

*Stella Butter, Sarah Heinz & Nora Kuster*

## **Introduction: Literature and Subject Cultures**

‘Subject cultures’ is a title in need of explanation. While much ink has been spilt on literary negotiations of subjectivity (cf. for example, Wolfreys; Gagnier; Zink), the concept of ‘subject cultures’, developed by the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz in his comprehensive study *Das Hybride Subjekt* (2006), is new to critical debates in literary studies. In his examination of subject cultures since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Reckwitz introduces this term to foreground how hegemonic forms of subjectivity are generated through interlocking practices and discourses in three social fields: the sphere of work, intimate personal relations, and the field of ‘technologies of self’. The latter refers to everyday practices that enable the subject to become attuned to its inner life. The image of the solitary woman writing a letter, which is depicted on the cover page of this volume, is but one prime example of such a technology. These diverse practices in different social fields generate and mutually reinforce “the same cultural pattern” (CSM 12), namely a dominant subject form. The variety of images on the cover page of this book point to the different hegemonic subject cultures that Reckwitz identifies in the history of “European-North American culture” (HS 30), specifically Great Britain, France, Germany, and the USA. The graffiti of Charles Dickens, for example, can be connected with the contemporary imperative to be creative and the concomitant valorisation of creative appropriations, in this case both of the city space and a canonical author. Taking its cue from Reckwitz, this volume is concerned with the emergence and transformations of subject cultures since the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the vital role that literature plays in the critical reflection and development of subjectivity and ways of life.

The aims of this volume are threefold. Our first aim is to show the added value of Reckwitz’ sociological theory for literary analysis. Literature is steeped in the stuff of social and material worlds: it explores interwoven subject forms and life-worlds by offering imaginative access to embodied selves acting out different forms of life. Literature thus unfolds, as the literary scholar Rita Felski (91) stresses, a phenomenology of social interaction. Reckwitz’ model of subject cultures enables a nuanced analysis of the social phenomenology staged in literary texts, as the case studies in this volume show. The theory of subject cultures is especially helpful for explaining tensions within literary texts, both in terms of form and content. The different cultural practices and discourses that feed into the formation of subject cultures inev-

itably introduce frissons precisely because these practices and discursive elements stem from different social fields with their own logic and semantics (cf. CSM 12). Literature often examines these dissonances within subject forms and ways of life, evaluating the failures and successes of hegemonic subject cultures' responses to the challenges of modernization (cf. Basseler, Nünning, and Hartley). Reckwitz provides a precise vocabulary to analyse these fraught subjectivities, for example codes that underpin each subject culture or the binary opposition of subject and anti-subject. His complex but clearly structured model can be easily adapted for the study of characters in fiction, genres or modes of writing. In George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, for example, the tension between the two different aesthetics in the novel, realism and romance, arguably results from the specific fissures within bourgeois subject culture: the hegemonic ideal of the moral subject and its internal other, the speculative subject (cf. Butter 123-82). Moreover, Reckwitz' theory offers valuable prompts for reflecting on issues of reader response: how does literature serve as a training ground for specific kinds of subjectivity? This question is especially worth pondering because Reckwitz makes much of the role that literature and the arts play as a motor for the transformation of subject cultures.

The crucial role afforded to literature and the arts in Reckwitz' sociological study serves as an ideal basis for continuing the interdisciplinary dialogue between sociology and literary studies, which is the second aim of our volume. Precisely because literature offers a speculative "social phenomenology, a rendering of the qualities of a life-world, that is formally distinct from either non-fiction or theoretical argument" (Felski 89), scholars of literature can enrich and complicate the existing research on subject cultures. As Rita Felski persuasively argues, literary texts

do not just represent, but make newly present, significant shapes of social meaning; they crystallize, not just in what they show but in their address to the reader, what Merleau-Ponty calls the essential interwovenness of our being in the world. Their fictional and aesthetic dimensions ... should be hailed as the source of their cognitive strength. (104)

It is for this reason that the theoretical part of this volume does not comprise solely an introduction to Reckwitz' theory. Instead, the last chapter of the theory section consists of Stefan Glomb's article on "The Hybrid Individual". Glomb uses literature, Ian McEwan's novel *On Chesil Beach*, as a "medium of knowledge" (49) that allows him to pinpoint the shortcomings of Reckwitz' theory, while at the same time drawing on Reckwitz to interpret McEwan. His article encapsulates how both the literary text and Reckwitz' sociological study "bring something to the table, rather than one being 'applied' to the other" (49).

As Reckwitz' theory offers valuable impulses for literary studies, the third aim of the volume is to make this theory of subject cultures accessible to an English-speaking public. Up until now, his two key works on subjectivity, *Das hybride Subjekt* (2006) and *Die Erfindung der Kreativität* (2012), have not been translated. Reckwitz has written two English articles on creativity, but these texts cover only some of the ground of his books and do not provide an extensive overview of the historical transformation of subject cultures since the 18th century. The first part of the volume hence introduces readers to the main concepts and terminology of Reckwitz' theory as well as summarizing his historical account of modernity. Where authors considered the original wording of Reckwitz to be important for their argument, the German original of translated passages is provided in the footnotes. All translations of Reckwitz into English are by the contributors themselves, both in the theoretical articles and the literary case studies.

The theory section is divided into four chapters. The first article by Maurus Roller provides a concise introduction to Reckwitz by explaining key concepts and how the different elements of his complex model connect. It thus lays the ground for the ensuing two articles on the historical development of subject cultures. Nora Kuster summarizes Reckwitz' analysis of the three hegemonic subject cultures since the 18th century, namely the bourgeois subject culture of the 18th and 19th century, organised modernity, and the creative consumer subject of our contemporary times. She only briefly addresses the latter subject culture because the third article by Elisabeth Maubach specifically focuses on a summary of postmodern creative consumer culture and its subjectivity.

Beyond this concise introduction, the first part of the volume also opens up critical and divergent perspectives on Reckwitz by addressing the issue of agency. While Roller claims that Reckwitz' theory "tentatively transcends postmodern doctrines by suggesting a position in between the subject's autonomy and heteronomy" (11), Stefan Glomb insists that the culturalist on-sidedness of Reckwitz' theory precludes the conceptualization of acts of autonomy or freedom, very much in the vein of postmodern approaches to the subject. Both agree, however, in their critique of Reckwitz' terminology with its primarily negative terms to describe the individual.

The case studies in the second part of the volume trace how literature engages with changing forms of subjectivity and critically discuss literary strategies of representation. The first three articles deal with bourgeois subject culture and, taken together, map its different phases, starting from its ascendancy in the 18th century to its hegemony in the middle of the 19th century and finally its crisis at the end of the 19th century.

In the first article, Maurus Roller concentrates on Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel *Pamela* to explore the interplay between the new middle-class values of the 18th-century bourgeois subject and the negative depiction of its anti-subject, the excessive aristocrat. He shows that Pamela's relation to Mr B.

and his reformation through the novel's middle-class programme are evaluated as positive and morally necessary and seem to endorse the new subject culture's premises. However, he equally tracks the novel's subversive subtexts, which are indicative of frictions within bourgeois subjectivity, e.g. the role of gender and ideals of femininity, the pornographic tendencies of the novel, or the bourgeois re-interpretation of the aristocratic gentleman ideal.

Meinhard Winkgens' article on Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* continues this analysis of bourgeois subjectivity by focusing on its hegemony in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He traces how the contradictions between the novel's manifest meaning and its latent sense can be explained by the fissures characteristic for this phase of bourgeois culture. While the novel's explicit endorsement of bourgeois codes, e.g. the dignity of work or the role of self-control and moderation, seem to lead to the narrator-protagonist's final contentment, its subtext shows how the values of Romantic counterculture shape David's personality. Throughout his development, Winkgens argues, the Romantic subject remains a supplementary other that fundamentally influences both David's development and the reader's relationship to him.

The third article uses detective fiction and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes to analyse the crisis of late-bourgeois subject culture towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sarah Heinz shows that the shift from the early bourgeois code of morality to the later code of respectability leads to a deeply felt ambivalence within middle-class subjectivity. In her analysis of *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, and of short stories from the first collection *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, she outlines how Holmes and Watson embody bourgeois culture while at the same time also transgressing its boundaries. In her discussion of detective fiction, Heinz then relates the ambivalences of late-bourgeois subject culture to the genre's conventions and to the specific reception process that it trains the reader in.

The ensuing chapters examine literary responses to changing subject cultures in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century and address the continued influence of bourgeois subject culture. The 'organisation man' (*Angestelltensubjekt*) takes centre stage in Nora Kuster's article on J.G. Ballard's *High Rise* (1975). She shows how this novel deconstructs middle-class subjectivity by featuring the archetypal home of the organisation man, namely the high-rise building, as "a sort of pressure-cooker that amplifies the tensions of organised modernity" (194) to the breaking point, allowing new forms of subjectivity and spatial practices to emerge. Her analysis offers a new reading of the frequently discussed violence in *High-Rise* because she does not link it to discourses of regression, but instead to the "transition from the post-bourgeois subject culture of the organisation man to that of the post-bureaucratic culture of post-modernity" (193f.).

The final three articles concentrate on the hegemonic subject culture of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century: the creative subject. Marie-Theres Wieme's article on A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and *The Children's Book* as critical origin stories of the

creative subject features first because she is interested in the way these novels trace elements of today's hegemonic subject culture back to previous times. In her analysis of *Possession*, Wieme concentrates on the Victorian plotline, specifically the correspondence between the poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, before shifting her attention to the avant-garde subcultures of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as depicted in *The Children's Book*. While in both novels creativity is cherished as a pre-requisite for the art of living well, these narratives are also critical origin stories because they issue an ethical warning against "a singular focus on the creative impulse" (209).

In her article on Julian Barnes' *England, England*, Tatjana Himmel questions previous interpretations of this novel by re-evaluating the depiction of Sir Jack Pitman. Her central claim is that Reckwitz enables a more nuanced reading of this character that eschews reducing him to a mere cliché. She explains the frictions in both Pitman's but also Martha Cochrane's subjectivity via residual elements of older subject cultures that continue to exert influence in postmodern culture. While both characters, Himmel argues, "appear to the outside world as economically successful subjects [...] ... their personal striving for self growth and authenticity cannot really be fulfilled" (249).

The home as a site for creative expressivity is the key topic of Stella Butter's article on Matthew Reynolds' *Designs for a Happy Home*. She argues that practices of 'doing home' are practices of the self that help to bring the subject of creative consumer culture into being. Home therefore "is not only a site forged by the creative self but it is also constitutive of the creative self" (251). In her reading of Reynolds' novel, Butter shows how the story of the protagonist Alizia Tamé, a successful interior designer, critically assesses the creative subject by illustrating how Alizia's imperative to be creative is also a will to power that treats people like parts of a designed interior and that suppresses inconvenient and messy bodily urges. The novel thus asks the reader to decide what ethical value rests in creative practices and how issues of agency, community, and power hierarchies are connected in today's hegemonic subject culture.

Overall, the articles provide a panorama of how the English novel has been a vital part of the development and transformation of subject cultures since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, serving as a medium in which the problematic legacies and norms of these models of the subject can be debated. At the same time, we hope that this volume serves as an incentive for further research in this field. As one can see from the list of articles, there are still many gaps to fill when tracing literary engagements with subject cultures, not only in terms of chronology. In its entirety, the volume has a strong focus on white middle-class subjectivity. Hence, topics such as the working classes or the new 'underclass' (cf. Welshman; Tyler) and queer sexualities still await being explored through the lens of Reckwitz' theory as do the voices of Asian-British or Black-British

writers and further female authors. Another desideratum results from Reckwitz' focus on Europe and North America. The question is whether his model also offers insights for understanding the development of subjectivity in cultural contexts beyond these Western countries, for instance, by helping gauge the impact of exporting European or North American subject models in the wake of (neo-)colonialism.

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Although not officially a *Festschrift*, the articles in this volume can be seen as a tribute to the stimulating research environment fostered by Meinhard Winkgens at the University of Mannheim. The *Oberseminar* (PhD and postdoc colloquium) that he regularly taught for many years certainly had a formative influence on us three editors: we appreciated the lively debates and challenging theoretical discussions that he initiated as well as his valuable suggestions for exciting research projects. The most recent of his colloquia concentrated on Reckwitz' theory of the subject and how it opens up an innovative perspective for readings of literature. It is this seminar that forms the point of departure for the collected essays in this volume and the people involved in the project. The colloquium brought together scholars from different generations and in different stages of their academic biography, ranging from young researchers who have recently completed their Master's Degree to postdoctoral researchers and professors. This volume documents the discussions and ideas developed in the course of many meetings during two semesters.

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