



Harry & Helen Gray
Humanities Program Series
Volume 2



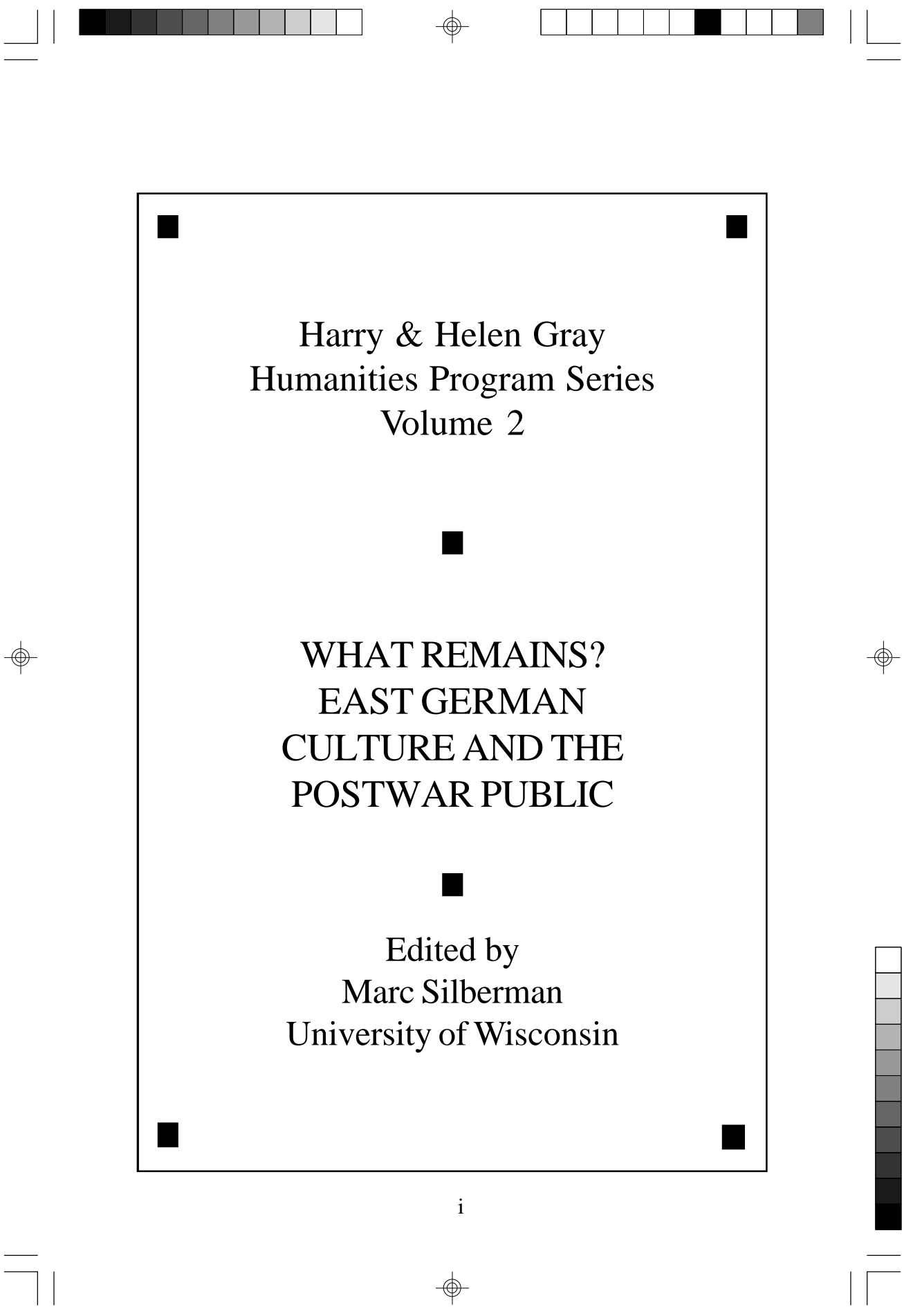
WHAT REMAINS?
EAST GERMAN
CULTURE AND THE
POSTWAR REPUBLIC



Edited by
Marc Silberman
University of Wisconsin

American Institute for Contemporary German Studies
The Johns Hopkins University






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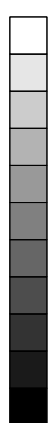
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FOREWORD

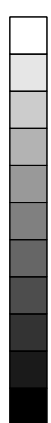
In 1990, when the German Democratic Republic (GDR) disappeared, few would have expected its almost immediate second coming in academic seminars, conferences, books, and journals. This volume of scholarly essays does not intend to resurrect a lost cause but rather asks questions about the problems of conceptualizing an important part of GDR identity: literature as a public event. Since literature had often been the only medium of public communication about life in East Germany while the Party held a tight reign over all information in the press and media, there has been a strong tendency to credit writers with creating a viable public sphere despite the stringent controls of everyday affairs. Did writers indeed create such a sphere which can be defined in participatory terms as in western societies? Or were the writers just variables in what has been called “socialist public sphere,” seemingly a contradiction in terms?




Thanks to Marc Silberman this volume allows a deeper look into the relationship of writers, state, and audience in the former German Democratic Republic. As an AICGS Fellow in Spring 1997, Silberman organized a one-day workshop at the Institute with experts in the area of East German literature, film, and censorship on April 25, 1997. Under the title, “What Remains? East German Culture and the Postwar Public,” the workshop opened a debate about the appropriateness of using the concept of public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) which Jürgen Habermas has defined as crucial for the development of modern democracies. In his lead essay, “Problematizing the ‘Socialist Public Sphere’: Concepts and Consequences,” Silberman assesses the ways in which state and Party interference in the literary exchange between author and audience enhanced the significance of private speech, creating new modes of public symbolism and mutual understanding which are hard to account for in the established western terminology. Silberman focuses more on the period of the 1950s and 1960s, when the GDR came into its own, yet he also discusses what later has been called *Nischengesellschaft*, the semi-autonomous sphere between public and private spaces which opened up in peculiar ways long before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He concludes with a look at the experiences and insights that East Germans can claim to bring to the rapidly changing reality of unified Germany and unifying Europe.



Silberman’s essay is also a response to the book, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (1995), in which David Bathrick uses Habermas’ concept of public sphere for a reconstruction of the intellectual opposition in the GDR around such writers as Heiner Müller, Christa Wolf and





Rudolf Bahro. While fine-tuning, in the ensuing discussion, his use of the concept of public sphere in a more direct relation to the later phases of the GDR, Bathrick concentrates in his workshop presentation on the vicissitudes of creating and **living** a public life in East Germany, exemplified in Stephan Hermlin, the late poet and essayist. Explicitly non-public is the censorship of the publishing sector which Carol Anne Costabile-Heming reveals with a stunning documentation of the byzantine treatment of the poet Günter Kunert. That the fall of the Wall meant the collapse of the “socialist public sphere,” is obvious; less obvious are the forms which the transformations of aesthetic production have taken since 1990 vis-à-vis a convoluted market and a less than attentive audience. Focusing on writers and filmmakers, Erk Grimm and Barton Byg demonstrate that these transformations reach deep into the creative process. Transformations of a different kind are outlined by Friederike Eigler, who discusses the rationale according to which Uwe Johnson, once labeled “the author of the two Germanies,” is being repositioned in the literary history of East and West Germany.

As this history is beginning to be rewritten, the precarious role of writers as producers of and participants in the East German public sphere is being reevaluated. The political ambiguities of their opposition that had been veiled by the western demand for eastern dissidents gains sharper contours. Embracing neither nostalgia nor damnation, the volume makes a case for the important role of the literary intelligentsia in reproducing the moral claims upon which the second German state after Hitler was built. It does not raise the question whether such privileging of public speech does not also privilege the literary over the technical intelligentsia which was more important for the inner functioning of this state yet less visible, less public, less symbolic. This question might be worth picking up at some future workshop.

“What Remains?” The Harry and Helen Gray Humanities Program of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies instituted the series with a workshop under the title, “The Dismantling and Restructuring of East German Cultural Institutions.” Organized in 1995 by AICGS Fellow Andreas Graf, it focused mainly on the dismantling of the media and broadcasting system. Marc Silberman’s venture in the literary field is a most welcome extension of the topic. I express my gratitude to him and the other contributors for the stimulating and innovative volume.

Frank Trommler
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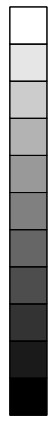
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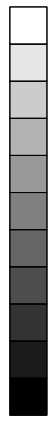
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PROBLEMATIZING THE “SOCIALIST PUBLIC SPHERE”: CONCEPTS AND CONSEQUENCES

Marc Silberman

Introduction

Public sphere is a concept derived from theoretical models and historical descriptions of the emergence of bourgeois society in the eighteenth century. How does it relate to the **socialist** public sphere in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)? In this overly administrative society, one with little or no tolerance for the constitutional guarantees of individual freedom and participation characteristic of liberal democracies, there existed, of course, modes of intellectual exchange, communication, discussion, and public expression. Still, the institutional structures of this putatively planned society left no room for open, rational debate, the very core of the idea of public sphere or *Öffentlichkeit* as defined by Jürgen Habermas.¹ What, then, does it mean to approach the social and cultural interaction in the GDR within the context of these terms?

As a Marxist-Leninist state, the GDR combined traditional features of monocratic societies, characterized by immobility, homogeneity, conservatism, and modern features of industrialized societies, characterized by mass production, mass appeal, and mass mobilization for an abstract goal. Yet, state control was never complete or absolute, and the Party was always obliged to compromise and recognize marginal spaces beyond its influence, especially in the area of culture and religion. In the cultural domain, for example, the number of organizations for those involved in the arts, in mediating the arts, in mass culture, etc. grew rapidly and engendered new demands and expectations that often conflicted with the Party's sense of authority or extended beyond its reach, despite efforts at hierarchical control and surveillance. Another aspect of the problem became visible in pronouncements of the official cultural policy when the Party repeatedly called for “open dialogue” but reacted with repressive, punitive acts whenever artists or writers actually made specific demands. I am suggesting, in other words, that there was no gradual shift from premodern to modern structures but rather that the simultaneity of **both** characterizes the GDR, not only in the last two decades but already in the 1950s and 1960s. In a more narrow sense, I question those who regard the appropriation of modernist and avant-garde cultural and artistic forms that began in the 1970s as a paradigm for the rediscovery of or “catching up” to

modernism. This position, which has been argued strongly by western scholars, ignores the fact the aesthetic shift in the 1970s was in the first instance a response to the political and moral stagnation in GDR society, not to structural modernization.² I am arguing furthermore that the public sphere in the GDR did not emerge only in the 1970s but rather the oppositional discourse and activity that became more and more apparent during the last two decades of its existence were the product of events and experiences in the 1950s and 1960s.

Öffentlichkeit is a concept that can be said in the most general sense to weave together economic, social, political, and cultural dimensions of a particular historical state, and as such it offers a framework for problematizing the way we retrospectively understand the GDR. In this respect my goal is fairly modest: to work toward more differentiated categories that can take into account the complexities of experience behind the so-called iron curtain. The image of a homogeneous, totalitarian society in which personal and social interests coincided simply mirrors the state-propagated illusion of collective harmony. The GDR may now be a closed chapter in strictly historical terms, but it is part of the postwar history of Germany, and the way we explain it to ourselves will have consequences for the way we judge and narrate Germany's relation to the present. Thus, it is important to specify how people saw themselves in the GDR, to understand their lives and habits as a system of social relations and differences, as a practice with both a rationale and historical meaning, although not necessarily a "rational" one. This demands a self-awareness and historical understanding that is not often visible nowadays. Reflecting on her past, writer and essayist Daniela Dahn remarked: "The internal structures of the GDR were by far not so monolithic as many apparently think today."³ The concept of *Öffentlichkeit* is a helpful tool for grasping more precisely the complex encounters with institutions and cultural forces within these internal structures and the relationship between institutional power and private behavior, whether it was opportunistic, oppositional, or both. My comments here are intended to interrogate the specificity of consensual and oppositional behavior in everyday life within the systemically immanent politicization of all social relations.

Opposition, resistance, convergence, congruence, complicity: these are all words which need to be made historically specific and meaningful in the context of GDR culture. Often enough since 1989 the state of GDR culture studies in the West has been bemoaned: no one read the signs of paralysis and stagnation leading to collapse, analysis was selective and oriented toward an idealized or stultified image of the socialist reality, texts were used to derive direct insight into "real life," and the analysis of representative authors and

single texts often neglected their conditions of production and reception. While the GDR's collapse has perfunctorily erased most of the institutional support of its culture, it has also opened up archives, simplified access to individuals, and freed GDR cultural studies from carrying the burden of what belongs more rightfully in the domain of the social sciences. As literary and cultural historians we do not exclude sociological and political concepts from our work, but we do set different accents and different distinctions from those of sociologists and political scientists. As a result, demographic or typological descriptions can recede in favor of recreating the framework for understanding the dilemmas and decisions faced by individuals, trying to do justice to the conditions, hopes and illusions, objective difficulties, and failures they faced.

The process of revitalizing GDR culture studies has already gotten underway. David Bathrick has made an important contribution to begin this process with his prize-winning study *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*.⁴ The title points to the crucial issues: speech, culture, and political change. More important for my purposes here, Bathrick's phrase "socialist public sphere" serves as a framework for investigating the role of dissident party intellectuals and socialist writers in the GDR. He shows that the cultural, or more specifically, the literary public sphere increasingly became the only intermediary site where critique was tolerated and effective, in contrast to inner-party dissent. In many ways my comments here are an extension of Bathrick's argument, formulated not in the spirit of correction but critical appreciation.⁵

At the outset of his study Bathrick refers to historian Hayden White's analytical approach, which draws attention to historical narratives as imaginative constructs subject to the methods and tools elaborated by literary and textual critics.⁶ Cultural historians of the GDR, Bathrick and myself for instance, are also subject to this hermeneutical precept, that is, we are "reading" events, lives, and texts, frequently against the grain, as symptoms of a system to be reconstructed and as constitutive elements of that system. Equally significant for the (cultural) historian's undertaking is a self-reflective awareness of positioning, of narrative voice, if you will. In the epilogue of his study, Bathrick shows how emotionally charged the series of three "literature debates" have been that took place after 1990 in reunified Germany. His own approach is not entirely beyond these emotions, for his urge to understand and convince can not be neatly separated from questions of self-identity and political conviction. I too am in a position that is not free of emotions, or "investments" as Bathrick calls them (5-6). As an outsider who has taken a keen professional interest in the GDR since 1970, who has lived unforgettable

personal experiences and made close friends there, I find myself subject to a special combination of memory and historicization, tinged with desires for justification, condemnation, reconciliation. Thus, I do recognize Bathrick's final wisdom vis-à-vis oppositional voices in the GDR that insists on situating them within the historical context from which they spoke, one characterized by a "double-edged evolutionary process" of self-legitimation within the system and the challenge to it (241). But I would go one step further and claim that critical intellectuals in *any* society, including ours and including us, are always subject to the double-edged evolutionary process in their relationship to the institutions of power.

Locating the Public Sphere

First let us consider some terminological issues. There are various definitions of "public" - state-related, accessible to everyone, of concern to everyone, pertaining to the common good or shared interest - and they correspond to symmetrical variations in the meaning of private.⁷ Indeed, one of the central achievements of the bourgeois public sphere, according to Habermas, was to distinguish the private from the public by creating the discursive possibilities for private persons to deliberate about public matters. The public sphere, in this tradition, is the institutional site for private individuals to construct public consent. Of course, the "public" as well as the "private" are historical categories, that is, they rest on politically and culturally determined classifications that delegitimize some interests and valorize others. Although the public sphere is in principle open to internal difference, it nonetheless excludes specific groups from political participation in specific social formations (for example, working-class women in the nineteenth century).⁸ Consequently, the model of the public sphere implicitly concedes the presence of alternative accessibility to "official," public political life. This will be an important consideration for the socialist public sphere in the GDR where participation in official politics was especially restrictive. For a socialist public sphere did not exist there if by that we mean a set of institutions, communication networks, and practices which facilitated debate about causes and remedies to political stagnation and economic deterioration and which encouraged the creation of oppositional sites of discourse. Based on this traditional definition of the ideal, self-transforming public sphere in which everyone participates in the practical discourse, evaluation, and validation of communicative principles, one could simply write off the public sphere in the GDR as a perversion and be done.

Not only historically but also culturally there are differences in the understanding of the “public” in the GDR. One dimension, for example, that impinges on the nature of the “public” is the concept of community. In contrast to the “public,” which is constructed by means of antagonism and debate, no matter how constrained, community refers to a relatively homogeneous and bounded collectivity characterized by consensus. The GDR’s self-representation characterized it as a nonantagonistic community (*sozialistische Menschengemeinschaft*), and the state developed a range of policies to ensure national and ethnic homogeneity as well as security procedures to eliminate ideological difference. These measures aimed to control or even prevent social transformations and thus helped the party to maintain its power. On another level, the plethora of private groups (*Nischen*), artists circles, and subcultural enclaves in the GDR reflected very different self-perceptions. Many regarded the privacy and intimacy of such “communities” as protection against their ideas or voice spreading into a wider arena or even as conspiratorial. Others signaled their difference in order to gain attention, in the East or beyond the border in West Germany, hoping perhaps that notoriety would protect them. Yet others “dropped out” entirely or finally left the GDR.

Officially *Öffentlichkeit* did not exist in the GDR. The tradition of Marxist analysis views the separation of state and civil society as an invention of the eighteenth century, that is, of a historically contingent period of bourgeois domination. It regards the liberal public sphere as a domain of bourgeois egoism and competition that fosters alienation and atomization rather than democracy. The ideal of public discourse becomes, consequently, a classic example of ideology, the false consciousness that masks the state as an instrument of the controlling class under the guise of equal rights. Marx and Engels envisioned a different model of organic unity or collective social harmony premised on the withering away of the bourgeois state, a form of political organization representing bourgeois economic interests. From the perspective of state socialism, then, the autonomous institution of civil society is a disruption “that must be controlled, regulated and dominated by the superior rationality and order guaranteed by state power.”⁹ The state in this ideal socialist society is the caretaker of universal interest, superior to individual interests, and in its Leninist extension this synthesis of the general good is crystallized in the party, in its leaders and functionaries.

In this respect there is a logic to the GDR’s founding in 1949 as a counter model to parliamentary democracy and the constitutional state in the western mode. The small group of emigrés who returned to Berlin from exile in Moscow to aid the Red Army in administering the Soviet Occupation Zone after

Germany's surrender was equipped with experience from their political defeats in the Weimar Republic and with a theory of Marxism-Leninism more attuned to the assumption and maintenance of power than to the construction of an egalitarian and free society. At the latest by 1949 the communist party (SED or *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland*) had abandoned whatever efforts had been undertaken to reestablish everyday civil society and directed its energies toward cementing its own leadership and control. Committed to the process of modern rationalization, the new leaders sought to eliminate the parallel developments of autonomous social subsystems. The instantiation of the one-party system, especially in its Stalinist mode of the *Partei neuen Typs* (new type of party), was directed at preventing the formation of a pluralistic, self-organizing civil society opposed to the Party and its claims to legitimacy. Party discipline, which formalizes an asymmetrical relationship between "discourse partners", became a weapon for conformity among the political elite, while public discourse tended to vanish in behind-the-scenes negotiations and between-the-line innuendoes. Thus, both socialist theory and practice in the GDR collapsed the state apparatus with the public sphere, thereby cementing authoritarian, hierarchical structures. Yet, if the public sphere did not exist in the traditional sense, public opinion did have a place, or to be more exact, published opinion, in which the social consciousness of the ruling class is reflected.¹⁰ In a socialist formation like the GDR the ruling class is defined as the majority working class, whose party controls the means of production and distribution. The party then assumes the traditional function of the public sphere because it represents in principle the identity of all class interests in the socialist society. Peter Hohendahl has equated this sublated version of the bourgeois public sphere with *Parteiöffentlichkeit* (party public sphere), which claims "to mediate between the Party and State on the one hand and the Party and the mass of citizens on the other."¹¹

Parteiöffentlichkeit and its pendant party discipline quickly bogged down in what Habermas referred to as the plebiscitary-acclamatory public sphere typical of dictatorial industrial societies.¹² In fact, a widely accepted explanation for the GDR's premodern social organization finds corroboration precisely in such phenomena. To be sure the bureaucratic and administrative structures consolidated in the early years with their ritualized representative functions and prescribed political status were premodern, even feudal when compared to the model of the liberal public sphere. But from the beginning an ongoing process of differentiation characteristic of complex, modern societies was also underway, not the least owing to the GDR's self-proclaimed goal to compete with capitalism. This introduced internal changes that constantly

undermined the premodern, or better, antimodern, closed social order, inducing a dynamic of structural conflict that the party was never able to master. *Parteipfentlichkeit*, as the organized reason of the party, was, then, on the one hand nonsense, on the other hand, party discipline did allow a limited space for internal free discussion, but without consequences for the public.

Mapping the Socialist Public Sphere

The point of departure for a discussion of the **socialist** public sphere should logically be the public sphere *tout court*.¹³ There is little need here to reiterate Habermas's normative aspects of the bourgeois public sphere, since this ideal type tends to mask precisely the internal contradictions and differences that emerge there. In other words, Habermas's *Öffentlichkeit* is less helpful for its critical edge than for its suggestiveness in describing the particularities of functions and structures in the socialist public sphere. Bathrick's *The Powers of Speech* is more to the point.

Bathrick defines three major, interlinking public spheres in the GDR: the official public sphere under party control, the West German media (including primarily broadcasting media but also other publication outlets), which were scrutinized closely and for different reasons at all levels of society, and the unofficial or counter public enclaves that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s (34). Rather than a map of the socialist public sphere, this triadic structure conveys a chronological image of the increasing differentiation of public space in the GDR. Straddling all three of these is yet another layer of mediation, the literary public sphere, institutionalized in the early years to legitimate the authority of the Party's socialist "ideal" and after 1970 increasingly independent as a vehicle of critical discourse (35-41). This latter function becomes the main object of attention in Bathrick's study. The socialist public sphere as such is treated in a concise commentary on a 1979 article by the literary scholar Robert Weimann, which introduced for the first time the concept of socialist public sphere within the GDR context (47-50).¹⁴ Both Weimann and Bathrick argue finally that socialist *Öffentlichkeit* did not really exist (yet) either theoretically or practically, but rather the concept referred to a projected or ideal notion of an open relationship between writer and audience that would not be controlled by a third instance (SED). In the following comments my aim is to pursue the evidence for a post-bourgeois or nascent socialist public sphere in the GDR by identifying the formation of various kinds of (hybrid) publics and the relations between them against the background of an ideal-typical socialist state.

Habermas's early work on the public sphere, in particular his critical perception of its structural transformation in late capitalism, has been faulted because it seems impossible to account adequately for the complex interpenetrations of state and society as a context for the ideal of a public sphere and at the same time claim for it the representative function as a forum for oppositional activity and debate. In a similar vein, I want to examine whether it is possible to speak of a socialist public sphere with attributes that include both hierarchical, monocentric claims to power and the spaces of counter or oppositional activity. As we have seen, the concept of socialist public sphere was applied to the GDR already in the late 1970s, yet the multiple qualifiers circulating around *Öffentlichkeit* are only one indication of its indeterminacy. To distinguish the socialist variant from the classical sense of responsible, general discourse about public matters, commentators have introduced, for example, formulations like *die sogenannte Öffentlichkeit* (so-called), *verbotene Öffentlichkeit* (prohibited), *zensierte Quasi-Öffentlichkeit* (censored), *verhinderte Öffentlichkeit* (obstructed), *eine relative Öffentlichkeit* (a relative), *informelle Öffentlichkeit* (informal), *kleine Öffentlichkeit* (small), *Spezialisten-Öffentlichkeit* (specialists'), *Suböffentlichkeit* (sub-), and *partei-gesteuerte Öffentlichkeit* (party-controlled). All of these reflect the need to acknowledge corrupted or regulated, yet productive forms of communication in the GDR.

Bathrick too introduces multiple appellations for the public sphere in the GDR without indicating whether they are parts of a larger whole, alternatives, or complements. These include: the officially sanctioned socialist public sphere (31), the cultural public sphere (41), the artistic public sphere (45), the critical socialist public sphere (110), the nondialectical public sphere (125), the literary socialist public sphere (224), and the counter public sphere (240). This last phrase Bathrick uses to distinguish what he calls the "established" literary opposition (e.g., Christa Wolf, Christoph Hein, Heiner Müller, etc.) from the Prenzlauer Berg poets, who developed a network of semipublic and unofficial outlets for their writing and multimedia performances during the 1980s. As far as I know, however, these poets and the GDR underground in other East German cities like Dresden Neustadt, Leipzig's Eastside, Erfurt, and Karl-Marx-Stadt shunned the use of the term "public sphere" to describe their spaces, including "counter public sphere," because it presumes an explicit political motivation, a domain of activity they rejected.¹⁵ Instead one finds phrases like *nichtkonforme Kultur* (nonconformist culture), *autonome Kunst* (autonomous art), *Gegenkultur* (counter culture), *Ergänzungskultur* (supplemental culture), *Kulturopposition* (oppositional

culture), *unabhängige Kultur* (independent culture), *inoffizielle Kultur* (inofficial culture), *ausgegrenzte Kultur* (excluded culture), and *zweite or andere Kultur* (second or other culture).¹⁶ Attempts by participants to describe these parallel spaces of cultural and artistic activity, in other words, locate them not on a map vis-à-vis the systemically given parameters of politics in the public sphere, but rather insist on their absolute autonomy. This “other culture’s” stress on imaginative activity, on the practice of inventing and circulating a culture outside of official boundaries, was naturally unable to escape the political boundaries of the system which brought it forth, but it does mark a significant difference insofar as it was able to reject the collective anxieties that served to reproduce the limitations of the established public sphere.¹⁷

To return to Habermas, in his later work he shifted his focus from the normative model of liberal democracy to questions of intersubjective communicative processes in modern societies, which can be understood as an indication of the need to integrate more complex social realities into his model of social change.¹⁸ In this context he writes of the GDR as a “totalitarian public sphere:”

It is precisely this communicative praxis on the part of citizens that, in totalitarian regimes, is subjected to the control of the secret police. The revolutionary changes in eastern and central Europe have confirmed these analyses. Not coincidentally, they were triggered by reform policies initiated under the banner of *glasnost* The German Democratic Republic is the primary case in point. In a first step, out of these citizen movements grew the infrastructure of a new order, whose outline had already become visible in the ruins of state socialism. The pacesetters of this revolution were voluntary associations in the churches, the human rights groups, the oppositional circles pursuing ecological and feminist goals, against whose latent influence the totalitarian public sphere could from the beginning be stabilized only through reliance on force.¹⁹

In the meantime it has become clear that this GDR opposition (like the literary public sphere) was unable to influence the construction of a “new order,” and in this respect their experience is unique among the oppositional movements in Eastern Europe. They played only a peripheral role in the rapid integration of the GDR into the reunified Federal Republic, which took a form they had never intended. That the opposition’s hopes were dashed in the reality of political collapse - and we must be careful here in representing the opposition as a unified voice - raises legitimate questions as to what role it actually played in breaking the grip of a totalitarian regime, for none of the citizen movements or

critical writers seemed to have linked up to the majority of the population prior to October 1989. Here Habermas's focus on communicative (inter)action, on voice and language as the vehicle for communication may be suggestive.

It is noteworthy that socialist leadership historically was positively paranoid about the power of the word. Party, state, and the security apparatus reacted with panic to the least public criticism, as if words could bring down the entire edifice. Of course, this was on the one hand the Enlightenment legacy inscribed into Marxism-Leninism, the belief in the social efficacy of rational argument, and on the other it was the legitimate and in retrospect justified conviction that here was the Achilles heel of actually existing socialism. The fact that voices or the collective voice of "*Wir sind das Volk*" communicated a message loud enough to unseat the geriatric leadership in October 1989 is a strong argument for the power of speech.²⁰ The fact that voices (and noise) continue to play such an important role in the process of political transformation in societies under crisis (I am thinking of Belgrade and Sofia in recent months) only corroborates it. The citizen movements in the GDR lacked contact with the broader population precisely because of a lack of public communication. With the founding of the *Neues Forum* in September 1989 this isolation was partially overcome, and the group's manifesto even defined dialogue and discussion, that is, the end of ritualized political language, as its goal: "In our country the communication between state and society is obviously disturbed... We need a democratic dialogue..."²¹ If, then, one accepts the presence of *Öffentlichkeit* in the GDR - a position that itself is open to question or that at least must be carefully qualified, it is necessary to examine its function and limits. A narrow definition would see it singularly as the privileged arena of struggle organized by the party; a broad definition would emphasize multiple publics among different collectivities. The distinction is important, since it locates where emancipatory "politics" took place and even what constituted the political in that historical context. Discussions based on a narrow definition of *Öffentlichkeit* often proceed no further than partitioning blame among collaborators and morally courageous dissidents. The broad definition treats variants and crossovers, an approach that seems more fruitful to capture the contradictions of GDR society.

The public sphere touches upon the core of intellectuals' and writers' identities because their most important tool is language and their prime goal is communication. It has become a cliché that the logocratic nature of communism predisposed the "intelligentsia" to an important role in socialist societies, conveying the party's utopian vision to the general public in one direction as educator of the masses and in the other representing the people's

needs as mediator for the vanguard leadership. The reverse side of the coin was the equally widespread surveillance and repression of writers and intellectuals by communist leaders. Revisionists, dissidents, and renegades were not mere class enemies but betrayers who interpreted the “sacred” words and texts differently and therefore threatened the maintenance of power.²²

Bathrick argues that, rather than traditional politics as in Habermas’s public sphere, literature and discourse about cultural values became the privileged sphere for critical reasoning, for in the collapsed space of the socialist public sphere the literary writer was by definition not just a private person but a public institution: “In the GDR, as in other socialist societies, the area of culture and in particular literature came to provide an invaluable forum for articulating the needs for pluralism and for actively organizing the groundwork for a more democratic public sphere. More than any other public institution, the literary writer served as spokesperson for issues of moral, philosophical, social, and above all political significance - a role that far transcended the social function traditionally accorded the realm of belles lettres in Western capitalist societies” (30). Situated between the state and the private sphere, the writer indeed becomes in this construction a cipher for the public sphere itself, the site where dominant discourse is contested. At the same time it is advisable to keep in mind two limitations. First, the “intelligentsia” as a group was not homogeneous in the GDR. It included party elites, technicians, artists, writers, scholars, and teachers. Of course, not all of them were oppositional intellectuals; only a minority saw itself in this role, and their acts ranged from quiet diplomacy and humanitarian gestures to conspiratorial dissidence and open defiance. Similarly, not all critics were intellectuals, so that other forms of everyday opposition must also be recognized, ranging from surreptitious labor opposition through work-by-rules actions to spying for the West out of political conviction. Second, the focus on intellectuals assumes a sophisticated, urban social strata that is frequently equated with East Berlin, thereby ignoring developments beyond the boundaries of the capital. As a result there has been an unfortunate tendency to focus on representative writers and intellectuals from Berlin at the expense of “normal” citizens and provincial life when elaborating the status and function of the GDR public sphere.

Speech in the Public Sphere

The exclusion of interest groups and social conflicts from the political arena in the young GDR of the 1950s meant that literature and writers assumed significant functions of representation and role modeling. Literature became public event, and writers were invited to contribute to the constitution of a new

socialist identity. Just as in the early bourgeois public sphere, cultural activity was to prepare the ground for political processes, of course without the autonomous institutions on which it was premised in the Enlightenment. From the party's point of view culture and politics collapsed into cultural policies (*Kulturpolitik*), a closed system with its own rules including loyalty to a given course and the definition of art as conditioning all activities. But the idea of intellectuals and political leaders as partners dominated cultural life in the GDR: "We registered a demand with those in power when we said we considered ourselves as socially critical writers who wanted to be integrated with their criticism into the system in which they live; in fact, we expected that the critique would be accepted even by those criticized, if not longingly then at least for the sake of the thing."²³ This (retrospective) description of an attitude shared by writers who were planning an independent anthology of literary texts in 1975 is typical, and their self-definition as (critical) partners of those in power reflects their treatment as an elite by the party. A corollary of this partnership, which only on the surface contradicts it, was the sense of solidarity among critical intellectuals as an oppositional force: "There was a unity and a good understanding among intellectuals. But this was only based on the fact that, somehow or other, you were *anti*... Real differences were hushed up."²⁴ This clinch between the partners of the socialist public sphere developed quite early in the GDR and preoccupied oppositional energies until its very end. The legacy of nondifferentiation among the critics only began to emerge after 1989, probably most strikingly in the change in affiliation by members of the citizens' party *Neues Forum* (later *Grünen/Bündnis 90*) to the CDU in January 1997.

The new socialist identity to which culture was to contribute in the GDR was grounded in the notion of a unified, homogeneous *Kulturnation*, a concept that itself reaches back to the Enlightenment. The expectation and practice of literature as an educational tool, as a moral weapon or a weapon of moral criticism enabled literature to distinguish the private (one's own voice) from the public (the putative consensual will of the working class), although the fundamental critique of authoritarian structures embedded in the private morality of the Enlightenment emerged rather late in the GDR. The editors of the planned anthology quoted above continue: "We look back and chuckle at our illusions. But we remember also the tough fights with those in power, which were sometimes a fight about single words but always a fight for the place in the moral center of the society."²⁵ Similar to Habermas, who privileged private virtues like morality, authenticity, and sincerity over public virtues of negotiation and consensus-building in his description of the constitution of the early bourgeois public sphere, these writers - still in 1994 - recall their activities

twenty years earlier primarily as a moral struggle. Here one begins to recognize the long-term effect of the Party's goal of depoliticizing social conflict in the early GDR and channeling it into moral and cultural values that were to be realized by pedagogy rather than politics. An equally sobering long-term effect was the widespread attitude toward speech as duplicitous or as nonbinding game. Public and published communication were perceived as the very opposite of communicative interaction, expressed in the frequent references to the falsity (*Verlogenheit*) of the media, the school system, or official statistics. Similarly, the perception of the socialist public sphere as a "playground," as a "rigged game," or as a situation with "rules of the game" exposes the awareness of the limitations of consent and the mechanisms intended to prevent any unforeseen speech.²⁶ The theatricalization of the public sphere, that is, the accommodation to staged communication with practiced roles and formulaic speech, also created acutely sensitive habits of coding language and reading between the lines.

Did these habits define, then, the rules of discourse in the socialist public sphere? Or did the Party's special status and its exclusion of certain discursive "issues" negate the very notion of discourse that grounds interactive communication and social change in the liberal public sphere? Systems theory characterizes Soviet-type societies as one in which a part of the system dominates the entirety; in this case the priority of the ideological subsystem transforms philosophy, science, art, literature, etc. into sham discourses.²⁷ Although such approaches allow for limited spaces in which private opinion can be expressed, it discounts the idea that protected niches represent a structure for discourse about social issues. In my view, however, two factors qualify this approach for the GDR: the Party itself was always forced for structural reasons to engage in political discourses beyond its own needs of legitimation, and the presence of the church maintained and, after 1972, organized possibilities for a variety of critical, autonomous discourses. This should not be confused with the ongoing official demand for "critical and creative difference of opinion" (*kritische und schöpferische Meinungsstreit*) or the entreaties to begin "the important discussion" (*das große Gespräch*) about one issue or another. These were formulaic phrases which masked the instrumentalization of power by the Party.

Bathrick's notion of the "powers of speech" refers to Michel Foucault's definition of institutional discourse, not one produced by individual subjects but constituted by means of linguistic and textual practices. He invokes this framework in the introduction (13-21, set off with an epigram by Foucault) in order to analyze the way opposition functioned in the GDR because it helps him

define dominant institutions of power, the challenges to and changes in those institutions, and the way individuals were both agents and objects of power relations (15). A strict Foucaultian approach to literary or cultural history would not recognize the role of intellectuals or writers as subjects who have intentions and who can control language. Rather, they would be treated as functions of discourse or ideological conventions, subordinate to legal and institutional structures that delimit discursive activity, and attention instead would focus on the institutional regime of meaning production. Bathrick is aware of this “inner dilemma of the Foucaultian paradigm” (22), and his entire study proceeds to seek evidence for the self-organizing activity of the opposition in the GDR. Indeed, the literary writers he most frequently invokes - Heiner Müller, Christa Wolf, Volker Braun, and Christoph Hein - again and again construct their texts around figures who become subjects by producing meaning and thereby implicitly model for the reader strategies for escaping the instrumentalization of power. The uneasy balance between Foucault’s denial of agency and Habermas’s insistence on the autonomous subject in the public sphere describe two antithetical poles that can not be bridged. Indeed, the insistence on an individual intellectual’s or writer’s “subjective authenticity” (e.g., Havemann, 67) or well-meaning efforts at providing an alternative way (e.g., Hein, 56) - only two of many examples cited by Bathrick - does not address the way they were implicated as well in the micro-mechanisms of the exercise of power. For many of these (socialist) intellectuals and artists defined their own activity - consciousness producing, cultural engagement, or aesthetic practice - as the most important factor in critical activity.

Central to Bathrick’s reconstruction of the GDR opposition is the binary distinction between inside and outside, a spatial trope for differentiating between critics who aimed at reform of the system from within and those on the margins who rejected the entire edifice as corrupt. The result is a study about the development of revisionist socialism in the GDR: “The forms of opposition I treat in this book emerge in every instance from a rewriting of some master code from within the code itself” (19). Since the inside/outside distinction rests on procedures of consensus-building and exclusion, I am particularly interested in seeing how such mechanisms evolved discursively in the early years of the GDR. Invocations of collectivity (*wir*), community (*Menschengemeinschaft*), partnership (*Zwiesprache*), or mutuality (*Wechselseverhältnis*) were a constant throughout the history of the GDR. Yet, contrary to the bourgeois public sphere, which thematizes difference, the socialist public sphere brackets it through the rhetoric of consent, while it masks informal control both in official and everyday life. As a result, its exclusionary usage of “we,” balanced by the

compulsion to produce images of enemies (*Feindbilder*), appealed to a kind of civic republicanism but disallowed any discussion about what constituted it. Here exclusion became a mechanism of selection and delimitation, a means ultimately of exhausting, not producing consent. In fact, Bathrick's study highlights a string of personal fates that illustrate how the discourse of power became silenced through mechanisms of exclusion: Havemann is expelled from the party, loses his teaching position at the Humboldt University, and is subjected to house arrest; Bahro is expelled from the party, thrown into jail, and sent to the West; public appearances by Biermann are forbidden and he is expatriated; Heiner Müller is thrown out of the Writers Union and prevented from publishing, etc. While on the one hand each of these represents an exemplary case of sophisticated dissent that grew out of socialist commitment, the impact was next to nothing within the socialist public sphere or it was delayed for decades.

Not only did important events or texts that challenged the "master code" not receive a public airing in the GDR (productions of Müller's *Lohndrucker* in 1958 and *Umsiedlerin* in 1961; Brecht's *Maßnahme* and Müller's *Mauser* - both treating the question of revolutionary terror - were neither produced nor discussed; Kafka and Nietzsche were "belatedly" discussed and published, etc.), but as the society itself became increasingly complex, so too did critical discussion and literature gradually migrate into ever smaller and fragmented spaces of reception among a minority of specialists. Bathrick, who refers mistakenly, I believe, to its "**public** significance" (216, his emphasis), demonstrates this paradigmatically in the case of the Nietzsche debate in the second half of the 1980s (Chapter 8), a debate long overdue and confined almost exclusively to literary scholars and philosophers in their professional journals. Robert Weimann, a knowledgeable observer of the literary scene, described in 1990 a parallel tendency among writers:

There was an abyss between what was written in literature and what was said in television or printed, for example, in *Neues Deutschland*. (There language was authorized and legitimated much differently than, say, in *Sinn und Form* or by Heiner Müller.) I had in mind precisely these contradictory communicative relations with this rupture between sender and receiver, between writers and a certain portion of readers. I am not referring only to institutionalized control mechanisms, to the ideology of those who dominate, but also to a large part of the population that was not at all interested in belles lettres.²⁸

Bathrick points to this tendency of marginalization and fragmentation as well but locates it within inner-party dissent, that is, on the level of theoretical debate

among the political elite. He goes on to evaluate the function of internal political dissent within the official public sphere **not** for its theoretical contribution (revisionist discourse aimed in the first instance at legitimating within the SED a new political elite, not at forming an opposition) but rather as acts of a few heroic individuals who modeled through their behavior a different “way of knowing and doing” (83). This, in turn, becomes additional proof that the literary sphere was the only or the major space for effective critical discourse.

As a closed society the GDR’s official public sphere censored and repressed open discourse. When discourse did become public, it usually brought forth an eruptive reaction (e.g., Soviet tanks for the uprising of June 17, 1953, the punishing 11th Plenary of 1965, military mobilization for the Prague Spring in 1968, the Biermann expatriation in 1976). More typical, however, were the situations that were never allowed to become public either through party discipline or by turning them into something else, often into a counter discourse. This was the case after the uprising in 1953, when the reform circle around Rudolf Herrnstadt, Karl Schirdewan, and Wilhelm Zaisser was attacked as an inner-party faction of German Titoism, or in 1956 after the revelations about Stalinist terror, when reform socialists like Wolfgang Harich, Gustav Just, and Walter Janka were branded as counterrevolutionary.²⁹ In fact, in the long run these measures usually led to a multiplication of problems; a notable example is the genesis of the first independent artists’ circle in Leipzig, born through the exmatriculation of students at the Literature Institute and Art Academy in the wake of the Prague Spring.³⁰ Rather than the binary inside/outside model, then, I propose that the GDR public sphere as a historical formation was characterized by processes which continually transformed the political into symbolic or performative gestures of affiliation or withdrawal. Neither a coherent structure nor an ontologically secure place, the GDR public sphere was constantly regrouping and reconstituting itself.

Socialist Public Sphere - *Die Literaturgesellschaft*?

The formative years of the GDR, those usually summarized as the period of consolidation of power or Stalinization, offer a useful field to work through some of the controversies and contradictions that were at play before the supposed convergence or modernization tendencies became apparent in the seventies. A typical, early cold-war approach to postwar German history views the emerging German states as a binary pair of modern and premodern structures. While the Western Zones under the tutelage of liberal democracies developed into a modern industrialized country with constitutional guarantees

protecting individual citizens' freedom and the balance of state power with social organizations, the Eastern Zone slipped into the Soviet orbit of state socialism with autocratic and hierarchical power structures, centralized control of all areas of life, and a bureaucratic apparatus for disciplining individual citizens. Without wishing to minimize the fates of particular victims subjected to the intrigues and rituals of the Stalinist system, nonetheless I want to review the GDR in the fifties that all too often is still described as a society comprised of undistinguishable people in a gray everyday who, cowed into submission, lost all personal qualities.

The capitulation of the National Socialist leadership in May 1945 marked the end of a violent, illegitimate regime and an initial hiatus in a process of modernization that had begun already during the Weimar Republic and continued on its contradictory path through the Third Reich.³¹ While modernization in the two postwar Germanies branched off in different directions, both emerged as the product of a fascist formation in which social hierarchies were already being leveled, industrial capacity streamlined under the dictates of efficiency and productivity, and the state apparatus consolidated for the exercise of power. Faced with a combination of rural gentry and war-damaged industrial capacity, modernization in the east was accelerated by means of forced industrial nationalization and rural collectivization during the fifties, accompanied by the flight of traditional cultural and administrative elites as long as the borders to West Germany were open, that is, until August 1961. The resulting cultural impoverishment meant that the remaining intellectuals and artists, those who had opted for the construction of a new, "better" socialist Germany lost not only the traditional institutional structures for cultural negotiations but also the broader educated public as addressee. Confronted with politically instigated campaigns against formalism, cosmopolitanism, and revisionism, they lacked the necessary public support to counter effectively the party's strategies of intimidation. On the other hand, the disappearance of the traditional educated middle class (*Bildungsbürgertum*) together with state programs promoting a political, administrative, and cultural elite recruited from the working class provided new avenues of mobility. State welfare mechanisms and formal liberalization of traditional legal constraints offered especially women (change in divorce and family law, later also abortion rights) and young people (access to education and early entry into the labor sphere) an unprecedented level of independence and access to positions of responsibility, albeit with the aim of expanding the pool of workers to serve the needs of the economy from the government's point of view.³² Yet, as mobility, urbanization, secularization, and cultural change fed the collective dreams of

constructing the new society, a parallel antimodern process of depoliticization was set in motion through a hypertrophied definition of the political. Every statement or opinion on any topic became ideologically relevant so that real political contestation shrunk, along with the intermediary public sphere of civil society (organizations, parties, media). This contradictory movement, already well established in the fifties, helps explain the form that an ever more elaborate network of semi official and private groups assumed in the following decades.

Within this contradictory movement the concept of *Literaturgesellschaft* (literary society), introduced by the cultural minister Johannes R. Becher, suggests a socialist variant of the bourgeois public sphere, that is, an ideal space that exposes both the claims and shortcomings of dominant power relations. As a referent for cultural policy in the 1950s, it offers a salient point of access because, like Habermas's early bourgeois public sphere, it is a project for structuring discursive relations with its own assumptions, prospects, and history. Strongly influenced by Georg Lukács's Hegelian aesthetics, Becher developed the concept to circumscribe the interdependency of literature and society in a series of essays he wrote between 1952 and 1957, including "Verteidigung der Poesie" (1952), "Poetische Konfession" (1954), "Macht der Poesie" (1955), and "Das poetische Prinzip" (1957).³³ The notion of *Literaturgesellschaft* derived from Becher's metaphorical understanding of literary relations as a communicative network of authors, genres, works, themes, and aesthetic forms beyond temporal and spatial constraints. The inherent democratic nature of literary relations could assume in his view a function in building a socialist society during the transformation to communism because it represented the best vehicle for a people's self-reflection (*Selbstverständigung*) and consciousness raising (*Bewußtseinsbildung*) in a transitional phase: "Literature is not only a social phenomenon, it also develops a *Literaturgesellschaft* in itself. . . . Only such a "*Literaturgesellschaft*" can form a true literature of the people, a national literature, a classical literature."³⁴ Moreover, such a society would gradually diminish the social privilege of education and with it the class-bound distinction between high and popular culture. Contrary to the commodification of art in capitalist society, the *Literaturgesellschaft* aims at the democratization of culture by making it accessible to all social classes.

The echo of German idealism - culture's contribution to the perfection of mankind - is not arbitrary, and sheds light on the sources of cultural policy in the GDR. Becher, an important Expressionist poet and an active communist in the Weimar Republic, returned to Berlin from exile in Moscow to cooperate with Walter Ulbricht in Germany's renewal. A deeply felt conviction in the need for

unity among all those who had resisted fascism - democrats, socialists, and Christians - guided his first initiatives. Becher's correspondence between 1945 and 1950, for example, reflects his active attempts to establish or maintain contact not only with authors who shared his exile experience but also with those who had remained in Germany, even with those who had found some arrangement with the Nazi regime.³⁵ During the same period in his role of President of the "*Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands*" he pleaded for an inclusive principle that spoke to all those who shared the vision of individual and national catharsis, to be achieved by a return to and continuation of the best German traditions.³⁶ Becher was motivated by a concept of national culture with deep roots in nineteenth-century German humanism, the *Kulturnation* that saw in classical aesthetics and literature both a compensation for unsuccessful social revolution and a substitute for politics. Following the national debacle of the Third Reich, the pedagogical concept of art and culture derived from German classicism dovetailed with the humanistic thrust of antifascist reeducation supported by the political leadership. The *Literaturgesellschaft* in turn adapted this patriarchal, authoritarian approach into a voluntaristic vision of democracy by example. Literature, more precisely, the progressive tradition of bourgeois German literature and working-class literature as the paragon of humanism, was to exercise its socio-political influence on the reading public. In this simplistic view ideologically "correct" and artistically "valuable" literature could raise the people's consciousness.

It is no surprise that returning emigrés could identify with this project, and they were openly solicited by cultural officials like Becher to reestablish the discredited German **political** system by means of the appeal to humanistic, classical **cultural** ideals. In other words, culture became the substitute for values denied in the political sphere. Representing the best traditions of enlightenment, education, and social progress, they saw themselves as intellectuals speaking in the name of the common good of the people. For the Party cultural activity was primarily a pedagogical tool for mass consciousness-raising, and administrative decisions to implement this goal displaced the notion of democratic participation in culture on the one hand and sought to bind intellectuals to the Party on the other. This alignment of artists and intellectuals with the state's pedagogical agenda threw into question their autonomy. For leftists who had followed developments in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, summarized most succinctly by Stalin's phrase at the time that "writers are the engineers of the soul," the pedagogical, even pedantic relationship between intellectuals and "the people" offered them a privileged role.³⁷ Contrary to the

traditionally polarized issue of intellectuals and power (*Geist und Macht*) in Germany, the progressives and leftists who returned from emigration to the Soviet Occupied Zone and the GDR did not fear a politicized *Geist* as the betrayal of their creativity or as an affirmative illusion of politics. Instead socialism promised them the emancipation from bourgeois individualism and the commodification of art, while the promise of access to **real** power extended by the Party in service to its pedagogical goals was seen as an invitation to participate in the dominant discourse in a fundamentally new role.

The direct social function accorded to intellectuals as teachers of the people fused the political and cultural elites as the power holders and relegated “the people” to the status of an object, one not constituted through social conflict and antagonism but by the dictates of cultural policy. The new role also cemented traditional habits and privileges, exacerbated by the returnees’ exile experience. Matthias Langhoff, the child of a prominent emigré, describes his memory of the intellectual community in these early years,

. . . as if they were only there for a bit of time, a sort of domestic foreigner. And although they had returned from exile, they did not call themselves returnees. East Berlin became an international city that excluded its citizens. The world of these people was indeed an artificial one, their home was a memory of Berlin before Hitler, about which no one was particularly keen; their present was the countries of exile that they had brought with in their baggage; their utopia was another country, a non-existent one they wanted to build. . . A ghetto of privileged people, a community of outsiders who resolved to create islands.³⁸

To be sure the ideal of the artist and the intellectual as partners of the working class in the service of the party was not free from a mixture of megalomania and sentimentality. The notion of a pedagogical mission authorized by the vanguard of the working class nourished the self-understanding of a public role: the feeling that the people needed them as teachers to help overcome the mistakes of the past and convey the lessons of history. Yet, it also justified party discipline, and the relationship between the politicized intellectuals and those in power was more often than not threatened by conflict. One only has to recall Bertolt Brecht’s encounter with the strictures of “formalism” in the context of his *Lullus* opera (1951/52), Hanns Eisler’s problems with his revision of the Faust material (1953) and its critique of the failure of revolutions in German history, the repercussions of Heiner Müller’s play *Die Umsiedlerin* about rural collectivization (1961), or the persecution of radical Marxist thinkers like the literary scholar Hans Mayer or the philosopher Ernst Bloch in the mid-1950s. This is only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak, but suggests that the

Literaturgesellschaft, as envisioned by Becher, had more conflict potential than he acknowledged.

One of Bathrick's major theses in *The Powers of Speech* argues that individual authors who gained international reputations "were able to attain a degree of 'institutional' status in their own right" despite party constraints and could use this status to articulate a more pluralistic public discourse (43). Although he mentions Brecht by name in this context of internationally established authors, a writer who died in 1956 already, the effect he describes refers to a development that gained momentum only in the late 1960s and thereafter. The institutional role of the writer and the intellectual in the 1950s was a process still in the initial stages of formation, as I indicated above, and the contradictory path it followed became the foundation for the later development Bathrick describes. The implementation of the *Literaturgesellschaft* was codified in the Party's cultural policy and the various administrative offices established to execute it. In an abstract sense it coordinated all areas of cultural production, distribution, consumption, communications, supervision, and education. More concretely it was a series of changing policy decisions that sought to influence the way writers wrote and readers read. During the immediate postwar years the cultural situation in the Soviet Occupied Zone was fairly fluid, reflecting the "united front" policy of the 1930s for which Becher's inclusiveness was symptomatic. By late 1948, however, the party had internally laid the groundwork for coordinating cultural policy with the dictates of the Cominform, the Communist Information Bureau responsible for transferring the Soviet model to its eastern European satellites, including in the domain of culture. Thus, key normative concepts such as partisanship (rather than autonomy), contact with the working people (rather than alienation), and socialist realism (rather than formalism) were adopted as guidelines for artistic production and evaluation.

The ideals invested in the *Literaturgesellschaft* may have concealed the power relations from the public but they did not resolve the conflicts that arose in the realm of cultural administration in the GDR. The attempts to institutionalize all phases of cultural activity led to a proliferation of offices and hierarchies in the state institutions dominated by the SED as well as within the other parties and related organizations. Their overlapping and opposing competencies were neither efficient nor always well-coordinated. Carsten Gansel, for example, traces nine major structural and personnel changes in the party's cultural office between 1946 and 1961.³⁹ He goes on to summarize how the directives were rarely consistent in the specific case of the office responsible for literary book publishers:

Considering the fact that one can not speak of planning in the early fifties, that there was a constant struggle within the state agencies as well as the party apparatus about decision-making competencies, that cultural policy initiatives regularly changed, that subjective and party-political interests were as much at odds as were the divergent intentions of the publishers, the cultural office tried to assume coordinating tasks in this murky confusion and to have a positive influence on the production of literature.⁴⁰

This is a rather different perspective on *Literaturgesellschaft* than Becher had envisioned but conforms nonetheless to its ideational core that literature goes beyond discrete texts to include their integration into a network of social relations. For the party and cultural functionaries it meant that social deficiencies could be compensated by an operatively understood literature offering readers agitation and information through patterns of identification with “positive” heroes. Among writers and intellectuals there was by no means unanimity about the best means to realize literature’s social potential, but most identified themselves openly as Marxist or communist supporters, and the critics among them adhered to a kind of agnostic, interrogating rationality that had little to do with Stalinist dogma but yet in its prudence was able to accommodate it. Becher is, in fact, a prime example, a high-level cultural representative who was famous for his refined political tactics but who physically and psychologically collapsed after he was forced to distance himself from his revered mentor Georg Lukács because of the latter’s involvement in the Hungarian revolt of 1956. With that the entire foundation of his *Literaturgesellschaft* had lost its philosophical grounding.⁴¹

Neither Lukács’s official disgrace nor Becher’s death in 1958 spelled the end of the *Literaturgesellschaft* as an ideal of the socialist public sphere. It lived on into the sixties both in the pedagogical conviction that the passive mass of people had to have its consciousness raised and in phrases like *literarisches Leben* (literary life), *die gebildete Nation* (the educated nation), and *Leseland DDR* (a country of readers). All of them variously sought to capture the hypertrophied relationship between writers and readers, between literature and a society in which other sites of discourse were unable to satisfy the needs of critical and/or imaginative activity. In a much quoted essay written in 1990 Monika Maron described the checkmate as follows: “All writers in the GDR, in so far as they were not apologists and opportunists of the Stalinist conditions, were carried along by the sometimes annoying admiration of the readers and their obsession with truth and heroes. And like almost every life-sustaining symbiosis in this country, the relationship between readers and writers was founded on scarcity.”⁴² The publicness of this “solidarity” of need emerges in

an exemplary way in the string of relatively broad-based discussions around significant contemporary novels published in the sixties, from Erwin Strittmatter's *Ole Bienkopp* (1961) to Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel* in its prose (1963) and film (1964) versions, to Hermann Kant's *Die Aula* (1964) and Christa Wolf's *Nachdenken über Christa T.* (1968). With due regard for the role of manipulated opinion in newspaper editorials and letters to the editor, where these discussions often took place, in each of these cases public debate crystallized and produced contradictions that had an impact on social discourse beyond the isolated text. It is striking that in the course of the 1970s such discussions petered out entirely, the last being stirred up around Ulrich Plenzdorf's controversial text *Die neuen Leiden des jungen W.* (1973), an intertextual parody of a Storm-and-Stress novel by Goethe. Instead this kind of exchange was increasingly privatized in the form of correspondence among writers or between authors and their readers (some of these found their way into print or became the occasion for an essay) or it became a fictional element of authorial self-reflection, for example in the public readings that conclude both Volker Braun's *Hinze-Kunze-Roman* (1985) and Christa Wolf's novella *Was bleibt?* (written in 1979, published in 1989). In other words the concept of *Literaturgesellschaft* was abandoned by the 1970s both as a policy and critical ideal because the "transitional" phase to communism was in the meantime becoming the stagnation of actually existing socialism. Parallel to this the democratization of cultural life envisioned by Becher had dispersed into a variety of leisure-time activities and entertainment offerings (of which traditional literature was but one) that could serve the needs of an increasingly stratified society seeking intimate rather than public modes of communication.

Socialist Public Sphere - *Die Nischengesellschaft?*

If the contradictions woven into the ideal of the *Literaturgesellschaft* were symptomatic for the uncertainties and convictions that accompanied the construction of socialism in the fifties in the GDR, then the 1960s were witness to how even a Marxist-Leninist regime was subject to changes in the "post-heroic" phase. In the course of the decade the GDR not only achieved a high level of industrial complexity that challenged the claims to power of the monolithic regime, but also with the closing of the border to the West in 1961 the leadership was suddenly relieved of the immediate ideological and economic competition with the "class enemy." This generated new social problems and a new basis for formulating consent. For example, a technological elite was emerging that challenged dogma in the name of efficiency. Especially in the crucial fields of state economic planning and

systems research (known as *Kybernetik* in the GDR) the credibility of rational arguments over ideology began to take hold. Moreover, with the new and expanding professional elites institutions of the economy and state management gained more weight. Most importantly, the outlines of an informal social contract became visible that replaced the arbitrary rule of ideology, so that a certain level of consumerism and well-being were accepted in return for non-interference in the power structure.

Many socialist intellectuals and writers responded to the building of the Berlin Wall and to the *de facto* closure of the GDR borders as a welcome opportunity finally to commence the “open discussion” of problems and expectations that the party had until then always postponed.⁴³ The desire to construct socialism as the fundamentally “other” seemed to have a chance, and hopes for unfettered self-realization in a society characterized by non-alienated social relations fed their imagination. This decade has assumed in some post-Wall perspectives a special significance for its transitional importance as the GDR’s “high times” or “the best years” and “the fat years.”⁴⁴ The reference here is to the perspective that during the 1950s modernization was hindered by a Soviet-inspired ideological dogmatism obsessed with formalism and decadence, while the 1970s were mired in bureaucratic stagnation and strategies for compensating the economy’s downward spiral. In other words, the 1960s - although still fraught with censorship, delayed gratification, and hierarchical structures in the economy, society, and politics - were experienced as a period of self-reliance and responsibility that allowed new discourses to circulate. From another perspective the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 could also be seen as the beginning of the GDR as a socialist ghetto, and probably the majority of the GDR population perceived it correctly at some level as a sign of the regime’s weakness. The hiatus of 1965, when the party shifted back to more centralized control in all domains under the guise of industrially organized consumer socialism and total planning of social processes, confirmed such attitudes of disillusionment, which reached a nadir with the GDR’s military support of the Soviet Army’s entry into Czechoslovakia in 1968, marking the end of hopes for reform socialism in Eastern Europe.

A limited horizon and lack of freedom defined the contours of the public sphere in the GDR, but as in all societies consent emerged from the circulation of discourses that constructed their own “common sense” of the way events, relations, and experiences were lived. The GDR in the 1960s demonstrates that even while the majority was disadvantaged by the construction of public consent, many were still able to find sites of meaningful discursive interaction.

I am referring here to the increasing tendency to shift communicative processes into the private sphere in order to avoid the supervision that pervaded the official public sphere. Daniela Dahn points to an important distinction between control of media and the culture of talk in the context of this *Suböffentlichkeit*, as she calls it: “Anything printed or broadcast was strongly censored; what was said beyond this so-called public sphere was astonishing.”⁴⁵ She includes private family, circles of friends as well as colleagues in work collectives and organizations among those who enjoyed the openness of this kind of semipublic discourse. While official communication was constantly subject to anxieties about unregulated discourse, in these protected alternative sites participants expressed their wishes, complaints, and reservations.

Günter Gaus, the representative of the Federal Republic to the GDR after the 1972 mutual recognition treaty was signed, coined the apt phrase *Nischengesellschaft* (niche society) for this phenomenon of private spaces in which people conducted their “real” life beyond the strategies of state control.⁴⁶ In a striking way it reproduces some qualities of Habermas’s early bourgeois public sphere, where the autonomous spaces of salons and coffee houses provided at first the opportunity for a small elite to assemble and discuss matters of public concern or common interest. Gradually this private space of the bourgeoisie was able to protect itself against arbitrary state power through the guarantees of democratic freedoms and expanded to include in principle all members of the society. In both social formations - the early bourgeois public sphere and the *Nischengesellschaft* of the GDR - the lack of structures for political **conflict** led to intimate spaces that could mediate between private individuals and centers of power. Whereas for Habermas this transformation initiated the dynamic split between private and public that is constitutive of civil society, in the GDR the development of semiprivate autonomous spaces brought forth a dualism of the private and the official, a society of duplication where double opinions and double talk prevailed.

The informal spaces for discussion in this parallel discursive arena should not be confused with conspiracy or pre-political organizations. If anything, individual and state appeared to be decoupled from one another in these zones of indifference toward politics in order to enable consumerism, leisure-time activity, and quality-of-life pursuits. The spectrum of their functions ranged from typical phenomena in an economy of scarcity, i.e., alternate networks of supply and practical aid, to compensatory relations for the impoverished civil society, i.e., arenas where individuals could create a supportive environment of self-realization. Two East German sociologists (retrospectively) have questioned the validity of the appellation *Nischengesellschaft* because in their

view it does not describe realistically either the uniformity behind the ideology of individualism or the actual process of atomization of social behavior which it tries to capture.⁴⁷ They are correct insofar as the *Nischen* were structurally unable to develop collective means of social and political intervention that challenged the state, even later in the 1970s and 1980s. Others, however, have pointed to these protean forms of civil society as a *Schule für Zivilcourage* (school for civic responsibility) that responded to the specificity of the GDR system.⁴⁸ In other words these exclusive spaces, characterized by non access, permitted oppositional interpretations of identity, interests, and needs to be articulated. Jens Reich, who became an important voice in the *Neues Forum*, described his *Freitagskreis* (a discussion group of intellectuals) as a kind of willed insulation against the official public sphere that at the same time counteracted intellectual isolation.⁴⁹ Adolf Endler, one of the elder members of the Prenzlauer Berg literary scene in the 1980s described the illegal but regular literary readings in private apartments that began already in the mid 1970s as “a large, developed, vibrant network, not only in the Prenzlauer Berg, which sustains and disseminates our work.”⁵⁰ These islands of discourse represented at least for some, perhaps even for many, an authentic space, in contrast to the apparent public space of official *Öffentlichkeit*. In particular, for intellectuals they were often perceived as the only authentic space: “In recent years it was of course a matter of self-protection for people to withdraw into **private circles**, as for all practical purposes the whole of GDR society did. Intellectual life, if indeed anything of the sort existed - and of course there was some - took place in private circles and no longer in institutions.”⁵¹

The GDR had reached a social and political crisis by the end of the 1960s, which in an important way explains the change in regime from Walter Ulbricht to Erich Honecker in 1971. The new regime’s various initiatives unfolding in the 1970s in the cultural domain (retreat from dogmatic notions of Socialist Realism) and consumerism (housing, electronics, fashion, etc.) were compensatory strategies that no longer even attempted to regulate the disparity between modern and antimodern structural features. Democratic promises were simply sacrificed for consumer socialism, and the state closed its eyes to the side effects of increasing social stratification and the “life-style” differences that arose with it. Of course, these “private associations” intentionally remained marginal and subordinated to the socialist public sphere. Rather than politicizing their spaces, they sought to contain the reach of politics into the intimacy of the niche, for politics was by definition under state control. The pre-political space of the artists’ and intellectuals’ circles, of the various groups clustered around the semiautonomous churches, and of the slowly emerging

citizens' groups were understood as oases of morality, "authentic" and free from ideological manipulation. They provided thus a sense of solidarity and social relationship that complemented the very failures of socialism.

The state counterpart of these islands and oases consisted of the security police, the Stasi, founded on opposite notions of mistrust and betrayal and to that extent the very antithesis of *Öffentlichkeit*. The Stasi was established in February 1950 in order to protect the Party. Its main function was to maintain the Party's power, which meant preventing any transformations in the society, even though officially there was no such thing as opposition in the GDR, only differences of opinion. Objectively there was no reason for an opposition to exist because, so went the logic, the GDR was a peaceloving nation. Hence, anyone opposed to the GDR was against peace as well and therefore a criminal.⁵² Nevertheless, the Stasi's activities from the beginning were concentrated precisely against this phenomenon, in the earliest years in the form of conspiratorial political subversion and economic espionage. Only after the closing of the border to West Germany in 1961 did the state security apparatus expand significantly and orient its efforts toward the control of and access to knowledge.⁵³ The best means to this end was the implementation of a huge network of official and unofficial collaborators whose specialty became infiltrating and destroying (*zersetzen*) the oases or niches, the private and semi-autonomous spaces for communication. Gert Neumann, a dissident writer involved in such circles in Leipzig during the 1970s and 1980s, quotes a statement of "his" Stasi interrogators, exposing the cynical perversion of the *Nischengesellschaft* as a clinch between citizens and the Stasi: "*Wir reden mit allen Bürgern. Alle Bürger der DDR sind für uns potentielle Gesprächspartner.*"⁵⁴ Here the power of speech is turned against itself, demonstrating that structures of power could permeate down to the most intimate communication processes.

Conclusion: Post-Wall Transformations of the Public Sphere

The foregoing comments have focused on institutional structures and interpersonal behavior during the GDR's early decades in order to contextualize later developments that led to systemic stagnation and the final collapse. They are intended to clarify some of the complexities during these foundational years because they in turn inflected both habits that contributed to the course of deterioration and responses to its aftermath. Peter Hohendahl was right to argue that "[t]o understand the nature of the clash between East and West, we have to reconstruct the structure of the socialist public sphere in East Germany."⁵⁵ This socialist public sphere was the product of forty-five years of experience, and its collective history must be accounted for in the reunified

Germany. In the past seven years the end of the GDR has been the object of a flood of studies and memoirs that have examined the exogenous and endogenous factors contributing to the rupture of 1989. These include inquiries into political and ideological blockages of the Cold War, into homegrown economic weaknesses and international market dependency, and into responses (or the lack thereof) to changes in the Soviet Union; analyses of reform groups within the party, of citizens' movements clustered around the Protestant Church defined by a multiplicity of concerns such as peace, ecology, military service, human rights, Third World issues, women's and gay rights, and of efforts on the part of the state security apparatus to restrain them; and discussions about the position of writers and artists and about the institutional responsibility of intellectuals.⁵⁶ An astonishing diversity of material was used in the attempt to understand how this socio-political construct became vulnerable to the point of implosion. But Hohendahl also warned that "Western commentators, especially, tend to assume the universal validity of their own structures and institutions and thereby deny the potential value of a socialist tradition" (48).

What is this value in post-Wall Germany? What does the tradition of the GDR's socialist public sphere with all its qualifications and perversions offer to a reunified Germany? How do we, especially as western commentators, weigh the validity of experiences and insights derived from practices gathered in a very different social system for the rapidly changing reality of European and global integration? The post-Wall transformations of the public sphere have been the object of intense commentary in the media, focusing on disappointed expectations, overwhelming difficulties in adjustment, nostalgia for a lost "golden age" of relative stability and simpler challenges (both in the East and the West), lack of identification with democratic processes, exhaustion of political energies, etc. Yet, what is often perceived as ingratitude or intransigence on the part of "Ossis" has little or no empirical basis. These general attitudes are derived more often than not from surveys based on unrefined questions, anecdotal information or interviews from a limited demographic pool, or statistics from a short period of time during which major structural changes have been implemented. Any prognoses are speculative, of course, but those that rely on a careful reading of past experience are more likely to contain a kernel of truth. I conclude, then, by pointing to three patterns that in my view derive from the specificity of the GDR experience and affect the transformations of the public sphere as it now constitutes itself in a reunified Germany.

First, notions of privacy and individualism thrived in the GDR despite ideological, philosophical, and literary ideals of collectivity. This was as much

a reaction to state efforts to diminish personal autonomy through the bureaucratization of a planned society as it was a practical necessity in the face of scarcity in every domain. As a result, the same conditions that undermined any sense of responsibility for decision-making in the public sphere spawned an appreciation for individuality in the private sphere. The strong literary tradition of positive and problematic heroes in GDR literature, for example, can be best understood within the context of the claim to self-realization and self-emancipation promised by the socialist vision and frustrated by the socialist reality. Thus, not absolute differences but rather a sense for subtle, gradual differentiations was well-developed in the GDR and marked the texture of political opposition as well. The nascent social movements of the 1980s, for example, did not attempt to project new alternative systems, instead they concentrated on practical solutions to local problems. This corresponded to the fundamental understanding of their individualism, no longer defined by the Marxist notion of collectivity but measured by personal happiness or success. Moreover, the fact that there were not only parasites, that again and again individuals came forth to plead for equality and justice during the entire history of the GDR, reveals the inconsistency and ultimately the openness of the state configuration. At the same time it indicates how the distrust of consensus, always experienced as the product of official coercion, hindered any organized opposition. Undoubtedly some of the disenchantment of the new *Bundesbürger* has been the result of their uncomfortable confrontation with the pressures of conformity and the constraints of non-differentiation in the new Federal Republic.

Second, and notwithstanding the previous conclusion, the same condition of scarcity elicited from GDR citizens a real talent for spontaneous, collective self-organization. The fact that administration and distribution of resources was unpredictable in the GDR's planned society meant that learning from experience had little value. Everyday activities were dominated by informal negotiation, not by formalized procedures. This became a kind of collective practice that allowed a wide margin for creative nonconformity in practical matters, yet it was unable to assert itself in official institutional spaces. The preference for self-organized, collective responses has inhibited the integration of citizens' groups and oppositional intellectuals into the rule-based public sphere of the Federal Republic, giving rise to frustration on the part of new and old *Bundesbürger*. The former suffer from an experiential deficit required for manipulating the institutional flexibility of a liberal democracy, while the latter are suspicious of seemingly ubiquitous *Seilschaften*, the informal networks of interpersonal relations and negotiations that maintained the GDR system as

long as it lasted. One area where strategies from the past have born visible results is the growth of autonomous interest groups that have arisen since 1989 after the state, union, and factory-sponsored “circles” (*Zirkeln*) “clubs,” and “cultural cabinets” (*Kabinette der Kulturarbeit*) collapsed. In the meantime thousands of new organizations have sprouted. The most original models are the self-managed artistic and cultural projects that have originated in urban centers, those like Tacheles, Kulturbrauerei, and Pfefferberg in Berlin (East) or Kraftwerk in Chemnitz. Often the energy of a few movers-and-shakers was enough to gain the support of local politicians who had little experience in the intricacies of communal administration and tended to regard the initiatives in any case as a positive sign of democratization. Some of these partnerships between independent agents and local governments have become successful magnets for urban cultural life in the new federal states.

Third, the rupture of 1989 is a distancing experience that has endowed many citizens from the GDR with a special kind of insight into the various claims about the Federal Republic’s virtues. The clash of old and new, the uncoordinated substitution of procedures and regulations, the vacuum produced when old structures collapse and new ones are not yet in place might be explained as typical transitional difficulties of an unprecedented social and political renewal, but they expose as well the endemic weaknesses and systemic rigidity that for West Germans have become part of a familiar, acceptable framework. Moreover, in forty years of socialist practice the East Germans developed a special sense for the incommensurabilities of institutional life. The often-cited ability to “read between the lines,” for example, presumes a multilingual talent that can distinguish between strategic and authentic speech. The poet Wolf Biermann ironically characterized this proverbial method of reading the main party newspaper as follows: “It was by no means easy to read *Neues Deutschland* correctly. Naturally you had to read between the lines. But even between the lines there were lies.”⁵⁷ The post-Wall continuity of reading between the lines might be precisely the East Germans’ perspicacity in recognizing the West Germans’ blind spots: they are not (yet) blinded to the illogic of their new, everyday “normalcy.”

To account for the contradictions that result from the dissolution of the GDR’s socialist public sphere into the liberal public sphere of the Federal Republic highlights the problem of understanding the residues and surplus accompanying the current transformations. Specific power arrangements shape and reshape the discursive spaces within which social groups from two very different societies now interpret their needs, invent their identities, and collectively formulate their political commitments. The existential experience

of these contradictions, made so manifest in the confrontation of East and West, may be the most important legacy the East Germans have to offer the new Germany.

NOTES

¹. I am referring here to the concept of *Öffentlichkeit* as defined by Jürgen Habermas in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962) and translated by Thomas Burger into English under the title *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). For a more elaborate appreciation, see below.

². This position has been articulated most forcefully and authoritatively by Wolfgang Emmerich, especially in his *Kleine Geschichte der DDR-Literature*, 3rd revised and expanded edition (Leipzig: Kiepenheuer, 1996). I have treated elsewhere at greater length the implications of this position, see Silberman, “Whose Literature Is This? Rewriting the Literary History of the GDR,” forthcoming in Jost Hermand and Marc Silberman, eds., *Contentious Memories: Looking Back at the GDR* (Frankfurt/Main and New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

³. Daniela Dahn, *Westwärts und nicht vergessen: Vom Unbehagen in der Einheit* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1996), p. 14.

⁴. David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), winner of the German Studies Association book prize in 1996.

⁵. In a previously published review of Bathrick’s study I delineate in detail the achievements, see *German Culture News* (Cornell University) vol. 4, no. 3 (May 1996), pp. 2 and 17.

⁶. Bathrick, p. 17. The reference is to Hayden White’s influential *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁷. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 128; also in *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), p. 71. Fraser here is distinguishing five meanings of “publicity”, which for our present purposes can be equated with “public”.

⁸. See, for example, Mary P. Ryan, “Gender and Public Access: Women’s Politics in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 259-88, as well as the editor’s own introduction (p. 35). This

volume is an important source for the American critique of Habermas's public sphere model.

⁹. For a discussion of the Marxist background on civil society, see John Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society* (London/New York: Verso, 1988), pp. 52-55.

¹⁰. Some important distinctions between public sphere and public opinion can be found in Wolfgang R. Langenbucher et al., eds., *Kulturpolitisches Wörterbuch im Vergleich* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1983),

see the entry "Öffentlichkeit" (pp. 542-46).

¹¹. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "Recasting the Public Sphere," *October* 73 (Summer 1995), p. 45.

¹². Habermas in the "Preface" to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. xviii.

¹³. Since the publication of Jürgen Habermas's seminal study on *Öffentlichkeit* in 1962, there have been numerous and adequate summaries of the major points, so that I will not repeat the background here. See Bathrick's summary in *The Powers of Speech*, pp. 46-47; Craig Calhoun, "Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 1-48; and Habermas's own brief re-presentation, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," *New German Critique* 3 (Fall 1974), pp. 49-55.

¹⁴. The article referred to is Robert Weimann, "Kunst und Öffentlichkeit in der sozialistischen Gesellschaft: Zum Stand der Vergesellschaftung künstlerischer Verkehrsformen," *Sinn und Form*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1979), pp. 214-43.

¹⁵. The notion of counter public sphere was articulated by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung: Zur Organisationsanalyse von bürgerlicher und proletarischer Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972). English translation by Peter Labanyi et al. under the title *Public Sphere and Experience: Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

¹⁶. See, for example, Uta Grundmann, Klaus Michael, and Susanna Seufert, eds., *Die Einübung der Aussenspur: Die andere Kultur in Leipzig 1971-1990* (Leipzig: THOM, 1996), especially the postword, pp. 160-61.

¹⁷. Christoph Tannert goes one step further and questions whether even descriptors like "zweite Kultur," alternative or underground culture can be applied to these formations; see "'Nach realistischer Einschätzung der Lage...': Absage an Subkultur und Nischenexistenz in der DDR," in Philip Brady and Ian Wallace, eds., *Prenzlauer Berg: Bohemia in East Berlin?* (Amsterdam and

Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 108-109, reprint in Ulrike Poppe, Rainer Eckert, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, eds., *Zwischen Selbstbehauptung und Anpassung: Formen des Widerstandes und der Opposition in der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1995), pp. 353-76.

¹⁸. See Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1981), where he revised the definition of public sphere from an arena to deal with certain public issues to one for discursive interaction, shifting to a procedural rather than substantive view of the public sphere. The English translation by Thomas McCarthy was published under the title *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

¹⁹. Jürgen Habermas, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 421-61 (here pp. 454-55).

²⁰. There is a lack of agreement on what exactly triggered the toppling of the Honecker leadership in the crucial days of October 1989. The terms of the "exit" (that is, the exodus via the embassies in Prague and Budapest in September and October) vs. the voice arguments are elaborated by Christian Joppke in *East German Dissidents and the Revolution of 1989: Social Movement in a Leninist Regime* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 139.

²¹. Quoted in Joppke, p. 141.

²². Michael Rohrwasser, *Der Stalinismus und die Renegaten: Die Literatur der Exkommunisten* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1991).

²³. Ulrich Plenzdorf, Klaus Schlesinger, and Martin Stade, eds., *Berliner Geschichten. "Operativer Schwerpunkt Selbstverlag". Eine Autoren-Anthologie: wie sie entstand und von der Stasi verhindert wurde* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), p. 8.

²⁴. Marianne Streisand (Germanist at the Humboldt University, Berlin), quoted in Robert von Hallberg's anthology of interviews with literary scholars and intellectuals, *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State: Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 68.

²⁵. Plenzdorf, Schlesinger, and Stade, eds, *Berliner Geschichten*, p. 19.

²⁶. See, for example, statements by Petra Boden (p. 113), Richard Pietraß (p. 182), Helga Schubert (p. 191), and Gerhard Wolf (p. 291) in von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State*.

²⁷. Sigrid Meuschel, for example, argues persuasively and at great length that the party's lack of legitimacy negated any trace of civil society and, therefore, of discursive activity in the political sense, citing at crucial points in

her introduction (pp. 9-13) the ground breaking study by Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller, and György Márkus, *Dictatorship over Needs* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); see Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft: Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1992). Bathrick too refers to Fehér's notion of "dictatorship of needs" (p. 62) but restricts its validity to the 1950s and 1960s.

²⁸. From an interview with Weimann conducted by Colin B. Grant in 1990, originally published in *Weimarer Beiträge*, vol. 37, no. 8 (1991), here cited from the reprint in Appendix II of Grant, *Literary Communication from Consensus to Rupture: Practice and Theory in Honecker's GDR* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995), p. 207.

²⁹. For background, see Helmut Müller-Enbergs, *Der Fall Rudolf Herrstadt: Tauwetterpolitik vor dem 17. Juni* (Berlin: LinksDruck, 1991) and Walter Janka, *Schwierigkeiten mit der Wahrheit* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1990).

³⁰. This becomes apparent in a number of the interviews included in Grundmann, Michael, and Seufert, eds., *Die Einübung der Aussenspur*.

³¹. Ralf Dahrendorf elaborated within the context of the formation of the Federal Republic the thesis concerning the Third Reich's modernity as its point of departure, see *Gesellschaft und Demokratie in Deutschland* (Munich: Piper, 1965). Jeffrey Herf's *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) provides an important extension and revision of the thesis, especially from the view of cultural life.

³². The extent to which this liberalization or modernization marked individual lives in the fifties can be followed in the oral history interviews conducted by Lutz Niethammer, Alexander von Plato, and Dorothee Wierling, eds., *Die Volkseigene Erfahrung: Eine Archäologie des Lebens in der Industrieprovinz der DDR* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991).

³³. See Johannes R. Becher, *Bemühungen I und II. Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 13-14 (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1971).

³⁴. Johannes R. Becher, *Macht der Poesie: Poetische Konfession, II. Teil*. In Becher, *Bemühungen II*, p. 206.

³⁵. Johannes R. Becher, *Briefe 1909-1958*. Volume 1 (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau, 1993).

³⁶. On Becher's unrealized plan for a journal called *Die Tradition*, see Werner Mittenzwei, "Nachkriegsentwürfe zwischen Erfahrung und Utopie: Johannes R. Becher, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács, Thomas Mann," in Claudia Keller, ed., *Die Nacht hat zwölf Stunden, dann kommt schon der Tag: Antifaschismus, Geschichte und Neubewertung* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1996), pp. 140-48.

³⁷. The resonance of Stalin's technologicistic definition of the writer could be heard in Günther Weisenborn's keynote speech at the First German Writers Congress in 1947 where he referred to writers as "architects of the soul" and the congress as a "parliament of the spirit"! Quoted in Carsten Gansel, *Parlament des Geistes: Literatur zwischen Hoffnung und Repression 1945-1961* (Berlin: Basisdruck, 1996), p. 63.

³⁸. Matthias Langhoff, "Wer keine Seele hat, muß das Land der Griechen mit den Füßen suchen oder Vom Fluch, den Abschied nicht loszuwerden. Eine Rede" (Berliner Lektionen 1996), *Theater der Zeit* 6 (November/December 1996), p. 26.

³⁹. Gansel, pp. 27-29. These shifts begin with the SED's "Abteilung Kultur und Erziehung" (1946-50), restructured in Spring 1950 and later that same year reduced in size and assigned new management personnel, in 1952 renamed "Abteilung für Schöne Literatur und Kunst" and divested of education, which became an independent office, in 1953 renamed "Abteilung Kunst, Literatur und kulturelle Massenarbeit", in 1957 reconfigured with education under the revised title of "Abteilung für Volksbildung und Kultur" and provided with a new oversight committee, "Kommission für Fragen der Kultur beim Politbüro"; based on recommendations from this committee, education and culture were again separated into two separate offices and remained so until 1989, while in 1960 the "Abteilung Kultur" was again restructured, and once again augmented after the Wall was built in 1961.

⁴⁰. Gansel, p. 153.

⁴¹. See Carsten Gansel's comments in Johannes R. Becher, *Der gespaltene Dichter: Gedichte, Briefe, Dokumente*. Ed. by Carsten Gansel (Berlin: Aufbau, 1991).

⁴². Monika Maron, "Die Schriftsteller und das Volk," *Der Spiegel*, February 20, 1990, p. 70.

⁴³. For positions of prominent authors on the construction of the Berlin Wall, see Matthias Braun, *Drama um eine Kömodie* (Berlin: Chr. Links, 1995), 17-19, where he describes the background to the production and censored performance of Heiner Müller's play *Die Umsiedlerin* in October 1961, soon after the Wall was erected.

⁴⁴. See, for example, the introduction by Ludwig to an exhibition catalogue on everyday GDR culture, Andreas Ludwig and Jörg Engelhardt, eds., *Alltagskultur der DDR: Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung "Tempolinsen und P2"* (Berlin: Be.Bra Verlag, 1996), p. 12, and the introduction by Ina Merkel to the catalogue of an exhibition on GDR consumer culture of the 1960s, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst e.V., ed., *Wunderwirtschaft: DDR-*

Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren (Köln, Weimar und Wien: Böhlau, 1996), p. 6.

⁴⁵. Dahn, *Westwärts und nicht vergessen*, p. 180.

⁴⁶. See Günter Gaus, *Wo Deutschland liegt: Eine Ortsbestimmung* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1983), pp. 156-233.

⁴⁷. Marianne Schulz and Jan Wielgohs, "DDR-Identität zwischen Demokratie und DM," in Thomas Blanke and Rainer Erd, eds., *DDR. Ein Staat vergeht* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1990), pp. 123-136 (here p. 129).

⁴⁸. See Walter Süß, "Revolution und Öffentlichkeit in der DDR," *Deutschland Archiv* 23 (1990), pp. 907-21 (here p. 910).

⁴⁹. Reich uses the metaphor of an "oyster" to describe the situation; see Jens Reich, *Rückkehr nach Europa: Bericht zur neuen Lage der Nation* (Munich: Hanser, 1991), pp. 7-9.

⁵⁰. Adolf Endler, *Tarzan am Prenzlauer Berg: Sudelblätter 1981-1983* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1994), p. 188.

⁵¹. Christa Ebert (a scholar of Russian literature) quoted in von Hallberg, *Literary Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State*. p. 122.

⁵². Ulrike Poppe, Rainer Eckert, Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, "Opposition, Widerstand und widerständiges Verhalten in der DDR: Forschungsstand - Grundlinien - Probleme," in Poppe, Eckert, Kowalczyk, *Zwischen Selbstbehauptung und Anpassung*, pp. 15-16, where they develop this idea based on the definition of "Widerstand" in the *Kleines Politisches Wörterbuch* (Berlin: Dietz, 1967).

⁵³. In his discussion of writers and the Stasi, Joachim Walther divides the surveillance of literature into three periods, 1950-1963, 1963-1976 (during which the employees and structural subdivisions ballooned), and 1976-1989. See *Sicherungsbereich Literatur: Schriftsteller und Staatssicherheit in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 1996), pp. 150-67 on the middle period.

⁵⁴. Statement in Herbert Witt, ed., *Poetik des Widerstandes: Versuch einer Annäherung*. Symposium am 25. und 26. Oktober 1991 in Leipzig (Leipzig: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1992), p. 91.

⁵⁵. Hohendahl, "Recasting the Public Sphere," p. 45.

⁵⁶. Symptomatic for this explosion of background material is the volume edited by Jörg Fröhling, Reinhild Meinel, and Karl Riha, eds., *Wende-Literatur: Bibliographie zur Literatur der Deutschen Einheit* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 1996). Equally symptomatic is the eighteen-volume collection of documents and commentaries assembled by the Enquete Commission of the Bundestag: Deutscher Bundestag, ed., *Enquete-Kommission "Aufarbeitung*

von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland: Anträge, Debatten, Berichte (Baden-Baden and Frankfurt/Main, 1995).

⁵⁷. Oliver Schwarzkopf und Beate Rusch, eds., *Wolf Biermann: Ausgebürgert*. Fotografien von Roger Melis. Mit abschweifenden Anmerkungen und wichtigen Nichtigkeiten von Wolf Biermann (Berlin: Schwarzkopf und Schwarzkopf, 1996), p. 178.



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**UWE JOHNSON—“DICHTER DER BEIDEN DEUTSCHLAND?”
ASSESSMENTS AND APPROPRIATIONS BEFORE AND AFTER
1989**

Friederike Eigler

Introduction

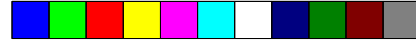
Since the political events of 1989 and the unification of Germany in 1990, Uwe Johnson has received unprecedented attention. Arguably this attention culminated in 1994, the tenth anniversary of his death and also the year he would have turned sixty. The upsurge in interest came from a variety of academic and non-academic quarters. Johnson's works, which until 1989 were published in West Germany only, have been reissued by his publisher Suhrkamp in the new series "Leipzig Suhrkamp." Numerous newspaper articles and well-marketed paperbacks on Johnson have appeared, all appealing to a readership that is not exclusively academic. Within the academic realm, a new yearbook (*Johnson-Jahrbuch*) and a new international series on Johnson-scholarship (*Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum*) were established in 1994 and 1989 respectively. The Johnson archives in Frankfurt/Main published many of his early essays for the first time and also put together a Johnson exhibit which toured Germany in 1991.

Since 1990 there have been many conferences on Johnson, ranging from regional to national and international meetings. Some addressed an academic audience, while regional events in Mecklenburg addressed the generally interested public; some meetings blurred the distinction between academic and non-academic events. Among this latter category was a symbolic return in 1992 of Johnson friends, writers, scholars, and journalists to Johnson's home town Güstrow in Mecklenburg. This event received considerable media attention since it included a *Sonderzug* from Berlin to Güstrow (a special train trip sponsored by the East German *Reichsbahn* and the West German *Bundesbahn*), speeches, readings by prominent authors from East and West, and a local tour of Johnson's high school and other places of his youth. Critics were quick to portray this event, which was also promoted by Johnson's publisher and long time supporter Siegfried Unseld from Suhrkamp, as embodying the new marketing strategies in the unified Germany.¹

Here I will assess the significance of the attention Johnson has received since 1989. I am particularly interested in how the recent Johnson reception relates to

larger discourses on the effects of German unification, the history of the divided Germany, and the reassessment of German literary historiography since 1945. Dismissing the wide attention Johnson has received as a marketing scheme, some critics argue that it betrays Johnson's lifelong attempts to avoid appropriations of any kind.² While recognizing that the recent Johnson reception is inseparable from the impact of the mass media and of marketing interests, I want to suggest that this neither fully explains nor invalidates the interest in Johnson. Instead, I will look at the debates surrounding both Johnson's biography and his works and will argue that these debates are part of the current processes of recovering and rewriting the history of the divided Germany on one hand and of negotiating diverging assessments of the unified Germany on the other. I further suggest that, within the discipline of *Germanistik* and German Studies, the recent interest in Johnson has larger implications for attempts to reconceptualize German literary history since 1945. The difficulties involved in categorizing his works under either GDR or FRG literature makes them a prime example for the discussion on literary historiography, which has assumed new significance since German unification.

In order to better contextualize the post-1989 reception of Johnson's works, I will first provide some background on Johnson and the reception of his works prior to 1989. After completing his studies in *Germanistik* under Hans Mayer at the University of Leipzig in 1956, Johnson was denied regular employment in the GDR, presumably because of his outspoken criticism of the state's attempts to criminalize the *Junge Gemeinde* in 1953 (the youth organization of the Protestant church).³ Johnson portrays these events in his first novel *Ingrid Babendererde. Reifeprüfung 1953*, a novel that—for different reasons—was neither accepted for publication in the East nor in the West.⁴ He subsequently submitted his second novel to the West German publisher Suhrkamp, aware of the fact that its publication would make his continued residence in the GDR difficult if not impossible. In 1959, he “moved” from East to West Berlin, just before his novel *Mutmassungen über Jakob* appeared with Suhrkamp. He insisted that he did not escape from East Germany but that he merely moved to the West. This personal assessment defied the political realities of the Cold War and neither stopped the GDR from calling him a traitor nor the FRG from trying to embrace him as a dissident. Never feeling at home in West Germany (more specifically West Berlin), Johnson spent long periods in the United States (New York City) and moved permanently to England in 1974. There he died in 1984, just one year after he completed the last part of his major work *Jahrestage: Aus dem Leben*



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der Gesine Cressphal, a project that had preoccupied him for more than fifteen years.

While the thematic and historical scope of *Jahrestage* is wider than that of Johnson's other works, all of his writings deal extensively with various aspects of life in the early years of the GDR. Johnson's depictions of social, political, linguistic and geographical aspects of GDR society differ in terms of detail and emotional intensity from his depictions of West Germany and the U.S. But far from being a work of sentimentalized memory, his texts are more accurately characterized as a work of remembrance regarding the history and legacy of fascism and the Holocaust, the early postwar period, and the failed socialist experiment in the GDR.⁵ His works include explicit accounts of various forms of ideological oppression in the GDR, for instance the surprisingly detailed description of the surveillance and recruitment methods of the Stasi (secret police) in *Mutmassungen über Jakob* in the late 1950s. These critical assessments of socialism in East Germany find their counterpart in Johnson's critical representation of the legacy of fascism and consumerism in West Germany and of racism and social inequality in the U.S.

What makes his works most intriguing, however, are the narrative strategies that preclude the reader's identification with any one perspective or ideological stance. For Johnson, the "border," a symbol of the ideological division of Germany and the world, turns into a literary category. Johnson's own position as *Grenzgänger* (border crosser) between two ideologically opposed systems required, as he puts it in his Frankfurt lectures *Begleitumstände*, a new language and new narrative styles.⁶ His writings attempt—both in terms of narrative style and of content—simultaneously to expose and defy the either-or-logic of the Cold War.

Considering his biography as *Grenzgänger* between the two Germanies, it may at first be difficult to understand why Johnson himself rejected the description "*Dichter der beiden Deutschland*" (author of the two Germanies), a term that was coined in the early 1960s by the critic Günter Blöcker. Johnson considered this label inappropriate since, on one hand, it was linked to an ideological appropriation by West Germany⁷ and, on the other, because his works were accessible in only one of the two German states.

Johnson's Reception In the GDR:

The publication of *Mutmassungen über Jakob* in 1959 was followed by the publication of *Das dritte Buch über Achim* in 1961, just weeks after the building

of the Berlin Wall. Predictably, Johnson's works were dismissed in the GDR for various aesthetic and ideological reasons; soon thereafter his books were entirely ignored (*totgeschwiegen*). Prominent GDR authors like Peter Hacks and Hermann Kant contributed scathing assessments of Johnson in the early 1960s.⁸ But it is also well documented that a number of other GDR authors were influenced by or responded to Johnson's works in their own writings. The best known example is Christa Wolf's *Der geteilte Himmel*.⁹ Thus there is some indication that the unofficial reception of his works undercut the official Johnson prohibition in the GDR. This phenomenon may be read as an example for the existence of a semi-public literary sphere that circumvented complete state control.¹⁰ It would be worth exploring further the extent to which this unofficial reception can be traced in intertextual references to Johnson's writings in GDR literature.

In 1986, after more than twenty years of almost complete silence regarding Johnson,¹¹ Jürgen Grambow, production editor for the Hinstorff Verlag in Rostock, broke the silence with an article on Johnson published in the GDR journal *Sinn und Form*.¹² Grambow also worked on a Johnson-anthology, a project that was eventually approved for publication and appeared in the Fall of 1989, almost concurrently with the opening of the Berlin Wall.¹³ Since 1989, Grambow has continued to be extremely active and successful in promoting Johnson's works, and he is one of the very few East German scholars who has extensively and critically written about the reception of Johnson (or lack thereof) in the GDR in general and in GDR *Germanistik* in particular.¹⁴ Significantly, Grambow himself was never part of East German academic establishment.

Overall it is important to keep in mind that the most recent interest in Johnson in the East is a phenomenon that was not entirely triggered by the *Wende* and the unification of Germany. The renewed interest in Johnson preceded these political events and needs to be viewed within the context of the major shifts in GDR *Kulturpolitik* and in GDR popular culture in the 1980s. David Bathrick has described these shifts as a "massive implosion of the borders separating public and private, official and nonofficial cultural life," a development, he argues, that furthered the emergence of citizens' groups in the late 1980s.¹⁵

Johnson's Reception in the FRG before 1989:

With his two novels published in 1959 and 1961, Johnson quickly became a well-known and often controversially discussed young author in the West. Johnson received important literary prizes including the Fontane prize in 1961 and the Büchner prize in 1970; excerpts of his works were included in many high school textbooks (*Lesebücher*); and his works were translated into several different languages, turning him into an internationally known author. The flipside of his success were attempts in the FRG to market Johnson as *Dichter der beiden Deutschland* and, more significantly, attacks from conservatives and right-wing critics who accused him of supporting communism and of morally justifying the Berlin Wall.¹⁶

The public attention Johnson received in the 1960s ceased in the 1970s and 1980s. After the publication of the first volume of *Jahrestage* in 1970, Johnson turned from a widely discussed author to one whose works were mainly considered in academic circles, a phenomenon that Ulrich Fries situates within a diminishing interest in the GDR among the general public in the West.¹⁷ The relative silence around Johnson in the FRG corresponds curiously with the enforced silence in the GDR. This silence was interrupted briefly by the publicity surrounding his untimely death in 1984, but did not really change until the late 1980s with several important publications on Johnson. Though primarily addressing an academic audience, these books signal a growing interest in Johnson by a range of scholars from West Germany and elsewhere.¹⁸ Thus, while the political events in 1989 and 1990 certainly contributed to the wide attention given to Johnson in the 1990s, the renewed interest in Johnson in both the East and the West preceded these events.

Arguably, the general lack of critical revision within post-1989 GDR *Germanistik* corresponds in some ways with a similar lacuna in the West. Among the mostly liberal representatives of GDR studies in the FRG and in the U.S. (and I include myself in this group), it was, prior to 1989, unpopular to address politically sensitive issues when researching or teaching GDR literature and culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, these “politically incorrect” issues included Stasi surveillance, censorship, and other forms of repression in the GDR, i.e., issues that happen to figure prominently in Johnson’s writings. In an article entitled “Wie Uwe Johnson die Staatsicherheit verfolgte,” Rudolf Gerstenberg corrects a common misperception about GDR literature, namely that Johnson was a rare exception to an otherwise complete taboo concerning representations of the Stasi. Although most of the texts he mentions, interestingly enough, could not

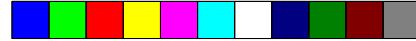
appear in the GDR, Gerstenberg points out that the taboo did not exist so much in GDR literature as it did in academic circles in both East and West.¹⁹

Helmut Dubiel has coined the term “anti-anticommunism” for liberal intellectuals in the West who created their own version of self-imposed censorship by avoiding issues that may have contributed to the anti-communism of the West.²⁰ While the selective reading and research practices within GDR studies before 1989 can be explained with the binary logic of the Cold War, it is less obvious why, since 1989, these often skewed approaches within GDR studies have been redressed only reluctantly.

Discourses on Johnson since 1989

One can look at the attempts to appropriate Johnson and his works for various ideological agendas as examples of the larger East-West discourses that historically have been fraught with failed communication, projections, accusations, and defenses. Indeed the differences between the discourses on Johnson by critics from the East and from the West are still so striking that it seemed helpful to continue using these East/West labels in my discussion of the Johnson reception since 1989. Yet, I would argue there is a clear distinction between ideologically motivated appropriations of Johnson prior to 1989, in particular during the Cold War of the 1960s, and the most recent commentaries on Johnson in which critics openly reflect the different positions from which they speak. What makes the Johnson reception since 1990 most interesting are competing interpretations that are grounded in the widely diverging social, political and cultural experiences of the critics.

There are critics from both the East and the West, for instance, who have discovered Johnson as regional author of Mecklenburg, but they have done so in very different ways. Fritz Raddatz’s three-part series on Johnson’s Mecklenburg in the *Zeit-Magazin* is a good example for the often romanticized representation of an unfamiliar part of Germany in the (West) German media. Raddatz evokes nostalgic images of Mecklenburg as embodying the pre-modern and juxtaposes these images—with reference to Johnson’s *Jahrestage*—to modern/postmodern images of New York City.²¹ Then there are critics from the East whose focus on Johnson’s Mecklenburg serves as an example for a new regionalism, the confirmation of regional identities that often corresponds with a high degree of alienation from the political system of the new FRG. But there are also scholars who rightly warn against turning Johnson into a *Heimatlidher* or provincial poet of Mecklenburg (with all its questionable connotations of “blood



and soil” literature).²² Both aspects of this regional dimension of the Johnson reception—the discovery of Johnson’s Mecklenburg from the outside and from within the reestablished state (the GDR had dissolved the traditional state structure in 1952)—have significantly contributed to the recent popularization of Johnson.

There are other ways in which Uwe Johnson’s works serve as an object of identification for some East Germans. Several commentators refer, for instance, to Johnson’s critical portrayal of the Federal Republic in his literary and his autobiographical writings. These texts include a chapter from *Jahrestage* entitled “Wenn Jerichow zum Westen gekommen wäre” (May 29, 1968) and the short prose works “Versuch eine Mentalität zu erklären,”²³ and “Eine Reise wegwohin.”²⁴ These texts portray East Germans who feel estranged and unwelcome in the West, as well as negative aspects of consumerism, the “free press,” and commodification, i.e., aspects that invite comparisons with a critical assessment of the effects of German unification.²⁵ One of the more prominent examples is Christoph Hein’s 1992 lecture in Dresden, “Ansichts-karte einer deutschen Kleinstadt leicht retuschiert” where he evokes Johnson’s Jerichow chapter in order to support his argument that the democratic structure (*Rechtsstaat*) in unified Germany is endangered.²⁶

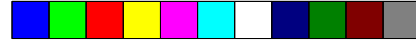
Other critics, some of them very young, consider the discovery of Johnson’s works decades after they were written, as an opportunity to learn more about the history of their own society and to work through aspects of GDR history that were, prior to 1989, largely inaccessible or taboo.²⁷ From this perspective Johnson’s works function, as Norbert Mecklenburg has phrased it, “als literarische Archäologie jenes deutschen Teilstaates, der mit den neunziger Jahren der Geschichte angehört” (as a literary archaeology of the German state that, since the 1990s, has become part of history).²⁸

Significantly, some of the same commentators who explore Johnson’s accounts of the early GDR are highly critical of West Germans who focus exclusively on Johnson’s representation of the GDR and fail to comment on his representation of the FRG.²⁹ The most sustained argument in this regard comes, however, not from an East German but from the British scholar Greg Bond. He argues that—by focussing on Johnson’s representation of the repressive side of GDR socialism—West German critics avoid dealing with another major topic in Johnson’s works, namely the common German history preceding the division of Germany, National Socialism and the Holocaust.³⁰

Some of the above-mentioned examples illustrate selective approaches to Johnson's writings that either foreground his critical representation of East Germany or West Germany and that lend themselves to promoting stereotypical views of the "other" Germany. Yet closer scrutiny of his writings also enables critics to challenge these very stereotypes. His writings provide ample opportunity for interrogating and negotiating East-West differences instead of simply ignoring these differences or reaffirming common clichés about the "other" Germany. Specifically, texts like *Das dritte Buch über Achim* or *Jahrestage* provide the opportunity to explore the peculiar dynamics between both German states and challenge an exclusive foregrounding of the "other" Germany (GDR) that tends to erase the role of the old FRG.

Scholars in the East and the West as well as scholars outside of Germany increasingly recognize Johnson as a central figure in German literature since 1945. His works provide opportunities for joint East-West projects and for productive academic exchanges. Among the most significant publications on Johnson are the proceedings of an international conference (1994 in Neubrandenburg) entitled *Johnson zwischen Vormoderne und Postmoderne*, edited by the East German scholar Carsten Gansel and the West German director of the Johnson archives, Nicolai Riedel. As Gansel points out, a large part of recent Johnson research has focussed on the reconstruction of history and on aspects of memory and remembrance in Johnson's major work *Jahrestage* (xi). Thematically, this focus foregrounds not only Johnson's representation of the divided Germany, but also the common history of Germany prior to its division, namely the war and the Holocaust. Those are the very issues that the British scholar Bond considered to be neglected in the recent Johnson reception.

However, one can read Bond's critique also as a response to the controversy about the so-called *Gesinnungsästhetik* (moralistic aesthetics) in 1991. Critics like Schirmmacher and Bohrer sought to ban the German past from post-unification literary debates and called instead for postmodern art exclusively concerned with the aesthetic realm, thereby constructing a questionable opposition between ethics/politics and aesthetics. (Klaus Scherpe has aptly summarized this dichotomy: "Der Moralist schreibt schlecht; der Ästhet hat keine Moral." — The moralist writes badly, the aesthete has no morals.³¹) As the title of the aforementioned volume, *Johnson zwischen Vormoderne und Postmoderne*, suggests, the opposition between ethics/politics and aesthetics is convincingly challenged in the contributions to this volume. Several articles investigate the relation between reconstructions of history and fiction in



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Jahrestage by drawing on postmodern theories.³² Critics including Gansel, Jochen Herres and Dirk Sangmeister are careful, however, not to turn Johnson into a postmodern author. Instead they point out postmodern dimensions of his works, all of which interrogate distinctions between the fictional and the historical realms. These postmodern aspects include intertextual elements, Johnson's comments on the role of the author as equal in status to that of the characters, and the integration of historical and other documents into the novel. These critics thus revise earlier assessments of *Jahrestage* as aesthetically conventional or even outdated.

Gansel, for example, draws on the notions of the postmodern and the premodern to discuss thematic aspects of *Jahrestage*. He conceptualizes Gesine's move from a small town in Mecklenburg to West Germany and eventually to New York City as a change from a pre- to a postmodern world and points out parallels to the experiences of many East Germans since 1989 who were plunged into postmodern West German society. While this assessment risks equating the GDR with a closed and homogeneous society, Gansel's overall argument seems to me convincing both with regard to the novel and to his allusions to contemporary Germany: He sees an unresolved and ultimately productive tension between Gesine's critical distance to the free market economy, crime, racism, and other aspects of U.S. society on one hand and her daughter Marie's immersion in U.S. society on the other hand. This contrast serves to relativize those aspects of the Gesine character that Gansel calls "romantic anti-capitalism."³³

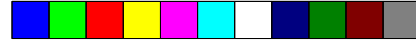
Gansel's article is a good example of a common phenomenon in recent Johnson research of straddling different discourses. There are numerous analyses which relate social, political and cultural aspects of contemporary life in unified Germany to academic discussions of Johnson. This mixing of discourses seems all the more significant when considering German academic conventions that distinguish—more so than in the U.S.—between academic and popular discourses and that have traditionally erased the subjective stance of the critic. This discursive shift entails risks, for instance a recycling of stereotypical ideas of the "other" Germany. But it also provides the opportunity to make explicit the positionality of the critic and the social and historical contexts within which Johnson's works are discussed. This, in turn, facilitates negotiating different readings of his works and, by extension, negotiating diverging readings of contemporary German society.

Conclusion

The renewed academic interest in Johnson has larger implications for literary historiography which I will briefly outline in my concluding remarks. Prior to 1989 most scholars in East and West presumed that Johnson was part of West German literature.³⁴ Since 1989 there has been little consensus about Johnson's place in literary history. (This uncertainty is reflected in the title of an international Johnson conference held in 1994 in France: "Uwe Johnson. L'écrivain de quelle Allemagne?" — Author of which Germany?). Some critics and scholars from the East are in the process of discovering Johnson as an author of and about the GDR. Prominent intellectuals and writers including Günter Grass, Hans Mayer and Manfred Bierwisch have declared Johnson to be the most significant author who came out of the GDR. Aside from assigning Johnson to either West or East German literature, Norbert Mecklenburg suggests other possible classifications: as regional author of Mecklenburg, i.e., as critical *Heimatsdichter*; as representative of socialist literature in the West; as representative of emigrants' literature; and as writer of the divided Germany.³⁵ These classifications recall Uwe Johnson's own autobiographical essay, "Ich über mich," in which he comments in an ironic manner on the numerous attempts to label or categorize him.³⁶

From today's perspective of a unified Germany, the assessment of Johnson as writer of the two Germanies—the assessment Johnson rejected categorically—assumes new significance. Viewing Johnson as author of the divided Germany not only avoids classifying him as either East or West German writer, it also opens up much larger questions regarding standard approaches to postwar German literature. The discussion about reconceptualizing German literary historiography has assumed new relevance since German unification. While scholars with diverging approaches and agendas are participating in this discussion, they all seem to agree that the standard separation between GDR literature and FRG literature does not adequately represent postwar German culture.³⁷

Within this larger discussion Johnson is significant in two different ways. First because Johnson's texts cannot be separated from his biography as *Grenzgänger* between the two Germanies, they resist easy categorization as either East or West German literature (as do the biographies and works of many other writers and intellectuals). His biography and his oeuvre therefore demonstrate the need for rewriting German literary history since 1945. Second, his works not only challenge standard East/West classifications but indeed



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foreground, both in terms of content and narrative style, how both German states depended on one another and reacted to each other within the logic of the Cold War. This latter dimension of Johnson's works seems to me a most crucial aspect that would have to be further explored in its effects on the production, distribution and reception of literature. From this vantage point Johnson's writings indicate one way in which German literary history after 1945 could and, I believe, should be rewritten.

Notes

¹. Thomas Rietzschel, "Sonderzug nach Güstrow. Mit Honeckers Salonwagen auf den Spuren von Uwe Johnson," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 8, 1992. Klaus Podak, "Güstrow und Uwe Johnson: Literarische Spurensuche per Schiene. Ein Sonderzug voller Geisterbeschwörer. Bundesbahn, ein Buchverlag und ein Bundesland gehen eine Liaison ein, um den 1984 gestorbenen Schriftsteller auch in Mecklenburg zum Klassiker zu machen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, September 10, 1992.

². See, for instance, Greg Bond, "'Die Toten halten zuverlässig das Maul': Uwe Johnson im wiedervereinigten Deutschland," *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum* 3 (1993): 181-87. Thomas Schmidt, "Auf dem Weg zum Klassiker?" *Johnson-Jahrbuch* 1 (1994): 282-93.

³. In a public speech at the University of Rostock Johnson pointed out that the state's treatment of the church group was in conflict with the constitution of the GDR. See "Die Katze Erinnerung." *Uwe Johnson—Eine Chronik in Briefen und Bildern*, ed. Eberhard Fahlke (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995) 47-48.

⁴. The manuscript of his first novel was found in Johnson's house after his death and was posthumously published by Suhrkamp in 1985. Johnson's correspondence with the Aufbau publisher in 1956 and several commentaries on his first novel are included in *Über Uwe Johnson*. ed. Raimund Fellinger (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1992) 11-46.

⁵. Several critics have commented on Johnson's interest in Walter Benjamin's notions of history and remembrance. See, for instance, Jürgen Grambow, "Poetik und Mimikry. Uwe Johnson als Leser Walter Benjamins," *Wenigstens in Kenntnis leben. Notate zum Werk Uwe Johnsons*, ed. Carsten Gansel, (Neubrandenburg: Federchen, 1991) 39-48. Theo Buck, "Uwe Johnsons Utopie gegen die deutsche(n) Wirklichkeit(en)," *Internationales Uwe Johnson-Forum* 5 (1996): 23-38, here 36.

⁶. For a summary and brief discussion, see: Carsten Gansel, introduction to *Uwe Johnson zwischen Vormoderne und Postmoderne: Internationales Uwe Johnson Symposium 22.-24.9. 1994*, eds. Carsten Gansel and Nicolai Riedel (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1995) IX-X.

⁷. D.G. Bond, *German History and German Identity: Uwe Johnsons "Jahrestage."* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993) 197-199.

⁸. Uwe Johnson, *Begleitumstände. Frankfurter Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1980) 154-56. See also Jürgen Grambow, "Uwe Johnsons Rezeption in der DDR," *Literaturbriefe aus Rostock*, (Frankfurt/Main: Luchterhand, 1990) 153-69, here 155-56.

⁹. Fritz Rudolf Fries considered his novel *Auf dem Weg nach Oobliadooh* to be a response to Johnson's *Mutmassungen über Jakob*. Günter Kunert comments on his interaction with Johnson in *Ein englisches Tagebuch*. See Grambow, *Literaturbriefe*, 156.

¹⁰. David Bathrick considers the "literary sphere" to be part of a "socialist public sphere." *The Power of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR*. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press: 1995). Both Bathrick and Marc Silberman (in his contribution to this volume) seek to explore the complex and often contradictory notion of a "socialist public sphere." The Johnson reception among some writers and intellectuals in the GDR is but a small example of how official GDR *Kulturpolitik* was incongruent with the multiplicity of "real existing" semi-public and private discourses among writers, discourses that in turn shaped their own (published) writings.

¹¹. Prior to Jürgen Grambow, Kurt Batt, chief editor of the Hinstorff-Verlag, discussed Johnson in "Die Exekution des Erzählers," *Sinn und Form*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1972): 1273-77. Reprinted in *Die Exekution des Erzählers. Westdeutsche Romane zwischen 1968-1972*. (Frankfurt/Main: 1974).

¹². Jürgen Grambow, "Heimat im Vergangenen," *Sinn und Form*, vol. 38, no. 1 (1986): 134-57.

¹³. Uwe Johnson, *Eine Reise wegwohin und andere Prosa*, ed. Jürgen Grambow (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau, 1989).

¹⁴. Grambow, "Uwe Johnsons Rezeption in der DDR," *Literaturbriefe*.

¹⁵. Bathrick, *The Power of Speech*, 55. This shift in the 1980s was signaled by the publication of controversial texts, Christoph Hein's open critique of censorship at the 1987 writers' congress, as well as by the emergence of a semi-official popular culture and various citizens' groups (Bathrick 53-54).

¹⁶. On the dispute between Johnson and Hermann Kesten in 1961 and the political scandal it provoked in the West German parliament, see Margund Hinz and Roland Berbig, "'Ich sehe nicht ein, daß die Mauer in Berlin ein literarisches Datum gesetzt haben sollte. . . ' Uwe Johnson im politischen Diskurs 1961.' 'Wo ich her bin. . . ' Uwe Johnson in der D.D.R., eds. Roland Berbig and Erdmut Wizisla (Berlin: Kontext, 1993) 240-69.

¹⁷. Ulrich Fries, "Zum gegenwärtigen Stand der Beschäftigung mit Uwe Johnson," *Johnson-Jahrbuch 1* (1994): 222-59, here 231.

¹⁸. Among these publications was the first issue of the *Internationale Uwe-Johnson-Forum* (published irregularly, volume 6 appeared in 1996) and a collection of essays entitled *Johnson: Ansichten—Einsichten—Aussichten*, ed. Manfred Jurgensen (Bern: Francke, 1989).

¹⁹. Rudolf Gerstenberg, "Wie Uwe Johnson die Staatssicherheit verfolgte," *Johnson-Jahrbuch 1* (1994): 47-57, here 49.

²⁰. Helmut Dubiel, "Linke Trauerarbeit," *Merkur* 496 (1990): 482-491, here 485.

²¹. Fritz J. Raddatz, "Landschaften der Erinnerung," "Auf Verwischten Spuren," "Heimat: Das schönste Land der Welt," *Zeit-Magazin*, May 1, 8, and 15, 1992. While Raddatz contrasts images from New York City and Mecklenburg, Jürgen Zetzsche argues convincingly that Johnson's representation of Mecklenburg is shaped by the perception of New York and vice versa. Cf. "' . . . ich meine die Grenze: die Entfernung: den Unterschied.' Uwe Johnsons Mecklenburg." *Biographie ist unwiderruflich. . . Materialien des Kolloquiums zum Werk Uwe Johnsons im Dezember 1990 in*

Neubrandenburg, eds. Carsten Gansel and Jürgen Grambow (Frankfurt/Main, et al.: Lang, 1992) 21-34.

²². Norbert Mecklenburg, "Ein Land, das ferne leuchtet," *Über Uwe Johnson*, ed. Raimund Fellinger, 334-71.

²³. First published in *Ich bin Bürger der DDR und lebe in der Bundesrepublik*, ed. Barbara Grunert-Bronnen. (Munich: Piper, 1970) 119-29.

²⁴. First published in Uwe Johnson, *Karsch und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1964).

²⁵. The following two volumes include several contributions by mostly East German critics who, in their analyses of Johnson, comment in a critical manner on the social and political situation in unified Germany: *Biographie ist unwiderruflich. . .*, eds. Carsten Gansel and Jürgen Grambow, and *Wo ich her bin. . .*, eds. Roland Berbig and Erdmut Wizisla.

²⁶. Christoph Hein "Ansichtskarte einer deutschen Kleinstadt leicht retuschiert," *Neue deutsche Literatur*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1992): 47-54. See Bond, *German History and German Identity*, for other critics of German unification who invoke Johnson.

²⁷. The most interesting account I have come across is an essay by Michael Jesse, "Da war Einer, den hätte ich gern gekannt," (*Wo ich her bin. . .*, eds. Roland Berbig and Erdmut Wizisla, 163-74). On his trip away from unified Germany to Russia he describes his experiences with Johnson's novels, written decades earlier, as an encounter with his own most recent past. "War es, dass ich plötzlich wieder lesen konnte über Deutschland und deutsche Geschichte und hier Jemand eine Sprache gefunden hatte, die so lange von mir, ungekannt und dennoch eigentümlich vertraut, vermisst wurde?" (165).

²⁸. Norbert Mecklenburg, "Uwe Johnson als Autor einiger deutscher Literaturen," *Literatur für Leser* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1991) 1-7, here 1.

²⁹. See, for instance, Roland Berbig, "Eine Bürgerin der 'D.D.R.' namen Gesine Cressphal erzählt. Beobachtungen zu der DDR in Uwe Johnsons *Jahrestage*," *Wo ich her bin. . .*, eds. Roland Berbig and Erdmut Wizisla, 319-56, here 350-51.

³⁰. Greg Bond, "'Die Toten halten zuverlässig das Maul:' Uwe Johnson im wiedervereinigten Deutschland," *Internationales Uwe-Johnson-Forum* 3 (1993): 181-87, here 186-87.

³¹. Klaus Scherpe, "Moral im Ästhetischen. Andersch, Weiss, Enzensberger," *Weimarer Beiträge*, vol. 42, no. 1 (1996): 109-127, here 115.

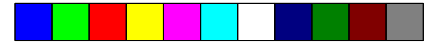
³². An anecdotal aside: At a Beckett conference in 1973, Ihab Issan, one of the major theoreticians of postmodernism, claimed that, if anyone, Uwe Johnson, would be able to write the story of the contemporary "hero." Ihab Hassan, "Joyce, Beckett und die post-moderne Imagination," *Das Werk von Samuel Beckett. Berliner Colloquium*, eds. Hans Mayer and Uwe Johnson (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975) 1-25, here 17.

³³. Carsten Gansel, "Zwischen Aufbau und Demission des Helden—Uwe Johnson, das Gedächtnis und die DDR," *Uwe Johnson. Zwischen Vormoderne und Postmoderne*, eds. Carsten Gansel and Nicolai Riedel, 31-54, here 43.

³⁴. A notable exception is Wolfgang Emmerich who in his *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (Frankfurt/Main: Luchterhand, 1989) discusses Johnson's early works as the first example of modern literature in the GDR (129-34).

³⁵. Norbert Mecklenburg lists these possible classifications in "Uwe Johnson als Autor einiger deutscher Literaturen," *Literatur für Leser*, 1-7.

³⁶. Johnson, "Ich über mich" (1977). Reprinted in *Über Uwe Johnson*, ed. Raimund Fellinger, 372-76.



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³⁷. See, for instance, Ursula Heukenkamp, “**Eine** Geschichte oder **viele** Geschichten der deutschen Literatur seit 1945? Gründe und Gegengründe,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 5.1 (1995): 22-37; Rainer Rosenberg, “Was war die DDR-Literatur? Die Diskussion um den Gegenstand in der Literaturwissenschaft der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistik*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1995): 9-21.





Carol Anne Costabile-Heming

CENSORSHIP AND REVIEW PROCESSES: THE CASE OF GÜNTER KUNERT

Carol Anne Costabile-Heming

In 1994 Patricia Herminghouse addressed whether literature in the German Democratic Republic could afford an alternative, genuine *Öffentlichkeit* and called into question the often-acknowledged role of literature as *Ersatzöffentlichkeit*, proposing that the censoring processes resulted in a “displacement of public discourse.”¹ In his discussion in this volume, Marc Silberman has problematized the concept of a “socialist public sphere” from a broad socio-cultural context, shedding light on the complexity of the concept—on the intertwining of public and private that occurred (behind the scenes so to speak) as intellectuals and ordinary citizens alike struggled to find a “voice” in a totalitarian society. In light of the controversies that have erupted in the 1990s regarding the extent to which writers, even critical ones, were complicit with the state, David Bathrick has emphasized that we should not forget the “historical contingencies” that governed the writers as well as their readers.² Thus, one cannot ignore the fact that the socialist public sphere did not intend to allow open discussion, in spite of varying definitions of “public sphere.”³ Despite this intent, the totalitarian regime in place in the GDR was not able to obtain absolute control over discourse.⁴ Indeed, the political and cultural climate often forced the party to compromise. Thus, the constellation of the socialist public sphere was not rigid, but elastic. If we examine the intersection of cultural politics and literary production, we can view GDR literature as a system⁵ composed of a complex web of interlocking structures. It was precisely the magnitude and complexity of the institutions of power that made the situation of literary production in the GDR unique. Through an analysis of the documentary information that abounds in the *Druckgenehmigungsverfahren* (authorization to print) and *Stasi* files, we can investigate simultaneously the hierarchical structure of censoring processes and their interlocking nature. From these documents, we learn that there were two very different visions of the public sphere in the GDR, the public sphere permitted and understood by politics and the open dialogue that the writers struggled to create. Research on the *Druckgenehmigungsverfahren* highlights the historical contingencies of which Bathrick spoke.

This essay will focus on the production history of texts by the former GDR writer Günter Kunert (*1929), a case study that illustrates the way that official and unofficial censoring procedures influenced the creation of the socialist public sphere in the GDR. Kunert serves as an excellent case study of censoring practices because of his unusual position in GDR literary history. Unlike many of his East German contemporaries, Kunert managed to exert a great deal of control over the direction that his literary career would follow. Early on, he established a profitable working relationship with the West German Hanser publishing house. While the majority of the GDR writers turned over the rights to their publications to East German publishing houses, Kunert retained the ownership of the rights to his texts. The *Aufbau Verlag* obtained only the rights to those texts published in the GDR and other eastern bloc countries. This business decision prevented the state from interfering with the publication of Kunert's texts in the West. Although such publications were subject to official scrutiny and the acceptance of royalties from the West violated GDR law, Kunert never paid any fines for his western publications, was never arrested, and was generally granted permission to travel. Because Kunert received treatment not accorded other GDR writers, his case cannot be considered representative for all literary production in the GDR. I will argue, however, that the information available in Kunert's files does indeed provide us with some insight into the institutions of power that guided the censoring processes in the GDR.

Under the official rubric of *Kulturpolitik* (cultural politics)⁶ the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the GDR successfully managed to establish a type of normative aesthetics for literary and artistic production. Despite all efforts to control discourse, critical texts repeatedly slipped through cracks in the system affording readers a glimpse at some sort of "truth," a situation that arose according to Herminghouse arose because of the "strategic location [of writers] outside the sphere of mass media, such as television and the press, where content and language were known to be subject to more direct party control."⁷ Thus, prior to 1989, literature was one arena where critical discourse was possible. Documentary evidence has since revealed that writers actively engaged in critical discourse often became targets for the *Stasi*. As an extension of the State institutions of power, *Stasi* surveillance could serve to hinder this critical discourse. Yet, Klaus Michael has successfully argued that the clandestine activities of the *Stasi* also helped to foster this critical discourse.⁸

This is but one example of the elasticity of the supposedly rigid socialist public sphere.

In order to reach any type of audience or “public,” texts and writers had to negotiate various levels of control. The pervasive hierarchical structure of control mechanisms extended from the SED Central Committee through the Ministry of Culture and down to the individual publishing houses. The Ministry of Culture supervised the *Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (HV Verlage)* [Administrative Authority for Publishing Houses and Book Trade], the regulatory board responsible for extending the authorization to print or *Druckgenehmigung*. Before a publishing house submitted a text to the *HV Verlage* for licensing, a series of pre- or internal censoring steps occurred that involved an editorial committee of the publishing house, a house editor or *Lektor*, and various internal and external reviewers or *Gutachter*. The review processes that the *Stasi* employed ran parallel to the predominant censoring processes. As politics and cultural policy often clashed, we can speak of a mixture of official and unofficial procedures at work. Indeed, the activities of *inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (IM)* [unofficial operatives] and cultural functionaries often overlapped: Many *IMs* held positions as *Lektor*, *Gutachter*, or editors within the publishing houses.

The censorship process followed a programmed series of steps. At its most basic level, authors practiced self-censorship, avoiding entirely those topics they deemed had no promise of publication. When an author chose to offer a text to a publishing house, the second level of censorship began. Each author worked in close cooperation with an editor or *Lektor* from the publishing house. This editor read the text for any problematic representations or taboo topics, dealing directly with the author. In order to receive the authorization to print, (*Druckgenehmigung*), each manuscript underwent a series of reviews or *Gutachten*; at least one internal and one external reader were asked to offer an opinion on the appropriateness of the text for the public and make a recommendation for publication. Final permission to publish any text rested with the *HV Verlage*. While this organization within the Ministry of Culture usually acted as the last instance of power, particularly difficult texts were often referred to the Central Committee for final approval.

Documents contained in the permissions’ file for Günter Kunert’s *Kramen in Fächern* (1968) illustrate the licensing procedure (Fig. 1).⁹ The first page of the file indicates the plan year, information about the edition, size of the

What Remains? East German Culture and the Postwar Public

DER VERLAG
(Name und Anschrift)

AUFBAU-VERLAG BERLIN UND WEIMAR

beantragt beim Ministerrat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Ministerium für Kultur,
HV Verlage und Buchhandel, 108 Berlin, die Erteilung der Druckgenehmigung für

EINZELOBJEKT Nr. 251 ZUM PRODUKTIONSPLAN 1968

SACHGRUPPE

B C

Autor:
(Name, Ort) **Günter Kunert**

Herausgeber:
(Name, Ort)

Illustrator:
(Name, Ort)

Titel: **Kramen in Fächern
Geschichten, Parabeln, Merkmale**
(Bei Übersetzungen sind außerdem Originaltitel, Verlag, Ort und Erscheinungsjahr anzugeben)

Übersetzung aus dem
(Ursprache)

Übersetzer:
(Name, Ort)

Vertragsabschluss:

Das Objekt erscheint in der Schriftenreihe:

1. Auflage erschien:

Letzte Auflage erschien:

Bisherige Auflagenhöhe:

Wieviele Auflage wird beantragt? **1**. Beantragte Auflagenhöhe? **10.000** Exportanteil:

Satzbeginn:

Druckbeginn:

Auslieferungsbeginn: **III/68**

Umfang des Werkes: **176**

Seiten = **11**

Bogen á 16 Seiten

Format (in cm oder TG): **19x19**

Einband: **1/1 Leinen**

Papierbedarf: (s. Seite 4)

Verkaufspreis:

Wird Subvention beantragt:

Valutabedarf (mit Währungsangabe):

Stellungnahme des Verlages zum Objekt. (Bitte Seiten 2 und 3 zu benutzen.) 3 3)

HL. Eing.: 1. März 1968	Druck-Nr.: 120/251/68	Ms.: 1x
An HL:	Ms. an Lektor: Dr. Neubert	Ms. an Lektor: 1
Auslassabst.:	Honorar:	Honorar: 125,- für Aufwachen
Lektoratsgeb.: 50,-	DG. erteilt: 11.4.68 für P.	Abgeschl.: 21.3. für
Bemerkungen:		

Dieser umrandete Teil ist nicht auszufüllen!

Verdruck P 5

Figure 1: Page one *Kramen in Fächern*

Carol Anne Costabile-Heming

Papierbedarf¹⁾

Textpapier:	1.465 kg
Sch'Umschlag:	<u>100 "</u>
	1.565 kg
	=====

Druckerei:

Berlin, 23. Februar 1968
Ort und Datum



K. Hähn
(Hähn)

Unterschrift der Verlagsteilung

Erläuterungen:

- 1) In die obere Hälfte des rechts danebenstehenden Feldes ist die Kurzbezeichnung der Bibliographie und in die untere Hälfte die Sachgruppennummer einzusetzen.

Kurzbezeichnungen:
DNA – Deutsche Nationalbibliographie, Reihe A
DNB – Deutsche Nationalbibliographie, Reihe B
DM – Deutsche Musikbibliographie
BdK – Bibliographie der Kunstblätter

- 2) Die Stellungnahme des Verlages zum Objekt soll enthalten:
a) Begründung der Herausgabe des Titels
b) Bemerkungen zum Autor, Wo ist er tätig? Ist er Träger von Auszeichnungen usw.?
c) Bemerkungen zum Übersetzer, Wo ist er tätig? Welche Werke sind z. B. von ihm bereits übersetzt worden?
d) Bemerkungen zu den Lektoren – siehe c)
e) Kurzgefaßte Inhaltsangabe, Sind Vorwort, Nachwort, Fußnoten vorgesehen? Ist der Titel lehrplangebunden? Für welche Schulen?
f) Bestanden verschiedene Meinungen über den Titel?
- 3) Es sind möglichst alle vom Verlag eingeholten Gutachten beizufügen, mindestens aber das des verantwortlichen Verlagslektors und das eines weiteren Fachexperten.
- 4) Der genaue Papierbedarf ist für das gesamte Werk einzutragen einschl. Vorsatz, Bezug, Schutzumschlag, bzw. Umschlagkarton, z. B.

Text – 320 Seiten: 105 000 Bogen hfr. weiß Werkdruck 61 × 86, 70 g/qm – 3,885 t
Bildteil – 16 Seiten: 5 500 Bogen hfr. weiß Kunstdruck 61 × 86, 90 g/qm – 0,259 t

Es sind nur vollständige und druckreife Manuskripte einzureichen!
Begleitschreiben für Druckanträge nicht erforderlich!

Anlagen: 2 Gutachten
1 Ms.-Kopie

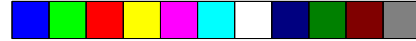
Figure 2: Page two *Kramen in Fächern*

printing and format for the proposed manuscript. Aufbau Verlag submitted the manuscript on March 1, 1968 and the authorization to print was granted on April 11, 1968—this review process extended over forty-two days. Further, a fee of 50 DM was paid to Dr. Werner Neubert for his services as an outside reviewer. The field for comments was left blank.

A second page shows the paper required for the desired printing.¹⁰ Additional information in this file includes a few handwritten notes and copies of the *Gutachten*. The information in these reviews serves several functions. First and foremost, they perform the function of literary review, addressing the aesthetic quality of the texts. Secondly, they have a political function, commenting on the acceptability of the point of view expressed for the socialist reading public. Thirdly, they provide historical background information on the author and his works in general, as well as situating the text under discussion into the context of GDR literature.

A comparison of the external (Werner Neubert) and internal reviews (Günter Schubert) indicates that Aufbau was very interested in publishing this manuscript. Closer scrutiny of the reviews reveals, however, that although Neubert and Schubert favored publication, they approached the text in different ways. Before evaluating the literary or aesthetic quality of the submitted manuscript, Neubert questions the admissibility of Kunert's literary works within the cultural-political framework: "A reviewer of Kunert's texts faces the task of accounting for the aesthetic-ideological **subjectivity** of this author, in other words, one must answer the question whether Kunert can assume a particular place in our editorial policy, which is simultaneously cultural policy"¹¹ Thus, Neubert admits that he is no fan of Kunert's literary works in general, and his subsequent remarks focus more on a political assessment than a cultural one. Neubert considers several texts objectionable, but deems the manuscript worthy of publication if Kunert agrees to remove the questionable texts. Parts of the review read as an attack, with references to Kunert's pessimism and inability to integrate himself into society. The following paragraph is particularly illuminating:

The author remains true to the ideological-aesthetic positions that he has emphasized in previous publications. His poetic postulations, which are not free of feelings of resignation, are always characterized by a *humanistic* point of origin and destination. While Kunert's place may not lie in the thematic, ideological-aesthetic mainstream of socialist literature, his



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publication attempts should be judged primarily from the perspective of our literary-political possibilities for **cooperation and integration** against the main goals of our literature, which unequivocally includes the grounded criticism of his works.¹²

Neubert takes a two-sided approach to Kunert and his texts that is particularly interesting for our purposes of examining the public sphere. One immediately notices that Kunert's literary works do not comply with the sanctioned public discourse. At the same time, however, there is a concerted effort to (re-)habilitate Kunert for the GDR's purposes. Because Kunert was deemed valuable, the parameters within which his texts were measured were somewhat elastic. Indeed, certain elements of Kunert's biography and personal convictions (such as humanism) are over-emphasized, as is the desire for cooperation. Thus, the review portrays Kunert as someone who needs guidance. The underlying assumption is that if Kunert accepts this guidance, then his discourse will conform to that of the public sphere, thus making his literature useful to the cultural politicians.

In the *Gutachten* by Günter Schubert, Kunert's editor at Aufbau, we notice a different approach. Unlike Neubert, Schubert reflects immediately on the literary-aesthetic qualities of the manuscript emphasizing the precision of the language, "rich in imagery, but not flowery, full of similies, but not overloaded ... it is definitely influenced by poetic diction."¹³ While the review does draw attention to Kunert's morality, "The narrator, Kunert, is a moralizer; he wants to improve. Capitalism, war and fascism have eroded moral and ethical standards,"¹⁴ Schubert also regrets that Kunert seems to give warnings without offering any concrete solutions. Despite this deficiency, Schubert concludes that, "Kunert's manuscript has a place in the ensemble of our literature. His humane conviction, his staunchly antifascist and anti-capitalist tendencies, and his exceptional formal qualities speak for a quick printing."¹⁵

These two reviews provide clear examples of the elasticity of the public sphere. Schubert deemed the manuscript worthy of publication; Neubert found the manuscript problematic, but deemed Kunert important to GDR literature. An additional note from Schubert in the file indicates that this manuscript is a serious revision of an earlier submission. An examination of the *Druckgenehmigung* for the original manuscript reveals, however, that Schubert's assessment had not changed significantly.¹⁶ While the original manuscript did not receive a *Druckgenehmigung*, the revision did, most likely

because Kunert removed several texts and added others, changing the overall tenor of the manuscript. The political climate of the time is also an important factor. In 1965, central control once again became the main party focus; thus, literary works produced during the time were closely scrutinized. By March of 1968, the political climate was once again more relaxed.¹⁷

In the file for *Eine handvoll Symmetrie*, Horst Eckert also originally recommended the manuscript's publication. On a separate page Schubert, provides background information on the manuscript—that the manuscript contains texts published in the West, that the publishing house and Kunert worked for approximately a year on the manuscript, that Kunert made certain changes, and that a discussion with representative from *HV Verlage* was to take place about the manuscript. Despite the positive reviews, two representatives from *HV Verlage*, Beer and Günther, rejected the manuscript. In addition, a meeting took place during which the editorial board of *Aufbau* discussed not only this manuscript, but its relationship to Kunert. In a memo recording the proceeding, Beer wrote, "Concerning the continued work with the author it was agreed that Comrade Caspar would conduct a discussion with Günter Kunert shortly under the following conditions: Comrade Kunert will be reminded with acuteness of the seriousness of the position that he has expressed in his latest literary works."¹⁸ Here we can see that even attempted threats were used as a means of squelching critical public discourse.

From his *Stasi* files Kunert learned that *Lektoren* from *Aufbau* reported on his activities, his plans, his political convictions and his spouse. Indeed, both Werner Neubert and Günter Schubert were operatives of the *Stasi*.¹⁹ Thus, the manner in which Neubert ponders Kunert's appropriateness for the GDR in the aforementioned manuscript review, actually grew out of a larger political context. Scattered throughout Kunert's *Stasi* files are sentiments similar to those Neubert expressed. A *Stasi* report from May 7, 1969, approximately one year following the authorization for *Kramen in Fächern*, depicts Kunert as "one of the leading writers of the GDR, who for more than ten years has affronted the cultural policy of the SED and the government of the GDR and wants to prevent the establishment of socialist-realist aesthetics in GDR literature."²⁰ Such sentiments prompted cultural-political confrontations with Kunert. In a "*Treffbericht*" (meeting report) from August 13, 1970, *IM* "Martin" [Hermann Kant] wrote: "He [Kant] is of the opinion, that it must be made clear to Kunert, if he is a member of the party, that he has to act according

to party statutes.”²¹ Such information clearly demonstrates the way that cultural policy and political goals intersected. The threatening tone of the report is disturbing; equally disturbing is the lack of clarity with which “Martin” speaks: no mention is made of how the confrontation with Kunert was to take place, nor who would confront him. Similarly, the actual consequences of the threat are not clearly explained.

While both of these *Stasi* documents address Kunert as a person and his position in socialist society, other documents illustrate how the *Stasi* tried to control the **effect** that Kunert and his texts would have. In December 1976, Kunert was invited to give a reading in Berlin at the *Jüdische Gemeinde*.²² His *Stasi* files indicate that the *Stasi* was aware of the scheduled reading and decided to take the following measures:²³

- Only those people who had received an official invitation would be allowed to enter.
- KUNERT would be advised to restrict his comments to his own literary activities and to avoid any other types of explanations.
- Those present were to ask questions pertaining only to Kunert’s activities as a writer.²⁴

Since this reading took place shortly after the protest of Wolf Biermann’s expatriation, we can speculate that the state wanted to create a semblance of normalcy in cultural affairs. Thus, the institutions of power did not try to ban the reading, a measure that would only succeed in causing more controversy. Instead, the *Stasi* undertook measures to ensure that neither Kunert nor the ensuing discussion reflected on anything other than Kunert’s literature.

The *Druckgenehmigungsverfahren* and cooperative efforts with the *Stasi* enabled cultural politicians to steer the direction that literary production would take. On the surface, this procedure was established to guarantee that the socialist point of view was interpreted and represented appropriately in literary works. In reality, these procedures made it possible for the state to coordinate, control, and license all aspects of literary production. Cultural activities thereby became part of the planned economy, whereby the state was able to guide the thoughts of its citizens/readers.

The availability of documentation from the *Druckgenehmigungsverfahren* and the *Stasi* enables scholars to understand better the complexity of the censorship process. While both instances of power were designed to limit the public sphere, we must also view these censoring procedures as a process, in

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Der Bundesbeauftragte für die
Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes
der ehemaligen
Deutschen Demokratischen Republik
Postfach 1199, O-10 866 Berlin

Buchlesung des Schriftstellers Günter KUNERT am 11.12.1976
in der "Jüdischen Gemeinde" Berlin

Durch eine zuverlässige inoffizielle Quelle wurde bekannt,
daß am 11.12.1976, in der Zeit von 16.00 bis 17.00 Uhr, in
Gemeindehaus der "Jüdischen Gemeinde" Berlin unter Leitung
ihren Vorsitzenden Dr. KIRCHNER eine Buchlesung mit dem
Schriftsteller Günter KUNERT stattfindet.
KUNERT, der jüdischer Abstammung ist, wurde nach inoffiziellen
Featellungen anlässlich eines am 1. Mai 1976 durchgeführten
Suchtagers für diese Veranstaltung gewonnen.
Es wird mit dem Erscheinen von ca. 70 bis 80 Personen gerechnet.
Der Gemeinderaum hat Plätze für 80 Teilnehmer.

Durch die HA XX/4 wurde inoffiziell darauf Einfluß genommen,
daß

- nur solche Personen eingelassen werden, die in Besitz einer
vom Vorstand der "Jüdischen Gemeinde" herausgegebenen Ein-
ladung sind,
- KUNERT vor Beginn der Veranstaltung vom Vorstand darauf
hingewiesen wird, lediglich aus seinem schriftstellerischen
Schaffen zu berichten und keine anderen Erklärungen abzu-
geben,
- die anwesenden Personen nur solche Fragen aufwerfen, die
die schriftstellerische Tätigkeit des KUNERT betreffen.

Durch die HA XX/4 wird die Veranstaltung unter operativer
Kontrolle gehalten und über deren Verlaufs berichtet.

Figure3: Buchlesung

which the boundaries of public discourse were not static. Because of the cooperative relationship that existed between *Lektor* and author, a certain amount of negotiation took place. Depending on the political climate, writers were often able to expand the public sphere to allow for critical discourse. The information in the *Druckgenehmigungs-verfahren* serves as a way to explain the historical contingencies that guided literary production in the GDR. Indeed, this documentary information illustrates that binarisms such as “good” and “bad” or “state supporter” and “critic” are too simplistic. The complexity of the *Literatursystem* points to a vast gray area that still needs further investigation. In offering us the chance to analyze the documentary information, Günter Kunert grants us the opportunity to open up his texts, break down the final barriers to understanding literary production in the GDR, and (re)contextualize the socialist public sphere as it existed in the GDR.

NOTES

¹. Patricia A. Herminghouse, “Literature as *Ersatzöffentlichkeit*? Censorship and the Displacement of Public Discourse in the GDR,” *German Studies Review: Special Issue: Totalitäre Herrschaft—totalitäres Erbe*, ed. Wolfgang-Uwe Friedrich (1994): 85-99.

². David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 24.

³. See for example the contributions in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992).

⁴. In his essay in this volume, Marc Silberman addresses exactly this point. Bathrick has also discussed this in *The Powers of Speech*.

⁵. Scholars have undertaken a project to examine the various power structures that influenced literary production in the former GDR. Because of the numerous layers of influence ranging from writers and their organizations through the party structure, they have opted to speak of a “system” of literary production. See Ulrich Meyszies, “Das Literatursystem der DDR. Kontexte und Voraussetzungen einer neuen Literaturgeschichte,” in *Studies in GDR Culture and Society 14/ 15*, eds. Margy Gerber and Roger Woods (Lanham: University Press of America, 1966) 111-126.

⁶. Herminghouse 87.

⁷. Conversely, those writers who engaged in critical discourse also became a major focus for *Stasi* activities. See Klaus Michael, “Alternativkultur und Staatssicherheit,” in *Aktenlage. Die Bedeutung der Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes für die Zeitgeschichtsforschung*, eds. Klaus-Dietmar Henke und Roger Engelmann (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1995) 138-149, here 138.

⁸. The distribution of paper was strictly regulated in the GDR. This enabled the censors to deny permission because of a lack of paper or to keep the production run small.

⁹. Emphasis in original: “In ausgeprägter Weise steht der Gutachter gerade bei Kunert vor der Aufgabe, die ästhetisch-ideologische **Subjektivität** dieses Autors ins Kalkül zu ziehen, also mit

die [sic] Frage zu beantworten, ob Kunert einen bestimmten Platz in unserer Editions politik, die immer zugleich Kulturpolitik ist, einnehmen kann." Druckgenehmigungsvorgang, Aufbau-Verlag, Ministerium für Kultur, BA Abteilung Potsdam, 2092, Bd. 1968 H-M.

¹⁰. Emphasis in original: "Der Autor verbleibt auf seinen ideologisch-ästhetischen Positionen, wie sie durch seine vorangegangenen veröffentlichten Arbeiten bereits fixiert sind. Seine von Stimmungen der Resignation nicht freien poetischen Fragestellungen sind letztlich stets durch einen **humanistischen** Ausgangspunkt und Zielpunkt charakterisiert. Wenngleich Kunerts Position nicht in der thematischen, ideologisch-ästhetischen Hauptrichtung der sozialistischen Literatur liegen, sollten seine Veröffentlichungsvorschläge primär vom Gesichtspunkt unserer literaturpolitischen Möglichkeiten der Zusammenarbeit und des Heranziehens an die Grundaufgaben unserer Literatur geprüft werden, was die fundierte **Kritik** an seinen veröffentlichten Arbeiten durchaus einschließt."

¹¹. "bilderreich, aber nicht blumig, voller Vergleiche, aber nicht überladen...Sie ist spürbar beeinflusst von lyrischer Diktion."

¹². "Der Erzähler Kunert is Moralist, er will bessern. Kapitalismus, Krieg und Faschismus haben die moralischen und ethischen Werte brüchig gemacht."

¹³. "Dieses Manuskript Kunerts hat seinen Platz im Ensemble unserer Literatur. Seine humane Grundhaltung, seine strenge antifaschistische und antikapitalistische Tendenz und seine außergewöhnliche Formqualität sprechen für eine schnelle Drucklegung."

¹⁴. Indeed, the final sentence reads the same except for the inclusion of the word *schnell* in the 1968 review.

¹⁵. The party would initiate tighter controls following the events of the Prague Spring in 1968.

¹⁶. "Zur weiteren Arbeit mit dem Autor wurde vereinbart, daß Genosse Caspar in Kürze ein Gespräch mit Günter Kunert von folgenden Voraussetzungen führt: Der Genosse Kunert wird in aller Schärfe auf die Bedenklichkeit der Position, die sich in seinen letzten literarischen Äußerungen ausdrückt, hingewiesen..." Druckgenehmigungsvorgang, Aufbau-Verlag, Ministerium für Kultur, BA Abteilung Potsdam, 2089, Bd. 1967 I-R.

¹⁷. *IM* "Köhler" and *IM* "Richard" respectively.

¹⁸. "Kunert gehört zu den führenden Schriftstellern der DDR, die seit mehr als 10 Jahren Front gegen die Kulturpolitik der SED und der Regierung der DDR machen und verhindern wollen, daß sich die sozialistisch-realistische Kunst in der Literatur der DDR durchsetzt."

¹⁹. "Er ist der Ansicht, daß hierbei unbedingt erreicht werden muß Kunert klar zu machen, wenn er Mitglied einer Partei ist, sich auch entsprechend dem Statut der Partei als Genosse zu verhalten."

²⁰. Kunert is half-Jewish. He has always attributed the certain degree of freedom he received in the GDR to this status. He believes that because he and his family suffered under the Nazi terror and because the GDR viewed itself as anti-fascist, the State was therefore more careful in applying repressive tactics.

²¹. "Nur solche Personen eingelassen werden, die im Besitz einer vom Vorstand der *Jüdischen Gemeinde* herausgegebenen Einladung sind."

"KUNERT vor Beginn der Veranstaltung vom Vorstand darauf hingewiesen wird, lediglich aus seinem schriftstellerischen Schaffen zu berichten und keine anderen Erklärungen abzugeben."

"Die anwesenden Personen nur solche Fragen aufwerfen, die die schriftstellerischen Tätigkeit des Kunert betreffen."



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PARAMETERS FOR INSTITUTIONAL AND THEMATIC INTEGRATION OF FILMMAKERS FROM THE FORMER GDR

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My title divides the production conditions for Eastern German filmmakers from the stories they have to tell as a practical device. It is clear however, that those with the most resources most often get their stories onto film, and those stories that are seen to “represent” or reach the widest, most affluent market are seen as the stories worth telling. The particular dynamics of these media market realities are fascinating in contemporary Germany.

I take it as a given that German cinema in the east and west relies on government subsidies to exist, and this has been true since the 1950s. A radical reliance on market demand would have virtually shut down Germany’s domestic film production long ago. The present optimism over recent box office successes, although a potential for future rebuilding, seems more likely to be the exception that proves the rule. Does an increase of the domestic share of the box office from 8.5 percent to 17.7 percent (while U.S. releases remain at an 80 percent share) reflect a trend?¹ The U.S. title of the biggest German hit of recent years gives the answer, “Maybe, maybe not.”²

What are the conditions for production for “easterners” in a united German cinema?³ Investment capital and even, to a lesser degree, the cultural capital in the German east is not in eastern hands. If only about 5 percent of the capital in eastern Germany is held by easterners, this will have the expected effect on the capacity for private investors to support film production. Given the fact that production of even “West German” or “European films” is a risky business, it is obvious that major investment in eastern film production is not forthcoming. As in the west, the source of funding for most films relies on State film boards,⁴ the regional television stations and some European and Federal funds (such as the Ministry of the Interior). On the whole these resources are limited, to the point that even multiple major players representing several western European nations can hardly produce a “minor” film in comparison to Hollywood.⁵ Since most film subsidies are regional, and one source is derived from box office receipts, the new states also have a smaller share: even with an increase in film attendance recently, their returns for 1995 were only 141 million DM as against 1.042 billion DM in the old states. (Another discrepancy arises from lower

ticket prices, about 2 marks less than the federal average of 9.5 DM.)⁶ Even where these funding institutions are available, easterners are at a disadvantage. The project-subsidy model is familiar to the westerners but foreign to easterners, who, in the GDR had a very reliable and centralized funding source, and who still tend to work in groups with a certain continuity and security.⁷ As the Oberhausen festival programmer Helmut Krebs put it, “Young filmmakers focus on film schools and TV-projects. For them the aspect of ‘*Kollektiv*’ (regarding GDR tradition) and social interaction during their work seems to be more important than in the West.” In regards to film funding, Krebs reports that since unification no special measures have been taken to open film production to young artists. “There does not exist a special funding for young people or newcomers.”⁸ A system of scrambling for grants and subsidies, as is also familiar for independent cinema in the U.S., rewards those individuals who can establish contacts and a track record with funding agencies; it is not in the interest of such people, however, to share their expertise in working the system. Thus, in a situation where information is power, competition is rewarded over cooperation.

In the initial years after unification, institutional continuity with the GDR faced a number of setbacks. The “Studio Babelsberg,” now managed for the French concern CGE by the West German director Volker Schlöndorff, has severed virtually all ties to its GDR predecessor DEFA with the exception of a fraction of the technical staff. The DEFA documentary studio was also dismantled after an initial attempt at continuity after 1990.⁹ Despite this lack of institutional continuity, however, a number of individuals and groups with film experience have become independent producers with an eastern flavor, primarily in Berlin/Brandenburg, Leipzig and Dresden. Subsidies for production by such companies are in decline, however, and not much private capital is available.¹⁰ Because of this, feature film-making has become nearly impossible for most eastern producers, while documentaries are much more common. A substantial 16mm documentary can be produced for about 300,000 DM, of which a producer has to come up with at least fifteen percent in private funds. A feature would cost at least ten times that. Economic trends are also working against the viability of these documentaries, since television stations are now paying less for broadcast licenses—a fifty percent decline since the early 1990s, from 1000 to 500DM per minute. On the other hand, the price to use archival footage for such films has gone up to 2500DM/minute.¹¹ To paraphrase the



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worn out life insurance saying, GDR film culture is literally worth more dead than alive.

If we turn from production to distribution, the U.S. dominates all of Germany, east and west, with few exceptions. Indeed, even the recent box office boom of German productions has relied on marketing through American distributors in Germany. Therefore, most future potential for both production and exhibition of “eastern” films comes from television (as it did for the “New German Cinema” in West Germany). ORB and MDR, broadcasters in Brandenburg and Leipzig, respectively, have cooperated on film productions made by artists with GDR roots, and MDR as the largest broadcaster in the east (serving Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt and Thüringen) has produced the most material from an explicitly eastern point of view (for example *Die Trotzki* (The Trotzki), *Das war die DDR* (That Was the GDR) and an eastern episode of *Tatort* (Scene of the Crime) from 1992, “*Ein Fall für Ehrlicher*” (A Case for Ehrlicher), the latter two for the ARD.¹²

It is ironic that those institutions with the most continuity since the GDR were most state-dependent under socialism—radio and television. The struggle for the youth radio program *Jugendradio DT64* until 1993 is perhaps a paradigm for what will ensue in film/tv production.¹³ The audience identified with the broadcaster because, despite its strict control by the state, it had become over time an indispensable part of their everyday lives and a functioning example of mass youth culture. In insisting that the state continue to provide this service, the audience was also acting consistently with the philosophy behind the anchoring of the right to public media in the west German Basic Law, which has its origins in the enlightenment concepts of education and the state in the German tradition. This reliance on the state, in the case of radio and television as a source of media is thus not limited to the east. As in the west, television is already and will remain a major source of production support for film in the new states. It also will be involved in the exhibition and distribution of the eastern film legacy, in cooperation with the *DEFA Stiftung* and the distributor that will continue to work on its behalf, *Progress Film-Verleih GmbH*.

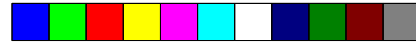
The material basis for a continuity with the *Erbe* or “heritage” of GDR filmmaking thus consists of the following:

1. The television stations as exhibitors of previous works and as producers of new ones (ORB, MDR and to a degree NR).

2. The *DEFA-Stiftung* (DEFA Foundation), expected to be created in 1997, which will own the rights to all DEFA films (with few exceptions) as well as distribution rights for the Five New States at least for about 3000 films from Eastern Europe. The DEFA collection contains about 750 features, 2300 documentaries and 750 animation films.¹⁴

3. Progress Film-Verleih GmbH, the successor to the GDR's film distribution company, privatized only as of July 1 of this year, and to be owned in part by an MDR company and another East German production company that grew out of GDR Television (Pro-Vobis). Income for the work of Progress and the *Stiftung* will come from distributing the films mentioned above, with two thirds going to the work of the foundation to "maintain and restore" the films. It is not out of the question that further productions could also be stimulated if not supported by this work.¹⁵

Small repertory theaters in urban areas of the five new federal states continue to represent GDR film history to steady audiences, as do the programs of the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Film Museum in Potsdam. In a climate of great vulnerability for any film publication, the journal *Film und Fernsehen* survives, partly with help from the Brandenburg government and mostly due to the dedication of its editor Erika Richter. In addition to the group continuity offered by *Verbände* (associations of film artists), the staff, students and traditions of the Film and Television Academy in Babelsberg retain strong connections to the former GDR. Although this source of identity may be weakened when the school moves to new quarters at the Babelsberg Studios Media Complex, it will also represent virtually the only connection that the institution will still have to its forty-seven years of eastern German production. Furthermore, the film school is a major production source for short films by young artists. The Leipzig Film Festival has survived unification, counter to some predictions, and still serves as a venue for eastern productions and, like the former East itself, as a window to eastern Europe and the so-called third world. Other eastern festivals have also continued, and even new ones have emerged.¹⁶ At other festivals in western Germany, eastern productions are relatively well represented, particularly documentaries. A major example is the Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, which featured a selection from five years of film subsidy in Saxony this April, and the "Young Cinema Forum" at the Berlin Film Festival, that showed a total of seven "eastern" productions this year out of nineteen German films. The emphasis of



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all the above festivals, East and West, has been on documentaries, partly as a reflection of the reality of eastern film production. In the Berlin festival's list of "New German Films" for 1997, feature films from the East make up a tiny minority of the titles, with the relative success of Helke Misselwitz's *Engelchen* (Little Angel, 1996) being the exception to the rule.¹⁷

A quite modest but relatively stable basis is thus present for film production in eastern Germany. What kinds of films are likely to be made under these conditions? The central contradiction of eastern German filmmakers is the fact that western Germans and the rest of the world had only a short-lived interest in their life experience—virtually limited to the impulse to escape the GDR that is seen to culminate in the tearing down of the Berlin wall. Outside interest in the pre and post-1989 experience of actual easterners has radically declined,¹⁸ while at the same time, the need for easterners to tell their stories or have their stories represented seems to be increasing.

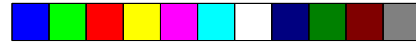
One example of this is the exhibition of films made in the former GDR that enjoys a significant degree of popularity on the two eastern regional television channels (MDR and ORB) and in small film theaters here and there in the new states. The major campaign of the distributor *Progress* for 1997-8 is the program "*Erzähl mir dein Leben*" (Tell me about your life), which explicitly addresses the deficit felt among Easterners in seeing their own history represented in public media. This campaign also connects with the plea of President Roman Herzog in 1995 for east and west Germans to tell each other their biographies in order to reduce prejudices. As a Munich film distributor of DEFA films said: "The DEFA-Films are the eastern biographies."¹⁹

Another aspect of the contradiction between representations of recent events by easterners and westerners is the dramatic difference between the film images of the end of the GDR. Western films consistently identify the historic turning point as the opening of the Berlin Wall, with the familiar image of crowds streaming across the border as an obligatory climax. Eastern films have conspicuously lacked such images and even more significantly, have lacked any consensus on or even belief in a single "turning point" that sealed the fate of the GDR and symbolized the rapid process of German unification.²⁰ On the contrary, eastern German productions beginning with the spontaneous hand-held camera work of documentary film students in Leipzig in 1989 stay so close to events and experiences of individuals and groups in local settings that any grand sweep of historical image-making is impossible. Here is thus the

thematic counterpart to the economic forces in favor of documentary over fiction: in the GDR, especially in the 1980s, a laconic style of documentary film-making developed (partly on the basis of earlier *cinéma-vérité* approaches abroad) that allowed for a certain degree of political and aesthetic independence from state ideology.²¹

The dynamic under which this approach functioned is quite fascinating: The filmmakers and the audiences for such east German documentaries were always acutely aware that state ideology was present in the production of any image by the state-supported camera. Thus, a commentary by the filmmaker was either redundant (if it were to support the state) or impossible (if it were to tend toward overt critique or opposition). Instead, any critique or opposition had to come from the seemingly “objective” depiction of life in the GDR as it really was. The results were at times simply stunning: aesthetically sophisticated films that investigate the irreducible gap between personal experience and public history, and the contradictions of the film medium itself in speaking for and to the “subjects” of history in a socialist state.

The absence of a state as the foil for this approach has radically altered its effect but it is nonetheless both aesthetically powerful and telling in the post-unification context. Numerous directors who had established careers prior to 1989 and some who were just leaving film school at the time have continued to make the small-scale, down-to-earth portrait film the staple of their output. Examples of landscape and workplace documentarists include Volker Koepp (*Wismut* and *Wittstock*, *Wittstock*, 1997), Jürgen Böttcher (*Die Mauer* and *Martha*), and the continuation of Barbara and Winfried Junge’s long-term documentary project on the children of Golzow. This project, which predated that of Michael Apted in Great Britain (*Seven Ups*, etc.) and is more comprehensive, continues with this year’s *Da habt ihr mein leben—Marieluise, Kind von Golzow* (There you have my life—Marieluise, a child of Golzow), 1996. Somewhat younger directors have taken a similar approach, such as Gerd Kroske’s *Voksal: Bahnhof Brest* (Brest Railway Station), 1994, and the series of land and portrait studies by Andreas Voigt *Leipzig im Herbst*, (Leipzig in Autumn) 1989; *Letztes Jahr Titanik* (Last Year Titanic), 1990; *Grenzland: eine Reise* (Border Land: A Journey), 1992; *Ostpreussenland* (East Prussia Land), 1995; *Mr. Beerman, Life, Dreams and Death* (1995). Landscape films with some similarities to the understatement of Böttcher’s work include Andreas Kleinert’s *Verlorene Landschaft* (Lost Landscape)



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and Eduard Schreiber's bitter film evocation of the trash-heap of history, *Lange nach der Schlacht* (Long after the Battle, 1995).²²

Ironically, the lack of an authorial commentary now seems disturbing rather than liberating: The long documentation of the landscapes left behind by major socialist industries, and the workers who still are active in this "afterlife" of socialism still refuse to echo the presumed ideology of progress and meaning. Instead they leave it up to the audience to construct this meaning. On the one hand, as implicit in the GDR, this could be a quiet suggestion of political activism toward change—to give some kind of direction to the chaotic events depicted. On the other hand, the most likely effect seems to be to cement the Eastern group identity, as on based in part on loss of *Heimat*.

The problematic effect of the western production *Beruf Neonazi* (Profession Neo-Nazi), which was eventually withdrawn from distribution in some areas, is present in the neutral presentation of east German youth in such films as Thomas Heise's *Stau—Jetzt geht's los* (Now it's boiling over, 1992) and Voigt's *Glaube, Liebe, Hoffnung* (Faith, Charity, Hope, 1994). Whereas audiences could have seen such revelations of violent and chauvinistic tendencies as a challenge to the state's claims of socialist progress before 1989. Since 1989, audiences are disturbed by the filmmaker's same refusal to take a position vis-à-vis the views expressed by the interviewees. Thus, when a skinhead asserts in Heise's film, "We're not violent, the system we live in is," the filmmaker offers no argument but lets the rationalization stand as the film's last word.

The depiction of former GDR citizens as victims or as dangerous, non-integrated elements in society brings me to the last question of my presentation: What kind of stories from the east are of interest to the rest of the world and why? Contrary to the tendencies toward small stories and a micro-history from the eastern point of view, the western view does still seem to need the image of a monolithic socialism as a foil. This does indeed ironically perpetuate the state domination against which people struggled while the GDR existed.²³ Although it is ironic that the GDR appears more attractive now that it has vanished, in terms of national narratives and their representation in film fiction, this phenomenon is quite natural. To the extent that the GDR stands for an archaic and repressed part of the German character and now part of the German past, it shares much of the mythical force for popular culture found in representations of transgression, otherness, the lost mythical past, etc. In this

context, it is not surprising that the GDR or at least its working-class identity are connected in popular culture to minorities of one kind or another—especially blacks.

If one abstracts for a moment from the depiction of the GDR as a culture to the most transgressive image it has produced in recent years: the neo-Nazi skinhead, the connection to U.S. views of minorities becomes clear. Despite liberal sympathies regarding their victimization, young male gang members in the U.S. (mainly, but not only from minority groups) are perhaps the deepest object of fear for white mainstream media audiences. Although there are minority gangs in Germany, the parallel taboo group seems to be unemployed white working class youth, especially in the context of the East. Here, the troubling and obvious presence of racism and anti-Semitism is difficult but important to place into the political context. As Sandy Close has written regarding white youth in the U.S., “Yes, racial and ethnic friction is there—ask any high school student. But they’re insignificant compared with the friction one finds in one’s own family. The deepest anger of the skinhead, the anger of militia members, is not at blacks or immigrants. It’s at the white political class, the white figure of authority, their father or mother, for abandoning them. They have wound up as “alones” in America at a time when the worst position to be in is an alone.”²⁴ The role of blacks as fantasy figures of transgressiveness and freedom from the deadly constraints of modern industrial society has been well researched. Stallybrass and White also connect the exotic and erotic fantasies of white men at the peak of colonialism with an irresistible attraction toward servant women.²⁵ A connection between former GDR citizens and such constructions of the “exotic” are present in numerous works—from comments by individuals in documentary interviews (*Former East/Former West*, by Shelly Silver, Heise’s *Stau*, etc.) to symbolic characterizations connecting blacks with the east in *Keiner liebt mich* (Nobody Loves Me), by Doris Dörrie, *Herzprung* (Helke Misselwitz), and even indirectly in Andreas Dresen’s *Mein unbekannter Ehemann* (My Unknown Husband) and Wolfgang Menge’s television series *Motzki*.²⁶

Because the GDR has no continuing history and because its past is potentially connected to Germans as victims rather than as Nazis or collaborators, it can represent an innocent childhood to post-unification “adult” Germans. As such, the representation of the GDR as “other” (an Other within the self) is parallel to the otherness encoded in romanticized images of women,



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people of color, homosexuals and lesbians, and all other “Others” who are seen as separate from the dominant culture. The Turkish/German writer Zafer Senoçak has invoked a similar dynamic in his essay about the Turkish child he once was, but who never grew up. His German self is the adult, the Turkish one is the child.²⁷ This perpetual childhood state as a defiance against the demands of German adulthood is at once a Romantic utopia and a stereotypical trap.

To the extent that easterners conveniently supply images of childlike innocence or transgressive, dangerous “otherness” to unified German culture, they will lack the power and influence that comes with adult responsibility for the future of the country and secures their control over their own images.

NOTES

¹. I am grateful to the following people who generously provided me with information for this essay: Helmut Krebs, Sigrid Lange, Helke Misselwitz, Erika Richter, Andrea Rinke, Klaus Schmutzer, and Hiltrud Schulz. For statistics, see Wolfgang Börnsen, “Deutscher Film im Aufwind. Der Berichterstatter der CDU/CSU-Bundestagsfraktion für Filmwirtschaft erklärt,” 5.6.1996 (www.cducsu.bundestag.de).

². *Der bewegte Mann*, written and directed by Sönke Wortmann, nearly doubled the box office receipts of the most successful films of the early 1990s by selling some 6.5 million tickets in 1994 and thus accounted for a small box office boom on its own (“FFA intern,” www.movieline.de).

³. In looking for continuity within the east and reception by the west, I am concentrating on film production in the “major” and “independent” categories, which require a certain degree of production backing and distribution. On the more limited realm of underground (especially super-8) filmmaking and video, see the following, respectively: Karin Fritzsche, Claus Löser, eds., *Gegenbilder. Filmische Subversion in der DDR 1976-1989* (Berlin: Janus Press, 1996); Uta Becher, “So schön kann Video sein. DDR-Bürger entdecken einen neuen Medienmarkt,” *Medien der Ex-DDR in der Wende, Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 40 (Berlin: Vistas, 1991): 100 - 113.

⁴. There are differences in the forms of the film offices and the stages of production they support. For an overview, see Lydia Trotz, *Filmförderung in den neuen Bundesländern, Beiträge zur Film- und Fernsehwissenschaft* 48 (Berlin: Vistas, 1996), 41 - 58.

⁵. The European Union’s *Garantiefond* for 1996 amounted to only 310 million ECU (Börnsen). 1996 subsidies from the Filmboard Brandenburg were only 15.3 million DM spread over 56 projects (Filmboard Berlin-Brandenburg homepage, www.filmboard.de).

⁶. “FFA intern.”

⁷. The Filmboard Berlin-Brandenburg, with its subsidy of “packages” of films (*Paketförderung*), seems to have the most continuity with the GDR’s personal and production relationships.

- ⁸. Helmut Krebs, personal communication with the author, 18 April 1997.
- ⁹. On the dismantling of GDR film infrastructure, cf. Trotz, 27-29.
- ¹⁰. Klaus Schmutzer, film producer, *À Jour Film*, personal communication with the author.
- ¹¹. Schmutzer.
- ¹². Andrea Rinke, "From *Motzki* to *Trotzki*: Representations of East and West German cultural identities on German television after unification," *The New Germany: Literature and Society after Unification*, Durrani, Good & Hilliard, eds. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 243-7.
- ¹³. Andreas Ulrich & Jörg Wagner, eds. *DT64: Das Buch zum Jugendladio 1964 - 1993* (Leipzig, Thom Verlag, 1993).
- ¹⁴. Thomas Schuler, "Die Mörder sind unter uns. Die Zukunft der Defa-Filme liegt beim Fernsehen, doch im Westen will selbst die Klassiker keiner haben," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1/2 June 1996.
- ¹⁵. Trotz, 30.
- ¹⁶. Trotz, 62-65.
- ¹⁷. On the feature films made by young GDR directors at the time of unification and shortly after, cf. *Der DEFA-Film: Erbe oder Episode? Augen-Blick* 14 (Marburg 1993) and Dietmar Hochmuth, ed. *DEFA-Novo: Nach wie vor?* (Berlin: Freunde der deutschen Kinemathek, 1994).
- ¹⁸. Schuler: "1990 kaufte der WDR für die Dritten Programme der ARD noch acht Filme aus dem Giftschränk der Defa... Als die Sender im vergangenen Jahr 100 Jahre Filmgeschichte feierten, kam die Defa so gut wie gar nicht vor."
- ¹⁹. Schuler.
- ²⁰. The two films *Das Versprechen* (*The Promise*) and *Nikolaikirche* (*Nikolai Church*), which may well turn out to be the only films to depict a sweeping narrative culminating in 1989, typify the differences between east and west in content, production and distribution. Each film was written and directed by prominent figures, East and West: *The Promise* was directed by Margarethe von Trotta and co-authored with Peter Schneider. *Nikolai Church* was directed by the GDR's most prominent director, Frank Beyer, and written by Erich Loest, based on his own novel. *The Promise* uses a melodramatic love story to trace the high points of east/west separation, culminating in the reunification of a nuclear family at the Berlin Wall as it opens on November 9. *Nikolai Church* uses similar conventions of narrative cinema, but traces a much broader and more differentiated spectrum of characters. Here, instead of a climax at the opening of the Wall, the film's turning point is reached when the state security forces realize they are not able to use weapons against thousands of Leipzig demonstrators holding candles. Rather than focus on crowd's streaming into West Berlin, Beyer juxtaposes the masses of candles with the representatives of state power hiding in their offices and turning out all the lights. The differing sources of funding are similarly revealing: *The Promise* is a German-French-Swiss co-production with financing from major film producers, television stations, and the European Union; *Nikolai Church* relied on multiple funding sources as well, but it was mainly a domestic "made-for-television movie," broadcast in two parts. In the U.S., *The Promise* had commercial distribution on film and video; *Nikolai*



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Church is only available through German cultural organizations, courtesy of InterNationes (Bonn).

²¹. As a pendant to this, there seems to be a resurgence of local cabarets as a specific regional response to the globalizing impact of unification and the dominance of commercial media imports. Cf. Rinke 241.

²². As an aside, the development of characters on television shows a similar trend, according to Andrea Rinke. Initially, east/west stereotypes were quite crass in the shadow of the grand narrative of unification and conflicting identities (particularly competing resentments east and west). But as Rinke has written, by 1992 a *Tatort* episode produced in the East could “represent a distinctly East German work ethos, a way of life which had its roots in the close-knit small communities of the GDR, with no strict division between colleagues and friends, between people’s roles in their work or private environment.” Cf. Rinke 248.

²³. Cf. Marc Silberman’s citation of Monika Maron in this volume.

²⁴. Sandy Close, “Interview With a Vampire, et al.: The Public-Private Divide,” *The Nation*, 18 September 1995: 280-1.

²⁵. Cf. Sander Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982); Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, eds., *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

²⁶. Cabaret sketches in the east also have depicted easterners as “animals” or “aliens from another planet.” Cf. Rinke, 242.

²⁷. “Das Kind,” unpublished essay.

**WRITING IN THE PRIVATE SPHERE:
EAST GERMAN WRITERS AND THE RETURN OF REPRESSED
IDENTITIES**

Erk Grimm

From the very beginning of the debate about the cultural phenomenon of a “second” east German culture,¹ commentators have emphasized the problematic relationship between the socialist public arena and its non-institutionalized literary alternative: the readings, performances, exhibitions, and gatherings of writers who transformed private spaces or spaces offered by the church into meeting places. In collaboration with musicians and artists, writers bypassed the direct control of the state and constituted “a closely woven network of social contacts and literary subcommunication,” a “substitute public” as Klaus Michael called it.² The private sphere—apartments, studios, and backyards as well as the parish—became the preferred sites of openly advertised, nonconspiratorial events.³ Since the late 1970s, writers began evading the constraints of organizations and institutions such as the Writers’ Union, the publishing houses, the *FDJ* (the state youth organization), and the socialist party. They created such a dense social network that they were able to disseminate and exchange homemade almanacs, journals, and lyric/graphic arts editions in spite of the rigid regulations for printed matter. At the same time, these writings did not receive official recognition and promotion during the 1980s. There are many examples of unnecessary delays and arbitrary state interventions. Seminal projects such as the *Leila Anastasia* anthology that introduced twenty young east German authors did not materialize because of decisions made by the copyright office and the administrative authority for publishing houses, represented by Klaus Höpcke in the Ministry of Culture.⁴ One of the most rebellious Berlin poets, Bert Papenfuß, sums up his experience, “There was certainly no prospect of publishing books... My manuscript sat with the *Aufbau-Verlag* for ten years, from 1978. It appeared in 1989.”⁵ Consequently, there was a growing number of frustrated non-established writers who left the GDR; if they stayed, they tried to avoid contact with the officials. In the view of Hermann Kant, the president of the Writers’ Union between 1978 and 1989, “the people from the Prenzlauer Berg wanted to have nothing to do with the Writers’ Union—that was their declared program—they didn’t want to join, didn’t want to correspond with it, didn’t want to enter into discussions with it, they wanted nothing at all to do with us. The reason was that we were part of the establishment and they were opposed to establishment of any kind” (qtd. in Hallberg 147). According



to Peter Böhlig, an observer and participant of these unofficial events, the emergence of independent literary journals coincided with the appearance of a new generation of artists and poets who could not be integrated in the conservative cultural apparatus and thus contributed to a new structure of the nonpublic.⁶

What is this nonpublic? In studies, anthologies, and journalistic reports of the last decade, the image of a multiform and yet homogenous literary scene has been evoked, often in reference to a generation of excluded East German writers.⁷ Commentators have used terms such as “scene” (Jan Faktor), “parallel culture” (Rüdiger Rosenthal), “creative enclave” (Heinz Ludwig Arnold) or “subculture” (Gerrit-Jan Berendse) to capture a sense of the non-conformist lifestyle and the richness of creative activities in art, literature, music, pottery etc. From a distance, the “scene” gained an aura that is characteristic of the commodification taking place since the middle of the 1980s; whether it is called the “Berliner Montmartre” (Lothar Lang), “the punk, drug, and café culture” (Karen Leeder) or “Bohemia in East Berlin” (Philip Brady), the literature of writers living in the district Prenzlauer Berg can no longer be distinguished from the public image in the West.⁸ Since the revelations about Sascha Anderson as an informer of the *Stasi* in 1991, journalists took interest in the rumor about squatters, poets, and informers and collected superficial anecdotes about the “underground.” Jane Kramer, for example, portrays the writers as “kids who wanted to write or paint or start a rock band”⁹ in East Berlin. Unfortunately, she does not shy away from unsubstantiated value judgments, while offering little insight about the larger political significance of the events she focuses on. Due to this interest in scandalous stories, a complex social and literary phenomenon of GDR history has been reduced to the activities of some “drop-outs” in the capital.

The popular image of the “underground” does not reflect the inner conflicts and the spread of second cultures in major cities of the GDR. Their emergence in the 1980s is an indicator of the disintegration of the socialist public sphere and the intellectual discourse “without taboos” as it was projected by Erich Honecker. The myth of a homogeneous subculture takes as a given that there is a typical representative of the scene, namely the young male poet who seeks the sensual and individualistic experience of art as an alternative to socialist everyday life. I argue that the shift toward poetry as the main vehicle of expression did not only drastically transform the role of the writer from the intellectual with political responsibilities into the apolitical but aesthetically progressive poet,¹⁰ but it also changed the view of implicit moral values which dominated the socialist public sphere. This transformation can be detected in the poets’ insistence on the

principle of pleasure instead of defending the official ethics of work. In various circles of poets in East German cities, the image of the young rebel who objects to the moral and aesthetic values of the gerontocratic public sphere was cultivated. Underneath the surface of a purely textual *jouissance* in poetry, there were forces that expressed an explicitly **male** sensuality. What can be seen as an underlying politics of sexuality with liberating effects is only part of a dialectic, since the process of liberation suppressed the individual's desire to determine one's own gendered, ethnic or religious identity. In other words: the implicit strategy of undermining the sober public discourses—especially within the most radical strands of linguistic experimentation—followed inherent patterns that rejected repressive statutes and common moral values while reproducing stereotypical behaviors toward women and ignoring ethnic and religious minorities. Therefore, the second cultures need to be reevaluated from both a sociological and literary point of view. The refusal to participate in institutions and organizations was possible because of a certain laxness in enforcing laws and statutes. Young people who came to live in the dilapidated areas of the bigger cities were not prosecuted for squatting apartments or avoiding to work.¹¹ The “soft tactics” of the *Stasi* prevented the second cultures of getting politically radical while creating a sense of constant paranoia.¹² At least the writers overcame their inertia in order to refocus on the “here and now” of their existence and fill its semantic vacuum with concrete meaning. Most writers saw a poetic mode of expression as the most appropriate vehicle to counter the stale rhetoric of the official political discourse. As poets they ironically affirmed the status quo. To be sure, the role of the writer was rarely that of the intellectual engaging in critical discussion. The East German supplement to the public sphere always evaded open confrontation.¹³ This is one reason why there is little evidence of a debate between the established writers and the second culture of poets, painters, performance artists, political activists, and musicians. Of course, we would need to examine the whole range of cultural activities and reconstruct the historical origins of a creative writing movement in many of the larger cities of the former GDR.

In examining the return of repressed identities in East German writers of the 1980s, there are a few distinctions to be made. The examples that will be presented later must be seen in the context of newly emerging strands of poetic and autobiographical writing of the decade. How many writers were actually involved in this unofficial literature? When did they make an appearance and where can they be located? The first clarification concerns the number of writers. In the main anthologies and scholarly studies of recent years, there are about forty to fifty authors whose contributions are listed. If we add the names of



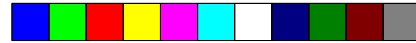
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those whose names were excluded in one or the other anthology, the number comes closer to seventy. The second distinction that needs concerns the temporal frame. After 1981, the year in which Franz Fühmann's proposal to publish an anthology of younger writers was rejected, the independent activities increased until the exodus of 1984 and the simultaneous attempt to create a union of writers—the so-called “*Zersammlung*,” a disassembly—which utterly failed. After 1984, there was a much clearer division between those who participated in readings, performances, etc., and those who engaged in the various strands of political activism. Between the mid-1980s and 1989, the unofficial journals, readings, and exhibitions became well known in the west so that the groups and individuals gained pride and prestige. In the same period, semi-public discussions such as the 1986 conversation in the *Aufbau-Verlag* and the “*Wort + Werk*” exhibit at the Samariterkirche in Berlin indicate the janus-faced policy of officials to appease and integrate the poets while at the same time persecuting those who contributed to the opposition journals of political activists such as *Umweltblätter* (Environmental Pages) or *Grenzfall* (Borderline Case). The third distinction concerns the geographical centers. Due to the aura of the “Prenzlauer Berg-connection” (Adolf Endler), the specific conditions and features of literary production in Leipzig, Dresden, Halle, Schwerin, and Karl-Marx-Stadt have been largely neglected.¹⁴ Yet, writers such as Johannes Jansen, Flanzendörfer, or Durs Grünbein appeared in Berlin or Dresden, and independent art-and-poetry journals were a widely spread phenomenon in many east German cities. Fourthly, one needs to mention that the prose writings¹⁵ of Reinhard Jirgl, Detlef Opitz or already established writers such as Wolfgang Hilbig or Brigitte Burmeister cannot be separated from the dominant trend just because these works do not easily fit the label of subversive poetry (Bert Papenfuß) or a generation of those born into the GDR, the “*Hineingeborenen*” (Uwe Kolbe). The changes in the economic and cultural environment, that is, the growing publicity and commodification after 1984, did not necessarily make these distinctions more transparent. Due to the system of distributing and marketing literary works, however, the individual achievements became more tangible and accessible to a wider audience.

The retreat from the established modes of production of socialist culture in the late 1970s resulted in alternative self-expressive activities that created a transitional social space. This “unpublic sphere,” with its open boundaries, allowed a certain type of non-political engagement to be fostered and molded. Restricted by official intervention, surveillance, and self-censorship, encounters of writers and artists took place at sites that blurred the distinction between public and

domestic. Social events turned apartments, workshops or backyards into galleries or reading halls and transformed cafés into cozy living rooms. What I call the “private sphere” appears as an always provisional space of social events that allowed their participants to find a tacit agreement on the meaning of their activism as a means of escaping political stagnation and unproductive intellectual discourse. At first sight, the private sphere seems to have been tolerant to different concerns in its pursuit of textual *jouissance* because it embraced the activities that undermined the values of work, puritanism, and rational discussion. The circulation of esoteric catchphrases and standard slogans, however, suggests that the liberating energy of displaying and disguising oneself turned into a binding force that kept the formation of personal identities in check. Apparently, the common interest in producing a web of intertextual links resulted in a certain jargon and group mentality. The tacit agreement among those who questioned the official use of language was their disregard of power and the disbelief in the utopian aspirations of the older generation. Referring to this attitude, the Leipzig-based playwright and poet Kurt Drawert stated that, “We said one cannot escape the power if one does not leave behind its language and its themes; it is a secret agreement to criticize the power, we said, and it makes it real and prolongs its life.”¹⁶ The plural pronoun “we” is revealing here, since it alludes to the predicament of these poets born into the socialist state. The non-confrontational strategies that produced the discursive system disseminated a notion of coherence that was at odds with the attempts to define a personal identity based on gender, ethnic, or religious identity.

In the following examples, I would like to examine more closely the rediscovery or, rather, the reinvention of identities in east German literature between 1986 and the early 1990s. It will be demonstrated that the literary figures at the periphery of the second culture deviated from the main course by defining their Jewish, female, and homosexual identities. The texts of marginalized writers who were equidistant to the activities at the Prenzlauer Berg unmask the exclusionary operation that was underlying the poetic discourse of the male dominated scene. I will consider the writings of Hans Noll, Bernd Igel, and Barbara Köhler to show the particular problems of **constructing** one’s self in the transitional space of the unpublic sphere. The status of the private as an **alternative** to the official socialist discourse gave certain liberties as far as an anti-bourgeois lifestyle and collective activities are concerned. But the “*asociale*” existence of non-conformist writers and artists created a role-model that prevented individuals in the “parallel discursive arenas” (Nancy Fraser) from articulating truly “*oppositional*” interpretations of their identities, interests and



needs” (my emphasis).¹⁷ In other words: the lack of a critical intellectual opposition toward the state was mirrored in the behavior toward the male peers.

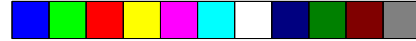
Hans Noll,¹⁸ born in 1954, the son of the writer and functionary Dieter Noll discovered the Jewish background of his mother at the beginning of his literary career.¹⁹ Trained as a painter, he started writing autobiographical prose in the middle of the 1980s. In his *Berliner Scharade* (Berlin Charade)²⁰ (1985), Noll clearly distances himself from the activities at the Prenzlauer Berg: “I never belonged to the scene even though my first studio was in its territory...” (353). A spokesperson in this narrative contemplates: “You are looking for a community, you huddle together so that—this is its side effect—the claws of the state security can more efficiently grab you.” (350). In contrast to his later books, Noll mentions Jewish Germans only in passing.²⁰ Nonetheless, his narrator makes some cynical observations, for instance on Marxists of small stature and the elegant Sephardic Jews who are rarely seen because the socialists had forced them out of the country (40). In *Nachtgedanken über Deutschland* (Night Thoughts About Germany, 1992), Noll is trying to come to terms with his parents’ silence about their Jewish identity. Due to their political convictions, Noll’s family succumbed to the assimilation of Jews in the GDR: “Besides I knew next to nothing about the unique history of my ancestors. A ‘Jewish problem’ was not an issue in my family; there was deep silence as far as this is concerned. Today I can imagine this attitude to some extent but cannot approve of it.”²²

In *Nachtgedanken*, the author’s name has changed to Chaim Noll. In response to the lack of the Jewish tradition in East Germany, Noll creates a new identity that is rooted in literary history, that is the “particularity of its condensed, grandiose humanity” that manifests itself in books (19). It is Heinrich Heine who satisfies Noll’s hopes to find a paradigmatic literary figure. In accepting, reconstructing, and identifying with the Jewishness of his ancestors, Noll breaks with his father and his education; he cannot tolerate the inconspicuous life in the midst of an “unloved, foreign, fundamentally anti-Semitic nation” (21). He clearly rejects the kind of Jewish-German patriotism represented by Jewish neo-conservatives like Michael Wolffsohn (22). In an ideal, almost Habermasian sense, the newly adopted Judaism compensates for the heartfelt loss of a larger urban community and the particularization of the city (145). Seeking consolation for an “appalling German reality” and Germany’s lack of culture, the writer resorts to a religiously inspired literature such as Logau’s, Klopstock’s or Paul Gerhardt’s poetry. In other words: the better Germany exists in its literature and language only while the people themselves are filled with an envy that is part of the “character of the *volk*” (58). His discomfort with the German mentality

results in Noll's newly acquired Mosaic creed. At the end of *Nachtgedanken*, Noll honors God in a stylized romantic image of the writer: "I put down my pen, open the window, watch the sky above the roofs of sleepers and thank Him who prompts these thoughts like all of them" (154). Noll seems to feel uneasy about abstaining from any political commitment. Nonetheless, he defends the contemplative mood of the distant observer by referring to the corruption of the state. Passivity is permissible as he says, quoting Seneca, who permits the philosopher to retreat from society if the state cannot be improved. Then, he suggests that only silence is appropriate, that is "quiet observation and meditation." Noll could hardly be more explicit about his views about the role of the intellectual in a unified Germany.

For Chaim Noll and writers such as Barbara Honigmann or Matthias Hermann, the reconstruction of a Jewish German identity took place in religion and literature, where they could find a tradition of their "Jewishness" that was "repressed" by their families. Like Honigmann, these East German authors chose to take on a repressed (or previously inconsequential) Jewish identity in adulthood, as Karen Remmler maintained in recent a study on *Reemerging Jewish Culture*.²³ Another critic, Thomas Nolden, noticed that in Noll's 1985 report *Der Abschied. Journal meiner Ausreise aus der DDR* (The Farewell. Journal of my Departure from the GDR), the author did not attribute much significance to his Jewish ancestors "for his social dissent."²⁴ Both Honigmann and Noll are trying to come to terms with their socialist parents who rejected their Jewish heritage by compensating for the loss of family traditions with a fictitious community. I argue that this reinvention of the self originates in the incompatibility between the chosen social environment (ie. the art academy) and the norms of the socialist public sphere (ie. Noll's father). Although Noll seems to envision a larger urban community and homogenous public sphere, his "return" to a religious Jewish identity does not entail a strong social bonding with like-minded Jewish east Germans. It is a rather isolated approach to the Mosaic belief, perhaps fostered by the influx of Jewish Russians who enlarged the small religious communities in Berlin.²⁵

The case of Chaim Noll shows that particular problems such as the (re)construction of a Jewish identity are closely linked to two aspects: first, a greater sensibility concerning the ambiguities of citizenship and family histories in the unified Germanies; and second, a growing awareness of nationalistic tendencies after 1989. As a student of fine arts, Noll enjoyed the privilege of a relatively liberal atmosphere at the academy, where he found like-minded friends. This milieu must have facilitated the decision to cut off the ties with his father.²⁶



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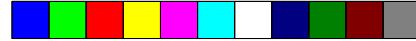
Although Noll shares the same social space with the artists and writers of Prenzlauer Berg, the confessional prose and contemplative-religious tone has nothing in common with the radical literary practice of the poets. As far as we can tell from the writings in journals and anthologies, questions of creed or of ethnic identity never stimulated a debate in the unpublic sphere. Writers of different nationality or ethnic background—ie. Asteris Kutulas, Leonhard Lorek, Raja Lubinetzki or Mita Schamal—might have expressed their views in contributions to the unofficial journals but they did not play a major role in the creative activities.

There are other marginalized writers whose interests in evoking the past and in problematizing human relationships differ from the main topics of the independent second culture in Berlin. In the south of the former GDR, Bernd Igel and Barbara Köhler have gradually moved toward more individualized gendered positions since the mid-Eighties; both completed their process of self-definition in the new market economy after 1990. As in the example of Chaim Noll, this change is connected with the act of remembering and questions of national identity. Bernd Igel, born in 1954, began studying theology in Leipzig but soon became a shy, almost invisible participant of various cultural activities. Throughout the 1980s, he contributed to the independent journals *anschlag* (attack) and *schaden* (damage), gave readings at Endler's culture club in Leipzig and created artist books. A volume of poetry with the enigmatic title, *Das Geschlecht der Häuser gebar mir fremde Orte* (The Sex of Houses Gave Birth to Strange Places) (1989) made him known to a wider audience in the West. Igel's prose poems oscillate between dream protocols and a tone reminiscent of Novalis, Trakl, and George. In an antiquated tone, the dream images evoke a childhood experience in which the body becomes the site of conflicting ideals of the self. The poetic persona is often a lonely child in bed who awaits dusk in his bed or is hiding in the nearby woods. The dream images portray a distant father whose military uniform and boots in the wardrobe raises questions about his true status and identity. The child feels guilty since it cannot adequately respond to the role it is expected to play before the father who seems to be a prison guard. The child's feelings of inadequacy are expressed in deep anxieties about bodily functions; the child constantly worries about sweat, excrement, urine, and the faulty way it uses language. "Warmth seemed to be just a warm word." Rather than analyzing this traumatic experience, the poem submerges into the past by reliving it as a dense web of allusions to the child's somber fears and sexual fantasies. The feeling of coldness prevails—a "Nachbar" (neighbor) becomes a night ghost, a "Nachtmahr."²⁷

Bernd Igel's political position is most directly expressed in a commentary on Jakob von Hoddis' poems,²⁸ "I see myself placed into the midst of outdated social structures [and] a revolution suffering of suffocation" (1330). Interestingly, Igel reveals his personal convictions in between the lines of a review rather than in a topical essay. Moreover, such open statements about political stagnation would not have been made before 1989. Apparently, the crisis of the political system allowed Bernd Igel to reveal his discontent with the state more openly while identifying with the tragic fate of the expressionist poet who died in an asylum. His gender identity is still covered by a collective subject, "our generation born in the fifties," which experiences the political stagnation of the state. He sees an affinity to the experience of the expressionists, particularly Jakob von Hoddis. Igel explains that he sees himself threatened by circumstances in which socialism is propagated as an ideology rather than as a form of living. He closes in saying that "only in its character as a form of living it is important to me" (1330).

This review of Hoddis' poems signals Igel's readiness to redefine his public persona. It is the beginning of a difficult process of coming to terms with a new social role after undergoing a sex change. As a woman, Bernd Igel called herself Jayne-Ann Igel. In an excerpt of a long diary called *Fahrwasser* (Navigable Water),²⁹ published two years after the review, Igel rejects an interpretation that defines identity as East German citizenship. Instead, she insists on a commonly shared experience of the self (301). In a confessional, autobiographical tone, the author describes the process of coming-out as leaving a hiding place; it is the end of being silent about her sexual identity and therefore the start of writing from scratch (302). Jayne-Ann worries that her appearance still changes between "plump girl" or a "long-haired man" (306). In an entry from December 12, 1989, she feels relieved that she can escape her father's projections of her identity: "I don't have to quarrel with father, to maintain the image of my self against his imagination" (303).

In a short essay on Jayne-Ann Igel, Wolfgang Hilbig gave the most illuminating comment on his/her works in a thoughtful introduction³⁰ to the poet's diary *Fahrwasser*, which never appeared in print. He reflects more on the specific problems of constructing identity in poetry than on the social ramifications of this sex change. Hilbig is enough of a sensitive reader to recognize the importance of this diary in its documentation of an autobiographical "I" that is distinct from the poetic subject characterized by its inventiveness and its double-gendered identity (298). His account, however, plays down the queer identity in



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order to construct a universal, neutered poetic subjectivity that would transgress the fixed gender roles.

It is noteworthy that Igel's radical decision to change her sexual identity coincides with the transformation of the political landscape and the new possibilities of exploring and redefining one's self in the larger context of citizenship. It is as if the 1980s slogans of transgressing boundaries materialized in the least predictable way. For those who had engaged in a revolt of the senses against puritanical state politics³¹ versus the search of group identities in the private sphere gained a new momentum. In Berlin, poets such as Frank-Wolf Matthies, Sascha Anderson, Bert Papenfuß, and Uwe Kolbe inverted supposedly political allusions to riots in the street into sexual innuendoes. Similarly, the Leipzig poets gave an erotic undertone to poems in distorted everyday language. What at first sight appears as a politics of sexual liberation in groups of predominantly male poets was haunted by the specter of ethnic and gendered identities of writers who had kept a low profile until the end of the eighties. At the same time, those writers at the margins of the allegedly homogenous "scene" tried to explore the repressive forces of their upbringing; turning toward the past, the individual is more outspoken about the double roles of parents as functionaries as if the authority had lost its power after the dismantling of the wall. In *Fahrwasser*, Jayn-Ann Igel confessed, "What I was hiding for years, I am allowed to be now" (300).

The cases of Igel and Noll gave the impression that gendered and religious identities emerged as a consequence of a growing self-realization. In order to upset this logic of a progressive liberation of repressed personal identities, I would like to examine the writings of Barbara Köhler, who lived in Karl-Marx-Stadt (Chemnitz) and Leipzig before she moved to the West. Among the works of the few women poets emerging in the 1980s, Köhler's poetry is at the venue of conflicting influences and it indicates the significant changes that occurred after 1985. Her poems are less conventional than those of Uta Mauersberger or Kerstin Hensel and yet they maintain a voice which steers again the most radical strand of the grammatological techniques of the 1980s. With writers such as Christa and Gerhard Wolf, she shares an interest in exploring her childhood near Karl-Marx-Stadt and the fate of tragic historical figures such as Hölderlin.

From the beginning of her career, Köhler set out to determine the role of women after the "*Ausreisewelle*." In 1985/1986, Köhler and her friend Melle exchanged a number of letters that appeared in the unofficial journal *schaden* (21 copies). The occasion was Melle's decision to part with his friend and leave the GDR in 1985. The letters focused on the impact of the political standstill and

a divided Germany on their relationship and thus made their private dispute into an event shared by others. In the context of discursive strategies, this correspondence is unique—it blurred the distinction between the intimate emotional communication and the journal’s approach to subvert the official jargon by “translating” it into a highly ambiguous poetic mode of expression. What allows this correspondence to reflect the disillusionment after 1984 is the openness of this conflict, given the fact that the unofficial art-and-poetry journals followed a widely accepted policy of playfully ironic and yet non-compromising content to avoid giving the impression of political conspiracy. There are a number of important features. First, the writers seem to have self-censored the expression of emotions to a large degree. Each letter is composed ambiguously as a response to a monologue. Second, the self-expressive tone of “love letters” is replaced by a mixture of analytical language, a play on idiomatic phrases and literary quotes. In her letters, Köhler poses as the querist who sees Melle as the quitter. To her, the FRG resembles a “steppe” in comparison to the “desert” of the GDR (54). The other half of Germany is not completely the truth (52). She accuses Melle of blaming the failure of their relationship solely on Germany while seeing her body torn apart by the impossibility to reconcile her political convictions with her attachment to her partner of seven years. Moreover, she realizes that her body and the body of women in general have become the object of male desire. Against a philosophy of negativity that she seems to connect with Melle, she is desperately looking for harmonies and a change toward the “human” via language (46). This correspondence has literary qualities because of numerous references to Kleist, Hölderlin, Heiner Müller, and Rilke. More importantly, these letters reverberate with Hölderlin and the Romanticists (interestingly, Christa Wolf’s *Gesprächsraum Romantik* (Chatroom Romanticism) appeared in 1985).³² This literary style conceals the direct expression of “love.” There seems to be no public place for speaking about emotions other than “literature” inasmuch as it transforms personal experience into a poetic idiom that offers a critique of everyday language. Rather than establishing a dialogue, the letters serve as a self-interrogation³³—they help to overcome silence: “one confesses in the torture of silence” (54). The self-referential language used in this correspondence indicates the attempt to break through the camouflage of metaphors (54) and offer a literal reading of the quotidian metaphorical language. It is through this approach to writing that Köhler differs from Christa Wolf’s stance. Through language (playing on everyday idioms), Köhler seeks to explore variations instead of the one and only identity.

In her two volumes of poetry, *Deutsches Roulette* (German Roulette) and *Blue Box*, she developed her gendered perspective by dismantling quotidian idioms about love. The binary opposition of male/female is questioned by locating the “subject” at the dystopian place of a grammatical and infantile “it.” The concrete experience of her childhood is sublated in a general critique of the conventions of upbringing. The ironic affirmation of an “it” as the origin of poetic speech both endorses and challenges the search of a neutral point of view because it superimposes the utopian androgyny with the objectification of the “it” as child and legal object. Although Köhler’s poetry has shifted its focus from the division of Germany to more “cosmopolitan” topics since 1985, its main concerns are still anchored in male-female partnerships that are examined in exercises of solitude. Accordingly, the first poem of *Blue Box* (1995) recognizes the speaker’s isolation as the condition of reflections on gender identity, “I am practicing solitude” the first poem begins.³⁴ While writers such as Gabriele Stötzer-Kachold articulated a radical feminist critique, Köhler’s female subject shrank to a less pronounced and far more modest position of the poetic “it.”

What makes the three East German writers remarkable examples of the real existing double-bind of the private sphere of the late 1980s is their way of exploring the social constructedness of personal identities. Against the labeling of “being born” into the GDR, they go public in order to resist the identification with “natural” roles offered by the official and unofficial cultures. None of them corresponds with the image of the “male drop-out” on the margins of socialist society. Noll’s, Igel’s, and Köhler’s writings underwent significant transformation since the mid-1980s. All three of them harked back to literature to connect a specific tradition with the newly constructed personal identity. In presenting “private” issues in the “unpublic” sphere they negated the matter-of-factness and the grammatological techniques of the literary groups in Berlin, but neither Köhler, Igel nor Noll entered the socialist public arena to reflect on the social conditions of this transformation of identities. The process of finding one’s Jewish, female, homosexual or transsexual identity in writing does not simply follow the logic of a liberation of the self. Instead, it is an encounter with many obstacles, such as broken traditions and a lack of diversified peer groups and academic communities who might be able to support these voices from the unpublic sphere.

ENDNOTES

¹. “Die Schatten werfen ihre Ereignisse voraus: eine Rücksicht,” [epilogue] *Ein Molotov-Cocktail auf fremder Bettkante. Lyrik der siebziger/achtziger Jahre von Dichtern aus der DDR* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1991) 392.

². See Klaus Michael in his interview with Robert von Hallberg in *Intellectuals and the Dissolution of the State. Professionalism and Conformity in the GDR*, ed. von Hallberg, transl. Kenneth J. Northcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 137.

³. See Christa Ebert and Sascha Anderson in Hallberg, *Intellectuals* 122, 259.

⁴. See Adolf Endler's comment on the anthology *Leila Anastasia*—later published in the west as *Berührung ist nur eine Randerscheinung*—in his and Gabriele Dietze's interview with Hallberg 307. cp. "Zum Vorgehen in der Angelegenheit der Anthologie 'Leila Anastasia.'" *Strategiepapier des Büros für Urheberrechte, Vogel oder Käfig sein. Kunst und Literatur aus unabhängigen Zeitschriften der DDR 1979-1989*, ed. Klaus Michael and Thomas Wohlfahrt (Berlin: Galrev, 1992) 302-303.

⁵. See Bert Papenfuß in Hallberg, *Intellectuals* 275. For other comments on censorship in the GDR see *Fragebogen Zensur: Zur Literatur vor und nach dem Ende der DDR*, ed. Richard Zipser (Leipzig: Reclam, 1995).

⁶. Peter Böthig, "Und; Undweiter; Undsofort..." (Bibliophile Zeitschriftenprojekte, Siebdruckbücher) *Vogel oder Käfig sein* 273.

⁷. For an account of this "Ausschluß aus der Öffentlichkeit" see Klaus Michael, "Sprache und Sprachkritik. Die Literatur des Prenzlauer Bergs," *Die andere Sprache. Neue DDR-Literatur der 80er Jahre*, ed. Heinz Ludwig Arnold, coed. Gerhard Wolf (Munich: text + kritik, 1990) 236. See also Geist, *Molotov-Cocktail* 392. The exact numbers of authors who belong to this "excluded generation" varies. For instance, Geist lists thirty-four poets born in the 1950s, nine in the 1960s; nine out of forty-three poets are women poets; Karen Leeder adds another nine poets to this list so that she comes up with forty poets born in the 1950s, twelve poets born in the 1960s; fifteen out of these fifty-two poets are women poets. Due to Leeder's decision to limit the pool to poets born after 1950, important older writers such as Häfner, Struzyk, Rosenlöcher, Wagner or Hilbig are not mentioned. Leeder's list could easily be expanded by Lothar Fiedler, Gino Hahnemann, Heidemarie Härtl, Andreas Hegewald, Martin Heydecke, Michael Rom, Frank Weiße, and Udo Wilke.

⁸. Rainer Schedlinski accurately pointed out that the image of a world of bohemiens does not do justice to the everyday life at Prenzlauer Berg: "...here in Prenzlauer Berg it wasn't a Bohemia. There weren't only artists; there was a perfectly normal social structure. There were alcoholics, asocial types, also some who made a lot of money dealing in automobiles, and barkeepers" (qtd. in Hallberg 269).

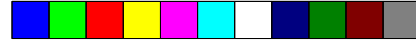
⁹. Jane Kramer, *The Politics of Memory. Looking for Germany in the New Germany* (New York: Random House, 1996) 155. There are several blunt statements such as "the new Prenzlauer Berg poets were into 'subjectivity'" (192) or "a poet named Alexander Anderson" is simply characterized by "He was not a very good poet" (156); the journal *Temperamenta* (sic) is called the "best underground East German literary magazine" (209), Schedlinski's *Die Rationen des Ja und des Nein* is translated as "The Ratio of the Yes and the No" and Suhrkamp appears as "Suhrkamp, the Frankfurt publisher" (201).

¹⁰. There are numerous comments on this apolitical role of the young poets. See for example: Jan Faktor, "Brief vom 2. Januar 1993," in Zipser 125.

¹¹. See Anderson, Schedlinski and Papenfuß in Hallberg, *Intellectuals*, 259, 267, 277.

¹². See Adolf Endler and Jan Faktor in Hallberg, *Intellectuals*, 306, 315.

¹³. The term "supplement" renders the non-confrontational course of many writers. Rainer Schedlinski for example rejects the term "alternative" (sic); his journal *ariadnefabrik* is part of the



“nicht-offizielle literatur” which escapes the “herkömmlichen öffentlichkeitsbegriff” since it “... führt zwangsläufig dazu, in gedanken eine gegenöffentlichkeit zu konstituieren, die dann mit den konventionen des öffentlichkeitsbegriffs in konflikt gerät, weil dieser, in seinem aufklärerischen sinne, stets alle meinen muß, während, wie im vorliegenden falle, diese öffentlichkeit teilbar geworden ist” “An das Literaturinstitut der Akademie der Wissenschaften,” [*ariadnefabrik 5/ 1988*] *Vogel oder Käfig sein* 313.

¹⁴. This view is shared by Klaus Michael, Uta Grundmann, Michael Gratz and others. cp. Michael Gratz, “Was sollte sich daran ändern? Anmerkungen zur Debatte um DDR-Literatur und ‘Underground’-Kultur,” *Verrat an der Kunst? Rückblicke auf die DDR-Literatur*, eds. Karl Dreiritz and Hannes Krauss (Berlin: Aufbau, 1993) 45.

¹⁵. For example writers such as Reinhard Jirgl, Norbert Bleisch, Henning Pawel, Detlef Opitz, Peter Wawerzinek, Brigitte Burmeister, Katja Lange-Müller, Irina Liebmann, Gerd Neumann and Wolfgang Hilbig.

¹⁶. Kurt Drawert, “‘Es gibt keine Entschuldigung.’ Offener Brief and Rainer Schedlinski,” *Haus ohne Menschen. Zeitmischungen* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1993) 64.

¹⁷. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus. Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 81.

¹⁸. Noll’s works are closely connected to the places in his biography: *Der Abschied. Journal meiner Ausreise aus der DDR* (1985); *Berliner Scharade* (1987); *Der goldene Löffel* (1989); *Nachtgedanken über Deutschland* (1992); *Taube und Stern. Roma Hebraica. Eine Spurensuche* (1994); *Leben ohne Deutschland* (1995).

¹⁹. For an account of the role of East German Jews in the former GDR see: Robin Ostow, “Becoming Strangers: Jews in Germany’s Five New Provinces,” *Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany. Life and Literature Since 1989*, eds. Sander L. Gilman and Karen Remmler (NY: NYUP, 1994) 62-74. For details of Noll’s family background see Thomas Nolden, *Junge jüdische Literatur. Konzentrisches Schreiben in der Gegenwart* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995) 31, 34-37.

²⁰. Hans Noll, *Berliner Scharade* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1987).

²¹. cp. Nolden 65.

²². *Nachtgedanken über Deutschland* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1992) 15.

²³. Karen Remmler, “En-gendering Bodies of Memory. Tracing the Genealogy of Identity in the Work of Esther Dischereit, Barbara Honigmann, and Irene Dische,” *Reemerging Jewish Culture* 186.-Honigmann left East Berlin in 1984.

²⁴. Nolden 34.

²⁵. For an account of this development see Robin Ostow, “Becoming Strangers: Jews in Germany’s Five New Provinces,” *Reemerging Jewish Culture in Germany* 65. cp. Nolden 16.

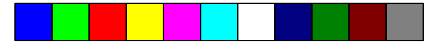
²⁶. See Helga Schubert’s comment on the conflict between fathers and sons, Hallberg 195-6.

²⁷. In a poem by Bernd Igel: “Noch nicht. Nicht mehr,” *Sprache & Antwort. Stimmen und Texte einer anderen Literatur aus der DDR*, ed. Egmont Hesse (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1988) 73.

²⁸. Bernd Igel, “Du vom Traum verlassene Stätte Mensch,” [Jakob von Hoddis. *Dichtungen und Briefe*. Zurich 1987], *Sinn und Form* 6 (1989): 1325-1330.

²⁹. Jayn-Ann Igel, “Fahrwasser,” *Sinn und Form* 2 (1991): 300-307. The book itself never appeared.

³⁰. “Über Jayn-Ann Igel,” *Sinn und Form* 2 (1991): 294-299.



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³¹. See Grimm, “Der Hohlkörper des Gedichts: Zur Poesie des Prenzlauer Bergs,” “*im widerstand/im mißverstand?*” *Zur Literatur und Kunst des Prenzlauer Bergs*, eds. Christine Cosentino and Wolfgang Müller (Frankfurt/M.: Lang, 1995) 91-118.

³². Christa Wolf and Gerhard Wolf, *Ins Ungebundene geht eine Sehnsucht. Gesprächsraum Romantik: Prosa und Essays* (Berlin und Weimar: Aufbau, 1985).

³³. The parenthetical admonitions make that absolutely clear: “bleibt nur die möglichkeit meine geschichte zu behaupten. (und nicht als bloße behauptung, als tun barbara!)” (49)

³⁴. Barbara Köhler, *Blue Box. Gedichte* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1995) 9.





David Bathrick

**REREADING STEPHAN HERMLIN:
RESIDUES OF DIFFERENCE IN THE POST-WALL PUBLIC
SPHERE**

David Bathrick

On October 3, 1996, *Die Zeit* published an article by Karl Corino entitled “Dichter in eigener Sache” (poet for his own cause). In it, he argued that, “the authority of the GDR writer Stephan Hermlin was founded on a representation of himself as an unyielding resistance fighter. In point of fact, this myth of his life (*Lebensmythos*) is a fabrication (*erlogen*). Corino’s explosive exposé of one of the leading, indeed legendary figures of GDR literature as someone who had basically invented a heroic story of the first twenty-eight years of his life opened up questions and debates at a number of different levels of public and professional concern. These debates take us to the very heart of differences in value and sensibility in the cultural-political post-1989 landscape in Germany today. I will focus here on three areas of concern as a way of framing a more wide ranging discussion of the East German writer as representative and barometer for differing perceptions within the bifurcated public sphere of the post-wall Federal Republic of Germany.

First, I shall explain and assess Corino’s claim to have supplied ample proof that Hermlin had, both actively and by virtue of omitted response, furthered a version of his early life seriously at odds with official records and documented materials in what would appear to have been an effort to aggrandize his reputation as hero, victim, and *bourgeois manqué*. Second, I shall discuss how the impact of these allegations played into ongoing tensions and suspicions between eastern and western German intellectuals, leading the former to accuse the latter of once again waging a demolition campaign aimed at undermining the credibility of east German literary and intellectual culture. The vitriolic nature of the interchange recalled the vehemence and rhetoric of the Christa Wolf and *Stasi* debates of the early 1990s, and provided one more example, if one were needed, of the vastly differing sets of ideological and epistemological standards that continue to guide the thinking of the “two” Germanies. Finally, I will show how the discussion pointed to fundamental questions concerning the relationship of life and literature, fact and fiction, truth and lie, and explore

what such a discussion tells us about the peculiar role of the German writer generally, and the east German writer in particular.

Let us begin with the case itself. In Stephan Hermlin, we have one of the leading figures of the GDR who, up to the point of Corino's revelations had remained virtually untarnished by the kind of *Stasi* allegations that had bruised such figures as Hermann Kant, Sascha Anderson, Rainer Schedlinski, Rudolf Fries, Monica Maron, Erwin Strittmatter—even Christa Wolf and Heiner Müller. Long term friend of Erich Honecker, member of the Academies of Art in both east and west Berlin, Vice President of the International PEN Society, Hermlin was a *grand seignor* of the GDR Party elite, who at the same time had stood up against arbitrary forms of power repression on the part of that very same establishment. Whether through his organization of a protest letter signed by twelve leading cultural figures on the occasion of Wolf Biermann's expulsion from the GDR in November 1976, or in his aid to countless known or lesser known GDR writers who over the years had been victims of the regime's arbitrary oppression; or in his efforts to organize peace dialogues between East and West German intellectuals in the early 1980s, Hermlin had gained a reputation as one who could move back and forth to either side of the power divide and still maintain his integrity.

What in part had enabled him to achieve such stature and carry out such a unique role was the public attribution to his very person of what numerous leading critics on the left and on the right, in the East and in the West have called a "model biography of a German antifascist" (*Musterbiographie eines deutschen Antifaschisten*). I quote now from the portrait of Stephan Hermlin by the west German GDR expert Frauke Meyer-Gosau, published in the *taz* and written in honor of Hermlin's eightieth birthday in April 1995,

The story of the Jewish son of the upper bourgeois Rudolf Leder, who took the *nom de guerre* Stephan Hermlin, is a story of battles. The experience of active resistance against National Socialism has also profoundly imprinted itself upon the worldview of the writer Hermlin. At the age of sixteen, he joined the Communist Youth League. From 1933 to 1936 he went underground in Germany to join the resistance as leader of the group called Erich Honecker. In 1936, he emigrated via Egypt, Palestine, and England to France. He participated in the Spanish Civil War, after that in the French Army, and finally in the French resistance. Then came internment and flight to Switzerland.

There, he was again arrested and released, finally to return to Germany in 1945.”¹

Meyer-Gosau’s rendition of Hermlin’s early life replicates in its outline what can be found in any number of biographies and monographs in East and West Germany. It is this canonized version with which Corino publicly takes issue, first in the above cited *Die Zeit* article, in a radio program of the *Hessischer Rundfunk* soon thereafter, and finally in his book entitled *Aussen Marmor, innen Gips: Die Legenden des Stephan Hermlin*, published at the end of October.² Corino’s investigations, he tells us, grew out of an aborted effort on his part to write a commemorative piece for the author’s eightieth birthday. It was, however, aborted, he says, because of his inability to ascertain exactly when Hermlin left Vichy France for Switzerland—was it 1941, as one source had it, or 1942, or 1944? The ever intensifying search to put together a consistent, coherent biography led him into increasing contradictions and inconsistencies. “Every discovery opened up five new questions, the answers to which produced an ever wider web of problems, etc. In the end there emerged an avalanche, itself capable of dragging down an entire construction of living lies” (6).

My task at this point will not be to adjudicate Corino’s individual claims or to settle once and for all the question as to whether the aura and reputation of Hermlin now lie in shambles. My own work on the subject and the time since its occurrence have been too limited to accomplish such a task. What interests me, rather, is the nature of Corino’s approach and the public response to it. On the one hand, I am concerned about the extent to which the neo-positivist methods he employed, while leading him to launch a kind of total demolition beyond what was permissible given what he had found, has, on the other hand, called forth responses of hysterical proportions by those who would defend Hermlin at any cost.

The information that Corino relies on comes from a number of differing sources: from copies of official documents (birth, marriage and death certificates, questionnaires by various government agencies, short biographies (*Lebensläufe*), medical reports, port of entry documents, school records, prison records, concentration camp records, correspondence with institutions, etc.), from Hermlin’s own public statements in interviews, essays, speeches or published autobiographical accounts of his life (he refused to speak to Corino), from the author’s own fictional writings in which the “I” form of narration

variously communicates or suggests a direct or indirect alliance with the life and experience of the writer Hermlin.

Two things should be stressed at this juncture concerning Corino's methodological approach. First, we find significant reliance by Corino on Hermlin's fictional autobiography entitled *Abendlicht*, published in 1979, for factual information about his life. We shall deal with this question in more detail below. Second, it should also be mentioned that a considerable amount of documentary evidence cited by Corino had been gleaned through discussions with Hermlin's estranged sister Ruth Frenkel, now living in Israel, with whom Hermlin had broken off contact in 1957, and who clearly reveals a strong animus towards her brother on any number of issues.

The following is a brief synopsis of the major allegations contained in Corino's account:

I. A considerable amount of the information we have about Hermlin's family and family life is either seriously distorted, completely falsified or intentionally full of omissions.

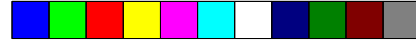
a) Hermlin's mother Lola Leder was a Galacian Jew, not a Christian of English descent, as depicted in *Abendlicht* and repeated in any number of other non-fictional sources. For Corino, the denial of his Jewish mother is linked fundamentally to Hermlin's more general denial of his Jewishness and his systematic effort to cover up his early Zionism.

b) Hermlin's father never served in the First World War as asserted in numerous fictional and non-fictional sources—as a non-German citizen until 1925 he would not have been allowed to—nor was he murdered by the Nazis in Sachsenhausen as was strongly suggested in *Abendlicht* and reaffirmed by Hermlin's silence in any number of interviews.³

c) The view of the Leder's family life in the 1920s to emerge from all of Hermlin's writings was one of extreme wealth and privilege from beginning to end. In *Abendlicht* and elsewhere there is talk of chauffeurs, nannies, horseback riding, the screams of peacocks in the backyard, as well as life in Berlin villas that are stuffed with famous original paintings and that served as a gathering place for the rich and famous. There is also talk of a pampered son who attended the best schools and graduated from the wealthiest gymnasium, friend to the children of the powerful and the moneyed.

The true plight of the Leder family was quite different according to Corino:

- Their financial wealth reached its zenith in the early 1920s, during the



inflation period, after which the family gradually fell on much harder times.

- Hermlin did not visit the best schools, did not earn an *Abitur*, did not attend the Humboldt University, as he asserted and wrote on numerous occasions, but rather was forced to leave the Gymnasium in Berlin in 1932 because he published an article in a Communist youth newspaper. The theme stressed here by Corino is that Hermlin makes the most of his privilege in order to aggrandize his decision to forgo that privilege and join the working class in their struggle for a better world.

II. In the second area of Hermlin's alleged mythologization Corino examined the ongoing revision of his political biography during this early period:

- He did not go underground, as asserted, when the Nazis came to power in 1933, but was living with his parents in Friedenau and on the Steinplatz in Berlin.
- He was not interned in the concentration camp Sachsenhausen from January to March 1934, as he claimed in a denazification questionnaire for the Americans in 1946.
- There is absolutely no evidence that he participated in the Spanish Civil War, either as a fighter or as an ambulance driver, as he had written on any number of occasions and was known to have talked about to numerous friends. I should also add that despite the fact that people like Alfred Kontorowicz reported in print not having seen Hermlin in Spain at any time during the war, there was no absolute proof offered that we was **not** in Spain at that time.⁴
- Finally, he did not play the role he claimed he had played in the French resistance and in the French military.

What we see in the images being constructed here by Hermlin, according to Corino, is the writer's desire to establish himself as an *Edelkommunist*; to construct a biography that would make him an absolute model in the eyes of his admirers; to make what was already an exceptional life an even more extraordinary one.

The response to Corino's article was immediate, heated and in part extraordinarily hyperbolic. As could be anticipated, a number of the voices from eastern Germany saw Corino's allegations to have occurred with "considerable financial backing and in the service of a radio station"⁵ or to be part of a climate "brought on by the collapse of communism, in which one time communists have become fair game for necrologists."⁶ Dieter Schlenstedt,

President of the East German Pen Society, took a decidedly ad hominem approach: “Corino was upset at what he called the authority of this GDR author, so he took it upon himself to push him around ... In point of fact, it is Corino who is the liar with his cleverness for speaking in the cloak of the truth: he may have the facts right, but the assertion that Hermlin is anything but what he is, is pure conjecture.”⁷

Central to the expressed outrage in these voices of GDR intellectuals was the emergence of a reaction formation that has become a fundamental part of the rhythms of public life since the fall of the wall. We saw it first in Christa Wolf’s paranoid response to the initial attacks upon her story *Was Bleibt* in 1990, when she spoke of a “witch hunt” by the western press, despite the fact that there were many western journalists and intellectuals in support of her position. We saw it also in Wolf’s response to the commotion around the discovery of her *Stasi* perpetrator file in January 1993, when in an interview for German television from the Getty institute on the coast of Southern California, she compared her fate at the hands of the German press to that of exiled writers who were driven from Germany in the 1930s. As we shall see below, Hermlin, feeling that he too had become a victim because of his struggle for a greater cause, would come to view anyone who would question his activities in the service of that cause to be persecutors, demolitionists, indeed the ultimate liars.

Given the fact that Hermlin was Jewish, it should not be surprising that the discourse of anti-Semitism would also play a role in the responses to the revelations about Hermlin—and this time by western and eastern writers alike. Silvia Schlenstedt, author of the standard GDR Hermlin biography⁸ as well as the dissident GDR writer Stefan Heym, both Jews, spoke of “the unmistakable tones of anti-Semitism” that were driving Corino’s brutal desire to destroy Hermlin’s reputation.⁹ Lothar Baier, writing in *Freitag*, found it astounding that Corino, “a genuine German born in Germany (*gut deutsch geboren*) in 1942, the year in which in occupied France the deportation of even Jewish children had begun,” would dare to dictate anything to the Jewish German Stephan Hermlin.¹⁰ Volkmar Sigusch went so far as to find that Corino’s efforts to unmask Hermlin arose from the same mentality that wants to see Auschwitz as a lie.¹¹

It took the ever unequivocally stentorian voice of Henryk Broder to bring some common sense into this circus of collective flagellation and guilt tripping:

“Corino’s remarks about Hermlin may have been nasty, they may have been mean or even hurtful—but they were not anti-semitic. You cannot talk about anti-semitism if a swindler who is a Jew is described as a swindler. On the other hand, we can talk about anti-semitism if a Jew, who is a swindler, is outed as a Jew, as so often occurs in this country in the case of ‘jewish speculators’—without the local newspapers so much as making a comment about it.”¹² The tendency, particularly initially, to employ the discourse of anti-Semitism to silence Corino and turn the debate about Hermlin into a battle between the anti-Semite and the antifascist says much about the difficulty of critical discussion in a public sphere bifurcated by reified forms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, be they post-1945 or post-1989. The metaphors of persecution, hunting and destruction remained legion throughout the journalistic discussion, with Corino being described repeatedly as a ruthless detective “who slipped into the sheep’s clothing of a critic in search of free game.”

This rhetoric of ad hominem incrimination was also employed by Hermlin himself immediately following the revelation, when, in an interview with *Der Spiegel*, he called Corino an “enemy” who had been persecuting him and others for years, and who was one of the first to read his *Stasi* files, in order to find something negative. This, Corino pointed out later on, was impossible, since Hermlin had immediately closed his files to the outside before anyone could have access to them. Pushed by *Der Spiegel* to answer to the charge that he had lied about his stay in Sachsenhausen on the American questionnaire, Hermlin admitted that he had done so, allowing, at the same time, that “in order to survive during those times I was forced more than once to disguise myself. The poet Louis Aragon once said that there is such a thing as a true lie.”¹³ In a reading at a Berlin art gallery shortly thereafter, Hermlin embellished his notion of what it means to lie for the truth: “I was lying for very pressing reasons, but Mr. Corino was not lying for the same reasons that I was, rather, he was lying from his deep anti-communist convictions” (*von tiefer antikommunistischer Überzeugung*).¹⁴

Let us pause for a moment and explore what exactly the basis might be that would necessitate the lie. Certainly all of us would agree that there are circumstances of extreme danger where one would be pressed, for survival’s sake, to prevaricate on any number of given issues. Is the case of Hermlin’s lie about his father’s murder or about his own incarceration in a concentration

camp one such example? My answer to that would be no and yes. No, if we look at the situation simply in terms of physical danger or maintaining one's freedom. Facing the American authorities in 1946, there was seemingly no immediate threat to Hermlin's life or to his freedom. What Hermlin was to gain was a job with the American occupying powers, and enhancing his status as a victim of Nazism can surely be seen as an opportunistic means to better his chances for getting employment.

Where it would not be viewed as opportunism, and furthermore, would not be interpreted as a mere lie would be in a situation where the final goal is seen to justify the means; where the process would be subordinated to a higher cause. This way of viewing things is precisely what permeates Hermlin's thinking from beginning to end. When Hermlin says that he lied for the truth, he is not talking about physical survival, but the preservation of the cause. Hermlin did not just invent in the immediate situation, nor did he limit his fabrications to fictional texts. The stories about his father's murder, his own concentration camp experience and his war record in the Spanish civil war gradually became woven into the much broader, ever coherent fabric of a legend that would transcend the untidiness and inadequacies of empirical fact. This transcendence was possible because in its adherence to the "higher" verities of historical materialist necessity, in this case the heroic struggle against capitalist fascism, it came to represent the better strand, the greater truth.

What becomes clear in our analysis of the Hermlin debate is that the rigidities and binarisms basic to the discourse of friend versus foe are not that far removed from the discourse of lying for the truth. What also becomes evident is the fact that his very adherence to such an absolute is what made Stephan Hermlin a vital point of political resistance within the GDR in the first place. As critical as Hermlin was of deformed Stalinism and the ultimately repressive policies apparent in the Biermann expulsion, Hermlin was not someone who would for a minute allow the critical mind to undermine one's necessary adherence to the larger trajectory of the historical dialectic and to its supreme guardian, the communist party.

But does all of this or will all of this make a difference in the way we read and now reread Hermlin's literary texts? Beyond the reading of individual poetic works, what do the revelations about Hermlin tell us about the eastern German literary public sphere before and after 1989? Many of his eastern advocates defended Hermlin precisely on the grounds that one must separate



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literature from life—that one cannot elide the two. Hermlin himself ridiculed Corino’s practice of comparing historical dates and names with the events and personages depicted in, say, *Abendlicht*, calling such an approach “a less than serious method.” There is, of course, irony here, on a number of different levels.

First, it was precisely the East German critics who were the first to read *Abendlicht*, not just as a spiritual autobiography, or a *Wunschbiographie*, not just as a synthesizing and aestheticizing of a life in the acknowledged ways that all fiction at some level is autobiography. Rather, for lack of other materials, in part because Hermlin himself was so notoriously reluctant to talk about his life, they used this work as a source of information about dates in his life.¹⁵

Second, their reasons for doing this take us a step closer toward understanding the structural and ideological underpinnings of the institution of literature itself in the GDR. Writing about contemporary literature, literary critics in the GDR (and not infrequently, also critics in the West!) often saw themselves as advocates and elucidators, not as critical interrogators of the literature or authors that they were treating. In the case of Stephan Hermlin (or Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Volker Braun, etc.) we have a figure who, for any number of members of the critical cultural Intelligentsia offered an alternative model allowing them to function on a number of important levels.¹⁶ As elucidators and interpreters of such individual works, they could at once affirm the epistemological and aesthetic deviations of an oppositional model and, in so doing, stage an alternative public stance as the building blocks for an potentially autonomous public space/sphere. Thus, it is not surprising that the process of alternative interpretive elucidation was rarely negative or contestatory, never an expose or a critique of the object of inquiry, that it was not primarily concerned with working empirically in archives or anywhere else for information about the lives of authors. For their critique was aimed in another direction—at the false images and politically abject values of the authoritarian status quo. The constituted legend of the antifascist Stephan Hermlin provided an absolutely vital buffer zone within which to operate a literary-critical culture of dissent. Legitimated by a biography of vastly canonical status, risks could be taken, free spaces opened up, networks developed.

Of course, examined within the larger framework of the socialist public sphere, the methodological and ideological practices of establishment and alternative writers do not appear all that different from one another. Both

ultimately believed in the realization of a project fundamentally at odds with the values of liberal bourgeois public life, either because of the latter's postulated notions of false freedom, or its versions of commodified culture. Both saw a dialectical interplay of life and art as the starting point for a socialist culture, one that constituted its values in some mediated relation to the larger unfolding of historical materialist truth. Both, finally, operated by needing and constructing literary and biographical models (*Vorbilder*, *Musterbiographien*) in order to legitimate their struggle to create a "sozialistisches Vaterland" (Ulbricht) or, on the other side of the political ledger, "a unique playground for deviant views about the world and the only place where readers find things that move and really affect them (Kunert)."¹⁷ If, for the official establishment, these models were made up of figures such as Ernst Thälmann, Hans Garbe or Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, then the counter to that in the "alternative" culture was the negation, but also the *Aufhebung* of such canonization: instead of a sanitized Hans Garbe,¹⁸ Heiner Müller's negative protagonist *der scab Balke*,¹⁹ in place of the model antifascist cinematic biography of Ernst Thälmann,²⁰ Christa Wolf's problematized *Kindheitsmuster* or Hermlin's own mythologically privileged path to the Communist Party depicted in *Abendlicht*. In the GDR, these *Aufhebungen* were important ways of countering Stalinist forms of public non-debate and political representation. As points of controversy in a post-1989 public sphere, however, they reveal how profoundly the legacies of the two systems will continue to confront each other from vastly different historical experiences.

NOTES

¹. Frauke Meyer-Gosau, "Stephan Hermlin," *taz*, 13 April 1995.

². Karl Corino, *Aussen Marmor, innen Gips: Die Legenden des Stephan Hermlin* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1996).

³. Fritz Raddatz, in an article entitled, "Der Mann ohne Goldhelm: Ein Nachwort zum Fall Stephan Hermlin," *Die Zeit*, 25 October 1996, refers to an interview in 1990 in which Hermlin explicitly states that his father died in a concentration camp. In *Aussen Gips, innen Marmor*, Corino mentions an interview of Hermlin by Günter Gaus on German national television in September of 1984 in which the latter says directly to Hermlin: "Your father, Herr Hermlin, was a very wealthy, art-loving, educated businessman of the bourgeois class. The National Socialists murdered him as a Jew in a concentration camp" (201). Hermlin makes no reply to this, leaving the impression, according to Corino, that the statement is true.

⁴. Alfred Kantorowicz, *Deutsches Tagebuch, Zweiter Teil* (Berlin: 1979) 643.

5. Dieter Schlenstedt, "Lügner im Umhang der Wahrheit," *Neues Deutschland*, 5-6 October 1996.

6. Friedrich Dieckmann, "Freiwild Hermlin: Detektiv Corino oder die Grenzen der Widerspiegelung," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10 October 1996.

7. Schlenstedt, "Lügner im Umhang der Wahrheit."

8. Silvia Schlenstedt, *Stephan Hermlin* (Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1985).

9. Silvia Schlenstedt, "Die Ausblendung gelebter Geschichte," *Neues Deutschland*, 8 October 1996.

10. Cited in Henryk M. Broder, "Im Dickicht der Lügen," *Der Spiegel*, November 11, 1996.

11. Cited in Broder, 196.

12. Broder, "Im Dickicht der Lügen," 196.

13. *Der Spiegel*, October 7, 1996: 259.

14. Volker Müller, "Die Moral der Lügen," *Berliner Zeitung*, 12 October 1996.

15. In her *Stephan Hermlin*, for example, Silvia Schlenstedt repeatedly cites *Abendlicht* and other fictional works as verification for facts about Hermlin's life in an initial biographical section of the book (40-67).

16. Here I would include literary critics and scholars, both in the universities and the Academy of Science; renegade philosophers such as Wolfgang Heise of the Humboldt University; dramaturgs and directors connected to theaters like *Die Volksbühne*, the *Deutsches Theater*, or the *Berliner Ensemble*.

17. Günter Kunert, *Diesseits des Erinnerns* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 1982), 185.

18. The "heroic" character Hans Ähre in Eduard Claudius' construction novel *Menschen an unserer Seite* (Berlin: Volk und Welt, 1951).

19. The "negative" hero, also based on the life of Hans Garbe, of a play by Heiner Müller. Heiner Müller, *Der Lohndrucker* in: *Geschichten aus der Produktion 1* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1974) 15-44.

20. *Ernst Thälmann: Sohn seiner Klasse* was a DEFA film which came out in 1954 and was directed by Kurt Maetzig.



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