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Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Zapf, Hubert. 2010. "Ecocriticism, cultural ecology, and literary studies." *Ecozona: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment* 1 (1): 136–47.

Ecocriticism, Cultural Ecology, and Literary Studies

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In recent years, ecocriticism has become one of the most visible and productive new directions of literary and cultural studies. Having originated in the United States as a minor, mostly regional form of environmentally oriented approach in the late 20th century, it has since spread throughout literature departments, and become a successful new branch of the humanities not only in the U.S. and Europe but worldwide. At first, ecocriticism met with considerable resistance at first from a scholarly community that was deeply shaped by the theoretical fields of cultural studies, poststructuralism, and postmodernism¹. However, it has gained increasing recognition as an important new field of research and teaching that opens up a broad spectrum of new perspectives and that can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and of literary studies at a time when the process of globalization, and the concomitant globalization of knowledge and science, continue to be interpreted in primarily economic and technological terms.

One of the most promising directions of ecocriticism, which has developed especially in Europe, is the approach of Cultural Ecology. From the perspective of the theory of science, Peter Finke's *Ökologie des Wissens (Ecology of Knowledge)* is perhaps the most systematic presentation of this theory, which posits ecology as a paradigmatic perspective of knowledge not only for the natural sciences, but for cultural studies as well. Such an ecology of knowledge implies a unifying perspective in the sense that it brings together the various cultures of knowledge that have evolved in history, and that have been separated into more and more specialized disciplines and subdisciplines in the evolution of modern science. Indeed, if ecocriticism is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between culture and nature, then it must necessarily also face up to the challenge of a new dialogue between the "two cultures" of the natural sciences and the humanities. Disciplines on both sides of the divide thereby turn into "shifting hybrid domains," in which traditional disciplinary boundaries are blurred (Wilson *Consilience* 10). At the same time, this drive for the

¹ There is, however, no binary opposition between the epistemologies of postmodernism and ecology, as Linda Hutcheon has pointed out, and as the later writings of Lyotard and Derrida among others demonstrate (Lyotard, Derrida).

unification of knowledge is only one side of an ecological epistemology. The other side is the awareness of the difference and diversity of the various areas and forms of knowledge that have evolved in history. In this sense, it is not only legitimate but mandatory for literary studies to focus on the question of how literary and textual knowledge can contribute in distinct and unique ways to ecocriticism and to contemporary knowledge about culture and the environment.

Cultural Ecology considers the sphere of human culture not as separate from but as interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes and natural energy cycles. At the same time, it recognizes the relative independence and self-reflexive dynamics of cultural processes. Even as the dependency of culture on nature, and the ineradicable presence of nature in culture, gain ever more interdisciplinary attention, the difference between cultural evolution and natural evolution is increasingly acknowledged by cultural ecologists. Rather than genetic laws, information and communication have become major driving forces of cultural evolution (see Finke *Ökologie*, *Kulturökologie*). While causal deterministic laws are therefore not applicable in the sphere of culture, there are nevertheless productive analogies which can be drawn between ecological and cultural processes. Gregory Bateson was the first to draw such analogies in his project of an *Ecology of Mind*, which was based on general principles of complex dynamic life processes, e.g. the concept of feedback loops, which he saw as operating both between the mind and the world and within the mind itself. The *mind* is conceived here neither as an autonomous metaphysical force nor as a mere neurological function of the brain, but as a “dehierarchized concept of a mutual dependency between the (human) organism and its (natural) environment, subject and object, culture and nature”, and thus as “a synonym for a cybernetic system of information circuits that are relevant for the survival of the species. “(Gersdorf/ Mayer *Natur – Kultur* 9; my trans.). A fundamental feature of this ecology of mind is a holistic and at the same time open and pluralistic approach to cultural phenomena, which are seen as existing in a constant exchange relationship with natural energy cycles but are also characterized by a high degree of independence, functional differentiation, and self-reflexive dynamics.

In Peter Finke’s wide-ranging, transdisciplinary project of an Evolutionary Cultural Ecology, Bateson’s ideas are fused with concepts from systems theory. The various sections and subsystems of society are described as ‘cultural ecosystems’ with their own processes of production, reduction, and consumption of energy – involving physical as well as psychic energy. This also applies to the cultural ecosystems of art and of literature, which follow their

own internal forces of selection and self-renewal, but also have an important function within the cultural system as a whole. From the perspective of this kind of cultural ecology, the internal landscapes produced by modern culture and consciousness are as important for human beings as their external environments are. Human beings are by their very nature not only instinctual but also cultural beings. Literature and other forms of cultural imagination and cultural creativity are necessary in this view to continually restore the richness, diversity, and complexity of those inner landscapes of the mind, the imagination, the emotions, and interpersonal communication which make up the cultural ecosystems of modern humans, but are threatened by impoverishment by an increasingly overeconomized, standardized, and depersonalized contemporary world.

In taking up such cues, as I have tried to show in my book *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie* (*Literature as Cultural Ecology*), literature can itself be described as the symbolic medium of a particularly powerful form of “cultural ecology.” Literary texts have staged and explored, in ever new scenarios, the complex feedback relationship of prevailing cultural systems with the needs and manifestations of human and nonhuman “nature,” and from this paradoxical act of creative regression have derived their specific power of innovation and cultural self-renewal. Literature draws its cognitive and creative potential from a threefold dynamic in its relationship to the larger cultural system – as a cultural-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counterdiscourse, and a reintegrative interdiscourse. It is a textual form which breaks up ossified social structures and ideologies, symbolically empowers the marginalized, and reconnects what is culturally separated. In that way, literature counteracts economic, political or pragmatic forms of interpreting and instrumentalizing human life, and breaks up one-dimensional views of the world and the self, opening them up towards their repressed or excluded other.

Literature is thus, on the one hand, a sensorium for what goes wrong in a society, for the biophobic, life-paralyzing implications of one-sided forms of consciousness and civilizational uniformity, and it is, on the other hand, a medium of constant cultural self-renewal, in which the neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses. The recently published volume *Kulturökologie und Literatur* (*Cultural Ecology and Literature*), to which 20 scholars from different countries have contributed, gives ample evidence of the fact that the range and potential significance of the cultural ecological model of literature goes beyond any national literature, demonstrating its relevance with reference to literary texts, styles, genres, and

movements from the 18th to the 21st century. Literature in the perspective of cultural ecology is thus a distinct form of cultural-ecological knowledge, which integrates but also transcends empirical, factual, and quantifiable forms of knowledge, including scientific versions of ecology.

The vital interrelatedness between culture and nature has been a special focus of literary culture from its archaic beginnings in myth, ritual, and oral story-telling, in legends and fairy tales, in the genres of pastoral literature, nature poetry, and the stories of mutual transformations between human and nonhuman life as most famously collected in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which has become a highly influential text throughout literary history and across different cultures. This attention to the culture-nature-interaction became especially prominent in the era of Romanticism, but continues to be characteristic of literary stagings of human experience up to the present. Indeed, the mutual opening and symbolic reconnection of culture and nature, mind and body, human and nonhuman life in a holistic and yet radically pluralistic way seems to be one significant mode in which literature functions and in which literary knowledge is produced.

Within the broader framework of Cultural Ecology, a substantial amount of research has meanwhile been produced. Various recent contributions on the relationship between literature, culture, and nature have been inspired by a broadly cultural-ecological approach, i.e. by the assumption that *the interrelationship between culture and nature*, rather than any immediately accessible “nature” as a precultural, pretextual essence, is the central focus and fundamental dimension of the study of language, culture, and texts. Pioneering contributions by German scholars working within the cultural-ecological paradigm *avant la lettre* were studies by Ursula Brumm on *History and Wilderness in American Literature*, by Günter Ahrends and Hans Ulrich Seeber on *English and American Nature Poetry in the 20th Century*, by Gernot Böhme on an *Ecological Aesthetics of Nature*, and by Heinz Tschachler on *Ecology and Arcadia: Nature and American Culture of the 1970s*. In the early 21st century, a new beginning was marked by the first ecocritical conference in Germany in Münster, 2004, and the subsequent publication of the proceedings in two volumes, one in German and one in English (Gersdorf/Mayer *Natur – Kultur, Nature*). The conference also saw the foundation of the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture, and the Environment, which has organized symposia and brought out its own publications since. The difference in focus from the ecocritical program of ASLE is indicated by the inclusion of the concept of “culture” in the name of ASLE's European sister association.

At the University of Augsburg, the analysis of the meanings and functions of literature from the perspective of cultural ecology has become a predominant research interest in recent years, resulting in a number of publications in the field (Caupert, Müller, Redling, Sauter, Zapf). In related developments, the Center of Cultural Studies at the University of Giessen has also published significant work on the cultural ecology of literature. Within its research programs on cultural memory and the functional history of literature, it has been focusing especially on the triadic functional model of literary texts (Gymnich/ Nünning). Andrea Bartl in Bamberg, Catrin Gersdorf in Berlin, Christa Grewe-Volpp in Mannheim, and Sylvia Mayer in Bayreuth have been producing important ecocritical work within a broadly cultural-ecological perspective. In the area of the teaching of literature, Berbeli Wanning at Ludwigsburg has expanded her work on nature in literary romanticism and realism (Wanning) into a research project on “Kulturökologie und Didaktik” (“Cultural Ecology and Teaching”). Another related project is the “Urban Cultural Ecology” project initiated and launched with a symposium by Jens Gurr at the University of Duisburg-Essen in early 2009. Elsewhere in Europe, the fusion of ethical and ecological issues in Serenella Iovino’s work has clear affinities to a cultural-ecological approach. This is also true of Axel Goodbody’s ecocritical studies in German literature and culture, in which he examines the role of writers in shaping concepts of nature and in integrating cultural discourse with environmental debate. In Turkey, Cultural Ecology has become a strong research focus in literary and cultural studies at Ege University, Izmir, where doctoral dissertations have been written on the relationship of Cultural Ecology to Angloamerican Gothic, to contemporary German literature, and to film. What is particularly emphasized in these contributions is the connection of Cultural Ecology to the Critical Theories of Nietzsche, Bakhtin, and Adorno/Horkheimer (see Ayhan, Civelekoğlu, Kaya). The first ecocritical conference in Turkey, held in Antalya in November 2009, and devoted to “The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons,” featured a panel on Cultural Ecology as well.

The emphasis on the textual and cultural mediatedness of all natural phenomena is thus characteristic of important branches of ecocriticism in Europe. This does not mean that nature is reduced to a mere construct of culture; what it does imply, however, is the assumption that nature is only accessible to us through cultural, i.e. linguistic and textual forms, and that it is therefore crucial to analyze and reflect on the multiple ways in which nature is discursively represented, manipulated, repressed, empowered, or creatively used in the symbolic forms and textual practices of a culture. As a consequence of this assumption,

the role of the textual and cultural sciences is especially important in this view for the emergence of that new, global ecology of knowledge that is needed for the future.

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