

Kindheitsmuster und Lebensläufe

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If one considers the recent discussion on H-German about the place of fictional texts in history courses, it follows that it has become necessary to consider the use of films to teach the history of East Germany within a broader context. Do we use fictional texts (novels, plays, and films) just to illustrate the historical account? Are Margarethe von Trotta's *The Promise* and Christa Wolf's *Divided Heaven* therefore only to be considered as illustration of historical events and their reflection on an individual level? Indeed, do films such as *Murderers Are Among Us* offer more than just a backdrop to the history book? And if these fictional texts are more than ivy on the old and decrepit *Plattenbauten* of the 1970s, it is important to elaborate what exactly students of German history might take away from them.

We now face a generation of students who were born around 1989 and who have, therefore, no memory of either the Cold War or the Berlin Wall. The GDR is as distant to these students as the Wilhelmine Empire was to me when I was in university. Films, especially DEFA films, may help to bring East German society closer to our students. I always make my classes watch the four-hour documentary *Children of Golzow*¹ hoping that they might develop an understanding of life in East Germany. Despite their value, however, such films and documentaries do not entirely capture the everyday-life experience of people but are rather mediated representations of political and ideological views.

However, these films are not so different from our history books: both are interpretations and both can be read as texts. Historians sometimes seem to forget that fictionalized accounts (films and novels) were not produced exclusively for entertainment. Authors and film makers created them with the implicit goal of provoking their audiences to reconsider assumptions about the past. Such fictionalized accounts have, in contrast to conventional history books, the liberty to raise more complex philosophical, moral, and ethical

questions. Even the best text book on the Nazi dictatorship can still not answer the question Christa Wolf raises in her novel *Kindheitsmuster* (1976): how do people live under a dictatorship? A question such as this might intrigue cultural historians and allow them to use fictional texts to discuss broader philosophical, moral, and ethical questions that transcend historical periods and situations. Fictional accounts, thus, provide a new way of looking at history: a way that leads historians on a path in between history and literature.

The film *Murderers Are Among Us* (1946) is an excellent example for the use of films in a class on East German history. While one can certainly watch this film as a momentary picture of Berlin immediately after the war, one should not overlook its multi-layered symbolism and the many fundamental questions in the context of the defunct society portrayed in the film. The individuals living in the half-working apartment building are connected by the motif of "seeing." There is the optician Mondschein, living in the basement and repairing glasses to enable people to regain their "clear sight." There is also the seer who is said to have the gift to see into the future and, thus, sells hope and promise. And there is, of course, the former physician and army officer Hans Mertens, who has lost the ability to look behind the surface or outer shell of humans (although he still owns X-rays from his former life and uses them to cover up the windows). It does not take much to "see" this movie in the context of the discourse past and present on how Germans can come to grips with their past. The first step toward reconciliation is to gain or regain a clear vision of the present as well as the past.

Optimism and hope are absent from the film. There are ruins at the beginning and there are still ruins at the end. When students are confronted with a glimpse of June-December 1945 they can begin to see how history can lose all direction; they begin to consider the question of how people could

continue to live after this catastrophe.

The film, however, offers much more than just such a momentary portrait of Berlin. In it, we find victims such as Susanne Wallner, fellow-travelers such as Mertens, denouncers such as the women on the stairs who constantly complains that there is no authority to which to report, and of course there are perpetrators in the person of Hauptmann Brückner. It is interesting that all the main characters with the exception of Brückner live within the same apartment building. Does this depict a division between those who can be of value for a post-Nazi society and those who cannot? The movie, further, raises the issue of how it might be possible for victims, denouncers, and all those who went along with Nazi society to live together. Curiously, Wallner, the victim, is probably the least developed character in this movie. We do not know why she was arrested and incarcerated and we do not know anything about her views. She might have been intended to represent all victims, and has, thus, become unrecognizable to both the viewer and to those in the film who cannot see. Certainly, her forgiveness seems to symbolize a precondition for a return to civilized coexistence with those who had participated in creating and stabilizing the Nazi dictatorship. This film, perhaps one of the best DEFA films ever made, raises fundamental questions with regards to the “emotional” reconstruction of German society.

If one further considers this film together with a novel such as Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* (there is simply no good translation of that title), students might realize the difficulties of cleansing society of Nazi ideas and thought. As the movie shows, denunciatory behavior did not stop with 1945, and as Wolf’s novel suggests, human beings are determined by the ideas to which they are exposed during their early childhood. The patterns learned in early childhood are not easily left behind. Very often, they determine our life and our thinking for the rest of our life. Such patterns can be filled with different contents, but the patterns remain the same. With regards to German history of the 1950s and 1960s, both *Murderers Are Among Us* and *Kindheitsmuster* might help explain the susceptibility of Germans in both Germanies for patriarchal and even authoritarian policies (this, it should be noted, has nothing to do with a concept of exceptionalism or a perceived special path). A discussion of such films and

novels in class might help students understand the intricacies of historical change and the pernicious continuation of old ideas long after a political system is gone. A discussion of political and social structures certainly does have value, but it does not help students understand how and why these structures came into being as well as their perpetuation and survival. Films and novels, thus, accomplish something traditional historical textbooks cannot: they delve into the psychological dimension of historical experience by those who are often dealt with in terms of class, milieu, or the quiet masses.

In general, the teaching of German history could gain significance and value for American students through the integration of novels and films that provide a dimension to the learning experience that is sometimes undervalued. Fictional accounts may serve various purposes: First, they can illustrate past lives and experiences and thus bridge the gap between the student’s life experience and the lives of the individuals from the period under study. Students who have seen the movie *The Children of Golzow* are often confused by the *normality* of life in East Germany. It is this confusion that provides an excellent starting point for a meaningful discussion about East German society and life in a dictatorship in general. Second, films and novels, however, have a much greater potential. *Murderers Are Among Us* raises general questions about historical change, transition, and the creation of new societies. German history is particularly useful for such consideration because of the number of extreme political changes that took place in the twentieth century. The parents of the children from the village of Golzow lived through five different social and political systems! For students who have little experience with historical change, the study of individual, although fictionalized, lives can provide an experience of history that they will not forget.

Notes:

1. *Children of Golzow: Lebensläufe -- Die Geschichte der Kinder von Golzow in einzelnen Porträts* (1980) is a cinematic compilation of nine biographies (four men and five women) from their first day of school to adulthood. It derived from the project of the East German documentary filmmaker Winfried Junge who in late August 1961 began to document the lives of the people of Golzow. See <http://www.umass.edu/defa/films/golzow.shtml>.

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