

Fiction Meets Science Book Club Meeting

March 12, 2019, 7 pm, Susan's house in Bremen

Book under discussion: Lily King's *Euphoria* (2014)

Notes by Christine Müller

First Impressions: Which topics would you like to discuss?

Susan: the novel's depiction of the beginnings of anthropology and its conflicts of disciplinary affiliation: does anthropology belong to the sciences or the humanities?; different methods, various ways of doing science as shown by the different anthropologist characters; what about the biographies of the people behind the story? How do we read the novel? As fiction or biography?

Dorothea: relationship between the fictional character of Nell Stone and the historical figure of Margaret Mead (→ not faithful to the real-life character); the representation of scientific practice in the novel (→ more exciting than it actually was)

Catherine: connections the novel shows between intellectual and erotic passion (ideas are sexy here); questions of objectivity and subjectivity in anthropology; the chosen narrative situation, especially the female author's choice of a male narrator (questions of authority)

Sarah: reader becomes him- or herself an anthropologist with this novel; ethical questions regarding the use of human beings for research purposes (→ the characters all use other people's lives to make a career)

...: How does the novel make us think about anthropological work?

Alice: women in science; relationship between biographical fact and fictional imagination (too much making up?)

...: fiction versus reality?; ethics of science; colonization

Uwe: the love triangle; the narrative situation; relationship to the story behind the story?; the different nationalities of the three characters: what role does that play in the story? (Stereotypes?)

Christine: representations of the "other"; is the novel biofiction or not?

Heather: ethical questions in writing about real people's lives: How far can you go as an author? What about the terrible things that happen to the fictional Margaret Mead and the terrible ways that Leo Fortune is represented?

Jana: the novel's ending; the methods employed by the anthropologist characters: are they really scientific?; underrepresentation of male scientist characters as compared to female scientist and engineer figures in the novel → interesting fact

Discussion:

How do we read the novel if we do not know the story upon which it is based/by which it was inspired? Why does Lily King give us so many clues regarding the story behind her story if she also emphasizes that her story is a different story? She changes the names of the historical figures (and the tribes and locations), but keeps many details of their lives (including the different nationalities, the love triangle). What is the function of the acknowledgement in the end? What if she hadn't written one? What are the rules as to how to relate to the world outside of fiction? → Everything that is legal is okay to do? Doesn't a novel such as *Euphoria* run the danger of giving us the wrong impression of a historical figure like Margaret Mead and of the kind of work she was doing? Margaret Mead's findings on aggression, for instance, are missing from the novel. Why this connection to Margaret Mead that the novel shows and that is emphasized by all reviews, in interviews with the author, etc.? Is the novel a bestseller because it has Margaret Mead in it? The sources at the end of the novel for those interested in the real story → yet they also show that Lily King relied heavily on the actual historical context and figures for her story and thus again allude to the world outside of the novel. So is the novel supposed to be about Margaret Mead or about anthropology?

How are the tribes represented in the novel? Is the representation based on the research by the three historical anthropologists or did the author invent these tribes and the characteristics she ascribes to them? She admits to changing their names and the locations where they lived, after all. It seems that they are described to fit the grid developed by the three anthropologist characters, that they are caricatured into "good" and "bad" tribes for reasons of dramatization. What about the **infanticide** which is a recurrent motif in the novel? It connects Fen/Nell with the tribes. Nell's wish for a baby and trying to get pregnant hinder her from understanding the Mumbanyo's treatment of firstborns, twins, etc. and make her leave. Representation of the Mumbanyo as inhumane towards babies raises ethical questions for anthropologists: When should one interfere in these cultures? Can/should one tolerate the violation of one's own ethical and moral standards? Should or do anthropologists have to impose rules when studying these tribes? (→ for example regarding cannibalism)

What about science in the novel? It teaches us about the beginnings of the academic discipline of anthropology when it was struggling to find its place between science and the humanities asking where it belongs. Is anthropology a science or an art? What about the methods employed by the characters to study tribes? They do not seem too realistic → do science or nerd novels have to teach accurate science? Isn't the goal primarily to get you interested in the topic? The novel also discusses the consequences of science through the grid and its use by the Third Reich.

What about the ending? The German translation is more explicit here than the English text in that it shows Nell throwing the flute overboard. This might explain her death → the jealous Fen kills her → biggest departure from the historical record → Margaret Mead married Bankson and had a daughter with him (something the novel denies the heroine) **What about the title?** *Euphoria* = moment of the development of the grid; moment of sexual pleasure in the women's hut; the moment when you start understanding the culture you live in.

What about the novel's narrative situation? → Three different narrative situations (third person omniscient; first-person (Andrew Bankson, speaking from the hindsight awareness of

the narrating I, his letters); and first person (Nell Stone's perspective through journal entries). Is Andrew Bankson also the third person omniscient narrator? → subjectivity of historical perspectives. The unreliability of a novel and the field of anthropology is mirrored in her choice of writing/narrative situation. The chosen narrative situation adds a third level to the dual-temporal dimension of all historical fiction: the moment of writing is the present, the time of the setting is the 1930s (the more distant past), and the time of narration in the 1970s (the more recent past). What about reliability here? → Bankson's fever. **The novel's relationship to the present** → North American writer's awareness of her own past → extermination of cultures instead of studying them, Native American genocide → contemporary concerns as being represented here?

What roles does **the acquisition and study of the different local languages** play in the novel? The characters seem to not engage too much in trying to understand the functioning of the different languages they are confronted with. But can you understand a culture without understanding how their language works?

What about the different nationalities? Their language is inflected differently; they use different terms/accents, for instance, Bankson's letters to his mother seem very English. What about **stereotypes** in the depiction of the different scientists? **How are the scientists represented here?** → Nell as the only true scientist. All are very curious but also selfish. Bankson uses the tribes to get away from his mother and find himself? Fen as greedy and possessive (→ steals the flute for his own benefit), but also a product of his day and time (very talented but also too full of himself and unable to deal with a successful, unconventional woman); colonial structures in their field research: building of houses, employing of servants, taking of artefacts (flute) and selling it to museum (stolen art)