

Oldenborg Center, Pomona College

German Literature 2008! - Changing of the Guard?

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Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation for my third lecture at the Oldenborg Center on contemporary German literature.

Trying times we go through – and looking back, 2006 seems like a long time ago, but yes - It was a breakthrough year for German literature, we saw notable changes in focus, away from the typical German hodgepodge to themes everybody else was concerned with. 911 and the wars that followed treated in novels by Katharina Hacker and Thomas Hettche. Ilija Trojanow's World Collector on Richard Francis Burton and the world of Islam, Stanistic's account on the war in Bosnia, not to forget Daniel Kehlmann with his double biography of Alexander von Humboldt and Friediech Gauß..

A new generation of German novelists! But then, 2007 brought everybody back down to earth. Copyrights for the German top titles were not bought as eagerly as in the year before, sales of the titles from the previous year weren't up to what American publishers had hoped for, and the themes of German top novels were very much centered around Germany and its history, again.

Nevertheless, as in 2006 and 2007, the German bestseller lists in 2008 were populated just as much with German authors and this trend continues on to the present day.

The surprise on last year's German literature scene was the Peace Prize of the German Book trade. It was awarded to the painter Anselm Kiefer. A first in the 58 years of this award that started in 1950, with the first laureate, editor and author Max Tau, who was honored in a private home in Northern Germany. 2008 it was celebrated in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt and the award going to Anselm Kiefer was a sincere gesture and acknowledgement

of his work relating to the national consciousness in Germany's post war history.

Anselm Kiefer, 64 years old and now living in France, worked for decades to alert Germans to what the jury called "the dictate of unaccommodating, abstract representation in Post War Germany, and how to overcome it" – "unverbindliche Ungegenständlichkeit" are the words used by the jury, somewhat elusive, still – even in translation. With all due respect, what Kiefer has shown us, the Germans, that is, were things lost that couldn't be found in a climate of evasiveness and repression of Third Reich topics in post war Germany. Connections between literature, science, mythology, and art in society.

Kiefer's passion for literature expresses itself not only in his paintings but also in his many artist books, often with lead mantles as if to protect literature.

Needless to say that Kiefer was represented in the LACMA exhibition Art of Two Germanys / Cold War Cultures. Unfortunately, if you haven't seen this remarkable exhibition, it closed on April 19th but will travel to the Germanische Nationalmuseum Nürnberg opening May 23, and the Deutsche Historische Museum Berlin opening October 3

Now, let's take a look at German literature of 2008:

Last year I said that 2007 was a let down compare to the upbeat mood of 2006 but there is hope, I said!

So let's see and start with *Feuchtgebiete* (Wet Areas) by Charlotte Roche. It became somewhat a sensation but was, because of its literary shortcomings, mostly trashed. It's about a young woman in a hospital waiting for her divorced parents to visit, hoping that those, at her sickbed, would make up and get together again. While waiting she starts discovering her own body, particularly those areas usually looked at as not ladylike and gets obsessed with avocado pits for example, so much so that one of her sexual experiments with these pits actually leads to an emergency operation. I will spare you the thrashings and mention only few words of a review by Franziska Seyboldt, an intern at the Berlin TAZ: She objects to the acidic reviews pointing out that most probably *Feuchtgebiete* was meant to become a non-fiction book and the fictional narrative was spun around the facts, just to ease the reading. The book basically is an objection to the typically capitalistic dressing of women as objects. And there are definitely useful sextips to be found not only for teenagers but also experienced women, not

without breaking societal taboos.

Also in Spring 2008 Martin Walser published what Martin Lüdke from the FAZ called Walser's most beautiful book: *Ein liebender Mann* (A Loving Man), Lüdke sees it as a successful attempt to write a fictional biography of a literary national monument, in this case Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Although set in 1823, negotiating 74-year old Goethe's affair with 19-year old Ulrike von Levetzow Lüdke sees this as a modern tale of "old man loves girl". Walser treats the subject in such a painless way and, without even making an attempt to emulate Goethe's style, one feels how Walser is making a tremendous effort to put himself into Goethe's skin, unflinching in believing in the "immortal power of love" that cannot be defeated, not even by age. There were voices noting a qualitative decline in the second half of the book where Walser composes "Goethe's letters"

And then there was Götz Aly's book *Unser Kampf* – It was torn apart, unanimously. He, an active participant of the 68 student revolt in Germany apparently went on thin ice when comparing the student movement in 68 with the Nazi movement in 1933. One critic called him a disgruntled hate monger.

Even Clemens Meyer winning the Leipzig Book Prize 2008 for his collection of short stories *Die Nacht, die Lichter* was nothing more to Sieglinde Geisel of Perlentaucher but convenient, a choice of the literature business relishing its own hyperactive presence. The hearty gulp of beer before entering the stage to receive his prize, and his tattoos received more attention than his writing, which is not without highlights but his "elegant literary style", as it was placated by the jury' is just not really existent she finds.

It was somewhat of a meager Spring and calls were heard "can't German authors deliver a little more life like writings?" Richard Kämmerling from the FAZ was pleading quietly. Or Peer Teuwsen from the *Weltwoche* asking "is there anybody still risking anything in German literature?"

As the Fall season came around there were more German novels reviewed as ever, contrary to the Spring where hardly any novel got more than one review, and some critics wondered how could it possibly be that there should be more than three, maybe four novels of note in one season. Was it just the publishing industry being busy with itself? However that may be, there was

one novel, the magnum opus of the season, and it was jubilantly received:

Uwe Tellkamp's *Der Turm* (The Tower) – A novel about the last years and downfall of the GDR. A great narrative spectrum with numerous locations and characters depicted with a number of literary means while the author still manages to present all details with an inner closeness. Not just a novel about the turn to the united Germany but a “reclaiming of the epic” so Dirk Knipphals from the TAZ. “The first historic philosophical interpretation of this time” proclaims Beatrix Langner from the *Zürcher Zeitung*, “a classic bourgeois family novel” so Sabine Frank from the *Frankfurt Rundschau*, “a powerful novel” writes Andreas Platthaus from the FAZ, “a timeless novel” in Helmut Böttigers view in *Die Zeit*. A masterpiece compared to the rest of the crop and the names of Döblin, Goethe, von Doderer, Mann, and others were whirling all over the place. Not a shabby compliment and *The Tower* was awarded the German Book Prize 2008

As to the other 2008 Book Prize shortlist titles, there was Ingo Schulze, *Adam und Evelyn* – a light book with transformed, biblical characters – placed in the turbulent GDR summer before the fall of the Berlin wall, driving regular GDR citizens out of the “coziness they were used to”. A tailor who applies his talent, to design women's clothes too enthusiastically, according to his girlfriend, that is. This relationship drama plays out during vacation time in Hungary when the government surprisingly opened its borders to the West to GDR citizens putting many in quite a dilemma having to decide on the spot whether to go back to the GDR, their lives, their families, or risk the a new start in West Germany.

Rolf Lappert, *Nach Hause schwimmen* (Swimming home) – was mostly applauded for its intensity portraying the highly intelligent Wilbur who measures only five feet. Life has left its painful marks on Wilbur and when he gets to know the staff member Aimee in a clinic for prevention of suicide she eventually gives him the power to “swim back home”, to find to himself.

Iris Hanika, *Treffen sich zwei* (Two meet) – Nicole Henneberg from the *Frankfurt Rundschau* is all choked up by this “romance” with its mix of realistic and fairy tale elements.

Sherko Fatah, *Das dunkle Schiff* (The dark ship) – also got a warm reception. It tells the story of the young chef Kerim who ventures to start the dangerous journey from Iraq where he briefly is associated with the Jihadi

but gets away to continue on to his final destination Berlin. There he finds love but can't quite get away from his past. The writing is so involving, Jens Jessen from the FAZ often put the book aside because he had to fight back tears. How does Sherko Fatah do that? He writes in a dry ascetic realism about the true fate of a Kurd who may be burdened a little too much by the author but altogether, the story is plausible.

So there, how moving, all critics in tears and emotional upheaval. Did the Germans rediscover love as a force? But hold it for a moment. There was one more title on the short list. It's Dietmar Dath's, *Die Abschaffung der Arten* (The Abolition of Species). This is where the scathing selves of the critics awaken and, at the same time, are put into a different kind of dilemma. This fantasy novel about the lost era of human kind in a world ruled by animals was published by a former Feuilleton editor of the FAZ and most every critic seemed to have difficulties to just trash this novel of a respected, versatile colleague who shows not only intellectual curiosity and broad scientific knowledge but also courage in combining a wide range of issues such as Darwinism, Socialism, and many other topics, finds Thomas Anz of the FAZ. The book itself he doesn't like for its lack of suspense, the torturous and annoying passages, etc. – despite its openness and broad spectrum from the Russian Revolution to Arno Schmidt. Others had similar problems and Ekkehard Knörer from the TAZ even warns to NOT judge Dath on the basis of just this book. There also was lots of laughter while reading, even fascination with Dath's "plea for a better and just life" but visibly, ambivalence is shown by every critic who couldn't get him- or herself to just give it a thumbs down. "How can bunk be so exhausting?" moans Burkhard Müller from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, well, reviewing this title was his job, he admits. And what does it say about the German reader who catapulted this title into the top 20 of the fiction bestsellers?

From the Book Prize long list Judith Kuckhart's, *Die Verdächtige* (The Suspect), and Uwe Timm's, *Halbschatten* (Half Shade), two more titles were making it into the top 20 fiction bestsellers. Kuckhart's mystery as well as Timm's fictional biography of the female pilot Marga von Etsdorf, who escaped the Nazi reign only to commit suicide in Africa, are noted for their poetic writing.

Feridun Zaimoglu, *Liebesbrand* (Love Blaze), the newest title of the Turkish born writer also on the long list for the Book Prize and very well received by the critics who, almost unanimously, are enthralled with Zaimoglu's

capability to change again and again as a writer.

And there was Peter Handke's, *Die morawische Nacht* (The Moravian Night). I only mentioned it briefly last year including the sigh of relief going through the literary community when realizing it's not a politically tainted book. But true to his reputation Handke found something else to generate extra attention with and putting him into the limelight. In this case he got the attention when he withdrew this title from the competition for the German Book Prize 2008 after it was included in the nominations for the long list. Officially, and I don't mind to give him the benefit of the doubt, he withdrew this title in order to give the younger generation of writers a better chance of winning. And maybe they did have a better chance of winning because *The Moravian Night* indeed is a compelling and convincing presentation by Handke with an unexpected dose of self-irony and self-criticism. An open minded Handke.

That brings me to another master of self-promotion: Günter Grass, and his second part of his autobiography: *Die Box* (The Box). Well, what happened here? Asides of a few, mixed reviews – no headlines at all. If Handke's *Moravian Night* was deemed to be the beginning of his “old age” work, *The Box* was mostly viewed as a “Grass-finally-over-the-hill-book”. Not that there weren't sympathetic personal notions here and there but form and content of the follow up to *Peeling the Onion* was received as a brash construct wherein Grass decides to have his grown children tell this part of his life in a rather ditsy language, but of course, written it was by Grass himself.

Now, once again, the question: How did the “little brother” Germany do on the American market? Altogether, copyrights to some 200 titles were bought and published in the US since the end of 2006 but it is for sure not representative of what's on the front burner in Germany itself.

Familiar names like Bonhöffer, Canetti, Cassirer, de Bruyn, Grass, Habermas, Hein, Herzog, Horkheimer, Jünger, Meinhof, Rilke, Schlink, Sebald, Unseld, von Dithfurt, Walser, Wolf. But there also was a good dose of writers considered to be the new generation like Götz Aly, Funke, Glavinic, Kehlmann, Lebert, Richard David Precht, Schätzing, Ingo Schulze, Stach, Stamm, Stanisic, and Trojanow, to name a few.

However, as far as the sales numbers go there really is only one author

making her way into mainstream America and that is again as in the year before, and the year before that – Cornelia Funke, adding to her balance sheet with the translation of the third *Inkworld* volume *Inkdeath* in October 2008, and this January, even though the *Inkheart* movie wasn't a smashing box office success, it did o.k. Cornelia Funke's numbers in the market make her the lone rider in this department.

Let's take a quick look at another playing field for German culture, the movies. The 2009 Oscars actually produced unusual results as far as German culture in the US is concerned. To my knowledge this year saw more nominations for either German or German co productions than ever before in post war history of the Oscars. There was *The Reader*, a film based on the novel by Bernhard Schlink, with multiple nominations including best picture, and Kate Winslet won the Oscar for best actress in *The Reader*. Director Uli Edel's *The Baader Meinhof Complex* based on the book with the same name by Stefan Aust was nominated for best foreign film but didn't win. In the short film category *Toyland* (Spielzeugland) won the Oscar; however, there is no book it is based on, just a familiar backdrop: in 1942, a German boy believes that his disappearing Jewish neighbors are going to Toyland. Finally, in the same category, *On The Line* (Auf der Strecke) by Swiss director Reto Caffi was nominated but again, there is no literary event as a precursor.

This little sidebar is helpful in shedding some light onto the question in the title of my lecture: Changing of the Guard? There is no doubt that this change is in progress, but the answer is multilayered. Let's start with the old guard: Grass, Enzensberger, Walser, Bernhard, Handke, Wolf to name a few. Interesting here to note is that Dath with his, I want to call it "unfinished", *Abolition of the Species* is given more respect as a colleague than "grandfather" Günter Grass, who was hailed as the last great German author to be a dominant public figure only three years ago. Grass and his *Box* now are pushed aside like an onerous weight and the writing on the wall reads somewhat like: Shut up already! Handke was more or less officially issued the certificate of having entered his "late work" period, despite the complimentary treatment of his latest work. There is silence around the others though they certainly do carry weight. Thomas Bernhard's work, e.g., is staged a lot these days in memory of the 20th anniversary of his death.

So who of the new generation has claimed or is about to claim their stake? There are Daniel Kehlmann, Ilija Trojanow, Cornelia Funke, and now Uwe

Tellkamp, among others. Are they ready for departure from a reality too narrow into a well-conceived story world, a “true” world as Ulrich Greiner wrote in *Die Zeit* last year when describing Peter Handke’s strength.

There is no doubt in my mind that this is coming about, the younger German authors encountering the whole world as a stage again and Uwe Tellkamp’s lauded novel *The Tower* on the last years of the GDR may be one of the last parts of the truss of this house that is being completed after a long and treacherous journey that had preoccupied Germany with its inglorious past. Outside of Germany themes as they are portrayed in films like *The Reader* and *Toyland* may still be preferred topics relating to Germany but there is another anniversary celebrated this year, the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and maybe, just maybe, we are at the beginning of a new Germany ready to go!! Even if the new generation needs a little more boot camp time to assert themselves.

Nothing comes easy! – A good example is Daniel Kehlmann’s *Fame*, published in early 2009, an interesting collection of interwoven short stories. Just take the description of one of the stories in *Fame*: an old lady, on her way to meet death, quarrels with the writer who invented her! ‘Fame goes to the heart of contemporary being, the “deterioration of identity” as a result of our efforts to “arm ourselves with the latest media techniques” – Andreas Breitenstein from the *Zürcher Zeitung* is smitten with the style, humor, even the existential stammering, while Heinrich Detering sees the main thrust of the collection in questions about “Fate” and “Coincidence”. Lothar Müller from the *Süddeutsche* sees nothing extraordinary in all of this and neither does Ina Hartwig from the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and a *Spiegel* critic found *Fame* to be somewhat like designer furniture, not without pointing to the pressure that comes with writing your first book after an overwhelming success as Daniel Kehlmann’s *Measuring the World* – so keep an eye on these young German writers and see how 2009 unfolds.

In closing I want to thank you for your attention and again, point out the websites www.perlentaucher.de and the gbo.org which were, as usual, very helpful in providing information for my lecture and last, not least, a link to my website www.paperview.com where you can find titles by the authors I talked about or topics I touched upon for you to purchase.

Thank you,

and again: never mind the feuding critics, they are just minds at work.