Participating in the City: Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel

Bringing together specialists on microhistory and the picaresque novel to develop new perspectives for urban history

International Conference
29 & 30 March 2012
Conference Room,
Oude Boteringestraat 44,
Groningen

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Participating in the City
Microhistory and the Picaresque Novel

PROGRAMME

International Conference
University of Groningen
29 & 30 March 2012
Programme

Thursday, March 29th 2012
Location: Conference Room, Bestuursgebouw RUG, Oude Boteringestraat 44

Morning  
Chair: Philiep Bossier (University of Groningen)

9:45 - 10:15  Reception and registration
10:15 - 10:30  Opening of Conference
10:30 - 11:30  Keynote: Giovanni Levi (Università Ca’Foscari di Venezia)
   To write a picaresque biography
11:30 - 11:45  coffee/tea break
11.45 - 13:00  Hans Renders (University of Groningen)
   Exceptions That Prove the Rule

Robert Folger (University of Utrecht)
   The rogue and the city: urban space as heterotopia in the Spanish picaresque novel
13:00 - 14:00  Lunch for speakers and organization in the ‘Engelse Zaal’ in the Academy Building

Afternoon  
Chair: Konstantin Mierau (University of Groningen)

14:00 - 15:15  Philiep Bossier (University of Groningen)
   The puzzling issue of the absent picaresque in renaissance Italy

Fabien Montcher (Spanish National Research Council)
   De la ventana de la muerte a la calle de la vida. Metempsychosis and picaresque chronicle as a means of a global representation of urban space in El siglo pitagórico (1644) by Antonio Henríquez Gomez
15:15 - 17:30  Excursion to RHC Groninger Archieven
Friday, March 30th 2012

Morning

Chair: Hans Renders (University of Groningen)

9:30 - 10:45 Keynote: Matti Peltonen (University of Helsinki)
In What Sense Microhistory Is Postmodern?

10:45 - 11:00 coffee/tea break

11:00 - 13:00 Binne de Haan (University of Groningen)
Capturing City Life. How Biography and Urban History Meet in the Street

Liesbeth Korthals Altes (University of Groningen)
Whose polis, whose history? Writing history and generic framing in David Mitchell’s A Thousand Autumnns of Jacob de Zoet

Konstantin Mierau (University of Groningen)
The Talk of the town' in Los dos Mendozas by Gonzalo de Céspedes y Meneses. A microhistorical reading of a costumbrist text with picaresque roots

13:00 - 13:15 Closing statement

13:15 - 14:00 Lunch for speakers and organization in the ‘Engelse Zaal’ in the Academy Building
Introduction

This conference brings together microhistory and the picaresque novel for the study of urban history. Firstly, the picaresque novel contributes new source material to the study of urban places from a microhistorical approach. Secondly, microhistory and picaresque focus on the same level of the urban experience, a level that is also referred to as the agent-based perspective. Thirdly, despite the apparent overlaps, the mutual benefits of an exchange between microhistorians and scholars of the picaresque remain largely unexplored.

The conference

The conference organizers have brought together a group of experts in the field of microhistory, the picaresque novel and literary representation in general. We shall explore such questions as: why do microhistorians not read picaresque novels? What part of urban historiography is left unwritten for want of source material for the individual perspective? What contexts of interpretation are left unexplored when literary representations of urbanity are read against macrohistorical narratives?

The speakers

The conference will open with a keynote by prof. Giovanni Levi (Università Ca’Foscari di Venezia) who founded the discipline of microhistory together with Carlo Ginzburg. Prof. Matti Peltonen (University of Helsinki), our second keynote speaker, will reflect on the relationship between microhistory and the research questions of postmodernity. Prof. Liesbeth Korthals Altes (University of Groningen) will contribute her background in literary and genre theory to the framing of the agent-based perspective. Prof. Robert Folger (Universiteit Utrecht) has published frequently on the picaresque, with particular emphasis on non-literary texts as sources for picaresque generic modes. Prof. Hans Renders (University of Groningen) will discuss the role of biography and microhistory in the juxtapose of urban and national histories. Prof. Philip Bossier (University of Groningen) will discuss the pertinent question why there are no picaresque novels in early modern Italy. Fabien Montcher, MA (Spanish National Research Council, Madrid) will study a case of picaresque representation as interpolated in other forms of narrative. Konstantin Mierau, MA (University of Groningen) will study picaresque representations...
of urban spaces against the context of municipal legislation. Drs. Binne de Haan (University of Groningen) will reflect on the problem of the agent-based perspective as relates to the increasingly popular idea of the biography of the city.

Microhistory and the Picaresque

Microhistory has come to be known as the detailed historical investigation of circumscribed units of analysis, often a particular event, place or individual life (e.g. *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976), *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983)). For some time now, it has produced counterproof for established historical narratives, by showing in what aspects individual experiences or specific events are characteristic or distinct of general historical tendencies. This conference departs from the position that picaresque novels, characterized by their first person perspective and action- and experience-based narratives, provide a host of material for the renegotiation of urban history at the microhistorical level. The picaresque genre started with the founding work *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599), went on to spawn canonical texts as *Simplicissimus Teutsch* (1669), *Gil Blas* (1715-1735) and continues to resonate in works as *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) by Michel Houellebecq. In picaresque novels members of the urban population are represented as active participants in their environment, with great emphasis on internal reflection and development. This development of characters through representation of the environment provides material for the study of the development of urban spaces and places. Including the picaresque texts in the study of particular urban spaces and places allows us to approach these not as finished, quantifiable products but as lived spaces, as processes experienced and produced by agents. The microhistorical study of extratextual referents can help to uncover the rapports between textual tradition and the immediate historical context of literary texts.

Shared Perspective – Complementary Methodologies

Microhistory and picaresque novel, moreover, coincide on the level of the represented perspective: they start from the particular. We feel that this specific perspective conditions the required methodology. Utilizing the microhistorical approach to study places and people represented in the picaresque avoids the explanation of urbanity as represented in literature in the context of large-scale ideological, economical or cultural developments (i.e. imperialism, capitalism, baroque), and takes us to a level of proof and counterproof on a commensurable level. Rather than close-reading literary works in a macrohistorical context of interpretation, we propose to juxtapose close-reading and microhistorical historiography in an attempt to lay bare the overlaps and disparities between the picaresque mode of representation and the representations found in historical sources such as letters, decrees and court documents, i.e. the traditional material of microhistrionians. We feel that introducing the microhistorical approach to the study of picaresque texts will remedy a hiatus in contexts of interpretation which have been employed so far for the study of picaresque texts. The above approach would both add to the material base of microhistory and to the status quaestionis concerning the picaresque novel.
Abstracts

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EXCEPTIONS THAT PROVE THE RULE

The city is the natural habitat of historiography. Political culture, architecture, literature, most art forms, as well as financial power are concentrated in the city. The popularity of city histories is thus hardly a surprise. Lately there has been an increase in histories of cities sporting the title ‘biography’. Rather than use the histories of one or more individuals as an interpretational model for urban history, they use the label ‘Biography’ to equate the city with a living organism that is subject to ephemeral events. Among this genre we can count the biography of London by Peter Ackroyd in which the British capital is envisioned as a body with dreams and complexes, and others have written biographies of such cities as Antwerp, Rome and Vienna.

On the other hand we find Montaillou by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, in which the author explains the changes in a small village in Southern France in the context of long-term evolutions, including climate changes. As of yet, microhistorians have focused on processes outside of the urban environments (Alain Corbin, Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie). However, we should ask how urban developments relate to national histories. I shall use a number of biographies to shed light on the Dutch phenomenon of ‘pillarization’. This phenomenon is not considered to have played a role in urban history. In my paper, I will demonstrate how biography and microhistory can contribute to urban history and discuss the drawbacks of approaching the city as an organism whose inhabitants’ fate is determined by the nature of organism.
One of the puzzles confronting historians of Italian literature is how to deal with the apparent absence of picaresque narratives in its early modern tradition. This phenomenon is all the more striking during the Renaissance and the Baroque, when Italy in particular is providing all of Europe not only with the mainstream models of re-reading classical heritage but also with the formats of new cultural practices at court and in the city. How can the absence of the picaresque be explained? My aim is to provide a range of possible new answers to this puzzling matter of European historiography. In that perspective, I will question the general situation of genre in post-tridentine Italy, showing how the overwhelming impact of both standard urban setting and socially positioned stock characters in theater might be responsible for the lack of necessity of importing the Spanish rogue. Are we faced with a clash of narrative cultures between the still Boccaccio-oriented Italy and the newer adaptations of the same model coming from abroad? Yet another hypothesis is attractive: maybe the picaresque is hiding behind the mask of other narrative types, less explicit than its Spanish models, more irregular in their literary scheme than the Lazarillo-tradition, but still offering the same possibility of social satire and urban framing depicted from a marginal position. As an example, I will provide a close-reading of one of the eccentric Seicento authors from Bologna, Giulio Cesare Croce (1550-1609), who in Le sottilissime astuzie di Bertoldo [The most subtle tricks of Bertoldo] (1606) was successful in combining commedia dell’arte, anti-urban parody and… fairy-tale.
Scholars of *El siglo pitagórico* (Rouen, 1644) tend to dissociate in their analysis the episodes of *transmigración*, in which the narrator’s soul undergoes various experiences of leaping from body to body, with an interpolated fragment of a picaresque novel entitled *La vida de D. Gregorio Guadaña*. This novel is the fifth *transmigración* of the work. It is the autobiography of Gregorio Guadaña, a character in which the main narrator’s soul incarnates. In my presentation, I will propose a close reading of the autobiography in relation to the rest of *transmigraciones*. I will discuss how in the novel the imagined symbolic spaces of each transmigration interact with urban spaces through the picaresque story of Don Gregorio. I will demonstrate how, in the Gómez Henríquez novel, representation of urban space subtly oscillates between the dreams and the wandering soul of the main narrator, on the one hand, and the ‘reality’ of Gregorio Guadaña’s picaresque pilgrimage on the other.
IN WHAT SENSE MICROHISTORY IS POSTMODERN?

In Richard J. Evans’ historical method book *In Defence of History* (1997) the new microhistory represented by, e.g., Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis, is given as an example of postmodern thinking. This suggestion is surprising because leading microhistorians have distanced themselves from ideas that are usually considered postmodern. Seeing microhistory as postmodern is also surprising if we first look at how Richard J. Evans defined postmodernism in historical research. In *In Defence of History* he is alarmed of the consequences of the Linguistic Turn and makes history theorists such as Hayden White or F.R. Ankersmit the main advocates of postmodernist historiography. Their views, especially White’s narrative theory with its radical relativisms, which do not accept truth-claims in historical research, is defined as the postmodern thinking which Evans fears is destroying the very foundations of historical research. Evans does not, however, stop here but continues by adding new elements to his definition of postmodernism. These other postmodernisms include, for instance, the work of Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton, who have published ‘compellingly told narratives’ which ‘they build on the obscure and the unknown rather than on the great and the famous. Both books take very small incidents of everyday life and retell them as stories, analysing them as metaphorical and symbolic clues to larger things.’ Also in the case of Davis and Darnton ‘the influence of postmodernist theory has played a questionable role’, according to Evans. But what could this ‘postmodern theory’ mentioned by Evans be? What theory or concept could explain the postmodernity of both Whitean tropology and Ginzburgian microhistory? Furthermore, how has the situation in defining postmodern thinking in historical research changed since the beginning of the 1990s when Evans prepared his method book?
In the field of urban history increasing attention has been paid to the experience of the city among residents and visitors. If we understand biography as a type of history told from the viewpoint of the life of one human being, we must, then, ask to what extent the biographical perspective is a significant and identifiable dimension in the field of urban studies. In my presentation I will problematize the relation between biographies and urban history. I will take the field of Biography Studies as my point of departure. I will ask such questions as: What insights do biographies of people who were in some form engaged with a city provide for the understanding of that city? What insights can be gained from the biographies of persons who were part of urban subcultures, of members of the cultural elite or even of unknown and marginal figures who lived in the city? By exploring these questions, I will try to come to a more profound understanding of the role of the city in biographies and biographical studies: is it used as a background that is not questioned in itself, or does the biographer include it in his problematization?

Not only can a biographer or historian investigate the significance of the city for a life, but reversely information obtained from biographical and microhistorical studies can lead to adjustments of the historical representation of a city. In addition, literary works can trigger off new research into urban history. Providing various titles as illustrations, I will argue that the combined results of urban history, biography and literary (picaresque) works in which the city plays a role, especially expose the complexity of capturing and understanding city life. However, the interdisciplinary character of the ‘agency perspective’ makes concrete the partial understanding of the formation of the image of specific cities, of the city as a spatial artifact and of the city as an economic, political, social and cultural center.
In the following presentation I will read the short story ‘Los dos Mendozas’ published in 1623 by Gonzalo de Céspedes y Meneses, court historian to Philip IV and author of a limited oeuvre of narrative works. A central aspect of the representation of the city of Madrid in the ‘Dos Mendozas’ is the movement of gossip. In a narrative constellation in which the chain of the events is determined by the movement of information through the city, a connection is established that reaches from Philip II down to members of the criminal underworld. In my presentation I will argue that in the text there is a rhetoric that links the urban underworld with quality of information. This connection finds its origin in the Guzmán de Alfarache (1599) and is a common motif of the picaresque novel. However, I argue that a merely intertextual reading does not lay bare the significance of the represented practice in the context of late sixteenth/early seventeenth century Madrid. A study of this literary representation in the light of municipal sources reveals that in late sixteenth century Madrid – the setting of the narrative – gossip in the public space is a forbidden practice. The study of sources such as decrees by the municipality and petitions by city police, reveal that the literary representation by Gonzalo de Céspedes y Meneses not only offers a valuation of information control by a marginal part of the urban population that finds its origin in a representation by Mateo Alemán, but moreover intentionally omits a part of the urban context to which they refer, thus creating a discursive space marked by impunity and control over information that juxtaposes differing and contradictory representations of space. I will use this case study to reflect on the microhistory-inspired methodology applied to lay bare these levels of significance.
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Keynote speakers:
Giovanni Levi
Università Ca’Foscari di Venezia
Matti Peltonen
University of Helsinki

Other speakers:
Philippe Bossier (University of Groningen)
Robert Folger (University of Utrecht)
Dinie de Haan (University of Groningen)
Elisabeth Korthals Altes (University of Groningen)
Kostantin Mironov (University of Groningen)
Patrik Mühlenbruch (National Dorothyoka Ograda)
Hannes Tenders (University of Groningen)

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Poster of the conference
Acknowledgments

This conference was a joint effort of:

Biography Institute (http://www.rug.nl/biografieinstituut)
Department of Romance Languages and Cultures
(http://www.rug.nl/let/onwerwijs/afdelingen/rtc/index)

First and foremost, we would like to thank all speakers and attendants for their participation in this conference.

We would like to thank the research institute ICOG (Groningen Research Institute for the Study of Culture) and the Stichting Nicolaas Muleriusfonds for their generous support of this conference.

We would also like to thank Rina Walthaus, Gorus van Oordt, Janneke Smedema-Fluks, Martijn Boven and Goffe Jensma for their help and feedback.

Our special thanks extend to Jona van Keulen and Peter Riem of the RHC Groninger Archieven.

We are particularly grateful to Marijke Wubbolts for her tremendous help with the organization.

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