*Brazzaville Beach*

Notes from the FMS Book Club Discussion

Monday 4/7/14, Oldenburg

Group members present: Anna Auguscik, Ina Schmidt, Jürgen Rullkötter, Wilfried Wackernagel, Laura Verbeek, Martin Ritter, Prof. Dr. Anton Kirchhofer, Dr. Natalie Roxburgh, Carlos Peralta

Summary of the discussion by Anna Auguscik

**William Boyd, *Brazzaville Beach* (1990)**

In our meeting we discussed William Boyd’s fourth novel favourably, if with some reservations. The general feeling was that the novel succeeded in hooking our attention but the judgment of the protagonist, Hope Clearwater, was mixed. In fact, while some perceived Hope as an unsympathetic character who lacks development, others were able to identify with the young woman and her story. Much of the judgment over the novel depended on the individual reader’s rapport with the main character and the question in how far we could trust her (or, for that matter, the author’s) account. In a second stage, we discussed the science in the novel – bearing in mind that (at least) two kinds of science were represented (mathematics and primate research) – and came to the conclusion that although science seems to permeate all levels of narration we learn little about the actual scientific process. Finally, we debated the epigraph “The unexamined life is not worth living” (a quote by Socrates, which is repeated at the very end of the novel): does Hope use a scientific gaze to examine her life, and if so, what role does the change in perspective (between first and third person narration), as well as her possible stance as an unreliable narrator play in our evaluation of the results of her examination?

**Characters**

* + Only developed character: Hope (Dunbar) Clearwater
  + Other characters mostly serve in particular functions; i.e. different male characters in Hope’s life: John Clearwater (husband); Professor Hobbes (supervisor and mentor); Eugene Mallabar (boss); Hauser and Ian Vail (colleagues); Usman Shoukry (lover); Gunther Neuffer (boyfriend)
  + The (mostly) unlikeable protagonist makes it difficult to invest in the story. If we still feel compelled by the plot despite the unlikeable character, would this speak in favour of the author’s achievement?
  + Hope as stereotypical ‘female’ (passive, undecided, in awe of strong men) or ‘masculine’ character (her relationships are based on sex rather than love; she lacks communication skills; strong body image)? How much does our judgment of Hope reflect our own preconceived ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman?
  + Does Hope lack in scientific spirit? Should she have intervened earlier, become more active?

**Plot and Form**

* + There are three levels of narration interspersed with comments (diary entries?) in italics. Hope Clearwater lives on Brazzaville Beach and reminiscences (level one) two periods in her life: her marriage with John Clearwater in England including her work dating woodlands and hedgerows in South Dorset (level two) and her work at studying chimpanzees at the Grosso Arvore Research Centre (level three)
  + Multiple levels of narration: are they confusing or helping the narrative?
  + Does the change between first person and third personal singular reflect the ‘divided self’ of the narrator-protagonist? Or do such ‘tricks’ prevent the reader to concentrate on the story? The lack of a clear system was perceived as largely confusing.
  + Politics: does the description of the political background do justice to the complicated situation in Africa or is it rendered too superficially?
  + Was the ending reasonable (Hope stays in Africa; life goes on) or outrageously depressing (she still works for the Grosso Arvore Project despite everything that happened)?

**Author**

* + Parts of the novel were discussed as ‘sloppy’; editing errors were understood as evidently problematic on one level, other mistakes seemed to be on a different level and more difficult to pin down: were they the sign of an author who needed to quickly fill the pages of an (at times) too lengthy novel or were they made to render the reader more aware of the problematic character of Hope Clearwater? Do such problems have more to do with our trust in the author or in the narrator-protagonist?
  + Did Hope or Boyd forget about protocols which she leaves at Usman’s (and which she uses for transcription after her own burned in a fire which may or may not have been laid on purpose)?
  + Hope’s pistol only has six bullets but she takes seven shots
  + Are the problems with math the author’s rather than Hope’s? (cf. Fermat’s Last Theorem, p. 134)

**Science**

* + In general, the (scientist) readers seemed somewhat disappointed with the science portrayed
  + BUT: the novel which was published in 1990 did reflect on new scientific insight into primate behaviour
  + Some frustrating representations of scientists: for example, Hope wants to get her name on the discovery
  + Highly problematic: observation of chimpanzees obviously interferes with their ‘normal’ behaviour; therefore, novel does well in hinting at such criticism (for example, during their fight Mallabar approaches Hope for what she did to the chimps: “What have you done? What have you done?” p. 265); but it could have pursuit that line more strongly; in fact, at times, the novel seems to open up an interesting idea and not to follow it up sufficiently
  + Positive: in the end, science works; people don’t; Hope’s observations (i.e. the truth about primates) make their way into public knowledge, if via Mallabar’s book rather than her own