

Michaela Schrage-Früh, Linda Shortt, Jakob Summerer

Introduction

In December 2023, we organized the annual GSAI conference hosted at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) by Professor Jürgen Barkoff and Professor Mary Cosgrove (TCD) and thematically coordinated by the GSAI Co-Chairs Dr Michaela Schrage-Früh (UL) and Dr Linda Shortt (MU). We selected the theme for our conference – German Studies and the Health/Medical Humanities – to address recent developments in the field. Originally, the term ‘medical humanities’ referred to the integration of the humanities in medical programmes with the aim of forging ‘humanist’, i.e. ethically-minded, health and medical practitioners. Fiction in particular was thought to have the power to elicit empathy and improve doctor-patient relations.¹ This one-directional approach, however, has shifted in recent years as the humanities have increasingly embraced insights from the disciplines of health and medical science and researchers in the humanities have begun to explore cultural representations of mental and physical health, emotion, trauma, illness, disability, care and ageing in genres such as literature, film, life writing and visual and performance art. The importance of exploring the intersections of health and culture has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has revealed “the determinants of health and structural health inequities”.² As Jane McNaughton notes:

Medical humanities has tended first and foremost to be associated with the ways in which the arts and humanities help us to understand health. However, this is not the only or necessarily the primary aim of our field. What the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed above all is what the field of *critical* medical humanities has insisted on: the deep entanglement of social, cultural, historical life with the biomedical.³

Even before the pandemic, however, topics related to mental and physical health and wellbeing were prominent in German-language culture. Examples range from dementia narratives such as Arno Geiger’s *Der alte König in seinem Exil* (2011) to illness memoir, fiction and film such as Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *So schön wie hier*

-
- 1 Stefani Engelstein: “Boundaries and Interdisciplines: Where Health Humanities Meets Literature and Science in German Studies”. In: Stephanie M. Hilger (ed.), *The Health Humanities in German Studies*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, pp. xvi–xxv, here: xvii.
 - 2 Stephanie M. Hilger: “Introduction. Intersections: Health Humanities and German Studies”. In: Stephanie M. Hilger (ed.): *The Health Humanities and German Studies*, pp. 1–20, here p. 10.
 - 3 Jane McNaughton: “Does Medical Humanities Matter? The Challenge of Covid-19”. In: *Medical Humanities* 49 (2023), pp. 545–552.

kanns im Himmel gar nicht sein! Tagebuch einer Krebserkrankung (2009), Kathrin Schmidt's *Du stirbst nicht* (2009) and Andreas Dresen's *Halt auf freier Strecke* (2011). This trend has continued and is now beginning to attract more critical attention as documented by pioneering recent publications such as Nina Schmidt's monograph *The Wounded Self: Writing Illness in Twenty-First-Century German Literature* (Camden House, 2018) and the collection *The Health Humanities in German Studies*, edited by Stephanie M. Hilger (Bloomsbury, 2024). These underscore the relevance of the health/medical humanities field also for the study of German literature, culture and history and signify a surging critical interest in the intersection of these two disciplines.

A medical/health humanities perspective can also reveal new insights into canonical nineteenth-century texts, as demonstrated by Olivetta Gentilin's contribution to this issue. Her article offers a comparative analysis of the protagonists in three of Georg Büchner's main literary works, *Lenz*, *Woyzeck* and *Leonce und Lena*. As Gentilin shows, the portrayal of these characters' manic and depressive disorders is informed by Büchner's medical knowledge, as indicated by his numerous intertextual references to medical and legal reports. In this sense, Büchner's literary texts might be read as case studies or case histories. However, as Gentilin further shows, by combining typical elements of these medical and scientific text-forms with aesthetic and rhetorical elements, Büchner's works bring to light new aspects of the diseases portrayed. In a third step, drawing on sociological theories by Luhmann and others, the author shows how Büchner's texts reveal the social and political contexts in which his characters' pathologies are embedded, thereby facilitating social critique.

Thomas Wilks' contribution, too, focusses on literary representations of mental health as embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts. In his article, he brings together – for the first time – works by Thomas Bernhard and Wilhelm Genazino, re-reading these through the lens of distraction which is understood here not only as inattention or shifted awareness, but also as disquiet and mental disturbance. In attending to how distraction is deployed in Bernhard's autobiography and selected novels by Genazino, Wilks outlines how ill-being and being well distract from each other in states where these are coexisting and how distraction can become an engine of growth for some protagonists, particularly for those in dysfunctional environments. Reading for distraction, Wilks argues, provides a new route into these works that avoids a narrow focus on plot by exploring performances of inattention.

The next three contributions focus on the representation of traumatic experiences and emotional regimes. Johannes Vith explores how cinematic landscapes in Baran bo Odar's film *Das letzte Schweigen* (2010) are used to visualize the psychological and communal impacts of sexual violence. To this end, Vith enlists Michael Richardson's concept of 'nonhuman witnessing' to explain how the natural and anthropogenic settings that are central to *Das letzte Schweigen*, such as wheat-fields, lakes and forests, serve as silent, inanimate witnesses to violence and as

symbolic representations of the spatial and temporal dimensions of psychological trauma. Through in-depth analysis of repeated aerial shots of a wheatfield as the primary nonhuman witness in the film – a place conspicuously devoid of human presence and sound – the author reveals how bo Odar’s subtle use of filmic space grants access to the key aspects of experiences of trauma, such as emotional numbness, speechlessness, and entrapment in a disabling cycle of re-experiencing and re-enacting the past.

Moving beyond a focus on trauma and biographical rupture, Gillian Pye chooses a slightly different interpretive lens in her close reading of Anne Rabe’s post-unification novel *Die Möglichkeit von Glück* (2023). Among a variety of culture-critical approaches to emotion, she utilizes William Reddy’s widely influential concepts of ‘emotives’ and ‘emotional regimes’ to investigate Rabe’s narrative representation of emotions. By focussing on emotional expressions as culturally and historically specific performances, intimately bound up with social power and collective identity, Pye uncovers how the complex historical moment of the Wende is structured and experienced in Rabe’s novel. With a keen eye for detail, the author dissects how Rabe’s characters encounter the emotional regimes of their GDR past in the narrative present, and how they are continuously forced to engage with enduring, GDR-specific expressions and expectations of emotionality in their everyday life. In Pye’s reading, emotional experiences are viewed as long-lived familial, social and political legacies that continue to inform ways of thinking and feeling across generations and sociopolitical constellations.

Katherine Calvert continues this focus on emotions as culturally inflected performances. Her article analyses the early 1970s feminist campaign for the legalization of abortion in the FRG. In particular, Calvert focusses on the verbal and visual expression of feelings in various flyers and leaflets circulated by activists of the so-called Aktion 218 campaign. Also drawing on Reddy’s ‘emotives’ and ‘emotional regimes’, as well as building on Sara Ahmed’s work on the crucial role of emotion performances in feminist activism, Calvert demonstrates how the modelling of anger towards the West German medical establishment, in combination with suggestions for improved healthcare for women, subverted the dominant emotional regimes for women at the time. According to Calvert’s analysis, the circulation of feminist emotives aimed at inspiring anger, hope and resistance thus played an important role in empowering the female addressees of the campaign and in challenging the emotional and medical status quo; they encouraged women to reject the submissive and demure emotional roles traditionally assigned to them and redirect their frustrations into political action.

Cultural gerontology, drawing together work on ageing across the social sciences and humanities, is a field that has gained increasing prominence in recent years, although its main focus is still often on anglophone texts and contexts. Martina Zimmermann’s contribution to this themed issue provides an abridged version of her keynote address at our conference, “Changing How We Think about Ageing:

A Narrative Approach". In her comparative analysis of Wendy Mitchell's *Somebody I Used to Know* (2018) and Susanna Schwager's *Das volle Leben: Frauen über achtzig erzählen* (2007), Zimmermann brings together a British woman's dementia memoir and a book of interviews with older women from Switzerland. As she notes, concepts of identity and personhood are typically tied up with the idea that people's lives happen in linear, chronological narratives. In her analysis of Mitchell's and Schwager's texts, however, Zimmermann highlights the uncertainties, inconsistencies and gaps of lived experience visible in both and argues that embracing the concept of episodicity, the insight that life happens in episodes or mini-narratives rather than in coherent narratives across time, can help shift negative perceptions about ageing as a cultural narrative of decline and loss. As Zimmerman's analysis shows, such a focus may help ease the pressure of social and cultural expectations that life needs to be lived along a prescribed narrative arc into old age and may also help counterbalance anxieties around dementia as well as enhance dementia care.

Written from the perspective of a medical gerontologist and lover of German culture, Des O'Neill's personal reflection on working between Germanistik, medical/health humanities and cultural gerontology highlights the value for medical practitioners and researchers of considering German literature, music, film and works of art that focus on illness and older age. According to O'Neill, the cultural texts that "enrich the knowledge base of the medical/health humanities" range from dementia memoirs, such as the aforementioned *Der alte König in seinem Exil* (2011) by Arno Geiger, to popular films such as Til Schweiger's *Honig im Kopf* (2014). Such texts can provide deeper insights into the subjective experience of dementia that can help promote more nuanced and empathetic attitudes to patients living with the condition. While providing a useful overview of developments and initiatives in medical/health humanities more broadly, O'Neill's article also points to the need for truly cross-disciplinary projects and collaborations across the humanities and medical sciences as potentially enriching for both disciplines.

Jess Benbow and Jakob Summerer's contribution demonstrates the productivity of this approach. Their collaborative article moves beyond a bio-medical framework to explore how eating disorders (EDs) are being written in German-language memoirs. Taking an interdisciplinary perspective that conjoins cognitive-linguistic methods, therapeutic insights and strategies from literary analysis, their analysis homes in on the use of metaphors for EDs, exploring what this can tell us about how eating disorders are experienced, communicated and understood. Detailing the scriptotherapeutic effects of writing for physical and mental well-being, their article showcases the importance of life writing for those who write and those who read, highlighting its usefulness for a more nuanced understanding of eating disorders and its wider contribution to the medical/health humanities.

Rachel MagShamhráin closes this special issue by putting the human at the centre of health humanities. Her article reflects on the manifold challenges of living care-fully while working in academia, described here as a time-greedy profession.

Against the background of a discussion of the time and over-time of work and how this can negatively affect female academic success, MagShamhráin's analysis of the corrosive reality of work-life imbalance traces a blurring of the personal and the professional. Critical of institutional efforts to promote holistic well-being through sanitized work-life balance models that seem to place the responsibility for balance on the overworked individual, MagShamhráin unmasks the assumptions that underpin such models, exposing their innate ableism and lack of attention to Care. In an effort to empower individuals, shift power relations and contribute to a more care-full academia, MagShamhráin abandons the autoethnographic mode for what she considers a more effective route, proposing an open-ended *Care in Academia* Manifesto that advocates for collective action and more nuanced understandings of success that reward excellence rather than excess.

Michaela Schrage-Früh is Associate Professor of German Studies at the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics, University of Limerick.

Linda Shortt is Assistant Professor of German Studies at the School of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures at Maynooth University.

Jakob Summerer is a PhD researcher at Trinity College Dublin and Programme Coordinator for the TCD Medical/Health Humanities Network.