

Introduction

Over the last few decades, literary non-fiction has been very popular. Non-fiction writers regularly feature in the media and win literary prizes, most bookshops reserve a special section for non-fiction books and review pages in literary magazines reserve a special space for this 'genre.' It seems that after the era of post-structuralist representational relativism, there is a need for referentiality. The reading public seems to experience what David Shields calls "reality hunger."

Literary non-fiction is certainly not a new genre. It is enough to take a look at the numerous publications discussing changing conventions of realism in different literary periods to learn otherwise. Does theorizing about it create an academic fiction? To some extent this may be true. Still, it may provide a useful theoretical framework for the interpretation of such texts. The label undoubtedly urges us to ponder the question of representation, and more specifically with regards to truth and mimesis. Furthermore, taking non-fiction's popularity into account, reflection on this subject can probably tell us something about contemporary culture in general. We invited contributors to comment on these and other aspects of literary non-fiction writing with reference to their respective fields of expertise.

In analyzing this form of writing, different ways of and approaches to conveying reality become the object of reflection. Some non-fiction writers are more reliant on the possibility of mimesis, or simply omit the question; others are very aware of the problem and emphasise the problematic aspects of representing reality in language. Some rely more on literary aspects, others on journalistic techniques. In this respect literary non-fiction is a tricky 'genre' allowing authors to have it both ways. It resists classification and allows for aspiring to both literariness and factuality. When the literariness is allowed to take the upper hand, however, journalistic objectivity may come under fire from critics, as was the case with the work of Ryszard Kapuściński, whose biography by Artur Domosławski revealed numerous inconsistencies in his journalistic accounts. But is it really the factual that makes literary non-fiction so popular?

Literary non-fiction writing can be roughly divided into three major categories: autobiographical writing, literary journalism (with travel writing as a major subcategory), and research non-fiction, each having its own specific character and opening up specific possibilities for discussing different aspects of truth and mimesis. What they have in common is that they tend to employ the first person narrator delivering the account – a technique which draws attention to the subjective character of the account in question. This may lead to the conclusion that what readers are looking for in non-fiction writing is not factuality. Rather, with today's information overload they are looking for a subjective account of reality – specialist's guidance, initiation, and gossip. The mediating persona is as important as the mediated real. And since there is no other real than the mediated one, it is the character of the account, its originality, that counts.

Literary representation seems to be at a curious crossroads today. Some writers rely on referentiality and truth. Others are very aware of the pitfalls of representation and they exploit it in a playful, often surprising and refreshing way. A specific referentiality pact is at play in the case of literary non-fiction, which is shaping readers' horizon of expectations. But there are also instances when the referentiality pact is consciously violated, for instance when it is being used in an ironic way, as is the case in mock-documentaries or mock-autobiographies. Then the violation itself becomes the essence of art. For the researcher this may be an interesting entry point for interpretation: how does the writer deal with the ambiguities of representation, how does s/he implement the first person narrative? What effect is s/he aiming at and what are the foreseen and unforeseen consequences of the choice? The contributors to this volume concentrate on this and other aspects of literary non-fiction writing. We hope hereby to open further discussion of various topics concerning the ambiguities of this text type, focusing on the ways in which it operates in the Dutch and South African literary fields.

Editor in charge
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