Inner Perspectives on Migration: the Potential of Fiction

Literature provides a dialectic space where a fictionalized individual is at the centre and can express complex trains of thought. Migrant literature, which I define by narratives that bring up stories of migration, can provide unique insight on the experience of migration and its consequences for an individual’s identity. My paper aims at presenting the way fictionalized migrations may contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon. I will be focusing on the Swiss migration context and analyse how feelings of rejection are expressed in two novels: Beat Sterchi’s *Blösch* (1983) and Melinda Nadj Abonji’s *Fly Away, Pigeon* (2010) that both provide aestheticized inner perspectives.

In *Blösch*, the protagonist, Ambrosio, is a Spanish immigrant worker who is employed as a milker on a small farm. Although he is on good terms with the farmer, he is confronted with the hostility of the villagers and must leave the idyllic countryside and find another job in an industrial slaughterhouse. I will focus on the allegorical relation between the slaughtering process, which is very accurately described in the novel, and Ambrosio’s feelings with regards to the xenophobia and rejection he experiences.

*Fly Away, Pigeon* won the most important book prize of German-speaking literature in 2010 and tells the story of a Yugoslavian family that immigrated during the 1960's, from the perspective of the daughter. The relationship between her and her parents is shaped by the difference resulting from her upbringing in urban Switzerland and her parents’ upbringing in rural Yugoslavia. My analysis points out that this situation provokes a family conflict in which the parents are faced with the difficulties of integration.

My methodology bases on the work of the Austrian sociologists Helmut Kuzmics and Gerald Mozetič (2003) who theorized the relations between the literary and the social reality. In an interdisciplinary approach, I combine this literary analysis with the findings of Etienne Piguet's historical study of Swiss immigration policy and of the migration fluxes towards Switzerland (2004). This context is essential, as both novels deal with the issue of xenophobia in the 1960s and early 1970s, a time when the topic of immigration was inextricably linked to the Schwarzenbach initiative. In 1970, it asked the voters to decide if the amount of foreigners living in the country should be limited to a maximum of 10% of the population. The historical rate of participation and the intensity of the discussions in the public media echoed the xenophobic mindset of a large amount of Swiss citizen and both novels refer to this social and historical situation.

Fiction allows for the migrant to be considered as an individual subject with his or her own voice, and not only as an abstract object of study. By linking complementary examples from two novels to the historical context of the Schwarzenbach initiative, my presentation aims to point out the potential of fiction as a means of gaining better understanding of the shaping impact of migration on individuals’ identities.