

La Sapienza

Valutazione tesi 35 e 36 ciclo

CANESTRELLA SABRINA

Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

Die Vielstimmigkeit als Häresie: Systemkritik, Resistenz und Subversion in der DDR-Literatur

Affiliation of the reviewer

Priv.-Doz. Dr. Martin Maurach
Department of Germanic Studies, German Studies
Faculty of Arts
Charles University, Prague
nám. Jana Palacha 1/2
CZ-116 38 Praha 1
martin.maurach@ff.cuni.cz

Report

Sabrina Canestrella: “Die Vielstimmigkeit als Häresie: Systemkritik, Resistenz und Subversion in der DDR-Literatur”
Doctoral dissertation, Roma, La Sapienza

Review

1. Form

Once again, I shall always refer to the automatic counting of pages in the file, NOT to the page numbers on a possible print-out.- In my first review of the present doctoral dissertation by Sabrina Canestrella: “Die Vielstimmigkeit als Häresie: Systemkritik, Resistenz und Subversion in der DDR-Literatur” about half a year ago, I wrote: „As for formal and linguistic aspects, the thesis is somewhat hard to read for a native speaker of German [...]“. Possibly, this has been too moderate an allusion, or for some other reason, it has gone completely unnoticed in the process of revision. Apparently, not the slightest care has been taken to produce a readable, coherent, intelligible, grammatically and logically correct text. There still are even quotations full of spelling errors, footnotes which indicate editions in other languages than have been cited, immediately repeated quotations, sentences without verbs or otherwise incomplete sentences or some with forms which do not fit anywhere,

vague and unusual expressions which do not give a clear idea of the intended meaning, etc.
etc.

The line of thoughts too often leads to blind ends, new questions are raised, new names and titles of theoreticians introduced, only to be dropped again a few paragraphs later. Trying to fight one's way through this labyrinth as a reader, one much too often finds oneself lost with near-to-nothing in hand. If the work really is to be presented in German language, the present version cannot be accepted.

I shall just note a few of the more striking examples. On p.175, we read: „Es wurde beobachtet, wie sich die Flasche von dem, was erlaubt oder verboten ist, seit den Jahren unmittelbar nach dem Bau der Mauer kontinuierlich bewegt hat [...]“. „Flasche“ is German for „bottle“. Unfortunately, after more than ten years of teaching German as a foreign language I am unable to conceive of what „*the bottle of that which is allowed or forbidden“ might possibly mean. Neither a similar word nor a typing error come to my mind as a possible explanation.

As I wrote in my first report: „Some longer quotations (which quite often are not free from errors either) are repeated nearly identically, in one case on the next page.“ Only now, thanks to revision, the repetition starts on the same page (98).

Historical facts

I should strongly recommend to double-check whether really the “XX. Parteitag der KPdSU” has been the “Beginn von Gorbatschows Glasnost-Politik” (60). And I should as well recommend to somehow lift the direct contradiction on p. 92 as to whether “Reisen zwischen der DDR und der Tschechoslowakei [have been, MM] unmöglich” around 1960 or not.

I shall not dwell on this any further. All these and many, many other errors on nearly each and every page have been copied without any correction from the first draft.

2. Content

The most important claim of the thesis now seems to be the “Vielstimmigkeit” (plurality of voices) of haeresy in the literature of former GDR and elsewhere, which is to be proved by choosing maximally diverse authors for analysis (33). This is fine, although it is, of course, a much weaker claim than the original one has been, and the danger of a *petitio principii* seems to be just around the corner, if “Vielstimmigkeit” is to be proved by a choice of authors whose diversity is already known to us.

In the introduction, it basically makes sense to distinguish more strictly between aesthetical and social forms of haeresy (18; following Welsch and Koschmal), although this distinction, for good reasons as well, is not referred to very explicitly any more in the textual analyses, at least, not following a coherent terminology. The most important theoretical references are Bourdieu, and later on Koschmal and Patocka, whose relevant thinking could have been presented in a more comprehensive way to make later cross-references easier and shorter. Following a George Zito, the author sees haeresy as a social and in general institutional phenomenon (12). In her conclusion, the author calls haeresy, orthodoxy and canon respectively somewhat blurred concepts (“eher nebulöse Begriffe”) which are tied to precise historical and social coordinates (“an präzise historische und soziale Koordinaten gebunden”, 170). This may certainly be a fruitful approach although it has to be said that the latter part of the sentence establishes a challenge which might be beyond the possibilities of a doctoral dissertation. In general, the author aims at describing cultural effects of both developments: formerly revolutionary marxism becoming a new orthodoxy, including totalitarian and semi-religious qualities, and the revolt of some intellectuals against this process (171).

The literature of former GDR in general is conceptualized as a “Gegentext” (counter text) against the official political discourse, following Wolfgang Emmerich here (15). Taking the examples of literary texts, with Plenzdorf the focus is laid on young rebels who in the end

become victims of the authorities or, moreover, of their resistance against the latter (57). Plenzdorf and Aksenov (or Aksjonow; the author uses both transcriptions without explicit distinction) have in common that they show the fight of the individual, as it has been seen by the movement of New Subjectivism in the 1960s and 1970s, against the institutions and perhaps their “doxa”. Plenzdorf’s “Die neuen Leiden [...]” call for a new strategy of handling the so-called literary “Erbe” (the selection from tradition which has been thought to fit into socialist ideals).

It should be said that, taking together the chapters dedicated to Plenzdorf and Kunze resp., New Subjectivism seems to be something they have in common. As well, a more detailed comparison of the way in which both authors describe youthful rebels could perhaps be of some use (124f.). Yet Kunze, whom the author reads with Patocka and his imagination or ideal of a ‘Gemeinschaft der Erschütterten’ (104), that is, of people who do not ignore the overwhelming presence and power of suffering and catastrophies in human life, Kunze after all seems to be particularly interested in liberty (90). In how far Kunze may be read as influenced by philosophical existentialism may be left open (100). In any event, he is, as opposite to Plenzdorf, a politically engaged intellectual (179).

It does not become quite clear how both aspects guiding the author’s analysis of “Die wunderbaren Jahre”, that is, their quasi-documentary roots in real experiences of Kunze on the one hand and the claim that they should be ‘models’ (‘Modelle’), not exact pictures of everyday life in GDR on the other, how, I say, these two aspects really could be reconciled (109, 112f.).

If the rebellion of young people as described by Plenzdorf and Aksenov is analysed as longing for sensuality and individualism and living in the present, as looking for a collective organised by one’s friends instead of the pre-structured one of the state or the ‘orthodox’ society, this might be true as well for many other literary revolutions like that of the generation of storm and stress against absolutism in the 1770s or of the expressionist movement against the state of Wilhelminism (the Second German Empire) at about 1910.

With respect to Volker Braun and his “Hinze-Kunze-Roman”, the author detects a closer connection between political and poetical intentions as well as a general background of the novel which may be more favorable towards socialism (136, 138f.) Braun, whom she identifies as a politically engaged intellectual as well (147), would be writing from a more omniscient point of view than Plenzdorf (152). Although the role of (aggressive, dominant) sexuality as a medium and metaphor of social inequality is truthfully identified in the “Hinze-Kunze-Roman” (160 pass.), one might remark that irony and other tropes of comical language are essential for its meaning as well. Its parody of official jargon of authorities from the GDR reaches far beyond the leitmotif of “im gesellschaftlichen Interesse” (“for society’s sake”) which the author truly identifies. But of course, to identify irony in a foreign language is one of the trickiest challenges one can imagine (162 pass.)

The question whether the history of haeresy has come to an end after the coming down of the Berlin wall in 1989 (184) might be a legitimate end of the enquiry. Unfortunately the following appendix about Vladimir Sorokin is far less convincing, even if it has once been intended as a presentation of an extreme contrast to the meaning of „Sinnlichkeit“ (sensuality) in the works by Kunze and Plenzdorf. Yet, this appendix better had been dropped altogether. It just closes abruptly with an even more cryptic allusion following an already cryptic quotation from Sorokin. There is no more formal conclusion that would explain the meaning of the whole of it.

I am well aware of classical studies about different cultural styles of scholarship. But I do not think that cultural relativism should have the last say when it comes to reviewing a doctoral dissertation.

Yet, if the majority of reviewers has come to the conclusion that this thesis may be admitted

„to the final examination for obtaining the title of PhD“, I certainly shall not oppose this. Following my personal judgment, and after roughly twenty-five years of teaching and research at German and international universities, however, I definitely do not recommend it in the present version either.

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

Again, for the sake of transparency, I renounce at a confidential report.

Evaluation file (optional)

File caricati:

[ReportCanestrella 2Maurach.pdf](#)

Presentation and clarity

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and ‘user friendly’, without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

None Poor Average Good Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

None Poor Average Good Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

- 1) adequate as is
- 2) require minor revision
- 3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

Accept as is Minor revision Major revision

Date: 6/18/2024

Reviewer: Maurach Martin