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Denying Difference to the Post-Socialist Other

Bernhard Heisig and the Changing Reception of an
East German Artist

April A. Eisman

Abstract

This article traces the reception of East German artist Bernhard Heisig's life and art—first in East Germany and then in the Federal Republic of Germany before and after the Wall. Drawing on post-colonial and post-socialist scholarship, it argues that Heisig's reception exemplifies a western tendency to deny cultural and ideological difference in what the post-socialist scholar Piotr Piotrowski calls the "close Other." This denial of difference to artists from the eastern bloc has shaped western understandings of Heisig's life and art since reunification. Once perceived as an intellectually engaged, political artist, both in East and West Germany, after the fall of the Wall and German unification, Heisig was reinterpreted as a traumatized victim of two dictatorships, distorting not only our understanding of the artist and his work, but also of the nature of art and the role of the artist in East Germany.

About the Author

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If world art history is to be written... it ought to be developed within a different, "horizontal" paradigm...

A critical analysis should reveal the speaking subject:

the one who speaks, on whose behalf, and for whom.

This is not to cancel Western art history, but to call this type of narrative by its proper name, "Western."

-Piotr Piotrowski, 2009¹

The West is not ready yet to see an equal Other...

-Olu Oguibe, 1994²

Postcolonial scholars like Olu Oguibe have argued that the West needs the Other to define itself.³ Focusing in particular on artists of African descent, Oguibe argues that artists of color are accepted into the Western art establishment only when their work reflects upon their "native" heritage.⁴ Those who try to escape this framework by adopting western conventions generally do not find acclaim, but rather are disparaged for adulterating their native "authenticity."⁵ As a result, he charges, non-white artists can only rarely assimilate into the western art market even if they have lived in the West for decades.⁶ Oguibe defines this emphasis on cultural difference as one of the most difficult challenges artists of color face: as Other, they are forced into a "numbers game" in which non-white artists compete for the limited number of spaces available to them in an otherwise white, western art world.⁷ In this game, artists of color cannot escape their associations with the "third world." Those who refuse to play the game, i.e. to create work or make statements that support the western view of them, are simply dropped in favor of those who will.

Whereas postcolonial scholars like Oguibe focus on the distant (racialized) Other, post-socialist scholars like Piotr Piotrowski focus on the "close Other," artists from eastern

¹ Piotr Piotrowski, "Towards Horizontal Art History," in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration, Convergence*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing: 2009) 82-85, here: 83.

² Olu Oguibe, "A Brief Note on Internationalism," in *Global Visions, Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London, Kala Press: 1994) 58.

³ Olu Oguibe, "In the Heart of Darkness," in Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) 3-9.

⁴ Olu Oguibe, "Play Me the 'Other': Colonialist Determinism and the Postcolonial Predicament," in *The Culture Game*, 18-32.

⁵ Olu Oguibe, "Nationalism, Modernity, Modernism," in *The Culture Game*, 47-59.

⁶ Olu Oguibe, "Double Dutch and Culture Game," in *The Culture Game*, 33-44. In this article, Oguibe shows how Yinka Shonibare, and to a lesser extent, Chris Offili, successfully play the culture game.

⁷ Olu Oguibe, "Prologue," in *The Culture Game*, xi-xvi. In this case, Oguibe is arguing about the difficulty faced by non-Western artists more generally, including those from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Europe.⁸ These artists are generally white and share a similar background to those from the West, but were separated from it for decades by the Iron Curtain. Their Otherness is based on politics rather than race. Rooted in the same cultural history and traditions as the West, their art nonetheless developed in a “different semiotic and ideological space than Western Europe,” so even when it looks similar, it often has a different meaning.⁹ This difference is frequently elided in the West, where socialist art is dismissed as peripheral and a poor imitation of art created in the center. In sharp contrast to artists from the “third world,” one of the greatest challenges these “second world” artists face is the elision of their difference, the inability for western critics to see that although the styles and imagery may be similar, the meanings can be different. The result is a misunderstanding of their work that distorts its meaning, reduces its complexity and strips the artists of their agency.

The loss of difference experienced by the close Other can be seen in the case of Bernhard Heisig (1925-2011), one of East Germany’s most successful artists. Highly praised on both sides of the Wall in the 1980s, he is best known today for his many expressionist paintings about war and trauma. These works are frequently interpreted in terms of his biography: Heisig was a teenage soldier for the Nazis in World War II, where he fought on both fronts and was a member of the prestigious 12th SS Tank Division of the Hitler Youth. Some of his paintings, such as *Fortress Breslau* (1969, fig. 1) and *The Battle of the Bulge* (1978-81), make direct reference to his own experiences, whereas others seem to suggest the connection more indirectly through the inclusion of military tanks and uniforms. Recent scholarship tends to emphasize these works, portraying Heisig as an artist obsessed by “his own wartime traumas.”¹⁰ His tendency to paint multiple versions of a particular subject, and to rework each canvas—sometimes to the point of destroying it—encourages this view, seeming to illustrate a Freudian response to trauma.¹¹ Some authors have claimed in recent years that “his artistic achievement lies in his lifelong struggle to come to terms with the traumas of a biography that passed from war and dictatorship to another dictatorship and the Cold War.”¹² The power of this interpretation is that it makes Heisig’s life and art into a microcosm of Germany’s recent history and, in particular, its struggle with totalitarianism.

⁸ Piotr Piotrowski, “Towards Horizontal Art History,” 2009.

⁹ Piotr Piotrowski, “The Geography of Central/East European Art,” in Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, ed. *Borders in Art. Revisiting Kunstgeographie* (Warsaw: Institute of Art, 2000) 43-50.

¹⁰ “Bernhard Heisig – The Rage of Pictures Opens at K20,” *artdaily.org* <http://www.artdaily.com/section/lastweek/index.asp?int_sec=11&int_new=13991&int_mod=2>. Last Accessed: 15. December 2011.

¹¹ Eckhart Gillen, “Beharrlichkeit des Vergessens. Der Maler als Regisseur seiner Erinnerungen,” in Gillen, ed., *Bernhard Heisig, Die Wut der Bilder* (Köln: Dumont, 2005) 28-53.

¹² Catherine Hickley, “East German Painter Heisig, Portrayer of War and Fascism, Dies,” *Bloomberg*, 11. June 2011 <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-06-10/east-german-artist-bernhard-heisig-painter-of-war-and-fascism-dies-at-86.html>> Last Accessed: 15. December 2011.



Figure 1

Bernhard Heisig, *Fortress Breslau – The City and its Murderers*, 1969. Oil on Canvas.
165 x 150 cm. (The painting no longer exists in this form; Heisig reworked it in 1977.)

In East Germany, by contrast, Heisig's life and art were interpreted quite differently. His Nazi past was not seen as a traumatic source for creativity, but rather as the reason he chose to become a communist and to live in East Germany, where he remained throughout the Cold War period. For him, as for many German intellectuals in the wake of World War II, Communism's critique of imperialism and its emphasis on pacifism seemed to offer a better path for the future. Rather than an artist obsessed by trauma, Heisig was presented in East German scholarship as a politically engaged artist who created more from his intellect than his psyche. His wartime paintings were linked to his biography, but the emphasis was on how they functioned as a critique of the continuation of fascism in the West. They were "never a simple history illustration."¹³ Not only did East German critics interpret Heisig's images of war differently than post-Wall critics, they also emphasized a greater variety within the artist's oeuvre, which include portraiture, murals, still lifes, and literary illustrations. These works showed the positive side of Heisig's artistic creation, fulfilling his own call in 1964 that art be well rounded: "The entire person, his joys, desires, longings, dreams, as well as the tragic elements, his fear, imperfection, pain—in short, life and death—are the content of artistic engagement."¹⁴

This article traces the reception of Heisig's life and art—first in East Germany and then in the Federal Republic of Germany before and after the Wall—to illustrate the western tendency to deny difference to the "close Other" and the impact this has had on our understanding of Heisig's life and art. It will show that Heisig was perceived as an intellectually engaged, political artist before 1989 in both East and West Germany. After the fall of the Wall and German unification, however, a previously marginal narrative in the West about Heisig as a traumatized victim came to prominence and ultimately usurped all other interpretations. This particular view distorts Heisig's achievements as an artist by depoliticizing him and his work. It thus downplays his allegiance to socialism and forces him into the role of the tortured, solitary artist. Such an approach not only limits our understanding of Heisig and his contribution to post-war German art, but also of art under Communism and the perspective it offers on art in the West. Ultimately, this rewriting of Heisig's life and art in recent years shows the West's inability to see or accept difference in the close Other, an illustration of Oguibe's statement that the West is not yet ready to see an equal Other. If we are to write a world history of art, however, we need to incorporate the art of the Other, both close and distant, and in Heisig's case, to accept not only that art could be created under Communism, but also that its meaning—regardless of stylistic or thematic similarities to work created in the West—was often quite different on the other side of the Wall.

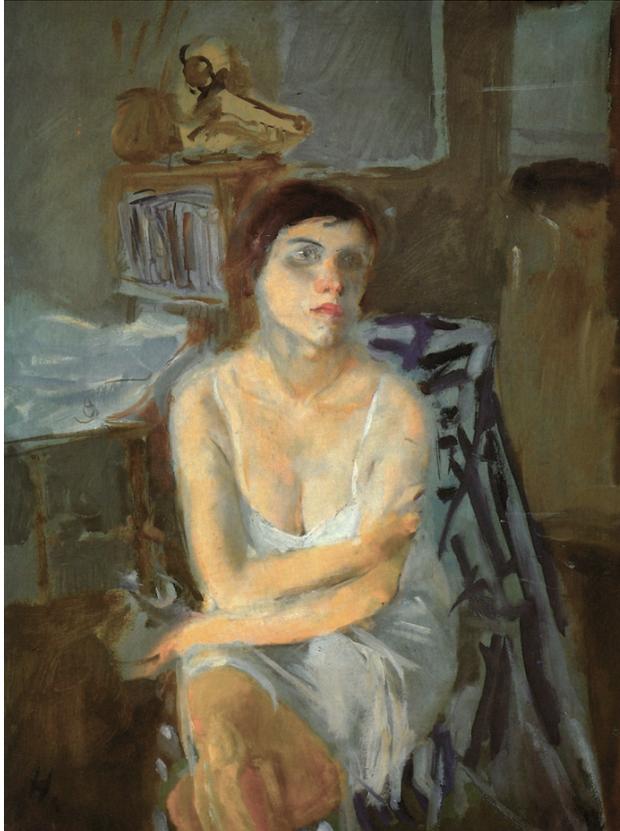
Bernhard Heisig in East Germany

Discussions of Heisig's art first began in the East German press of the 1950s, with several articles mentioning his work in 1959. At this point in time, the thirty-four year old artist was a teacher at the Leipzig Academy and chair of the Leipzig branch of the Association of Visual Artists. Unlike today, he was known in these early years primarily as a graphic

¹³ H[enry] S[chumann], "Als Künstler gebraucht werden," *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (16 March 1968).

¹⁴ Heisig's speech at the Fifth Congress of the Association of Visual Artists Germany (VBKD), 1964, as reprinted in Ulrike Goeschen, *Vom sozialistischen Realismus zur Kunst im Sozialismus* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2001) 424-9.

artist rather than a painter and for having a straightforward, realist style. In a review of the Fifth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig published in the national magazine *Sonntag* in 1959, Horst Jaehner stated that Heisig's portrait drawings and lithographs on the Paris Commune showed he was one of the most talented artists of the younger generation in the exhibition.¹⁵ In another review, this one of a small exhibition of his prints and drawings, the unnamed author praised Heisig's portraiture, stating that "every single one of these faces betrays something of the soul."¹⁶



In 1960, Heisig was singled out as one of four up-and-coming young artists—together with Harry Blume, Werner Tübke and Willi Sitte—in a substantial article published in the national magazine *Junge Kunst*.¹⁷ The article stated that these four artists, despite significant differences in temperament, background and painterly style, shared a similar striving for artistic excellence that was important for the development of art in East Germany. Heisig was represented by a portrait painting (1958, fig. 2), two lithographs, a drawing and some sketches.¹⁸ The text focused on the lithograph titled, *Peace March* (1957, fig. 3), praising it both for showing an early event in the history of Soviet power, i.e. the October Revolution, and also for transcending that moment in time to create a work that emphasized class, brotherhood and internationalism.

Figure 2

Bernhard Heisig, *Model Scene (Jutta)*, 1958. Oil on Fiberboard, 79 x 59.5 cm. Stiftung Moritzburg. Kunstmuseum des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt. Foto: Klaus Göltz, Halle/Saale.

¹⁵ Horst Jaehner, "Genrebild kein Stiefkind mehr," in *Sonntag*, Nr. 31, 1959, 7.

¹⁶ "Mensch und Natur," *Mittel Neueste Nachrichten*, 18. September 1959.

¹⁷ "Vier Maler zwischen Gestern und Morgen," in *Junge Kunst*, April 1960, 17-32.

¹⁸ In the article, the portrait, now known as *Model Scene (Jutta)*, was dated to 1960. The museum that owns the work dates it to 1958 based on the information it was given when it acquired the painting from the artist in 1973. Wolfgang Büche. "AW: Copyright Anfrage: Bernhard Heisig 'Modellszene' (1958)." Email to April Eisman. 7 March 2012.



Figure 3

Bernhard Heisig, *Peace March*, 1957. Lithograph. Size and location unknown.

The following year, in August 1961, Heisig became director of the Leipzig Academy, one of East Germany's four main art schools, and introduced a painting class to the curriculum. Three months later, he exhibited two paintings and ten lithographs at the Sixth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig. This exhibition marked his emergence onto the East German art scene as a painter and the beginning of a more sustained engagement with his work in the press.¹⁹ Most reviews of the Sixth mentioned his paintings of the Paris Commune and pointed out the importance of the topic for the history of socialism: it was the first communist government on European soil. Some questioned the tone of the works, however, especially in the wake of Walter Ulbricht's visit to the exhibition in December. Apparently Ulbricht, head of the East German State, had disliked the passive quality of the figures in Heisig's paintings and had encouraged him to emphasize the "storming" of the Communards.²⁰ The Leipzig art historian Joachim Uhlitzsch stated that although the paintings were both titled *March Days in Paris* (1961, fig. 4), they were more like a "last stand," the doomed fight of May rather than the heady days of March.²¹

¹⁹ Heisig created his first painting, *Circle of Young Field Biologists*, in 1952. It was followed by *1848 in Leipzig*, which he worked on from 1954-58, and several portraits. Although he exhibited one of these portraits, *Modellpause*, at the Fifth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1959, it was first with the Paris Commune paintings in 1961 that Heisig began to be discussed in the press for his paintings. He first began working with this topic as a series of prints in 1956.

²⁰ Werner Krecek & Karl Heinz Hagen, "Ein Blick in den Spiegel unserer Zeit, Rundgang mit Walter Ulbricht durch die 6. Kunstausstellung des VBKD Bezirk Leipzig," *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (15 December 1961).

²¹ Joachim Uhlitzsch, "Es gilt das Leben zu verändern," *Das Blatt*, January 1962.



Figure 4

Bernhard Heisig, *March Days in Paris I*, 1960. Oil on Canvas. 123 x 153 cm. Destroyed through overpainting.

These texts about Heisig's paintings at the Sixth reveal the importance of art in East Germany, where not only did the head of State visit the exhibition and offer his opinion on some of the works displayed, but the exhibition itself was discussed in great detail in the press. The interest in Heisig's paintings reflected both the importance of the Paris Commune to East Germany and the importance of Heisig's role as one of East Germany's earliest history painters. These early articles also offer insight into Heisig's working process and, in particular, his interest in engaging with others in the creation of his art. As one article noted, Heisig responded to criticisms raised by the jury that the paintings were too static by reworking one of the compositions.²² This is one of the first mentions of Heisig's tendency to rework paintings, and the reason given is an intellectual rather than emotional one.

²² Clipping from *Junge Kunst*, Heft 1, 1962, as found in Akademie der Künste (AdK) Archive, Kober Nachlass 14.

Just under three years later, in February 1964, Heisig resigned from the pressures of his position as director of the Leipzig Academy in order to have more time for his work.²³ He continued on as a professor, however, until 1968, and was also head of the graphics department until that time. In the two years following his resignation, he was at the center of a number of controversies about art that were taking place in East Germany in these years as artists and art historians attempted to broaden the definition of Socialist Realism. The first of these controversies, which took place in April 1964, was over a number of speeches given at the Fifth Congress of the Association of Visual Artists.²⁴ Heisig's was one of them. In his speech, he defended modern art, stating that "modern art was not a forbidden fruit on the tree of capitalism," but rather was something that East German artists could use to create socialist art.²⁵ He also stated that it should be artists—not political functionaries—who should decide what art is, and that it was in fact their responsibility to do so as part of the East German intelligentsia. This speech resulted in a multi-week investigation into his loyalty to the State and, ultimately, a public self-criticism to redeem himself with the Party.

Within six months of the speech and self-criticism, and perhaps in response to them, Heisig shifted away from the straightforward realism of his early work to the modern style for which he is now known, one marked by the use of simultaneity. One of the first examples of this new style was a series of murals he created for the Hotel Deutschland in late 1964/early 1965. Each of the murals focused on a city in Germany and demonstrated a modern style quite different from his earlier work. In *Schwedt* (fig. 5), for example, which was the most controversial of those he created, bright colors swirl together in organic shapes that combine the large, simplified face of a working woman with the shapes and symbols of the city into a composition that, according to the Leipzig journalist Rita Jorek, "did not make it easy" for the viewer.²⁶ In a positive review, Jorek explained that these murals "are not to be understood as an illustration of thoughts and ideas, but rather as independent artistic creations." She then quoted Heisig as stating that "all too frequently it is forgotten that the happy attitude towards life that a work can produce also has an ideological function." This article was the first of four in a series published in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* that engaged with the complexity of Heisig's murals from both positive and negative perspectives. The intent of the series was to help the general public to better understand and appreciate art, presumably in response to the State's desire—heavily promoted in the wake of the building of the Wall in 1961—for a higher quality of art for the "educated nation."²⁷

²³ Resignation letter from Heisig to Binder, 19. February 1964. Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst (HGB) Archive. As will be discussed later, Heisig's resignation as director was later seen by western scholars as politically motivated, a punitive action based on the controversial speech he gave in April 1964. His resignation letter, however, predates this event, and its pre-conference date is confirmed by two other documents at the Archive of the Leipzig Academy.

²⁴ The art historian Hermann Raum and sculptor Fritz Cremer also gave controversial speeches at this conference.

²⁵ Heisig's speech at the Fifth Congress of the VBKD, 1964, as reprinted in Goeschen, 424-9.

²⁶ Altogether, Heisig created four murals for the Hotel Deutschland. The fourth, however, was created at a later date. Rita Jorek, "Wir stellen zur Diskussion: Bilder auf der Etage, Ein erstes Gespräch mit Prof. Bernhard Heisig," *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (10 July 1965).

²⁷ April Eisman, "In the Crucible: Bernhard Heisig and the Hotel Deutschland Murals," in Amy Wlodarski and Elaine Kelly, eds. *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011) 21-39. In 1964, the Second Bitterfeld Way called for a higher quality of art for the "educated nation," a term used at the Sixth Party Conference in 1963 with regard to East Germany.



Figure 5

Bernhard Heisig, *Schwedt*, 1965. Sgraffito. 300 x 900 cm. Radisson Blu Hotel, Leipzig.

Photo: April Eisman.

The second debate focused on a new painting in the Paris Commune series that Heisig showed at the Seventh Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig that fall. Like his murals for the Hotel Deutschland, *The Paris Commune* (1964, fig. 6) combined multiple moments and events into one image, which showed more than fifteen people engaged in hand-to-hand combat in the final days of the Paris Commune. Early on, critics in Leipzig praised the work as “energetic” and “explosive,” a “symphony of dramatic tones” that made “the unstoppable strength of the Communards noticeable.”²⁸ As the exhibition wore on, however, critics from places other than Leipzig began to attack the painting on both stylistic and thematic grounds. These attacks culminated the following spring with an article by Harald Olbrich in *Bildende Kunst* in which he stated that Heisig’s “superficial interests in problems of form... and writhing amorphously doughy masses decidedly limit the Party value of the Commune.”²⁹

²⁸ Günter Meißner, *Neues Deutschland* (5 October 1965), M.T., *Die Union* (21 October 1965) and *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (3 October 1965).

²⁹ Harald Olbrich, “Ästhetische Subjektivität oder Subjektivismus,” in *Bildende Kunst* 5 (1966) 272-273.



Figure 6

Bernhard Heisig, *The Paris Commune*, 1964. Oil on Canvas. 150 x 152. Destroyed through overpainting.

The controversies in 1964 and 1965 were followed by a few years of quiet in which only a handful of texts about Heisig appeared in the press, generally in response to small exhibitions of his graphic work. Then in 1968, Heisig had a small solo exhibition of his paintings that marked a turning point in his career. At the time, he was still a professor at the Leipzig Academy, although he resigned later that summer, working as a freelance artist for several years until the mid 1970s. He was also still seen primarily as a graphic artist. This latter fact becomes clear in the most extensive review of the exhibition, that by the Leipzig art historian Henry Schumann, who began by acknowledging that this was the first major exhibition of paintings by “the graphic artist Professor Bernhard Heisig.”³⁰

³⁰ H[enry] S[chuman], “Als Künstler gebraucht werden,” *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (16 March 1968).

This article was one of the first to mention Heisig's wartime experiences and to interpret his work as a reckoning with fascism. Schumann pointed specifically to Heisig's lithographic series from 1965/66, *The Fascist Nightmare* as an attempt at self-emancipation, and stated that "the causes of the imperial war are visible" although it is a pacifist tone that dominates the work. He then turned to the Paris Commune, which he saw as Heisig's central theme, and argued that it, by contrast, showed the possibility of a just war, the final goal of which was to end all wars. According to Schumann, of the approximately eight finished paintings Heisig had created on the Paris Commune to date, four still existed and were in the exhibition, including the controversial one from 1965. He then pointed out that these paintings were not historical illustrations, but rather, allegories. Mentioning two of the earliest paintings in Heisig's oeuvre to deal explicitly with the Nazi past, *Jewish Ghetto Fighters in Warsaw* and *The Christmas Dream of the Unteachable Soldier*, both from 1964, he stated that these works mark "the possible beginning of a thematic enrichment of his painting and maybe even a new socialist history painting." He ended the article by stating that painting was not just for a circle of aesthetes; it was something that was needed in East Germany.

The following year, in 1969, Heisig was at the center of another controversy, this time over the "loud, brutal, wild – and very sensitive" painterly style evident in his painting, *The Brigade* (1969), which was on display at the Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig.³¹ Although many of his paintings the previous year had exhibited a similarly energetic brushwork without causing a stir, a number of critics did not think this style suitable for depicting one of the most revered topics in East German art, the worker portrait. The harshest criticism was written by Dr. Herbert Letsch, editor of the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, who wrote that:

The expressive painting wakens above all the impression of pained, mistreated human beings. The painting has a strong leaning toward the amorphous, the destructive, the morbid. At the same time the clumsy and brutal painting style is not to be ignored... Bloody and virtually brutal reds have been placed in the faces, with corresponding pale, sick blues and weak greens. The warm orange tones emphasize the amorphous and brutal character of the painting. This use of color does not lead to an expressive enhancement of a true expression of the spiritual life of the new human being, but rather an impression of pained and physically mistreated human beings... Similarly the composition avoids all stability; it is as amorphous and formless as the painting itself. The features of the handwriting apparent here are the painterly expression of a subjective and false interpretation of the essence of the socialist human being.³²

A similar sentiment was expressed a month later—allegedly by a reader, although reader letters like these were sometimes written by cultural functionaries—in the government's national newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*: "I know that Professor Heisig is an artist with great talent, but the construction workers that he painted radiate, in my opinion, neither the strength of the working class, their creation, their self-confidence, nor the true humanity of socialist personalities. They appear to me to be crude, impersonal, and foreign..."³³ In response to these criticisms, Heisig continued working on the painting, ultimately destroying

³¹ Dr. M.T., "Eine Topographie in Farben. Werken von Bernhard Heisig bei 'Kunst der Zeit' ausgestellt," *Die Union* (30 March 1968).

³² Dr. Herbert Letsch, "Handschrift-Expressivität-Ideologie," in *Leipziger Volkszeitung* (24 May 1969).

³³ Irma Nitschka, "Wir suchen unser geistiges Antlitz, Leser schreiben zu Bezirksausstellung 'Architektur und bildende Kunst,'" in *Neues Deutschland* (24 July 1969).

the original and creating at least two others in the process. One of them, *The Brigadier II* (1969/70), would later become one of his best known works in East Germany.

In the 1970s, Heisig rose to national prominence in East Germany, in part due to the significant cultural “thaw” that occurred in the wake of Erich Honecker becoming head of the communist government in 1971. Shortly after taking power, Honecker stated that “for those artists who truly believe in Socialism, there can be no more taboos on their work, neither in content nor in style.”³⁴ The resulting period of “breadth and variety,” which lasted until the end of the Cold War with only minor fluctuations in policy, marked a greater openness to modern artistic styles for traditional media. Newer media such as installations and performance art, however, were not included, nor were artists allowed to make direct criticisms of East Germany or the Soviet Union. It is at this point in time that Heisig gained national prominence within the East German art world.

In January 1972, Harald Olbrich published a heavily illustrated five-page article on Heisig in *Bildende Kunst*, praising him as one of the “most exciting artists in Leipzig” and pointing out the significant development in his work in the past five years.³⁵ Olbrich praised Heisig’s recent lithographs and paintings of Vladimir Lenin (fig. 7), tracking the various elements and stages in Heisig’s work to date. He pointed to the influence of Lovis Corinth and Oscar Kokoschka on Heisig’s paintings, and of Max Schwimmer on his prints, as well as to the importance of Heisig’s murals on the development of his artistic style, including the decision to create a series of worker portraits in the late 1960s. Olbrich saw history paintings as playing the most important role in Heisig’s oeuvre, and especially the Paris Commune series. He cited Heisig’s experiences in World War II as part of the reason why his images on the Paris Commune in the mid 1960s were so controversial: his own experiences had led him to paint the Paris Commune as a heroically senseless battle. Heisig’s recent exploration of this past in paintings like *Fortress Breslau – the City and its Murderers* (1969, fig. 1) and the lithographic series, *The Fascist Nightmare* (1965/66), however, had allowed him, in Olbrich’s opinion, to gain the distance necessary to separate these personal experiences of World War II from his portrayal of the Paris Commune. Olbrich also pointed to the importance of landscapes and still lifes for the development of Heisig’s style since 1964, offering him inspiration in terms of both color and painterly sensibility.

³⁴ Erich Honecker at the Fourth Conference of the Central Committee of the SED as reported in the Party’s main newspaper, *Neues Deutschland* (18 December 1971) and cited in *Kunstkombinat DDR, Daten und Zitate zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945-1990*, eds. Günter Feist and Eckhart Gillen (Berlin: Museumspädagogischen Dienst, 1990) 77.

³⁵ Harald Olbrich, “Voll schöpferischer Unrast. Zum Schaffen des Leipziger Malers Bernhard Heisig,” *Bildende Kunst*, January 1972.

**Figure 7**

Bernhard Heisig, *Lenin and the Incredulous Timofej*, 1970. Oil on Fiberboard. 272 x 150 cm. Museum der Bildenden Künste, Leipzig. Photo Credit: bpk, Berlin/Museum der Bildende Künste, Leipzig/Ursula Gerstenberger.

Eight months later, *Bildende Kunst* published another article about Heisig, this one by the Leipzig art historian Karl Max Kober (1930-87), who had had many long conversations with the artist about his work.³⁶ Titled, "The Chance to Contribute to a World View," it focused on the development of Heisig's Paris Commune paintings, culminating with the highly praised four-panel version first shown at the Eighth Regional Art Exhibition in Leipzig in 1972. In the six-page, heavily-illustrated article, Kober discussed Heisig's work in terms of the recent emergence of history painting in East Germany, but argued that Heisig's paintings were not simply illustrations of the past; rather, they were allegories for the present. Kober saw the emergence of the Paris Commune topic in Heisig's oeuvre as a response to "counterrevolutionary putsch" in Hungary in 1956, together with a book Heisig was reading at the time by Prosper Olivier Lissagary on the Paris Commune, and credited Heisig's return to the topic after a multi-year break following the criticisms of 1965 as a response to the Vietnam War. He praised the 1972 version as the culmination of a dialectical process: it was the combination of the early static images of Heisig's first paintings on the topic with the scenes of battle in the second series to create a third variation that combined them both into a new formulation.

In October 1972, the Seventh Art Exhibition of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) opened in Dresden. The most important exhibition of contemporary art in East Germany, it contained the four-panel version of Heisig's *The Paris Commune* (1972) as well as another key work in Heisig's oeuvre, *The Brigadier II* (1969/70, fig. 8).³⁷ The latter was a portrait of a brigade leader that had emerged from the discussions about his controversial painting of a group of brigade workers exhibited three years earlier. An article in *Kulturelles Leben* praised the new painting—which showed a smiling middle aged man in red shirt and hard hat confidently giving the thumbs-up sign—as a model for future images of the working class, a topic the author believed to be of crucial importance for the future of East German art.³⁸ He saw in Heisig's painting a valuable combination of both a unique individual and an ideal type that reflected the strength and character of the working class. He also admired the masterful brushwork and colors of the painting, the surface of which seemed to shimmer. An interview with Heisig in *Kunst Erziehung* explained how the work had come into being, in part from the discussions that had taken place about *The Brigade* a few years earlier.³⁹

³⁶ Karl Max Kober, "Von der Chance an einem Weltbild mitzuwirken. Zu Bernhard Heisigs Bildern ueber die Pariser Kommune," *Bildende Kunst*, September 1972.

³⁷ The Seventh Art Exhibition of the GDR was the seventh of ten major exhibitions of contemporary East German art that took place in Dresden, generally every four to five years. It began with the Allgemeine Deutsche Kunstausstellung in 1946, which included art from all four occupation zones. From 1949 until 1968, it was called the German Art Exhibition Dresden.

³⁸ Peter Betthausen, "Brigadier, Gemälde von Bernhard Heisig," *Kulturelles Leben*, April 1973.

³⁹ "Der Künstler zu seinem Werk. Bernhard Heisig zum Gemälde *Der Brigadier* — VII. Kunstausstellung der DDR," *Kunsterziehung*, February 1973.

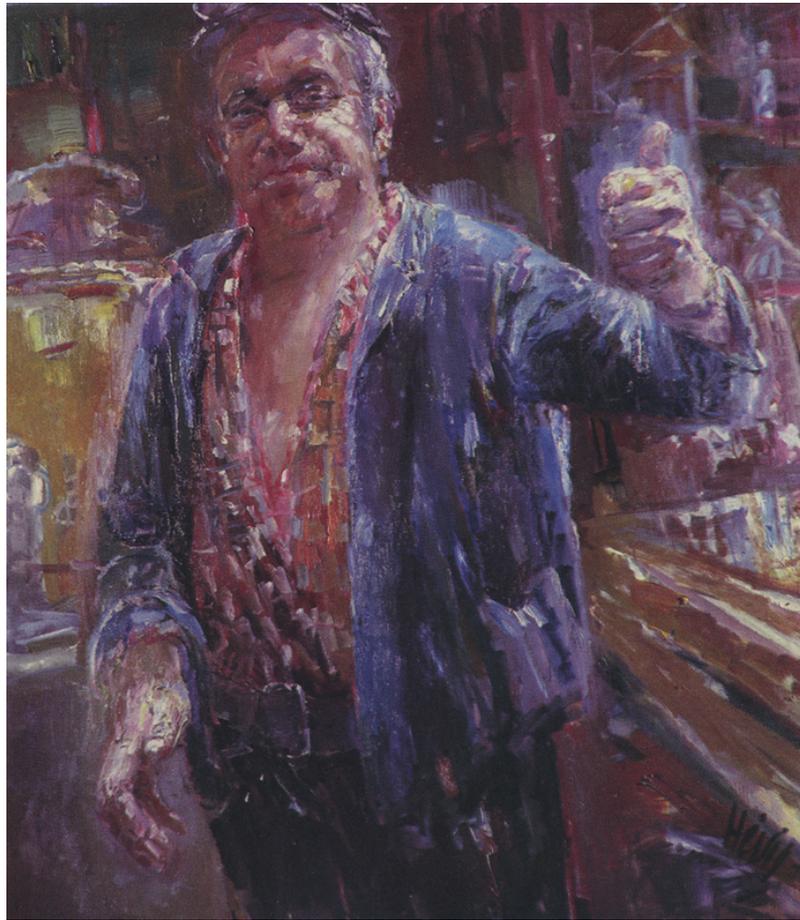


Figure 8

Bernhard Heisig, *The Brigadier II*, 1969/70. Oil on Canvas. 140 x 125 cm. (The painting no longer exists in this form; Heisig reworked it in the mid 1970s.)

The following year, in 1973, a major retrospective of Heisig's work opened at the Gallery of New Masters in Dresden, the first at that prestigious location to focus on an East German artist under the age of fifty. At forty-eight, Heisig was a freelance artist in Leipzig and had just been made a member of the Academy of Arts in Berlin and Vice President of the Leipzig branch of the Association of Visual Artists. The substantial catalog that accompanied the exhibition contained short texts by the vice president of the Academy of Arts, the First Secretary of the national Association of Visual Artists, the head of the cultural department of the Regional Council Leipzig (*Rat des Bezirkes*), and the director of the Gallery of New Masters in Dresden.⁴⁰ These political forwards each mentioned the quality of Heisig's work and his commitment to society: in Heisig's work "a passionate knowledge of our socialist

⁴⁰ Bernhard Heisig, *Gemälde, Zeichnungen, Lithographien* (Dresden and Leipzig, 1973). Hereafter: BH73. The cover image for this exhibition was a detail from the 1972 Paris Commune painting showing several faces.

reality and political engagement are combined with high artistic mastery.⁴¹ The catalog also contained the most substantial text on Heisig that had yet been written, a thirty-five page article by Karl Max Kober, who had published an article on Heisig in *Bildende Kunst* the previous year.

Titled “Bernhard Heisig, Life and Work,” Kober’s catalog text developed themes that would be repeated in subsequent publications on Heisig in East Germany.⁴² The first was Heisig’s working method, which he explained was like “an arduous dialog” with the canvas, a working and reworking of the image until it was either finished or destroyed. He stated that Heisig was never satisfied, working and reworking a painting, and even making multiple variations of it, in a constant attempt to find convincing solutions to the artistic puzzles he set for himself. In terms of the Paris Commune, Kober pointed out that the earliest versions were destroyed, one through over painting, another painted into a later version.

A second theme was Heisig’s past in World War II, which Kober credited for Heisig’s hatred for all things inhuman and his decision to join the Communist Party. This decision, according to Kober, also had important repercussions for his art: it made Heisig realize the importance of Realism as an artistic style, which he saw as the only way to reach the people and get them to think, and that even as an artist, there was no escape from societal problems. Kober also talked about the Paris Commune thematic in Heisig’s work as a metaphor for World War II, but not as a way to get rid of his memories or to compensate for his trauma, but rather because of Heisig’s natural interest in conflict. The Paris Commune allowed him to show hand-to-hand conflict in a way not possible for World War II. For Heisig, all of these works—including the handful of new paintings making direct reference to the war—were about getting people to think; to look behind facades and mistrust idols and wolves in sheep’s clothing.

In a three-page review of the exhibition published in *Die Weltbühne*, the Berlin art historian Lothar Lang pointed out Heisig’s painterly debts to Kokoschka and Corinth, before arguing that he had a different world view than these artists: Heisig reflected on the problems of the world in his art, but as a socialist, and his work contributed “to the intelligent socialist art” that required viewer engagement.⁴³ Lang also pointed out that it would be a disservice to Heisig to think of him simply as a “painter of landscapes or still lifes” since “his most important achievements are in portraiture and history.” Mentioning Heisig’s self-portraits, portraits of his mother, Lenin, the musical director Vaclav Neumann and *The Brigadier*, Lang stated that “from now on, Heisig must be considered one of our best portraitists.” He then turned to Heisig’s “history” paintings, stating that they contribute to “the historical consciousness of our time.” He divided them into three main categories: the Paris Commune, German fascism, and the events and problems of the present.

Two years later, the Leipzig art historian Renate Hartleb published the first “book” about Heisig, a roughly twenty-page text for the *Artist and Work* series.⁴⁴ Stating that “creative unrest is a basic element in the creations of the Leipzig painter and graphic artist Bernhard Heisig,” she emphasized the breadth of his oeuvre, which included portraiture, nudes,

⁴¹ Werner Wolf, “Vorwort des Mitgliedes des Rates des Bezirkes Leipzig und Leiters der Abteilung Kultur,” in BH73, 9-10.

⁴² [Karl] Max Kober, “Bernhard Heisig, Leben und Werk,” in BH73, 13-47.

⁴³ Lothar Lang, “Der Maler Bernhard Heisig,” in *Die Weltbuehne*, Issue 30, 24. July 1973.

⁴⁴ Renate Hartleb, *Bernhard Heisig* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1975). The cover image for this book was *Model Scene (Jutta)* (fig. 2).

landscapes, genre scenes and illustrations, in addition to murals and the Paris Commune. She pointed out the many artistic references in his work to other artists, including Kokoschka, Corinth, Adolph Menzel, Max Beckmann, Otto Dix and Fernand Leger. Like Lang a couple years earlier, she singled out his portraits of his mother, of Vaclav Neumann and of workers, as evidence that "Heisig seems predestined for portraiture." Yet she also argued that "although portraiture is very important in Heisig's work, his most important achievements are in the realm of history paintings, especially his works on the Paris Commune." She, too, looked at his prints on the Fascist nightmare and his criticism of militarism in both of these works.

By 1975, Heisig's reputation as one of East Germany's most important artists was firmly established. A talented graphic artist and painter, he was praised for having made significant contributions to East German art, especially in terms of history paintings and portraiture. Viewed as a socially engaged artist whose works reflected upon the problems of the day, Heisig's art was considered a feast for the both the eyes and the intellect. The following year, in 1976, Heisig returned to the Leipzig Academy, assuming the position of director for more than a decade; he also became Vice President of the national Association of Visual Artists. In 1978, he received the National Prize of East Germany (First Class). By the early 1980s, his work represented East Germany in major art exhibitions in the West, including documenta and the Venice Biennale. With this increased interaction with the western art market, Heisig shifted into a third phase of his artistic development, one that emphasized a modern style but moved away from a specifically East German subject matter to embrace topics that transcended the Iron Curtain.⁴⁵ Common themes in his paintings of the 1980s included Icarus and the Tower of Babel, both of which symbolized the dangers of hubris; paintings of the Prussian military past and of World War II; and variations of earlier paintings such as *Fortress Breslau* and the *Paris Commune*.

Heisig in West Germany

A different, albeit not entirely unrecognizable Heisig emerged in West German scholarship, which first began in the early 1970s, although it was not until 1980 that articles focusing on Heisig were anything but occasional.⁴⁶ In that year, Heisig had solo exhibitions in Bremen and Frankfurt am Main; they were followed by another at the Brusberg Gallery in

⁴⁵ The first phase of Heisig's painted oeuvre (1952-63) is marked by a realist aesthetic and socialist subject matter. In the second phase (1964-76), Heisig shifted to a modernist aesthetic, which he combined with a socialist subject matter. In the third phase (1977-89), he continued with the modernist aesthetic but shifted to a "German" (as opposed to East German) subject matter. April Eisman, "Bernhard Heisig and the Cultural Politics of East German Art," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2007, 43-44.

⁴⁶ The Munich-based *Tendenzen* magazine published an article about Heisig in 1966, but it was written by the East German curator, Gerhard Winkler. The first articles written by West German authors appear in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in the early 1970s, although articles about the Leipzig art scene more generally had been published as early as 1968 ("Auf der Suche nach Bildern, Kunst in einer sozialistischen Stadt. Bericht aus Leipzig von Eduard Beaucamp," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*). The first article to focus on Heisig appears to be the one published on January 8, 1972, albeit without an author, "DDR-Kunstmarkt gefordert;" it was followed nearly two years later by Camilla Blechen's article, "Nie ganz zufrieden. Bernhard Heisig in Leipzig." With the exception of an article in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on September 2, 1976, nothing else of significance appears to have been published about Heisig in the West until 1980, at which point at least nine different articles in a number of newspapers were published. He was, however, mentioned in reviews of documenta 6 in 1977.

Hannover in 1981.⁴⁷ Together, these exhibitions marked the beginnings of what would become a veritable flood of exhibitions—and articles—about him in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG: West Germany before 1990, united Germany thereafter) that continued into the new millennium. Notably, the first of these took place in the immediate wake of documenta 6 in 1977, which marked the emergence of contemporary East German painting—and, specifically, Heisig, Werner Tübke, Wolfgang Mattheuer, and Willi Sitte—onto the Western art scene.⁴⁸ These four artists quickly became East Germany's best-known painters in the West and, later, the focus of controversy in the cultural battles following German unification in 1990.

Since none of Heisig's solo exhibitions in West Germany was accompanied by a catalog, his western reception from these years must be reconstructed largely from brochures, press articles and entries about him in catalogs of East German art more generally.⁴⁹ These texts—the ones written by West Germans—demonstrate comparatively little engagement with the art itself, tending to make general observations about Heisig's oeuvre rather than careful analyses of individual works. They also have a number of themes in common, several of which set them apart from their East German counterparts.⁵⁰ First, there was an overwhelming emphasis on Heisig's paintings of war and conflict to the virtual exclusion of the rest of his oeuvre. His landscapes, for example, were mentioned in only three of nineteen articles from the 1980s. Significantly, of the three, one dismissed them as a failure, while another saw little difference between them and his war paintings: "Even nature is made into a battlefield..."⁵¹

Second, Heisig's paintings of war and conflict were largely interpreted in terms of his "personal entanglement" in the "horrors," "nightmare" or "barbarism" of the Second World War, rather than from an intellectual investigation of the mechanisms of oppression that led to it.⁵² The latter was only rarely mentioned. Instead, Heisig was called a "deeply frightened warner," "traumatically touched" by his experiences, which "churn his innards" and "afflict

⁴⁷ This was not Heisig's first exhibition in the West. In 1966, he had exhibited prints from *The Fascist Nightmare* series in Würzburg. (The Magdeburg catalog lists the Würzburg exhibition as having taken place in 1965). Nonetheless, he did not become a recognized name in the West until these later exhibitions.

⁴⁸ The East German sculptors Fritz Cremer and Jo Jastram also exhibited work at documenta 6; their inclusion was a concession to the East German government in exchange for allowing the four painters—who had been invited by the exhibition's curator—to attend. *Stichwort für Ausstellung Paris und Documenta*. Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DR1/8171.

⁴⁹ The press articles cluster around his solo exhibitions in 1980-82 and 1984, as well as his commission to paint the West German Bundeskanzler Helmut Schmidt in 1986. Important catalogs of East German art in West Germany that included articles about him are *Zeitvergleich: Malerei und Grafik aus der DDR* (Hamburg: Art, das Kunstmagazin, 1982) and *Zeitvergleich '88 - 13 Maler aus der DDR* (Berlin: Galerie Brusberg, 1988).

⁵⁰ Frequently West German publications included articles by East German art historians. The article on Heisig in the documenta 6 catalog, for example, was written by Lothar Lang.

⁵¹ PHG, "Unter dem Teppich sind Menschenleiber gefangen," in *Berliner Morgenpost* (24 June 1984). Michael Nungesser, "Bernhard Heisig Neue Bilder, Zeichnungen," in *Die Kunst* 6 (1984). In all three articles, the mention of Heisig's landscapes was only in passing.

⁵² Georg Bussmann, "Bernhard Heisig: Die Beharrlichkeit des Vergessens und andere Bilder," exhibition pamphlet (Frankfurt am Main: Frankfurter Kunstverein, 1980). Volker Bauermeister, "Hannover: 'Bernhard Heisig. Bilder und Graphik,'" in *Die Zeit* (18 December 1981). Camilla Blechen, "Der Unzufriedene," in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (5 February 1982). Rudolf Lange, "Höllenfahrt durch Zeit und Geschichte, Bernhard Heisig bei Brusberg in Hannover," in *Hannoversche Allgemeine* (12/13 December 1981).

him to the present day.”⁵³ His work was thus seen as an “attempt to free himself from [the] angst” produced by his “traumatic experience of the destruction of his home town of Breslau.”⁵⁴ As such, they were considered “authentic” expressions of the artist’s personal experiences in the “chaos of German history.”⁵⁵

A third element shared by most of the articles written by West German authors—and one also visible in East German texts, albeit to a lesser degree—was the desire to place Heisig’s work within a *Gesamtdeutsch* (German without regard for East or West) tradition. In particular, leading Expressionist artists of the early 20th century, including Beckmann, Corinth, Kokoschka and Dix, were frequently mentioned as important precursors to Heisig’s work.

While the “Germanness” of Heisig’s art was an important factor for most of the West German authors—including the prize-winning author Günther Grass, who stated in a catalog of East German art in 1982: “they paint more German in the GDR”—a few focused on the critical potential of his work in terms of the Nazi past.⁵⁶ In his article from the Frankfurt am Main brochure, Georg Bussmann stated that Heisig’s art asks “questions that are only too seldomly... posed in the FRG.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Rudolph Lange wrote that East Germany is much further along in coming to terms with this past than West Germany; “it has not stopped denouncing the violent crimes of the National Socialists and the fascists.”⁵⁸ This view of Heisig’s work, however, was rare in the West, where the emphasis tended to be on Heisig as a victim of history rather than as someone actively engaging with it.

The West German emphasis on Heisig’s war paintings must be seen in the context of a renewed interest in the Nazi past of that country. In 1979, just a year before Heisig’s solo exhibitions in Bremen and Frankfurt am Main, millions of West Germans had tuned in to the American television miniseries “Holocaust,” which focused on the plight of one Jewish family during the Holocaust. This media event is credited with sensitizing a whole generation of West Germans to the horrors of World War II and with creating a “Holocaust Wave” of documentaries and books on the subject.⁵⁹ It was also in 1980 that a scandal emerged around Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer’s contributions to the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale: both were condemned in the German press for creating what were perceived to be proto-fascist works.⁶⁰ In comparison, Heisig’s military paintings, with their emphasis on traumatized soldiers, were clearly not promoting a fascist agenda and could be read as both an example of German victimhood as well as of the suffering of war on a more universal level.

⁵³ Bussmann, 1980. Blechen, 1982. Lange, 1981.

⁵⁴ Lange, 1981, and CB [Blechen], untitled, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (25 January 1982).

⁵⁵ Bussmann, 1980. G. Rühle, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (14 April 1979).

⁵⁶ Günther Grass, “Sich ein Bild machen,” in *Zeitvergleich* (1982), 12.

⁵⁷ Bussmann, 1980.

⁵⁸ Lange, 1981.

⁵⁹ Andrei S. Markovits and Rebecca S. Hayden, “‘Holocaust’ Before and After the Event: Reactions in West Germany and Austria,” in *New German Critique*, No. 19, Special Issue 1: Germans and Jews (Winter 1980), 53-80.

⁶⁰ Lisa Saltzman, *Anselm Kiefer and Art After Auschwitz* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Significantly, and in contrast to the 1990s, most of the articles about Heisig published in West Germany in the 1980s were positive, nor did they attempt to hide his relationship to East Germany.⁶¹ In fact, some even highlighted it. In 1980, Bussmann stated that “one senses the person, one senses position and a point of view...” in Heisig’s work.⁶² “It is clearly legible on which side he stands [i.e., on the side of Communism]. Nonetheless this painting is... not one-dimensional propaganda... The human significance of Heisig’s work is obvious; it lies in the use value of these images for mankind, for his understanding of history, his self-understanding, his self-worth...” As such, it was possible to “de-politicize even this art” and thereby appreciate it in the West.

Heisig’s Retrospective 1989 – East and West

In the final years of the Cold War era, scholars from East and West Germany came together to create a retrospective exhibition of Heisig’s work that toured cities in both countries beginning in the fall of 1989. In the forward to the catalog, the curators explained the long-held desire for such an exhibition, but that it was only with the “political normalization” of recent years that it was finally possible. They had chosen Heisig for this first exhibition because he was already well known in West Germany: Heisig had been in all of the major exhibitions of East German art in West Germany since documenta 6 in 1977 and also had work in major collections in the West. The catalog for the resulting exhibition, *Bernhard Heisig: Retrospektive*, reflects the state of the literature in both countries just before East Germany’s collapse. It remains the most comprehensive and representative look at Heisig’s work to date.

The 1989 catalog contains more than one hundred full-page color illustrations dedicated to Heisig’s paintings. Roughly 45% of them are history paintings and *Komplexbilder* (lit. complex paintings), 34% are portraits, and 21% are still lifes and landscapes.⁶³ There are also more than one hundred black-and-white pages devoted to Heisig’s drawings and prints—which are generally black-and-white in the original—with topics representatively distributed among portraiture, history, and literary illustrations. The catalog thus captures the diversity of Heisig’s artistic production in East Germany and weights each section accordingly. The works shown also represent the various phases in his oeuvre—at least as far as possible considering his tendency to rework images—with canvases dating from the late 1950s to 1989. In terms of presentation, there is no reliable order to the images, although one could argue they are roughly chronological.

⁶¹ An important exception to this is “Unter dem Teppich sind Menschenleiber gefangen” by PHG in the *Berliner Morgenpost* (24 June 1984). PHG calls Heisig’s work “a crude, obsessive painting.” He ends the article by calling Heisig’s landscapes failures. Peter Sager is also critical in his article, “Ein Künstler mit Profil,” in *Die Zeit* (26 March 1982), but his criticism is aimed at the East German government rather than at Heisig. Presumably there were a few more; Karin Thomas mentioned, for example, that Heisig had encountered “hybrid ignorance... that accused him of second-class eclecticism and allegorical excess” during his first solo exhibition in West Germany at the Galerie Hertz in Bremen in 1980. Karin Thomas, “Deutsch-deutsche Kunstdialog,” *Die Weltkunst* (1 January 1982): 29. Thank you to Dieter Brusberg for allowing me to use the press folders from his gallery.

⁶² Bussmann, 1980. All quotes from this paragraph are from this source.

⁶³ *Komplexbilder* is a more inclusive term for Heisig’s multi-figure compositions, which include not only history paintings, but also mythological and literary topics.

In the introduction to the catalog, the exhibition's curators—Peter Pachnicke from the East and Jörn Merkert from the West—pointed out that in comparison to music and literature, which can cross political borders relatively easily, the lack of access to original works in the visual arts had led to deep-seated stereotypes on both sides of the Wall. In the West, East German art was often thought to be “beautified Party-conforming Realism without artistic individuality,” while in the East, West Germany was often thought to be an “art market dictatorship [promoting] abstract art with no relation to reality.”⁶⁴ Such stereotypes only began to be redressed in the 1970s and 1980s. Now a deeper look at individual artists was needed, they argued: a comprehensive exhibition of Heisig's work was wanted by both sides.

The introduction—like the catalog as a whole—combined eastern and western perspectives of Heisig's work. It pointed out that in the West, his work first gained notice in the late 1970s at the documenta exhibition in 1977, and that it was particularly valued because of the “self-tormenting intensity with which he grappled with German history – and not as a moral finger pointer, but rather as someone involved... [Heisig] has created the ‘work of mourning’ that, according to Alexander Mitscherlich, is necessary for coming to terms with the darkest phase of German history.” These works appealed to the West's recent “hunger for images” stemming from decades of abstract art, but were also different from the “wild painting” that had emerged there in the 1980s: “This is not painting from the gut... [here is] an intact, precisely calculated image... Heisig: a painter who sets the whole of his artistic means [in play]...” In addition to his value for the West, the introduction also emphasized his commitment to society: “for Bernhard Heisig, it is important to have the chance ‘to work on a world view,’ since he is convinced that the best art requires a connection to—and interaction with—society.”

The introduction is followed by nine articles, three of which are by East Germans: Pachnicke, Kober, and Sander. Pachnicke's article is by far the longest in the catalog and follows directly after the introduction. It attempts to correct some of the misunderstandings that surround Heisig's work in the West. First, he looks at the often-vehement artistic debates that took place in East Germany, especially those in the 1960s in which Heisig's Paris Commune paintings played a role. These conflicts, he explains, were a “dispute of opinions”—rather than merely clashes with “dogmatic narrow-mindedness”—over the definition of Realism in East Germany.⁶⁵ They were an attempt—ultimately successful—to “push through a new understanding of Realism against an historically outmoded [one, i.e., illusionism].” Also at stake was the role of the artist in society: “[Artists like Heisig] wanted a dialogical relationship to the public,” rather than a didactic one.⁶⁶ These debates, Pachnicke points out, were the crucible in which Heisig forged his views on art; they were a “method of recognizing—and being able to formulate—his own truth.”⁶⁷

Another important point Pachnicke made was that Heisig's theme (*Thema*) is not war, as is often contended in the West, but rather conflict; war is simply the subject matter (*Stoff*) through which he can address it. He pointed out that Heisig's interest in conflict—his

⁶⁴ Jörn Merkert and Peter Pachnicke, “Vorwort,” in Merkert and Pachnicke, eds. *Bernhard Heisig: Retrospektive* (Munich, Prestel Verlag, 1989), 7-8. Hereafter: *Retrospektive*.

⁶⁵ Peter Pachnicke, “‘In jeder Figur stecke ich drin,’ Innovation der Figurenmalerei,” *Retrospektive*, 9-25: 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

“preparedness” for this theme—predates his wartime experiences.⁶⁸ As Heisig has stated, just being in war is not enough to make one want to paint it; one needs a special leaning toward it. According to Pachnicke, this leaning was already evident in Heisig as a child. Pachnicke also emphasized the importance of structure in Heisig’s work, reinforcing the point made in the introduction to the catalog. He then ended the article by pointing out that Heisig’s images are “not just about oppression and angst. An insatiable hunger for beauty, harmony and continuity fills... many of Heisig’s landscapes, nudes and portraits.”⁶⁹

Pachnicke’s article is followed by Merkert’s, who focused much of his text on Heisig’s views on art, which are often at odds with the Western perspective. He pointed out that Heisig does not believe in the West’s emphasis on the unique individuality of the artist in paint and quotes him as follows: “having to hold onto oneself is very stressful, especially for artists. Always requiring him to be original and new, to push his ego to the forefront. A dreadful thought...”⁷⁰ Moreover, according to Heisig, “the problem with freedom and art [as understood in the West] is that it means ‘make whatever you want.’ ...To be needed, to play an indispensable role in the spiritual interaction with society, that needs the cooperation [*entgegenkommen*] of the artist with society. Not in that [the artist] gives in, but rather that he reaches out, gets mixed up in, and takes a position...”⁷¹

The rest of the articles in the catalog look at Heisig’s life and work from a variety of perspectives. Beaucamp described his first encounters with the artist in Leipzig in 1968. He also placed his work within the Western art historical canon, making links not only to Corinth and Kokoschka but also to the Dadaists and Robert Rauschenberg. For Beaucamp, Heisig’s greatest achievement was the integration of non-painterly artistic developments into painting. Klaus Honnef looked at the relationship between Heisig’s work and film with its shifting perspectives and acoustic references. Carla Schulz-Hoffmann compared his work to that of Beckmann and Dix. Sander, on the other hand, focused on Heisig’s print series, *The Fascist Nightmare*.

The last article in the catalog—not including the biographical documentation—was written by the highly regarded West German scholar, Eberhard Roters. Unlike the other texts, his continued in the Western tradition of focusing almost exclusively on Heisig’s *Komplexbilder*; it includes his mythological and literary images as well as his allegories of the present, and interprets them in terms of his wartime biography. In fact, Roters argued that the Paris Commune paintings are actually allegories for Heisig’s experiences as a soldier, “a first level for coming to terms [with this past].”⁷² For Roters, Heisig’s paintings are “memory paintings,” which he also called “the inner rooms of our consciousness.”⁷³ His importance as a painter is thus in “remembering for the future.”⁷⁴ It is this view—with its emphasis on memory and trauma—that would come to prominence after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 15, 19.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁰ Jörn Merkert, “Die eindeutig vieldeutige Wirklichkeit,” in *Retrospektive*, 26-35: 26.

⁷¹ Merkert, 26.

⁷² Eberhard Roters, “Schlesisches Himmelreich – Preußisches Hölle, oder: Die Tiefe der Erinnerung,” in *Retrospektive*, 82-93: 85.

⁷³ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 83. Originally, *Der Wut der Bilder* bore the title, “Erinnerungen für die Zukunft.” This was changed shortly before the exhibition opened in Leipzig.

Heisig After German Unification

Whereas East German writers had dominated the scholarship about Heisig before 1990, writing all of the books and catalogs about Heisig's work before the 1989 retrospective, only three published new articles in a Heisig catalog in the first fifteen years after the fall of the Wall.⁷⁵ Of them, only one—Dietulf Sander—had previously published on Heisig.⁷⁶ Instead, the myriad of texts written about Heisig after unification were written by former West Germans. This shift from an East German perspective to a West German one in the wake of November 1989 led to a greater emphasis on Heisig's war paintings and a tendency to interpret them in terms of trauma. Unlike earlier West German publications, however, most of the articles written after 1990 attempted to distance Heisig from East Germany, which had been vilified after its collapse, the result of losing a forty-year competition to be the "better Germany."

The view of Heisig that dominates scholarship today developed during the 1990s and was concretized in 2005 with *Bernhard Heisig: Wut der Bilder (The Rage of Images)*, a major solo exhibition that traveled to cities throughout Germany for the artist's 80th birthday. It opened in Leipzig in March 2005 with a speech by then-chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who called Heisig "one of the most important German artists" of the 20th century.⁷⁷ Although the catalog and official press presented the exhibition as a "comprehensive overview of Heisig's work," it was not. Instead, it focused on the artist's paintings of war and trauma.⁷⁸ It was, in essence, a reiteration of (West) German curator Eckhart Gillen's dissertation thesis, which focused on Heisig's "personal engagement as a painter and graphic artist with the past, with his role as victim and perpetrator in war and as a member of the criminal organization, the Waffen-SS."⁷⁹ By calling this selected view of his work a "retrospective," however, the exhibition presented Heisig as an artist obsessed with the traumas of war: it seemed he could paint little else. The exhibition contained no still lifes; landscapes were represented by only two small works, neither of which was shown in Berlin; and Heisig's portraiture was limited, with one exception, to biographical works and politicians. Similarly, his graphic work made up only a small portion of the exhibition and was limited primarily to self-portraits and images of war and conflict. None of his many literary illustrations was included. And his Paris Commune paintings were reinterpreted as little more than allegories of his own wartime

⁷⁵ There are occasional reprints of past articles by Kober and speeches by Heisig.

⁷⁶ Günter Scholz published a short article on *The Fascist Nightmare* in the small catalog, *Otto Dix, Bernhard Heisig. Der Schrecken des Krieges* in 1992. Jürgen Papies published two articles in 1995, each taking a close look at one of Heisig's themes. And in 1998 and 2005, Sander published articles on Heisig's prints. Sander also published a book in 2001 based on his dissertation research, *Bernhard Heisig, Schutzversuche, 1963-2001* (Berlin: Galerie Berlin, 2001). Significantly, this book contains virtually no text, only a short, four-page introduction by Sander and a half-page commentary by Heisig.

⁷⁷ Rede von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder zur Ausstellungseröffnung Bernhard Heisig – "Die Wut der Bilder," March 20, 2005. 21 February 2007, <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/2005/03/___Anlagen/nr-26-3814286,property=publicationFile.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Eckhart Gillen, ed., *Bernhard Heisig, Die Wut der Bilder* (Köln: Dumont, 2005) 10. Hereafter *WdB*.

⁷⁹ Eckhart Gillen, "Schwierigkeiten beim Suchen der Wahrheit:" Bernhard Heisig im Konflikt zwischen 'verordnetem Antifaschismus' und der Auseinandersetzung mit seinem Kriegstrauma. Diss. U Heidelberg, 2004, 15.

experiences, as evidenced by the article titled, "Bernhard Heisig Fails as a History Painter and Finds His Theme: The Paris Commune as a Trench Painting."⁸⁰

The impression that Heisig was an artist deeply traumatized by the war was also suggested by a reinterpretation of his painterly process. Rather than viewing his tendency to continually rework a painting and make multiples of it as a reflection of his artistic struggle to find the ideal form, the curator presented it as an illustration of a Freudian response trauma: "Whoever wants to understand Heisig's work better, must acknowledge the decades-long memory work of the painter in the sense of Sigmund Freud's famous text, 'Memory, Repeating and Working Through.'"⁸¹

The catalog texts also placed great emphasis on the conflicts Heisig had with East German government in the 1960s. Significantly they focused on his speech at the Fifth Congress in 1964 and his Paris Commune painting from 1965, both of which were read in terms of suffering for his belief in western-style modern art. The conflicts surrounding his murals in 1965 and *The Brigade* in 1969, which cannot be read as a defense of western modernism, were mentioned only in passing, if at all. Similarly, Heisig's departure from his position as rector of the Leipzig Academy in 1964 was presented as a consequence of the speech he gave at the Fifth Congress rather than as a resignation. This reinterpretation of Heisig's departure first emerged in the catalog for the retrospective exhibition in 1989 and became increasingly common as the 1990s progressed. By the time of *Wut der Bilder*, however, archival evidence had been uncovered that proved Heisig had resigned before the conference took place.⁸² How the 2005 catalog dealt with this information reveals much about the state of East German art's reception. Although the catalog texts acknowledged the existence of the letter, the authors downplayed or dismissed it throughout. In the biography, for example, the authors cited Heisig stating that he did not remember such a letter and suggested that it was improperly dated.⁸³ Elsewhere, a bolded headline announced, "Heisig's Fall as Rector," while in two other articles references were made to Heisig's being "let go" and his "loss" of the position.⁸⁴ Despite acknowledging the letter, the catalog nonetheless leaves the reader with the impression that Heisig lost his position rather than voluntarily gave it up.

In *Wut der Bilder*, Heisig appears as a victim of both the Nazi past and the second German dictatorship. Indeed, this double victimization is presented as an important part of his artistic value: Heisig's "artistic achievement lies in his lifelong struggle to come to terms with the traumas of a biography that passed from war and dictatorship to another

⁸⁰ Eckhart Gillen, "Bernhard Heisig scheitert als Historienmaler und findet sein Thema: Die Pariser Commune als Schützengrabenbild," in *WdB*, 95-113.

⁸¹ *WdB*, 28.

⁸² In 2004, I found three documents in the archive of the Leipzig Academy—the resignation letter, official acknowledgement of its receipt, and a letter confirming Heisig's replacement—all dated to before the conference. I alerted the curator of this fact and provided him with a photocopy of Heisig's resignation letter.

⁸³ *WdB*, 318.

⁸⁴ Karl Sieberg Rehberg, "Expressivität zwischen Machtkalkül und 'Produktiver Verunsicherung. Bernhard Heisig als 'Motor' und Integrationsfigur der Leipziger Malerei," in *Wut der Bilder*, p. 293. Gillen, "Weltlandshaften und Weltbilder," in *Wut der Bilder*, p. 241, Paul Kaiser, "Prinzip Zugriff. Bernhard Heisigs Wandbild 'Gestern und in unserer Zeit' Vor und Nach 989," in *WdB*, 274

dictatorship and the Cold War.”⁸⁵ Rather than an active participant in his own life’s story, Heisig is relegated to a victim who can do little more than paint about the past that seems to haunt him. It is an image of the artist that reflects the shift in both East German studies in the early 1990s to a totalitarian paradigm, one that conflated East Germany with the Third Reich, and in German culture in the late 1990s to an emphasis on German victimhood rather than guilt over the events of the Nazi era.⁸⁶

Conclusion: The Larger Implications of Rewriting Heisig’s Life and Art

In the twenty years after the collapse of East Germany, Heisig’s reception changed significantly as East German art historians were replaced by West German ones and Western texts lost their earlier complexity. The post-Wall view of Heisig—which reached its apex in the 2005 exhibition and catalog, *Wut der Bilder*—rewrote the artist’s life and work, eliminating his political commitments to socialism and East Germany. Such commitments were problematic in unified Germany, both because he had chosen socialism over capitalism and because the idea of a politically committed artist conflicted with the depoliticization of art in the West after World War II.⁸⁷ After 1990, Heisig was forced into a post-war western concept of art that valorized artistic “freedom” and preferred to imagine artists as loners rather than as intellectually committed to improving society.⁸⁸ Heisig’s experiences in “two dictatorships” were used to give him authenticity by depicting him as one who had suffered through a difficult past from which he was freed once capitalism had triumphed. The focus on trauma similarly placed primary emphasis on Heisig as an emotional artist, who drew inspiration from his tortured psyche, rather than as a political artist inspired by his intellect. The new interpretation robbed him of his agency and his art of its relationship to the East

⁸⁵ Hickley, 2011. This is a slight rephrasing of a quote from the promotional material for the 2005 exhibition, *Bernhard Heisig: Wut der Bilder*: “His artistic achievement lies in the constant artistic examination of a biography that passed from war and dictatorship to a further dictatorship and the Cold War.” <http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/aktuell/festivals/11_gropiusbau/mgb_ProgrammlisteDetailSeite_1742.php>. Last Accessed: 15. December 2011.

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the totalitarian approach, which has since fallen out of favor, see Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For a discussion of the shift from perpetrators to victims, see Bill Niven, ed. *Germans as Victims* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 8. Much-discussed examples of this emphasis on German victimhood are W. G. Sebald’s *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003, originally published in German as *Luftkrieg und Literatur* in 1999) and the movie *Downfall* (2004, *Der Untergang*).

⁸⁷ For a discussion of the conscious depoliticization of West German art in the early postwar years, see Jost Hermand, “Modernism Restored: West German Painting in the 1950s,” *New German Critique*, No. 32 (Spring/Summer 1984): 23-41. For a more general discussion of the depoliticization of western art after 1945, see Greg Barnhisel, “Perspectives USA and the Cultural Cold War: Modernism in Service of the State,” *Modernism/Modernity*, 14(4): 729-754.

⁸⁸ Although the West also had politically active artists, the emphasis in western scholarship has tended to be on aesthetic innovation rather than on content.

German and Cold War contexts in which it was created, and thus denied East German art any role in post-war German culture except as a negative foil.⁸⁹

Although this article has focused on Heisig's reception in Germany, the difficulties of interpreting these figures extends into English-language scholarship, which is only beginning to address East German art.⁹⁰ An important recent contribution to the field is the catalog for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's blockbuster exhibition in 2009, *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures*, which conclusively proved that East Germany did have art. And yet the catalog suggested that this art was created by dissidents or, in the case of official artists like Heisig, contained subversive content that "passed undetected through the censors."⁹¹ The catalog left unchallenged the Cold War stereotype that sees official art in East Germany as little more than kitsch or political propaganda. In fact, in one of the two articles to focus on East German art, the German sociologist Paul Kaiser dismissed all official art in East Germany in one fell swoop, stating that the government "created a backward-looking system of art whose conceptual guiding feature was an antimodernist, uncritical, apologetic socialist realism."⁹² This view evidences the totalitarian approach to East Germany that came to prominence in Germany in the 1990s but that has largely fallen out of favor in the new millennium, replaced by a greater emphasis on the lived experience of East Germans (*Alltagsgeschichte*) and a recognition of the complexity of social life in East Germany.⁹³

This inability to accept that artists could be committed to East Germany, and thus part of its official culture, and still create art (as opposed to kitsch) is not shared by other disciplines. Official East German literature has long been recognized by English-language scholars for its excellence: Christoph Hein, Stefan Heym, Heiner Müller and Christa Wolf are all part of the German canon.⁹⁴ More recently, Anglo-American scholars have also begun to

89 Frederic Jameson makes reference to this fact at the beginning of "Dresdens Clocks" in the September/October 2011 issue *New Left Review*: "Anyone with a commitment to socialism needs to take an interest in the history and fate of the German Democratic Republic (DDR), up to now the object of systematic neglect by West-of-the-Rhine liberal and radical intellectuals alike, who have scant knowledge of its achievements in painting and film, and assume its economic and political lessons to be exclusively negative."

⁹⁰ Important texts include *Tradition and Renewal: Contemporary Art in the GDR* (exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1984), *Twelve Artists from the GDR* (exh. cat., Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1989), and Marion Deshmukh, *Cultures in Conflict: Visual Arts in Eastern Germany* (conference proceedings, 1998).

⁹¹ Stephanie Barron, "Blurred Boundaries: The Art of Two Germanys between Myth and History," in *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures*, 12-33, here: 25.

⁹² Paul Kaiser, "Symbolic Revolts in the 'Workers' and Peasants' State': Countercultural Art Programs in the GDR and the Return of Modern Art," in *Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures*, 170-185, here: 171 & 172. For more about how East Germany was portrayed in this exhibition, see April Eisman, "Review of the 2009 LACMA exhibition catalog, *Art of Two Germanys / Cold War Cultures*," in *German History* 2009 27(4): 628-630.

⁹³ This emphasis on *Alltagsgeschichte*, of which the German social historian Alf Lütke was a pioneer, has encouraged the burgeoning field of East German material culture.

⁹⁴ For example, see David Bathrick's *Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

recognize the quality of East German film and material culture.⁹⁵ The visual arts, however, have yet to follow suit: none of the artists held in high esteem by the East German government—such as Heisig—are well-known outside of Germany, the result of a lingering Cold War-era ideological emphasis on the necessity of “freedom” for the creation of art, and thus the incompatibility of art and State Communism.

The rewriting of Heisig’s life and art to fit into western preconceptions impedes our ability to understand the artist and the complexity of art in East Germany. When Heisig clashed with cultural functionaries in the 1960s, he was not fighting for modern art in the western sense of artistic autonomy; rather he was fighting for a greater openness to the forms of modern art, which he believed artists could use in their efforts to create art that made a connection to the people. He did not believe in art for art’s sake of the West nor the idea that the artist should be a loner. In fact, already in the 1950s he argued against the “artistic suicide” that he saw taking place in the West, where artists were rejecting a connection to society and the people in favor of exploring their psyches.⁹⁶ Instead, he believed artists should be involved in the world in which they lived and chose to live in the East because he felt he, as an artist, was needed there, and was excited to “participate in the creation of a world view,” especially one that fought against imperialism.⁹⁷ As he stated it, “I never wanted to emigrate. I always had the possibility, but I always had the feeling that I was needed... Art in the West... that of Joseph Beuys, did not offer what I wanted, therefore the West was not my world. I wanted this world here to be different...”⁹⁸

In 2009, post-socialist scholar Piotr Piotrowski argued that to develop a truly global art history, scholars need to recognize “the one who speaks, on whose behalf, and for whom... not to cancel Western art history, but to call this type of narrative by its proper name, ‘Western.’”⁹⁹ A study of Heisig’s reception illustrates the profound impact of the temporal-geographical location of the “speaker” on the scholarship produced: texts written during the Cold War, for example, acknowledged Heisig’s commitment to and engagement in East German society, whereas those written afterward elide these connections to emphasize trauma instead. This change in Heisig’s reception illustrates the dominance today of a western perspective on East German art that differs from that which existed before the Wall fell. It also reveals the West’s inability to see or accept difference in the close Other. Heisig’s themes are reinterpreted through a lens that elides socialist criticisms of capitalism as well as alternatives to the West’s emphasis on the individual. If we are to write a world history of art, however, we need to incorporate not just the art of the Other, both close and distant,

⁹⁵ Examples of the recent literature on East German film include Sean Allan and John Sandford, eds. *DEFA, East German Cinema, 1946-1992* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1999), Marc Silberman, “Learning from the Enemy: DEFA-French Co-Productions of the 1950s” *Film History*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Cold-War German Cinema (2006) 21-45, and Thomas Lindenberger, “Home Sweet Home: Desperately Seeking Heimat in Early DEFA Films,” from the same issue of *Film History*, 46-58. Examples of the emerging literature on material culture include Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, eds. *Socialist Modern. East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism. Plastics & Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008) and Uta A. Balbier, Cristina Cuevas-Wolf, and Joes Segal, eds. *East German Material Culture and the Power of Memory*. Bulletin of the German Historical Institute. Supplement 7 (2011).

⁹⁶ Heisig’s speech at the Fourth Congress of the VBKD, 1959, AdK Archiv: Kurella Nachlass 330, 138.

⁹⁷ Kober, 1972.

⁹⁸ Typescript (20 April 1995) for Lutz Dammbeck’s documentary, *Dürers Erbe* (1995), as quoted in Gillen (2004) 9.

⁹⁹ Piotrowski, 2009.

but also what that art means—or meant—in those cultures. In Heisig’s case, this means having to accept that art could be created under Communism and that its meaning—regardless of stylistic or thematic similarities—could be supportive of socialism and critical of the West. Until we do, artists like Heisig will have to continue playing the “culture game.” But in contrast to the game played by artists of color, where, as Oguibe explains, artists have to maintain their connection to their “native” lands to be successful, for East German artists, the rules are the opposite: to be successful in the West means having to distance oneself from any positive relationship to the country in which they lived until 1990.

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