

Research Alumni interview with Dr. Mike Sinding

Dr. Sinding, what made you choose FAU and ELINAS to work on your research project “Genre Dynamics and Functions: Blending, Framing and Worldview”?

-ELINAS is a unique research center at FAU (unique anywhere, as far as I know), one that’s dedicated to fostering cooperation between literary scholars and scientists.

The directors, Klaus Mecke (Theoretical Physics) and Aura Heydenreich (German Literature) advertised a postdoc position to support their work, and I saw from the ELINAS website that they were specifically interested in comparing and connecting forms of cognition across the arts and the sciences. Moreover, they were specifically interested in genre, narrative, metaphor and world-models as potential bridges between the humanities and the sciences. I had been researching exactly these topics for some years, so it seemed like the perfect environment to develop my work.

Could you give us a short description of your research project?

What was it that made you interested in this specific topic?

-I’ll answer these questions together, if you don’t mind.

The interest in my topics goes back a long way, to my doctoral work on a particular genre, known as Menippean satire (some call it ‘anatomy’). It’s a form of philosophical satire that can be traced back to Greek writers (especially Lucian), and it strongly influenced the early novel, via writers like Miguel de Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*. The best known English authors using the genre are Jonathan Swift and Lawrence Sterne.

There were many studies of Menippean satire, the novel, particular authors and texts, and genre theory. But most scholars seemed slightly baffled by the concept of genre. They seemed to be sure, somehow, both that genres exist and that they don’t really exist, or cannot really be defined satisfactorily—because most genres include such very different texts, and change over time, and merge into other genres. And yet there they are. As Margaret Atwood once said, genres look solid from a distance, but when you get up close it’s like trying to nail jelly to a wall.

So I was fascinated by Menippean satire itself, which includes some of the most brilliant, challenging, and funny books I’d ever read (Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Beckett’s trilogy, Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*), and I was also fascinated by those daunting theoretical questions about what genres are and how they work.

Eventually those questions took me into research on categories, concepts and cognition, and I used that to work out some fairly satisfying answers.

Once I’d worked on a single genre in depth, I became interested in how genres could mix, often in quite complex ways, to create striking new texts, and even new genres. This is the “blending” part of the project. Literary historians say Cervantes “invented” the novel by fusing (in *Don Quixote*) the genre of chivalric romance (marvelous stories of knights’ adventures) with the genre of picaresque tale (gritty stories of rogues learning to survive in the urban underbelly).

The topic of genre mixture has been around for a long time in literary studies. In the Renaissance some writers, like Sir Philip Sidney, attacked genre mixtures as clumsy and ridiculous, but others, including Shakespeare, ignored the Sidneys and created brilliant genre experiments, for example

tragicomedies like *The Winter's Tale*. But there are few efforts to examine genre mixture in detail, and in a systematic way. I aim to do so by analyzing a range of mixed-genre texts, using an analytical framework based in cognitive science, Conceptual Blending Theory (see the next question).

The “framing and worldview” part of the project is a further development.

Looking closely at literary genre blends, I began reconsidering the fact that literary genres were not defined by their functions, as extra-literary genres often are. The point of a birthday card is to send someone a birthday message, and the whole genre design is oriented to that function. The point of a science article is to inform others about new scientific research, and again the whole genre design is oriented to that function.

Literature isn't instrumental like that. A sonnet or play can have a range of functions, which might be different for different people. And a literary text is not necessarily “done” when you've read it once.

But one central function that literature does have is constructing imaginative worlds, and worldviews, and genre is a major resource for literary world-making. Broad literary genres, like comedy and tragedy, are often defined by emotion, and by plot. Their stories are oriented to creating certain moods. And you can also describe moral worldviews or attitudes as comic, tragic, etc.

You often find such narratives and moods used in political discourse to persuade people to accept and support political views, parties and policies. That is, political partisans will “frame” the ideal communities they want to realize in comic terms, and frame the anti-ideal communities they want to reject in tragic terms. Think of Obama's signature comic mood of hope and reconciliation, and the policy directions it implies, vs. Trump's signature tragic sense of catastrophe and cultural war, and its implied policy directions.

I'm looking at how this phenomenon operates in some early texts of modern Western politics.

You work with Mark Turner's and Gilles Fauconnier's theory of conceptual blending. What is this theory about?

-Conceptual blending theory is a theory about how creative thought works, based in linguistics and cognitive science. In fact, the theory has a broad view of creativity, so it addresses many levels of mental complexity, from the everyday to the pyrotechnic, in many domains, from ordinary speech to literature, to music and visual art, to mathematics and science. So while Turner and Fauconnier have described blending as a “mechanism of creativity”, it has deep implications for “the way we think” (another title of theirs) in general. They analyze major forms of thought such as metaphor, counterfactuals (e.g. ‘if I were you, I would ...’), irony, narrative, and much more.

They see these as all related to one another, on the basis of deeper principles, rather than being entirely different processes. So they compare these many kinds of examples in order to describe those principles of how concepts are framed and interconnected and manipulated in detail.

Many others have picked up blending theory and worked with it and expanded it. I use it in my studies of genre mixture and find it very helpful.

For more on blending theory, see www.markturner.org/blending.html

You chose Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* for your analysis. Why?

-These were the main texts in the "French Revolution Debate" in 1790s Britain, which was a very long and bitter "pamphlet war" about what the Revolution meant, and whether Britain should embrace it or shun it. They are considered the founding texts of modern ideologies of conservatism (Burke) and liberalism (Paine). As one historian puts it, the Revolution Debate represents "the origins of modern politics". There are many varieties of these ideologies, and in some ways their current incarnations don't look anything like Burke and Paine. But there are important continuities. Very roughly, Burke was conservative because he was against the Revolution, and Paine was liberal because he supported the Revolution. Burke saw it as the worst thing that had ever happened in the world, a kind of descent into a dystopia or hell. Paine saw it as the best thing that had ever happened, an ascent into a utopian or paradisaal state.

There have been efforts in recent years to describe the contrasting psychologies of conservatives and liberals. But so far those efforts have focused on recent US campaigns, rather than looking closely at these substantial texts which are at the historical roots of this psycho-political divide.

Burke and Paine are both powerful and intriguing writers, and I am looking at the details of how they use metaphors and narrative genres throughout their texts to construct their worldviews.

How did you find the interaction between researchers at FAU?

-I find the interaction at FAU very engaging and impressive. I've never seen the kind of exchange and collaboration between the arts and the sciences as you find in the entire ELINAS network.

You get physicists and mathematicians and neurobiologists talking with literary scholars about shared concerns. Everyone is interested in how the others think and what they do, and there's a very lively exchange. They're creating what they call an 'interdiscursive zone' linking the sciences and literary studies. This goes against the tendency (easy, and natural in a way) to fall back on one's customary assumptions, and keep digging deeper into one's specialization. The interdisciplinary work is very challenging, but also very rewarding.

We want to get past the idea of the 'two cultures' (as C. P. Snow put it), the idea that scientists and humanists have grown so far apart that there is no shared language and no possibility of communication. This has never been entirely true. Snow himself was a novelist as well as a physicist, and there are plenty of other examples. But it does capture certain realities. The division between the humanities and the sciences has become institutionalized, and the need for ever-deeper specialization is a real barrier to cooperation. But with the right networks of people, and with efforts to adapt institutions, it is possible to begin to overcome the divisions and discover new ways of thinking.

What would you say to students or young researchers who are considering whether they should choose FAU for a stay abroad?

-Of course it depends on what a person's particular goals are. For researchers interested in literature and science, ELINAS is wonderful. Where else can you take courses on 'physics for humanists', and 'history of physics', and meet eminent scientists who are also writers, or writers with deep scientific knowledge (Iggy McGovern, Roald Hoffman, Lavinia Greenlaw, Raoul Schrott), and attend lectures and conferences by leading experts in literature and science from all over the world?

-For students from North America, they might be pleasantly surprised to find how supportive of research Germany in general is. You have the DFG, but also the Humboldt Foundation, the Volkswagen Foundation, the Max Planck institutes, and many other organizations. Research is reported on in local newspapers and magazines. That doesn't happen much in North America, as far as I can tell.

And FAU is a good place to start. There is a large number of international students, and the FAU Welcome Center is a terrific resource for visitors from around the world. The people there are very friendly, and extremely helpful for arranging the stay, getting you settled in, and dealing with any questions that arise. I haven't seen anything quite like it at other universities.

What were your first and subsequent impressions of the Erlangen-Nuremberg region?

-We noticed Erlangen was an interesting mix of the French style (from the Huguenot exiles from France, as I understand), and the Bavarian.

We arrived in April, so one of our very early impressions was Bergkirchweih. That was something like Bavarian boot camp, an intense immersion into festival culture, because our Gästehaus was right across the street from the site. It was fun for the first few days, but the celebrations were loud and relentless, and after day 10 we hoped we'd never hear "Ein Prosit" again.

But the whole region has a remarkable history and culture. Erlangen is a lovely town to live in, without the expense and crowds of a big city. And we have come to appreciate how well-located it is. When you feel the need for some cosmopolitan immersion, Nuremberg and Munich and Regensburg are close. You can get on a bus and be in Prague in 4 hours. My family and friends back in Canada can't believe this.

Do you have a highlight, an experience or a moment from your stay in Erlangen and at FAU which you find particularly memorable?

-Bergkirchweih was certainly memorable, but not always for good reasons.

-More significantly, the first workshop we had with the group was memorable in all the right ways. Two guest professors, Bruce Clarke from Texas Tech U and Dirk Vanderbeke from the University of Jena, spent 4 days guiding us through a study of the narrative qualities of a very ambitious science fiction novel, Stanislaw Lem's "Fiasco." The workshop was held at the Bamberg Sternwarte observatory, which was a wonderful setting, and roughly half of the group of about 15 were astronomers, while the other half were literary scholars. So it was a really interesting encounter of backgrounds and styles of thinking, and it was then that I really started to get to know the group, and see its potential.

What are your favorite places at FAU and Erlangen-Nuremberg?

-There are some excellent places for meetings at FAU. I'm thinking of the Orangerie, which is directly on the Schlossgarten and the Schlossplatz; and also the Alte Bibliothek.

Again, the Bamberg Sternwarte Observatory is quite special. It's perched at the top of a hill in the Altstadt, with a panoramic view of the city. It has a kind of villa attached, an astronomy museum, a biergarten next door, and the astronomers have created an impressive garden.

-And at the Uni-Gästehaus, we became fond of Entla's Keller, the lovely biergarten across the street. It's a great place to sit out among the trees and the lampions, and have a beer and a meal.

(Interview conducted by Christina Dworak, M1 – Office for Marketing, March 2017)