

Post Second World War German Literature: *Trümmerliteratur* (rubble literature) or *der Stunde Null* (hour zero) or *Heimkehrerliteratur* (or home coming) literature

Hari Kumar, written May 2022; published July 2022

A review of "*Draussen vor der Tur*" by Wolfgang Borchert; viewed May 2022 at 'Berliner Ensemble' Berlin

We are facing a driving current move towards a new inter-imperialist war. Again- it might be said.

But not as it was in WW2 where one protagonist was a socialist state under fierce attack. Today is more akin to WW1. Naturally given the increase in capital development over some 100 years, it is at a higher degree of intensified inter-imperialist competition.

The Ukraine war is only the visible apex of this as yet un-resolved re-division of the world. The two major power blocks that are facing off are led on the one hand by the USA and EU – soon to embrace Scandinavia also. The other is led by Russia and China, and will likely include some parts of what till recently was the conglomerate of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa).

For such reasons, it is timely that the Berliner Ensemble Theatre, is reviving "*Draussen vor der Tur*" ("*Outside the Door*", or "*Being on the Outside*") by Wolfgang Borchert (1921-1947). Several aspects of this will interest Marxist-Leninists. Namely - the author, the literary movement he belonged to, the play itself, the current production, and the theatre in which it is being staged now in Berlin. This article will only discuss the first three. We return to the last at a later stage.

***The author*¹**

Borchert wrote the play at 26 years of age, returning from forced service in the Nazi assault on Stalingrad in 1941. His father was in the Dada movement, and Borchert was an early poet. But to earn a living he became a bookseller while circulating anti-Nazi poems. This led to his first jail. On release, in 1937 he saw the famous German actor *Gustaf Gründgens*, playing *Hamlet*, which inspired him to become an actor.² But he was conscripted in 1941, and sent to the Eastern Front. There he claimed that his finger was shot off in single combat against a Russian soldier. The Nazis rejected this, seeing instead 'self-mutilation' to evade military service. Exonerated he escaped the death penalty, but he was quickly re-arrested for anti-Nazi satires on Goebbels, statements and poems. Under the *Heimtückegesetz*, (1934 Nazi 'Treachery Act') he was convicted of "defeatist statements". Sentenced to nine months imprisonment, he was then sent back to the Eastern Front in a 'punishment battalion'. All this led to chronic hepatitis, typhus and severe frostbite. He would die in liver failure in 1947.

He survived and returned to his family in 1945. But he was a bed-ridden, physical wreck, in the last two final years of his life. He wrote his famous play in an inspired burst in eight

¹ This section largely from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Borchert; "Wolfgang Borchert '*Draussen Vor Der Tür*' Und Ausgewählte Erzählungen," 1986, Hamburg, Verlag; 'Arbeit Zukunft'; <https://www.arbeit-zukunft.de/2007/11/19/sag-nein-zum-60-todestag-von-wolfgang-borchert/>; and Lebendiges Museum Online at: <http://www.hdq.de/lemo/biografie/wolfgang-borchert.html>

² Gordon Burgess, '*The life and works of Wolfgang Borchert*'; 2003; p.1-2; Woodbridge, Sussex

days. He only heard it as a radio play 'horspiel'. A wonderful rendition of the original, of course in German, can be heard free.³ In 1947, he died tragically - one day before its stage premier. Stephen Spender in a foreword to the first English translation of his works wrote:

"This appears to be the life of a perfect victim of our times, a man whose soul must bear simply the impress of the world of dictatorship and war and post-war horror into which he was born. It is in some ways like the life of a man born and bred in a prison cell."²

The play itself is briefly reviewed below, however his most famous single poem deserves attention. That is, "Sag Nein!" (Say No!). That is only one phrase that echoes down to us, the more correct title is "Dann gibt es nur eins!" (Then there is only one). This was written as a 'Manifesto', as lay on his deathbed in Basle, just weeks before his death. While I think it rings out in the original German, the power also certainly comes across in translation:

"You. Man at the machine and man in the workshop. If they order you tomorrow not to make any more water pipes or cooking pots - but steel helmets and machine guns. then there is only one:
Say no!
You. Girls behind the counter and girls in the office. If tomorrow they order you to fill grenades and mount scopes for sniper rifles, then there is only one thing:
Say no!
You. Factory owner. If they order you tomorrow, you should sell gunpowder instead of powder and cocoa, then there is only one thing:
Say no!
You. Researchers in the laboratory. If they order you tomorrow to invent a new death against the old life, then there is only one thing:
Say no!
You. Poet in your room. If they order you tomorrow not to sing love songs, you should sing hate songs, then there is only one thing:
Say no!
You. Doctor at the bedside. If they order you tomorrow, you should the men write fit for war, then there is only one thing:
Say no! ...
You. Mother in Normandy and mother in the Ukraine, you, mother in Frisko and London, you, on the Hoangho and on the Mississippi, you, mother in Naples and Hamburg and Cairo and Oslo - mothers on all continents, mothers in the world, if they tomorrow command you to bear children, nurses for war hospitals and new soldiers for new battles, mothers in the world, then there is only one thing:
Says no! Moms say NO!..."⁴

³<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mofWO3ImfE>

⁴ The full text at: <https://www.bo-alternativ.de/borchert.htm>

The power this poem wields is shown, as recited by actress and artistic director of the Hamburg Theater, *Ida Ehre*.⁵ She premiered the stage play and announced Borchert's death on stage after its performance. In 1983, for the "Kunstlers für Friede" (Artists for peace) she addressed an open-air meeting, and the passion is clear.

II) Borckert and the Trümmerliteratur (rubble literature) or der Stunde Null (hour zero) or Heimkehrerliteratur (or home coming) literature

Borckert was the most famous of this school of writers. On war end they made their way home, from the fronts, or from prisons or from exile. But Germany was changed. Many had begun writing their experiences in the prisoner-of-war (POW) camps of the Western Allies.⁶ The school gave rise to 'Group 47', and work from the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In West Germany, *Heinrich Böll* became the most famous exponent. Writers of the GDR largely adopted variations – sometimes perversions - of 'socialist realism'. That term and its derivation is discussed in the "Theses on Art" of W.B.Bland and Maureen Scott.⁷ That term was less rigid than bourgeois writers have alleged in the pre-1953 USSR.⁸ We will discuss the GDR or East German derivations at a later stage. But for now, we only remark that Borckert's version differed, as is seen below.

Trümmerliteratur aimed at realism, but it was also influenced by existentialism and by writers of the Resistance. For example, from *Jean-Paul Sartre*, *Albert Camus*, through to the more realist *Ignazio Silone*. American realists such as *Ernest Hemingway*, and *John Steinbeck* were another influence. The Allies had widely distributed those authors in the POW camps. The overall literary result aimed at a psychological raw truth, but coupled to a 'magical' realism.

Returning veterans had found an unrecognizable 'home', with only 'rubble' and poverty. Moreover they were shunned by those who were yet able to live in comfort. Even so, their writings reverberated in the wider German people. Simply because many people had found their houses destroyed and had been left with nothing. Another theme was also urgently understood, of a perceived collective guilt for the war, for Nazi fascism and what came to be known as the Holocaust. This was amplified into what Finkelstein called the "Holocaust Industry".⁹

lii) The synopsis of the play and four 'magic' realisms

A stark tone is set from the prologue. In the 'horspiel', an introduction is intoned by a separate voice from the actor who plays the lead personage, Beckmann - a returning

⁵ See at 0.49 seconds of/2.48 at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_4mH0MBviE

⁶ <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trümmerliteratur>

⁷ League of Socialist Artists and MLOB, "Theses on Art; Alliance 53 August 2004 W.B.Bland "Stalin & The Arts' On Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics"; Alliance ML No 53 August 2004; at: <http://ml-review.ca/aml/AllianceIssues/A2004/STALINART.html>

⁸ Hari Kumar, 'Was Stalin's View On Art Different From That Of Marx And Engels? A talk given to commemorate Bill Bland at Conway Hall, London, September 2001'; for Alliance ML; at: <http://ml-review.ca/aml/AllianceIssues/A2004/MEMORIALBILL53.html>

⁹ Norman Finkelstein, 'The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering'; 2000; now from Verso, London 2015.

soldier.¹⁰ As the “Personnel” lists him, he is “one of them”. He has been away for three years – or ‘a thousand days’. The play starts as follows:

“A man comes to Germany.
He was gone a long time, the man.
Very long. Maybe too long.
And he comes back very different from when he left. Outwardly it is a close relative of those creatures that stand in the fields to frighten the birds (and sometimes people in the evening). Inside - too. He's been waiting out in the cold for a thousand days.
And as an entrance fee he had to pay with his kneecap. And after waiting a thousand nights outside in the cold, he finally comes home.
A man comes to Germany.”¹¹

The returned soldier Beckmann finds his wife has taken up with another man, and she turns Beckmann out the door. Very soon, the ‘magic’ of Borckert’s *realism* becomes vivid. Four examples will suffice.

First, a burping ‘Undertaker’ watches impassionately as Beckmann is about to drown himself in the Elbe in Hamburg. He is joined by an ‘Old Man’, which makes for an extraordinary meeting. It is revealed that the Undertaker is ‘Death’ and constantly burps from eating too many dead: “Overeating. Outright overeating. That’s all. You can’t stop burping these days. Burp! Sorry!” The Old Man declares he is one “in whom no one believes any longer” – for he is God, who is unable to prevent his ‘children’ from killing themselves.

The second ‘magical’ device is the personification of ‘The Elbe’. When the soldier Beckmann attempts to drown himself, he wonders what has happened. He is enlightened but startled by Elbe - who replies;

“You thought I was a romantic young girl with a pale green complexion? The type of Ophelia with water lilies in her loose hair? You thought you could spend eternity in my sweet-smelling lily arms. No, my son, that was a mistake on your part. I’m neither romantic nor sweet-scented. A decent river stinks. Yes. After oil and fish. What do you want here?”

Beckmann replies he wants “to sleep” and escape the world. Elbe rejects him, not actually unkindly – urging him to struggle:

“You snotty-nosed suicide. No, you hear! Do you think because your wife doesn’t want to play with you anymore, because you have a limp and because your stomach is growling, that’s why you can crawl under my skirt here with me?... I don’t want your miserable little life... Let an old woman tell you: Live for a while. Let yourself be kicked Kick again!... I want to say something to you, very quietly, in your ear, you, come here: I fuck your suicide! You baby”.

¹⁰ This is different from the Berliner Ensemble presentation 2022 being discussed.

¹¹ All play quotes are translated from Wolfgang Borchert, “Draussen vor der Tur”; 1986 edition; Rohwolt Taschenbuch at: https://www.academia.edu/3836898/Wolfgang_Borchert_Draussen_vor_der_Tuer

Beckmann is dumped by the Elbe onto the shore, where a young woman either takes pity on him, or being lonely enough, fancies him. She takes him home. A sojourn is interrupted by a one legged giant cripple on crutches. It turns out to be her dead husband – killed on the front. Of his absence “the girl” has previously said: “Starved, frozen to death - what do I know. He has been missing since Stalingrad. That was three years ago.”

It is implied but not certain, that the giant cripple was one of the eleven soldiers of a total of 20, that subaltern corporal Beckmann had led to their death, in Russia. Beckmann: “I was three years away. In Russia... In Stalingrad”. He was following orders to lead a foray into the surrounding forces. The encounter with the Giant Crippled soldier is ended as the Cripple leaves, having left his memory imprinted on Beckmann’s mind.

The third ‘magical’ image comes in – it is the “Other”. We had heard him before, but the Other leads Beckmann to his next encounter. How are we to see ‘the Other’? This turns out to be an inner dueling, contesting, advising “Other” – presumably of Beckmann’s own consciousness. The “Other” will later - at the very end become silent, and thus desert Beckmann when Beckmann is finally at a total end. But for now, Other urges Beckmann to get rid of his guilt, or his “responsibility” (“Die Verantwortung”). How?

By giving Die Verantwortung back to his commanding officer. Beckmann finds the commanding officer, who has meanwhile been eating caviar for three years. During which time Beckmann and the minions were:

“under the snow and had steppe sand in their mouths. And we spooned hot water. But the boss had to eat caviar. For three years. And they shaved our heads off. Up to the neck - or up to the hair, it didn't really matter. The head amputees were the happiest.”

The commanding officer demands what does Beckmann want? He replies that he wishes to give back responsibility, explaining this may let him sleep to avoid a recurring nightmare. This makes up the fourth, and devastating ‘magical’ example. Beckmann is every night woken by a blood stained General who plays a giant xylophone made entirely of bones:

“He's got skullcaps, shoulder blades, pelvic bones. And for the higher notes, arm bones and leg bones. Then come the ribs—many thousands of ribs. And finally, at the very end of the xylophone, where the very high notes are, there are knuckles, toes, teeth. Yes, the teeth come last.”

Beckmann argues that responsibility is “not just a word, a chemical formula, according to which light human flesh is transformed into dark earth. You can't let people die for an empty word.” The commanding officer is horrified, and momentarily overcome by a semblance of perhaps guilt. But he pulls himself together – and brazenly takes it all as a wonderful comedy-act fit for the stage. Booted out, and prodded by the Other – Beckmann find his way first to a stage director. His act is deemed ‘too true’ and shocking for people, and besides it is not art. Finally Beckmann tries to find his parents. They have committed suicide to evade de-nazification:

“The old Beckmanns could no longer... They exhausted themselves a bit in the third Reich.. What does an old man like that need to still wear uniform. And then he was against the Jews, you know that, son, you. The Jews... Been a little active, your old man. Was amply used by the Nazis.”

His last hope – his parents are no longer alive then. Now even his “Other” deserts him, as all seems hopeless. The last anguishing words in the play to the “Other” are:

“Where are you, other? You're always there! Where are you now? Now answer me! now i need you answerer! Where are you, then? You are suddenly no more there! Where are you, answerer, where are you.. Where's the old man who calls himself God? Why isn't he talking!! Please answer! Why are you silent? Why? Doesn't anyone have an answer? Doesn't anyone answer??? Doesn't anyone give an answer???”

Such powerful devices are not ‘naturalism’, nor are they an exact fit for what is conventionally understood as “socialist art’. Undoubtedly they are a heightened realism with some imaginative twists rendering the term ‘magical realism’ suitable. Do they achieve the function of art in moving an audience towards the truth – the horrors of war? In my opinion, they do.

iv) The Berliner Ensemble production by director Michael Thalheimer; and playing Beckmann and The Other – Karin Wehlisch.

The production premiered on the 25 March 2022. It is up against historical precedents including the *Horspiel*³ and film adaptations, not to say significant prior stage productions. The production tries therefore to be novel and modern. A staging with a forest of hanging lights that entwine around the actors is effective. However in the quest for novelty ridiculous stags is introduced – the director is put on rollerskates (that he nearly falls off inadvertently), the commanding officer is being shaved in a slapstick foamy scene. All this is simply distracting and does not add. Perhaps the most useless novel feature is that Beckmann is almost continually screeching. The monotony this introduces, suffers compared against the clips that can be seen in prior stage production and films.¹² But live performance of the play is worthwhile, and the anti-war message is propelled forward. Besides the intense history of the Berliner Ensemble and the shadows of Bertolt Brecht and Helene Weigel is always worth visiting. I intend to return to that theme. But in the meantime, for this play – the old-fashioned *Horspiel* trumps the ‘novel’ stage.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sz4I7rkWFDE>