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Das Mietshaus in Brigitte Burmeister's novel
Unter dem Namen Norma:
a German microcosm.

A thesis presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree
of Master of Arts
in German at
Massey University

Ruth Ellen Single
1997

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the East Berlin tenement block in Brigitte Burmeister's novel *Unter dem Namen Norma*, and its symbolic function as an archive of the German condition from the Wilhelminian era to the present.

Situated on the corner of Marienstraße and Luisenstraße (an extension of Wilhelmstraße, where many government offices have been and will once again be housed), the house is a cornerstone of Germany, past and present. The narrator of the novel, Marianne Arends, ponders the actions and consequences of these past tenants, combining their experiences with her own imagination to reassure herself of her identity at a time when the socialist society in which she grew up is being replaced by the capitalist system of the West.

Brigitte Burmeister's book echoes the themes of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* as she looks at the way people deal with, or fail to deal with, their past. The same is true for her criticism of stereotypes. A similar link is established between the values shown by Brigitte Burmeister, and the ideas and beliefs of Christa Wolf, to whose work many parallels are drawn. The link between the suspected Stasi

informer in *Norma* and Christa Wolf's own Stasi codename reaffirms this.

Along with the Stasi story she makes up, Marianne creates two fictional characters, a 'zweites ich', Norma, who admits truths that Marianne cannot yet bring herself to accept, and a daughter, Emilia, who represents hope for the future.

To emphasise the themes of *Norma*, many images reoccur throughout the novel, and the use of leitmotifs is particularly noteworthy. True to the cyclic pattern of the book, the leitmotifs point back to the central image of the novel: the tenement block.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Associate Professor Axel Vieregg for his help and supervision, and my family, friends and flatmates for their support and encouragement. I would also like to thank the DAAD for enabling me to spend a semester studying in Dresden, from where I was able to experience the impact of the reunification process first-hand.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Hannie Winkler, without whose influence I would never have learned to appreciate German life and literature, and would most probably have studied science.

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INTRODUCTION

When the East German regime collapsed in 1989, many East German intellectuals, while welcoming the demise of the present East German system, were hoping a new attempt at a socialist system could be developed. These feelings found their most vocal expression at the demonstration of 4 November at Berlin's Alexanderplatz. Half a million people came together, making it the biggest unofficial demonstration in the DDR. The crowds were addressed by such authors as Christa Wolf, Stefan Heym and Heiner Müller, who were advocating a change in East German politics that would give the people a greater role to play. Among the authors who were not present but later expressed an agreement with the ideas put forward was Brigitte Burmeister, an author at that time still virtually unknown. Born in 1940 in Posen, Burmeister had studied Romance languages in Leipzig and from 1967 was a member of the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin. Since 1983 she has been an independent author as well as a translator from French. Her first work, *Anders oder Aufenthalt in der Fremde*, appeared in East Germany in 1988. Along with many of her colleagues, Burmeister was disappointed when the cry of the people changed from 'Wir sind das Volk' to 'Wir sind ein Volk'. In a conversation with Margarete Mitscherlich, published as the book *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu* in 1991, she expresses her reaction when the election results were announced in March 1990:

"Es gab Tränen...und ich erinnere mich an ein Gemisch aus furchtbarer Enttäuschung, Wut auf die 'blöden Massen'... Es war mir zwar klar, daß ein politischer Umschwung stattgefunden hatte, von 'Wir sind das Volk' zu 'Wir sind ein Volk'. Aber in welchem Ausmaß..."¹

¹ Brigitte BURMEISTER and Margarete MITSCHERLICH: *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu - Zwei deutsche Seelen - einander fremd geworden*, Hamburg: KleinVerlag, 1991, p.109.

The interview with Margarete Mitscherlich is an attempt to come to understand each other's East or West mentalities. The analysis of the German psyche which Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich had conducted in relation to Germany's Nazi-past in *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern* (1967) becomes relevant once again, this time applied to the situation after the demise of the GDR. How the East German past is to be dealt with, in relation to the way the Nazi-past was or was not dealt with, is one of the topics that the two women, one from the East and one from the West, discuss. They were aiming to break down the stereotypes between the two societies by sharing their personal experiences as women, and by discussing issues such as work, families and the role that intellectuals have in society. They discuss the need for 'Trauerarbeit' in a changing society. The 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung' - or lack of it - which the earlier book discusses in relation to the National-Socialist years, is revived in the later book in relation to the GDR. In Brigitte Burmeister's fictional work, the issue is taken up again and it seems as if she wanted to demonstrate how the mistakes made in relation to the Nazi past could be avoided in relation to the past of the GDR. Although the issue being dealt with is similar, because in both cases (ie. after the demise of the Third Reich and after the demise of the GDR) a need for 'Trauerarbeit' is apparent, there is a difference in the extent of participation of the general public between one system and the other. After speaking of the Nazi "Totalitarismus", Brigitte Burmeister says of the DDR Volk "[Es] hat sich nicht identifiziert mit der Führung, zu keiner Zeit... Darüber sollte kein Fackelzug

hinwegtäuschen.”² The need to deal with the past is the same, the past itself is of a different nature.

Many East German authors made a final attempt to resist the pull of West Germany, a great deal hoping to rebuild a better Socialist society, others looking towards the more welfare-orientated system in countries such as France as a model preferable to what they saw as the unfettered capitalism of their sister country. Shortly after reunification, Christa Wolf, Stefan Heym and others put together a petition ‘Für unser Land’, in which they advocated the preservation of a separate East German state. The petition was signed by over ten thousand people, including Brigitte Burmeister, but, of course, it came to nothing. As Burmeister sees it, its failure lay “nicht nur daran, daß sich der unselige Egon Krenz da lautstark hineingehängt hat”, but also because the majority, “oder wie es so schön heißt: die Menschen in der DDR, haben den schnellen Anschluß gewollt.”³

After their attempts to avoid reunification had failed, there was a delay for a year or two and then the authors returned to literature as their means of expression. Out of this debate came a number of works (*Was bleibt*, Christa Wolf (1990); *In Berlin*, Irina Liebmann (1994); *Unter dem Namen Norma*, Brigitte Burmeister (1994); *Nikolaikirche*, Erich Loest (1995); *Animal Triste*, Monika Maron (1996)) dealing with the collapse of East Germany and the aftermath of reunification. It is interesting that an overwhelming number of these works are written by women. This is hardly surprising, as in East Germany, women traditionally made up a major proportion of authors; but the high percentage of women writers expressing their views on reunification

² *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu*, p.79

³ *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu*, p.72

reflects also the fact that the women had more to lose by the demise of the GDR. Eva Kaufmann⁴ clearly defines one major problem that reunification posed for authors accustomed to the security of a socialist state "DDR-Autorinnen mußten sich umstellen und einstellen auf die Bedingungen, unter denen westliche Autorinnen seit je leben, auf die Marktwirtschaft... Der Broterwerb muß durch Lesereisen, Arbeiten für Funk, Fernsehen, Film usw. usf. gesichert werden."

The need to find an alternative income uncovers other changes in the social system: A greater amount of women had been employed in East Germany than in the West, and they had had the advantage of canteen meals and of creches that were run by the state, a luxury no longer found. Another factor that the women of East Germany fought for as their country faced integration into the West German system was the right to abort an unwanted child. It is the women who by nature prefer stability to change. They are more committed to human concerns than choosing a career.

Best known of the East German female authors is certainly Christa Wolf. Her first post-unification work was eagerly awaited, as she is well known for her early stance as exemplified in *Der geteilte Himmel* (1963), in which she defended Socialism and called upon East Germans to work together in the building of a functioning, socialist society. Burmeister will have had this book in mind as she wrote *Norma*, fashioning the plot and some of her characters after those of Christa Wolf's early work and thereby showing how the game has changed, but the rules are still the same. Both Rita and Marianne follow their partners to

⁴ Eva KAUFMANN, 'Adieu Cassandra? Schriftstellerinnen aus der DDR vor, in und nach der Wende', p.222, *Women and the Wende: Social Effects and Cultural Reflections on the reunification Process*, ed. Boa and Janet Wharton, Amsterdam, Atlanta, 1994

the West, but then return to their familiar East German environment. For Rita, it is the time of the building of the Berlin Wall. For Marianne it is the time of it being torn down.

Parallels can also be drawn between *Norma* and Christa Wolf's short story *Juninachmittag* (1967). In Brigitte Burmeister's novel, the narrator's husband, Johannes, would like to spend the coming holidays in Ligurien, where they holidayed the year before. Marianne is not interested, however, and would prefer to remain closer to home, on the Baltic coast:

An der Ostsee, wiederholte ich. Wo wir uns kennengelernt haben, falls du dich Erinnerst, und kriegen konnten, die herrlichsten Ferien überhaupt und seit dem ersten Augenblick am Strand, im Wasser, nur noch Glück, sagte ich (p.104).

The ability that Marianne has to find everything she needs within the borders of East Germany makes her strikingly similar to the narrator of *Juninachmittag*. While the husband there drools over the thought of Italy, the wife enthuses over holidays spent on the Baltic coast. Within East Germany, Christa Wolf's narrator finds paradise achievable. Her family do not need to travel to the Mediterranean in order to feel the sun, smell the pine needles and watch the fruit grow:

Die Sonne...hatte schon angefangen, sein Haar zu bleichen. Im Laufe des Sommers und besonders in den Ferien an der Ostsee würde wieder jener Goldhelm zustande kommen...[...]und der süßliche Duft von fast verblühten Akazien mischte sich mit dem fremden Geruch von Macchiastauden und Pinien...⁵

Summer and winter, the child smells of herbs that its parents do not know, "die es aber geben mußte, denn das Kind roch nach ihnen". The child is a part of the

⁵ Christa WOLF, 'Juninachmittag', 1967

paradisical world, that is potentially within reach and he can already experience reality. In these texts, both Brigitte Burmeister and Christa Wolf both show a lack of need to go beyond the borders of East Germany, in as much as their protagonists find happiness at home.

Since the Wall came down, three books have been published by Christa Wolf. The first was *Was bleibt*, which came out in 1990, and still deals with the situation that prevailed at the time before the fall of the wall. The other two books deal directly with 'die Wende', first in essay form in *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou* (1994) and then in the form of the fictional work, *Medea* (1996). *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou* is a collection of speeches, essays, letters and journal entries that record the author's experiences and opinions between 1990 and 1994. Her disapproval of the reunification is evident as she speaks of post-1989 Berlin as "diese() vereinigte() Stadt mit ihren zwei Gesellschaften" in which "die gegenseitige Fremdheit jetzt tiefer einschneidet als vorher, als die Mauer stand, die uns auf Abstand hielt, so daß die einen die anderen bedauern, die anderen die einen beneiden konnten." Christa Wolf goes on to quote "einer von diesen ewigen Mauermalern": "ALLES WIRD BESSER, NICHTS WIRD GUT"⁶. In *Medea* the immigrants from Kolchis that make themselves a place in Corinthian society are the ones that let go of the superior Kolcher traditions and - embracing the materialism of the new society - do not mind that the city of Corinth is founded on a lie.⁷ This seems to be a parallel to the East Germans' embrace of the West, although Christa Wolf herself plays this down: "Manche Kritiker haben das Buch

⁶ Christa WOLF, *Auf dem Weg nach Tabou: Texte 1990-1994*, Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994, pp.56/7

⁷ "Es ist nämlich so: Entweder ich bin von Sinnen, oder ihre Stadt ist auf ein Verbrechen gegründet." (*Medea*, p.15). Christa WOLF, *Medea - Stimmen*, Gütersloh: Luchterhand Literaturverlag GmbH, 1996

übrigens als Kommentar zum West-Ost-Gegensatz, absurdersweise sogar als Schlüsselroman gelesen... Ich glaube in der Bearbeitungszeit des Themas seit 1992 bin ich immer weiter weg getrieben worden von den ursprünglich vielleicht sich aufdrängenden Ost-West-Vergleichen.”⁸

Like Christa Wolf, Helga Königsdorf regretted the demise of the GDR but was aware of its inevitability. Reflecting on the time before reunification, she commented: “Die besten von uns arbeiteten an korrigierten Entwürfen als es längst dafür zu spät war”.⁹ Since 1989 she has written many short stories and essays that contain a lot of ‘Ostalgie’ (nostalgic feelings for East Germany) including ‘Aus dem Dilemma eine Chance machen’, ‘Ohne den Ort zu wechseln, gehen wir in die Fremde’ (1990), ‘Gleich neben Afrika’ (1992) and the novel ‘Im Schatten des Regenbogens’ (1993).

While Christa Wolf and Helga Königsdorf stayed committed to their background, other East German writers, notably Monika Maron and Irina Liebmann had already moved to West Germany in the eighties. Even while she was living in East Germany, Maron had to have the more important of her fictional works published in the West. *Flugasche*, a criticism of the environmental problems at Bitterfeld, is one such work. She had already begun writing *Stille Zeile sechs* (published 1991) before the historical events of 1989, and in 1996 the book *Animal Triste* was released. It describes through a love relationship that fails the radical life-style change of a woman living in the changing society in the new united Germany. In her essayistic work, Monika Maron indicates that she wanted a united Germany,

⁸ ‘Sind Sie noch eine Leitfigur, Frau Wolf?’, *Tagesspiegel*, 30 April, 1996

⁹ As cited in Wolfgang EMMERICH, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR*, Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1996, p.461

but that the reunification has not turned out as she would have liked it to.¹⁰

Irina Liebmann responded to the reunification of Germany with the novel *In Berlin* (1994). It is the story of a woman who flies back into East Berlin after spending time in Vienna on a visitor's visa. It is a love story caught up in the whirlwind of the 'Wende', and the main protagonist must question why she loses her direction once in West Berlin. Memories of her childhood mingle with events in the present, until suddenly the future is also in sight. Irina Liebmann's novel is aptly described in the blurb: "ein mutiges Buch. Sie fragt nach den Bedingungen unserer Existenz, nach den Ursachen von Blockaden und Gewalt in den privaten Beziehungen ebenso wie in den politischen Verhältnissen in Deutschland. Ein Buch, das sich ins Offene wagt."¹¹ The chapter headings of the book can almost be read as rhetorical questions that the narrator is asking herself: "Wann soll denn die Änderung eintreten?", "Aber gestern, wie war das gestern?"

This 'stream of consciousness' narration covers many of the issues found in *Norma*, and uses similar imagery:

Wer in diesem Haus schläft, schläft im rechten Winkel einer Hausecke nahe der Straßenbahn über einem Hof voller Katzen. Bei geöffnetem Fenster hört er Tiergeschrei und das Quietschen von Metall auf Metall, in Abständen füllen die Krachlawinen der Flugzeug im Anflug auf Tegel das Zimmer. Andere Geräusche der Nacht kommen von Sirenen, Lastwagen, aneinanderknallenden Waggons auf dem Rangierbahnhof (p.14)

¹⁰ "Ich selbst begann in dem Maße die deutsche Einheit zu wollen, wie die Argumente für die deutsche Teilung mir verdächtig wurden. Inzwischen ist mir die Einheit zum Alptraum geworden". Monika MARON, 'Zonophobie', *Kursbuch*, Berlin: Rowohlt, September 1992, Issue 109, p.91

¹¹ Irina LIEBMANN, *In Berlin*, Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1994

The constant references to the Straßenbahn (pp.14, 18, 44, 45, etc.) and other forms of rail-wagons (S-Bahn, p.45, etc.; U-Bahn, p.130, etc.) function in a similar way to a leitmotiv, as they bring to mind Christa Wolf's book *Divided Heaven* and the themes that it encompasses. All three books discuss similar issues, as they explore how their female protagonists cope when societal changes separate them from their partners.

Like Maron and Liebmann, Helga Schubert welcomed the freedom to express opinions that came about with reunification. In *Die Andersdenkende* (1994) she writes:

Ich will doch auf eigenen existentiellen Wunsch möglichst autonom denken und handeln, und das bedeutet doch abgegrenzt und unabhängig von andern Menschen, ihre Meinung achtend, aber auch verlangend, daß sie meine Meinung anhören und respektieren, sozusagen als gleichberechtigte Stimme. (p.204)

The book is a collection of 29 texts (short stories, newspaper articles and essays) that were written between 1972 and 1993. Although she stayed in East Germany until the collapse of the Socialist state, Schubert has revealed in her post-unification prose that she was happy to whole-heartedly follow the leadership of Chancellor Kohl and to take on his vision for the future. Beth Alldred¹² calls attention to the similar background that she shares with Brigitte Burmeister, and also to their differing reactions to the Wende. Both are freelance authors that were born in 1940 and that saw problems in the East German society that they were raised in, but their opinions differ on the topic of a solution for those problems. Helga Schubert can be seen to stand at the opposite end of the spectrum to Christa Wolf. Where the former seems to represent one extreme, namely that of embracing the West

¹² Beth ALLDRED, 'Two contrasting perspectives on German unification: Helga Schubert and Brigitte Burmeister', *German Life and Letters* 50: 2 April 1997

and all that goes with it, the latter is situated at the opposite extreme: still strongly defending Socialism and grieving over the disappearance of the DDR. Where then, is Brigitte Burmeister situated on this spectrum?

That is indeed one of the major questions that I wish to address in this investigation. I will also seek to discover the intentions with which Brigitte Burmeister wrote the novel *Unter dem Namen Norma*. How is her view of the process and progress of reunification revealed in the book, and how is the past dealt with; a past which, although it has been left behind, still determines the lives of the people she describes? Are there any lessons that she has learnt from Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's work on Germany's inability to come to terms with the Nazi past that Burmeister can now apply to some extent to the reflection on another past regime? Her dialogue with Margarete Mitscherlich seems to be a hinge between the two.

The answers are contained, so it seems, in the very location which Burmeister chooses for her novel: a tenement block situated in the heart of Berlin, almost right on the line that divided East from West. Its location is also that of a street of major historical importance, so that the house seems to have witnessed and to contain this history. What are the responses from the various factions that are represented in the past and present occupants of such a house? I would like to consider how Brigitte Burmeister makes use of the milieu she has chosen to develop her ideas, and how her aesthetic approach, including the use of techniques such as the leitmotif, supports her intentions. I will also show how the book *Unter dem Namen Norma* is a response to Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich's book *Die Unfähigkeit zu*

trauern. The way of dealing, or rather *not* dealing with the past that the Mitscherlichs reject seems to be mirrored in the character of Johannes in *Norma*, and is rejected also by Burmeister. How does each character respond to the demise of the GDR, in which their identities are founded? Johannes changes his identity, refusing to waste another thought on the GDR, unlike the character Marianne, who responds by delving into the past, thereby clinging to her identity. Characteristically, as with the women authors mentioned, it is the women in the text who are given this task. Finally, after discussing the above issues, it will become evident whether or not the book that Marianne and Norma discuss in the closing moments of the novel ("Kormoran - der letzte Zeuge", p.284) refers solely to Hermann Kant's novel *Kormoran* (1994) or whether it can also be seen as the story that they themselves star in: "Ein Roman, auf den schon alle warten. Er handelt von den Abenteuern eines Arbeiterbauern in vierzig ungelebten Jahren." (p.284)

Similar to Helga Königsdorf, Christa Wolf, Monika Maron and others, Brigitte Burmeister's fictional work is embedded in a series of essays and interviews. The more important of these are:

Wir haben ein Berührungstabu (1991)

'Keine Macht, aber Spielraum' (1991)¹³

'Schriftsteller in gewendeten Verhältnissen' (1994)¹⁴

'Die Tugend der Rücksichtslosigkeit' (1994)¹⁵

'Ein Roman aus Berlin Mitte' (1995)¹⁶

¹³ Anna MUDRY (ed), *Gute Nacht, Du Schöne - Autorinnen blicken zurück*, Frankfurt am Main: Luchterhand Literatur Verlag, 1991

¹⁴ Brigitte BURMEISTER, 'Schriftsteller in verwendeten Verhältnissen', *Sinn und Form*, 4/1994

¹⁵ Hella KAISER, 'Die Tugend der Rücksichtslosigkeit', *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 22.10.1994

¹⁶ Sabine KEBIR, 'Ein Roman aus Berlin-Mitte', *Lesart*, 1/95

‘Haben Sie noch die Mauer im Kopf, Frau Burmeister?’
(1995)¹⁷

The following is a summary of the views she expresses in these texts, along with selected quotations. According to Brigitte Burmeister, there is a tendency to see the German Democratic Republic as having been either black or white, and that view needs to be changed, for it is not true: “Wenn ich irgendetwas gelernt hab seit der Wende, dann, daß die ehemalige DDR alles andere als einheitlich, leicht durchschaubar, auf einen Nenner zu bringen ist”.¹⁸ It is now that unemployment, high rents, high taxes and health insurance premiums are seriously impacting on the lives of people that the security that surrounded East Germans is becoming more widely appreciated by them. The freedom of speech and movement and the availability of goods and services have come only at a price:

“Auch das Sparen von Zeit und Kraft auf dieser Ebene schlägt nicht so recht zu Buche, weil man sich rumplagen muß mit einer ausgefeilten Bürokratie, Versicherungen, Steuern, Anträgen aller Art, einem Haufen unverlangter Post und gerade, wenn wenig Geld da ist, mit der ständigen Jagd nach günstigen Möglichkeiten”.¹⁹

As Burmeister sees it, when the GDR broke apart, so did the safety, security and direction that was a part of it, leaving a vacuum, because there was no time allowed to farewell the old society while adjusting to the new:

Es hätte allenfalls die Möglichkeit gegeben, sich gemeinschaftlich eine Zeit des Ausprobierens und des Sich-Ablösens von den alten Verhältnissen zu gestatten und auch auszulernen. Das ist nicht passiert.²⁰

¹⁷ ‘Haben Sie noch die Mauer im Kopf, Frau Burmeister?’ , *Der Tagesspiegel*, 9 November 1995

¹⁸ *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu*, p.117

¹⁹ *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu*, p.111

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.15

Burmeister's views can perhaps be best summarised in her remarks about the present time. On life since reunification, Brigitte Burmeister comments "Mein altes Fremdheitsgefühl ist inzwischen verwandelt - in ein neues".²¹ The plight of the East Germans thrown suddenly into Western society emerges in Burmeister's book *Unter dem Namen Norma* (1994). Like Anders, the first person narrator of the author's earlier work, Marianne Arends, is condemned to an 'Aufenthalt in der Fremde'. Indeed, Arends is an anagram of Anders, a fact that critic Michael Braun draws attention to.²² Marianne's truths and memories are similar to the experiences of David Anders. Anders speaks of "Freiheit, brüderliche Liebe, Gerechtigkeit"²³ just as Marianne values "Freiheit, Gleichheit, Brüderlichkeit" (*Norma*, p.285). Like Marianne Arends (p.211), David Anders sees strangers that are "Wie aus dem Buche."²⁴ Both struggle to understand the different actions and attitudes displayed by a foreign group of people.

Burmeister has also commented specifically on *Norma*. Part of the process of adaptation to the new, reunified Germany for Marianne is to come to terms with the East German past, which should not simply be deleted from memory. Those who have grown up in the German Democratic Republic have been conditioned by the ideas and ideologies of that society. Their past cannot be swept under the mat, as the memories of fascism had been, according to Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich.²⁵ Now that all Germans may well share a

²¹ *Sinn und Form*, 4/1994, p.654

²² Michael BRAUN, 'Fremd in einem Dschungel, der Deutschland heißt', *Basler Zeitung*, Buchmessenbeilage, 5.10.1994

²³ Brigitte BURMEISTER, *Anders, oder, Aufenthalt in der Fremde; ein kleiner Roman*, Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1987

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.49

²⁵ "...Daß zwischen dem in der Bundesrepublik herrschenden politischen und sozialen Immobilismus und Provinzialismus einerseits und der hartnäckig aufrechterhaltenen Abwehr von Erinnerungen, insbesondere der Sperrung gegen eine Gefühlsbeteiligung an

common future as a nation, they must also share their past lives with one another in order to understand one another better. Only then will the mental wall between the two peoples be removed once and for all. "Immerhin" says Burmeister, "gibt es jetzt die Möglichkeit, sich die Realität anzuschauen, sie nicht nur zu messen an den Bildern, die man sich von ferne gemacht hat, oder stehenzubleiben bei den Urteilen auf den ersten Blick."²⁶ Pulling down 'die Mauer in den Köpfen'²⁷ by building up the memories is something Burmeister aims for in the writing of *Norma*: "Vor allem wollte ich wohl Erinnerungen bewahren."²⁸ The house in the novel becomes a store house of these memories.

Burmeister keeps as close to her own memories and experiences as she can, trying not to invent too much, so that she does not stray from the true memories of East Germany: "Dicht an den eigenen Erfahrungen wollte sie bleiben, möglichst wenig ausdenken"²⁹. She tries also to be tactful, so as not to offend anyone ("niemanden verletzen, nicht taktlos werden"), although she also admits she does not put much effort into the attempt "einer DDR-Mentalität Rechnung zu tragen, aber auch nicht, für Westdeutsche besonders verständlich zu sein". She realises that the book will be read differently in the East than in the West, and she finds this is a good thing,³⁰ recognising that the unity of Germany exists only on political documents at this stage. "Wer hat mit diesem Ausmaß an Fremdheit und sogar

den jetzt verleugneten Vorgängen der Vergangenheit andererseits ein determinierender Zusammenhang besteht", *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, p.9

²⁶ *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu*, p.16

²⁷ A term widely used in Germany. Critic Andreas Rumler says: "Offenbar ist die deutsch-deutsche Grenze mit ihrem tödlichen Waffen-Arsenal nach der Wiedervereinigung abgelöst worden durch eine Mauer in den Köpfen der Bürger der nun vergrößerten Bundesrepublik" ('Westmenschen - "Wie im Buche"', *Deutsche Welle*, date unknown)

²⁸ Hella KAISER

²⁹ *ibid.*

Aversion gerechnet, die seither zu spüren sind?", she asks. She wishes that people's attitudes would be more of interest and respect, like when one travels in a foreign country: "Begegnung mit Neugier und Respekt, wie sie bei Reisen in fremde Länder selbstverständlich sind".³¹ Instead there are stereotypes that need to be identified and removed:

In den Verständigungsschwierigkeiten zwischen Deutschen aus Ost und West können jetzt erst die nichtideologisierten, die realen Differenzen wirklich hervortreten, Unterschiede in Erfahrungen und Mentalitäten, für deren Artikulation es keine gemeinsame Sprache gibt.³²

Brigitte Burmeister's views seem to come together in the novel *Norma*.

The response of critics to *Norma* ranges from Rainer Moritz's description of "steifer, eher biederer Prosa" to Sibylle Cramer's "welch gescheites, welch schönes Buch". I will look at the views of the critics now in more detail, paying particular attention to what they say about the tenement block and its residents.

Although she concedes that the world of the tenement block bears witness to a certain historical awareness to be found among its residents at a time of transition between the past and the future, Juliane Sattler comments: "das Fenster zum Hof öffnet ja nicht den Blick auf die große Weltpolitik"³³. I would like to disagree, as it seems to me that Burmeister wants to show precisely in which ways the 'große Weltpolitik' impacts on the lives of those that

³⁰ "Daß das Buch im Ost und West wohl 'unterschiedlich' gelesen und verstanden wird, scheint ihr sicher, ja, erstrebenswert." Hella KAISER.

³¹ Hella KAISER

³¹ Brigitte BURMEISTER, *Gute Nacht, Du Schöne*, p.36

³³ Juliane SATTLER, 'Das Fenster zum Hof', *Hessische/Niedersächsische Allgemeine*, 20 January 1995

Marianne watches from her window. Andreas Rumler³⁴ is closer to the mark when he comments that the house, like its inhabitants, “repräsentiert” “fast wie ein Symbol Stadt und Geschichte des Landes”. Burmeister uses the small details of the apartment block to represent wider aspects of society. Eva Kaufmann³⁵ uses the example of the stairwell to put this point across. Marianne describes the stairwell as “dämmerig und still” although her estranged husband sees the same area as “finster und öde”. “Offensichtlich”, Kaufmann points out, “spielen in diesen konträren Urteilen über ein unschuldiges Treppenhaus die gesamten Lebensorientierungen der Streitenden mit.” Burmeister’s use of small details to make much larger comments, a point I will further deal with later, is well summarised by Eva Kaufmann:

In unzähligen Details vermittelt der Roman ein Bild der allgemeinen Konfliktlage, die sich sowohl im polemisch aufgeladenen öffentlichen Diskurs als auch in der privaten Kommunikation niederschlägt.

Thomas Kraft draws a strikingly apt parallel between the apartment block and an office desk “aus dem die Erzählerin je nach Bedarf die entsprechenden Schubladen herauszieht, um ihre Geschichte vorantreiben und gleichzeitig vorsichtig abrunden zu können.”³⁶ One story that the narrator comes up with uses material from many of these drawers, but its main plot comes from her imagination. It is the story of someone who was as much a perpetrator as a victim that Marianne tells a guest at her husband’s West German party. This story has brought differing reactions from the critics. Thomas Kraft suggests that the narrator knows, as

³⁴ Andreas RUMLER, “Westmenschen - “Wie im Buche””, *Deutsche Welle DP/ZR-Kultur*, no date given

³⁵ Eva KAUFMANN, “Handlung ohne erkennbaren Grund”?, *Neue deutsche Literatur*, September/October 1994

³⁶ Thomas KRAFT, ‘Noch immer in der DDR gefangen’, *Hannoversche Allgemeine*, 18 March 1995

does Saint-Just, whose biography she translates, that "Herkunft ohne Schuld nicht sein kann".³⁷ Detlef Kuhlbrodt suggests that Marianne tells the story out of boredom at a party of glazed-faced people: "Aus Überdruß am gelangweilt dahin-plätschernden Small talk erzählt sie einer desinteressierten West-Tussi...eine ausgedachte Biographie".³⁸ To Andreas Rumler, Marianne is prevented from starting anew because of feelings of fear and inferiority.³⁹ As previously quoted, Brigitte Burmeister stresses the different reception of the book in East and West Germany. This is what Andreas Rumler has recognised when he states: "West- und Ost-Leser dürften ihre Motive je nach dem spezifischen Erfahrungshintergrund anders bewerten". Sabine Kebir speaks of "eine Heldin mit Opferakte" whose husband should realise the story is fictional "durch die Verwendung des Namens der gemeinsamen Freundin".⁴⁰

This brings us to another aspect of the novel that is interpreted differently by different critics: the existence of Norma. Sabine Kebir recognises Norma to be the "zweites Ich" of Marianne and she understands the friend to be a physical actuality. Michael Braun also sees Norma as a citizen of Berlin, one who has formed her new German identity and concept of the enemy.⁴¹ Thomas Kraft mentions Marianne's "quirilige, pragmatische Freundin Norma", Bruno Preisendörfer comments on Marianne's best friend and Leonore Schwartz sees Norma as the "Hoffnungsträgerin und Identitätsstütze" of Marianne. Other authors look closer

³⁷ Thomas KRAFT

³⁸ Detlef KULHRODT, 'Menschen mit rosig goldener Glasur', *die tageszeitung Berlin (taz)* - Buchmessenbeilage, 5 October 1994

³⁹ Andreas RUMLER

⁴⁰ Sabine KEBIR

⁴¹ "Sowohl Max...als auch Norma, die beste Freundin, haben sich ihre neuen deutschen Identitäten und Feindbilder bereits gebildet.", Michael BRAUN

however, and describe Norma as “eine Erfindung”⁴² or “eine Erscheinung”⁴³. To back up her argument that Norma may be a figment of Marianne’s obviously active imagination, Susanne Ledanff refers to page 95 of the book; Marianne reasons with Johannes using the argument: “Weil die unsichtbaren Mauern das Wesentliche waren, braucht man über Erscheinungen wie Norma nicht zu reden”. Ledanff then goes on to question whether Norma is perhaps a “Realitätsprinzip gegen die Rationalisierungsmechanismen der Vergangenheit, die in der Gegenwart fortgesetzt werden?”

Another character that some critics have mistakenly understood to be real is Marianne’s ‘daughter’, Emilia. Detlef Kuhlbrodt, Walter Emmerich and Frank Wehdeking all describe how Marianne goes back to East Berlin and “bleibt mit der Tochter”. As Thomas Kraft points out, Marianne is childless. Emilia is imaginary, to use Marianne’s own words, the child is a “Kopfgeburt”. I will discuss this later in detail.

We have seen the intentions with which Burmeister wrote this novel and we have looked at some interpretations and misinterpretations of the critics, along with some intentions which are clearly overlooked by those who have commented on the book. Now we need to look at the book itself in closer detail and the intentions of the first person narrator, Marianne.

Like Brigitte Burmeister, Marianne, who has many things in common with Burmeister, is interested in recording memories of East Germany, so that they are not lost forever as the transition into a new society takes place. Marianne’s

⁴² Sibylle CRAMER, ‘Deutsche Zustände und die offenen Felder im Gefüge der Gegenwart’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Buchmessenbeilage, 5 October 1994

⁴³ Susanne Ledanff, p.26

stream of consciousness is full of stories of her own past, the earlier years of those who live or have lived in the tenement block and thoughts of how things used to be east of the Elbe. In her desire to uncover the past, even searching through the communal rubbish bins is not out of the question. She also considers joining the manual workers drinking beer in the garden after work, in order to ask them about the differences in pipes, vents and taps since reunification: "Nicht Preisunterschiede, sage ich, ich meine die Eigenschaften." (pp.166/7) She wonders if she could pin an advertisement to the noticeboard:

"Wer hilft mir beim Sammeln von Erinnerungen? Suche Tagebücher, Briefe, Dokumente aus vierzig Jahren. Marianne Arends, Aufgang B, vier Treppen." (p.167)

Maybe she could invite people to a discussion group with the theme "Unsere Biografien"? But these are just passing thoughts, as she imagines the wrong people coming, the wrong things being said. Finally she concludes that leading was never a strength of hers and "organisieren auch nicht" (p.170) and she pictures someone approaching her and recording her memories:

Gute Mikrophone, geschlossene Fenster, mehr ist nicht nötig. Es wird alles aufgezeichnet, in einem beliebigen Augenblick. Nichts besonderes muß gesagt werden, ganz im Gegenteil, auf die Alltagsrede kommt es an... (p.170)

One thing she has done to keep the events of the last two years, the reunification, from becoming "zwei Jahre[n] Tumult in [ihrer] Erinnerung" is to write a journal ("eine Art Chronik") of what happened. On her birthday, and the first birthday of the fall of the wall, she records individual events and their chronological order, so that she can be sure in years to come, that her memories are correct: "mir schwarz auf weiß bestätigt, daß bestimmte Ereignisse sich zugetragen hatten von einem Herbst bis zum übernächsten" (p.197). The journal gives account of

national events ("Im März fanden unsere ersten Wahlen statt"), of Marianne's own actions ("Ich unterbrach meine Arbeit, wenn im Radio eine Sitzung des zentralen Runden Tisches oder der Volkskammer übertragen wurde") and of her own opinions ("Wir mußten den Sieg der Mehrheit verwinden" - compare to Burmeister's "Wut auf die blöden Massen", p.1 above). Brigitte Burmeister herself has mentioned that she would have liked to have been able to write "eine persönliche Chronik" using a diary, but as she did not keep a diary over that time, she eagerly awaits "Erlebnisberichte" of others.⁴⁴

We move now from journal-entries to junkmail. Burmeister extends her comment about junkmail, as quoted earlier (p.12 of thesis), by making the same comment through the narrator. Marianne arrives back from West Germany to find the proof of capitalism cluttering her floor. In a society where newspapers carried no advertisements, junkmail was unheard of. Marianne notices: "Die Freunde im Urlaub schreiben wenig... Die Unbekannten aber vergessen dich nicht..." (p.187) Earlier Marianne had painted a mental picture for Max about how she could imagine the future: Johannes with a new wife and perhaps a little child. She describes the "bunten Vorlagen" and a table set for breakfast in the garden. The junkmail is to her a symbol of the West and the capitalism that it embraces. This parallels with Burmeister's own views, as expressed in the interview with Margarete Mitscherlich:

"Auch das Sparen von Zeit und Kraft auf dieser Ebene schlägt nicht so recht zu Buche, weil man sich rumplagen muß mit einer ausgefeilten Bürokratie, Versicherung, Steuern, Anträgen aller Art, einem Haufen unverlangter Post..."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Brigitte BURMEISTER/Gerti TETZNER, 'Keine Macht, aber Spielraum', *Gute Nacht, Du Schöne*, p.56

⁴⁵ *Wir haben ein Berührungstabus*, p.111

Seen in context with a comment made earlier, Brigitte Burmeister's view of the "glänzender, glatter, geplegter" side of the capitalist West is not necessarily condemning: but it was a "sinnlich wahrnehmbarer Unterschied, anziehend und abstoßend, insgesamt spannend".⁴⁶

Marianne's curiosity of the Hausmeister, Kühne, is typical of her interest in people's pasts. Together with Norma, she tries to guess what sort of life he has led, and pastes a possible past to him. Norma suggests that Marianne ask him outright, but she considers the idea stupid: "So naiv kann nur Norma sein." (p.19) Marianne's quest for memories is hindered by her passiveness. She imagines conversations with people, yet she never initiates them: for her it is more comfortable to research alone. The letters she reads are the decades of correspondence to the sisters Minnie and Ella König, who once resided in the tenement block, from a friend now living in America. It amuses Norma that it is not where they are buried that interests Marianne, but rather which sister pencilled in her and her sister's eyebrows. Marianne tries to explain to Norma that that act would have been "Die letzte Linie des Widerstands", a faint mark of protest. (p.27) Eye-liner is the last link that they had with the 'golden twenties' that they grew up in. They did not feel at home in either the Third Reich or the German Democratic Republic. I will look further into this in the following chapter.

Of her own past, Marianne remembers, among other things, her time working in the factory in her student years, and the holidays spent on Rügen. One very vivid recollection is that of the "Volksaufstand" on 17 June 1953. What she retells is the story of a child who keeps her opinions from her communist friend not for fear of the friend informing

⁴⁶ *Wir haben ein Berührungstabu*, p.74

the Stasi, but because she did not want to lose the friendship: "Sie hätte mit die Freundschaft gekündigt, wenn ich sie zu meiner, mich zu ihrer Gegnerin erklärte - das stellte ich mich vor, nichts anderes, und davor hatte ich Angst." (p.69)

This is also the first example of the second area of Marianne's intentions, following her desire to record the memories of the GDR. The book is framed by three 'revolutions': the French revolution, the uprising in East Germany in 1953 and the process of reunification which is, in Marianne's opinion, still under way socially, if not politically. The French revolution failed morally, in Marianne's view, due to the bloody terror involved, and the 1953 uprising was brutally squashed, but the end of the book ends optimistically, as Marianne considers how the third could succeed.

The book is divided into two large chapters. The first is titled simply "Am 17. Juni", and brings with it the associations of the 1953 uprising. Although the workers that initiated the riots in East Berlin and throughout the cities of the Soviet Zone did succeed in temporarily delaying the increase of work quotas, their rebellion had more far reaching consequences. By the end of the day it was obvious that the Soviet Union was prepared to allow their military presence to squash any attempt to destabilise the system, and it was equally obvious that West Germany and the Western powers were not willing to do anything about that. For every political prisoner that was freed, more were imprisoned, and although the party underwent purges, it merely made the SED stronger. The people were asking for social changes, but the changes they got were political, and were not necessarily an improvement. Ulbricht took the opportunity to throw out

any remaining politicians who were not Communist hard-liners. It is not the political consequences that stand out in Marianne's memory forty years later. It is the social aspects: how her mother couldn't get to her school because of the demonstrations in the centre city, how they had to stay at home that evening, and could hear gunfire from the house, and how she kept quiet about her opinion that the uprising was a cry for freedom, because she feared losing a friendship: "Unsere Freundschaft hielt, solange wir den Graben links liegen ließen", she tells Max, her lover.

The second chapter of the book is headed with the title 'Am 14. Juli', and therefore brings with it the associations of the storming of the Bastille on that day in 1789. The theme of the French revolution is carried through to the book that Marianne is presently translating, which is a biography of the revolutionary, Antoine de Saint-Just. Of Brigitte Burmeister's use of this era of French history, Christine Cosentino comments: "Wahrnehmung und Akzeptanz fußen auf den vielversprechenden utopischen Anfängen der französischen Revolution, die die Ich-Erzählerin im Jugendbildnis des Saint-Just am reinsten ausgeprägt sieht."⁴⁷ On 17 June, Marianne is in the process of translating the chapter "Die Schönheit der Jugend", dealing with the utopian ideals of Saint-Just and the 1789 storming of the Bastille. Later, as she tries to integrate into the West in the year 1992, she is translating the events of the "Terrorjahr 1792" which ends with the death of not only Ludwig XVI, but also the death of Saint-Just himself. Marianne explains to Norma how Saint-Just "glaubte wie sein Freund Maximilien Robespierre an die vorläufige

⁴⁷ Christine Cosentino, 'Ostdeutsche Autoren Mitte der neunziger Jahre', *Germanic Review* 71/3, Summer 1996,

Notwendigkeit des Terrors im Dienste der Tugend." (*Norma*, p.270) This phrase is significant in two ways.

Firstly, it is a phrase that was often used by the leaders of Communism, especially in the time of Stalin. Translated to the East German situation, it was used, for instance, to excuse and explain the hardships that the people had to endure. The five year plan of 1952 focused on the building up of heavy industry in Eastern Germany, while allowing for only the minimum production of consumer goods. As a result, while their brothers in the West were experiencing the Economic Miracle, East Germans were struggling to get by. The constant excuse given by the Stalinists was that this time of hardship was necessary in order to bring about a better Socialist future. By 1989, such a notion was utterly rejected even by those who still wanted a new Socialism in the German Democratic Republic after 1989. Their ideal was now a 'Socialism with a human face' on the model of the short lived Prague Spring of 1968.

Secondly, the idea of "die vorläufige Notwendigkeit des Terrors im Dienste der Tugend" echoes a conversation overheard by Marianne a month earlier. Two men were discussing present times, and one commented that "Köpfe hätten rollen müssen. Hier auf dem Alex, wo die Brillenträger Revolution gespielt haben." He is referring to the demonstrations led by intellectuals such as Christa Wolf in October 1989, and suggests that if shots had been fired as the German Democratic Republic collapsed, the

conditions now would be clearer. Instead of blood flowing, compromises were reached.⁴⁸

Marianne's opposing stance on this is clearly shown later on. She quotes Saint-Just's statement "Das Glück ist ein neuer Gedanke in Europa", and Norma suggests this as a good theme for Max to speak on when sealing the 'Freundschaftsbund' between the two women. The phrase itself is not new, but it still applies, as it was never fulfilled. The phrase "Freiheit, Gleichkeit, Brüderlichkeit" is also used.⁴⁹ Marianne would like to see the positive values that the French revolution stood for developed in the new, reunified Germany, and she sees that as possibility, encouraged by the fact that for once, a 'bloodless revolution' had led to the overthrow of the old regime. Her intention is to ensure that the events will have a better ending this time.

As Marianne sees it, the breaking down of stereotypes and the building up of friendships between those with different backgrounds are essential elements if "das Glück" is to be truly established in Europe. This is to be carried out by acknowledging that no one, oneself included, is innocent enough to cast the first stone. Following on from that, one must sweep before one's own door before trying to improve the lot of others. One must resist the choice between forgetting on the one hand or clinging to one's hate on the other:

Und wir selbst...sind so unschuldig nicht, daß wir den ersten Stein werfen dürfen. ...Halten wir dennoch den Besen fest, mit dem wir vor der eignen Tür zu kehren haben! Lassen wir uns nicht beirren, nach dem eigenen Platz in der großen Verstrickung zu fragen, nach der Mitschuld unseres Formats!

⁴⁸ *Norma*, p.81

⁴⁹ *Norma*, p.285

Widerstehen wir der Wahl zwischen vergessen und
hundert Jahren Haß!⁵⁰

After this speech by Max Marianne is moved "wie Tante Ruth es gewesen war nach einer guten Predigt". She has seen first-hand how destructive 'die Mauer im Kopf' can be. Unable to come to terms with the stereotypical elements of her husband's West German friends, she finally created a story to complete a picture of herself to fit the mold the West Germans have of those from the East. Or maybe to become what *she* considered to be the West German view. Together with her 'zweites Ich', Norma, she often created backgrounds for the people that she observed in day-to-day life. As July 14 draws to an end, however, she finds she no longer wants to pin any history to a person if it is not their own:

Keinem, auch dem Langhaarigen nicht, konnte ich eine wahre Geschichte anhängen, die nicht seine war. Aber niemals wieder würde ich eine erfinden. Morgen das Buch wieder aufschlagen und weiter übersetzen dort, wo Johannes mich gestern Abend unterbrochen hatte, im Kapitel über Saint-Just und seine Freunde. (p.270).

Here, Marianne seems to pay attention the words of Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich, who put forward the question: "Wie kommt es denn zu derart unerschütterlichen Überzeugungen, in denen sich Bruchstücke von Realität und unsere Einbildung vermengen?" (*Die Unfähigkeit...*, p.135). The Mitscherlichs' and Brigitte Burmeister's answer to this question will be examined in a later chapter.

Eva Kaufmann picks up on the main protagonist's yearning for "Sprechen ohne Hintersinn und Nebenton" without "die alten Töne der Kritik" and "die neuen der Rechtfertigung" (*Norma*, p.10). She sees this, quite rightly, as an intention of the book. Marianne wants to be able to speak

⁵⁰ *Norma*, p.282

the truth plainly, without having to disguise it or hide it.

We have seen that Marianne's intentions as she is faced by a changing society are to collect memories of the people and circumstances in the society she grew up in, to promote in her own life values that will help form the most promising future, and to break down the barriers that remain between East and West Germans. Instead of an 'Unfähigkeit zu trauern', which shuts out the past, she seems to demonstrate a real capacity for making the past come alive. The revolutions that frame these intentions are seen within the framework of the tenement block as the dates around which the action of the book is structured are 17 June and 14 July.

In the following chapters, I will show to what extent Brigitte Burmeister has realised her intentions in the writing of *Unter dem Namen Norma*, how her view of reunification is revealed through the novel, and how she uses her chosen milieu to develop these ideas. After my investigation, it should be possible to see in which ways *Norma* is a response to the book *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, and to see also what each of these books have to say about dealing with the past and avoiding stereotyping. I will then respond to Burmeister's critics.

I will begin the first chapter with the central image of the novel; the East Berlin tenement block. After showing its locational and historical significance, I will go on to examine the actual residents of this building in the second and third chapters, revealing how past residents have dealt with the transition from one type of society to another. The fourth chapter will look at imaginary characters in the novel, and the significance that they have in the life of

the main protagonist. The leitmotifs used will then be followed as they appear throughout the novel, thus showing their importance to both the themes and the whole aesthetic value of the text.