

**Walled In Literature. An Architectural Inquiry**

Nikolaus Wegmann  
Princeton University

*The Berlin Wall is – in spite of its obvious function and its supposedly simple form (Gestalt) – an object that must be read carefully. Countless attempts have been made to analyze the significance of the Berlin Wall. The present analysis does not make use of statistics, mass media representations, or historical moralities in its attempt to arrive at a new understanding of the Wall. Instead, the focus is on the Wall as a complex architectural form and its function for a second German national literature after 1961.*

*Nikolaus Wegmann, a Germanist and literary historian with a strong interest in media culture, received his intellectual training at Bielefeld (Promotion 1984), Cornell University, and Köln (Habilitation 1998). He has taught German literature at Bielefeld and Köln and media studies at Potsdam, the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen München, and at the Institut für Theater, Film und Fernsehwissenschaft Köln. He has also held positions as a visiting professor at the University of Iowa and the University of Washington. His research is focused on basic philological and cultural techniques such as (re-)reading, collective reading, note-taking, or searching and finding. Nikolaus Wegmann is vice president of the Friedrich-Schlegel-Gesellschaft in Mainz, Germany. Together with Prof. Ulrich Breuer, he has edited Athenäum. Jahrbuch der Friedrich-Schlegel-Gesellschaft since 2008. He is a founding member of the American Friends of Marbach (AFM), and a co-founder of the Princeton-Weimar-Summer School for Media Studies.*

*And it would be boring if it no longer existed.*

Heiner Müller on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1989, responding to the question whether the GDR will still exist in the future or not?

What could I tell you that you do not know yet? Everyone knows everything, and if not yet, everyone can easily find out what he or she always wanted to know about the Berlin Wall. The Wall can be still overwhelming, is still there, in mass media, in personal stories, in large-scale research. Even more so around a commemorative year. A maximum has been reached in 2009: The 20-year anniversary of the fall of the wall. For weeks, the German media has been broadcasting and printing non-stop about the Berlin Wall. On all channels and in every medial format one can think of. “The story of the German Reunification is

gradually filling libraries” (*Die Welt*, October 31, 2009). Experts have started to talk about overexposure: once something has been overexposed, however, it loses in concision and significance – paradoxically, precisely because it is shown so often and so extensively. Regardless of how relevant the phenomenon actually is. Do such inflationary effects exist only in the mass media? In the world of research at any rate, there is something similar. Of course, one usually takes for granted that research is always good. But then again it is also well known that a topic can be over-researched or even “researched to death.” This could be the case for our topic as well. Large-scale research has existed in this field for a long time in the form of the *research group* and the even larger research cluster, as for example the one on *Coming to Terms with the Communist Dictatorship in East Germany* (In German: *Zur Aufarbeitung der SED Diktatur*).

In the English-speaking world the dimensions of the phenomenon are different. But nonetheless, the fall of the Wall is ultimately world history as well. Timothy Ash recently took a look at the current publications on our topic in the *New York Review of Books* in a very long collective review.<sup>1</sup> But even this is not sufficient. There will have to be a continuation according to Ash. How many will there be in the end?

If this is the case: how can one then justify one’s own research? At the end of the day, isn’t one just part of a widespread run on a flourishing topic? Ash was not really convinced by what he had in front of him. By and large, in his evaluation, research on the Wall has a contemporary-historical focus. It aims to find out what one has always wanted to know about the Berlin Wall: how were the events of November 9, 1989 and August 13, 1961, possible at all? This seems to be the question of all questions – and one seeks an answer above all “on the basis of a scrupulous, detailed chronological reconstruction of intended and unintended effects, in multiple directions on multiple stages, day by day, and sometimes—as on the evening of November 9th in Berlin—minute by minute.” One ‘comes to terms’ with the past, and one does so by means of

reading it as a causal chain: everything appears plausible, thoroughly explained, and seamless. It had to be like that.

Is this wrong? First of all, the closeness of this kind of research to the mass media evokes skepticism. The media, too, has been explaining incessantly how the events happened and had to happen in this way. Research and media appear to have similar interests, at least when the “role of the media” is integrated into the causal model of explanation: “The reporting or misreporting of events, especially by television,” Ash says, “is itself a vital part of the causal chain.” The Wall, however, cannot be subsumed in a universal chronology of events. It is also a *vexing object* that defies causal explanation and cannot be interpreted in a way that produces something evident. It is rather – and this is my point – a *problem*. Or, to state the matter in terms of a task: Research should restore to the overexposed Berlin Wall the quality of being a problem attracting new ideas, different materials, and unfamiliar, even irritating conclusions.

In what follows, I shall make an attempt to do so as a literary historian. In a first step, I will approach the Wall as a construction, a built architecture that opens up a space. What is at stake is an architectural reading. In a second step, I will consider whether and how the topography of the Wall determined the conditions for literature in the German Democratic Republic. By that I do not mean the ignorance of the Socialist Unity Party or the machinations of censorship. Rather, my topic is the GDR as a space *intra muros*, a specific space with its own temporality and its own rules of communication. Finally, I will pose the question as to whether this walled-in space was, *despite everything*, productive of the existence of literature. It is in this sense that I entitled my talk: “Walled In Literature. An Architectural Inquiry.”

## I.

A Literary Historian who is interested in GDR Literature cannot get around the Wall. Without the Wall there is no GDR Literature. The Wall was the *condition of possibility* for this literature in the second half of the twentieth century.

Conversely, to do a cross-check: to write a “history of GDR Literature prior to the construction of the Wall in 1961” is, according to Klaus-Michael Bogdal, a Bielefeld Germanist, virtually impossible. Prior to this decisive year there is simply a lack of necessary material. The “works that have become a part of cultural memory”<sup>2</sup> as Bogdal and the more recent research put it – are lacking. The single exception, Uwe Johnson’s “Mutmaßungen über Jakob,” was published as a book in 1959 (and appeared only) in West Germany.<sup>3</sup>

Let’s stick with the research for the moment. After all, GDR-Literature is no marginal topic for German Literary Studies. As the temporal distance to the object of study has grown, the perspective has changed. For a long time one was content with a mostly critical examination of single works and authors. In the meantime the tendency is towards a larger-format view that sees GDR-Literature from the point of view of its epochal seclusion. This literature now draws interest as a context distinguished precisely by the fact that it is *narrower than an arbitrary set of literary works of art is generally able to be*. And here the Wall becomes an issue once again. This time it is no longer the interpretive litmus test used to question and assess this literature and its authors in terms of their respective attitudes towards the Wall. Rather, one now talks about a radical spatial incision that first made this Literature possible. One seems to be more ready to accept the particularity of this literature as the object of research. But the term “incision” remains vague in the extended description. Either the term refers to that which is merely self-evident if incision simply stands for the separation of Germany. Or the term is taken as a metaphor, and the concrete relation of space and wall gets lost in the abstraction of a concept like “social space.”<sup>4</sup> Under the effect of a Bourdieu and his Cultural-Sociology of modern industrial society, the incision becomes a caesura in the cultural or discursive space of time. The Wall, which after all did once really and concretely exist, thus disappears in a general context of political, cultural, and contemporary history.

That one avoids the Wall as a wall has its reasons. Thus for a long time it was almost inevitable that an explicit remark was considered a statement in a political debate. “Whoever remains silent is guilty,” were the terms with which Günter Grass and Wolfdiétrich Schnurre had set the imperative in the very year the Wall was built. “To call the injustice of August 13 by its name,” Grass continued in his open letter, was a duty.<sup>5</sup>

One acted at all times on a terrain of big questions with grave significance. Here they were part of everyday life. The *German Question*, the *Competition of Systems*, and the question of *Cultural Inheritance* existed as conflicts over the legitimate successor of the classical-humanist tradition. Whoever followed these debates found himself soon enough in the midst of politics, morality, and power. Here one could be, here one had to be engaged.

Today the avoidance of the topic has a different character. Twenty years after the fall of the Wall the great political debate is passé. But not its echo as a moral debate. Here too the form of the conflict makes insight more difficult. In the meantime it has become clear that a moralization of the Wall results in a kind of knowledge patterned on a decision: as always when it comes to morality it's a matter of a gain or loss of respect. The question of respect or disdain concerns in equal measure persons and the societal system that allowed this construction to be built. Each piece of information is read only in the mirror of this assessment. Conversely, following the logic of morality, the assessment seeks out that information that it can make use of.<sup>6</sup> Thus one researches in the style of investigative journalism – in other words, one finally uncovers who knew what when, who was corrupt, and who was in the opposition. Up to now the Stasi files – whose breadth can be measured in bookshelf-kilometers – have provided more and more of these details – or, in plain language: Aha-revelations. There is no genuinely new knowledge. Rather, the topic is supposed to be kept in permanent unrest. According to morality, there may not be any closure or *Schlussstrich* let alone forgetting. Even a mere cooling off of the topic seems suspect.

## II.

But here in Eugene, we are not holding a conference on coming to terms with GDR history. This is an opportunity to approach the Wall as that which it undeniably also was: built architecture. Once articulated, this is evident. Nonetheless, this perspective for describing the Wall has been omitted for the most part.<sup>7</sup> There are, to be sure, numerous technical reconstructions of the Wall – of its length and height, the kinds and dimensions of the materials used, of its topographic layout in urban and rural landscapes. All these aspects have been traced with greater and greater attention to detail, measured out precisely and documented meticulously. Architecture, however, was *not* the issue. If the Wall was to be regarded as architecture at all, it could, at best, only be bad – if not inhuman – architecture. Shortly after its construction, in the early sixties, one saw in it a *KZ-Mauer*, that is, a concentration camp wall – a mere 16 years after the Second World War had ended: “I see the Wall (...) it resembles the wall of a concentration camp (...) glass shards and splinters adorn its top (...). Will they ever know what they are doing?”<sup>8</sup> As the example shows, the historical reference for this indignation precedes and conditions the actual reaction. In this case one need no longer talk about architecture – indeed one must not.

A text by Rem Koolhaas – and this is the one exception I know – differs from all of this. It is not a very well-known text, which might have to do with its place of publication. The text, barely as long as an essay, gets almost lost in Koolhaas’ nearly 1400-page volume *S, M, L, XL* from 1995.<sup>9</sup> In addition to this, numerous concrete building projects make it clear that the volume is about architecture. And certainly not literary history.

Let us turn to the text itself. It is entitled *Field Trip*, which can in parallel be understood as excursion. This is exactly what Koolhaas did. In 1971, in the final stages of his study of architecture, he went to Berlin in order to take a look at the Wall “on site.” The single purpose of the trip, as Koolhaas said in 1993, looking back on his final project for his degree, was “to document *The Berlin*

*Wall as Architecture.*” How did he go about this? First of all, the seemingly clear-cut project turned out to be much more difficult than expected. He had misjudged the task: “I had hoped to “do” the wall in a day and then to explore the rest of the cities.” So quickly, in one day, and so smoothly, without resistance – this is not possible. The object, which was merely supposed to be “documented,” is able to do something that he had not anticipated: the Wall vexes him. It renders prefabricated knowledge invalid, and its hypnotic force demands – almost as a defense – serious study: “its attraction was hypnotic. It made me a serious student” (231).

The “Berlin Wall” is different from what one thinks. Koolhaas reports that all that remained for him was astonishment, a kind of being surprised. To begin with the most spectacular: “The greatest surprise: “the wall was heartbreakingly *beautiful*” (222). What is it that is being said here? Where does the overwhelming impression of beauty come from when Koolhaas calls the Wall “the most purely beautiful remnant of an urban condition” (222)? Is this theory-building gone wild with an urge to arrive at a punch line? Or does the attribute “beauty,” even in italics, indicate that the architect sees a work of art in the Wall? Does he, standing before the Wall, switch topics and professions and talk about nothing but art?

Perhaps art and the artistic do indeed play a role here. But then the artistic is a matter that lies beyond architecture, even if it is still relevant. One can, to be sure, look at the Wall and regard it as a structure or sculpture and subject it to “any arbitrary aesthetic criteria,” as is always the case with works of art.<sup>10</sup> But if one no longer makes a distinction between architecture and art, then the Wall itself – in analogy to the work of art – would be understood as communication and not as building. This, however, would not describe the Wall as architecture. At best, it would be the acknowledgement that Koolhaas has failed with his project.

Koolhaas did not become an artist, but rather an architect. His involvement with aesthetics has less to do with works of art than with attention

and interest. He notes how little attention the Wall gets. This disinterest becomes tangible, in his view, for example, in the wooden platforms that – located in the West and in immediate vicinity to the Wall – function as overlooks. It was only from these platforms that one could gaze at the Wall and take it in as the staggered construction that it is: from the Rear Wall, to the death strips and signal fences with barbed wire, to the Outer Wall. When Koolhaas went to see the Wall, however, this interest had already past: “The platforms – thrusting voyeuristic positions of ideological gloating – were mostly empty.” And he generalized his diagnosis: “the wall was normalized” (222).

However, this wasn't the case for the architect to be. His encounter with the Wall was something like an *experience of architecture*. Yet this does not imply – however expectable – unease in the face of the deadly danger that arose from the Wall. Nor is it a sheer reality shock in the face of an oversized construction or building. Koolhaas himself speaks of an “epiphany.” At its heart is the insight that this isn't just any construction. Here it's a matter of architecture itself: “It was as if I had come eye to eye with architecture's true nature” (223). Koolhaas first really becomes an architect – thus the drama that is taking place here – in the face of the Wall. Without letting himself be distracted by its materiality, its political-ideological meaning, or its brutality, he experiences the Wall as architecture, indeed as the incarnation of architecture as such. Should one follow Koolhaas here? That might prove difficult. Koolhaas' text doesn't say what it means, at any rate not directly or consequently. And moreover the reader also struggles because he hasn't counted on difficulties: the Wall as a political artifact with a spatial ordering-function appears all too easily legible in comparison with other realities of the modern world. One thinks one knows enough about the Wall and avoids the *effort of a reading* with this seemingly obvious knowledge.

### III.



So let us stop here and make sure we know where we're standing. The thesis from which we began, according to which GDR Literature has its condition of possibility in the Wall, can now be extended. If this Wall is to be described as architecture, then only under the presupposition that that which is architectural in architecture makes itself apparent. "The Berlin Wall," as Koolhaas argued, once again bringing into proximity the Wall and a general statement about architecture as such, "was a (...) demonstration of the power of architecture" (226). Is the nature of architecture thus simultaneously its power? And how is one to understand this power if it isn't merely that which every layman can see: a gigantic blockade, a massive and highly dangerous barrier that lets nothing and nobody through?

In order to go further here, we need the support of a second text. It is pertinent to the matter, even though its author was neither familiar with Koolhaas' text nor interested in the GDR or even its literature. The title (an allusion to a classical topos in the instruction of architecture): *The Deconstruction of the Box. Inside and Outside in Archi-tecture*.<sup>11</sup> The author: Dirk Baecker, a sociologist, student of Niklas Luhmann, and the son of an architect.

What is the architectural in architecture? Is architecture itself able to provide an answer? Is there a central idea? Or does everything get lost in the endless diversity of that which architecture organizes, from protection against wind and weather to mobility? Every building may have a legible blueprint and layout. But to recognize the principle of architecture in this vast diversity is another matter. Baecker has begun – as though on our behalf – the search. He neither imposes a crash course in architecture on us, nor does he lead us into the realm of social history. Rather, Baecker questions the communication about architecture, to be more precise: the theory of architecture as an instance of reflection on architecture. There he finds the candidates for this search for principles – and all of them are major concepts of architecture theory: space, function, form, and construction. Baecker scrutinizes each of them only to realize – I'm leaving out a good deal – that the central idea from which everything else

could be deduced is not there (Baecker 82). And now? Only a change in direction in the question from which we began can help. We are no longer searching for the concept of all concepts. All that is needed – according to Systems Theory as a theory of operative difference – is “a distinction that must be made so that architecture can take place” (82). Baecker’s answer to the question of all questions is not original, but it is evident. He sees the true reality of architecture in the “distinction between inside and outside,” and the truly remarkable thing about this is “just” that this distinction “as a *distinction* has the function of constituting architecture as such” (83). To be more concrete: “one can only be sure that one is dealing with architecture when one can go in and come out again and when the conditions change as a result of this being able to go in and come back out again, that is, when things take place and can be expected in a different way inside than they can outside” (83). Once again: whoever wishes to get at the nature of architecture may not think of it as a *Leitkonzept*, that is, as a guiding idea. The most decisive thing is to be found at the place where architecture first comes into being at all. That is, according to Baecker, the place where architecture, by virtue of its activity, establishes a distinction between inside and outside and intervenes in the conditions of space (Raum-Verhältnisse) by means of this basic operation.

Now we have a beginning. But this isn’t yet sufficient in order to be able to recognize architecture unerringly, at all times, again and again. One still needs something like an elementary design element that can be connected with this basic distinction. This element has to be more than a function external to architecture or a general anthropological definition of tasks Baecker finds that for which he had searched in what Frank Lloyd Wright called enclosure. Architecture – to avoid an excursus on the “box in architecture” – can only be a dwelling or housing insofar as it *encloses*. Baecker takes up this thought, speaks however not of enclosure but rather of *shielding*: “It’s not the distinction between inside and outside as such that counts, but rather the shielding that

delineates the inside from an outside and protects against an outside that nonetheless must remain accessible from each point on the inside” (90).

Once again: both determinations – the inside/outside distinction and shielding – are, in their interaction, a first result of the search for the architectural in architecture: “As soon as it’s a matter of a shielding that separates inside from outside, one is dealing with architecture, regardless of the purpose of this architecture, the material it might use and how it may appear” (90). The idea of shielding is still too indeterminate. A third element of determination is necessary. This third element is the movement, the change, or, to be conceptually exact: the *difference* between inside and outside: “Shielding only has validity when it distinguishes the possibility of closing from the possibility of opening and maintains both possibilities as present” (91). Shielding thus precisely does not entail the production of closure. On the contrary: “Not only may the outside not be excluded, it must remain accessible. And the inside may not only give protection, it must also be possible to leave it” (91).

Opening and closing are thus the two mutually connected possibilities of architectural creation. Or, to put it differently and closer to the practical activity of an architect: the shielding is not only the sought after regulative idea of architecture (95). It is at the same time a “real element, however it may be distinguished” in each individual case, “that generates the exclusion of an inside *in* an outside.” Thus it is clear that shielding is always in each case a construction-task that must be concretely resolved. How architecture proceeds with this task, “which of the possible closings and openings it chooses, determines at once how it condenses plans and buildings into a form” (95).

#### IV.

Is this sufficient for an attempt to document the Wall as architecture? At the very least one can give it a try. To begin with one can note that an architectural description of the Wall as architecture does not aim at its figure – as it offers itself to perception.<sup>12</sup> The Wall is as architecture – even when it is built – form.

“Form” is thus not another word for figure or for the appearance that an object has. Rather, form stands, defined in terms of a theory of difference, for an *operating along a distinction*, in this case: along the division of inside and outside, with an asymmetry in favor of the inside, as is typical of architecture.

Koolhaas has a similarly active understanding of architecture when he poses the question of what it is that defines “the wall’s performance,” and thus makes clear that this is the question of all questions: for the Wall’s performance coincides with that which determines “*any architecture*” (Koolhaas 226). To study the Wall as an operative structure is thus to study the nature of architecture. But this also implies, as one can learn from the Wall, a negative potential: “The wall suggested that architecture’s beauty was directly proportional to its horror” (226). Koolhaas, keeping his description of the Wall free from all moralism, puts this negative dimension under the general rubric of “unpleasant consequences” – without spelling out what this would entail. This negative dimension is, in Koolhaas’ cool, matter of fact view of the power of architecture, an intrinsic part of the picture (226).

By now it should be clear how different the political-ideological and the architectural description of the Wall are. To talk about “unpleasant consequences” in the context of the reality of the Wall is, in politics and in the world in which we live, only permitted as cynicism. Politics regards the Wall in terms of the purpose for which it was built: the Wall exists in order to close the borders, indeed to close them so efficiently that they can no longer be crossed. This was the dominant interpretation, even though everyone knew that this purpose could by no means be efficiently, let alone perfectly fulfilled. One knew in general terms about the Wall’s permeability, but its dramatic reality – in smuggling, escapes, criminal acts, and as a bureaucratic special case – made it impossible (even in research!) to regard this permeability as part of the *architecture* of the Wall. In the drama of the Wall, the predominant idea is that closure was *the* architectural rational behind it. Nonetheless the Wall has fallen. By now it is very well known how this came to pass. Everything has

been documented, researched, and double-checked. Yet in the midst of such certain knowledge there lurks a deep rooted suspicion that undermines this very knowledge. Perhaps it was just a slip that happened live on TV (that is, when Günter Schabowski, a GDR official, misspoke) that singularly accounts for why the Wall came down on November 9, 1989. According to this alternative explanation, then, there was no fall of the Wall as there was a fall of the walls of the Bastille in 1789. Rather, the Berlin Wall – and this fits quite well with our architectural reading – *was opened*. If the real story is this inventive, one might to ask, counter to the general view, whether the Wall's architecture played its part in the overall instability of the situation.

## V.

The error was already there at the outset, for one believed that it was possible to build a wall that was just a wall – and not architecture. It was supposed to be a construction that produces nothing but closure, one that achieves this goal by distinguishing unambiguously between an inside and an outside along the course of the Wall. According to Koolhaas und Baecker, however, this is too simple a thought. Building a wall by no means separates worlds as easily as the objective, concrete shape of a “mere” wall might suggest. The wall's performance is far more complex than the single function that its builders had assigned it. Thus it is disproportionately difficult to reckon with the Wall, much less to control it.

Around 1960, in a plausible move given the precarious political-economic situation, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany pushed for a closing of the border as complete as possible. This was an absolute priority. As a consequence, to put it in architectural-theoretical terms, the other side of the basic architectural distinction, namely opening, was disregarded or rather underestimated. This, however, has consequences for the ‘first’ side of the distinction, namely closing. The distinction flips over into an *inverted asymmetry*: it is no longer the inside that it is privileged. Rather, one desires the outside that has been

excluded by means of closing. Only on the outside does there appear to be the freedom necessary to change the situation: a wall with no recognizable provisions for an opening seems hopeless, a dead-end. The wall turns into an immurement, a dungeon. Every additional attempt to increase the wall's efficiency in producing closure – just think of its ongoing perfection – can only intensify the resentment against this disregard of architecture. Koolhaas' has a similar argument; after all, the "enormous reservoir of resentment" against architecture that he observed in the 1970's fed off of this very rejection of the Wall: "Looking at the wall as architecture, it was inevitable to transpose the despair, hatred, frustration it inspired to the field of architecture." All the forms, Koolhaas continues, in which the resentment against the Wall as something manufactured found expression, such as „the fanaticism of the tunnel diggers; the resignation of those left behind (...) were finally all too applicable to architecture itself" (226). A wall that is lacking in provisions for switching sides is – counter to the expectations of its ignorant commissioners – is not simply insurmountable. Even if the wall was, by means of its technical perfection, insurmountable in each individual case, it nevertheless provoked an endless series of attempts to overcome it in spite of this: and indeed solely by virtue of its mere existence as a permanently closed wall. Political indoctrination and economic misery, often cited as the true causes, could only have intensified the impact of this miscalculated architecture.

## VI.

This mistaken architecture was nevertheless able to persist for quite some time. It will not suffice to refer to a supposedly omnipotent propaganda in this context. Nobody believed in the "anti-fascist protective wall." The Berlin Wall was a humiliation for all GDR citizens. How then was this construction able to persist *despite its extreme improbability*? The obvious reasons are – of course – well known: coercion, surveillance, and an economic politics that was, above all, a social politics.

But perhaps there was another instance that played its part in intricate ways, namely literature in the GDR. I am not implying here that GDR literature was a mere tool of SED propaganda. Of course it wasn't that. Otherwise it would never have been able to become so important. The literature of the GDR was the *Leitmedium* – in its literal sense, the guiding medium – of a society determined by the construction of the Wall. In this way, GDR literature differs fundamentally from all other literatures of the West, which, by comparison, can never be more than “art” or “mere entertainment.”<sup>13</sup> A medium is a *Leitmedium* insofar as it has the function of sustaining community and identity. In and through this special medium, a society comes to an understanding of itself. This accounts for the extraordinary position, perhaps even the peculiar priority of such a medium. One cannot get around it, unless one wants to exclude oneself. It is, to cite Jochen Hörisch's brief definition, “a medium that is truly unavoidable.”<sup>14</sup>

Literature in the GDR was unavoidable because it transformed imprisonment into a *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed garden. This does not mean that this literature embellished socialism as an idyll. Rather, this literature undertook an engagement that was on the one hand so fundamentally connected with the general political, cultural, and socio-economic conditions of this completely walled-in country that it earned it the title “GDR-Literature.” But this engagement was at the same time the resumption of a much older and arguably genuinely German project. It is still known under such heavily charged and now dated names as “National Literature” and “Cultural Nation” or *Kulturnation*. In the West, where one sought an affiliation with modernity as the epitome of World Literature, this project was mere literary history. Whoever saw the matter otherwise was considered anachronistic. In the GDR the situation was just the opposite. Here the old project was invoked with great effort once again from history. Perhaps this project – and not so much Socialism – was the true experiment of the GDR. Did it not consistently and proudly

designate itself as a *society of readers*, a *Lesegesellschaft*, indeed as a *literary society*, a *Literaturgesellschaft*?

Nonetheless, as with many experiments, this one did not quite end as those responsible for it had supposed. At the beginning, of course, everything seemed to be under control. One employed literature as a mere tool. The expectation was that literature would do what Benedict Anderson had proposed in his groundbreaking study on nation building. A political unity ought to take shape out of the development of a national literature, Anderson claimed with particular attention to German history.<sup>15</sup> In the *Originalton* from 1972: “With the formation of the GDR humanistic German literature received a genuine home. Supported by the first German worker’s and farmer’s State and the Party of the working class, this literature was able to develop itself in ever greater measure as a socialist National Literature of the GDR.” So much for the knowledge from the official encyclopedia.<sup>16</sup> If everything had gone according to plan, this literature would have been capable of something that socialist propaganda could never achieve: it would have made the existence of a second State on German ground appear plausible, indeed, desirable. To further this goal the State leadership was prepared to support literature on an unprecedented scale.<sup>17</sup> One was even prepared to make literature into an *affair of state* or *Staatsangelegenheit*.<sup>18</sup> Yet from precisely here on out the experiment becomes dangerous. This literature that had been promoted as a matter of the State by no means wrote what was expected of it. As the experiment continued it did so less and less.<sup>19</sup> In retrospect one can see that literature did indeed become the Leitmedium in the GDR. However, it did so not for the society of the GDR – or only for a very limited time – but rather for what was once called the Good Society.<sup>20</sup> The good society is precisely not society, nor is it the new, socialist society. Nor does the good society – the term dates from the time around 1800 – imply an intensification of society in the sense that here there is an assembly of those who particularly well represent an existing society. In the way that only the merited party cadre would have been able to represent the socialist society of



the GDR. Rather, this Good Society of the GDR converged at a distance from the official society of party politics. What's more, in a country in which the press and broadcast media were part of the State apparatus, this society could only come together at all in the medium of literature. Its members were by no means dissidents or holdouts. Nor were they merely advocates of an old *Bildungsbürgertum*. They were first and foremost readers, to be more precise: they were *emphatic readers*, to whom literature meant more and spoke with greater truth than any party newspaper or State controlled television channel. Here was the place – beyond the sphere of the merely private – where one could criticize and even protest against social conditions. If only by way of an enthusiasm for the true, beautiful, and good of literature. One was the good society to the extent that one felt oneself superior to society. Once again, this superiority was not motivated by economics or career considerations. One was superior here because one was more serious and more unconditional in one's judgment, because one held oneself and the world to higher standards. This strong feeling of superiority did not even bow before the State. On the contrary. In the Good Society of the GDR, taken as the true literary society of the GDR, one was ever determined to risk a *confrontation between the authority of literature and the authority of the party*. In short: one saw oneself just as the heroes in Christa Wolf's novels thought and acted.<sup>21</sup>

## VII.

For the Good Society, the fall of the Wall was the end of community building on the basis of literature. In its view, the *Wende* of 1989 marked a tremendous *decline of literature*. Now literature had to disseminate itself in the Western market and thus also had to assert itself against the market. Its greatest relevance up to that point, indeed its essential attribute had broken away. The German-German literary conflict, the *Deutsch-deutsche Literaturstreit*, not by chance the only realm in which there truly was something like a real *Querelle* between the East and West, could only mark this loss. But now this too is 20

years in the past. Whether its literature sank with the GDR? Perhaps today, this question is, with the big bang of the digital book and the discussion of the World Wide Web as an entirely different Leitmedium, at best a question for literary historians dealing with the past.

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<sup>1</sup> Ash, Timothy Garton. "1989!" *The New York Review of Books*, November 5, 2009. [www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/nov/05/1989/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/nov/05/1989/)

<sup>2</sup> Bogdal, Klaus-Michael. "Alles nach Plan, alles im Griff. Der diskursive Raum der DDR-Literatur in den fünfziger Jahren." In: Mein, Georg and Markus Rieger-Ladich, ed. *Soziale Räume und kulturelle Praktiken. Über den strategischen Gebrauch von Medien*. (Bielefeld: transcript, 2004) 123-148, here 123.

<sup>3</sup> And Johnson's text seemed completely alien anyway compared with literary prose of its era. See: Emmerich, Wolfgang: *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR. Erweiterte Neuauflage*. (Leipzig, 1996) 147. (Cf. Bogdal 123.)

<sup>4</sup> See Footnote 2.

<sup>5</sup> Fischer, Gerd. "Wer schweigt - wird schuldig. Schriftsteller baten die UNO um Hilfe: Pocht das Gewissen nicht lauter?" In: Richter, Hans Werner, ed. *Die Mauer oder der 13. August*. (Reinbek: rororo aktuell, 1961) 129-131, here 129.

<sup>6</sup> Baecker, Dirk. *Poker im Osten. Probleme der Transformationsgesellschaft*. (Berlin: Merve, 1998) 71.

<sup>7</sup> In the meantime: Olaf Briesse. *Steinzeit. Mauern in Berlin*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Krüger, Klemens. "Der 13. August in der DDR. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen (UKW-Sendung des Norddeutschen Rundfunks vom 10. Oktober 1961)." In: Richter, Hans Werner, ed. *Die Mauer oder der 13. August*. (Reinbek: rororo aktuell, 1961), 7-20, here 19.

<sup>9</sup> **S,M,L,XL** is a book by Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, edited by Jennifer Sigler, with photography by Hans Werlemann. It was first published 1995 in New York and 010 Publishers in Rotterdam. The book is a collection of essays, diary excerpts, travelogues, photographs, architectural plans, sketches, cartoons produced by Office for Metropolitan Architecture (O.M.A.). O.M.A. is a Rotterdam-based company founded by Koolhaas in 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Baecker 1998, 100.

<sup>11</sup> Baecker, Dirk: Die Dekonstruktion der Schachtel: Innen und Außen in der Architektur. In: Luhmann, Niklas, Frederick D. Bunsen, and Dirk Baecker. *Unbeobachtbare Welt. Über Kunst und Architektur*. (Bielefeld: Haux, 1990) 67-104.

<sup>12</sup> On this point, see: Wegmann, Nikolaus. "Die Mauer. 1961-1989." *Weimarer Beiträge*. 47.1 (2001): 104-123.

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<sup>13</sup> Hartmut Winkler has criticized the privileged position of certain media and has instead suggested the concept of “Leitmedium” (a dominant medium). The concept of a dominant medium is however also problematic. Namely: how should the concept be defined, exactly? Is it the invention of script that brings about this rupture, or is it critical that a writerly caste establishes itself and gains influences over the social process? Or does general literacy displace education in an oral tradition? Quantitative and qualitative criteria appear to be hopelessly entwined. And what’s more, talk of a dominant medium too easily disguises the fact that it is generally media constellations – a concert of interwoven media – that define a media-historical situation. See: Winkler, Hartmut. *Docuverse. Zur Medientheorie der Computer*. (München: Boer, 1997) 188.

<sup>14</sup> See Jochen Hörisch’s introduction to: Ludes, Peter (1998): *Einführung in die Medienwissenschaft. Entwicklungen und Theorien*. (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1998) 11-32.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition. London and New York: Verso, 1983.

<sup>16</sup> This was certainly not the case. It was not the founding of the GDR in 1949, but much more the construction of the Wall (beginning in 1961), that provided the first opening for the development of an independent GDR culture. See: Goodbody, Axel, Dennis Tate, and Ian Wallace. *The Failed Socialist Experiment: Culture in the GDR. German Cultural Studies*. Ed. Rob Burns. (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1995) 147-207, here 167.

<sup>17</sup> Whoever was admitted as an author was set for life. Even lyric poets had a secure income – even if this involved receiving the assignment of translations, etc.

<sup>18</sup> Questions of literature were handled by the uppermost heads of the communist party and of the state, in a spirit of discussion, in no way only under the sign of ignorance and barbarism.

<sup>19</sup> This caesura is indeed the Eleventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the SED in December 1965). See: Goodbody, 172-174.

<sup>20</sup> Kieserling, Andre: “Das Ende der guten Gesellschaft.” In: *Soziale Systeme: Zeitschrift für soziologische Theorie*, 7.1 (2001): 177-191.

<sup>21</sup> A full description of this type of community can be found in Uwe Tellkamp’s novel: *Der Turm. Geschichte aus einem versunkenen Land*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008.

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