Pasts renewed in contemporary German graphic storytelling

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Visual Styles

Personal style of the individual comics auteurs leans on diverse cultural and communicative strategies.

Narration by interlacing visual and textual information.

References to narrative and pictorial traditions and genres.

Flix: ”Da war mal was: Erinnerungen an hier und drüben” (2009)

Mawil: ”Kinderland” (2014)

Birgit Weyhe:
”Im Himmel ist Jahrmärkt” (2013)
”Madgermanes” (2018)

Nora Krug: ”Heimat” / ”Belonging” (2018)
Strategies of representation using artefacts

All comics use representations of objects in their narrations. But the functions of these representations differ massively between individual narrative styles:

Flix uses objects to symbolise more abstract entities (paper file -> StaSi, red carnation -> state socialism) in a kind of pars pro toto-approach.

Krug shows everyday objects as evidence for the specific culture she describes. (ref. ethnographic museum)

Mawil shows objects to illustrate details of East German every-day life and the youth culture of the time.

Weyhe shows objects as artefacts as well as cultural references, sometimes combining objects to reflect on abstract concepts (e.g. “Heimat” in the meeting of a Prezel and a leopard): she creolises (Johannes Schmid) elements from African and (East) German visual tradition.

Flix: “Da war mal was”
Nora Krug: ”Belonging”
Mawil: ”Kinderland”
Birgit Weyhe: ”Madgermanes”
”Im Himmel ist Jahrmarkt”
Strategies of showing and reflecting on individual and collective memory

Generational perspectives on “Kollektivschuld” / collective guilt and individual responsibility in the light of the “floating gap of memory” when biographical memory end is redacted into foundational memory (Assmann).

Background: German public debate on Nazism differs from international debate (“us”/”them”).

Debate on Nazi-state and society differs from debate on East Germany due to difference in severity of crimes, and because of closer historic proximity and demographic relatedness to the latter (30 years).

Negotiation of selected cultural continuity continues.

Nora Krug: “Belonging”

Birgit Weyhe: “Madgermanes”

“Im Himmel ist Jahrmarkt”

Mawil: “Kinderland”

Flix: “Da war mal was”
Conclusion

Narrations codify perspectives on the past. Individual narrations and opinions detail stages in that process and are part of the negotiation on the meaning of things.

Comics contribute visual negotiations of the past and its artefacts. They primarily document how the past is re-told at that particular moment in time (i.e. their present).

They codify generational and cultural perspectives (plural!!) on the past in their narratives. They participate in negotiation of the “floating gap of memory” (Assmann).

Narratives about recent history are selectively institutionalised and documented / codified. With growing historic and biographical distance, situations, events, behaviours are re-evalued and re-told.
Conclusion

Alexander & Margarete Mitscherlich: “Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern” (1967) analysed the lack of self-critical evaluation of individual involvement in Nazi regime. The analysis is equally valid for treatment of involvement with East German regime.

Individual involvement in collective actions becomes re-evalued from focus on a person’s behaviour and responsibility to focusing on the collectives ethical state of mind and actions.

BUT: ancestorial involvement can keep excusatory myths intact despite historic evidence against them.
Conclusion

With growing biographical / historical distance it becomes easier to be judgemental on individual and collective responsibility:

other narratives compete and complement the formation of identity and can limit dependence on particular older narratives

if these are not considered crucial by involved individuals.