

DAAD German Studies Research Grant
Project proposal

The Aesthetics, Politics, and Subculture in “Punk” Texts of the 1980s

1945, 1968, and 1989 are all acknowledged as pivotal moments in German literary history. The year 1978 has been overshadowed and subsumed under the “German Autumn” and terrorism. 1978 is a watershed year not because of the political violence, but because it is the subcultural moment of punk. Punk, as cast by Dick Hebdige, was often directly offensive and threatening, but draws comparisons to Duchamp’s ‘ready made’ in its attempt to undermine relevant discourses and create ruptures in society. My professor Lawrence Grossberg locates such subcultural moments as punk at the level of an oppositional politics that produces ruptures in society between the audience and the larger hegemonic context within which they exist. Punk enters into the morass of the German Autumn as a type of “differentiating machine” (Grossberg). In this differentiating machine, in which people’s identities are shaped through identification with one side of a dichotomy, the identification of authors with the aesthetics/politics of punk gives historical grounding to the subcultural moment of postmodernism. Currently punk is experiencing a renaissance in Germany, evidenced by the filming of such punk-centered texts as *Verschwende deine Jugend* by Jürgen Teipel. The problem with this renaissance is that punk is being understood in a nostalgic sense. With my research I seek the historical grounding and significance of this subcultural moment. To this end, my research project explores the connection between the West German punk cultures that emerged in the early eighties and prose/short fiction literature of the 1980s.

My research in Berlin will provide my project with a basis for determining how West German punk cultures developed aesthetically and politically. This development is not an offshoot of British punk and the Sex Pistols, but rather its own moment in history, with its foundation in a very definite German history. The actual literary analysis in my work will focus on works by Thomas Meinecke, Joachim Lottmann, and Rainald Goetz, three authors intertwined in the subcultural, musical, and literary scenes of the eighties. I intend to look at Meinecke, Lottmann, and Goetz as proponents not only of a punk political aesthetics but also of an affiliation with the modern. These authors remain engaged with aesthetics and politics of the German literary scene. Goetz is involved in theater, poetry, and prose, Meinecke's texts continue to exhibit mishmashes of theoretical discourse, and Lottmann continues to ask what exactly the 80s were. I hypothesize a connection between what we currently call punk and how a "punk" text functions with the style(s) of literary expressionism. If these authors can be read as indicative of literature of the 1980s, then not only will a more accurate image of the literature of the 1980s come into focus, but the question of the inheritance of literary expressionism and the avant-garde can be theorized. Firstly, I want to open up and expand the field of scholarship on 80s literature and secondly, I want to dig deeper into the field of 80s literature as a period of aesthetic and political transition. My research seeks to engage with the question of postmodernism in German literature. I challenge that the question is not one of postmodernism but rather one of modernism as a yet uncompleted project. I am not convinced that the 80s were as postmodern as current scholarship leads me to believe.

Research on West German literature of the 1980s insists on the waxing of a West German postmodern literature. Postmodernism is, in short, a paradox. The bottom line is that postmodernism in literary debates is about an aesthetic in literature that is a response to culture, economics, and politics. The relevance of this debate for my research is evident in such journals as the *German Quarterly's* thematic issue on literature of the 1980s (1990). In this issue, the paradox of postmodernism runs parallels to the paradox of 80s literature. If we understand this paradox as a crisis in literature, then 80s literature jives much more with literary and aesthetic trends of modernism. Through my research I seek to show that West German punk and literary aesthetics of the 1980s tap into a modern tradition out of synch with many tenets of postmodernism. Postmodernism is grounded in ambiguity; I want to ground it in the history of punk.

While some research on the relation between punk and literature exists, these works remain in the minority and connected to the nostalgia for punk (Winkels 1988, Diedrichsen 1985, and Glaser 2003). An historical conception of the aesthetic and political project of the 1980s is still lacking. My scholarship engages current West German debates in scholarship and newspapers surrounding this period, arguing against the disconnect between literary phases and singular trajectory of the literature suggested by some scholars by looking at the specific connections between punk, text, and social transformation. Punk texts attempt to salvage politics at a point when oppositional politics was dead. The historical juncture of punk in Germany was right after the German Autumn, the high point of German terrorism as well as the height of West German conservatism and homeland security; punk shifts politics to another field, from national identity to the body. Like literary expressionism there's a certain undermining of

relevant discourses (Hebdige) with punk from the public spheres where free speech came under fire to a more subcultural sphere where aesthetics (i.e., style) mattered. My research and dissertation will show how politics migrated to aesthetics in the early 80s.

In order to prepare for my project I need to embark on research in Berlin. My proposed research has a multi-pronged approach. First and foremost, I need to examine the historical basis of my work: punk subcultures in West Germany. To this end, I must work in the Archiv der Jugendkulturen located in Kreuzberg, Berlin. This archive has a massive, one-of-a-kind collection of publications by, for and about punk cultures since their inception in the late seventies. With the help of the director of the archive, Klaus Farin, I intend to work through the most important publications that bear witness to the cultural politics of punk in West Germany. These sources are nowhere to be found in North America. Secondly, I intend on contacting the Forschungszentrum Populäre Musik at the Humboldt University where I plan to discuss my work with Dr. Peter Wicke and/or the staff. Thirdly, Dr. Erhard Schütz and Dr. Thomas Wegmann are currently involved with the authors of my study and work at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Fourthly, libraries like the one at the Institut für Kulturwissenschaft at the HU or the library for Neuere Deutsche Literatur at the Free University can provide me theoretical and primary texts for my literary analysis, as well as German dissertations that deal with my topic. In addition to the cultural artifacts I seek to uncover, I will also need to complete literary research on the authors and texts that will feature prominently in my analysis. Due to the extensive *Feuilletondebatte* about these authors, I will also need access to newspaper archives and non-bound resources. As an optional resource, if time and funding permits,

I would like to make a day trip to Dortmund to meet with Prof. Dr. Ronald Hitzler at the Lehrstuhl für allgemeine Soziologie to discuss his project on Jugendszenen.

As a result of my research trip to Berlin, I will be able to ascertain a historically grounded picture of what I view as an as yet problematic assessment of the aesthetic, political, and cultural landscape of 1980s German literature. After my research trip, I will return to work on my dissertation under the guidance of XXX at The University of XXX.