



Social reality in the contemporary German-language novel

In German-language literature, the notion of “realism” is mostly associated with the social novel (*Gesellschaftsroman*) of the 19th century. The latter is currently experiencing renewed interest in German-speaking countries, with authors such as Jenny Erpenbeck, Katharina Hacker, Henschel Josten and Juli Zeh. This thesis examines how the contemporary German novel portrays social reality and its role in civil society, i.e. how contemporary literature expresses social criticism. The literary perspective was broadened by philosophical, sociological and socio-literary approaches. Three axes emerged for this study: the anchoring of extra-literary reality in fiction, social structures and the emotional level.

The extra-literary references to reality anchor the plot in the reader’s contemporary time, enabling them to enrich the information given in the fiction with their own basic knowledge. In this way, they can easily recognize the historical places and events incorporated into the literary narrative. Faced with events that disrupt their lives, the characters look for ways to live with the consequences. Political reactions and public debate strongly influence the characters’ behavior. Responses to external factors are as varied as the societies depicted in the novels.

The social fabric of the novels is revealed through the characters’ work and interaction with neighbors. Working conditions influence their daily lives, especially those on the margins of society. As a result, time and money play a major role for all characters. Integration into society is not easy, and prejudices and conflicts between neighbors make interpersonal relationships complicated. Despite the conflicts, there is always support for each other, especially in emergencies, whether it’s between neighbors on the street, between residents of the same town or even internationally.

Emotionally, characters experience fear and anger in different ways. External events can provoke as much anguish as violence or the behavior of others. While failure to understand this behavior leads to fear, powerlessness gives rise to anger.

This thesis explores the different ways in which fiction creates a link with extra-literary reality and the ways in which novels incorporate social criticism. As a result, readers can connect fiction with their own extra-literary reality and reflect on their own position.