

A Passage Back to Frankfurt: A Short Report on the 8th Summer School of the New Literatures in English

Departing from Frankfurt leads us on a retrospective journey to the point of the first arrival in the city of commerce which, due to its international airport, for most Germans signifies a gateway to 'the world'. With the physical motion forwards, the mind travels back to the arrival at the 8th Summer School of the New Literatures in English on 2 September 2007.

One of us was lucky enough to be in the privileged position of receiving the newsletter and could thus spread the info about the otherwise not widely promoted event to the other. Even more luckily, we were upgraded from the hard floors of the Katholische Hochschulgemeinde to the labyrinthine, colourful comforts of the Jugendgästeetage, with a far lower ratio of people per bathroom and the luxury of collective dinner cooking.

Slightly taken aback by the old IG Farben edifice, which resembles a six-headed Huxleyan culture ministry block more than a university building, we were warmly welcomed by the ever-present, ever-competent, ever-helpful student staff in charge and handed our programme for the week. We dropped Monday night's warm-up event from our schedule – a rallye is not the most tempting evening activity in unstable weather conditions – but this was, in fact, the only one we left out in a tightly planned week, which is a definite salute to the variety of end-of-day events.

The arrangement of papers in order of theme, geographic focus or theoretical approach is a difficult task – bound by the limits of slots available, the lecturers' spare time and the abstracts' conciseness – and not necessarily one to be achieved by all means. In fact, a conglomeration of different colours, tastes and textures may be just as desirable as any strictly structured composition. Nonetheless, an introductory lecture – a splendid idea in itself and a cherished element for all the first-timers in poco theory – in the middle of the third conference day, does seem slightly out of place. So, while still undecided on the necessity of a clear thematic structure, one did have the odd moment of wondering why some papers were grouped together or which far-off bridges of thought some of the lecturers had to overcome in order to connect their area of focus with the conference theme. But then again, there was a definite thread of Maori culture throughout the week.

Analogously, the 'departure' from a planned lecture presents a welcome change to the programme – for example when it offers an impulsive, to a certain degree debatable but highly stimulating creative monologue dealing with contemporary literary discourse. This is not the case, however, when this departure results in a chaotic and unfocused debate of aesthetics vs. politics – partially dogmatic in nature – instead of asking why the literary world discusses these things in the first place.

It was a real treat to see some well-dosed visual support of papers, definitely an argument in favour of Power Point presentations. However, it might actually make sense to have a quick glance over presentation modes in advance, before the audience is confronted with a size 8 times new roman text in windows word format. Speaking of support and looking through a stack of handouts received throughout the week, we decided to keep some for their bibliographies, others for book titles, and a few knowing they will never be browsed through again.

The workshop options ranging from readings and performances to a parallel permanent exhibition, starring new faces and old acquaintances, were as diverse as the frame programme (although the question remains where the history of Nazism in Germany fits in with the study of the new literatures in English). Generally, readings and performances turned out to have a bigger appeal embedded in the evening programme at stunning and suitable venues, rather than being squeezed into the lecture time where, also, the art of self-promoting has a tendency of appearing slightly misplaced. Additionally and to our utmost content, academics seem to have acquired stardom with students frequently taking pictures not only during readings but also at regular lectures. One has gotten used to the injunction to switch off mobile phones, and will no doubt accept the plea to mute the barking sounds of photo cameras in the near future.

Finally, the midweek party should definitely be mentioned, an occasion where lecturers and students could be seen performing the latest Bollywood-moves side by side, a great opportunity to literally shake off strains and stresses after three rather intense conference days. The sparse attendance of the first lecture next morning surely was something one had to put up with, although those who missed it in favour of a longer snooze should be told that it certainly would have been worth getting up for.

Having departed from a week of travels through the waters of the New Literatures in English, we realized that we had not only detected new shores, but also that our picture of the city changed. Frankfurt – the city of skyscrapers has become the city of meeting points and contact zones.

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