

Between Words and Images – Eccentric Artists and Their Constructions of Reality in Recent German Literature

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Abstract:

This paper intends to analyse three eccentric figures and their constructions in contemporary German literature from the 1960s to 2005. The aim of this paper is to examine how the main characters, Hieronymus, Henry, and Fabian, from different books (one novel, two short stories) by German authors (Peter Weiss 1965, Eva Zeller 1983, Steffen Kopetzky 2005) share eccentricity on different levels. As obsessive collectors, the protagonists devote themselves to the construction of artistic projects through sensual and emotional experience in accordance with a phenomenological perspective (Gaston Bachelard 2007). The main underlying basis for such artistic practices and the type of relationship established between these literary figures and their objects and creative works, on one side, and particular objects, and images used in creating imaginary or alternative worlds, on the other side, are key elements in our analysis.

Keywords: Recent German Literature, Image-Word, Eccentric/Obsessive Collectors/Characters, Eccentric Constructions

Introductory remarks on the literary figures

In the novel *Fluchtpunkt* by Peter Weiss (1965), Hieronymus is a mathematician, manufacturer of calculators, and a specialist in macro-economics. One day he decides to give up his work, his family and all social benefits in order to live in an “old garage” and to dedicate himself exclusively to “dem monströsen Gebilde seiner Arbeit” (Weiss, 1965, p. 138). His work results from the technique of making collages of newspaper cuttings on various themes and fields, which lends it a fragmentary character (Weiss, 1965, p. 139).

The development of a wide-ranging utopian project is present, when Henry in the short story *Der Turmbau* by Eva Zeller (1983, pp. 59-66) describes in detail a scale model of a city in the form of a tower to an imaginary audience.

Finally, Fabian in the short story *Deutsche Mechanik* by Steffen Kopetzky (2005, pp. 170-216), aims at the construction of an enormous structure (Kopetzky, 2005, p.199), of mechanical nature, whose metal parts he buys and takes to his atelier over the years (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 201).

The selected protagonists share disappointment with their daily, family, and social life. Therefore, to fulfill their irreparable emptiness, they build eccentric constructions or projects. The obsessive collection of useless objects and even waste (trash) is a behaviour that reflects a sense of loss and of disorientation. Particularly Hieronymus and Fabian cultivate an obsessive “culture of waste”, where the ritual inherent of the creative process shows affinities with the staging of garbage dumps.

Creative Objects-Constructions – Projects and Images

Weiss’ narrator met Hieronymus when he was already around fifty years old and his project was still at an early stage (Weiss, 1965, p. 138). Nevertheless he still had the opportunity to follow Hieronymus’s work on his universal book.

The images attributed to Hieronymus derive from a radical turning point in his life, his exclusive and obsessive dedication to his project work. Despite his social status and physical decay, the narrator still recognizes in him “die ehemalige Eleganz” (Weiss, 1965, p. 138) and “einen Zug von weltmännischer Überlegenheit” (Weiss, 1965, p. 138), identifying him with an

alchemist “dem es eben gelungen war, Gold herzustellen” (Weiss, 1965, p. 140). The narrator sees that Hieronymus has voluntarily chosen social exclusion. Not even a psychiatrist could assess his troubled mental state (Weiss, 1965, pp. 141-142). Even Hieronymus himself is aware about his troubled mental state, because he says to the narrator that if he were subjected to a psychiatric evaluation the following would happen: “Er würde mich einsperren, denn er würde verstehen, daß ich nicht mehr zu zähmen und der Gesellschaft dienstbar zu machen sei” (Weiss, 1965, p. 143).

The narrator uses also the image of the castaway, which expresses well Hieronymus’s failure of social inclusion: “[...] er lebte einfach in einer Wirklichkeit, aus der die alltäglichen Maßstäbe entfernt worden waren. [...] wie ein Schiffbrüchiger quer über einem der Betonsockel lag, [...]” (Weiss, 1965, p. 142). Hieronymus’s library is also an archive of memory. The inside of the garage is described as an mountain landscape by the way books and journals are hoarded from which he cuts out text passages and images to build his universal book. Hieronymus collects cardboard boxes, where he stores newspaper cuttings, arranged by themes. The way the boxes are stacked up emphasizes the image of the mountain.

“Das Schriftbild, das auf den riesenhaften Blättern entstand, enthielt unzählige kleine Einheiten, die er aus den Bergen von alten Büchern und Zeitschriften, die den Raum zu einer zerklüfteten Landschaft machten, ausgeschnitten hatte. Die Wände waren bis zur Decke mit Papierschachteln angefüllt, die er aus Schuhgeschäften zusammengetragen hatte, und in denen er die Stöße des Rohmaterials verwahrte” (Weiss, 1965, p. 139).

In the short story *Der Turmbau* by Zeller (1983) we can recognize an image-text structure. The text starts “in media res” and in the middle of an oral speech sentence, which hinders its immediate spatial and temporal location. But from a visual point of view, the sequence of the sentences without paragraph or sentence divisions presents the text visually very similar to a poem. However, as we continue reading, we verify that it is in reality an oral presentation of a construction project, an utopian city, which, according to Henry, will be carried out in the future when we read “seine Turmstadt von morgen” (Zeller, 1983, p. 60). The project is still in an experimental stage, for Henry has at his disposal only a scale model of the future city to assist his oral presentation and temporarily visualize his dream. Although it is a dream, Henry really aims to achieve it, as it is confirmed by the narrator: “Nein, Henry hat nicht auf Sand gebaut” (Zeller, 1983, p. 61). Even if

Henry, as the author of the project, is the main speaker, we have also access to Henry's wife and the narrator's opinions, specified by the first or third person singular. So the space of the utopian city is primarily described from two different points of view. While Henry overvalues the exceptional housing conditions of the future city in a tower shape, his wife, on the contrary, although she sees confirmed Henry's perspective as she walks through the space inside the house, emphasizes strongly its negative aspects, and Henry's dream house and space transforms itself in a real nightmare and labyrinthine space for her. In this short-story by Zeller (1983) neither have we access to biographical information about Henry nor are there any concrete images applied to Henry. But we infer by Henry's public presentation of his city scale model and his guided tour given to his wife that most probably Henry is an architect. We can also link his oral presentation to a theatrical performance, which seeks mainly the approval of his wife and of the general public. Henry's argumentation clearly shows the radical need for changing the cities' building method, in an non-specified future The main character announces to his listeners a type of construction that suggests the form of a tower by the way the habitable cells are arranged, in a pile. To visualize the construction, Henry uses the image of the sea foam as a mountain of bubbles caused by agitation of sea waves movement:

“[...] die Zeit sei nicht mehr fern, in der bewohnbare Zellenberge nach Art vergrößerter Schäume sich auf den Weltmeeren türmten, ja, sich in deren Untergrund senkten, wie denn, meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren, Magnifizenz, liebe Kommilitonen, Utopien legale Mittel sind, um der Zukunft auf den Leib zu rücken” (Zeller, 1983, p. 60).

Also Fabian Eckenfelder leads a monotonous life, living with his girlfriend Andrea in the centre of Berlin (Kopetzki, 2005, p. 172). Fabian has to go every day to his old garage, in Neukölln. The short-story starts at the final stage of his artistic project, when he leaves his house to pick up the last piece commissioned in an old shop/garage called *Eisen Zart* (Kopetzki, 2005, p. 173). The narrator focuses on the twenty four hours, which precedes Fabian's creative project conclusion. The text recovers and interweaves however several issues and topics, such as biographical and professional data and also personal details, not presenting a linear narrative structure. These different events articulated with each other enable us to understand the present moment of the narration, where Fabian is about to conclude his life project, after having inserted the last piece. The piece of work he had made for the

train station in Hamburg was, according to Fabian, a decisive event in his professional career, because, besides providing him a national projection, contributed to introducing an order in his life, always marked with financial difficulties (Kopetzki 2005, p. 180). He was nevertheless obliged to use different working methods, which contrasted significantly with his usual method, performed previously. The construction material and his favourite working techniques shows affinities with the so-called conceptual art, practiced from the 1960s, but already anticipated in readymades, devised by Marcel Duchamp in the 1920s, and in pop art, developed from the 1960s by the North American artists, Claes Oldenburg, Andy Warhol, and Roy Lichtenstein:

“Er konnte sich aber auch nicht länger auf das unvorsehbare Zufallsspiel des Findens einlassen. Seine Arbeit würde fundamentaler, bedeutender, kreativer sein – er würde nicht mit Ready-mades, Gebrauchsgegenständen und Schrott arbeiten, sondern Teil für Teil entwerfen” (Kopetzki, 2005, p. 180).

After this major commission, Fabian had finally the financial means and with them the opportunity to focus exclusively on his dream of building “Die perfekte Mechanik” (Kopetzki, 2005, p. 181), which he also calls “das Projekt der großen Mechanik” (Kopetzki, 2005, p. 182).

So, while carrying the last piece of this project, Fabian remembers scenes of his past life that led him to this moment. Because he had not finished his University degree, he lacks respect for his own work. He does not see himself as an artist, but rather as a constructor of strange machines: “Bastler und Hobbymechaniker” (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 188) or “Er war ein Bastler” (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 189).

Fabian remembers the day when he ordered the first time “ein erstes Werkstück für die Mechanik” (Kopetzki, 2005, p. 179), because before he rarely ordered anything. Till then he had always manufactured the pieces from common material or from dismantling old machines, which he could find in fairs or on the market (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 179). His talent is shown precisely in the way he combines incompatible materials. This way, Fabian shows a certain inconsistency in the process of conception for not following pre-established principles: “Er war keineswegs der brillante Handwerker, [...] er arbeitete eigentlich sogar ziemlich ungenau, aber niemand als er selbst vermochte seine Fehler zu sehen (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 179).

Thus the image of the tower reveals itself in Fabian's collection of invoices that increase in height over the years while the artist is buying various structures for his monumental work. It is when he puts the last invoice at the bottom of the drawer that he becomes aware of the dimension of his machine and remembers the first invoice (Kopetzky, 2005, pp. 204-205). According to Bachelard (2007) the inside of a wardrobe, such as the inside of a drawer, is an "Intimitätsraum, ein Raum, der sich nicht jedem Beliebigen auftut" (Bachelard, 2007, p. 94) and is without doubt "ganz erfüllt vom stummen Tumult der Erinnerungen" (Bachelard, 2007, p. 95). The growth of Fabian's machine coincides therefore with the impressive increase of the amount of invoices, similar to water tanks or even to a flood by the use of the verb "quollen". It is also suggested that the metallic structure is an organism, when its unbridled consumption is mentioned. The invoices represent thus a particular testimony of his project development over the years.

"Mittlerweile quollen alle drei Fächer über. Die Maschine war gewachsen – was sie dabei verschlungen hatte, wußte er nicht. [...] Er sammelte die Belege, das genügte. Auch wenn ihn jetzt, nachdem er die letzte Rechnung dazugelegt hatte, die schiere Menge beschriebenen Papiers nachdenklich stimmte" (Kopetzky, 2005, pp. 204-205).

Fabian's home is described as a labyrinth with the countless machines built by him over the years. Andre Hellmer, a successful gallery owner, is the first and only one to have access to Fabian's collection of machines. Fabian's private space offers the vision of an alternative world by the dimensions and forms of different artefacts (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 190). Fabian also builds very small machines, evoking the concept of miniature, according to Bachelard (Bachelard, 2007, pp. 155-185).

"Beim ersten Besuch, den Hellmer Fabian labyrinthischer Erdgeschoßwohnung abstattete, verschaffte er sich ziemlich unverholen einen Überblick über die zahlreichen freien Arbeiten, die Fabian im Laufe der Zeit gebaut hatte, seltsame Maschinen, manchmal doppelt so groß wie eine alte Nähmaschine, gelegentlich aber auch winzig klein, wie aus einer Ameisenwelt" (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 191).

The connection between the space and the machines becomes visible after selling and therefore removing them from Fabian's home. We witness a radical change of the space. The emptiness of the house is perceived as a nudity and as a result of an invasion, a devastation. For this reason, the

narrator says the following: “[...] Fabians leere Wohnung, die ohne ihre langjährigen Bestände an Maschinen ihre schadhafte Blöße zeigte und nicht verlassen, sondern verwüstet wirkte – ausgeraubt eher denn geräumt” (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 192).

When Fabian enters his garage with the last metal piece, the close relationship between the metal pieces and the space becomes also clear. Inhabited only by metals, the atmosphere becomes, according to Fabian, unpleasant. The metal’s coldness spreads through the space and air, losing all human warmth:

“Das Atelier war eiskalt, seit er nicht mehr darin wohnte, fröstelte es ihn zunehmend, es war ihm unbehaglicher als früher. Vielleicht lag das auch an der großen Menge edelsten Metalls, das er auf den unterschiedlichsten Wegen in das Atelier geschafft hatte, denn die Luft, die ihm entgegenschlug, war eine Eisenluft” (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 201).

After realising that he had constructed a bomb, Fabian also feels that the space of his garage had reduced, which he therefore perceives as “tödliche Enge” (Kopetzky, 2005, 209). Afraid, he gets out running without his keys. The steel door closes and the artist is this way excluded from his garage (Kopetzky, 2005, pp. 209-210). While he is calling the key service, a clear separation between inner and outer space of his garage is established. Only from outside, Fabian is able to see the real dimension and omnipotence of his machine, which in his opinion, took up all the inner space and excluded him this way from his own garage. The brightness and dark tone of the orange colour lends to the machine an appearance even more sinister and threatening. The narrator suggests implicitly the idea of the son’s revolt against his father, his creator:

“Das Leuchten hinter den Fenstern des Ateliers schien während seiner Abwesenheit einen dunkel-orangen Ton angenommen zu haben. Zum ersten Mal betrachtete er die erstarrte Mechanik in voller Größe, so wie sie war – sie füllte den Raum des Ateliers ganz und gar aus. Sie hatte ihn herausgedrängt, hatte ihn abgeschafft, ihn vertrieben” (Kopetzky, 2005, p. 213).

In conclusion, we have seen that the three figures have in common the compelling need to collect a wide range of everyday objects and by this to design their particular alternative world, their constructed reality. Facing difficulties, while resisting the outside world, the protagonists take refuge in various artistic and technological media of retaining and preserving memory, including their own bodies, highlighting, consequently, the sensual and

emotional experiences involved. While creating their projects, the three characters establish a special relationship with their objects and projects, which they always perceived as artistic and visually overwhelming. Feeling rejected and socially excluded, the characters feel that they can only find fulfillment in their creative projects. The relationship between image and word, art and literature becomes particularly clear when images are associated with the characters and used to describe the characters' process of working. This close relationship reveals itself also when their process of creating is presented as showing great similarities with art movements. Their efforts are undoubtedly valued when they are able to create extraordinary projects under difficult conditions over a long period of time. Their physical and mental resistance and resilience grant their artistic works a state of "temporary staging" as "works in progress" that reinvents an aesthetic threshold very similar to the art movements in the 1960s and that encouraged a new way of living and understanding that the completion of a project is less important than the creative process itself. Ultimately, we have seen that the artistic and eccentric practice of the selected characters intends primarily to compensate for a loss of memory and meaning and for their struggles with an order in the outside world which they perceive as overwhelming and uncontrollable.

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