

# The Berlin Seminar on German Literary Institutions

## A Course Correction for German Studies

---

*William Collins Donahue/Martin Kagel*

The contributions to this section arose in the context of the annual *Literaturbetriebsseminar* that we direct at the storied Berlin *Literaturhaus* in the Fasanenstraße. Two of the essays are penned by faculty participants and two by authors who were invited guests to the seminar in 2022 and 2023 respectively. Together they illustrate the life and practice of the seminar, and in this sense may serve as better ambassadors than any mere descriptive overview we could hope to provide. Nevertheless, before introducing the essays we offer some background on the seminar's genesis, aims, and achievements in order to illuminate the larger context that generated them.

\*\*\*

The conviction that led us to found and then sustain the *Berlin Seminar on German Literary Institutions* is that the *Literaturbetrieb* is essential to understanding literary life in Germany – not just one of a number of equally worthy topics within German Studies or *Germanistik*, but an area about which every scholar should have some understanding. Yet thus far it has figured as the discipline's poor relation. In 2015, we determined it was time to address this neglect, not with yet another book (though we succumbed to that temptation too), but rather with a lively, interactive, participant-centered seminar.<sup>1</sup> From the beginning, the goal has been to convene a vertically integrated group (ranging from Master's and Ph.D. students through senior faculty members); instill in them an ethos of collegiality such that distinctions of age and rank are of little significance; and foster active and critical engagement in the

---

1 See Donahue/Kagel: *Die große Mischkalkulation. Institutions, Social Import, and Market Forces in the German Literary Field* (Paderborn: Fink/Brill 2021), especially »*Mischkalkulationen*. Transnational Perspectives in the German Literary Field (pp. 3–14), where we credit our forebears in this area and give a fuller accounting of the history and goals of the seminar. This volume contains a selection of essays, presentations, and interviews that emerged from the first four iterations of the seminar.

form of a collective inquiry. We invite participants into congenial and candid conversations with our guests rather than to a series of frontal presentations with an obligatory Q&A session tacked on at the end.

Established in 2016, and convened six times since (with an unavoidable COVID hiatus), this two-week seminar has thus far introduced well over 100 professors and graduate students, mostly based in the United States, to the »business« of German literature and to many key actors and institutions that promote literary culture in Germany and in the German-speaking world. *German Literary Institutions: The Berlin seminar* (GLIB) thus epitomizes the core transatlantic mission of this journal.

Known in the early years as the *Notre Dame Berlin Seminar* (owing to a major grant from the University of Notre Dame), GLIB was founded, as we noted at the outset, to compensate for an understandable deficiency within US-based doctoral programs. In certain respects, without a doubt, a number of German Studies Ph.D. programs in the United States were on par with or even surpassed the training provided by many German universities: they offered ideal faculty-student ratios and were—on the whole—more interdisciplinary, more receptive to literary and cultural theory at an earlier stage, and better connected to a wider array of jobs in higher education post-degree. They also attracted some of the best senior faculty, often siphoning off Germany's own stars. But whatever advantages they may have held (and to some extent still do today) they lacked direct access to the German *Literaturbetrieb*.

While principally a consequence of geographical location, this dearth is due also, at least in some cases, to deliberate programmatic decisions.<sup>2</sup> With some notable and welcome exceptions, the *Literaturbetrieb* tended to be treated as a disciplinary stepchild rather than as a truly central concern. Without proximate access to the many institutions and people that comprise the German literary field, the undertaking appeared to many on this side of the Atlantic simply unattainable. The »gap,« to the extent it is acknowledged, is typically filled with the occasional visiting author or journalist—often the Max Kade Visiting artist or Professor—who may or may not reference the crucial role the *Literaturbetrieb* plays in their career. That is surely better than nothing, but it does not suffice.

The gambit of the Berlin seminar is that the *Literaturbetrieb* is no mere add-on or side show. Our understanding of literature and literary life risks distortion if we treat published texts as if they arrive *ex nihilo*, or view them only in relationship

---

2 One hears, for example, that the *Literaturbetrieb* is too praxis-oriented, and too distant from theory. Relatedly, it is sometimes maintained that the lessons of the *Literaturbetrieb* can be gleaned informally, and therefore need not be incorporated formally into an already packed graduate curriculum. There is some truth to both these claims, yet it has been our experience that the fund of data in this area is sufficiently rich to justify formal and systematic study, including theoretical framing (e.g. media impact considerations, questions regarding trans-medial promotion, as well as socio-linguistic and cross-cultural translation debates, etc.).

to an individual author's biography or oeuvre, or even within the larger socio-historical context, traditionally construed. All of the above are of course valuable approaches. Yet the GLIB mandate calls for additional attention to the web of relevant literary institutions and practices that determine a text's initial publication and subsequent distribution, reception, archivization, as well as possible adaptation for the stage and translation into other languages and cultural contexts. What role in this story—often behind the scenes—do lectors, publishers, reviewers, agents, dramaturgs, translators, educators and others play? How is the literature shaped—possibly even before we encounter it as readers—by state subsidies, university writing programs, German public radio and television programming, literary festivals, theaters, the distinctive network of German *Literaturhäuser*, church-sponsored academies (that promote literature and culture), reading clubs, book fairs and the like?

This network of factors—which applies differentially to individual authors—is, of course, not meant to occlude the fundamental importance of the literary works themselves. For us it was never a matter of pitting literature and authors against institutional and economic factors. Rather it has always been a matter of coming to a fuller appreciation of the former in light of the latter. Aesthetic choices are never made in a vacuum; some indeed are attributable to the very factors enumerated above. The compound term »Literaturbetrieb,« by joining elements that are more fruitfully studied in combination rather than isolation, possesses a wisdom all its own. We are certainly not the first to draw attention to these factors, but we are distinctive, we hope, in offering a comprehensive *response* in the form of GLIB, as our programs over the years demonstrate (see <http://gliberlinseminar.weebly.com>).

US-based academics continue to comprise the target, but not the exclusive, audience for GLIB. Although the *Literaturbetrieb's* component parts are virtually everywhere to be found in Germany, only a few *Germanistik* programs within German higher education actually make systematic use of them. One of those is the well-regarded *Literatur- und Medienpraxis* (LuM) program at the University of Duisburg-Essen, which has sent a number of participants and presenters to the seminar on a regular basis since its inception.<sup>3</sup> But they are the exception that proves the rule, namely that despite the abundance of opportunities to engage with it, the *Literaturbetrieb* remains an underutilized object of study in Germany as well.<sup>4</sup>

3 For a fuller picture of the Literatur- und Medienpraxis Studiengang, currently led by Prof. Dr. Rolf Parr and Dr. Hanna Köllhofer at the Universität Duisburg-Essen, online at <http://www.uni-due.de/germanistik/lum>.

4 This is a challenge we would very much like to address. Providing greater access to Germany-based participants (faculty and students) has thus far been hindered by two factors. First is the fact that US and German academic calendars are out of sync, compounded by the German theater schedule, which typically goes into summer recess just when one might otherwise find an accommodation. Second is the fee structure, which though modest by US standards

\*\*\*

Authors are regular and prominent guests in the seminar. Nevertheless, and somewhat in defiance of our training, we resist the temptation to jump immediately to a discussion of their latest novel, story or poem. We ultimately allow for those discussions, and with distinct pleasure. We sponsor public readings and discussions of individual works, and line up to have our books signed. But our first commitment has always been to ask about the author's experience within the *Literaturbetrieb*. Accordingly, Helga Schubert, in a piece introduced below by our colleague Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, tells the story of literary life in the GDR and how all that changed quite dramatically with unification in 1990. Awarded the well-regarded Bachmann Prize as a young woman, she was not able to accept it because of GDR strictures unevenly applied. Later, and somewhat unexpectedly (because she had been recruited to serve on the jury, not to be considered as a recipient), she was offered it once again. This belated honor—a rectification of the earlier injustice done to her literary career—enhanced the reception of her remarkable collection, *Vom Aufstehen. Ein Leben in Geschichten* (2021). Schubert read from that book and engaged avidly with the 2022 seminar.

The second essay, by Dilek Güngör, is a record of her introductory remarks presented to the 2023 seminar. It is a disarmingly candid statement on what it means to call oneself a writer, how to navigate an often unforgiving publishing world, and how to find one's own voice and genre. Here she recounts, among other things, the fascinating genesis of her novel *Vater und ich*, nominated for the German book prize in 2021, explaining how its success shaped her self-understanding as a »legitimate« *Schriftstellerin*. As her title indicates, this has been a long journey toward attaining the confidence and courage to acknowledge her special mastery of literary »miniatures.«

The next two essays reflect collaboratively on two plays we attended together in June 2022, at the *Berliner Ensemble* and *Deutsches Theater*, respectively. They attest to the vitality of seminar's collective inquiry, referenced above, demonstrating how reception is substantially enhanced when made a truly group project. In »Upstaging Borchert,« Daniel Reynolds, Ruth Gross, Doris McGonagill and Susan Wansink integrate their own observations with those of other seminar participants to assess Michael Thalheimer's re-staging of the postwar classic *Draußen vor der Tür*. They find

---

is high for Germans. Customarily covered by the faculty member's or student's home institution in the US, the fee covers only a small portion of actual expenses; the seminar is heavily subsidized, including a generous annual grant from the Max Kade Foundation (New York), covering participants' transatlantic flights. A partial solution to this problem may be in sight: with enough advance planning, advanced students at German universities (those beyond the coursework stage) could arrange to absent themselves for the duration. The remaining task is to identify a funding mechanism beyond the ad hoc options currently available to Germans.

much to praise in the BE's innovative, »anti-dramatic« staging, and credit the actors with bravura performances; but they also question the relevance of the play's antiwar message in the context of the Russian attack on Ukraine. While Doris McGonagill is the solo author of »Winnetou Meets Gordon Gekko,« she too draws generously on the varied and contradictory responses voiced by seminar participants. She accounts for this variety by locating the discrepancies in the melange of approaches and genres represented in the loosely-knit play itself. While acknowledging virtuoso performances, as well as the boldness and wit of directors Tom Kühnel and Jürgen Kuttner, she argues that the boundless parody of *Hasta la Westler, Baby!* may ultimately undermine the very political critique it purports to offer.

Each of these contributions highlights, though often unobtrusively, the decisive role of the *Literaturbetrieb*. Schubert underscores the impact of literary prizes in promoting authors and book sales, not to mention the sometimes nefarious role of government intervention. Güngör references—with some ambivalence—the part played by literary agents and publishers. And the participants' essays evidence not only the esprit de corps that is the hallmark of the seminar, but testify also to the distinctive role of theater—much more vibrant in Germany than the US— in nurturing literary life. Together they illustrate the seminar's ongoing, collective, critical inquiry into the German literary field and we are very pleased to present them here.

