

**The Impossibility of the Wenderoman:  
History, Retrospective, and Conciliation**

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*“The Impossibility of the Wenderoman” argues against the conventional conception of the Wenderoman (and of thematically related films and plays) that views it essentially as a kind of cultural document of the German “Wende.” Placing the question within the larger problematic of historical fiction and political literature, this paper notes first that the very genre is itself an impossibility insofar as its boundaries are ever-expanding. The quintessential contribution of the genre, this paper argues, is twofold: retrospective and “conciliatory.” It is the first insofar as we are willing to look beyond literature and film that focuses principally on the Wende per se, and instead take Unification as a juncture from which truly to look back (taking advantage of the new temporal perspective given us by “the turn”), and thus reevaluate Cold War conventions, specifically those governing German-German and German-American cultural relations that often went unquestioned in the postwar period. In other words, the Wenderoman dimension I elaborate (drawing especially on Kempowski’s *Letzte Gruesse*) may contribute to a more profound understanding of the period it “closes” than the one it ostensibly celebrates and inaugurates. Secondly, the Wenderoman functions as a prominent vehicle of cultural memory, preserving various moments of a Marxist-inspired social agenda for future generations. Agamben’s notion of “the contemporary” as well as foundational concepts of “cultural memory” are useful here. The discussion features well-known films (*Good Bye, Lenin!* and *Das Leben der Anderen*), theater (Brussig’s *Leben bis Maenner*), as well as several novels. Whether this process of cultural “sifting” will remain purely elegiac, or serve as a resource for imagining alternative social possibilities in the future is of course impossible to know—both because it is far too general of a hypothesis, and still far too early to tell.*

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“Da bin ich noch: mein Land geht in den Westen. . . Was ich niemals besaß wird mir entrissen./Was ich nicht lebte, werde ich ewig missen. . . Mein Eigentum, jetzt habt ihrs auf der Krallen./Wann sag ich wieder *mein* und meine alle.”  
Volker Braun, “Das Eigentum” (1990)

## I. Introduction

There is something secondary, epiphenomenal, and derivative about the *Wenderoman*. As the compound noun itself signifies, the aesthetic “root” subordinates itself to the robust political referent, which itself is a questionable—though widespread—euphemism for a series of complex historical events.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the assumption persists that we have a fairly well understood political occurrence that simply requires its literary monument. Is the *Wenderoman* indeed anything more than a more elaborate version of the inaugural poem written to celebrate the swearing-in of a US president? Is it, in other words, a kind of cultural arabesque, a decoration and thus affirmation of a political *fait accompli*?

The application of the term *Wenderoman* is itself so elastic as to render it of questionable use for academic inquiry: as we will see, it can refer to an almost endless body of narrative, and has understandably been expanded to include film, theater, as well as other kinds of art. A boundless oeuvre is by definition difficult if not impossible to analyze. Nevertheless, we may be able to identify a crucial common denominator that brings some structure to this amorphous (and growing) body of work after all, namely that of “cultural reconciliation.” At its core, the successful *Wenderoman* (or film, etc.) seeks to make its peace with discrete facets of the GDR’s Marxist past and, in a more restricted sense, to heal the wounds of the Cold War division. The GDR as “Stasiland,” with its Stalinistic SED and autocratic police state, is all too easy to censure, condemn, and consign to the past. What the *Wenderomane*—or at least the ones that will stand the test of time—achieve is a task of cultural redemption. They filter out the aspirations, and in some cases even some partially realized moments, of Marxist utopian striving

that, the works implicitly argue, are worth carrying over into the present. They body forth, in other words, those aspects of the GDR past that, as Agamben uses the term, can paradoxically be perceived as “contemporary.” Like all art that rises above mere documentation it is by nature a dynamic and controversial project. This paper surveys the current (or early) understanding of the term; argues for its fundamental reconceptualization; and, based on several popular works, seeks to illustrate the “redemptive” or “conciliatory” mission of the *Wenderoman* adumbrated above.<sup>2</sup>

## II. Reconsidering Political Literature

To avoid misunderstanding, it may be worth pausing to note that the term “consolation” has a bad name, especially in the annals of leftist literary criticism. For many, it suggests the prospect of making peace not with progressive ideals (variously defined) that deserve another chance, but rather with an unjust, exploitive status quo (in this case, the “rapacious” annexation of the East by the West, as some harsher critics have framed it). Even notable literary works of the German *Wende* that “disclose” (to use Sartre’s term for politically engaged literature) the painfully high price of Unification can—as Adorno argued long ago in his widely read *Commitment* essay—be seen as ultimately obsequious to reigning ideologies. In other words, aesthetic “eulogies” for the GDR may not so much “redeem” the respective Marxist ideal, but simply serve—as eulogies usually do—as balm for the inevitable pain of the political transition. As the Frankfurt School argument would have it, even (or, perhaps, precisely) works that appear critical of this thing so flippantly referred to as “die Wende,” function ultimately in a manner that eases our leave-taking. This is surely one possibility, and one that bears keeping in mind. But this argument certainly has no monopoly on the multiple ways in which conciliation functions in the *Wenderoman*. What, in the end, matters more—the radical form that allegedly defies commodification, or the “political message” of more conventional narrative? How can we really know *a priori*? Given their accessibility, not to say conventionality, all the works discussed here would fail Adorno’s litmus test. But cleaving uncritically to the

Adornian point of view simply forecloses further investigation of an intriguing genre.

The mention of Adorno reminds us, however, that the *Wenderoman* is really a subset of that larger problematic of political literature that itself possesses a rich theoretical and literary genealogy. The overtly political or historical novel poses many risks, not the least of which is its own early obsolescence. If it hews too closely to the events of the day, it is bound to quickly date itself. This seems to be the case with Peter Schneider's *Eduards Heimkehr* (2000), which in many respects accurately reproduces the Berlin of the 1990s, when virtually the whole downtown area of the city was perceived as a giant *Baustelle* (construction site). The property disputes, particularly claims of Westerners on Eastern real estate, were one hallmark of those turbulent times, and they are admirably portrayed in Schneider's novel.

But these quarrels frankly no longer loom large in German public culture. Nevertheless, if one were looking for a snapshot of that era—if one can use that word for a prose work of over four hundred of pages—this novel might well prove serviceable. Yet if this were the definitive criterion, there would always be (and justly so) that nagging question about the novel's essentially derivative status. After all, if we wanted solid social knowledge about these matters—municipal building ventures or contested property claims in post 1989 Germany—wouldn't we look elsewhere to other disciplines for more rigorous and representative studies? If we really wanted to understand the socio-political dimensions of Unification, wouldn't we turn our attention to the work of sociologists, political scientists, and historians? Novelists might tell us how they—or their characters—feel about these events; and we may more or less acquiesce. But not infrequently they get it wrong, as Egon Schwarz has shown.<sup>3</sup>

Which is not to say that novels can't capture the spirit of the times, or the *mentalité* of a particular era, or at least that of a particular class. Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) has been said to do just that, as has Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1894). No doubt they both possess that moment of aesthetic "sensuality" upon which Aristotle (in dialogue with Plato) built his defense of the arts. In German

aesthetics, Schiller and Hölderlin went a step further, arguing that the sensual aspect of art raises it above philosophy and the sciences, rendering it more attractive, more readable, and more powerful than dryer historical or theoretical accounts.<sup>4</sup> Of course literature can be more dramatic, emotional—in short, juicier. And yet we cannot escape the fact that the historical accuracy of these novels is a verdict that can only be granted by historians—or perhaps by lay readers who weigh the novels against historical evidence. And thus while we can justify their ongoing appeal on wholly other grounds, in this regard we are indeed back at our starting point, namely the novel as essentially secondary to politics and history.

### III. The *Wenderoman* as Chronicle: A Parasitic Position?

Now some will object that historians themselves increasingly turn to literary evidence for their studies, and this is certainly true, as Konrad Jarausch's recent study, *After Hitler: Recivilizing Germans, 1945-1995* (2006), amply demonstrates. In depicting the impression World War II made on Germans, Jarausch asserts that "literary treatment of the war . . . provides a kind of memory archive" (33); and elsewhere he acknowledges that "the subsequent observations [of his study] draw on the individual diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs located in novelist Walter Kempowski's comprehensive collection" (vii). What we need to remember, however, is that Jarausch's deployment of literature is not a case of finding *the* single successful novel of World War II, nor even a handful, but rather a complex compilation and sifting of numerous and diverse sources, including a great deal of extra-literary material.<sup>5</sup> Even Walter Kempowski's unparalleled achievement in depicting the plight of the German refugees from East Prussia during the last months of WWII in his novel *Alles umsonst* (2006)—which draws upon the same vast archive Jarausch refers to above, and that we know in part from Kempowski's *Echolot* (1993-2005)—can only receive the full historical imprimatur *ex post facto*, that is, by considering his work in the context of historical studies such as Richard Bessel's magisterial *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (2009). *Alles umsonst* is a masterpiece in its own right, to be sure, but it only becomes *historically* accurate in dialogue with the tools of historical investigation.

One could of course argue that novels that begin as explicitly (or ostensibly) political or historical, such as Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869)—which Isaac Babel praised for its realistic portrayal of the Napoleonic Wars—become in the end aesthetic works essentially disconnected from their historical moorings. This is true of the so-called histories of Shakespeare and Schiller; in fact the latter developed an elaborate justification for intentionally idealizing historical events in order to make them “universally” applicable.<sup>6</sup> He freely admits to fudging the evidence—by creating, for example, the wholly fictitious, but dramatically useful figure of Mortimer for his *Maria Stuart* (1800). But who would actually read this play today in the hope of understanding English sixteenth century monarchical disputes? Grabbe's *Scherz, Satire, Ironie und tiefere Bedeutung* (1822) is famously mired in contemporary political references—making it a real challenge to read and almost impossible to get through without explanatory annotations—yet it manages to communicate its comedy to subsequent generations nevertheless.

Still, this claim to transcending the times they depict is seldom made on behalf of the *Wenderoman*. At least not yet. In fact, practitioners, critics, and theorists are all fairly fixated upon the *Wenderoman* (and its related genres) as fundamentally *historical*. I will show first that while a number of popular mass market films and novels deploy traditional mimetic strategies in order to depict the *Wende* in an apparently realistic fashion, they in fact frequently distort or omit events in order to insert a crucial moment of conciliation—sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Second, in a kind of epilogue to this larger argument, I want to suggest an expanded definition of the term *Wenderoman*, one that will allow us to look beyond the usual suspects, and include works such as Kempowski's hilarious *Letzte Grüße*—a novel that not coincidentally takes place during 1989, and yet steadfastly marginalizes the very political events that would soon lead to a united Germany. This more capacious conception, which would include, for example, Andreas Dresen's film *Stilles Land* (1991), takes 1989 not as a starting point, nor even as an essential reference point for

subsequent flashbacks, but rather as a broader opportunity for retrospective reevaluation of Cold War assumptions and the GDR's potential Marxist legacy.

#### IV. The Establishment View of the *Wenderoman*

Before challenging conventional wisdom, however, I should perhaps review the established view of the *Wenderoman*, such as it is. Egon Krenz is credited with coining the term—or at least the first half of it. Insofar as he did so before the fall of the wall and in reference to reformist internal changes within the post-Honecker GDR, it is clear that *Wende* initially evoked neither radical change nor the political unification with the FRG that it has since come to connote (Hector 5).<sup>7</sup> The term *Wenderoman* seems to follow both from the hunger of journalists and academics for such a thing,<sup>8</sup> as well as from advertising executives who apparently found the term pithier than alternatives, such as *Vereinigungsroman*, and pushed its use in marketing these works (Hector 6). But more important than any of these, of course, are the numerous authors who supplied and continue to write novels that in some direct way or other take 1989 as their focal point.

Having read well over a hundred of these, including those listed in Wolfgang Emmerich's and Volker Wehdeking's now standard literary histories,<sup>9</sup> Anne Hector comes to the unsurprising conclusion that they all share one of the following three characteristics: either 1) their plots are set squarely in 1989 and directly thematize the fall of the wall; or 2) they play partly in 1989, but include numerous flashbacks to GDR days; or 3) their plots are set mainly in the post-1989 era, and treat the manner in which Easterners come to terms with the West and the market economy (Hector 26). Extrapolating from the much smaller group of novels she examines in detail, Hector adds the requirement that the Stasi be represented in order for the respective work to qualify as a true *Wenderoman*.<sup>10</sup> A constant throughout is the firm belief that the *Wenderoman* constitutes at its core—despite whatever errors of fact or judgment it may also harbor—a work that is essentially true to the history of 1989 and its aftermath. They are rife with “topical debates of the day” she insists (Hector 187), and comprise their authors' genuine efforts “alles so darzustellen, wie es ‘wirklich’ war” (ibid. 190). She

invokes Leopold von Ranke with no irony. The *en passant* concession of factual distortion, subjectivity, or prejudice seems in her account to function rhetorically, namely in order ultimately to endorse the reliably *historical* achievement of this oeuvre. This view is echoed in Katharina Gerstenberger's call for works in the tradition of the nineteenth century realist novel with the power "to reflect and comment on the German national self-understanding" (7), as well as in Wolfgang Gabler's dictum—reminiscent of Georg Lukacs' conception of critical realism—"Der Maßstab des Wenderomans ist die historische Wahrheit, die von typischen Figuren unter typischen Umständen repräsentiert werden soll."<sup>11</sup>

Let us briefly discuss a novel that is said to fulfill this criteria. *Eduards Heimkehr*, Peter Schneider's fictional account of a young German's return to Berlin to take possession of a contested apartment building, tells a story that, as I have said, already feels dated.<sup>12</sup> Yet it also includes a plot line that might qualify for the more general rubric I have adumbrated above. For this novel is not just about real estate—and the various claims to it that represent (perhaps too schematically) the phases of recent German history—but also about the rift between Eduard and his American wife, Jenny. Throughout Eduard worries about his alienation from Jenny—who not coincidentally is a Jew. Their ultimate reconciliation is the novel's awkward lunging toward what I will establish as the shibboleth of the genre, namely reconciliation. Indeed, it might be viewed as an allegory of *Versöhnung*—a reconciliation on multiple levels: Between East and West Germans (and their competing views of the Holocaust)<sup>13</sup> and between Germans and (American) Jews.<sup>14</sup>

In *Eduards Heimkehr*, Jenny comes to feel more relaxed in the new Berlin than her philandering, displaced German husband. But Schneider's plotline, like Schlink's similar attempt in the short story "The Circumcision," collapses under the weight of its allegorical assignment.<sup>15</sup> This is not necessarily due to a lack of aesthetic ability on the part of the author, but to the impossibility of the task in the first place. For how does one seriously make an American Jew—a young woman in both cases—representative of American condemnation and then (potential) forgiveness of Germany? This would involve making explicit something that is

scarcely admitted openly: namely the widespread assumption that American Jews drive the Holocaust commemoration efforts in the U.S. as well as U.S. expectations of Holocaust commemoration in Germany.<sup>16</sup> Schneider's valiant effort to allegorize reconciliation, let alone document it, is essentially still born.

## V. Unending Material Overflow: An Analytic Nightmare

The impulse to use historical criteria along the lines of Hector's tripartite scheme is understandable. How else can one sort out *Wenderomane* from all that has been written since 1989? After all, one could make a reasonable case for almost any film or book written in the last twenty-some years; for hasn't every aspect of cultural output been profoundly affected by this unexpected series of political events? One example of the almost limitless claims for this moniker—were we to abandon the criterion of punctual historical mimesis—is Ridley and Vogt's suggestion that increased interest in Thomas Mann's family story (real and fictional) has somehow to do with post-'89 sentiments (Ridley and Vogt 7). Buddenbrooks as a *Wenderoman*? Maybe. But then where do we draw the line?

The fact is we can't, and that makes the question both fascinating *and* quite unmanageable. Despite the impressive archival passion of Frank Thomas Grub, literary, filmic and other aesthetic candidates for this genre cannot be adequately catalogued. His admirable two-volume handbook (of over one thousand pages), *“Wende” und “Einheit” im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur (Band 1: Untersuchungen; Band 2: Bibliographie)* is a valuable resource, but one that was destined to be outdated even by the time of its publication in 2003.<sup>17</sup> The field is being overrun in two directions: on the one hand, by “excavations” of GDR material for current consumption, and on the other, by the continuing proliferation of works on this topic. An example of the former would be the recent “rediscovery” of the 1979 DEFA film *Alle meine Mädchen* (All My Girls), directed by Iris Gusner and screened at the recent annual meeting of the German Studies Association (2012). Though filmed a full decade before Unification, its insertion into scholarly discussion now renders it a kind of *Wendefilm*, a film that not only “documents” an episode from the GDR,

but asks its contemporary audiences about the value and efficacy of worker solidarity, as well as the nature of employee/management relations. Not merely antiquarian, it poses the question—I would argue—about the *contemporary* relevance of the socialist conception of workers' rights and responsibilities.<sup>18</sup> On the other side, we might easily include the entertaining mass-appeal musical *Hinterm Horizont: Das Musical* (2011), which continues to draw audiences to this day.<sup>19</sup> This unabashedly nostalgic vehicle for Udo Lindenberg songs is a crowd pleaser without doubt (especially when the actors distribute *Eierlikör* after the show to the audience); but, I argue, it is also a medium for resurrecting socialist egalitarian values freed from the historical trappings of the historical police state.<sup>20</sup> It surely means to function in this way.

And the list goes on—such that one could easily conclude that the *Wende* is only just now coming into partial view. Consider briefly Elke Hauk's compelling *Der Preis* (2011; release 2012), whose double-entendre title indicates not only a "prize" that sets the story in motion, but also the high "price" the protagonist has paid to escape the GDR. Or more broadly still: the price the GDR demanded of all its citizens. No less topical is Christian Petzold's Oscar-nominated *Barbara* (2012). It tells the story of a doctor desperate to leave a failed and repressive police state, and in the process manages to illustrate one of those "honeycombed" niches of relative happiness that Mary Fullbrook seeks to identify in her controversial study *The People's State: East German Society from Hitler to Honecker* (Yale UP, 2008). Undoubtedly my own incomplete list will be outdated at the time of this article's publication.

Without wishing to disqualify literary accounts of 1989 as historical source material (in the broad and plural sense referred to by Jarausch above), I think it is safe to say that if this all they are, or if this is their principal function, *Wenderomane* will one day pass into well-deserved oblivion, as some already have. What may save them—indeed, what makes some compelling even now—is their simultaneous appeal to more general, dare I say universal, themes that speak directly to readers/audiences both within and far beyond Germany. This

more general appeal can be subsumed, as I've been suggesting, under the general heading "reconciliation."

## **VI. Faux History and the Rescue of Socialist Ideals (*Good Bye, Lenin!* & *The Lives of Others*)**

Let us cast a glance instead at two wildly successful films that actually distort history in order to tell a larger, conciliatory story. Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin* (2003) received international acclaim not because—or not only because—of its specific rendering of 1989.<sup>21</sup> It is in fact hard to believe that U.S. audiences—even if we limit our purview to those who attend art-house cinema, where these films mainly played—care that much about German history. For them, let us remember, 1989 and 1990 were more about the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War—or, more crassly, about America's "victory" in this decades-long nuclear standoff. (Most Americans, as has been repeatedly demonstrated, never understood that East and West Berlin were located fully within the borders of the former GDR.) What appeals to larger, international audiences, rather, is the overarching theme of forgiveness, as represented in the reconciliation among the father, Robert, who fled to the West, and the mother, Christiane, a true-believer, who stayed in the GDR and raised her family—and of course the winsome son, Alex, played by the handsome, young Daniel Brühl, who brings them (and thus Germany) together. For it turns out that Robert never meant to abandon his family at all. The plan, as Alex discovers when he finally visits his father in the West, was for him (the father) to escape first, and to have his family join him at a later date.

How does one render sympathetic a proud, card-carrying SED collaborator? Film audiences the world over are well acquainted with this narrative formula, which we might in shorthand notation dub the "Jason Bourne strategy": One simply makes the morally compromised figure into a proportionally much greater victim, while resolutely keeping off-screen his or her misdeeds (collaboration, or actual crime). Christiane, a proud supporter of the GDR regime right up to the end, can easily be forgiven for her lifelong collusion with the

authoritarian regime because she is portrayed as a multiple victim—first of her husband (who, as it appears for much of the film, abandoned her and their children and then remarried), then of the Party (which never lived up to its ideals), and finally of fate itself. We are simply not inclined to assign blame to a woman who lies in a coma only to wake from it with terminal heart disease.



*Image 1: Christine awakes from her coma after Unification: As a multiple victim, viewers are not inclined to reflect upon the potential deleterious effects of her life-long collusion with the SED. (Still from Good-bye Lenin!).<sup>22</sup>*

Alex's efforts to keep his beloved mother unaware of the demise of the GDR and the fact of Unification proves so entertaining not because it truly laments the dissolution of the GDR, but because it reprises the GDR very selectively—ensconced within the firm assurance that the dictatorship is gone for good. In an unforgettable and I think truly moving scene, the mother sees a mass of Westerners in what she still believes is East Berlin, or in her parlance “die Hauptstadt der DDR,” and concludes that the Party leaders were after all right in their belief that the West Berliners would one day, of their own volition, come over in droves to “the better Germany” (das bessere Deutschland). It is so touching that one can easily forget—for the time being—that this claim originates in the SED's defense of the Berlin Wall, where about 165 unarmed East

Germans were killed by GDR border guards while trying to escape to the West, including unwitting children who wandered into the border chasing a ball.

In this way—that is, by securely sequestering Christine from any of this horrific history—the mother can figure as the representative what was best in the GDR, even if this is reduced to laudable goals that the SED itself betrayed. It represents a moment of redemption, and thus joins the many books and films (one thinks of Fontane's *Der Stechlin* [1897] and Joseph Roth's *Radetskymarsch* [1932]) that suggest the residual goodness and decency of a society or state destined to pass away. The mother may be naïve, but she is not stupid (that would undercut the moment of reconciliation). At last she does understand that the GDR is no more—that is, after all, the meaning of the silent but meaningful exchange between her son's girlfriend and her at the hospital. But she withholds this recognition from her son out of love and respect for his heroic efforts to spare her the suffering of coming to terms with the historical truth. The film spares us too, in a way, even while it purveys—and depends upon our knowing—the basic facts of 1989. The story it tells is thus one of the fundamental goodness of people, in the same way that Anne Frank is both nominally about the Nazi persecution of the Jews, but also, and in a larger sense, an affirmation of human goodness.<sup>23</sup> *Good-bye, Lenin* bids a farewell to Communism, but permits its viewers to affirm the socialist, communal ideals that might, some years earlier, have caused *them* too to view the GDR as the better Germany. It is eulogistic and elegiac.

Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006) functions similarly, but instead of featuring a committed schoolteacher and low-level Party activist, it introduces a pretty highly placed member of the Stasi, Captain Gerd Wiesler (played by the now deceased Ulrich Mühe).<sup>24</sup> Thus the measure of redemption, when it comes, is that much greater. But the price it demands, the relatively greater betrayal of history, is commensurately higher: This guy is not just a deluded, enthusiastic civilian follower (like the mother in *Good-bye, Lenin*), but a real scoundrel—at least when we first see him teaching

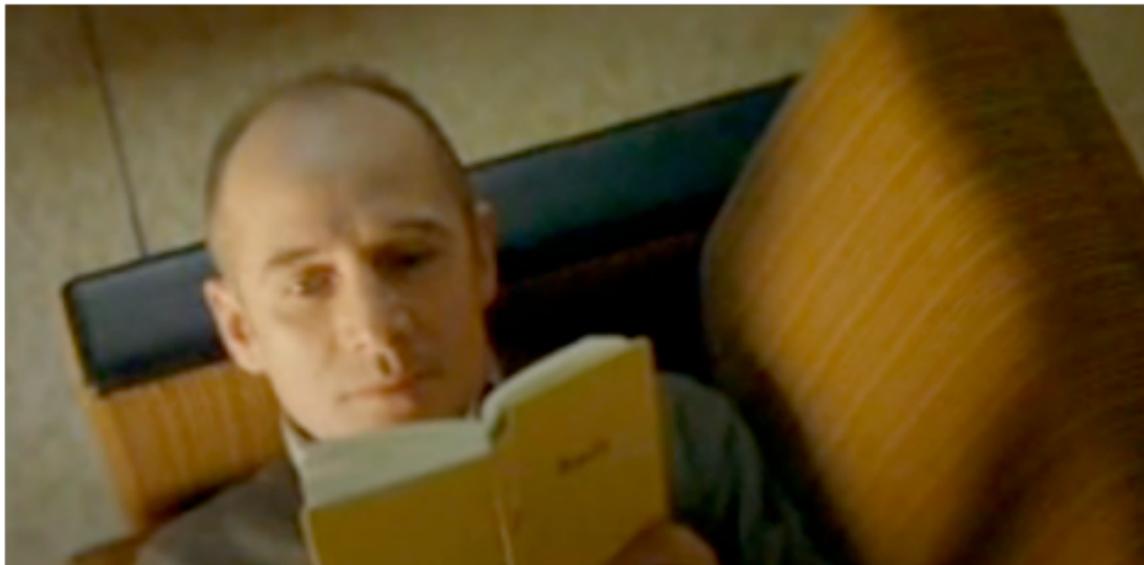
young Stasi recruits how to conduct an interrogation that truly intimidates prisoners.



*Image 2: Wiesler's multiple transformations (from hardened Stasi officer to vulnerable figure to hero-rescuer) exemplify the larger "redemptive" mission of Das Leben der Anderen. (Still from Das Leben der Anderen.).<sup>25</sup>*

His path to salvation also follows a well-worn narrative strategy in which the true villainy is transferred to a superior, a technique that, along with his humanization in other ways, tends to exonerate him from the very things we know he is guilty of—at least as long as we are caught up in the film's gripping fiction. In the course of the film he thus becomes more pitiable than condemnable: we see that his lonely existence lacks the love and tenderness that he witnesses while spying on the lovemaking scenes between the handsome playwright, Georg Dreyman, and his gorgeous partner, the actress Christa-Maria Sieland. In stark contrast, Wiesler turns for "intimacy" to an aging prostitute (right out of a George Grosz caricature)—who appears to be a government-approved provider who "services" a number of his Stasi colleagues—for the brief physical gratification that for him must stand in for real intimacy.

While prowling about in the Dreyman's large old-fashioned apartment, Wiesler removes a volume of Brecht's poetry from one of the book-lined walls. He takes it home to his soulless and spartan module apartment in a predictably hideous GDR *Plattenbau*, and in one of the most beautiful scenes of the film, the camera gives us a high angle shot of this repentant spy, lying on his couch with book in hand, capturing in its frame not only the Brecht volume, but half of Wiesler's face, including one of his stunningly beautiful blue eyes. He is fully captivated (as are we, via the voiceover) by one of the loveliest expressions of lost love, Brecht's "Erinnerungen an Marie A."



*Image 3: Wiesler's transformation is marked by a dramatic high angle shot of him reading Brecht, who functions here as a cipher for the "salvageable" part of the GDR cultural legacy. Significantly, it is a volume taken from Dreyman's apartment. (Still from Das Leben der Anderen).<sup>26</sup>*

It constitutes an aesthetic technique that underscores once again this master spy's enforced separation from the warmth of true human community, and one that speaks directly to the audience. He manages to overwrite his former villainy by enacting a dramatic rescue that places his career and possibly even his life in jeopardy: he removes the incriminating typewriter, and thus saves Dreyman from the film's real rogue, his Stasi boss, Oberstleutnant Anton Grubitz. Wiesler pays the price of his deed twice over: for the remaining days of the GDR he is demoted to the mailroom, reduced to steaming open the mail of his compatriots;

and in the newly united Germany, this former Stasi “professor” (there actually was a Stasi “Hochschule” in Potsdam!) is relegated to stuffing mailboxes along the Karl Marx Allee with ads that surely nobody wants, while people like the unctuous GDR Minister of Culture Bruno Hempf seem to slip easily into an equivalently privileged post-1989 career.

The film garnered all kinds of awards, both in Germany and the U.S., and enjoyed international success.<sup>27</sup> But it was harshly criticized by some for its historical inaccuracy and improbability. For example, actor and director Michael Gwisdek faulted the film for propagating a completely false view of the GDR and denounced it as having “nichts mit der DDR-Geschichte zu tun . . . , sondern nur mit Hollywood” (quoted in Hector 71).<sup>28</sup> Even Timothy Garton Ash, who wrote a rave review in the *New York Review of Books*, concedes that it distorts history; indulges the false but widespread conflation of Nazism with the GDR; and hews closely to the Hollywood formula for pleasing audiences. The problem is that it suggests, if only indirectly, not only that someone like Gerd Wiesler actually existed, but also that he might just represent a larger group of such redeemable Stasi captains.

*Das Leben der Anderen* is not overtly guilty of this claim, of course. It cannot be. But when a pleasurable fiction meets with the powerful yearning of audiences to affirm the essential goodness of humankind, we are bound to entertain the proposition that Wiesler may indeed stand for more than merely himself—just as we are tempted to think that Schlink’s Hanna Schmitz, the handicapped and victimized Nazi perpetrator from *Der Vorleser*, may in the end “explain” a whole class of low-level criminals, rather than represent an exceptional (or even historically impossible) single case.<sup>29</sup>



*Image 4: Wiesel metamorphoses into a kind of “representative” Stasi figure as true evil is pushed ever higher up the hierarchical ladder. (Still from Das Leben der Anderen).<sup>30</sup>*

In this way, the film can have it both ways: it rehabilitates an unknown quantity of Stasi personnel while unambiguously condemning the institution as a whole for unvarnished cruelty of the kind that leads to the suicide of the blacklisted playwright and composer, and the death of the young actress and love interest, Christa-Maria. In this case, too, the film clearly builds on the events of 1989, but in a manner that fairly overtly renders it allegorical and thus transferable to other times and settings.<sup>31</sup> But while it may broadly affirm the “humanity” of the central trio, and thus traffick in kitsch, it also seeks to rescue something more specific: the “good Marxism” of Brecht and Dreyman—that is, a Marxism that provides the film’s strongest, internal critique of the brutal police state. Remember that Dreyman writes his surreptitious copy for *Der Spiegel* from the perspective not of a defector, but of a reformist Marxist.

Whatever one may make of the larger redemptive strategies I have been arguing for, there can be no doubt that these two films are seen to function in a

politically conciliatory manner *within* Germany in a more immediate and practical sense. This surely is the intent of the German *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (Federal Office of Political Education), which produced a very useful and widely disseminated “Filmheft” (film booklet) on each film within a year of the respective film’s production.<sup>32</sup> The materials are provided free of charge to schools and other cultural institutions and signify a quasi-official imprimatur. I would not credit the Office’s president, Thomas Krueger (who wrote the preface to each), of surreptitiously sponsoring the propagation of certain socialist ideals as potential resources for contemporary social organization, though this is precisely the films’ (and the *Wenderoman*’s) greatest potential achievement. Rather, these publications signify a narrower—but by no means incompatible—view of conciliation as the healing of intra-German wounds associated with Unification. In this respect, Hector is right to emphasize that the bulk of *Wende* narratives are concerned with mediating the widely reviled experience of former East Germans both to “Westerners” and themselves.<sup>33</sup>

## VII. The Checkered Career of Thomas Brussig

There is a whole class of more recent writing by younger authors that could be fit under this heading of pseudo-historical prose. These authors, now in their thirties and forties, were children during the GDR and thus their memoirs and fiction tend to recall an apolitical, often nostalgic childhood free of adult worries. As children they are innocent of—perhaps even oblivious to—a repressive regime, and thus accounts of a quite happy childhood are to be expected. Conversely, they cannot serve as credible witnesses to those aspects of GDR life to which they were not exposed or did not really understand. Like J. M. Cotzee’s wonderful memoir of growing up during the era of apartheid in South Africa, *Boyhood: Scenes From Provincial Life* (1997), their stories can be read as both historically rooted in a particular (and in many respects unsavory) regime, and yet exemplary of a more general genre of autobiographical writing that records the compelling period of childhood and adolescence—in other words, the great (and universal) challenge of authentically rendering childhood from an adult perspective. Their nostalgia for

an East German youth—sometimes misclassified as a case of “Ostalgie”—may thus in the end be more a case of our more general longing for a return to childhood. While 1989 proves crucial in that they could presumably never have written these stories had the oppressive regime persisted, the historical GDR and its demise remain secondary, to say the least.<sup>34</sup>

This is perhaps the most charitable way of looking at Thomas Brussig’s early work— *Helden wie wir* (1995) and *Am kürzeren Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999). Though not quite a child in 1989 (Brussig was born in 1965, served in the NVA, and worked a number of low-end jobs during the GDR), the narrated time in both novels is a sanitized East German childhood and youth. Brussig has repeatedly maintained that his aim in these books was to portray the GDR in a much more positive light than was commonly the case in the German press of the 1990s, and one can hardly deny him success by this standard. Still, growing up in the shadow of the Wall on the “shorter” (Eastern) end of the Sonnenallee never seemed so much fun as in his novella.<sup>35</sup> The repressive state comes across as an annoyance against which its clever population is easily able to inoculate itself with wit and ingenuity. Though the collapse of the GDR has often been referred to as the “velvet “ or “peaceful” revolution, there was in fact a disturbing series of harsh police actions in the months that immediately led up to the so-called “fall” of the wall: police brutally dispersed protest marches and imprisoned demonstrators. To portray the Stasi simply as clownish and inept—as Brussig does in *Helden wie wir*—is not only a partial and rosy view of history, but also a seriously flawed one. But then again, we are surely asking too much in applying this standard.

Of course one could easily respond that any novel that features a protagonist who attributes the fall of the wall to the prowess of his phallus announces its own comedic intent and thus should not be taken seriously. *Sonnenallee*, too, contains its own “confession” for peddling an overly sanguine view of the SED dictatorship, albeit an eleventh-hour one, offered, so to speak, after the damage is already done. And it would seem unwarranted to demand of these fictions historical accuracy after arguing that even the best *Wenderoman* is

at best “historical” in a secondary sense. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for the kind and degree of historical distortion, as well as the terms of the aesthetic trade-off, especially as we observed above in the two films. There the mythologizing and idealization served a larger social purpose, namely reconciliation with Socialist ideals and a Fontane-like irony and tolerance about human foibles: *menschlich, allzu menschlich*. Can the same be said of Brussig? Do these early novels that play fast and loose with history offer a general human-interest plot that rises to the same stature? Do they in any sense sift laudable Marxist ideals of social justice from the reality of dictatorship of “the people”? Or do they rather exploit this material for mass, even puerile, entertainment, downplaying the lethal nature of the SED regime in order to offer light-hearted confections? This will perhaps remain a matter of taste. Here I can only attempt to suggest evaluative criteria for this kind of “historical” fiction.

That Brussig is capable of more ambitious work is proven by his remarkable little one-act, one-man play, *Leben bis Männer* (2001). The odd-sounding, ungrammatical title is perhaps the first sign that we are entering a more complex world than that of his earlier novels. A washed-up, has-been, loser of a boys’ soccer coach—played brilliantly by Jörg Gudzun at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin—delivers a spell-binding monologue rife with bigotry and misogyny that somehow garners our sympathy.<sup>36</sup> Ostensibly he is talking about soccer, a mere game, rather than serious issues of recent German history. And this seems to relax the audience, or at least lower its defenses against painful political allegory. But soon we see that his real topic, without him appearing to be fully aware of it, and without him abandoning the language of soccer, has expanded to life under the SED dictatorship and to the trials of the Wall border guards (*Mauerschützenprozesse*). He is no authority figure, to be sure; indeed his speech is an instance *par excellence* of self-repudiation (Selbstdementierung); but he is a profound witness and case study. He does not provide the kind of straightforward mimesis some theorists of the *Wenderoman* seem to expect; on the contrary, the story of the dissolution of the GDR and of German Unification is presumed rather than narrated directly. And, like the films

discussed above, this story that in one sense is firmly rooted in German *Zeitgeschichte* simultaneously transcends its historical referents and speaks also to other places and times.<sup>37</sup>



*Image 5: Jörg Gudzuhn playing the boys' soccer coach in the one-act play *Leben bis Männer* at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Publicity still from Deutsches Theater, Berlin.<sup>38</sup>*

Though he staunchly defends his former player, Heiko, for having shot and killed an unarmed GDR citizen attempting to cross over into West Berlin, no attentive reader would conclude that the play itself endorses this view. On the contrary, the coach's pronouncements are throughout so thoroughly problematic that we are constantly challenged either to contextualize his version of events with data external to the play, or at least to be wary of accepting his judgments at face value. Perhaps sometimes we just feel discomfort as we laugh with self-recognition. Because he wants to focus on the dilemma of the pre-1989 East German citizen, Brussig demurs from directly representing the murder at the wall. To do so would have saturated the play with sympathy for the victim—and understandably so. This is not a case of distorting history, I would say, but rather of selective representation in order to communicate something journalism and jurisprudence are perhaps less well equipped to do: namely, to present the wall

guard as both unambiguously guilty and simultaneously as limited, determined, and in some sense deformed by his upbringing in an authoritarian state. Because of this bold choice (to render the murder as report rather than via direct depiction) we are able to grasp the predicament of the soldier who was raised under radically different social norms and legal precepts than the ones by which he is now being judged.<sup>39</sup> This is merely a starker version of the formula that has been applied to the coach throughout the play: both he and Heiko are “softened” by their rich socio-political contextualization.<sup>40</sup>

Seeing the individual as in crucial respects socially determined is also a certain “socialist” legacy worthy of cultural preservation, Brussig implicitly argues, particularly within a capitalist society that tends to glorify and exaggerate self-determination, or, as the American myth has it, “rugged individualism.” *Leben bis Männer* portrays Heiko as both victim *and* perpetrator, without the former aspect excusing or obscuring the latter. Brussig’s aesthetic decision to foreground the socialization aspect thus allows for a degree of moral complexity that does not compromise moral judgment. More importantly, perhaps, it identifies a phenomenon that inevitably points beyond itself to a larger class of such dilemmas. Indeed, *Leben bis Männer* invites us to think not only of East German border guards, but perhaps also of US soldiers who tortured inmates at Abu Ghraib, or of CIA officers who water-boarded prisoners in order to extract information. For these too, especially in the former case, constitute crimes that were resolutely defended as legal by superiors, including White House lawyers.

Like Christiane in *Good Bye, Lenin!* and Wiesler in *Das Leben der Anderen*, the coach emerges as a kind of victim, despite his obvious failure to own up to his own responsibility. To the end, he defends Heiko and his own practice of cheating at soccer by identifying and then manipulating acquiescent players. Throughout, he promotes a bogus (and yet hilarious) analogy between soccer and the state, as well as one between soccer and “world history.” Yet when he talks about the devastating unemployment after the *Wende*, and the sudden sense of alienation and loss of purpose that follows from it, one feels oneself in the company of Studs Terkel’s witnesses to the Great Depression. It is

a show-stopping passage in this dramatic monologue. For he—the coach—is one of those 50-something Easterners deemed too old to bother with after '89. He does not qualify for re-training, or new educational opportunities (e.g., “der zweite Bildungsweg”) simply because at his age he is not worth the investment. Somehow Brussig manages to communicate this profound sense of injury—to which we all can presumably relate—in the sovereign-sounding voice of an entertaining wit. And he does so without propagating a cheap nostalgia for the glory days of GDR “full employment,” and without excusing this coach for his obvious shortcomings. Negatively, to be sure, but perhaps for this reason all the more powerfully, this play strongly evokes Marxist ideals of overcoming alienation and economic exploitation.

### **VIII. The *Wenderoman* Without the *Wende*: “Postwar” After All? (Kempowski’s *Letzte Grüße*)**

Thus far I have been examining the ostensible role of history in a handful of core works of contemporary German culture that unambiguously foreground the historical *Wende*, but more importantly ask us to consider the more enduring question of what (Marxist-inspired) social values should survive the collapse of the GDR. While critics understandably insist on applying the measuring stick of historical veracity, we have seen that historical veracity, while recurrent at least as a claim, is in fact secondary in a whole variety of ways. The *Wenderoman* can afford to be partisan in the service of social ideals in a way that historiography cannot (or can not overtly avow). It will use just enough history (and just enough fiction) to make its point, but remains in the end pseudo-historical.

One way of rescuing “the historical” for this genre would, paradoxically, be to deemphasize the *Wende* itself, and use it not as a principal focal point or even as the obvious narrative fulcrum.<sup>41</sup> For the year 1989 stands not only for the onset of a new political order in a united Germany, but also for the end of the Cold War. 1989, in other words, inaugurated a widespread reassessment of the postwar period, a critical retrospective reaching back to 1949. One could even argue that in the immediate (or still proximate) wake of 1989, we are in a better

position to reevaluate not the last twenty-plus years, but the more distant past we know relatively better. As we saw, novelists who rushed to capture “the spirit of the times” in some cases found their work outdated shortly after it went to press. Historians tell us they generally need a twenty or thirty-year distance from their material in order to separate themselves sufficiently and achieve a more balanced perspective, a fact that surely bedevils historian Claudia Koonz’s current efforts to write an “historical” account of the still contemporary “hijab debates” in Germany and Europe.<sup>42</sup> If this is true, it opens up yet another set of works for analysis. Paradoxically, the *Wenderoman* becomes in a sense a postwar novel par excellence.

One of those “backward looking” novelists is Walter Kempowski, whose *Letzte Grüße* (2003) features Alexander Sowtschick, a German author of uncertain quality who visits the United States as a guest of the Goethe Institute in the summer of 1989 to celebrate the so-called “Deutsche Wochen.” On his way over, Sowtschick is very pleased with the special treatment he receives in the first class cabin, but miffed when the captain makes his announcements in three languages—English, French, and Danish, but not German: “Weshalb wurden die Belehrungen aus dem Cockpit nicht auch auf deutsch bekanntgegeben? Das war die Frage. Hatte das was mit neunzehnhundertvierzig zu tun? Mit jener Zeit, in der deutsche Soldaten die Osterbrodgade entlangmarschierten, und man hatte sie doch gar nicht gerufen?” (LG 41<sup>43</sup>)—a euphemism and understatement that will characterize all of this narrator’s “historical” reflections.

Sowtschick can only see the U.S. through the optics of World War II—a mirror image, by the way, of a common American approach to Germany. He harbors a deep resentment toward the United States alongside an equally powerful fascination for it—after all, he eagerly accepts the invitation for the month-long visit, even while he worries that others may have been asked first and declined the offer before the Goethe Institute finally got down to his name on their list. In the following excerpt rendered in free indirect speech (*erlebte Rede*) Sowtschick hits upon many of the themes that will recur throughout his adventures across America. By the way, “die Menschheit” here ironically refers to

Americans (a common, though not uncritical, usage in the globalized, post-1989 world):

Auch Sowtschick hatte das vor: die Menschheit befruchten, also sie belehren, damit sie eine Ahnung von Europa kriegt, von Kaffeehäusern, kleinen Buchhandlungen und von Schwarzbrot, so daß sie endlich mal kapierten, wie man mit Europa umzugehen hat. Daß man also nicht Bombenteppiche ablädt auf Barockkirchen und hinter Mädchen herpfeift, sondern die Hände gefälligst aus den Taschen nimmt. Schließlich kam man nicht als Bettler. (LG 52)

He chafes at the idea that a culturally inferior country such as the United States enjoys a geo-political position that allows it to push the culturally superior Germany around. But the book's recurrent theme is the Allied bombing of German cities and civilians. He doggedly seeks out American bombardiers of German cities to ask how they feel about what they did. To him, these are not exemplars of America's "greatest generation," but terrorists who need to come to terms with *their* past.

Sowtschick is not, however, in a particularly righteous position to be making this criticism: indeed, he seems to have been involved in some nasty business during the war. (Since his is the narrative's controlling consciousness, we never learn exactly what this is.) So his pursuit may well constitute an effort to deflect attention from his own past. In any case, his experience of the American preoccupation with the Nazi period of German history—something he encounters at virtually every US university German department he visits—may not be totally misplaced. He may, in other words, deserve some of the myopic and prejudicial treatment he receives at the hands of Americans who nurture stereotypical views of Germans as Nazis. He is of that generation that makes him suspect in the eyes of a number of his hosts. In addition to a questionable past, he has an uncertain career in the present: he seems not to be much of a writer, despite the commercial success that allows him and his wife to live in considerable comfort. When he was jeered by a Swedish audience, for example, he insists that it is a response not to his writing, but to the auditors' unhappy memory of Nazi

Germany 's aggression (LG 48). In America, he doesn't do much better: Again and again during his US tour he fails to draw crowds or even modest size audiences; no one seems to recognize him (which he of course chalks up to American ignorance of a superior culture); and not infrequently his appearances are simply cancelled.

As in *Leben bis Männer*, the protagonist's compromised status does not neutralize the power of his persistent quest for American bomber pilots with a bad conscience. Like Diogenes with his lamp, but without his virtue, Sowtschick looks for these ex-pilots every place he stops—but he never finds a single one. Even readers who know that Nazi Germany pursued a suicidal policy of defending its cities to the bitter end, even when there was no hope of military success (Bessel, op. cit.), and even those who are reminded that bombers of the WWII era were far less accurate than those of today—even such readers will not be able to shake off this persistent and uncomfortable question. What must it feel like, what *should* it feel like, to have dropped bombs on so many defenseless citizens? And why is this question so systematically suppressed in American public culture?<sup>44</sup> The bombing of German cities and civilian populations—particularly in the last year of the war—remains one of the strongest of German memories of the war, and the term that Germans traditionally have employed to describe this indiscriminate killing from the air is “Terror”—long before the term came to be associated with militant Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda. Americans as terrorists? Only the boozy, has-been German author Sowtschick, hardly known in the US even to Germanists, could get away with this.

By drawing out this particular strand of the novel, I have very likely given a false impression of a serious, “issues” novel. In fact, it is incredibly funny, with barbed and sophisticated humor. Germanists of a certain age (those old enough to have studied or taught during the Cold War) will enjoy the delicious depiction of US departments of German, where writers like Sowtschick so often gave their readings. Again and again, Sowtschick encounters US colleagues who profit immensely from the incredible generosity of the Goethe Institute and *Inter Nationes*, but prefer to teach courses on East German literature and openly

espouse the GDR as the better Germany (“das bessere Deutschland”). Even more astounding, but of course familiar to those of us of that certain age, is the hilarious indictment of the FRG’s cultural policy that gladly underwrites this view. For Sowtschick alone among all the authors invited to tour America is a conservative “Erfolgsautor”; all the others appear to be leftists. There is no funnier, or more scathing, depiction of the Federal Republic’s masochistic, breast-beating cultural policy—desperate to establish its own democratic (and anti-Nazi) credentials by sponsoring artists and authors highly critical if not hostile to the state. All the other FRG-sponsored authors quite agree that the GDR is the superior state, though of course none of them lives there, and all are quite content to have their bread buttered in the West.

Only well into the novel are we informed that the year of Sowtschick’s visit is 1989, but thereafter we get reminders on a fairly regular basis. We are reminded of, but then distracted from, the fateful events that play only fleetingly on the margins of Sowtschick’s consciousness. He shows a modicum of interest of what must be the occupation of the German embassy in Hungary, but the reference is not overt. For though he watches the television news, he fails to report to us what he is seeing, and probably does not understand the English well enough. The unfolding collapse of the GDR does not quite rise to the level of importance of his other concerns, chief of which is his desire to be paid in cash for every reading, even when his appearance is cancelled. What kind of *Wenderoman* is this?

Kempowski presents in this ostensibly light-hearted picaresque novel of 430 pages a humorous and biting critical view on a world order that was about to disappear. Particularly the relationship of the US to Germany was about to change. Soon the obsequiousness vis-à-vis the Western superpower would be a thing of the past, as the new, enlarged Federal Republic gradually and cautiously began to assert itself internationally—though always carefully stage-managed so as to appear (and be) thoroughly enmeshed within a larger Europe. The Cold War era, which cast West Germany as a kind of vassal state, was about to melt away. 1989 rang in a new dispensation—although no one could have quite

expected it at the time—in which Sowtschick’s questions about American bomber pilots, which seem perhaps impertinent at the time just before the fall of the Wall, might actually be posed. This international, transatlantic shift is as much a part of the *Wende* as the Berlin construction boom, the *Gauckbehörde*, and (former) GDR property disputes. In many ways, it is the far more momentous “turn.”

*Letzte Grüße* is not only a farewell to a bygone era; it is equally part prophecy. For one feels that Kempowski is not only describing what fell away, but also actively suggesting what still might come to be. The novel signals a new order in which not only the Holocaust would (eventually) be historicized, but one in which the undifferentiated view of Americans as heroes and rescuers could be questioned; the political naivety of US Germanists could be expressed; and a time in which German resentment vis-à-vis the United States—going back to the Allied occupation—could be more honestly aired. More than the protagonist’s lingering question about American bomber pilots, however, readers are left with the question about that “better Germany.” Were we really all such fools? All entirely duped? Does someone with the Nazi past of Sowtschick get to occupy the moral high ground? Kempowski doesn’t have to name those “Marxist” communitarian values that both blinded and inspired so many of his readers. Simply by evoking them, he raises the question of their viability within the new capitalist-triumphalist dispensation.

## IX. Conclusion

The *Wenderoman* is only truly impossible if we fail to take the broader view. If we restrict it to a kind of literary narrative of political events that can be told as well or better by historians or political scientists, then we relegate it to secondary status, a mere vehicle for information that would always raise the question of its own “accuracy.” This reduces literature to an illustrative role, a kind of “history lite” (which, we might note in passing, is precisely the way some historians use literature in their courses). Yet everywhere we look, critics are obsessed with the *Wenderoman*’s “historical” status—usually admitting to certain “liberties,” but often affirming the basic task. Paradoxically, the *Wenderoman* as I have

reconceived it here, may be best be poised to investigate a more distant past—a past “sealed” by the *Wende* itself. This is Kempowski’s contribution to reshaping our view of the Cold War and the dissolution of what until then seemed like an unbounded, unending period known as “postwar.”

The second kind of “impossibility” that attends this discussion is the incredible (but truly exciting) proliferation of *Wende*-works. Looking backward, so to speak, the past provides a rich archive of potential works: the reprise of any number of previously unknown DEFA films continues to expand the oeuvre. Going forward, the growth is simply inevitable: Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Heimsuchung* (2008) and Barabara Honigmann’s more recent *Bilder von A.* (2011) are just two notable examples of more recent works that provide rich perspectives on the *Wende*, broadly conceived. But there are many more, as we’ve noted above, and surely many more to come. A “comprehensive” catalogue, as we have noted, is a forever-receding target. This renders any generalization—any attempt at characterizing a set that itself remains open-ended—provisional at best.

Nevertheless, we can ascertain—even if only in the negative—a common aspiration toward reconciliation with potentially viable or at least truly lamentable aspects of the GDR Marxist vision of a more just, egalitarian society. None of these works has an overt political program; none has a revanchist or specifically ideological agenda. Implicitly, suggestively, however, they hold before our minds vestiges of a past society that persist, sometimes naggingly and irritatingly, into the present. This is their “redemptive” common denominator. Even the antihero Sowtschick, an ostensible avatar of the culturally middlebrow Western bourgeois, manages to evoke a GDR-like thirst for justice against the “unassailable” Western ally. The only thing that distinguishes him in this respect is his interest in cities other than Dresden. In a no doubt curious manner, he opens the door to re-writing history, to reconsidering postwar verities, and to recovering suppressed truths.

In identifying aspects of the socialist dream/project that may be worthy of preservation, if only in the repository of fiction, these works achieve their greatest accomplishment, one that will stand the test of time, even when judgments about

those values diverge. But this, too, is a near impossible task. For “reconciliation” will always signify to some a kind of retrograde affirmation of the status quo. Beyond the narrower political meaning of the term (by which, as we’ve noted, the FRG seeks to endorse the healing of East-West divisions by way of “political education” materials), “reconciliation” remains a highly charged and contested term in literary and cultural studies. To some, it signifies a kind of deceptive aesthetic strategy—an all too “consumable” literature (Adorno) or all too pleasurable “consensus cinema” (Rentschler) that only pretends to hold out the possibility of social critique, while at a deeper level conspiring with the capitalist status quo.<sup>45</sup> Yet it may also be true—these wise men to the contrary—that the popular, accessible, poignant and humorous works discussed here serve as vehicles of cultural memory, and in this way make available values and aspirations that did not die once and for all with the GDR.<sup>46</sup>

It may well be that the “survivor” values I have identified here are accidentally (which is to say historically), rather than necessarily “Marxist.” The communitarian, egalitarian and social-justice agendas we have noted might indeed have had a number of other sources (and this is surely what makes these works travel so well internationally and in time).<sup>47</sup> But that is not the point. Neither do I wish to suggest any revanchist desire to resurrect “das bessere Deutschland”—or to carry out what Barbara Honigmann has one of her figures say derisively about Biermann and Havemann, “die immer noch glauben, eines Tages den realen durch den wahren Sozialismus ablösen zu können” (*Alles, alles Liebe!*, 2000). These are all to some extent or other pleasing fictions that may simply remain in the realm of the imagination, or worse, stand in for real social change. But that needn’t be the final word: They may also serve to make crucial aspects of the past “contemporary” to future audiences. It is simply impossible to tell.

<sup>1</sup> I first gave this paper at a conference commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall organized under the auspices of the North Carolina German Studies Seminar and Workshop series on October 9, 2009, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill (<http://www.unc.edu/ncgs/workshops.html>). I thank the principal organizers, Karen Hagemann and Konrad Jarausch. This essay is a revised version of that talk. I also wish to acknowledge the thoughtful contributions of my students in the “Wenderoman” seminar that I held in the spring of 2010 within the Carolina-Duke Ph.D. in German Studies program.

<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the *Wenderoman* (and its related genres) extends the cultural sifting process conducted by leftist intellectuals from the time of the “fall” of the Berlin Wall. See, for example, Martin Jay, “Once More an Inability to Mourn? Reflections on the Left Melancholy of Our Time” (69-76), Jens Reich, “After the Resignation of the East German Intelligentsia: A Time for Clowning” (88-92), and the guest editors’ “Introduction” (vii-xvi) to the special issue of *German Politics and Society*, Fall 1992, Issue 27: *Getting over the Wall: Recent Reflections on German Art and Politics since the Third Reich*, eds. William Donahue, Rachel Freudenburg, and Daniel Reynolds.

<sup>3</sup> Schwarz, Egon. “The Conundrum of the Writer’s Political Engagement.” *German Politics and Society* 27 (1992): 3-11. Print.

<sup>4</sup> In the German tradition Schiller and Schlegel are probably the best-known aestheticians to take up and elaborate Aristotle’s argument in favor of art (and literature in particular); see Roche, Mark William. *Why Literature Matters in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2004). 23-30. Print.

<sup>5</sup> One can glean a sense of the diversity of just the literary sources from the following: “For all of their differences in stylistic quality, popular representations of the Second World War—for example Hans Hellmut Kirst’s *08/15*, Theodor Pliever’s *Stalingrad*, and Fritz Wöss’s *Hunde, wollt ihr ewig leben?*—share the same basic tendencies as the more sophisticated texts by Wolfgang Borchert, Heinrich Böll, Siegfried Lenz, Alexander Kluge, and Christa Wolf” (Jarausch 33).

<sup>6</sup> On this, see Martha Helfer’s excellent discussion of Schiller in *The Word Unheard: Legacies of Anti-Semitism in German Literature and Culture*. Chicago: Northwestern, 2011. Print.

<sup>7</sup> See Christa Wolf on the insufficiency of the term, which she criticizes precisely because it seems not to connote fundamental and deliberate change, but rather the unintentional change of course triggered by the shifting of winds that are beyond the sailor’s control (qtd. in Hector).

<sup>8</sup> Radisch (see Hector 34), Gabler (Hector 36), and Gerstenberger (Hector 35).

<sup>9</sup> Emmerich, Wolfgang. *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*. Berlin: Aufbau, 1996, and Wehdeking, Volker. *Die deutsche Einheit und die Schriftsteller: Literarische Verarbeitung der Wende seit 1989*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995. See also Fischer, Gerhard, and David Roberts. *Schreiben nach der Wende*.

Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 2001, as well as Hector's list of primary literature, pp. 192-96.

<sup>10</sup> For example: "Die Stasi entwickelt sich zu einer Kategorie, die als Thema von jedem Wenderoman erwartet wird" (74). Indeed, the key role Hector attributes to the Stasi receives repeated attention throughout her study. See in addition pp. 35, 68, 80, 85, and 185.

<sup>11</sup> Gabler, Wolfgang. "Der Wenderoman als neues literarisches Genre: Thesen." *Zeiten-Wende – Wendeliteratur. Umriss. Schriften zur mecklenburgischen Landesgeschichte. Vol. 4.* Weimar/Rostock: Edition M, 2000. 75. Print. Gabler underscores the primacy of history as follows, "Wie in allen hier vorgestellten Wenderomanen suchen die AutorInnen demnach regelmäßig—aber jeweils unterschiedlich—einen großen historischen Zusammenhang, um die geschichtliche Bedeutung der von uns erlebten Gegenwart zu illustrieren" (ibid. 81).

<sup>12</sup> Stefanie Regine Bruns concurs but argues that the novel's real fault is its over-ambition: "Eduard beobachtet gleichzeitig distanziert und neugierig die rasanten Veränderungen in Berlin und die immer noch vorhandenen Unterschiede zwischen Ost und West. ‚Eduards Heimkehr‘ ist ein gut erzählter Roman, der die ‚typisch‘ deutschen Eigenheiten zumeist treffend beschreibt. Leider versucht Peter Schneider, zu viele Themen auf einmal zu bewältigen: Die Stasi-Vergangenheit wird ebenso thematisiert wie die NS-Zeit, Eduards Forschungsprojekt über verhaltensändernde Gene wird in den Medien mit der Rassenlehre der Nazis verglichen. Daneben werden Jennys Orgasmusprobleme konstatiert, analysiert und therapiert. Dabei hat das Buch wie dargestellt, nun wirklich genug Höhepunkte zu bieten." Bruns, Stefanie Regine. "Berliner Chaos: Peter Schneider erzählt von einer Stadt zwischen Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Aufbruchstimmung," *literaturkritik.de* 1.10 (1999): n. pag. Web. 29 Oct 2009. <[http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez\\_id=466&ausgabe=199910](http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=466&ausgabe=199910)>.

<sup>13</sup> Unified Germany notably achieved, as Bill Niven demonstrates in *Facing the Nazi Past*, a consensus on the commemoration of the Holocaust; indeed post '89 public culture is rife with compelling (if occasionally controversial) examples of such commemoration. This, along with the gradual ascendancy of the so-called second and third generations in Germany, has led to palpably more relaxed treatment and reception of the Holocaust. Indeed, it has largely ceased to be traumatic—if it ever really was—and has become incorporated into German and world history.

<sup>14</sup> The tensions between second generation Germans and what is sometimes perceived a "Jewish American" insistence on Holocaust commemoration and rituals of guilt is, I argue, a pervasive, if usually unacknowledged postwar phenomenon. See Introduction and chapters 3 and 4 in my *Holocaust as Fiction: Bernhard Schlink's "Nazi" Novels and their Films*. New York, NY: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010. Print.

<sup>15</sup> On the awkward execution of “The Circumcision,” see Franklin, Ruth. “Immorality Play.” [Rev. of *Flights of Love: Stories*]. *The New Republic Online*. 27 Dec 2001: n. pag. Web. 20 Oct 2009.

<[http://www.powells.com/review/2001\\_12\\_27](http://www.powells.com/review/2001_12_27)>. She points out: “Though Schlink’s depiction of Sarah and her family has an undeniable ring of truth, it is hard to think of a similarly stereotypical portrayal of Jews in all of contemporary literature. Certainly many American Jews hold opinions about Judaism and about Germans similar to those represented in ‘The Circumcision,’ but Schlink’s unsympathetic, deadpan recitation of them is weirdly lacking in perspective ...”

<sup>16</sup> For a development of this argument, see William Collins Donahue, *Holocaust as Fiction: The “Nazi” Novels of Bernhard Schlink and Their Films* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2010) c. 5, “Victims All: *The Reader* as an American Novel,” pp. 133-51.

<sup>17</sup> Grub, Frank Thomas. “Wende” und “Einheit” im Spiegel der deutschsprachigen Literatur: Ein Handbuch. Band 1: Untersuchungen. Band 2: Bibliographie. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003. For a list of dozens of Wende films, see Hodgin, Nick, and Caroline Pearce, eds. *The GDR Remembered. Representations of the East German State since 1989*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Though anything but a document of 1989 in the sense of Hector or Grub, the film is nevertheless documentary in two senses: it both illuminates a certain era and social aspect of the GDR, and tells the story of a documentary filmmaker who is following the routines and interactions of women workers at a lightbulb factory. In chronicling the stultifying assembly-line work of these women, the film also offers—as unlikely as it may seem—a critique of the quintessentially (e.g. “Fordism”) capitalist division of labor that degrades employees to mere cogs in the production process.

<sup>19</sup> Further information can be found at: <http://www.stage-entertainment.de/musicals-shows/hinterm-horizont-berlin.html>.

<sup>20</sup> On this, see my “Germans’ lingering link to the wall,” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 14, 2011. C 5. [http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/inquirer/20110814\\_Germans\\_lingering\\_link\\_to\\_the\\_wall.html](http://www.philly.com/philly/opinion/inquirer/20110814_Germans_lingering_link_to_the_wall.html)

<sup>21</sup> In addition to a slew of German and European awards, *Good Bye, Lenin!* was nominated for the Golden Globe Best Foreign Language film and received the London Film Critics Circle award for Best Foreign Language film. For an informative discussion of the film, see Hodgin, Nick. “Aiming to Please? Consensus and Consciousness-Raising in Wolfgang Becker’s *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003).” *New Directions in German Cinema*. Ed. Paul Cooke, and Chris Homewood. London/New York; I. B. Tauris, 2011. 94-111. Print. While I am sympathetic to Hodgin’s reading in general—and have profited from it—he is more willing than I to credit the film as “historical” in nature.

<sup>22</sup> Screen shot from the film's online trailer at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJb4efZcFUM&noredirect=1>

Public domain; cinematic trailer. Accessed May 11, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> See Sagan, Alex. "An Optimistic Icon: Anne Frank's Canonization in Postwar Culture." *Germany in the American Mind: The American Postwar Reception of German Culture*. Special issue of *German Politics and Society* 13.3 (1995): 95-107. Print.

<sup>24</sup> For an insightful treatment of the film in general, and a specific discussion of the film's relationship to history (e.g. as a "corrective to *Ostalgie*"), see Cooke, Paul. "Watching the Stasi: Authenticity, *Ostalgie* and History in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others* (2006)." *New Directions in German Cinema*. Ed. Paul Cooke, and Chris Homewood. London/New York; I. B. Tauris, 2011. 111-127. Print. See also Paul Cooke, "*The Lives of Others*" and *Contemporary German Film: A Companion* (De Gruyter, forthcoming, May 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Screen shot from online trailer of the English-language subtitled version: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrpC7Nf4rBI>; uploaded by SonyPictureClassics. Public domain. Accessed May 11, 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Among many, many others, *Das Leben der Anderen* garnered the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film of the year.

<sup>28</sup> See also Zizek, Slavoj. "The Dreams of Others". *In These Times* 18 May 2007: n. p. Web. 17 Aug 2007.

<[http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3183/the\\_dreams\\_of\\_others/](http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3183/the_dreams_of_others/)>. This is actually a discussion that needs to be broken down to specific scenes, narrative strands, or themes, rather than rendered as a judgment on the film as a whole. Several times I queried Vera Lengsfeld, who was held prisoner for a brief time at Hohenschoenhausen for her GDR-era political activism, about her view of the film's alleged historical accuracy. She repeatedly affirmed its faithfulness to history, but always with reference to the interrogation scenes, not with regard to the redemption of the Stasi captain. Thus antithetical stances can be supported (at a level of generality), including the film's official *Presseheft*, which firmly insists "dass der Film bis ins kleinste Detail authentisch [ist]" (p. 14), [http://www.just-publicity.de/assets/pdf/DLDA\\_presseheft.pdf](http://www.just-publicity.de/assets/pdf/DLDA_presseheft.pdf). For a strongly dissenting view, but still one that hinges on the film's putative historicity, see: Werner Schulz, "Das Leben der Anderen hat keinen Preis verdient," <http://www.welt.de/politik/article734960/Das-Leben-der-anderen-hat-keinen-Preis-verdient.html>

What Schulz says about the film--"Doch bei Filmen, die Geschichte abbilden, lohnt es sich, genauer hinzusehen. Da viele ihr Geschichtsbild aus solchen Streifen beziehen."--characterizes the larger critical reception of the Wende-genre.

<sup>29</sup> See my *Holocaust as Fiction*, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-97.

<sup>30</sup> Screen shot from online trailer of the English-language subtitled version: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrpC7Nf4rBI>; uploaded by SonyPictureClassics. Public domain. Accessed May 11, 2013.

<sup>31</sup> This fully corroborates the director's view of the film, as emerges from his response to criticisms of the film's failure to adhere strictly to historical reality. See Timothy Garton Ash, "The Stasi on Our Minds," *New York Review of Books*, May 31, 2007, pp. 6, 8.

<sup>32</sup> See for example, Kaupp, Cristina Moles. *Good Bye, Lenin! Wolfgang Becker BR Deutschland 2003. Filmheft*. Ed. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. Fachbereich Multimedia und IT. Bonn, 2003. Print.

<sup>33</sup> Hector is right when she notes that the *Wenderoman* (and its related *Wendegenres*) is largely an East German affair. Though one could cite counter-examples, it is not on the whole a matter of presenting Western and Eastern accommodation to the post-1989 reality in an even roughly equal manner. Rather, it is fundamentally a one-way street: a case of mediating the East German experience to a wider reading/viewing public. It is essentially about humanizing and rehabilitating the other—here the East German other—after a time of tremendous social upheaval when citizens of the former GDR often felt marginalized, downtrodden, and in some cases exploited. In this sense, the well-executed *Wenderoman* joins the ranks of those great works, like Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767), that promote understanding and reconciliation in the wake of profoundly divisive conflict.

<sup>34</sup> Its somewhat incidental nature can be demonstrated by the case of Joel Agee, whose compelling memoir of growing up in East Germany was published well before the so-called "fall of the wall," albeit in the West, and long after he was free of SED censorship. See Agee, Joel. *Zwölf Jahre - Eine amerikanische Jugend in Ostdeutschland*. Munich et al.: Hanser, 1982. Print.

<sup>35</sup> Sebastian Handke has wittily referred to this phenomenon as the "Sun-Alleyization of GDR memory." Cited in: Cooke, Paul. Op. cit. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Irma Weinreich, writing for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, observes, for example, "In den Kammerspielen des Deutschen Theaters in Berlin wurde herzlich gelacht, aber oft blieb den Zuschauern das Lachen bei dem Fußballstück auch im Halse stecken." See her "Nicht brüllen, denken - Fußballtheater in Berlin," at: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/theater-nicht-bruellen-denken-fussballtheater-in-berlin-140053.html>. Accessed May 11, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> For a fuller treatment, see my "'Normal' as 'Apolitical': Uwe Timm's *Rot* and Thomas Brussig's *Leben bis Männer*," in: *German Culture, Politics, and Literature in the Twenty-First Century: Beyond Normalization*, eds. Stuart Taberner and Paul Cooke (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2006), pp. 181-94.

<sup>38</sup> Source: [http://www.deutschestheater.de/spielplan/leben\\_bis\\_maenner/bilder/](http://www.deutschestheater.de/spielplan/leben_bis_maenner/bilder/). Public domain; accessed May 11, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> For an enlightening and discriminating discussion of the *Mauerschützenprozesse*, see Schlink, Bernhard. "Rechtsstaat und revolutionäre Gerechtigkeit." Humboldt Forum Recht 1 (1996). Web. 4 Mar 2013. <<http://www.humboldt-forum-recht.de/deutsch/1-1996/index.html>>. For broader discussions of coming to terms with the GDR past from a juridical point of view, see *Vergangenheitsschuld und gegenwärtiges Recht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), especially 38-123.

<sup>40</sup> For a five-minute excerpt from the play, see the following recording: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUBu0nQyLdU>

<sup>41</sup> Even when Hector allows that the *Wenderoman* can include historical "flashbacks," the focal point—the point to which the narrative necessarily returns, is 1989, thus making it in her rendition a fundamentally presentist genre ill-suited to investigate and engage the political and ideological wounds of the Cold War.

<sup>42</sup> For a brief sampling of her argument from her current larger book project, see Koonz, Claudia. "Hijab/Headscarf: A Political Journey." *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon*. Ed. Gluck, Carol and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010. 174-199. Print.

<sup>43</sup> Citations refer to Kempowski, Walter. *Letzte Grüße*. Munich: btb, 2005. Here and henceforth abbreviated as "LG" with page number.

<sup>44</sup> In 1994 the Smithsonian National Museum of Air and Space attempted to launch a critical exhibit about the US dropping of nuclear bombs on Japan during WWII. Veteran groups and others mounted vociferous objection to the planned exhibit because it raised questions about the mission's necessity. They prevailed, and the "Enola Gay" exhibit was cancelled before it was ever mounted. A sanitized, uncontroversial exhibit was installed in its place and was on display from 1995-98. Not long after this, perhaps not coincidentally, W. G. Sebald and others began to put this question back on the agenda, though now with reference to Germany, beginning with his 1997 Zurich lecture "Luftkrieg und Literatur" (published in 1999).

<sup>45</sup> For a detailed and, I think, persuasive refutation of Rentschler's thesis, see Hodgin and Cooke, op. cit. Without indiscriminately endorsing "crowd pleasing" art as politically progressive, both Hodgin and Cooke make a strong case for the potential of accessible art proffering meaningful social critique. Methodologically, there is of course no way of resolving this dispute a priori. Rather, a careful, multi-layered analysis of the ways in which these works function sociologically—i.e. an array of reception studies—would shed more light on this thorny question.

<sup>46</sup> These widely-circulated works discussed in this essay play an important role in building an ever-expanding storehouse of "cultural memory" whose larger or future potential social effect is impossible to predict. On the foundational concept of "cultural memory" (Kulturgedächtnis) see Assmann, Jan. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. Munich: C.H. Beck, 1997. Print, as well as Halbwachs, Maurice. *Das kollektive*

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*Gedächtnis*. 2nd ed. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996. Print, and Hueyssen, Andreas. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, London: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>47</sup> The Greens (the German leftist political party, “Die Grünen”) may, for example, be viewed as a more direct source for some of these very same social values, though that is not my point here. They, at any rate, owe a considerable debt to their Marxist-inflected ‘68er predecessors. For an excellent overview see Markovits, Andrei S., and Joseph Klaver. “Thirty Years of Bundestag Presence: A Tally of the Greens’ Impact on the Federal Republic of Germany’s Political Life and Public Culture.” *AICGS German – American Issues* 14 (2012). Web. 4 Mar 2013. <<http://www.aicgs.org/publication/thirty-years-of-bundestag-presence-a-tally-of-the-greens-impact-on-the-federal-republic-of-germanys-political-life-and-public-culture/>>. A somewhat more detailed version is available in German via the Heinrich Böll Stiftung: <http://www.boell.de/publikationen/publikationen-drei%C3%9Fig-jahre-im-bundestag-16856.html>.

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