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Introduction: The Long Shadow of Terrorism

Since the conference on Cultural Memory of German Left-Wing Terrorism at Cardiff University in September 2005, where most of the essays in this volume were presented for the first time, various new documents have emerged in which not only novelists, poets, playwrights, film makers, but also journalists and historians attempt to make sense of this recent past, each in their distinct way. One of the most spectacular manifestations was Elfriede Jelinek’s play Ulrike Maria Stuart, staged in Hamburg’s Thalia Theater in the winter of 2006 and broadcast on German television six months later. New artistic representations were accompanied by a range of scholarly assessments, most notably by Wolfgang Kraushaar’s two edited volumes on Die RAF und der linke Terrorismus, published in 2006. This new wave of interest in the Red Decade (Gerd Koenen) coincided with the heavily debated release of former RAF terrorists Brigitte Mohnhaupt and Eva Heule, the speculations about the identity of the killer of Siegfried Buback and the publication of the tape recordings of the Stammheim trial of May 1975. The media hype resulted in headlines also in the international press. Indeed, the fascination with German terrorism has never been confined to Germany. Recent studies by John Horgan on ‘The Psychology of Terrorism’ and Jacco Pekelder on the influence of the RAF in the Netherlands demonstrate that the RAF has to be seen in a transnational context. New ‘insights’ which are published in the press on a regular basis and the political excitement they evoke indicate that the violent past of the 1970s refuses to go away. The RAF has become one of Germany’s never-ending stories, and continues to intrigue and disturb artists and scholars alike.

Waves of Cultural Memory

This volume is dedicated to the study of various artistic and historical documents that recall German left-wing terrorism in the 1970s. It is intended to contribute to a better understanding of this violent epoch in Germany’s recent past and the many ways it is remembered. Memory is never a fixed concept: it is formed by various social processes which, as Aleida Assmann pointed out in her book
Erinnerungsräume (1999), ‘inevitably evoke postponement, deformation, distortion [and] adjustment […]’. Memory not only stores the past, it also revitalises it. The process of remembering constructs the core of our private and collective identity, hence the juxtaposition of past and present is a crucial concept for determining our psyche and daily life. We remember in different ways and at different times, voluntarily and involuntarily, stimulated by smells, tastes, images, sounds or words. Art and literature are not only devices for remembering, the ‘Gedächtniskünstler’ (Aleida Assmann) have the task to conserve what has been stripped away from the past and cannot be reconstructed by those who have been personally associated with or lived through the events. At the same time, however, they operate as interpreters of this past. When traces of memory fade away, cultural documents become important aids for reading and reviewing the past – they also present themselves as alternatives to historiography and eyewitness accounts.

Interestingly, in the case of the explosion of cultural memory at the end of the previous century, an anomaly can be observed when communicative memory coincides with cultural memory. In other words, the act of living remembrance as conveyed in, for example, interviews, autobiographies and diaries of former terrorists and their fellow travellers, is accompanied by films, books and various other artistic documents, produced by a younger generation.

But why, we may ask, the need for this cultural memory? There is a range of monographs and conference proceedings that focus on the importance of memory after the unification of the GDR and the ‘old’ FRG in terms of shared national identity, despite 41 years of division. Volker Schlöndorff’s movie Die Stille nach dem Schuss (2000), for example, played a prominent role in emphasising the involvement of the German Democratic Republic in the violent culture associated with left-wing terrorism and state power in the Federal Republic. Still, this does not answer the question why the ‘terrorist genre’ is so popular, especially since it coincides with a still existent direct memory.

The attraction of being exposed to memory sequences as transported by films, novels and other works of art is not merely an opportunity for re-reading the past, it also enables us to scan the grounds of the ‘dangerous liaison’ between violence and aesthetics: