“But Somehow it Was Only Television”: West German Narratives of the Fall of the Wall in Recent Novels and their Screen Adaptations

East Germans have long been criticised for harbouring a feeling of Ostalgie, a nostalgia for their old, Socialist state, but only recently has it become apparent that many West Germans obviously experience a similar sense of loss and longing for a seemingly simpler time before reunification. The texts that express these feelings tend to focus on the fall of the Wall as the pivotal point of change in German post-war history. Typically the characters in these books deny the significance and impact of this major political event and strive to reduce its importance, at best to a minor television moment. This attitude can be observed in the novels liegen lernen and Herr Lehmann and in their film adaptations. Despite having been accused of indulging a feeling of Westalgie, a closer analysis reveals that they are in fact deliberately provocative and challenge Eastern and Western stereotypes. In addition the films find ways to transport the books’ ironic narrative to the screen, and they also reinforce the authors’ implicitly critical attitude towards their characters’ political apathy by portraying the fall of the Wall in ways different to the books. The films react to the provocation voiced in the novels and function like an intertextual commentary as they integrate the opening of the border into a meaningful context for the protagonists and restore it to its historic importance.

The last few years have seen the publication of a number of novels, autobiographical narratives and non-fiction accounts that look back on Germany in the 1980s. Critics already speak of a “nostalgia boom of the eighties”.1 This trend, which seems to have been started by Florian Illies’ Generation Golf2 – an ironic portrait of his contemporaries linking the allegedly consumerist attitude of this generation to Volkswagen’s launch of their Golf model in 1974 – can also be observed in recent film releases, such as Benjamin Quabeck’s Verschwende deine Jugend (Waste Your Youth)3 and Hendrik Handloegten’s Paul Is Dead,4 both set in West Germany in the early eighties. As Reinhard Mohr, himself the author of Generation Z,5 recently remarked in Der Spiegel,
there generally seems to be “a wave of sentimental memories” passing through Germany, indicating a need for “collective recollection”.

It can be assumed that this development has in some ways been triggered by the political and social changes that Germany has undergone in recent years, in particular by the process of unification and its repercussions. The generation which experienced the fall of the Wall as young adults is now looking back on its childhood and youth. This is happening on both sides of the former border, and Generation Golf was swiftly followed by similar publications dedicated to the experience of growing up in the GDR – soon dubbed “Generation Trabant” by critics. Jakob Hein’s Mein erstes T-Shirt (My First T-Shirt), Jana Hensel’s Zonenkinder (After the Wall) and Claudia Rusch’s Meine freie deutsche Jugend (My Free German Youth) all present themselves as largely autobiographical accounts of East German adolescence.

This process of looking back and reviewing one’s youth, which currently seems ubiquitous in both the German literary scene and the cinema, is necessarily different for East Germans than for their West German counterparts. In the rapid process of unification East Germans were subjected to drastic changes in their way of life and experienced a “profound displacement”. In addition to having to cope with the introduction of a different socio-political system and the inherent “strain of transformation” they witnessed the “systematic devaluing” of their GDR past as part of a condemnatory discourse, dominated by the West. Accordingly, the integration of the five new Länder into the existing Federal Republic has been perceived by many in the East as a

---