

Sponsored by:
Culture 2000
Project of the European Union



Hannah-Arendt-Institut
für Totalitarismusforschung e.V. an der
Technischen Universität Dresden

*„Überwindung der
Diktaturen -
Dichter, Künstler
und Schriftsteller in
der Begegnung“*

*„Overcoming Dictatorships -
The Encounter of
Poets, Artists and Writers“*



*6th Project Report
(May 2008)*

Trent – Perspectives on art and dictatorship.

Gert Röhrborn (Dresden)

The Trent workshop was dedicated to the presentation of the literary anthology and the continuation of the scientific work on the related project topic of art and dictatorship. So far workshops were used to establish a connection between the ideational realization of (rather marginal) national cultural traditions and insights in the diversity of European culture. Having realized the actual opportunity of focused debates which transgress multiple borders (in relation to nation, politics, and artistic genre) and provide diverse conceptual and material outcome participants of all project events are provided with rich experience to draw from.

I

The contributions convened during the last 18 months for the volume *Present tensions. European writers on overcoming dictatorships* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2008) are not just creative products of the respective author, but results of the joint reflections during the project in its own right. Editors Kristina Kaiserová and Gert



The Cathedral of Trent (Photo: TU Dresden).

Röhrborn, inspired by an idea of the Hungarian dissident writer Miklós Haraszti, ask to what extent art – which has been sailing against the wind in the seas of social borders and taboo from time immemorial – must include a violation of the law in order to be recognized as an

artistic act of lasting relevance. Willing to distinguish themselves from competitors, avant-garde and provocative artists run the risk of retrospectively portraying earlier contradictory (alienating) expressions of their fragmented identity as a whole in the context of their Self and their environment.



Taking a glance at the surroundings of impressive Castello del Buonconsiglio (Photo: TU Dresden).

The creation and self-determination of nations follows somewhat similar patterns. It would be too farfetched to compare the development of an individual and self-responsible artist with the processes of formation of identities and interests, which are accompanied by significant “collateral damage“. Yet literature and art regard the visualization of the losses and traumatization on the part of losers of such processes as one of their major tasks. They are able to “reach beyond the limits of legal processing and the consequences of the drawing of (necessary) new political boundaries and yet still avoid the partial exaggerations of academic and journalistic debate.“¹

It is a matter of course that art and literature used to have a political function in times of dictatorship, as literary scholar Astrid Köhler stresses in her introduction to the anthology. If at all, uncensored media and political debates can find only marginal space in closed societies. This is the reason why many turn to literature in the hope of finding a sphere in which the

¹ Kaiserová, Kristina/Röhrborn, Gert (2008): „The generation affected will have to see it through.“ Literary paths out of dictatorship, in: idem (ed.): *Present tensions. European writers on overcoming dictatorships*, Budapest, pp. 3-15, p. 8.



Bird's-eye view on Trent (Photo: TU Dresden).

dissemination of information and the formation of political opinions are still possible, albeit by means of ciphered communication. Although – luckily – literature has lost this specific political function in contemporary European societies, there is no doubt that men and women of letters may still play a vital role in processing our shared past of dictatorships. “They are virtually predestined to refer our present to our past, to rally against forgetting in an era lived at an ever-increasing pace, and to cultivate the difficult art of remembrance. (...) Thus the sensitivity developed by the authors of the period both to the potential ideological contamination of all sections of society and, within that context, to the manipulative, but also the informative and liberating possibilities of their particular medium – the word – can still be seen as a basis for lasting relevance and impact.”²

By way of opening the public presentation of the anthology in the magnificent Hall of Frescos in the Municipal Library of Trent on 9 May 2008 Dr Sandra Maestri, cultural advisor of Trent municipality welcomed the guests. Mrs. Maestri gave voice to her conviction that transborder cultural engagement offers a crucial contribution to long-term mutual understanding and stability, provided that is safely rooted in local activities. Representing the organizers of the event

Gustavo Corni (Trent) and Gert Röhrborn (Dresden) used the opportunity to thank Mrs. Maestri for the financial and logistic support of Trent municipality. Both speakers referred to the imaginative power of literature in addressing and overcoming the wounds inflicted by 20th century dictatorships to the (formerly) multi-cultural societies of Central Eastern and South Eastern Europe. Corni and Röhrborn



From left to right: Gustavo Corni, Gabriel Chifu and Francesco Zambon (Photo: TU Dresden).

cherished hopes that the texts convened in the anthology will contribute to the reduction of prejudice and the development of new forms of understanding between the countries of united Europe.

In his detailed presentation Francesco Zambon, Professor of Literature at Trent University, referred to the comments of his colleagues by focusing on selected contributions of the anthology. He particularly applied himself to identifying the personal perspectives of the authors. Zambon was of the opinion that convening the different interpretations and experiences is already a worthwhile contribution in itself which fosters the diversity and perpetual creativity of culture in Europe. He was followed by three project writers who, by reading from their texts, acquainted the audience with the variety of texts and perspectives. The insistent voice of Gabriel Chifu (Bucharest) transformed the presentation of his poems from the Eighties, among them the fascinating *Jocul de table* (A game of backgammon), into an unforgettable experience. Its lines connect

² Köhler, Astrid: On the role of language in the memory, processing and overcoming of dictatorships, in: ibidem: pp. 16-26, p. 19.

childrens' plays with the big game of life and the dirty one of politics, and within a minute the audience is left behind in awe



“Local hero“
Alessandro
Tamburini
obviously
enjoyed reading
from his *Il cielo
che prima non
c'era* (The sky
that wasn't
there before)
(Photo:
Silvestro Lodi).

and terror. Lutz Rathenow (Berlin) presented his essay *Das Versprechen auf einen gültigen Ort* (The promise of a place to call our own), a very personal time travel back to a night spent at Alexanderplatz in the Seventies. No less than his colleagues Rathenow is able to employ literary means in order to bring back the conditions and narrowness of dictatorship into the consciousness of his audience. With a sensitive description of aspects of life which are usually deemed to be off politics – love and discovery in the juvenile Sturm und Drang period – and his flippant remarks he manages to bring his message through via the backdoor. The final presentation was reserved for Alessandro Tamburini (Rovereto), who is held in high esteem in Trent not only due to his local base but also because of his literary preoccupation with the civil life and suffering in Italy during World War Two. The reading could also be seen as a prologue to the presentation of Tamburini's most recent novel *Uno sconosciuto alla porta* (A stranger at the door; Pequod, 2008), which was to take place a short time after.

II

Processing the past by a mutually fruitful collaboration of cultural and scientific actors which goes far beyond the mere continuity and complementarity of scientific presentations on the topic is what distinguishes this project. Artists as well as scientists and organizers are happy to take part in the interdisciplinary discussions on human behaviour under dictatorships, the role of art in creating and encoding memory and the European dimension of this process.

Followed by an eager student audience the international conference *Overcoming Dictatorships. Intellectuals and Regimes* took place in the Economics Faculty of Trent University on 10 May 2008. The aim was to focus through the most recent historiographical approaches on the theme of the complex and problematic interrelation between intellectuals and dictatorships. The comparative approach was to be applied to the more important dictatorships of the inter-war period as well as to the authoritarian systems of the post-war period. It should be noted that the deliberate attempt to use a rather wide concept of the “intellectual” as a social figure helped to prevent the all-too-common exaggerations of the normative



Karl-Siegbert Rehberg during his presentation, to his left Gustavo Corni and Monica Cioli (Photo: TU Dresden).

responsibility of historical actors, be it in the form of the “eternal dissident” (Edward W. Said), the “liberal prig” (Ralf

Dahrendorf) or the “traitor” (Julien Benda). Thereby speakers were inclined to offer more contextualized and fair judgments of intellectuals’ behaviour.

Two subsequent panels saw presentations on intellectuals in fascist Italy (Monica Cioli, Trent), Soviet Russia (Olga Novikova, Brussels/Madrid) and Romania (Cristina Petrescu, Bucharest). Speakers particularly focused on artistic forms of expression and their (ab)use for official and political purposes. Whereas Karl-Siegbert Rehberg (Dresden) presented his thoughts on the „Art of idea“ as a key to the sociological analysis of societies, Eckart Gillen (Berlin) was applied himself to the topic of painters between conformity and opposition. Both scientists present their ideas in reference to established painters of the former German Democratic Republic, i.e. Harald Metzkes and Gerhard Richter (Gillen) as well as Werner Tübke and Willi Sitte (Rehberg). The debate was characterized by a remarkably intensive and critical evaluation of their artistic work between the conflicting priorities of the doctrines of state ideology, the struggle for privileges and offices and the strife for individual self-realization. Furthermore debaters also raised issues topical for the early period of the processing of the past in reunited Germany, which had particularly addressed the amalgamation of the arts and the regime in Communist Germany. The discussion was completed by a presentation of Alessandro de Magistris (Milan) on architecture, politics and the city in Stalin's Russia, which drew upon an interesting and frequently neglected field of research. Participants could also reflect on the interplay between architecture and power during a visit to the magnificent Castello del Buonconsiglio, which had been used as residence of the powerful prince-bishops. Its historical importance is justified by hosting the “Council of Trent” (1545-1563), during which the counter-reformatory strategy of the Catholic Church was developed.

III

The Project “Overcoming Dictatorships“ has been used to facilitate future cooperation activities not least by fostering interdisciplinary networking contacts. Yet a majority of participants underlines the importance of conceptual and methodological enhancements. A more sophisticated understanding of Central Eastern Europe and the reduction of prejudice was achieved up to a convincing degree (constantly rising with the maturity of the project) by regular meetings, long-term cultural transfer and perpetual reflection. The improvement of networks and the conceptualization of future projects is first of all a matter for poets, artists and writers and project partners among each other; first attempts to exchange ideas on scientific-cultural activities have been perpetuated from October 2007 on.

Together with the publication of the exhibition catalogue (Bielefeld/Leipzig: Kerber, 2008) the opening of the touring exhibition in Birmingham will further actively promote this development. In order to meet the requirements of our self-given task of establishing East-Western European dialogue, the 17 artworks convened in the exhibition do not only deal with old collective identity formations of Stalinism, National Socialism and Fascism; they also question western political and socio-economic uniformities and critically engage with ‘new’ dictatorships such as consumerism, globalisation and mass media. During a conference named *Roles of the Visual in Overcoming Dictatorships* the intersections of the visual arts in mediating the political, socio-economic and cultural changes in post-dictatorial societies and the impact of such changes on cultural production will be explored. Speakers will focus on developments in Russia and Hungary, the former Yugoslavia and Great Britain. Updated information will be available on <http://overcomings.blogspot.com>.

On the right – Monuments of Trent in the course of time (Photos: TU Dresden).

I – Mosaic with an inscription glorifying the fascist state (with a subsequent retouching of the fascist symbol of the fasces in the hands of the portrayed person as well as the name of the dictator Mussolini).

II – Fascist soldier in a uniform of ancient Rome.

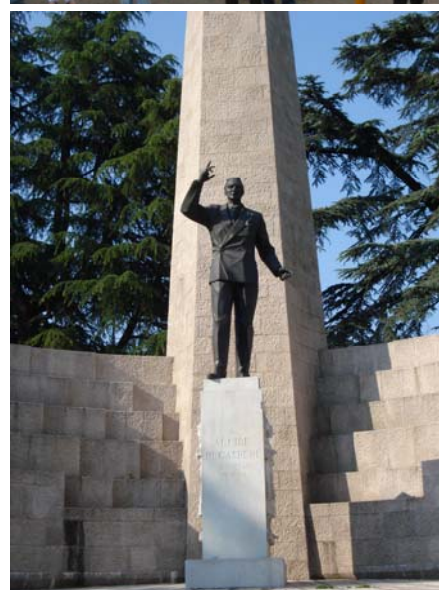
III – Statue of Alcide de Gasperi, defender of Italian culture in Habsburgian Trentino, opponent of Mussolini and late founder of Democrazia Cristiana, the dominating political party of post-war Italy.



I



II



III