

Ramón Plo-Alastrué and María Jesús Martínez-Alfaro, eds. 2001: *Beyond Borders: Re-Defining Generic and Ontological Boundaries*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter. 207pp.

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This collection of essays focuses on a well-established area of study. Ever since Saussure propounded the autonomy of language, and philosophers like Wittgenstein or Heidegger considered the nature of representation and meaning to tell us that language *is* world, these ideas have been applied to literature by many critics like Allen Thiher or Brian McHale, who speak of the construction of ontological worlds or zones which come into contact and overlap. The study of genre goes back to Aristotle and much has been done by structuralist poetics to explain how narratives are constructed, with Gérard Genette calling the transgressions of narrative levels *metalepsis*. In a postmodernist context, writers like Matei Calinescu or Patricia Waugh describe how narratives create alternative or possible worlds, and changing attitudes regarding the relationship between fiction and reality have led to the present understanding that all narratives, including history, are fictitious constructs. A rethinking of the nature of genres forms part of feminist, postcolonial, new historical, and gender studies and Greenblatt and Gunn have drawn attention to the effect of these areas of study on the canon. Hence, to question traditional views of the relation between history and literature or fact and fiction has become commonplace.

These questions come to light in varying degrees in this collection and the good thing about it is that it brings together essays on many different aspects of the theme of crossing generic and ontological boundaries in a single volume. Although all the essays deal with narrative, they cover the novel, film and history. English, Irish, American and Indian authors are discussed and topics like marginal and minority literatures, historiographic metafiction, history, biology and hermeneutics, feminist writing, and the mingling of voices in postcolonial and other kinds of narrative (fiction and film) from both sides of the Atlantic are considered. The editors themselves sum up the main concerns in the “Foreword” as follows:

[A]re boundaries necessary even just in order to be rejected? Up to what point is their definition possible? Can any tentative definition coincide with itself, or should we give up to never-ending indecision and indeterminacy? Does the designation “postmodern genre” sound like a contradiction in terms? . . . [I]s it possible to read a given text without bringing to it a particular set of generic expectations?

The extent to which these questions are actually handled or answered is debatable. Even so, there is a broad variety of approaches to the central issues of the book, ranging from hermeneutics and chaos theory to feminist, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories. While all are bound by the common theme of crossing borders, there are different views about what borders are transgressed: these range from the blurring of generic distinctions, to the relationship between history and fiction, the real and the virtual, or even between tradition and individual talent. Regarding this, the Introduction points to the spaces between the fictional world and the reader’s world (10), and goes on to state that “[b]y re-

shaping genres and relativising well-established paradigms other voices have succeeded in making themselves heard, other worlds have been brought to the fore, other meanings have been conveyed across cultural boundaries" (14). This does not apply, however, to all the essays in the collection.

There are also differences regarding the relative depth into which these studies go. Some provide an in-depth look at the work of an author, others a more theoretical approach, then there are those which provide an introduction to aspects of a specific work or works by the same author. Only two essays consider and compare different works by different authors and these deal with film. But even those that provide an initial approach to an author's work are thought-provoking and might act as a starting point for further research, albeit some articles spend too much time on plot summaries.

A basic problem with the Introduction is its insistence on the idea that postmodernist *literature* has brought about the changes within genres and even ontological problems when the book's articles deal exclusively with postmodernist narrative. Moreover, it ought to have been made clear that recent theories tend to foreground the hybrid and heteroglot nature of narrative, its dialogic nature and even the nature of the novel as oppositional discourse. Ontological problems are not exclusive to postmodernist narrative: Robert Alter has suggested that literary realism is a contradiction in terms and Holquist and Reed have shown that the novel is a staggered system where there is an unusual relationship between the "real" settings and details of narrative and the fictitious characters and events. The same is true of film. Even the mixing of genres is not exclusive to postmodernism. Alastair Fowler has stated that the novel does not have a specific generic repertoire: it is always hybrid and brings together different kinds of writing. As regards the transgression of conventions, Reed has suggested that the tradition of the novel itself is anti-traditional and the processes of defamiliarisation which are, as Shklovsky says, what characterise the novel, tend always to contest existing conventions and traditions. The basic premise of the book, then, is debatable. Even so, features that might be considered typically postmodernist are highlighted and it finally centres on the idea that schizophrenia is the ideal trope for postmodern culture, which leads to a number of dichotomies that include the opposition authenticity/inauthenticity or plain fact and fiction.

The collection begins with James R. Aubrey's essay on postmodern film which is characterised by the notion that metanarrative play without intentionality is what makes it postmodernist. It summarises a number of films where different levels of "reality" are presented and where characters move from one to another or what is accepted as real is questioned by the introduction of another superior level. However, more emphasis could have been placed on the difference between what is real and what is not: the fact is that within the dichotomies virtual and real, fictitious construct and reality, or the game and the real, the difference between the one and the other is usually made clear in the films mentioned. It is in those where that difference is blurred or transgressed that there might have been more to say.

This is followed by a piece by Sonia Baelo Allué about the mingling of high and popular culture in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*. It mentions several examples of genres coming into contact or the mingling of popular and serious forms, and shows how pop culture, comics and video games are now part of this tendency towards fusion. While these are features of some postmodernist narratives, Walter Reed has shown that the novel

has often tended, among other things, towards *vulgarisation*, which is his term for interweaving high and low literature. Moreover, that this novel typically deconstructs the conventions of the detective novel is debatable. Knowing who the killer is from the start is already a feature of Poe's fiction and Hitchcock's films, so that suspense does not depend on who the murderer is, but on whether the murderer will be caught, how, and when. Furthermore, the tradition of "confessions" in literature might suggest an alternative label here.

The next essay, by Maria Pilar Berruete Rodríguez, deals with "The Struggle for Identity in Eric Kraft's *Reservations Recommended*" and states that the oppression of the individual in American society has led to a kind of split personality where social selves hide and sometimes usurp the "former" self. In this novel, ontologically distinct levels are transgressed as fictitious characters take on real life in the imagination of the equally fictitious narrator, and one identity is usurped by another within the same character. The complex relationships between characters, narrator, author and even reader, where overlapping occurs, reflect how we can no longer think of any of these terms as distinct ontological entities, which is where the blurring of boundaries comes in: all of these, including personal identity, are shown to be fictitious constructs in a fragmented contemporary society.

The notion of crossing the divisions between history and fiction in what is ostensibly a parody of an autobiographical memoir is the main concern in Mónica Calvo Pascual's essay on Stephen Marlowe's *The Memoirs of Christopher Columbus*. The essay, which does not mention that it is a parody, draws attention to how this novel also crosses the boundaries of waking reality and dream, the text (referring to historical and fictional texts) and life, leading to the formulation that life *is* text. The feature that is highlighted is that there is an overlapping between that text and other histories and fictions and it is hinted rather than clearly stated that myth and legend are literally taken as part of Columbus' life. The result is that Columbus becomes a floating signifier in a text composed of a chaotic mingling of styles and layers of narrative.

Francisco Collado's "Fear of the Flesh, Fear of the Borg: Narratives of Bodily Transgression in Contemporary U. S. Culture" focuses on the instability of the human self and deals with "bodily transgressions" which include werewolves and vampires from gothic literature and film and more recent examples of physical transformation and transgression in films like *The Silence of the Lambs*. The essay gradually centres on the relationship between human flesh and the inorganic, and ponders where recent narrative has taken us so far and where it might take us in future. This brings us to contemporary cyberpunk and, in a variety of examples, the contrast between the virtual and the real and the way they overlap and merge is described. The relationship between humans and machines follows, and several narratives and films are discussed at varying lengths. Towards the end, the emphasis is clearly placed on *Matrix* but the essay closes open-endedly, implying rather than stating the moral and other implications of the narratives discussed. This open-endedness is summed up in the closing lines which state that the relation between fear and attraction towards bodily transgressions and the possibilities for the relation between man and machine are not yet clear-cut.

After this, Angeles de la Concha describes Marina Warner's feminist rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in *Indigo*. The first clear point is the accepted notion that all

narratives, including histories, are fictional constructs and it suggests, eventually, that post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonialism, and new historicism have led to the rewriting of stories to “recast old myths and endow them with new significance” (84), which means, in the context of Warner’s *Indigo*, a new mapping of old territory. Then, the most worthwhile part of the essay begins. Even then, however, the impression is that *The Tempest* is being talked about, rather dubiously, as if it were history rather than literature, in spite of the assertion that “emplotment assigns meaning to events, turning them into history.” *Indigo* does provide an alternative to *The Tempest*, but in terms of providing a different vision of the roles, characters and events that we find there and by rejecting the ideology underlying the play. It is not an alternative to history. Even so, this essay shows how Shakespeare’s characters are refracted into many different ones in order to highlight the possibilities of different readings of the original in the light of a different ideology, which is the reason for this kind of rewriting which contests the original premises of Shakespeare’s play.

The essay that follows is by Violeta Delgado Crespo. It sums up John Banville’s literary intentions as the search for new forms to include the chaos of experience at the thematic level and to highlight the fiction that results at the structural level. We are told that these novels have to do with capturing the nature of an experience or an individual, which is only possible through art, at which point the essay brings us to the *Art Trilogy* and describes a shift in Banville’s work towards pictorialism, in which art rather than science is the source of understanding and painting becomes the focus. A summary and explanation of each of the novels in the *Art Trilogy* follows, which leads to the idea, linked to the third novel, where painting becomes a metaphor for the act of writing, that the limits between art and life are indistinguishable.

While still dealing with narrative, the subject changes in “Catastrophism and Hindsight: Narrative Hermeneutics in Biology and in Historiography” by José Angel García Landa. This provides a comparative analysis of Stephen J. Gould’s *Wonderful Life* and Michael André Bernstein’s *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*. The former contests the idea of directionality, a narrative view of history and Darwinian anthropocentric biology in favour of a historical and hermeneutic approach to biology. The point is to avoid the posterior plotting of events which is the result of a narrative view of history. Similarly, Bernstein’s book contests the idea of “backshadowing” in history. The conclusion, presented as an “afterthought,” proposes that we focus on present concerns and question the myths of the past that perpetuate an imaginary vision of the future. My afterthought was just what boundaries are referred to, although it might have to do with the way these concepts belong to science, history and literature.

Carmen Indurain Eraso’s “*Boys on the Side: Undermining the Road Movie’s Expectations*,” shows that the change in the protagonists’ gender changes everything else in this female “road movie.” Following a lengthy summary of the film, it points out similarities and differences between different types of road movie, highlighting the link between gender and generic differences, although what this has to do with the main theme of the book is not clear. The link is probably the way in which the boundaries imposed by the conventions of earlier road movies are contested and another, which is not really foregrounded, would have to do with the way in which social barriers are crossed in the film. In this regard, a feature of the film that might have been considered is the way in

which its marginalised protagonists exert an influence on the small middle-American town that accepts them, which goes beyond a simple question of tolerance, a message that is highlighted earlier in the essay.

María Lourdes López Roperó describes Caryl Phillip's *Cambridge* as a novel which mingles the travel narrative or journal of Emily Cartwright, the "slave" narrative of the character, Cambridge, and the journalistic newspaper story which narrates the same events. The basic point of this essay is that this is a postcolonial novel which through unreliable narration and the juxtaposition of different modes of representation undermines the very conventions it employs. It concludes by showing how the novel subverts genre categories, reader expectations and the authority of eurocentric master narratives. The closing question "who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the travel diary, the novel and the slave narrative, the novel and the newspaper chronicle or the novel and historiography?" is a forced attempt to make the essay fit into the book's overall structure without considering the fact that the hybrid novel form has always made use of these and many other modes of representation anyway.

"Beyond Borders: Trickster Discourse in Louise Edrich's Fiction," by Silvia Martínez Falquina, has to do with the need to rethink the concepts of ethnicity and culture and introduces the concepts of *postethnicity* and *postindian* to overcome old boundaries. The constant search for identity in Native American life coincides with a need to find a voice among these marginalised groups, where the image of the Indian, and even the name "Indian" itself, belong to hyperreality. This "hyperreal" image of the Indian (who, after all, is not from India) is based on the concept of "alterity" or otherness, although there are also stereotypes. This shows that the idea of the American Indian is a construct based on conventional dichotomies between Indian and White or Indian and Western culture. Edrich's tricksters draw attention to the fact that there is no such thing as a pure Indian or pure White identity in novels that incorporate and contest notions associated with both and, hence, the tricksters make us question the borders between the two.

One of the high points in this collection is Susana Onega Jaén's essay on Peter Ackroyd. It is a comprehensive introduction to his novels and reveals something of the creative process which underlies his work. It begins by drawing attention to how real characters from history inevitably form part of Ackroyd's work which, like that of Eliot and Pound, involves an assimilation and synthesis of intertextual fragments. However, the "twin poles" of faith and scepticism mean, ironically, that any attempt to achieve wholeness is undermined by a scepticism which knows that this is only fictitious and transitory. The central idea suggests that in Ackroyd's work there is a transition from *Ego* to *Eidos* (or soul), which recalls Eliot's rendering of the relation between individual talent and tradition. This takes place in the "underworld" where all the great poets are and where the mythic patterns of the imagination are revealed. The transgressions of distinct ontologies and the crossing of temporal boundaries, as well as the frontiers between history and fiction, then become possible in the world of Art. The essay provides the reader with a clear picture of Ackroyd's role as providing a creative link which crosses the boundaries between a collective tradition and the "real" world.

The next essay, by Dora Sales Salvador, discusses Vikram Chandra's novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, which is considered as transcultural rather than postcolonial narrative because, in the age of globalization, colonialism is not "post" at all and, in addition, we can

now appreciate an interweaving of languages and cultures where English has become a *lingua franca*. The essay sums up the novel and draws attention to the interaction between India's epic past and the "road-movie" present of the protagonist and concludes by highlighting the fact that this is an open-ended novel made up of different strands, interweaving different literary systems, both marginal and mainstream, bridging cultural gaps and moving between "liminal" spaces, indeed, a hybrid which crosses the borders of traditions.

"Who's afraid of Ian McEwan?" by Jürgen Shlaeger dedicates most of its time to summarising the novels but does make a few interesting assertions about McEwan's work. It provides a nice introduction, but the reader might lose sight of what it has to do with crossing borders. While this is not always clear in the descriptions of the novels, it would seem to have to do with what appears to be a transgression of the limits of decency or the seeming lack of propriety of some contemporary novels.

The final essay considers the film *Paris, Texas* but also mentions Sam Shepard's work as a dramatist. Juan A. Tarrancon de Francisco's essay provides a clear introduction to some of the main characteristics of Shepard's work as well as summing up the film for us, the main point being that the individual gains access to the self through representations. However, the conclusion prompts further questions about the relation between the true self and the false self, the illusion of self and the potential self.

Each of these essays has its merits and there is a good deal of variety in terms of subject matter which is handled to varying degrees of depth. The collection provides an introduction to the idea of transgression in a variety of forms as well as a range of theoretical approaches to narrative. There is in it something for those who come to a specific area of study or author for the first time and also something for more specialised readers. There is a broad appeal here: while some of the essays are suitable for the undergraduate who is studying contemporary narrative, it is probably aimed more particularly at the graduate student of postmodernist narrative in its many different variants. Some readers might find themselves interested in only some of these sixteen contributions, but it is always stimulating to find such variety within the covers of a single volume.

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