



Cultural transformation in Eastern Germany after 1990

Klaus-Dieter Rossade, London

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Introduction

The six papers in this volume are a selection from presentations in the culture section of the conference *Transformationsprozesse in den neuen Bundesländern*, held in London in April 2004 and organized by the Association for Modern German Studies and the Centre for East German Studies at the University of Reading with the support of the Goethe-Institut London. A selection of papers from the politics and society section were published in the previous issue of *German as a foreign language* (GfL 3/2004). All contributions, including two papers focusing on language issues (Reiher & Baumann, Roth, both in GfL 2/2004) mark the attempt of organizers and participants to take stock 15 years into the existence of a “new” Germany.

In December 2004, Edgar Reitz’s *Heimat 3* series about the transformation process of Eastern Germany in the 1990s was aired. Like its predecessors *Heimat* (1984) and *Die zweite Heimat* (1992), it follows the lives of ordinary people in Schabbach and other locations, each time dissecting complex individual and collective realities and presenting the viewer with the pieces for re-assembly. But whereas it had taken over three decades for Reitz (and the German people) to confront the major transformation from the world wars and Nazi Germany (in *Heimat*) and West Germany’s social revolution in the 1960s (in *Die zweite Heimat*) the third installment portrays a period of German history that had finished barely 4 years before.

The readiness of Germans from the East and the West to reflect on their recent history is commendable if one considers for a moment how postwar Germany might have developed differently if East and West Germans had started to work through their NS heritage equally speedily. But with the increase in speed comes the lack of distance to survey, analyse, organize, structure a period that is still vivid in people’s minds and is leaving its marks on their lives today. Whereas the contributions in the politics and society section analyse a variety of surveys and studies in order to contribute to a more reliable picture about the

changes in society, the contributors to the culture strands are searching for authentic voices, experiences and memories. It is significant that *Heimat 3*, unlike its predecessors, was a collaborative effort between Reitz and Thomas Brussig, well known author of *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* and *Helden wie wir*; there are still two stories to be told that require authentic voices from both parts of 'unified' Germany.

The authors in this special GFL issue are searching for authentic voices from the East and the West in film, literature, architecture and advertising posters/post cards. In each case they try to classify and structure the complex transformational processes so that others can make sense of what is happening around them. Time will tell which of these attempts remain useful in the future. But for now some common themes are emerging from the contributions to this volume.

For many of the writers featured in the papers (see Priester and Goodbody), writing constitutes a physical act of remembering, reflecting or recapturing the past. For architecture, the comparable process would be the 'authentic' urban planning proposed by Dempsey. This pragmatic aspect of artistic production is echoed in the genre of autobiographical writing that has been a preferred mode ever since the beginnings of the 'new' Germany. In working through their individual circumstances, the relationships with their fathers (Priester) and their place within a local community (examples in Schutte and Goodbody), artists work through the collective history of the state that was eradicated at a stroke in 1989/1990. Recently, over the last five years, a new, more confident voice has emerged in films like *Sonnenallee* (see Schutte) and the writing of the *Zonenkinder* (see Evans). This emerging discourse is beginning to shape the perception of today's national and international audiences and goes beyond the discussion about the quality of the new (n)ostalgia. Culture may once again assume the role of spearheading the 'real' unification: not merely the political one, but a unification where the memories of both parts of Germany have their rightful place and all Germans their individual histories preserved. Urban town planning, it is argued, could support this process by creating the spaces that hold the memories of individual and collective histories for everyone to experience every day of their lives. But the emerging discourse will have to bow – for a while at least – to the still dominant voice of global capitalism, its potent symbols of market and consumerist power from the tall edifices of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz and the pervasive, exploitative and

sexually charged gender discourse that rules the streets of Berlin through ephemeral street advertising (see Morton).

Barend Schutte assesses the impact of the hegemonic western discourse coming out of WestGermany in some of the post 1989 film productions. Using Martin Dell's three stage development model, he traces a transformation from western domination of the narrative in films like *Wie Feuer und Flamme* (2000), which accompanied the actual political takeover of East Germany, to the hitherto muted and now emerging cultural self-assertion of Eastern culture in films such as *Sonnenallee* (1999).

Owen Evans looks at how the so-called "Zonenkinder" (Hensel), who, largely teenagers around the time of the *Wende* and without a political voice at the time, are now emerging with a distinctive voice. The work of Jana Hensel (b. 1976), Jana Simon (b.1972) and Claudia Rusch (b.1971) demonstrates how the authors begin to deal with the events that had, with a stroke, assigned their childhood experiences and memories to the rubbish heap of history.

Elisabeth Priester examines how such childhood memories and experiences emerge in a new *Väterliteratur* from authors such as Kerstin Hensel (b.1961) and Volker Altwasser (b. 1969). Whereas 1970s West German and 1980s East German writers engaged in this sub-genre, often triggered by the death of the fathers, in order to expose the authoritarian nature of their society through the autocratic and oppressive traits of their fathers, this new wave of father reflection, triggered by the death of a state rather than a person, reflects on the interdependence of the father-child relationship and the GDR past.

Joel Morton reveals the ideological battleground between competing gender discourses as they emerge from ephemeral posters and cards in the streets of Berlin, Prague and Warsaw. The 'residual', 'dominant' and 'emerging' elements of these discourses are both evidence of and change agent to the cultural, economic and political transformation that is taking place in Eastern Germany.

Anna Dempsey assesses the authenticity of Berlin's Potsdamer Platz as a public place by contrasting it with the reconstruction of the Old Jewish Quarter. Her measure of authenticity derives from the way such places 'preserve and present multiple pasts' and

thus display the potential of these places to record the transformation process and allow for a new and unified urban experience.

Axel Goodbody examines how the physical changes to the East German landscape have entered the poems of contemporary writers. One of the themes emerging from this is *Heimat*, a rediscovery of the local as an emotional focal point for personal and collective memories, yet with a critical awareness about the dangers of traditional *Heimatgefühl*.

Together these contributions point out some of the successive as well as the synchronous developments that mark the current transformation of German society. It is hoped that the broad and varied choice of examples the authors use to support their views, will provide a rich and exciting material base for use in class- and seminar rooms wherever people gather to make sense of what has been happening in Germany over the last fifteen years.

Biodata

Klaus-Dieter Rossade is Lecturer in German at the Department of Languages at The Open University (UK). His research interests are the history of German Studies, intellectuals in totalitarian systems, intercultural aspects of language learning and computer mediated conferencing (CMC) in language learning. His book “‘Dem Zeitgeist erlegen’? Benno von Wiese und der Nationalsozialismus” will be published in autumn 2005. He is currently Acting Head of the German section at the Open University, and convenor of the Association of Modern German Studies (AMGS).