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## On the Reception of GDR Literature: Introduction

Patricia Herminghouse  
*University of Rochester*

Peter Uwe Hohendahl  
*Cornell University*

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**EDITORS' NOTE:** Although or because the German Democratic Republic has ceased to exist, considerable interest in GDR culture remains. As long as that interest endures, we plan to continue publishing the *GDR Bulletin*.

# ON THE RECEPTION OF GDR LITERATURE

## INTRODUCTION

Patricia Herminghouse, University of Rochester  
Peter Uwe Hohendahl, Cornell University

In view of the disappearance of the GDR as a distinct political entity in 1990, papers from a conference on reception of its literature and culture which were still predicated on the assumption of its existence as a separate state have themselves now become part of the phenomenon which they set out to examine. The papers which appear in this issue of the *GDR Bulletin* were originally presented at a November, 1988, workshop in Washington, D.C. under the sponsorship of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies and the Goethe House New York. Space limitations unfortunately preclude the publication here of all the contributions, although more may appear in a future issue. In addition to our appreciation of Thomas Fox for his decision to inaugurate a new dimension of the *GDR Bulletin* as a scholarly journal with these selected papers, we want to express particular gratitude to R. Gerald Livingston of AICGS and Jürgen Üwe Ohlau of Goethe House New York for their support of the conference, and to Malve Slocum Burns of AICGS and Barbara Schlöndorff of GoetheHouse for all their efforts to assure a successful and productive meeting in a cordial and comfortable setting.

Conducted as a workshop which was intended to lead to a larger symposium on this topic in 1990, the conference brought together a small group of experts from the GDR, the Federal Republic and the United States. Despite some opening remarks which attempted to introduce the element of confrontation which has often characterized meetings between East and West Germans, the American setting served to promote dialog rather than contestation.\* The organizers' intention of opening up new channels of communication among scholars with common interests was facilitated by a format which encouraged discussion and frank exchange between presenters and commentators. The following working papers were presented: Manfred Jäger: "Über Zugänge zur DDR-Literatur auf kulturpolitischen Wegen"; Christel und Heinz Blumensath: "Zur Rezeption der DDR-Literatur im Bildungswesen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland"; "GDR Literature and the Western Book Market," a panel discussion with Mark Rectanus, Ingrid Krüger, Wolfgang Emmerich, and Frank Hörnigk; Angelika Bammer, "The American Feminist Reception of GDR Literature (with a Glance at West Germany)"; Rainer Rosenberg, "DDR-Literatur als Gegenstand der Literaturwissenschaft in der BRD"; Bernhard Zimmermann, "Der Blick nach 'drüben': Zur literaturkritischen Rezeption von DDR-Literatur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland"; David Bathrick, "Productive Mis-Reading: GDR Literature in the USA." In addition, Hans Joachim Schädlich, Wolfgang Emmerich, Therese Hörnigk, Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, Margy Gerber, Volker Gransow, Patricia Herminghouse, and Peter Hohendahl served as commentators in the various panels and sessions. While the original papers referred to American and West German reception of GDR literature without questioning the historical East-West division, it was not this East-West split, but the process of cultural transmission, including similarities and differences between American and West German responses to East German culture, that concerned both organizers and participants. In the discus-

sions it became evident that the West German reception had usually been predicated upon the opposition of the two political systems, whereas the American appropriation appeared frequently to have disregarded this opposition or even to have been unaware of its existence. In the U.S. the cultural profile of the GDR was even weaker than its political presence, minimal as that was in 1988. Curiously enough, as a result of recent events in Eastern and Central Europe, American awareness of East Germany is currently much greater. Images of the opening of the Berlin wall on millions of American television screens highlighted the existence of the other Germany at the very time when it was beginning to disintegrate. While the prospect of German unification has been discussed from various perspectives within this country, it does not yet appear to have fundamentally affected the American assessment of GDR literature. This holds both for the indifference of the general reading public as well as for the moderate tone of discourse within the scholarly community, which generally continues to regard GDR literature on its own terms within the socio-political constellation of its origins.

In West Germany, on the other hand, significant changes have occurred in attitudes towards East German culture. The West German press has provided an increasingly critical, if not hostile, image of major East German writers (most prominent among them, Christa Wolf) and academic discourse has likewise taken on a noticeably more adversarial tone. Although it is too early to say what directions new scholarship may take, already it is obvious that a major revisionist movement is underway. Drawing on revelations about the pervasive influence of the East German *Staatssicherheitsdienst*, recent criticism seems to be returning to an earlier image of the GDR as a totalitarian state, i.e. "ein Staat, der nicht sein sollte." Under these conditions the much-debated question of whether there is more than one German literary tradition takes on a different meaning. It may no longer be a question of whether there can or should be a common canon for all German-speaking readers, but rather of whether East German literature should have any place in this corpus at all. The existence of an autonomous East German literary tradition seems to pose a threat to the notion of German unification as it has emerged west of the Elbe during the last eight months. The decision that the GDR would become a part of the Federal Republic according to Article 23 of the West German *Grundgesetz* rather than forge a new constitutional basis for genuine unification is reflected in the current subalternation of East German literature within the literary system of the Federal Republic.

Unforeseen as this development was at the time of the Washington conference, it does not contradict the basic insights which emerged there regarding how the particular historical, political, and cultural configuration in which reception of this literature occurs affects the response to it more deeply than any qualities supposed to inhere in the text itself. For this reason it is not unlikely that in the near future the American response will differ significantly from the debate within Germany, where nothing less than issues of national identity are at stake.

\*For a review of the conference, see Volker Gransow, "Provinzialismus oder Weltliteratur? DDR-Literaturgeschichte in Washington" in: *Deutschland Archiv* 22 (1989), H.4, 437-439.

## PRODUCTIVE MIS-READING: GDR LITERATURE IN THE USA

David Bathrick, Cornell University

I should like to preface my remarks concerning the reception of GDR literature in the United States by the following rather bold, maybe even irresponsible assertions:

1) Seen from the broadest perspective of literary life in this