

Terror: The power of narration

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From the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Bonn examined 'Geopoetics of Terror' in her doctoral thesis. Credit: Barbara Frommann/Uni Bonn

Literary texts have the potential to penetrate war and terror by

overcoming divisive narratives, according to comparatist Dr. Dana Bönisch. In her thesis at the University of Bonn, she examined newer, largely unknown novels on 9/11 and the so-called "War on Terror." She worked on literary examples that counteract a simplistic narrative of "Good versus Evil." For her analyses, she also made extensive use of methods from visual and spatial theory, and in particular, from topology.

"Whoever is not with us is against us!" The fight against terror in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was marked by such rhetoric. The slogan is intended to create a clear separation between "us" and the "others," who are mutually exclusive: We are the good guys, you are the bad guys—we live in a democracy, you are the terrorists—we are just, you are the unjust ones. Bönisch examined such categorizations and divisions on the basis of more recent, less well-known works on the War on Terror. Prof. Dr. Christian Moser from the Department of Comparative Literature supervised the thesis on "Geopoetics of Terror," a term that Bönisch uses to point to the 'world-making' capacities of fiction in a global age.

How do we invent "ourselves" and "the others"? How can language work against simplification? How is it possible to narrate complexity? These questions are the focus of the thesis.

"There is a lot of research on the first generation of 9/11 novels, which are often told from a victim's perspective," says Bönisch. Newer, largely ignored literature on this topic is much more complex. Often it also includes the perpetrator's perspective, processes of globalization and dependency relationships. The comparatist is convinced of fiction's specific potential to approach ethical and political questions in the wake of the "War on Terror" and its repercussions.

Using the novels, Bönisch examined the dynamic tension between simplifications and complexity. In Kevin Powers' 2012 "The Yellow Birds," a young U.S. soldier tells of his Iraq mission and his home in

Virginia. "Both locations become increasingly interwoven," reports Bönisch. The flora in Iraq and in the homeland, for example, is surprisingly similar—which works against the stereotypical media image of the war zone of Iraq as a dusty wasteland, but at the same time, acts destructively at plot level: The entanglement of spaces can also be read as an effect of the protagonist's post-traumatic stress disorder.

This has consequences: The strategy of combating terrorism mainly in the countries of origin in order to keep it away from home is not working. That is why "here" and "there" merge in "The Yellow Birds." In order to better understand these effects, Bönisch also used mathematical methods. Topology breaks with simple notions of proximity and distance, instead seeing space as fluid and relational. "Topological thinking works against simplifying categories and dissolves apparent opposites," says Bönisch. This also blurs the concepts of "us" and "the others."

Bönisch claims that the combination of increasing geographical distance and reduction of risk regarding one's own body has been taken to its extreme in current warfare. Drones that hit targets in Afghanistan can be controlled from the Nevada desert. When the target is "marked" in an attack and the drone pilot is connected to the target with a constant data stream, the image becomes a weapon in the truest sense of the word. "The target location thousands of miles away becomes an abstract area of pixels and coordinates—war becomes a computer game," says Bönisch. In the 2012 "September," Thomas Lehr not only describes the perspective of the drone pilot during the attack, but also provides the viewpoint from the ground as a counterbalance. Against the rhetoric of "clean warfare," the text sets out injuries and suffering.

These novels illustrate the ways in which literary texts show resistance in the face of contemporary wars and the extent to which they produce visibility, Bönisch explains. It is especially in longer text forms that

complexity can be developed in the first place. "The thesis is also intended to remind us how easy it is to fall for simplistic narratives." It is necessary to demand the much more arduous way of approaching complex contexts. Bönisch says, "Literary texts have the potential to reverse the simplistic division into 'us' and 'them' and to provide a more complex view of war and terror."

Provided by University of Bonn

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