

**Marcela
Knapp**

INTERSPACES. CULTURAL JOURNALISM AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF AESTHETIC WORLD- PERCEPTION

Introduction

The social institution of fiction takes a special place in the social order of many contemporary societies. It discloses itself as fictional, it cuts the referential function of language and claims that what it represents does not exist. It is thus contrary to the social need to strive for facticity and stability – for the closure of meaning which tolerates only a single truth. As a social phenomenon, it thus disrupts the principles of the constitution of the social which permanently seeks to minimize the openness of meaning. But as an institutionalized phenomenon, fiction is deeply ingrained in the constitution of (Western) societies and therefore the question may be asked: How does artistic fiction become productive in an environment that insists on its own facticity?

To talk about artistic fiction without considering the practice of reception means considering a partial dimension of art only, the literary scholar

Wolfgang Iser claims¹. Every literary text is designed to include the act of reception, an activity that introduces the recipient as an agent into the production of the artwork. Reception is an act of completion, without which the art remains fragmentary. My own considerations are nourished by these thoughts. In order to find out more about the meaning and role of art in society, we have to look at those practices that engage art with society; it means detecting those points of intersection that intertwine artistic fiction and the constitution of social meaning. I claim that these interspaces between artistic text and social meaning are the discursive laboratories that make operative the specificities of artistic fiction. Conversely, they bring to light the particular role artistic production takes within society.

Interspaces are those spaces where art participates in politics, which, in Jacques Rancière's words, is the "partition of the visible and the sayable", an "intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world"², which he elsewhere terms a "regime of meaning"³. It is in the interspaces that art develops the power to shape a society's 'social imaginary significations'⁴. Due to the participatory nature of reception the resulting interpretations are not stable. With reference to Wolfgang Iser, I will therefore conceptualize the act of reception as a performance. Each interpretation of the same artwork results in a different staging of the

¹These thoughts are developed both in Wolfgang Iser. (1970). *Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*, Konstanzer Universitätsreden 28. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag and Wolfgang Iser. (1993). *The Fictive and the Imaginary. Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins UP.

²Jacques Rancière. (2004). The Politics of Literature. *SubStance*, 33 (1), 10.

³Jacques Rancière. (2010). The Paradoxes of Political Art. In Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (pp. 134-151). Ed. and transl. Steve Corcoran, London/New York: continuum, 144.

⁴The term 'social imaginary significations' is derived from Cornelius Castoriadis' social philosophy and designates those central significations that provide the principle(s) that give structure and order to our social world. They are those significations that provide a society's self-image and are therefore crucial for the totality of its appearance. See Cornelius Castoriadis. (1987). *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, transl. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge/Malden (MA): Polity Press, 135-145.

artwork and thus performs the work differently⁵. Reception and performance are therefore used interchangeably, and the term ‘performance’ is used particularly at those times when the emphasis rests on the processual character of the discourse.

In order to exemplify this claim, I will draw on two such moments where an artwork emerges as a public event in the Federal Republic of Germany, and in which the process of interpreting this artwork reached such a degree of density that it justifies speaking of a collective reception. The first example is the renewed public engagement with George Orwell’s popular novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in the years 1983/1984 on the occasion of the titular Orwell-year. The second example is the public discussion about a series of movies in the mid-1950s that came to be known in West Germany as “Halbstarken-Filme”, a term that might be translated as ‘rebel youth movies’; with ‘rebel’ carrying negative connotations. What appear at first sight to be rather disparate (and arbitrarily chosen) cases, are in fact carefully selected in order to depict the wide range of possibilities resulting from the unbound creative potential of artistic fiction. It will be the challenge of this article to establish a nexus between both events that goes beyond the mere recognition of both being works of fictional art⁶.

West Germany’s *Feuilleton*, spanning a time-frame from the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949 to Germany’s reunification in 1990, is an excellent example of a platform on which cultural journalism deeply entangles artistic production with social and political topicality. As Markus Payk remarks, West Germany’s *Feuilleton* displays an intense superimposition of

⁵Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 281-304.

⁶The informative value of this essay is restricted to the narrative genres of art: feature film, novel and theater play. Central to my research interest is the element of fictionality within narrations that discloses itself as fictional and thus negates its world-referential character.

journalistic practice and claim to intellectual entitlement⁷, which has to be read as a claim to set moral standards. It thus exhibits a strong orientation towards society. The *Feuilleton* is generally considered the cultural journalism of the opinion-leading national daily and weekly newspapers⁸. In the *Feuilleton*, these opinion-leading print organs enter into dialogue, often with direct references to one another, as they represent different political orientations ranging from the liberal and alternative Left to more conservative ideologies⁹. What is crucial in this respect is that cultural journalism in West Germany can be thought of as a symbolic platform for cultural negotiations and the social constitution of meaning, which makes cultural journalism a text genre that points beyond the confines of its topic¹⁰.

The world in options

I will start with a description of the more recent discursive event, because it exhibits what might anthropologically be thought of as primordial to fictional expression. The dispute about George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* posits fiction as a structure of doubling, which Wolfgang Iser describes in *The Fictive and the Imaginary* as characteristic of pastoral poetry in antiquity and which constitutes the fictional dimension of the expression.

⁷Marcus M. Payk. (2008). *Der Geist der Demokratie. Intellektuelle Orientierungsversuche im Feuilleton der frühen Bundesrepublik: Karl Korn und Peter de Mendelssohn, Ordnungssysteme. Studien zur Ideengeschichte der Neuzeit* 23. München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 14.

⁸Wolfgang Albrecht. (2001). *Literaturkritik*, Sammlung Metzler 338, Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 22-24.

⁹For a history of the development of literary criticism in Germany, of which the *Feuilleton* is the most important platform, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl (Ed.). (1985). *Geschichte der deutschen Literaturkritik (1730-1980)*. Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung.

¹⁰And this is true also for the material I explore in relation to the rebel youth films. The distinction between opinion-leading national print media and regional print media had not yet been developed in its definitive shape after World War II, and as such the material for this case deviates from the criteria established above.

Doubling refers to the structural co-presence of the fictional and the social world. The fictional narrative withdraws from social reality and yet can only become meaningful against the backdrop of social reality, which in turn renders social reality present in the structure¹¹.

The analysis is based on ten *Feuilleton*- articles published between 1 January 1983 and 24 March 1984. The dispute can roughly be subdivided into the faction that follows the argument exposed in an article published in the influential liberal-left political magazine *Der Spiegel* and claim that (Western) democracies are being threatened by the spread of surveillance technology, and the faction that reads *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a representation of the communist states of Eastern Europe, particularly the USSR. The following quotation could probably serve to headline the debate¹²: “On the last day of the ominous ‘1984’ we ask: ‘Are we free?’ The answer to this question does not come naturally, because many understand freedom differently”¹³. From the beginning to the mid 1980s, the novel provokes the question of freedom. Where does it begin and where does it end? And what elements does it comprise of? Beyond all political differences, Orwell's novel stands for the total loss of individuality and personal freedom. This is the uniting element before interpretations spread into multiple versions of social reality.

Particularly the first article in the sample, published by *Der Spiegel*, was of crucial importance. The interrelation of Orwell's fiction with contemporary social reality directly led to the scandalization of surveillance society. Subsequently, a large movement against technological data collection led to the postponement of a population census scheduled for April 1983. The

¹¹See chapter 2 “Renaissance Pastoralism as a Paradigm of Literary Fictionality”, in Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 22-86.

¹²Translations from German have been realized by the author.

¹³Anthony Burgess. (1983, December 31). Von der Ohnmacht unserer Eierköpfe. *Die Welt*.

resulting lawsuit ("Volkszählungsurteil") against the state of West Germany in December 1983 eventually formulated the right to informational self-determination and thus marks a milestone in the struggle for data privacy¹⁴. In the preface to the documentation of the gala in celebration of 25 years of the "Volkszählungsurteil", the German Federal Commissioner for Data Protection even claimed that "[t]he verdict by far constitutes the most important contribution of jurisdiction to data protection in Germany, for the basic right to informational self-determination is an essential functional condition of a liberal society"¹⁵. The political reverberations of the threat formulated by *Der Spiegel* against the backdrop of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are not to be underestimated: they resulted in the legal codification of a threat first expressed in fictional terms, as Massing claims¹⁶. While these events might serve as an example for the power of fiction, what interests me is a question independent of the concrete socio-political effects (which are generally difficult to measure given that socio-political developments are never unidimensional). Rather, I am interested in how critics make productive the fictional dimension of the novel for the interpretation of social reality¹⁷.

In its lead paragraph, the *Spiegel* article claims:

¹⁴There is little literature available dealing with the movement against the population census that resulted in the "Volkszählungsurteil" of December 1983. One exception is Otwin Massing. (1987). Von der Volkszählungsbewegung zur Verrechtlichung oder: Öffentlichkeit, Herrschaftsrationalisierung und Verfahren. In Harald Hohmann (Ed.), *Freiheitssicherung durch Datenschutz* (pp. 85-109). edition suhrkamp, Vol. 1420, Frankfurt/ M.: Suhrkamp.

¹⁵Peter Schaar. (2009). Vorwort. In Bundesbeauftragte für den Datenschutz und die Informationsfreiheit (Ed.), *25 Jahre Volkszählungsurteil Datenschutz – Durchstarten in die Zukunft! Dokumentation der Festveranstaltung der Konferenz der Datenschutzbeauftragten des Bundes und der Länder aus Anlass des 25. Jahrestages der Verkündung des Volkszählungsurteils des Bundesverfassungsgerichts am 15. Dezember 2008 im Bürgersaal des Karlsruher Rathauses* (pp. 15-25), Bonn, 5.

¹⁶Massing, Von der Volkszählungsbewegung zur Verrechtlichung, 96-98.

¹⁷As this article will show, the fictional dimension of fiction cannot be simply taken as an opposition to the factual dimension. Rather, fictionality turns out to be the particular ways (the mode) of approaching and making use of a work of art.

In 1948 George Orwell wrote the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. His vision of the total surveillance state has come very close to reality. The transparent citizen is there, his data is recorded. The perfect technical surveillance apparatus awaits political abuse: 1983 is *Nineteen Eighty-Four*¹⁸.

This statement bundles the experiences of computerized developments of the late 1970s and early 1980s that enabled the processing of large amounts of personalized data. For West Germany, the introduction of grit investigation into police routine during actions against the Red Army Faction in the 1970s serves as a paradigmatic example of the union of technology and social control. The author also puts forward several other examples, such as the machine-readable ID card planned to come into use in 1987. The 1980s witnessed the invention and distribution of the first wave of Personal Computers proclaimed the most influential “Machine of the Year” by *Time* magazine in 1982¹⁹. Computerization was received ambivalently: while it eased professional as well as private life, it also entailed the capacity of interconnecting the authorities for means of social control. For the (unnamed) *Spiegel* author, this capacity was perceived as a threat:

Nineteen Eighty-Four, conceived as a warning and written as a satire, had become a code for everything that the world has invented in relation with totalitarianism and personal monitoring, terror of ideology and bureaucracy, ministerial dishonesty and manipulation of historical truth, psychological horrors and man’s injured dignity, extinction of liberality and personality, whether love or religion.

It is a code because many of Orwell’s visions have long since been present to some extent, often already tested and more often overtaken by reality.

¹⁸Die neue Welt von 1984. (1984, January 3). *Der Spiegel*, 1/1983, 19.

¹⁹Werner Faulstich. (2005). Die Anfänge einer neuen Kulturperiode: Der Computer und die digitalen Medien. In W. Faulstich (Ed.), *Die Kultur der achtziger Jahre* (pp. 231-245). Kulturgeschichte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, München: Wilhelm Fink, 236.

Because on closer inspection there are elements that appear more terrible than the vision²⁰.

Feelings of threat and anxiety were pervasive in 1980s West Germany, the media scholar Werner Faulstich remarks. The fear of the "Orwell-State" queued in a line of fears which included the demographic aging of society, environmental pollution, and "foreign infiltration"²¹. The strength of Orwell's novel has to be seen in its capacity to distill the unease that accompanies computerization, turning the novel into a 'code' or signification that bundles the diverse dimensions of computerized social control.

The-novel-as-a-code fixes the novel's world as the anti-world within social signification. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* appears as an alternative option of the world, which establishes a relationship of tension with social reality. A structure of doubling becomes visible in the performance of the novel. In the face of the fictional world, which as a "phantasmatic figuration"²² has shape but not being (Is/Is-not), social reality surges as a reflection of the fictional world. If we think in terms of the existence of being in a total universe, the non-being of the fictional here appears as existent, against which social reality takes shape. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* marks a horizon of totality in that it presents the recipient with the appearance of a world framed by a beginning and an end, fixed by the words of its creator. In relation with the finite appearance of the fictional world, social reality appears as 'magmatic': indefinite and in the process of constant flow²³. In

²⁰Die neue Welt von 1984, 19-20.

²¹Faulstich, Die Anfänge einer neuen Kulturperiode, 10-16.

²²Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 296.

²³The 'magma' is a concept coined by the social philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis. He describes it as "a multiplicity which is not one in the received sense of the term but which we mark out as such, and which is not a multiplicity in the sense that we could actually or virtually enumerate what it 'contains' but in which we could mark out in each case terms which are not absolutely jumbled together. Or, we might think of an indefinite number of terms, which may possibly change, assembled together by an optionally transitive pre-

opposition to the finite world of fiction, social reality appears subject to transformation and actualization. Technological surveillance might have existed as “an optionally transitive pre-relation”²⁴ – a presence that lends itself to organization by signification – prior to the (renewed) performance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Yet, the critical reappraisal of the novel reassesses social reality in terms of the novel. Through the structure of doubling, technological surveillance becomes tangible and visible as a social signification.

With regard to the oppositional assessment of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the attempt to diffuse the emergence of the technological threat as a ‘virtual singularity’ is conspicuous. Wolfgang Bergsdorf of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* claims, for instance, that “Orwell’s vision ... is characterized by the frightening omnipresence and omnipotence of totalitarian apparatuses. Resistance seems futile. With Orwell, humanity fights its last stand”²⁵. For Bergsdorf, bureaucratic institutions in the Orwellian universe, such as the Ministry of Love and the Ministry of Truth, are part of the total structure of social control. He rejects the *Spiegel* article's reduction of the novel to technological means of control. He further concludes that Western civil liberties still impede the expansion of socialism and that the continued uprisings in the Eastern bloc prove that the mechanisms of total control have not yet succeeded in dominating individual thought, which remains free²⁶.

The differences in interpretation arise from different perceptions of global politics. While the position represented by Bergsdorf is dominated by Cold

relation (referral); [...] And we have to think of the operations of identity logic as simultaneous, multiple dissections which transform or actualize these virtual singularities, these components, these terms into distinct and definite elements, solidifying the pre-relation of referral into relation *as such*.” Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 344.

²⁴Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, 344.

²⁵Wolfgang Bergsdorf. (1983, March 4). Zweck der Macht ist die Macht. George Orwells Roman ‘1984’ – Prophetie oder Utopie? *Die Zeit*, 10/1983.

²⁶Bergsdorf, Zweck der Macht ist die Macht.

War politics, the *Spiegel* article transcends the political context of the novel's production and brings *Nineteen Eighty-Four* into direct relation with 1980s West Germany or the Western world per se. While for Bergsdorf the novel is applicable to the social 'other' (Communism, USSR), the innovative – and scandalizing – character of the interpretation proposed by the *Spiegel* article lies in the creation of a productive tension between social identity and the fictional world. It is more than just a relation because the tension created challenges to West Germany's self-image.

Crucially, this structural element of the political discourse on surveillance society and the transparent citizen – the tension between a fictional dystopia and social reality – has been widely applied in the peace movement of the early 1980s, as Susanne Schregel points out. Imagining a world after nuclear war was an important part of the common repertoire of political mobilization²⁷. The use of the Orwellian universe for structural purposes within yet another discourse is hereby explainable by the wide distribution of this mode of thinking within the politicized left-alternative population of West Germany. In terms of discursive reasoning – which was strongly influenced by dystopian fiction – it fell on fertile ground. We may speak of a language of political mobilization, which Bergsdorf's position opposes. The exterritorialization of the novel's meaning (making it applicable only to Eastern socialism) means an avoidance of the discursive structure of mobilization.

While the importance of the structure of doubling in relation to a society's self-image is not explicitly discussed by Wolfgang Iser, the implied image of mirroring points towards the necessity of seeing the self in the (fictional) mirror: "The doubling of fictionality may be conceived as a place of

²⁷Susanne Schregel. (2011). *Der Atomkrieg vor der Wohnungstür. Eine Politikgeschichte der neuen Friedensbewegung in der Bundesrepublik 1970-1985*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 137-184.

manifold mirrorings, in which everything is reflected, refracted, fragmented, telescoped, perspectivized, exposed, or revealed”²⁸. With reference to Helmuth Plessner’s understanding of subjectivity as split between a role-bearer and the figure of the role, Iser argues that this structural relation recurs in the ‘doppelgänger’ structure of literary fictionality, whereby the world (role-bearer) appears in the particular shape presented by narrative fiction (figure of role). The world thus comes into being (for us, the human) only through its doubling in representations. The particularity of literary fictionality, in contrast to other forms of representation, is “the simultaneous presence of doubled positions, which makes it representative of the nature of doubling itself”²⁹. He further concludes:

In overstepping all boundaries, fictionality becomes the epitome of inner-worldly totality, since it provides the paradoxical (and perhaps, for this very reason, desirable) opportunity for human beings simultaneously to be in the midst of life and to overstep it. This simultaneity of two mutually exclusive conditions – achieved by literary fictionality – enables human beings to experience their inherent split³⁰.

The ‘midst of life’ and its transcendence has to be thought of as “[t]he state of being above and outside oneself”³¹, which however also means to see the self emptied of an immanent being and the doublings as the possibilities of being of the empty self.

It is this structure of fictional narrative that is made productive by the *Spiegel* article and the supporters of its position, while the ‘classical’ interpretation of the novel, as represented by Bergsdorf, outsources the relation of doubling to the socialist ‘other’ and thus keeps the self-image in a status of stability. In the *Spiegel’s* discourse of political mobilization,

²⁸Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 79.

²⁹Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 82.

³⁰Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 83.

³¹Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 84.

Nineteen Eighty-Four appears as the mirror that reflects the world as a complete totality, and therefore fixed. In opposition to the clearly defined and limited space of the fictional world, social reality appears as unfixed and unfixable, transformable, magmatic, and thus renders transformation thinkable. In as much as computerization is thought of as in a relation with what it could become, it is an exercise in seeing social reality as devoid of limits. Social reality is thus simultaneously an actual condition as much as a possibility within a total system of control, which transcends the status quo. The transcendence of social reality takes the shape of the anti-world, which negates being; at the same time it is in non-being that we experience totality and fixation. Social reality, on the other hand, takes a multiplicitous shape that continuously defers fixation and thus appears in its magmatic dimension.

The scandalizing discourse generated by *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is structurally built on the doubling of worlds that are bound in a relationship of tension. The tension thereby created is permeated by the paradoxical opposition of fixity:fictionality and magma:social reality. Especially the former parts of the respective combination (fixity/magma) are not to be thought of as taking place on a manifest level of the discourse, but have to rather be seen as implicit guidelines to the approach of the fictionality/social reality relation. Perceiving the fictionality/social reality relation as one of a doubling of worlds, as a 'doppelgänger' structure, is not inherent to literary fictionality, but is the result of the practice of interpretation. The discourse on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has to be seen as an exercise in seeing and imagining the world in relational terms, which allows its comparison with possible (absent or latent) worlds. Seeing the world as relative to another world is to recognize the variability of possible social worlds. It is an exercise in seeing the world and society as potentially transformable. It is on

this level of relating to the world that the discourse about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* makes operative the fictional dimension of the artwork.

The language of change

My second example of an artistic interspace is the public reception of a series of movies that initiated what came to be known in West Germany as the “Halbstarcken” film genre. *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *Rock Around the Clock* were screened in West Germany between 1955 and 1956 and generated a discourse about youth as a symbol of rebellion and as a threat to the moral order of Western societies. In the restrictive environment of 1950s West Germany, where moral conservatism and subservience to authority served as a safe haven and a crutch in the face of a society jolted by war and moral breakdown, these movies were perceived as a threat to this petty bourgeois world³².

As indicated above, this analysis greatly differs from the discourse about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As the opinion-leading media had not yet fully developed, this case includes material from dailies published in local urban hubs, such as Stuttgart, Hamburg, Cologne etc. The articles are not in dialogue with each other. Instead, the material has to be thought of as portraying the West German socio-cultural landscape, which lacks greater variety in the 1950s. What makes this example interesting is the simultaneous emergence of a social phenomenon coined “Halbstarke” by the media, and in short succession the development of the more consumer-oriented teenager-culture. The rebel youth films appear to have preceded the youth culture(s) of the 1950s and thus raise the question of the role these

³²Werner Faulstich. (2002). Die neue Jugendkultur. Teenager und das Halbstarckenproblem. In W. Faulstich (Ed.), *Die Kultur der fünfziger Jahre* (pp. 278-290). Kulturgeschichte des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts, München: Wilhelm Fink.

artworks play within the process of developing a new social identity. The material consists of 83 newspaper articles, between approximately 10 and 30 articles for every film. The films were selected here for the unity they form by not only being generative of the genre but also because they are cross-referenced in the material and thus as a whole develop a multi-dimensional picture of youth as an aesthetic phenomenon. For reasons of space, I am going to concentrate on the discourse surrounding *The Wild One* and will introduce the other film-performances in a more general sense.

It is difficult to bring the manifest dimension of the discourse(s) to a single conclusion. *The Wild One*, *Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without a Cause* were considered examples of social criticism that exposed the limitations of the US-American social order, an order which on some levels could be applied to West Germany. While *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* were deemed to be addressing the borders between moral transgression and delinquency, the young people depicted in *Blackboard Jungle* were clearly located beyond legality. *Blackboard Jungle* nonetheless exposed most clearly the gap between generations and, related to this, the younger generation's questioning of authority. While *Rock Around the Clock* received little credit for its artistic execution and was generally classified as a feel-good movie, it popularized Rock'n Roll, which developed into a genuine identitary expression of 1950s youth culture.

Beyond the disputed question of the validity and applicability of the plots' message to West Germany, the figures of Johnny/Marlon Brando and Jim/James Dean become the movies' most convincing and outshining elements in the discourse surrounding *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. What is noticeable in almost all articles is a certain kind of ambivalence around the figures characterized by the films. Although they raise suspicion and unease, most critics cannot escape the attraction

radiating from Marlon Brando and James Dean. In a rather positive appreciation of *The Wild One*, a contributor in *Hamburger Anzeiger* exposes the youth's actions as "'sinning' without being sinners" and "doing mischief out of an uninhibited feeling of being alive"³³. The quotations show the in-betweenness of the youth's actions, undecidable between good and evil. This is explicitly expressed in an article in the *Rheinische Post* in which the critic claims that, except for the figure of the sheriff, "there is no unambiguously designed notion of good and evil". Marlon Brando, in the figure of the gang-leader Johnny, fully represents this ambiguity, as the same contributor exhibits in his characterization of the figure:

The role of the gang-leader Johnny appears to have been tailored especially for Marlon Brando – the embodied beau, the unredeemed thug with a grain of gentleness. This smart, soft, wicked face, these lanky controlled movements, the secure tread of a man that knows countless horse powers in his mastery, repeatedly ask the inaudible question that the film avoids to ask³⁴.

The indecision that speaks from these quotations results on the one hand from the threat experienced by the transgressive nature of the youth gang's behaviour, while on the other hand the critics fail to withdraw from the actor's attractive power to embody the notion of transgression. In the context of the 1950s social setup, with its moral rigidity and Christian – especially Catholic³⁵ – hegemony, positing transgression as an attraction means loosening the authority of the strict discursive morality prevalent in a society in search of inner stability following the disruptions and chaos of

³³H.S. (1955, January 15). Der Wilde. *Hamburger Anzeiger*.

³⁴K.H. (1955, April 16). 'Der Wilde'. *Rheinische Post*.

³⁵During World War II, the Protestant Church was split into the "Deutsche Christen" (German Christians) and the "Bekennende Kirche" (Confessional Church). The former welcomed National Socialism and its ideology, while the latter opposed it. Due to this internal division, which continued into the post-war period, the Protestant Church in Germany was perceived as disunited and therefore as unable to take a leading role in the reconstruction of state and society. Cf. Thomas Großbölting. (2013). *Der verlorene Himmel. Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945*. Bonn: bpb, esp. 22-25.

World War II and its aftermath. The hegemony of the Catholic Church resulted from its capacity to posit itself as the only institution that had remained uncompromised by National Socialism and could thus guarantee a certain stability³⁶. The 1950s witnessed a return of religious dogma accompanied by a rollback on sexual liberties. Along with religious dogma's augmenting strength went the propagation of Catholic values, especially in terms of gender relations, sexual morality and the disciplining of physical desires³⁷. The voluptuous and overflowing physical appearance of Johnny/Marlon Brando breaks with the culturally accepted restriction of the body as it exposes exuberance and the excess of boundless life, as the following quotation, full of eroticism, well exemplifies:

[The film director] Benedek wonderfully leads the young proto-man Brando and stages commotion that gains density and life through improvisation. Brando strides, sleek like a panther. Even his back is (pardon me) full of expression. His rhythm of speech has been perfectly translated: it evokes his abounding masculinity: a male uniqueness in film³⁸.

It is here that we have to really search for the threat to the established order posed by *The Wild One*, as the film's plot – the signifying dimension of the film – in the end restores the social (codified) order and can therefore not be considered subversive. Subversion emerges from the physical presence of Johnny/Brando, his power of attraction, from which the presumably adult critics fail to withdraw.

³⁶Later social controversies, such as the controversy that developed out of the theater play *The Deputy* (written by Rolf Hochhuth and first performed by Erwin Piscator in 1963), would question this image of the Catholic Church. In the 1950s, this image of the oppositional church proved persuasive for many Germans.

³⁷Mark Edward Ruff. (2005). *The Wayward Flock. Catholic Youth in Postwar West Germany, 1945-1965*. Chapel Hill/London: U of North Carolina Press. Drawing on very personal experiences, Ulf Preuss-Lausitz describes the influence of these authoritarian and prude moral conceptions on the perception of the body: Ulf Preuss-Lausitz. (1983). Vom gepanzerten zum sinnstiftenden Körper. In U. Preuss-Lausitz, et al. (Eds.), *Kriegskinder, Konsumkinder, Krisenkinder. Zur Sozialisationsgeschichte seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (pp. 89-106), Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.

³⁸H.S. (1955, January 15). Der Wilde. *Hamburger Anzeiger*.

While the beginning of the 1950s in West Germany was still characterized by the structural similarity of youth and adult lives, which were largely dominated by work and a lack of leisure, the mid 1950s experienced an increase in leisure time which enabled the development of special youth activities and resulted in the expansion of a teenager culture by the end of the 1950s³⁹. So at the time when *The Wild One* and the other rebel youth films were screened in West German cinemas, a gap between the generations had started to develop, which would eventually force society to reconsider its understanding of social cohesion so as to include notions of differentiation and stratification. In the discourse about *The Wild One*, critics still lack a clear terminology for these emerging social identities. The term “Halbstarke”, which will give its name to the film genre, is still absent from the discourse. The gap between the generations has not yet solidified into an open confrontation. The distinction of a differentiated (rebellious) youth as structurally opposed to the adult normative world will only be formulated in succeeding films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* and especially *Blackboard Jungle*.

Yet the film already contains the grain that will explain Brando’s success as a youth idol and which makes the film a threat to the established order. The exuberant physical presence he gives to the figure of Johnny proposes the existence of a different language, a “body language” as opposed to the discursive language of religious and legal code. The focus on bodily expressiveness evolves as paradigmatic for the emerging youth culture: Rock’n Roll dance, popularized by the film *Rock Around the Clock*, will become the symbol of the 1950s ‘youth rebellion’⁴⁰.

In the essay “The paradoxes of political art”, Rancière deals with the

³⁹Faulstich, Die neue Jugendkultur. Teenager und das Halbstarckenproblem.

⁴⁰Knut Hickethier. (2003). Protestkultur und alternative Lebensformen. In Werner Faulstich (Ed.), Die Kultur der sechziger Jahre (pp. 11-30)., München: Wilhelm Fink, 15-16.

aspirations of self-proclaimed 'political art' to change consciousness so as to generate political action. Art, he claims, functions on a different level of consciousness. He rejects the notion that art can directly lead to political action:

There is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action. Instead, this kind of shift implies a move from one given world to another in which capacities and incapacities, forms of tolerance and intolerance, are differently defined⁴¹.

For Rancière, politics is defined more broadly, not merely as conflicts between parties and interest groups, but as shaping the processes and elements that become meaningful to society. It is on this level that literature and the arts participate in politics:

Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking⁴².

Rancière draws attention to the fact that there is a primordial dimension to social life that presupposes a common world in which eventually different interests and perspectives meet. Literature and the arts participate in politics because they work on this level of consciousness. Through the way they describe and image things they bring to view dimensions and topics previously located beyond expressivity. It is less of a question of what they talk about than how they talk about things. In the essay "The politics of

⁴¹Rancière, *The Paradoxes of Political Art*, 143.

⁴²Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, 10.

literature”, Rancière proposes the term ‘regime of writing’⁴³ to refer to a particular way of representing the world in literature. He draws on Gustave Flaubert and other French realist writers of the 18th century, particularly the way their writing questioned the previously established order of representation. While the ‘belles-lettres’ were organized according to a strict hierarchy of subject matter and class belonging (the aristocrats were represented by tragedy, while the people found representation in comedy), the realist writers destroyed these hierarchies of representation. Any topic, human or inhuman, was equally worth talking about in the same language. Things started acting within the structure of their prose and humans became ‘petrified’ in that they are subject to their environment. Rancière claims that Flaubert’s writing was political in that it proposed an equality among everything (and everyone) and the accusations of being a democratic writer as voiced by his contemporary critics proves true. In this sense, literature emerged as something opposing poetry and drama⁴⁴. Instead of acting, literature “is displaying and deciphering the symptoms of a state of things”⁴⁵.

The discourse on the rebel youth films – *The Wild One* in particular – exhibits the distillation of a ‘regime of writing’ that is not ‘writing’ in the strict sense of the term, but is peculiar to the audiovisual medium of film. The fascination radiating from Johnny/Marlon Brando is of such a kind that escapes literary meaning. The critics cannot get hold of it in the classical sense of interpretation. It is a fascination with appearance that goes beyond the structural organization of the plot and its elements and is something particular to literature, as exposed by Rancière. Appearance surfaces in opposition to interpretation as an element of (social) being and thus heralds a new ‘regime of meaning’ in which appearance becomes a means of social

⁴³Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, 14.

⁴⁴Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, 11-14.

⁴⁵Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, 18.

differentiation, as the identity of youth cultures and style show. In his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige explores this phenomenon in post-war Britain and shows the distinction of subcultures by style⁴⁶. In the discourse about *The Wild One* (in combination with the subsequent movies of the genre) we can witness the search for a new language that gives expression to the physical regime of meaning.

We can perceive a movement: from the threat posed by the phenomenon of the rebel youth in *The Wild One*, to the differentiation of 'Halbstarke' from the teenage youth that just "wanted to have fun", as a commentator of a screening of *Rock Around the Clock* remarks⁴⁷. As the title of the just quoted article says, the discourse(s) about the rebel youth movies turns out to be a discourse about changing times: "Different times, different steps". The films thus become the carrier of a new identity, which is simultaneously associated with a new era:

The film comprises no indecent parts, its images are totally harmless. It is the music and the nerve-shattering, numbing rhythm that provokes this incredible and inexplicable impact. It is insufficient to explain the impact on youth with natural exuberance. The rock-twist-fever is not a mere display; it is an explosive material that blasts all safety valves; it is a narcotic that disables reason. It is possible, that all this is a temporary confusion. But what if it is in parts an expression and symptom of a time of jet engines and nuclear bombs – a time that has just begun?⁴⁸

Media here becomes the agent of social change, its initiator as much as its sign, and as the above quote shows, its a-rationality and physicality is symptomatic of this new era and is that which makes these films

⁴⁶Dick Hebdige. (1979). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London/ New York: Routledge.

⁴⁷Borg. (October 21, 1956). Andere Zeiten, andere Schritte. Zum Film "Rock around the clock". *Sonntagsblatt*.

⁴⁸JFR. (1956, September 15). Die Kinos wurden zu Tollhäusern. Eine Massenhysterie der Jugendlichen, ausgelöst durch einen neuen Film. *Badische Zeitung*.

exceptional. The ‘regime of writing’, which here has to be reconceptualized as a ‘regime of presentation’, directly translates into a new ‘regime of meaning’ characterized by expressiveness as opposed to the old ‘regime of meaning’ governed by discipline and the suppression of desires⁴⁹. Transformation is thus present on a manifest level of the discourse, while the new ‘regime of presentation’ proposes the terms of the newness.

The public reception of the rebel youth films takes the films as a means to conceptualize the changes taking place in society, of which the differentiation of generations is a symptom (yet not the cause). The films’ formulation of a new language enables critics to give expression to social change. The new ‘regime of presentation’ makes newness speakable and thereby able to be included as a new dimension into the general ‘regime of meaning’. The discursive interspace generated by the films’ performance has to be thought of as the space in which the translation, from ‘regime of presentation’ into a language that participates in the ‘regime of meaning’, takes place. It is here that the magmatic dimension of the social is brought into language and thus becomes visible as a sign that is meaningful to society.

Concluding remarks

If we understand fictional works of art as meaningful within a social context, it is imperative to look at those spaces in which the fiction’s performance comes to a close, a space that is always a particular context within a time-space framework. In the in-between space of artistic reception, fiction becomes operative for the constitution of society.

⁴⁹Of course, we should not think here in terms of a complete substitution of ‘regimes of meaning’, but rather of the co-presence of different orders of meaning that become indistinguishable over time.

In the 1983/84 discourse on Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the imagination of the social world as bearing relation with another world is of crucial importance: the world is thus imagined as relative. Relativity denies the existence of an essence and points towards the (wo)man-made character of the world. The rebel youth films, on the other hand, serve as a means to give a language to social change. It is through the films' 'regime of presentation', that the changes taking place in society are given shape and form. They redirect the gaze so as to introduce a new bodily expressivity and sensuality and thus disrupt the traditional order of perception. While the first discourse narrates the world as transformable, the second discourse gives an account of a physical dimension of social life, which irritates the discursive order of the early 1950s. Both discourses draw upon fictional works of art in order to unsettle established perceptual frameworks. The assumed stability of social reality, as proposed by the traditional interpreters of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is negated by those who support a dystopic interpretation and depict social reality as factually unstable. The perception of social reality as indeterminate makes political mobilization a meaningful social act. Similarly, the re-organization of bodily sensuality in the rebel youth discourse lastingly transforms social behavior, since it creates a substrate of social individuals, for whom the experience emanating from the films opens new spaces of feeling, saying and doing. In both discourses, the fictional works of art gain their meaning through the disruptive element in the works' reception. Only by translating the works' text into a perturbing effect do they gain their relevance for the constitution of social reality.

Both narrations of social life, as directly emanating from the artworks, are deeply ingrained in the contexts of their reception. The impact of a work of art has to be sought after not so much in an assumed universal message inscribed in the work of art, but rather in the power it exerts in the interspaces of its reception. Every performance exhibits a specific mode of

bringing the artwork into productive relation with social reality, and it is at this junction that each society determines the importance of the arts for its constitution. The question we direct at the work of art thus should not be: What does it say? But rather: How do we make use of it?

REFERENCES

Albrecht, Wolfgang. (2001). *Literaturkritik*. Stuttgart/ Weimar: Metzler.

Bergsdorf, Wolfgang. (1983, March 4). Zweck der Macht ist die Macht. George Orwells Roman '1984' – Prophetie oder Utopie? *Die Zeit*, 10/1983.

Borg. (October 21, 1956). Andere Zeiten, andere Schritte. Zum Film "Rock around the clock". *Sonntagsblatt*.

Burgess, Anthony. (1983, December 31). Von der Ohnmacht unserer Eierköpfe. *Die Welt*.

Die neue Welt von 1984. (1984, January 3). *Der Spiegel*, 1/1983.

Castoriadis, Cornelius. (1987). *The Imaginary Institution of Society* transl. Kathleen Blamey. Cambridge/Malden (MA): Polity Press.

Faulstich, Werner. (2002). Die neue Jugendkultur. Teenager und das Halbstarckenproblem. In Werner Faulstich (Ed.), *Die Kultur der fünfziger Jahre* (pp. 278-290). München: Wilhelm Fink.

Faulstich, Werner. (2005). Die Anfänge einer neuen Kulturperiode: Der Computer und die digitalen Medien. In Werner Faulstich (Ed.), *Die Kultur der achtziger Jahre* (pp. 231-245). München: Wilhelm Fink.

Großbölting, Thomas. (2013). *Der verlorene Himmel. Glaube in Deutschland seit 1945*. Bonn: bpb.

Hebdige, Dick. (1979). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London/ New York: Routledge.

Hickethier, Knut. (2003). Protestkultur und alternative Lebensformen. In Werner Faulstich (Ed.), *Die Kultur der sechziger Jahre* (pp. 11-30). München: Wilhelm Fink.

Hohendahl, Peter U. (Ed.) (1985). *Geschichte der deutschen Literaturkritik (1730-1980)*. Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung.

H.S. (1955, January 15). Der Wilde. *Hamburger Anzeiger*.

Iser, Wolfgang. (1993). *The Fictive and the Imaginary. Charting Literary Anthropology*. Baltimore/London: Johns Hopkins UP.

Iser, Wolfgang. (1970). *Die Appellstruktur der Texte. Unbestimmtheit als Wirkungsbedingung literarischer Prosa*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag.

JFR. (1956, September 15). Die Kinos wurden zu Tollhäusern. Eine Massenhysterie der Jugendlichen, ausgelöst durch einen neuen Film. *Badische Zeitung*.

K.H. (1955, April 16). 'Der Wilde'. *Rheinische Post*.

Massing, Otwin. (1987). Von der Volkszählungsbewegung zur Verrechtlichung oder: Öffentlichkeit, Herrschaftsrationalisierung und Verfahren. In Harald Hohmann (Ed.), *Freiheitssicherung durch Datenschutz* (pp. 85-109). Frankfurt/ M.: Suhrkamp.

Payk, Marcus M. (2008). *Der Geist der Demokratie. Intellektuelle Orientierungsversuche im Feuilleton der frühen Bundesrepublik: Karl Korn und Peter de Mendelsohn*. München: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag.

Preuss-Lausitz, Ulf. (1983). Vom gepanzerten zum sinnstiftenden Körper. In Ulf Preuss-Lausitz, et al. (Eds.), *Kriegskinder, Konsumkinder, Krisenkinder. Zur Sozialisationsgeschichte seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (pp. 89-106). Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.

Rancière, Jacques. (2004). The Politics of Literature. *SubStance*, 33 (1), 10-24.

Rancière, Jacques. (2010). The Paradoxes of Political Art. In Jacques Rancière (Ed.), *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (pp. 134-151). London/ New York: continuum.

Ruff, Mark Edward. (2005). *The Wayward Flock. Catholic Youth in Postwar West Germany, 1945-1965*. Chapel Hill/London: U of North Carolina Press.

Schregel, Susanne. (2011). *Der Atomkrieg vor der Wohnungstür. Eine Politikgeschichte der neuen Friedensbewegung in der Bundesrepublik 1970-1985*. Frankfurt/ M.: Campus.