

Post-Modernism, Freiburg 1968: Observations on the German Reception of Leslie A. Fiedler's "Revolutionary Ideas"

In June 1968, a symposium took place at the University of Freiburg dedicated to the topic of contemporary literature in Europe and North America ("Für und wider die zeitgenössische Literatur in Europa und Amerika"). It was attended by scholars from English and German departments as well as writers, among them Martin Walser, Reinhard Baumgart, and Hilde Domin. A special guest appearing at the symposium was Leslie A. Fiedler. He had been invited by Peter Heller, professor of German studies, to talk about contemporary literature and he gave a lecture which later evolved into his groundbreaking essay "Cross the Border – Close the Gap" on the death of modernist literature and the unstoppable rise of postmodernism. The symposium apparently was soon forgotten but Fiedler's talk had a curious reappearance in a German translation.¹ On 13 September 1968, the German weekly newspaper *Christ und Welt* published the first part of the lecture, translated by one of its culture editors, Wolfgang Ignée, under the title "Das Zeitalter der neuen Literatur. Die Wiedergeburt der Kritik"; one week later the second part followed.² In both cases, short introductions by the editors of the newspaper stressed the provocative, controversial, and visionary quality of Fiedler's "revolutionary ideas".³ Judging from their presentation of Fiedler's essay, it was perceived to have the power and sting of a theoretical manifesto. Indeed, in the weeks following its publication, numerous authors

¹ All background information is taken from the editorial introductions to Fiedler's essay in *Christ und Welt* as well as the master's thesis by Danny Walther who rediscovered what he calls the "Fiedler-Debatte" in 2007. He includes primary research on the Freiburg symposium, which will not be discussed in this essay, and on the publication history of the translation. His thesis can be found online as a pdf-document. See Leslie A. Fiedler, "Das Zeitalter der neuen Literatur: Die Wiedergeburt der Kritik", *Christ und Welt* 21:37, Feuilleton (13 Sep. 1968), pp. 9-10; Leslie A. Fiedler, "Das Zeitalter der neuen Literatur. Indianer, Science Fiction und Pornographie: Die Zukunft des Romans hat schon begonnen", *Christ und Welt* 21:38, Feuilleton (20 Sep. 1968), pp. 14-6; Danny Walther, *Die "Fiedler-Debatte" oder Kleiner Versuch, die "Chiffre 1968" von links ein wenig aufzuschreiben*, Magisterarbeit (Universität Leipzig, 2007).

² On the specifics of the publication history of the essay see Walther, pp. 21-8.

³ See the editorial introductions to Fiedler's essay and the introduction to the responses by Becker and Heißenbüttel; Jürgen Becker, "Der Schrei", *Christ und Welt* 21:40, Feuilleton (4 Oct. 1968), p. 11; Helmut Heißenbüttel, "Tote Aura", *Christ und Welt* 21:40, Feuilleton (4 Oct. 1968), p. 11.

responded to Fiedler's provocative theses. Yet the reactions were primarily negative and after roughly eight weeks the discussion in *Christ und Welt* was over. The editors promised a book publication containing all of the contributions and they indicated that Fiedler himself would reply to his German critics, but neither the book nor Fiedler's response ever appeared.⁴ Thus, the overall impression prevails that the theoretical manifesto on the appearance of a new, "postmodern" literature, which was to become a classic in the debate on postmodernism, had been violently rejected – with few yet significant exceptions – by German writers and intellectuals in 1968.⁵

One might view this aborted debate as a curious episode in the reception history of Fiedler's work, yet I believe it has more profound implications for the history of transatlantic exchange and for the question of how and why the revolutionary force of a manifesto may or may not travel between cultures. In his idiosyncratic way, Fiedler presented a bold assessment of the contemporary cultural situation.⁶ He argued for the merging of high and low culture, he proclaimed the vision of a new literature for which a new critical language would be needed, and he implied the shifting of the cultural hegemony from Europe to the United States. Following Galia Yanoshevsky's discussion of the genre, Fiedler's presentation in Freiburg as well as his published essay clearly had the power and drive of a manifesto: He was combative, polemical, performed in a 'missionary' way to create a major intellectual disturbance, and he proclaimed the death of an old as well the birth of a new cultural movement.⁷ In the long

⁴ There were all together ten direct reactions to Fiedler's essay. Only Rolf Dieter Brinkmann had read the other authors' contributions before writing his own. In a public sphere shaped by magazines such as *Der Spiegel* the editors clearly hoped for, and pushed, a lively critical debate that, in the end, however, developed only modest proportions. See Walther, pp. 21-8 for research on the editors of the newspaper (especially Wolfgang Ignée).

⁵ As Walther points out, the essay was established as a 'classic' reference point of the postmodernism debates in the 1970s and early 1980s; in Germany particularly via Wolfgang Welsch, pp. 21-8; see Wolfgang Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, 6. Auflage (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), p. 15ff. The English version was first published in *Playboy* magazine and later included in Fiedler's collected essays; all references will be to this later version; see Leslie A. Fiedler, "Cross the Border – Close the Gap [1970]", *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, Volume II (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), pp. 461-85.

⁶ Fiedler's unique argumentative and theatrical style of presenting his views on literature and culture were legendary and has been the subject of numerous studies. Kühnel calls him "a maverick, in spite of all the affinities to and affiliations with other 'myth critics'", see Walter Kühnel, "Leslie A. Fiedler", in Hartmut Heuermann and Bernd-Peter Lange, eds., *Contemporaries in Cultural Criticism* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1991), pp. 49-82, p. 74. Winchell describes his fame as an academic orator; see Mark Royden Winchell, *Leslie Fiedler* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), pp. 1-12; on Fiedler's career and legacy see the collection of articles published by Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, eds., *Leslie Fiedler and American Culture* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1999).

⁷ See Galia Yanoshevsky, "Three Decades of Writing on Manifesto: The Making of a Genre", *Poetics Today* 30:2 (Summer 2009), pp. 257-86. Walther hesitates to call Fiedler's

run, Fiedler's intuitions about a radical dehierarchization of culture, the growing importance of popular myths, the changes brought about by technology, or the shift to 'imaginary' forms of identity construction proved to have been right on target. And yet, among his German critics only one, Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, embraced his theses whole-heartedly. So the question must be asked why the revolutionary drive of Fiedler's manifesto was not shared in late-1960s Germany and why, instead, it immediately led to hostile rebuttals. In what follows I want to suggest a few observations on the reasons for this reaction; negligible in quantity as the debate may seem from today's point of view, it actually reached into numerous fields of postwar German culture which is why I want to limit my remarks by focusing on questions of popular culture, myth criticism, and the notion of an 'imaginary nationality'.

I

As the editors of Fiedler's first part in *Christ und Welt* mentioned, his lecture in Freiburg had been called "The Case for Post-Modernism".⁸ They translated this title tentatively into "Plädoyer für die nach-moderne Epoche" indicating that the exact phrasing of the era after modernism was still an open question. Yet the assertive stance of Fiedler's talk in which he was stressing the newness of the historical moment was undisputed. The manifesto-like character of his essay became clear in the short introduction to the second part in *Christ und Welt* where the main points of his argument were summarized. The editors identified seven theses:⁹ 1) the art novel of modernism à la Thomas Mann, James Joyce, or Marcel Proust is dead; 2) modernism died of its obsession with rationality and analysis; 3) literary criticism in the vein of the New Criticism lacks the language

German article a manifesto yet gives good reasons why it was designed and received in this way, pp. 296-306.

⁸ Reinhard Baumgart, however, mentioned in his (later) contribution that the original title had been "Close the Gap and Cross the Border"; Reinhard Baumgart, "Die Fünfte Kolonne der Literatur: Der Prediger Leslie A. Fiedler streichelt die Furien der Nach-Moderne", *Christ und Welt*. 21:41, Feuilleton (11 Oct. 1968), pp. 16-17, p. 16, col. 5. In their introduction the editors stated that Fiedler had given his talk at Freiburg university "anhand nur weniger Notizen" (with few notes) as a "Stegreifvortrag" (impromptu presentation); Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 1), p. 9. Given the very close structural and argumentative correspondence between the German translation, which was based on Fiedler's written version of his oral presentation, and the English version later published I find this hard to believe. The title indicated by Baumgart would also imply that a draft of the later English version existed prior to the event in Freiburg. Yet Walther quotes from a letter by Wolfgang Ignée that Fiedler's written version, which he translated into German, no longer exists, p. 23. This obviously makes a comparison between the early stages of the essay and the answer to the question of how the manifesto evolved difficult.

⁹ In the following seven points I am paraphrasing the summary of the editors preceding Fiedler's second part on 20 September 1968.

to discuss the new literature; 4) authors over forty will have difficulties to adjust to the future and literary criticism will have to regard itself as an art form in its own right; 5) formalist schools such as the "nouveau roman" are not postmodern but rather latecomers of modernism; 6) postmodern ("nach-moderne") literature is already among us; it is anti-art, magical, frivolous and loves the marketplace; 7) the highest aim of the literature of the future will be to close the gap between elite and mass culture, i.e. to create the "klassenlose Literaturgesellschaft" – a classless literary culture.¹⁰

The sheer number of theses highlighted by the editors indicates that Fiedler had indeed presented a forceful case that managed to overwhelm his audience. Several critics who had been present at the symposium mentioned that his performance had been like that of a priest. As Reinhard Baumgart writes, in Freiburg Fiedler's best argument had been his personality, pathetically wishing for a new literature: "Man mußte sich bekehren lassen oder ungetauft bleiben".¹¹ Yet the editors of *Christ und Welt* had clearly identified the crucial points of his argument: the death of modernism, the inappropriateness of the critical language, the mythopoetics of the new literature and, finally, the struggle over closing the gap between high and low culture, critic and audience. A few years after the Freiburg symposium, Fiedler characterized in similar form the late ("third") phase of his work in the introduction to his collected essays published in 1971. To cross the border and close the gap had led him, politically, to "a populist, even anarchist stance based on an impatience with all distinctions of kind created on the analogy of a class-structured society".¹² He was still unable to abandon the appreciation of high art but was consciously turning to the realm of Pop as a result of a growing awareness "that the cult based on the appreciation of works available only to a few has proved not only repressive in a political sense, but even more damaging in a psychological one".¹³

Fiedler thus built his vision of postmodern literature on three provocative premises: first, it resulted from the symbolic 'death' of the old generation's literature and the arrival of a younger generation seamlessly born into the new cultural moment; second, it shifted the center of cultural dominance from the old, exhausted Europe to the vibrant, highly productive culture industries of North America; and, finally, it prioritized as the main function of cultural exchange the dehierarchization of taste and choice as the final realization of a truly democratic culture. In Fiedler's own case, the generational gap which he proudly claimed to have overcome ("this second volume of my essays is the product of my third birth"),¹⁴ had actually never been as great as he implied. Born in 1917 and belonging biographically to the intellectual climate of the

¹⁰ Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 2), p. 14.

¹¹ Baumgart, p. 16, col. 1.

¹² Leslie A. Fiedler, "Introduction", *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, Volume II (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), pp. 403-5, p. 404.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 405.

Jewish intelligentsia in New York City, he had frequently engaged in debates about mass culture and the popular arts (in fact, the level of sophistication that he and other authors demonstrated in their discussion of popular culture was unmatched in postwar Germany with the exception of the Frankfurt School).¹⁵ But in the German context of 1968, Fiedler's arguments about the death of modernism, the (symbolic) death of the older generation, the necessary merging of high and low, and the promise of literature to celebrate "Traum, Vision und Ekstase"¹⁶ by drawing on the Western, Science Fiction, and pornography was sure to draw flak from his critics.

II

Some authors, such as Martin Walser, flatly denied that modernism was dead and, drawing on his own biography, reaffirmed its continued reign: "Ich habe angefangen zu schreiben zur Zeit des Modernismus, der bei uns noch absolut herrscht".¹⁷ As one of the authors present at Fiedler's lecture in Freiburg, Walser recounted that he had felt the strong urge to resist Fiedler's arguments, or, as he put it, "[...] weil der SDS in Ferien war und ich daran dachte, daß Amerika seit Jahren dabei ist, die westliche Lebensart und -chance zu verderben, widersprach

¹⁵ This can be seen in the ground-breaking publication *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* edited by Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White to which many authors of the Frankfurt School made contributions and which also included an essay by Fiedler that defended comic books against the "middlebrows"; see Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends [1955]", in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 537-47. In a 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium, Fiedler characterized the ambiguous post-war constellation of Europe's exhaustion and the increasing importance of popular culture coming from the United States, a reference that represented an early indication of his transatlantic theme: "From Europe it is easy to understand the religious nature of the American belief in innocence and achievement; to see how even the most vulgar products of 'mass culture', movies, comic books, sub-literary novels are the scriptures of this post-Christian faith – a faith that has already built up in Western Europe a sizeable underground sect which worships in the catacombs of the movie theaters and bows before the images of its saints on the news-stands. A hundred years after the *Manifesto*, the specter that is haunting Europe is – Gary Cooper! Vulgar, gross, sentimental, impoverished in style – our popular sub-art presents a dream of human possibilities to starved imaginations everywhere. It is a wry joke that what for us are the most embarrassing by-products of a democratic culture, are in countries like Italy the only democracy there is". Leslie A. Fiedler, "Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium", *Partisan Review* 19:3 (May-June 1952), pp. 282-326, p. 295. On Fiedler's biography and career see Mark Royden Winchell, *"Too Good to Be True": The Life and Work of Leslie Fiedler* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2002).

¹⁶ Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 2), p. 16, col. 3; the English version read: "The Dream, the Vision, *ekstasis*", Fiedler, "Cross", p. 483.

¹⁷ Martin Walser, "Mythen, Milch und Mut", *Christ und Welt* 21:42, Feuilleton (18 Oct. 1968), p. 17, p. 17, col. 2.

ich dem Schamanen-Gesang aus Neu-Wild-West".¹⁸ Similar thinly concealed anti-Americanisms characterized the other contributions and indicate that Fiedler's text had activated a strong them-versus-us pattern of reception. Overall, his critics seemed to feel that Fiedler's 'revolutionary ideas' had indeed identified important characteristics of the contemporary cultural moment but they did not like his assertive rhetorical performance and, in the end, rejected most of his claims. From a traditional Marxist perspective that Peter O. Chotjewitz took, Fiedler's case for the subversive quality of the new literature was unconvincing. Calling Fiedler a "Literatur-Ideologe",¹⁹ Chotjewitz instead stressed the inevitably affirmative and counterrevolutionary function of literature in Western countries. Other less dogmatic critics found fault with Fiedler's assertion that he was presenting something new and contested his manifesto's claim for originality. Heinrich Vormweg saw him in the tradition of cultural criticism à la Alfred Kerr while Robert Neumann found his argument about the death of the old novel to repeat an established pattern: "Der Roman ist tot' heißt und hieß immer schon: die bisherige Verpackung ist *out of date*".²⁰ If the rejection of Fiedler's intervention was based on the nationality of the messenger – his Americanness – there was also clearly a desire at work to disavow his assessment of a generation gap by claiming that his manifesto stood in a long line of similar texts, i.e. by stressing continuity, not rupture.²¹

The two main points of disagreement, however, revolved around Fiedler's concept of myth and his notion of closing the gap between high and low culture. Fiedler's numerous references to the search for new myths which could support his vision of an age of ecstasy and passion, of "wonder and fantasy"²² immediately led to the defense of enlightenment values and the tradition of rationalism. Taking up Fiedler's assertion about aging authors unable to comprehend the new

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 17, col. 1.

¹⁹ Peter O. Chotjewitz, "Feuerlöscher für Aufgebratenes: Was Fiedler 'dufte' findet, stinkt und ist bürgerlich", *Christ und Welt* 21:45, Feuilleton (8 Nov. 1968), pp. 15, 21, p. 15, col. 1.

²⁰ Robert Neumann, "Ritter Kunos ... Fiedler braucht kein Alibi", *Christ und Welt* 21:44, Feuilleton (1 Nov. 1968), p. 15, p. 15 col. 3. Arguing from a more academic point of view, this was also Hans Egon Holthusen's major point of criticism: "Fazit: Die Entstehung einer literarischen Pop-Kultur in Amerika verdiente eine behutsame kritische Untersuchung. Sie sollte aber nicht zu einem epochemachenden Ereignis aufgeblasen werden". Hans Egon Holthusen, "Anti-Helden gegen Troja: Leslie A. Fiedlers seltsame Katzensprünge", *Christ und Welt* 21:43, Feuilleton (25 Oct. 1968), p. 15, p. 15, col. 5.

²¹ With regard to Fiedler's nationality, there existed an interesting tension between the editors' enthusiastic description of Fiedler in *Christ und Welt* as "brillanter Essayist" and the negative bias of the headlines given to his critics' responses; Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 1), p. 9. Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, whose reply came last and who had the benefit of having read all contributions, bemoaned the negativity of these headlines. However, as the editors explained in parentheses, they had been chosen by themselves, not the authors; Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, "Angriff aufs Monopol", *Christ und Welt* 21:46, Feuilleton (15 Nov. 1968), pp. 14-5, p. 14, col. 1.

²² Fiedler, "Cross", p. 483.

times, Wolfgang Hädecke facetiously wrote: "Ich bin eines jener Fossilien, die noch für fröhliche Vernunft plädieren [...]".²³ One passage of Fiedler's essay in particular had disturbed the German critics. Writing about the pleasures of the New Western in American literature, Fiedler had first pointed to the glorification of violence as a type of guerrilla violence attacking civilization only to imply that a second aspect was even more important for the New Western:

Er ist gegründet in der tiefen Sehnsucht nach dem Stamm: nach einer Gesellschaftsform, die den Autoren wünschenswerter erscheint als den beengenden, bürgerlichen Familien, denen sie entstammen, und der seelenlose, unmenschliche, durch und durch bürokratisierte Staat, der sie zur Schule und zur Universität schickt und ihnen dann ihren Platz in der Gesellschaft anweist.²⁴

Even though Fiedler immediately characterized the Western's reliance on violence and the "nostalgia for the Tribe"²⁵ as "pubertär" and "kindisch"²⁶ his overall reliance on the notion of myth not just as the general foundation of cultural texts but as an important source of rejuvenation for the new literature via the industrialized mythology of popular culture was decoded very differently in the German context.²⁷ Reinhard Baumgart made the seemingly trivial but important point that there simply did not exist a similar popular mythology on which one could draw in Germany: "Offenbar ist das mythische Vakuum, von dem Fiedler schreibt, hier doch fühlbarer, der Schock der Entmythologisierung nachhaltiger als drüben".²⁸ This not only meant that the products of the American culture industries could not be used in the same way in postwar Germany as in the United States; it implied that the whole discourse about myth-making was tainted, because in Germany it inevitably raised the specter of fascism. Robert Neumann cautioned about the Western: "Western? Fein. (Aber Vorsicht! Indianer-Blubo und Stammesromantik – da sitzt der Wurm des Faschismus drin)".²⁹ Similarly, Wolfgang Hädecke and Jürgen Becker found fault with Fiedler's case for an ecstatic literature because it opened the door to a

²³ Wolfgang Hädecke, "Fossil mit Vernunft", *Christ und Welt* 21:42, Feuilleton (18 Oct. 1968), p. 17, p. 17, col 4.

²⁴ Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 2), p. 14, col. 2. The later English version read "Warfare, however, is not the final vision implicit in the New Western, which is motivated on a deeper level by a nostalgia for the Tribe: a form of social organization thought of as preferable both to the tight two-generation bourgeois family, from which its authors come, and the soulless out-of-human-scale bureaucratic state, into which they are initiated via schools and universities", Fiedler, "Cross", p. 471.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 2), p. 14, col. 2; "juvenile" and "infantile" in the English version, Fiedler, "Cross", p. 471.

²⁷ On the integration of C. G. Jung's concept of archetypes in Fiedler's work and his not all together convincing attempt to combine myth criticism with historical contextualization see Kühnel.

²⁸ Baumgart, p. 17, col. 2.

²⁹ Neumann, p. 15, col. 3.

kind of irrationalism that, according to Becker, German authors like Gottfried Benn had been infected with.³⁰ Chastising Fiedler for an 'inflated romanticism', Hädecke summarized this line of critique: "Da wollen wir nur aufpassen, daß die postmoderne Literatur nicht eine präfaschistische wird".³¹

Thus, the concept of myth, ancient as well as popular, that Fiedler put at the heart of his manifesto as a visionary promise to liberate the new literature from the deadening rationality of modernism raised the fear of a returning fascism in the German intellectual climate of the late 1960s. One obvious consequence of this trope of fascism for the German critics of Fiedler was that due to the country's recent past the function of literature was necessary to engage in a 'progressive' furthering of social developments.³² 'Dreams, visions, and ecstasy' did not seem to be very promising prospects in this endeavor and instead conjured up Goebbels-like visions of fanaticism. Heinrich Vormweg called Fiedler's ideas opportunistic and detected in them a "pseudoreligiöse Apotheose einer fanatisierten und zugleich vulgären Literatur".³³ Vormweg's combination of fanaticism and vulgarity revealed that the disagreement between Fiedler and his German critics over the meaning of myth as a form of liberation or as a return to fascism was also intimately connected with Fiedler's second major line of argument: popular culture. Baumgart had pointed to the underlying dilemma: In contrast to the long and vivid tradition of American popular culture produced in a highly innovative and efficient industrial system and brought to life in movies, music, television, comics, and much more, German culture could not draw on anything nearly as elaborate (and popular) nor, in the 1960s, on anything not tainted by the experience of fascism. Closing the gap between elite and mass or high and low was consequently either seen to be related to the dangers of a popular fanaticism, or it simply pointed all the more strongly to the cultural damage done during the years of fascism – to the feeling of a cultural void that was in the process of being filled by British and American popular culture.

The core of Fiedler's manifesto about the closing of the gap was a two-fold rhetorical movement. He celebrated the young authors who managed to overcome the separation between high and low culture, and he attacked the cultural critics who still tried to uphold this separation and therefore missed the dawn of the new era:

³⁰ Becker wrote: "Gottfried Benn ist ein historisches Beispiel dafür, daß mit der Anbetung solcher Irrationalismen die Literatur nur dem Faschismus vorarbeitet, was in den Vereinigten Staaten am Ende sogar der Fall ist", p. 11, col. 2. On the difficulties of the German authors to use the concept of myth due to the history of fascism, which had already been a point of critique at the Freiburg symposium, see Walther, pp. 48-86.

³¹ Hädecke, p. 17, col. 5.

³² For a more extended discussion of the political functions of literature in postwar Germany see Walther, pp. 98-114.

³³ Heinrich Vormweg, "... langer Bart: Comics für Saubermanns", *Christ und Welt* 21:44, Feuilleton (1 Nov. 1968), p. 15, p. 15, col. 2.

Der Gedanke einer Kunst, die sich ausschließlich an die gebildete Minderheit der Gesellschaft wendet – bei uns sind das die Akademiker – und einer anderen, minderwertigen Kunst für die Ungebildeten – also für eine abgesonderte Minderheit, die weder von Gutenberg noch von Geschmacksfragen etwas versteht –, kann in einer pluralistischen Gesellschaft, sie sei kapitalistisch, sozialistisch oder kommunistisch, nur Relikt einer bösartigen Differenzierung aus der Zeit einer überholten Klassengesellschaft sein.³⁴

Although Fiedler's German critics expressed a general sympathy for his ideas of moving towards a more democratic culture, they eventually rejected this vision. For Jürgen Becker it conjured up the nightmare of mass culture. Unable to share Fiedler's "Frohsinn", he testified to the apocalyptic vision of seeing "aus seiner Vorstellung von klassenloser Massenkunst ein mystifizierendes Gelall entstehen, das alle Ohren taub macht [...]".³⁵ Once more the trope (and memory) of fascism seemed to equate mass culture with mystification and fanaticism. On the other hand, Reinhard Baumgart and Robert Neumann gave vent to the impression that Fiedler's manifesto was not developing an argument but making a sales pitch, in effect attempting to sell "Pop" to a European audience. This is how Baumgart reacted to the claim that the new literature should be funny, disrespectful, and vulgar: "Also doch, höre ich sagen, also eben doch nur Pop. Was erstens Knall bedeutet und zweitens, wie man eher weiß, populär, Subkultur, Underground, die neueste Marke auch im Schaugeschäft eben auf dem Höhepunkt und morgen schon wieder überstanden".³⁶ Popular culture in this perception was not a liberatory or subversive force, nor was it a realm in which a more genuine democratization could happen, it was simply a commercialized business dominated by fads and changing fashions. Robert Neumann made a similar point about Fiedler's references to the genres of Science Fiction and pornography: "Es ist einfach der heutige letzte Schrei – übermorgen wird es der vorgestrige letzte Schrei sein".³⁷ What these reactions show is that in the late 1960s, Fiedler's German critics were unable to share his enthusiasm about the prospects of 'closing the gap' because they either mistrusted popular culture as an agent of democratization or they felt that mass culture was primarily a detrimental force of commodification. Again, as with the disagreement over the reign of modernism in Europe and postmodernism in the United States, both perceptions of popular culture had nationalistic overtones. The rejection of Fiedler's

³⁴ Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 2), p. 15, col. 2. The English version read: "The notion of one art for the 'cultured,' i.e., the favored few in any given society – in our own chiefly the university educated – and another subart for the 'uncultured,' i.e., an excluded majority as deficient in Gutenberg skills as they are untutored in 'taste,' in fact represents the last survival in mass industrial societies (capitalist, socialist, communist – it makes no difference) of an invidious distinction proper only to a class-structured community"; Fiedler, "Cross", p. 478.

³⁵ Becker, p. 11, col. 3.

³⁶ Baumgart, p. 16, col. 4.

³⁷ Neumann, p. 15, col. 3.

claims was not just a repudiation of his vision in general; it seemed to be an attempt to resist the onslaught of American popular culture in particular, i.e. a complicated negotiation of the position and self-image of intellectuals in postwar Germany.

To be fair to Leslie Fiedler's German critics, his essay on 'closing the gap' underwent certain important changes before it was published in its English version that would have helped them to see its revolutionary potential more clearly. Two examples may serve as an illustration. The German version in *Christ und Welt* already alluded to the imaginary quality of the notion of identity in a post-modern world, yet this became much more pronounced in the English version. While Fiedler was promoting the search for new mythologies from popular culture, such as the New Western, he was aware that they would not lead to essentialized notions of identity but to temporary, fleeting, and imaginary forms of attachment to signs and narratives from a specific cultural realm which, after the Second World War, happened to be primarily American. He saw this quality of playing "imaginary Americans, all of us, whether native to this land or not"³⁸ as a particular cultural pattern which for historical reasons had evolved in the United States. But the rise of popular culture as a global phenomenon had transformed it into a universal habit of selectively choosing elements to create one's cultural self and thereby to undermine and deconstruct all notions of essentialized national selfhood. A longer section on this sense of an imaginary selfhood was added to the English version and, had it been included in the German essay, would probably have signaled to Fiedler's German critics that they were arguing from a perspective of national identity that he was actually trying to dissolve.³⁹

A second passage of the German version became clearer in the later English publications. Even though Fiedler's rhetoric made reference to notions of passion, ecstasy, or wonder, he was keenly aware that the postmodern condition he was describing and hoping for relied heavily on advanced technologies. The "post-electronic Romanticism"⁴⁰ he was writing about represented the paradoxical desire of longing for a sense of 'tribal community' and at the same time

³⁸ Fiedler, "Cross", p. 473.

³⁹ Two paragraphs missing in the German version from 1968 can be found on page 472 and 473 of the English version, beginning with "In light of all this [...]" and ending with "[...] have now come to know it". The different endings of the German and English articles, in which Fiedler turned to Leonard Cohen's vision of a new, disruptive spirituality (called the "New Jews"), also underscored this point. The German version read: "Die 'neuen Juden', sagt der Jude und Kanadier Cohen, brauchen keine Juden zu sein, aber es werden wahrscheinlich Amerikaner sein. Nach allem, was war und nicht mehr wiederkommt, durchaus glaubhaft", Fiedler, "Zeitalter" (part 2), p. 16, col. 5. In contrast, the English version stated: "Such New Jews, Cohen (himself a Jew as well as a Canadian) adds, do not have to be Jewish but probably do have to be Americans – by which he must surely mean 'Imaginary Americans,' since, as we have been observing all along, there were never any other kind"; Fiedler, "Cross", p. 485.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 484.

being aware that all dreams of purity, innocence, or lack of corruption were obsolete. The flight from industrialization into the mythical West, or as his German critics implied to the "Stammesromantik" of fascism, was never a serious claim on Fiedler's part. Rather, the point was how to integrate advanced technologies on which everything in industrialized cultures depended: "It is rather to make a thousand little Wests in the interstices of a machine civilization, and as it were, on its steel and concrete back; to live the tribal life among and with the support of machines [...]"⁴¹ This passage, too, was not included in the German version; it would have clarified Fiedler's reference to a tribal culture as not so much an outmoded and dangerous romanticism but rather as an attempt to readjust the postindustrial machine culture to the needs of ordinary people (a vision that was taken up by the social networks of the digital age). Most likely, some of his German critics would not have agreed with his utopian vision of merging human needs and technology, but they would have realized that their accusation of his manifesto as promoting a kind of proto-fascism was off the mark.

III

The only exception in the majority of critical reactions to Fiedler's essay was Rolf Dieter Brinkmann whose article represented the final contribution to the debate. In an ironic twist Brinkmann's angry response confirmed Fiedler's main points: As the youngest author of the contributors (born in 1940) he gave expression to the new sensibility of young writers and wholeheartedly embraced Fiedler's position. Defending him against the monopoly of "ugly, cynical, old men"⁴² Brinkmann presented himself, consciously or not, as the perfect embodiment of Fiedler's new generation of literary authors. He enthusiastically supported what all the other contributions had vigorously denied, stating as an initial premise that Fiedler – the American – dared to formulate the obvious about the new cultural constellation, namely "daß das europäisch-abend-ländische Kulturmonopol gebrochen ist".⁴³ Yes, in the contemporary cultural moment there was a generation gap and to make matters in Germany better, this gap should get wider. Since the older generation was completely out of touch with the actualities of life, in order to create a more contemporaneous art it

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Brinkmann wrote about the clash between young and old authors: "Der einzig zu gehende Weg für jüngere Autoren, wollen sie nicht durch die häßlichen, zynischen alten Männer des Kulturbetriebs kaputtgemacht werden, ist: grundsätzliches Mißtrauen gegen jede Freundlichkeit seitens dieser Leute – und der Maxime des Gangsters Dutch Schulz zu folgen: alles prüfen, das Beste behalten. Denn: Die alten Leute, selbst wenn sie 'jung' erscheinen, sind tot, weil sie keine Zukunft mehr haben"; Brinkmann, "Angriff", p. 14, col. 3.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 14, col. 1.

would be necessary to push this difference, to realize "daß die Kluft zwischen den Generationen sich noch weiter vertieft".⁴⁴ Yes, popular culture played a pivotal role in contemporary cultural life but it was not produced in Germany, it came from the United States. It consisted of music by *The Doors* (to which Brinkmann was listening while writing his response) and paintings by Andy Warhol which were hanging in his apartment. And yes, the current moment should indeed be called "post-modern".⁴⁵

In the year after the debate over Fiedler's essay, Brinkmann edited a volume of new American poetry and reiterated that "Post-Moderne" was a good term to characterize the poems (and by implication other cultural forms, too, since the new poetry was often incorporated into performances or multimedial works of art).⁴⁶ In both, his contribution to the debate and the introduction to the new poetry, Brinkmann was less interested in terminological distinctions or questions of literary history (even though he professed intimate knowledge of the American literary avant-garde). Rather, he connected the postmodern moment with a new epochal style, a new aesthetic sensibility that had evolved in the cultural center of the 1960s: New York City.⁴⁷ As he explained, the poems he had selected for the anthology conveyed a sense of immediacy and directness, a feeling of presence, personalized forms of expression, wit, and a predominance of everyday images that sometimes incorporated trivial elements from popular culture but always put them to different, surprising uses. The new American poetry was attractive because it was anti-theoretical and, furthermore, because it did not respond to the pressure "mit dem Gedicht politische Bekenntnisse abzugeben" – clearly a jibe against the various responses to Fiedler.⁴⁸ The new literary aesthetic together with new forms of distributing the poems (in the streets) and of combining poetry with films, music, or light-shows, led

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 15, col. 5. Brinkmann did not dwell too much on the trope of fascism yet he made it clear that the generation gap was also due to differences in the socialization of older and younger authors: "Unter der Geste scheinbarer Aufgeschlossenheit, die man eingangs demonstriert – man will ja nicht hinten stehen – kommt das Mickrige, Krämerhafte zum Vorschein. Wird der Zynismus nicht mehr gesehen? [...] Es herrscht eine generelle, tief-verwurzelte Ignoranz und Abneigung gegen alles 'art-fremde'"; *ibid.*, p. 14, col. 1 and 3.

⁴⁵ The importance of Andy Warhol for Brinkmann's "aesthetics of the surface" and for his concept of postmodernism is discussed by Gerd Gemünden, "The Depth of the Surface, or, What Rolf Dieter Brinkmann Learned from Andy Warhol", *The German Quarterly* 68:3 (Summer 1995), pp. 235-50, p. 235.

⁴⁶ Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, "Notizen 1969 zu amerikanischen Gedichten und zu dieser Anthologie", in Rolf Dieter Brinkmann, ed., *Silver Screen: Neue amerikanische Lyrik* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969), pp. 7-32, p. 14.

⁴⁷ In the 1969 publication Brinkmann again expressed his conviction that in the 1960s the tides of cultural innovation had shifted to the United States: "Ist auch nur annähernd begriffen worden, daß zum erstenmal innerhalb des westlichen Kulturbereichs eine trotz vieler Widersprüche einheitliche Gesamtbewegung *nicht mehr in Europa, sondern 'dort drüben'* in New York stattfindet?", *ibid.*, p. 18, emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

Brinkmann to a conclusion about the democratizing implications of the postmodern cultural moment that was clearly an echo of Fiedler's essay: "Es ist das Bemühen, *Literatur zu popularisieren*, die Kluft zwischen 'hohen Kulturleistungen' für eine kleine Elite und 'niederen' Unterhaltungsprodukten zu verringern".⁴⁹

Thus, in contrast to all the other German critics of Fiedler's manifesto, Brinkmann became a strong and outspoken advocate of the new aesthetic and affective power of Pop. Although he adapted Fiedler's notion of postmodernism to his own ends – establishing a common pattern in the use of the fuzzy concept ever since –, he followed Fiedler's lead to claim an irrevocable generational and transatlantic rupture. And then the debate in *Christ und Welt* was over. Walther claims that it had almost no repercussions in the German intellectual climate of the late 1960s.⁵⁰ Yet Brinkmann's further development of his article's main points in the introduction to the anthology of American poetry (which was full of visual references to American cinema) demonstrated that Fiedler's "revolutionary ideas" were trickling down into selected subcultural movements. Furthermore, the clash between different generations of writers and intellectuals over Fiedler's essay had revealed a symptomatic pattern of dissent in postwar Germany, an exemplary discursive fault line. An older, yet not really old, generation of writers born in the 1930s who had experienced fascism and war as children, were pitted against writers born in the 1940s who had grown up with American culture and were indeed Americanized in a way that made them, mentally and affectively, into a new generation. In this clash of generations, the German reception of Fiedler's manifesto revealed that there was radical disagreement over three crucial questions: the proper role and function of art, the value of popular and mass culture, and the perception of the United States as a producer of culture. These questions were, in fact, also central to the late 1960s debate in the United States, yet the different sensibilities on which they drew were unmistakable, as Brinkmann indicated: "Die BRD hinkt gegenüber den USA nach, aber befindet sich bereits auf dem Weg".⁵¹ This was probably overly optimistic. The debate over Fiedler's essay had highlighted the cultural and psychological legacy of Germany's fascist past for the attempts of writers and intellectuals to define their place in society, the difficulties of seizing the con-

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 22, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ Walther, pp. 23-4.

⁵¹ Brinkmann, "Angriff", p. 15, col. 4; Brinkmann was not only interested in cultural questions, he was the only respondent to take up Fiedler's references to the role of technology in contemporary life and its impact on culture: "Tatsächlich sind die entscheidenden, heute allgemein beherrschenden technischen Neuerungen in den USA ausgeprägt worden, und so stellt sich eine weitere Frage: inwieweit kulturelle Leistungen vom Stand der Technik unbeeinflusst sind und sein können, wollen sie relevant sein. Zweifellos besteht kein Abhängigkeitsverhältnis, doch wohl eine Wechselwirkung ist hier zu unterstellen. Um den neuen Trend der Literatur zu verstehen, ist es wichtig, nach der Auswirkung der neuen technischen Apparate zu fragen"; *ibid.*, p. 15, col. 1.

temporaneity of the cultural moment without being burdened by the experience of the country's recent past. With the exception of Brinkmann, the contributors were not keyed to ecstatic visions of a postmodern future but defining their cultural practice as a response to, and preemptive insulation against, what had happened in recent German history. This ambiguous attachment to the past, then, emerges as one of the crucial reasons for the controversial and antagonistic reception of Leslie A. Fiedler's essay in the pages of *Christ und Welt*. Unfortunately, the response of Fiedler to his German critics that the editors had promised in the introduction to Brinkmann's article never appeared. But given his penchant for provocation it seems likely that Fiedler would have enjoyed a key phrase taken from Brinkmann's essay that the editors of *Christ and Welt* had chosen as its motto: "Ich hasse alte Dichter".⁵²

⁵² Brinkmann, "Angriff", p. 14.

Manifeste

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