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**Liesbeth Korthals Altes.** *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*. Lincoln, NE/London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, 325 pp., £ 40.00.

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This innovative study examines the relevance of the category of ethos for analyzing processes of literary interpretation. With its emphasis on ethos – the author’s, the narrator’s, and the figure’s ethos – and on interpretation, it contrasts with traditional ethical approaches to story-telling, which attempt to disclose the ethical implications of fictional works by investigating semantically relevant aspects of narrative form and style. While Korthals Altes regrets narratology’s lack of interest in interpretation and its evasion of the category of the author, there is at least one focus which her work and that of ethical narratologists seem to share, namely the concern with value negotiation and construction. The subtitle of the work under review is *The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* just as the subtitle of one of the most remarkable recent studies in ethical narratology, Nora Berning’s *Towards a Critical Narratology* (2013), is *Analyzing Value Construction in Literary Non-Fiction across Media*. What Korthals Altes and Berning understand by values and value construction/negotiation cannot be laid down in the form of propositional statements, because it is inseparably connected with matters of narrative perspective and the balancing of positions given in the text’s various voices which

have to be processed by the reader. Before going into such details it is necessary to set forth what Korthals Altes endeavors to do in her study with a first focus on her theoretical approach.

The starting-point of the work are controversially discussed and potentially scandalous works such as James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, an apparently authentic autobiography, central aspects of which turned out, to the dismay of readers and critics, to have been fabricated by the author, or Michel Houellebecq's works whose provocatively disillusioning views on Western society allow for doubts if they are meant seriously. Such works raise questions as to what Korthals Altes calls 'the author's ethos' and stimulate processes of ethos attribution which do not only concern the works themselves, but also the authors and the images they present of themselves in the public cultural debate. The analysis of ethos attribution "thus leads from discussions about a text's meaning into debates about the social status, authority, and responsibility of literature and writers into the heart of meaning and value negotiations that weave the fabric of culture" (11). Korthals Altes borrows her notion of ethos largely from Aristotle's treatise *On Rhetoric*, which distinguishes three means of persuasion: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. Since *ethos* is defined by him as persuasion through character, it can be profitably applied to the various speaking instances in narrative works. What Korthals Altes is specifically intrigued about are "ethos puzzles", for instance cases in which "it is more appropriate for interpreters to attribute an ethos to authors, rather than to narrators or characters" (6). "Assumptions about the authorial or narratorial ethos" can, she argues, "spark off, or reinforce, readers' decisions about how to frame the kind of work they have at hand" (7).

In the center of the many diverse theoretical approaches of the book's first part there is a discussion of the social construction of meanings and values with special emphasis on hermeneutics or, rather, as the writer expounds in deep-searching reflections, metahermeneutics. "The domain of expertise claimed by hermeneutics" is, as she argues, "that of interpretation" which has been "often overlooked in narratology" (37). With reference to her adoption of hermeneutics Korthals Altes speaks of the "return of the repressed" (37), quoting authorities such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer, Ricœur and Heidegger. Recognizing "the limitation of cognitive sciences with respect to the experiential and social dimensions of art" (31), she welcomes their possible contributions to the humanities if they are interested "not just in the human brain but in the social dimensions of mind, and in culture" (49). Further aspects considered critically are 'cognitive engineering' (Donalds 2006), 'embodied ethos' (Boyd 2009), the notion of 'frames' (Goffman 1974), the 'theory of mind' (Zunshine 2006), and the ascription of consciousness to fictional characters according to everyday psychological inference processes" (Palmer 2004), called "continuity thesis" in the book (36).

Another concern of the book's first part is the social production of meaning and value in the case of literary narratives and the role of authorial ethos in this process. The reference to diverse theoretical approaches, which help to forward the argument, is again wide-angled. Thus sociological and historical perspectives on authorial ethos, habitus and postures, developed by Bourdieu and Viala, are adduced, and so is French discourse analysis, especially the work of Amossy and Maingueneau, which reactualizes Aristotelian notions of ethos. Also Boltanski and Thévenots's model for conflict analysis is discussed because of its potential highlighting of competing interpretive practices and value regimes.

In the book's first part Korthals Altes had with reference to hermeneutics already spoken of the "return of the repressed". The same formula recurs as the subtitle of the second part of her investigation, "Ethos in Narratology", which pleads for the return of interpretation in narratology. She argues that interpretation "was, right from the start, narratology's bone of contention" (91) and criticizes narratologists like Genette, Todorov and Prince for having neglected interpretation and for having excluded the author from their theorizing in the attempt to establish narratology as a scientific discipline. The whole second part of the book is a comprehensive discussion of the position of narratology between hermeneutics and cognitive sciences and a revision of key concepts such as communication in narratives, embeddedness, intentionality, fictionality and reading strategies. It is one of Korthals Altes' endeavors to map the unprecedented boom of narratology in the last decades – she speaks of an "explosion of developments within narratology" (95) – "according to the role of interpretation, moving from 'hard' theorizing to the interpretation of individual works" (95). It is impossible to refer to all the theoretical aspects she discusses. The account must thus be restricted to just a few points, the evaluation of "narratological models of embedded communication" (106), the reference to readers' search for "ethos clues" (110), the need for empirical studies on "readers' tolerance of ethos and genre ambiguities, as attested in the case of *enfants terribles* such as Houellebecq and Angot" (111), and the importance of frames and reading strategies on which readers have to rely when faced with postmodern texts which blur "fact/fiction boundaries" (119, 122). Particularly important and significant are the discussions on ethos attribution in controversial texts and the various facets of authorial images in such texts.

Building on the theoretical framework established in the first two parts, the book's third part deals with two key issues, the framing function of genre and the problem of readers' assessment of "a narrative voice's or an author's sincerity, or rather, its irony" (173). The equation of sincerity and irony, which suggests that sincerity may be a mere pose, takes us into the core of the argument on ethos. In fact, the section on irony and ethos (205–247) must be regarded as the book's

most original contribution to narratology, as seven theses show that are formulated to capture “irony’s central relevance to the analysis of ethos in literary narrative” (217). The last chapter articulates several convictions, which have been perceptible all along, in a concentrated form. One is that “interpretation, as a social negotiation of meanings” exercises the reasoning function of humans (250). Another one is “the idea that theories of narrative fiction that elude the diversity of interpretive perspectives amputate themselves from a critical reflective dimension” (250). A further one is “that both the aesthetic and the ethical interests of narratives result from the multiplication of (conflicting or ambiguous) framings for issues with existential relevance” (250). The basic advantage of the revision of narratology proposed in the book is seen in that it explicitly includes “the analyst’s or reader’s own ethical standards and pathways for interpretation and judgment” in the scrutiny of narrative texts (251).

An important dimension which makes the book what it is has yet to be considered. This is the fact that all through the study the theoretical argument is illustrated and substantiated by narrative texts, texts, that is, which are ethically in one or another way ambiguous or problematical, misrepresenting the author/narrator or the world referred to and engaging in posturing and lying, although the most daring deception which occurs when an author forges his or her own biographical self, a deception which tends to cause extreme public indignation, remains unmentioned in the book (see Meyer 2006). In order to characterize the scope of the investigation, it is necessary to have a look at its corpus. Most of the texts analyzed are postmodern, many French and some English and US-American. There are, among others, Samuel Beckett, *Not I* (1972), Christine Angot, *Sujet Angot* (1998), Michel Houellebecq, *Atomized* (2000), Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (2000), Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2001), James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (2003) and François Bon, *Daewo* (2004). The investigation does not only constantly refer to these texts, but it also closely examines carefully selected passages. These textual analyses, in which the author demonstrates a great capacity for narratological interpretation, belong to the book’s highlights. Representative examples are the close readings of passages from Philip Roth (123–127) and Dave Eggers (240–243). Another of the book’s great moments is the reconstruction of the frustrating attempts of critics to “construct the value” of Houellebecq’s work “in relation to his posture and ethos” (77).

The limitation of the book’s corpus to postmodern narratives and specifically to works that are in one way or another scandalous contrasts to some extent with its title which suggests that this is an investigation targeted to narrative art in general, which is by no means the case. The book does in no way unfold a tradition of “display texts” (Marie-Louise Pratt), “found in the earliest fictional narrative of which we have written trace, the Gilgamesh epic, up to the works of

Houellebecq or James Frey” (24). The somewhat surprising reference to the Gilgamesh epic and the mentioning of Flaubert and Baudelaire (213) and the inclusion of Knut Hamsun and the Russian postmodernist Aleksandr Prokhanov in the discussion fail to give historical amplitude to a study which is closely connected to French culture, where the writer and his or her ethos have since the times of Voltaire taken a much more heeded and respected position in the public debate than in other cultures (see 176).

In spite of its fascinating topic the book does not all along make for exciting reading. One reason for this is that right from the beginning we are made aware of its central thesis, namely that narratology should accept interpretation as its duty and give the role of the author and the problem of authorial ethos due attention. This thesis is repeated many times throughout the book and illuminated and supported from a multitude of different theoretical angles in a discussion in which the same names, Frey, Houellebecq, Eggers etc., tend to recur ever and again. Another reason which makes reading somewhat heavy-going derives from theoretical overload. Admittedly all of the many theoretical concepts and positions which are adduced – Korthals Altes has indeed an admirable grip on practically all aspects of her discipline including linguistic approaches – help to strengthen her argument, but one asks oneself at times if a focus on a number of central aspects would not have been better and if one must really always say all that may be of some relevance to the topic. Although these remarks may be understood as reservation on the reviewer’s side, there is no doubt that the book has a great many assets, above all the wide scope and depth of its theoretical argument, fine textual analysis and a deep understanding of ethical issues in the sphere of literature and their relevance in public contexts. Its central argument is weighty. Verbal art is understood to be “unique in its capacity to articulate human experience” and at the same time it displays itself, as a consequence of “shared concepts”, for “intensified perception and scrutiny” (27). Ethical narratology, which is still searching for a firm theoretical and methodological basis, can benefit from Korthals Altes’ introduction of the category of ethos and her insistent plea not to forget the author in narratological models.

## Works Cited

Meyer, Therese-Marie. 2006. *Where Fiction Ends: Four Scandals of Literary Identity Construction*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.