholars Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian concerning doing literary theory in the twenty-first century, quoted by Danijela Lugić in her introduction: “[W]e are reaching a point where critical-theoretical thinking is thinking with – with others [...]” (p. 17).⁹ The present volume is an inspiring product of intellectual collaboration within an academic community gathered around the Hungarian Association for the Study of General Literature and the University of Zagreb. What I am holding in my hands is a book that will be instructive and stimulating not only for scholars of Central European cultures but for anyone in the research field of comparative literature and literary theory in general.

Literature

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⁹ Matei, Moraru, and Terian, *Theory in the “Post” Era*, 21.

