Iconicity as a Doorway to a New Space: Lesser Known East German Women Writers in the Seventies and Eighties

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Abstract:

Christa Wolf, Anna Seghers, Irmtraud Morgner, Brigitte Reimann and Maxie Wander are not the only women who wrote in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Although these five are the most well-known of that country's female authors, their fame should not cause us to ignore the very varied corpus of unrecognised literature produced by East German women. I uncovered more than 350 names of women who lived, wrote and were (or at least tried to be) published in Eastern Germany between 1971 and 1989, i.e. the second half of GDR history or the "Honecker era" (Lequy 487). Among this multitude, I choose to concentrate here on the eight I find most interesting from the point of view of literary iconicity. Applying Peirce's semiotics, I distinguish successively between imagic, diagrammatic and metaphoric iconicity. All eight authors I selected for this paper explore and exploit the materiality of words. Thanks to the corporeality of language, they open a door to new literary and political dimensions. This paper aims at both showing which innovative aspects literary iconicity brings to the works of lesser known GDR female writers, and analysing which innovative aspects their works bring to the theme of iconicity.

1 About a century ago, two theories of the sign were conceived on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The European semiology of Saussure emerging on one side was "verbocentric," as Saussure saw the arbitrary nature of *la langue* as the paradigm form of representation. On the other side, Peirce, a systematic philosopher, suggested a much broader epistemological conception of representation: for him, the sign-relation is able to explain comprehensive theorems of knowledge and perception. Iconicity is nested within a complex structure of philosophical, as opposed to linguistic, concepts. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we must acknowledge that Peirce has won the match: our language is not exclusively arbitrary as Saussure postulated, and iconicity is ubiquitous in language and literature, cognition and scientific activities.

2 Broadly speaking, iconicity refers to a specific relation between the form of a linguistic sign and the concept to which that sign refers in a person's understanding of his or her real world. Pierce considers the relations between three basic elements — the representation (*sign*), the object of the representation (referent or *object*) and the way the object is represented

(*interpretant*). In his correspondence with Lady Welby dating from 1908, Peirce explains which "path" can be followed between object and interpretant.

> I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. (Peirce, *Semiotic* 80-81)

The logical order of determination is indicated by the direction of the arrows in Fig. 1:
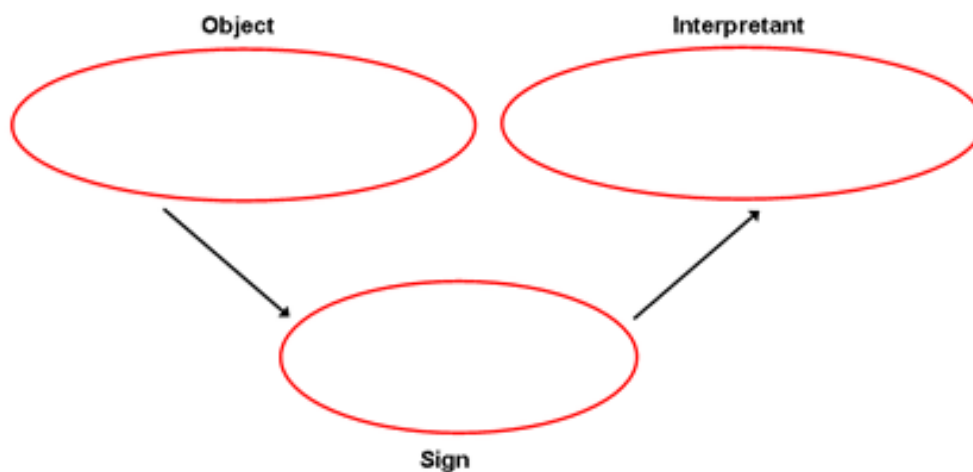

Fig. 1.

3   The correspondence between sign and object can be quite direct, when both share common, intrinsic features. This basic version of iconicity, whose existence Saussure did not reject, is commonly referred to as *imagic*. A prominent example of this type is the notion of onomatopoeia, which is not limited to words such as the German *bang* or *plumps*, but also includes puns like *Mauser* (in place of *Mauer*, German for *wall*). Katja Lange-Müller, an East German writer, chose this name for the main character of the book she published in 1988, four years after leaving the GDR and one year before the East-West German wall came down. In other cases, however, the correspondence between sign and referent is far less direct: in Peirce's taxonomy of signs, this type of iconicity is termed *diagrammatic*. In this case, there is no overt

similarity between the signifier and the signified. Caesar's *veni*, *vidi*, *vici* is a very often used illustration for the iconic diagram. The sequence of individually symbolic words mirrors the sequence of actions it enumerates. There is a third and a last category of iconicity, rarely addressed by Peirce's critics: *metaphoric* iconicity. Jappy gives an obvious example to illustrate how metaphors operate: "This surgeon is a butcher" (Jappy, Chapter 3). The metaphor, which will be analysed more precisely later on, conveys the idea that this surgeon treats patients as if they were lumps of meat and bone in the butcher's hand. Even if this example might be a metaphoric sign (or hypo-icon), Peirce insists on the point that metaphor is form, and not a piece of figurative discourse such as a sentence.

4   The corpus of works on which this study draws consists of texts written by eight lesser known GDR female authors between 1978 and 1989. Astonishingly enough, the Peircean concepts of iconicity have never been applied to the writing of East German women. This is indeed quite surprising, since the former GDR appears to be a good "substrate" for iconicity, as far as the working and living conditions of female authors were concerned. I would even like to suggest that the three types of iconicity described above (imagic, diagrammatic and metaphoric) are inherent in the writing of women in the GDR, due to the specific features of that country. Geographically, politically, economically and sociologically, East Germany differed a lot from Western Europe: It was virtually impossible to cross the border to the Federal Republic of Germany. The state's doctrine was marked by militarism and nationalism; the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) dominated political life. The SED was based on centralism and on the principle of social unity, which reinforced the standardisation of society, whereas divergent elements were excluded or instrumentalised. The socialist regime ruled over the mechanisms of literary creation and reception: writers, reviewers, publishing houses as well as the channels of distribution were under government control. This state domination had paradoxical consequences on the literary climate, which also benefited from this public support: reading and writing played a bigger role than in other countries. Another specific feature of GDR society is the so-called "proclaimed equality of rights" between men and women. Indeed legislation in the GDR was very progressive (e.g. female access to so-called masculine jobs, equality of wages, divorce, birth control and abortion). Nevertheless the ways of thinking had not evolved as quickly as the politics, and most of the time women were still in charge of the household and the children's education, in addition to their paid jobs.

5   The standardisation of society was an expression of political will. However, this does not necessary mean that all GDR female authors to be dealt with in this paper had the same experiences in their lives as women and as writers. Of course they shared a common denominator, a lack of recognition, but their personal situations might have varied a lot. The following diagram shows how close or distant some lesser known female writers were from the central power. The state machinery treated some in a more or less friendly way than others (Fig. 2).

They could publish without any difficulties: Burmeister, Erb, Hensel, Königsdorf, Strittmatter

She stayed, but her works were partly censored: Schubert

She emigrated, only parts of her works were published in the GDR: Eckart (1987)

She stayed, but nothing was released in the GDR: Stötzer-Kachold (1 year imprisonment)

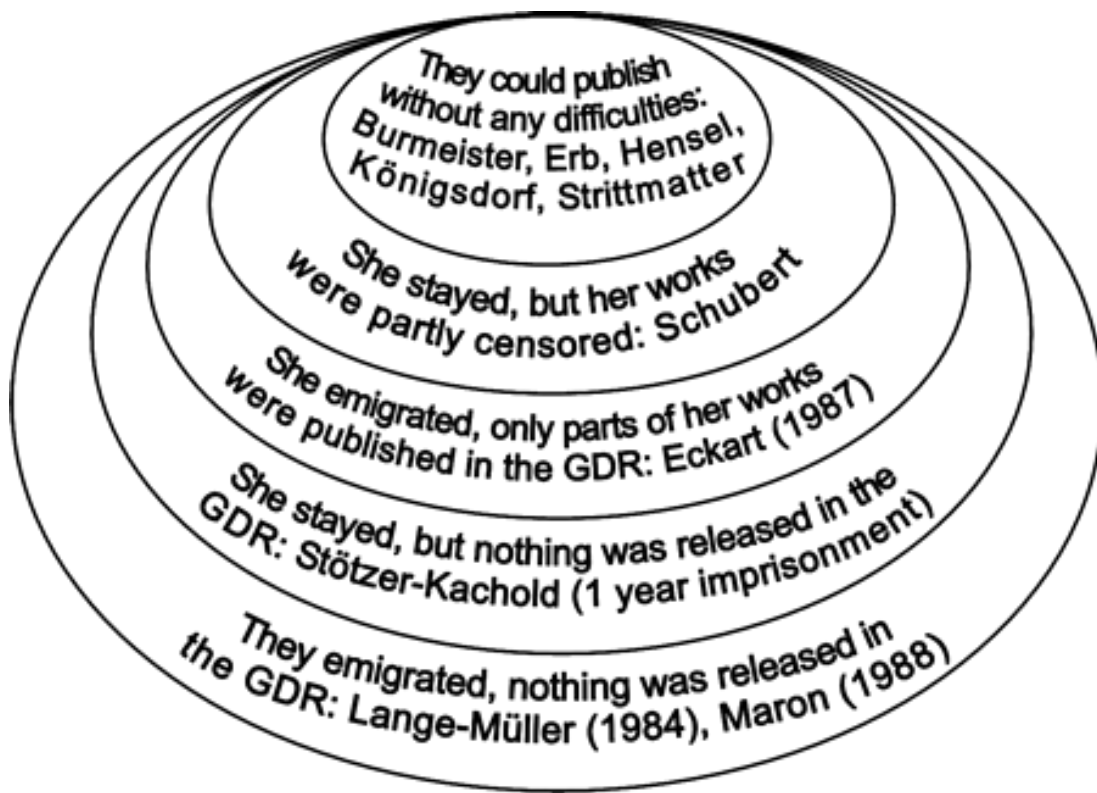They emigrated, nothing was released in the GDR: Lange-Müller (1984), Maron (1988)

Fig. 2.

The literary climate in the GDR (i.e. the conditions in which literature emerged) could be tough for one author and yet encouraging for another one, depending on her political acceptance. There may be a strong link between the political acceptance of an author and the use she made of iconic means in her literary works. Can we say, for instance, that the more literary iconicity she used (i.e. the more daring and provocative her writing was), the more difficult it was for her to stay in the GDR and have her works released there? In order to test this intuitive hypothesis, we need to have a closer look at the texts — and at the East German context.

6   Why might it be that unrecognised works by East German female authors hold so many surprises as far as literary iconicity is concerned? Their innovative potential is due to their very specific place of emergence. Since East Germany remained a patriarchal country in spite of its progressive socialist laws, in this particular context language appears to be dual, existing simultaneously as a factor of oppression and a key to emancipation. Iconicity enables the writers to cope with language duality:

> The iconic force in language produces an ENACTMENT of the fictional reality through the form of the text. This brings realistic illusion to life in a new dimension: as readers, we do not merely receive a report of the fictional world; we enter into it iconically, as a dramatic performance, through the experience of reading. (Leech and Short 236; emphasis in the original)

Leech and Short allude to the emotive value of iconicity for the interpretation of literary texts. They refer here to an "enactment," which leads to a reader-based "dramatic performance." This performance is by definition a subjective process, which is an individual result of the act of reading. It means that the representation of the text (the sense) does not exist before the act of reading, which makes it difficult for censorship (as well as self-censorship) to work efficiently. This is why we can assume that literary iconicity is particularly vivid in works written by East German female authors, due to their very specific way of life.

7   More than in Western Europe, the life of lesser known women writers in the former GDR was affected by the double standards described above. First, they experienced this contradictory situation as women — living in a state where the question of women's liberation was considered solved but the mentalities remained patriarchal. Secondly, they felt the rift between principles and reality, between theory and practice in their life as writers. On the one hand, the GDR society was extremely literature-friendly: many people read a great deal of books; the authors were in close contact with their editors and readership. Moreover, even books considered hard to sell were published; editorial decisions were not governed by the commercial rules applied in capitalist countries. On the other hand, literary creation was subject to censorship, which automatically induces self-censorship. Thirdly, lesser known East German women writers experienced marginalization in the literary landscape because their works were considered second-rate or not considered at all. During the GDR era their texts were not duly reviewed or

analysed by literary critics. Recognition finally came late and with hesitation (i.e. after the *Wende* in 1989-1990).[1]

8   Beyond these GDR-specific difficulties, East German women writers — like other female authors all over the world — also coped with the problem of what Sigrid Weigel called "double place" (Weigel, *Topographien* 262; my translation). They experienced this phenomenon both in their life and in their writing: they lived in an inherently patriarchal society, which at the same time pretended that the equality of rights between the sexes had been achieved. They faced a male language that tended to exclude them, but also served as their first means of effective expression. Thus, they had to look through what Weigel calls "the man's glasses," in her much-cited essay on the topic of Feminine aesthetics, entitled "Der schielende Blick" (Weigel, *Blick* 85).<fn>"The title [. . .] is full of ambiguities. 'Der schielende Blick' can mean 'the cross-eyed gaze', 'the surreptitious gaze out of the corner of the eye' or 'the gaze directed in two divergent directions'" (Translator Harriet Anderson, in Weigel, Focus 303).</fn> Indeed, for East German female authors, there were no other ways to see: the patriarchal glasses are the language in which they articulate themselves, the reason they need to draw conclusions. But the paradoxical status of women in a patriarchal society as both subject and object allows them to squint: with one eye they see through the glasses but with the other they dare to peek at another reality (Weigel, *Blick* 104). Iconicity may serve as a literary technique enabling these female authors to rule the norms instead of being ruled by them.

9   The first type of iconicity used as a literary technique is the imagic one. East German female writers often use imaginisation in search of a suitable literary setting. They make literary use of a resemblance between an item and its referent by some — visual, pictorial, acoustic — characteristic. Katja Lange-Müller's work is one of the most striking examples. She plays with the phonetic shape of words and the evocative value of sounds in order to locate her writing between both German states (Lange-Müller, *Kasper*). Her story entitled *Kasper Mauser — Die*

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[1]The following examples illustrate this late and only partial recognition by the scholarly community: The volume Vogel oder Käfig sein (an overview of art and literature in independent GDR magazines from 1979 to 1989) presents only 23 contributions by women from a total of 158 texts (Michael and Wohlfahrt).In her "obituary" dedicated to GDR female writing, Christa Wolf mentions only her — already famous — colleagues Irmtraud Morgner, Inge Müller, Brigitte Reimann, and Maxie Wander (Wolf 19). Instead of searching in anthologies or high-circulation magazines, one should track down lesser known GDR female writers in isolated articles or in case studies written from a feminist point of view: Ph.D. theses (Schulze, Dahlke) or scholarly articles (Abret and Nagelschmidt).

Feigheit vorm Freund tells us less about life in East Germany than about the author's break with her former existence and her transition to a new society.

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