Lisa R. Whitmore

Transcending Conspiratorial Interpretations of the East German Avant-Garde


From an American perspective, the task of analyzing shifts in GDR studies since the “Wende” evokes a sense of precariousness. The year 2000 will bring the final “Conway Conference” in New Hampshire, due in part to the discontinuation of funding by the Goethe Institute and the Marshall Fund. In addition, American conservatives have incited general funding cuts for the arts and humanities since the mid-nineties. The loss of financial support from both German and American sources decreases the opportunities for examining GDR literature and surreptitiously influences the scholarly interest in it. This may partly explain why the East German Studies Group deliberated again in 1998 whether to disband, despite a record number of young contributors.

The field of GDR studies in North America is contending with a surface notion that it is obsolete, while, back in Germany, the undifferentiated leveling of the GDR cultural legacy is ensuing, with serious repercussions for the cultural and emotional unification of Germany. Since the so-called Christa Wolf debate, attempts to undermine the value of GDR culture have not stopped, as the debacle surrounding the Weimar art exhibition, “Aufstieg und Fall der Moderne” attests. If museums only exhibited artifacts originating within those societies of the last 10,000 years that guaranteed the freedoms of speech and assembly, the exhibitions would be relatively dull. The “negotiations” currently taking place in the cultural realm appear more concerned with divvying up funds and publicity than with evaluating cultural contributions. Thus, it is important that sober, analytical debate balance the sensationalism of feuilleton and large public exhibitions.
This article addresses the self-publishing poets of the nineteen eighties and the history of research into their work. The alternative literature of the eighties makes a significant case study for understanding the potential values that may inform a “reevaluation of GDR literature.” The dichotomy between politics and aesthetics, which has been central to the “deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit” had already played a role in these authors’ self-understanding almost a decade before unification. The currently accepted dichotomy used to disparage GDR literature, namely the division between “literary literature” and “Gesinnungsliteratur” (literature of conviction), resembles the bifurcation of art and meaning within East German alternative culture of the eighties. In the “Prenzlauer Berg scene,” the aesthetic was privileged above the political. However, rather than leading to a diversity of insightful analyses, the scholarship became limited in its own way, culminating in the diffuse theoretical claim that the aesthetic dimension eclipsed meaning and content. The case of the East German avant-garde speaks against the introduction of a “Stunde Null” in East German studies in which literary inquiry would be suddenly shifted towards a concept of “the aesthetic” that can only be vaguely defined.

The most serious problem is that aesthetic criteria are often linked to secondary agendas. As Martha Woodmansee points out in her book, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*, even the eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophy of aesthetics was influenced by historical developments, most notably, the threat of a new commercialized popular literature.1 The sociological and political inquiries that have dominated the interpretation of GDR literature since the seventies were not oblivious to aesthetics. They were tied to a particular aesthetic that grew out of the early twentieth-century attempts to challenge the pseudoreligious function that the arts held for the upper class and to redefine them as an integral part of modern urban life.2 It is not surprising that the leftist avant-garde is being called into question, considering the post-totalitarian suspicion of ideology, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the assumption that the market will always absorb its antagonists.3 Interestingly, the return to a concept of disinterest in aesthetics moves the discussion of aes-

---

2 In an article for *Die Zeit*, Ulrich Greiner declares political themes to be “außerritarisch” or nonliterary. The criteria by which he decides which themes are literary and which are nonliterary remain undefined. Reprinted as Ulrich Greiner: Die deutsche Gesinnungśästhetik. In: *Der deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit oder “Freunde, es spricht sich schlecht mit gebundener Zunge.”* Ed. Karl Deiritz and Hannes Drauss. Frankfurt/Main 1991.