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TITEL

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ERSCHIENEN IN

Textpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie # 14 (3.2017) / www.textpraxis.net

URL

<http://www.uni-muenster.de/textpraxis/darin-tenev-models-of-poetics>

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:hbz:6-20259569507>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17879/20259569065>

URN und DOI dienen der langfristigen Auffindbarkeit des Dokuments.

EMPFOHLENE ZITIERWEISE

Darin Tenev: »Models of Poetics. A Response to Robert Matthias Erdbeer's *Poetik der Modelle*«. In: *Textpraxis* 14 (3.2017). URL: <http://www.uni-muenster.de/textpraxis/darin-tenev-models-of-poetics>, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17879/20259569065>

IMPRESSUM

Textpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie

ISSN 2191-8236

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster

Graduate School *Practices of Literature*

Germanistisches Institut

Schlossplatz 34

48143 Münster

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URN and DOI serve the long-term searchability of the document.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Darin Tenev: »Models of Poetics. A Response to Robert Matthias Erdbeer's *Poetik der Modelle*«. In: *Textpraxis* 14 (3.2017). URL: <http://www.uni-muenster.de/textpraxis/darin-tenev-models-of-poetics>, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17879/20259569065>

IMPRINT

Textpraxis. Digital Journal for Philology
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D-48143 Münster / Germany

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Models of Poetics

A Response to Robert Matthias Erdbeer's *Poetik der Modelle*

Robert Matthias Erdbeer's essay *Poetik der Modelle* is an important programmatic text that lays the foundations for an innovative model theory of literature. It provokes the literary scholar not only to change her or his attitude vis-à-vis the object of investigation (be it a work of art, or a trend, or a literary movement, the historical transformations of a genre, etc.), but also to join and develop one aspect or another of the poetics of the model as charted by Erdbeer. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this essay quite probably will play a crucial role in the very way the field of literary studies is defined, producing deepened and better understanding of what literature is and how it works.

The essay *Poetik der Modelle* [translation: *Poetics of the Model*] in its final part delineates in a concrete way the field and the tasks of such a poetics,¹ but it is noteworthy that according to the very logic it describes, *this poetics of the model builds a model of poetics in general*, capable to take into account the whole history of thinking about literature in a critical manner. Here critical would mean, among other things, the self-reflective movement of the judging agency, a movement that acknowledges and affirms the dynamics inherent in the agency, which is not absolute or transcendent in relation to its object and because of this very reason the critical activity is always directed simultaneously towards the object, towards the agency, and towards the way they are related. Developing in this way the point made by Julia Kristeva in her early text *Semiotics: A Critical Science and /or a Critique of Science*,² namely that »semiotics thinks of its object, its instruments and the relation between them, and in doing so thinks (of) itself«, and that »as a result of this reflection, it becomes the theory of the very science it constitutes«,³ Erdbeer describes the manner in which the modelling activity can also be a metamodeling, both modelling something and modelling itself. This, however, leads to the conclusion that the model of the general poetics, which the ›poetics of the model‹ provides, renders and manifests its own *transformability*.

In the case of literary studies, one can ask what agency should guide the critical and theoretical activity of metamodeling, in other words, what agency should guide the modes in which the modelling activity models itself? This question is all the more complex due to the fact that the main object of literary studies, the literary text, is in itself ›modellbildend‹ [translation:

1 | Robert Matthias Erdbeer: »Poetik der Modelle«. In: *Textpraxis. Digitales Journal für Philologie* 11 (2.2015). URL: <http://www.uni-muenster.de/textpraxis/robert-matthias-erdbeer-poetik-der-modelle>, DOI: 10.17879/57289683848 (last viewed on 09.11.2017). From now on, references to the article will be indicated using the author's name and relevant page number in parentheses, here p. 29–33.

2 | Julia Kristeva: »Semiotics: A Critical Science and / or a Critique of Science« (1968). In: Toril Moi (ed.): *The Kristeva Reader*. New York 1986, pp. 74–88. Erdbeer quotes and comments this text on p. 15 of his essay.

3 | *Ibid.*, p. 77.

›model-forming[›], it is a modelling agent in its own right (Erdbeer, p. 5). Erdbeer's answer lies in what he, following a term of Reinhard Wendler,⁴ calls the ›Eigensinn‹ of the respective model object, of the object that is turned into a model agent by the judgement of a model agency. The model object always carries aspects, »die von der Modellinstanz nicht vorgesehen sind« (Erdbeer, p. 23) [translation: »that have not been devised/predicted by the modelling agency«]. The ›Eigensinn‹, a highly individual capacity or feature of the object, is the object's active force beyond the modeller's intentions. It is actively participating in the modelling procedures with its independent modelling agency: »Gerade dieser Eigensinn fungiert indessen oft als Quelle der modelltypischen Emergenz; er macht den Gegenstand zum epistemischen Agenten des Modellgeschehens, der auf diese Weise an die Seite der Instanz und ihrer Konzeptionen tritt« (Ibid.) [Translation: »This very ›Eigensinn‹ is, to a large extent, responsible for the dynamics of emergence typical for modelling activities; it turns the object into an epistemic agent, elevating it to the level of the modelling agent and its strategic decisions«]. This daring suggestion implies that poetics can let itself be guided by the object under study and model its own modelling activity on the basis of the active force proper to this very object. The critical modelling activity will not just apply ready-made theories and categories; on the contrary, whatever theories a model poetics applies, they will be transformed – re-modelled – by the object during the investigation. In this way, the critic will have a powerful tool to define reflectively the limitations and the applicability of his initial presuppositions. And only in this way one can speak of a genuine collaboration of text and interpretation through a procedure of ›shared control‹ (›Koooperation der Teilsysteme – Text und Deutung – durch geteilte Steuerung« [Erdbeer, p. 29]).

In his essay, Erdbeer demonstrates in an impressive way how such a poetics works in his analyses of the video game *The Stanley Parable* and of Ilse Aichinger's short story *Der Gefesselte* [*The Bound Man*]. Erdbeer's readings are an example of the manner in which the analysis borrows its tools from the analysed object and uses them not only to state something about this object, but also to re-model the theory and the tasks of a general poetics.

The danger of ascribing such a crucial role to the analysed object lies in the fact that in this way one can easily mix and confuse the language of the analysis and the language of the object, erasing the critical distance between the two. The danger is that the researcher will trust its object, as it were, and will be unable to look at it objectively. I think that the model theory that Erdbeer proposes, inspired by Bernd Mahr, avoids in an elegant way this danger, but the very manner in which it does this deserves theoretical attention since, to my sense, it is not sufficiently thematised in the essay.

First, it must be said that the ›Eigensinn‹ should not be considered as a mystic property, a magical *je ne sais quoi* of the model object. However, in the case of literature, it is very specific in that it is not always visible to everybody. On the one hand, there are the formal and thematic properties of the literary object that can be specified easily. These can be, for example, verse structures, rhetorical *topoi* and figures, generic aspects, etc. They can be easily specified because of a specific history of literary modelling that render them accessible, especially by comparison. It is the task of a historical poetics of modelling [›historische Modellpoetik«] to trace the genealogy of the particular model processes that triggered the formation and the transformation of the forms (Erdbeer, p. 31). Here, one should also include the modes of relation between the work and the concepts of reality, the work and its context, its forms of reference and allusion, etc., as they were structured within the historical processes.

4 | Erdbeer refers here to Reinhard Wendler's influential study *Das Modell zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft*. München 2013.

On the other hand, however, Erdbeer's poetics of the model faces the challenge to take into account also the dynamic aspect of the literary work, which means that one has to consider not only past transformations, but also the very transformability of the literary object, a transformability that is immanent to it. The transformability requires to be alert not only to something already given, but also to the *modalities* of the literary object. The literary object reveals itself, it indicates its own potentialities. It reveals itself not in making statements about what it is, what the reality is, but by the way it relates to itself; not through its *what*, but by the way of its *how*. In its *how* the work is always already its own comment, always already at least double. The model researcher formalizes the *how* and directs his formalization back to the work, so that the ›Eigensinn‹ starts functioning as a *formal indication* of the process of modelling *within the literary object*. This procedure can be observed in the way Erdbeer reads *The Stanley Parable* and *Der Gefesselte*. It is this procedure that allows him not only to say, for example, that Aichinger's story deals with the »*Modellsein des Modells*« [translation: »model-being of models« (Erdbeer, p. 10), but to base part of his own poetics of modelling on this reading of Aichinger, introducing the concepts of ›modality management‹ and ›poetische Steuerung‹ (Erdbeer, p. 7–10, 32f). This aspect of the ›Eigensinn‹ is usually neglected by the critics, which leads to nothing less than the substitution of a particular interpretation for the potentiality of the work. The interpretation, being an actualization of the potentiality, will leave the potentiality, and therefore the transformability and the dynamic aspect of the work out of sight (and too easily is such a closure defended by the seemingly contrary claim that the possible readings of a work are simply limitless). For a critical attitude that neglects the question of potentiality – the possibilities and limitations –, many aspects of the ›Eigensinn‹ are bound to remain invisible.

This second way of reading the ›Eigensinn‹ supposes a distinction between *two types of indices*. Usually, indices point to a context. In the case of the literary work, the context can be literary, historical, social, anthropological, philosophical, etc. However, the ›Eigensinn‹ also reveals how the work *indicates itself* and how it relates to the context; thus, the ›Eigensinn‹ indicates the work's proper modelling activity within its transformability. In other words, the ›Eigensinn‹ can be used in a formal manner as a tool for tracing the mode in which the work models its own possibilities (Erdbeer, p. 22). Let us call the first type *context indices*, and the second type *potentiality indices*. It seems to me that a proper study of the indexicality of the second type, a study of the potentiality index, must be developed within the framework of the poetics of the model. It is only on the level of the literary object indicating its own potentiality that we can fully grasp its dynamic aspect.

It is on this level perhaps that one should also begin to distinguish different orders of potentialities of the literary object. Here, I will but mention two, both of them suggested by Erdbeer's work on the *The Stanley Parable*. First, there is the *narrative potentiality*. It is analysed in *Poetik der Modelle* with a particular attention to the problem of the storyline and the role of the narrator (Erdbeer, p. 2–4, 26–28). Erdbeer enlists three types of models resulting from the ludic modelling of the game: labyrinth, decision tree, and storyboard. Yet, if one reads Erdbeer's analyses carefully one cannot fail to notice that all the problems of the narrative in *The Stanley Parable* come from the way the narrative of the game is unable to fully control and direct the main protagonist, Stanley, and the figure who stands behind him, namely the player. It is as if the character has potentialities of his own that are irreducible to the narrative potentialities, since they cannot be grasped in terms of narrative. Thus, simultaneous with the *narrative potentiality*, there is a *character potentiality* of a different order and the game is based on the tension between the two. All this is still too fragmentary

an observation. The character potentiality can, of course, be also a potentiality for a different story line, and at the same time, it includes something that cannot be subsumed under the story and discourse distinction. Tzvetan Todorov in a chapter on *One Thousand and One Nights* poses the question ›What is a character?‹, and states that a character is a possible story.⁵ It is obviously only one of several possible answers, and both the psychological novel and the theoretical concept of Henry James, quoted by Todorov in the beginning of his text, pose a serious problem if one tries to reduce the character to the story and to explain it away with narratology. *The Stanley Parable* faces the player with the same issue, and it can perhaps even be argued that it is the tension, and not the harmony, between the narrative and the character potentialities that make them perceivable as such, indicating and thematising thus the model-building process within the game as well as the model-being of the model. The fact that there are character potentialities distinct from the narrative ones, can be exemplified with works like Goncharov's *Oblomov* or Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, where the characters are most often remembered in all their particularities even though the story is easily forgotten. (Let it be said in passing, that such characters are much easier emancipated from the work in which they appeared, which explains why they are so popular with philosophers. It is enough to look at all the philosophical interpretations of Bartleby, who do not pay any attention to the storyline.)

I think that a poetics of the model can help literary scholars distinguish between different orders of potentiality and deepen their knowledge as to how the literary work or any other literary object models itself and guides the reader when the latter is building a theoretical or historical model after it, delineating its transformability. Erdbeer's *Poetik der Modelle* is perhaps the most important step in this direction until now.

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5 | Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *The Poetics of Prose*. New York 1977.