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To cite this article: Ewout van der Knaap (2018) Representing 9/11: Journalism and Autobiography in the Work of Alexander Osang, *Oxford German Studies*, 47:2, 230-240, DOI: [10.1080/00787191.2018.1452768](https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2018.1452768)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00787191.2018.1452768>



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Published online: 22 May 2018.



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REPRESENTING 9/11: JOURNALISM AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN THE WORK OF ALEXANDER OSANG

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The article analyses the modes of representation used by the GDR-born journalist Alexander Osang in writing about 9/11. His observations of 9/11 in New York open up recollections of 11/9, the historic date in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. His gaze is compared to the way his wife observes. The authentic tone and the self-referential mode raise questions about relevance in literature.

KEYWORDS: 9/11, Terrorism, Representation, Journalism, Autobiography, Osang

The audiovisual imagery of 9/11 has been discussed on German television more than in other national networks, as a study of the intercultural reception of the attacks has shown.¹ The epochal watershed of 9/11 turned out to be a transnational topic that, in German cultures too, has become part of the literary field. The long German tradition of trauma-related literature dealing with the Holocaust has caused sensitivity in the representation of pain, loss, and catastrophe. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, narratives on a personal and a more elaborate level, began to circulate universally, including in Germany. A small canon of German literature on 9/11 has developed, including texts that explored changes after the events in New York (e.g. Else Buschheuers blog *New York Tagebuch*, 2001 and Kathrin Röggla: *really ground zero*, 2001); texts that discussed the aesthetic and ethical impact of the attacks on writing (Ulrich Peltzer: *Bryant Park*, 2002), texts that made palpable the major impact 9/11 also had on European citizens (Katharina Hacker: *Die Habenichtse*, 2006); and texts that laid bare multicultural perspectives by juxtaposing US

¹ Thomas Schmidtgall, *Traumatische Erfahrung im Mediengedächtnis: Zur Struktur und interkulturellen Rezeption fiktionaler Darstellungen des 11. September 2001 in Deutschland, Frankreich und Spanien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2014).

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and Iraqi contexts (Thomas Lehr: *September Fata Morgana*, 2010).² Although there is no such thing as *the* German perspective on 9/11 — there are many perspectives — the national context of German 9/11 literature is part of an established tradition of atrocity narration.

Some of the vast number of literary representations of 9/11 in Germany are journalistic accounts. Taking a closer look at some texts that the successful German journalist Alexander Osang has written, I will discuss strategies of representation from the angle of authenticity and cultural identity. Why Osang is particularly interesting in the discourse of 9/11 literature will become clear. Born in the GDR, Osang oscillates between journalism and literature. He has specialized in journalistic reportages and portraits, but also writes fiction: for example, a novel *Die Nachrichten* (2000) is about the career of a TV-presenter who is accused of having been a Stasi informer. I will reread Osang's stories written in the aftermath of 9/11 in the light of the memoirs he and his wife published in August 2011.

Osang's strategies for representing 9/11 consist of personal eyewitness accounts and reports of eyewitness accounts. The emplotment of 9/11 in the tradition of reportage and portrait seems logical, with regard to the proximity of the events and the curiosity of readers to come close to the events. Osang's strategies fit the demands of memorial and testimonial atrocity discourse.

The collection of stories *Neunundachtzig: Helden-Geschichten*, published in 2003,³ seems to be Osang's attempt at positioning himself as a reporter between two major events in his life. It is quite obvious that in comparison to 9/11, the revolt in 1989 changed his life more drastically. When he was asked about the 1989 experience, Osang replied: 'Es ist wirklich wie eine Axt in mein Leben gefahren, für mich hat sich alles verändert'.⁴ His German identity is firmly rooted in his memories of 1989. Nevertheless, his experiences in 2001 are part of both his personal life and his journalistic work. By foregrounding the relevance of autobiographical experiences for a reporter, Osang personalizes his writing. In the introduction ('Neunundachtzig', N, 7–18), this authentication strategy already becomes visible in the choice of photographs that have been inserted. Several images have an informal character, for instance, a photograph of Osang's brother-in-law.

Read as a European notation, 9/11 denotes a very significant date in German history; 9 November has become known as 'Schicksalstag' because of the events that fell on that date: the proclamation of the Weimar Republic in 1918; the Beer Hall Putsch attempt by Hitler's Nazis in Munich in 1923; Reichskristallnacht in 1938. And finally, the 9th of November became forever significant when, in 1989, the Berlin Wall fell.

Five out of the twenty-one stories that Osang presents in *Neunundachtzig* referring to the eighty-ninth floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center. But

² Several examples can be found in Heide Reinhäkel, *Traumatische Texturen. Der 11. September in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012). For an analysis of Bryant Park see also Christoph Deupmann, 'Ausnahmestand des Erzählens. Zeit und Ereignis in Ulrich Peltzers Erzählung Bryant Park und anderen Texten über den elften September 2001', in *nine eleven. Ästhetische Verarbeitungen des 11. September 2001*, ed. by Ingo Irsigler and Christoph Jürgensen (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008), pp. 17–29.

³ Alexander Osang, *Neunundachtzig: Helden-Geschichten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2004) N indicates to this volume, page numbers refer to this collection.

⁴ It truly hit my life like an axe, for me everything has changed, <http://www.spiegel.de/sptv/dokumentation/a-747662.html>.

the title also links the text to the fall of the wall in 1989. A story about a man who stays with a handicapped colleague while the tower collapses ('Zelmanowitz' Tat', N, 36–41) investigates heroism. A story about the funeral of a fireman inquires further into heroism ('Der kurze Abschied', N, 180–83). A story about a young couple who treat their Beetle car which has been covered by the dust of the attack as if it were a baby ('Das Baby lebt', N, 54–56) highlights materialism. Finally a story about people who worked on the eighty-ninth floor of the north tower manages to portray rescuers, survivors, and eyewitnesses ('Die 89. Etage', N, 203–21).

To begin with, the juxtaposition of stories about the eighty-ninth floor of WTC1 with stories about the German wall sounds like a magic of numbers: 9/11 and 11/9 (the date the Wall was opened) resonate in eighty-nine, bifurcated in the years 1989 and 2001. But the confrontation of major landmarks in history is not meant to proclaim a connection, merely to find an origin in the biography and national identity of the reporter. In doing this, Osang stresses that the age contemporaries live in is full of historical moments. It is a personal choice by a reporter who happened to be a witness: 'Ich mache keine Geschichte, ich hänge mich immer nur ran' (N, 17). Osang contributed to a special issue of *Der Spiegel*, devoted to 9/11. In the article 'Die lange Flucht' ('the long escape') he reflects on and describes his personal escape when the towers fell. Revealing the context and the aftermath of the events in Manhattan he adds personal information, such as suffering from 'posttraumatic stress' (*Spiegel* 6/2006, 43). He quotes the prognosis of an editor of the magazine, that it will be just like after the Berlin wall fell: for half a year hundreds of stories will be published (*Spiegel* 6/2006, 43). From a journalistic viewpoint that might be true of the German media, but it is clear that in literature the storytelling has continued, trying to capture 9/11 for the collective memory.

In his retrospective article Osang uses comparisons and analogies from the past to represent the events. Walking on Brooklyn Bridge when the first tower fell, he could only think of history. He thought of the explosion of the airship 'Hindenburg' and of the explosion of the Space Shuttle (*Spiegel* 6/2006, 40), thus stressing both his German frame of reference and his global citizenship. The disaster in Manhattan, in his view at that moment, was bigger than these explosions. Five years later Osang repeats that the attacks were bigger than the explosion of the airship (W, 119). He also stresses that people gravitate towards the Twin Towers: people suddenly write him emails ('Es ist ein unerhört warmer, freundschaftlicher Ton in all den Mails [...]'), (W, 236) sharing the moments of their lives during the attacks, in an attempt to participate in the event: 'Viele beschrieben, was sie gerade machten, als die Türme zusammenfielen, wo sie waren, was sie dachten. Jeder wollte sich zum Unvorstellbaren in Beziehung setzen' (*Spiegel*, 6/2006, 40). Osang was able to escape the dust by hiding in a cellar. He had felt attracted to the dust cloud, 'wie eine Motte': 'Ich war kein Zeuge der Weltgeschichte, ich war ein Insekt' (*Spiegel* 6/2006, 40). What is striking is the emphasis on metamorphosis. The reporter has changed into a futile creature not using his human brain. It is a subtle intertextual reference to Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* and Gregor Samsa's transformation into a beetle. In Osang's retelling of the events even the identity of a New York police officer changes. It is clear that Osang's gaze is dominated by Kafka's narrator: 'Und da lag er, auf dem Rücken, wie ein Käfer' (*Spiegel* 6/2006, 43). The helplessness of the wounded police officer who, in the midst of the panic, was hit by a

police car is underlined by the comparison. Osang's plain observation in which the police officer is compared to an insect unable to move is intertextually charged, opening up a realm of explanations why the police officer could be framed in Kafka's world. The reader of Kafka's story is uncertain whether the metamorphosis is actual or imaginary. Likewise, the spectator is unable to believe what happens on 9/11. Moreover, the depiction of the injured police officer reminds the reader that the security of US citizens is severely threatened. For the global event that he witnesses, Osang needs canonical German literature to process the major transition the city undergoes.

Osang neither aims to interpret the clash of civilizations nor the political, global, and economic implications. Instead, he focuses on accounts of the New York terror itself, as well as on the posttraumatic society. Interestingly, he gives his first-hand account, interviews witnesses, and, juxtaposes the perspective of his wife with his own perspective. Ten years after the tragedy, on Sunday the eleventh of September 2011, in the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, Osang and his wife Anja Reich launched their non-fiction book *Wo warst du?* (2011), presenting their New York experience, starting with the desire of an East-German couple to live in the Big Apple and detailing their account of 9/11: Anja sitting at home with the children, Alexander following his journalistic instinct and hunting for news. The critical response in the German media was fairly limited and more or less took the account by the German journalist couple as a cue to write about the 9/11 anniversary with a touch of human interest.⁵

In spite of 9/11, the dream of living in New York is not destroyed. One can only vaguely assume that New York is attractive to the East German couple as a capitalist antidote to the GDR. Much more prominent is the image of the city as a safe haven in which they can lead a quiet and happy family-life. In the US, the German journalist is not surrounded by fellow-countrymen or by colleagues of the magazine he works for. The symbolism of New York that Osang and Reich share consists of the particular American dream of liberty. This is revealed most acutely at the end of *Wo warst du?* (W, 263.),⁶ when, at the moment Alexander finally comes home Anja picks up the novel *Amerika* that Franz Kafka wrote about a young man heading to the USA to find a new home.

Interestingly, in *Wo warst du?* the couple renders a double perspective of the moment when they were informed about the attack. First, according to Osang's flashbulb memory, the telephone rang and his New York colleague from *Spiegel* informed him about a hole in the WTC. Then Reich writes that during the telephone conversation Osang took the remote control to switch to images of the WTC. She remembers her child protesting against the disappearance of the cartoons. She also remembers what she said to the child about their family visit to the tower.

Two questions are posed by memories like these. Firstly, relating to Osang's account of the moment that the phone rang: ever since the phenomenon of flashbulb memories has been laid bare, the properties of these kinds of memories in comparison to ordinary memories have been scrutinized. Scholars have found that flashbulb memories can be 'distinguished from ordinary memories by their vividness and the confidence with

⁵ Constanze Neumann, 'Die Entscheidung, in die falsche Richtung zu laufen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 14 December 2011, 30/40.

⁶ Anja Reich and Alexander Osang, *Wo warst du? Ein Septembertag in New York* (Munich: Piper, 2011). To this publication will be referred to using W followed by page numbers.

which they are held'.⁷ However, no empirical support has been found for claims about better accuracy, consistency, and longevity of flashbulb memories.⁸

Secondly, one could be sceptical about accounts of 9/11, published ten years after the events. To what extent are Osang and Reich's memories questionable self-portraits? The Old Testament question 'Wo warst du?' — 'Where wert thou?' is transferred to feelings of apocalypse on 9/11. This question hints at the perception of a lost paradise and is often posed after shared events. The title and parts of the book are self-referential and self-reflective, questioning why one would need to be on the spot and asking what others did in an historic moment. The book is about the professional gaze and the urge to be at the right spot, the shameful journalistic pride to have been there: 'Das ist mein Fegefeuer, denke ich' (W, 142), and Osang asks: 'Was ich gerade erlebe, ist doch eine Parabel auf die Vermessenheit und Vergeblichkeit meines Berufes' (W, 142). But, foremost, the question: 'Where wert thou?' resonates with the fear of a wife who is desperate to hear from her husband. Anja fears their relationship could have changed after the attacks and after Alexander had been on the site that would become Ground Zero: 'Ich habe Angst, dass wir uns plötzlich fremd sind' (W, 204).

In contrast, Osang primarily thinks of the story he could write if he can only come close enough. Strikingly, cultivating the reputation of a brilliant journalist is reminiscent of Egon Erwin Kisch (1885–1948), a Czech writer of literary reportage who called himself 'der rasende Reporter' and indeed had been a gritty reporter who always seemed to be at the right spot. Osang won the prestigious Egon Erwin Kisch Prize several times (1993, 1999, 2001). Both he and his wife refer to his status as a star-reporter, seemingly in order to understand why he takes extreme risks and prioritizes journalism over family life. All this makes clear that Osang is not just any German journalist in New York, he is a star-journalist who becomes even more important because he was at the right spot at the right time. The reproach that Osang is staging himself in a narcissistic manner would be too easy, because his reflection on his reputation helps understand why he risks his life for his work. For this reason also, the suspicion that the couple aim to profit from the 9/11-industry would be too easy.

Wo warst du? is a re-vision in the true sense of the word. It is an attempt to recapture, reconstruct, rethink, and recollect 9/11, as well as the life of a young German family in New York. The autobiographical texture seems to strive for transparency and relatability. Reich's and Osang's reflections appear highly 'authentic' because both accounts refer to daily life; family life; neighbours; their experience as foreigners in the USA; the ambitions of the journalist Osang; the tensions between the couple; Reich's ambiguous housewife role; the status of *Spiegel*; the collision of professional pride, or hubris, and intimacy.

Their accounts include photographs from the family album: Anja with New York friends; their son in front of his school in Brooklyn; the family in winter; Alexander with a newspaper. Tellingly also, two drawings by their son Ferdinand (W, 162) as

⁷ Jennifer M. Talarico and David C. Rubin, 'Flashbulb Memories Result from Ordinary Memory Processes and Extraordinary Event Characteristics', in *Flashbulb Memories: New Issues and New Perspectives*, ed. by Olivier Luminet and Antonietta Curci (Hove: Psychology Press, 2009), pp. 79–97 (p. 92).

⁸ Ibid.

well as two little poems by him (W, 173, 174) add to the discourse of 9/11 as quoted by Anja. The first drawing depicts the burning Twin Towers, people falling from the building, and a plane heading for a tower. The second drawing represents Bin Laden: 'Das ist bin laden der dis sich dis alles ausgedacht hat!' [*sic*] (W, 163). The drawings were faxed to Ferdinand's grandmother in Berlin. When this was done, unfortunately, is not mentioned, but it is said that he had drawn this or another drawing of an attack before the actual attack had even taken place. The little boy feels guilty of the attack, because he had earlier built the Twin Towers out of Lego and destroyed them with a Matchbox aeroplane (W, 174). Whereas in 2001 the son feels voodoo-powers and fears that he might have provoked the attack, in 2010 the Canadian photographer Jonathan Hobin has depicted children re-enacting the attack on the Twin Towers. This was part of his project *In The Playroom*, in which children re-enact events in recent history.⁹

Eerily enough, two little poems the son wrote at school also seem to anticipate the attacks:

The City (1)

The Twin Towers are high
Which reach up to the sky
And if it falls down
Its gonna fall down on a clown

The City (2)

The city, the city, the city
Cars driving and people yelling
And people yelling on top of the Twin Towers

Mixing a different, childish voice into the parents' reflections adds to the authenticity of their accounts. The juxtaposition of the image of the self-confident and successful journalist with private details makes the book sentimental and the couple vulnerable. Inserting the child's perspective seems to be a strategy to stress the speechlessness of the adult who finds difficulty in narrating the events.

The sense that one is part of a historical event comes about gradually. Initially, Osang's disbelief is strong. On the TV-screen Osang notices a hole in the first tower: 'Ich fühle mich von dem Loch belästigt. Es bedroht meinen kleinen Tagesplan [...]' (W, 65), yet he is unaware of American Airlines flight 11, like the vast majority he assumes that it is a sports aircraft and does not want that to spoil his time.

Later, he is convinced that he should act like a true representative of *Spiegel*. He climbs on the roof of the building he lives in and watches a black cloud, carried by the wind like 'a black flag' (W, 68) This is the moment of an ironic epiphany:

⁹ 'Art or Exploitation? Photographer Who Uses Children to Re-enact Tragic Historical Events Such as 9/11 Angers Parenting Groups', *Daily Mail*, 23 April 2011 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1379780/Art-exploitation-Photographer-uses-children-enact-tragic-historical-events-9-11-angers-parenting-groups.html>>. Last access at 5 April 2018.

Ich habe etwas gemacht, eine kleine Szene, eine Beobachtung in einer Geschichte. Ich kann schreiben, dass ich auf dem Dach meines Hauses in Brooklyn stand und mich die Wolke an ein schwarzes Fähnlein erinnerte, ein Halbsatz für eine Kolumne

Finally Osang can no longer escape his journalistic instincts, for the imagery is omnipresently broadcasted and enters the space of privacy. He catches this moment in the simile of a jungle set on fire: ‘die Bilder selbst greifen über wie ein Buschfeuer’ (W, 79). After that, he drives to the spot and starts to walk. The towers, he observes: ‘sind stärker beschädigt, als ich dachte. Die Löcher erinnern mich jetzt an Wunden’ (W, 107). The imagery of a wounded entity will be used in other reflections as well.

Much later, Osang reflects on his professional urge: ‘Ich denke an die große Geschichte, die Weltgeschichte, und an die kleine Geschichte, die Geschichte, die ich erzählen kann’ (W, 119). Doing his job is fulfilling, in spite of it all, and is commented on self-ironically by giving access to the thoughts that he as a reporter has when on the spot:

Es geht mir gut, ich war so dicht dran, wie es ging. Ich habe meine Aufgabe erfüllt. Ich kann schreiben, dass ich zweihundert Meter vom Turm entfernt war, als er zusammenbrach. Vielleicht waren es auch nur hundertfünfzig. Oder hundert. Vielleicht schreibe ich hundert. Ich kann schreiben, dass ich vor dem zusammenbrechenden Turm durch die Straßen Manhattans fliehe. Ein Turm folgt mir durch Downtown. Das ist ein Satz. Das kann ich schreiben. Ich kann schreiben: Ich war dabei. Es ist etwas ganz Großes passiert, und ich war dabei. Ich habe es beobachtet. Ich bin der Mann vor Ort. [...] Ich stand nicht auf der anderen Seite des Flusses. Ich bin der Spiegel-Mann. (W, 129)

By ironically framing himself as ‘the *Spiegel*-man’ Osang refers to a pop culture phenomenon of superheroes. He merges the role journalists have in extreme situations with the American figure Superman. The German journalist adopts a role when he blends in with US culture.

In contrast with his own achievement, Osang refers to other citizens as non-witnesses, who have not been close to the disaster: ‘Sie sind nur Zaungäste, sie haben doch nichts erlebt’ (W, 189). People in Manhattan who have found shelter watch those on the street with alienation: ‘Für die Menschen dort, bewegen wir uns hinter Glas, wie Lebewesen in einem Terrarium. Für sie sind wir jetzt Teil einer anderen Welt, zu der auch die Staubwolke hinter uns gehört’ (W, 130). Osang’s boastful remarks reveal the belief that even participants, once they are observers, differ from those who have just walk-on parts.

The south tower (the one hit by the second plane) collapsing first is a turning point for Osang. In his account of the collapse of the towers he uses figurative language comparing the situation to the fairytale *The Sleeping Beauty*: ‘Ich [...] bin nun, in diesem Augenblick [when the tower crashes], auch jemand aus dem eingeschlafenen Hofstaat Dornröschens, den ich vorhin aus meinem Auto beobachtet habe’ (W, 118–19). This comparison is reminiscent of the diary of the former GDR-poet Thomas Rosenlöcher who, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, compared the liberated

GDR to the awakening court of Sleeping Beauty.¹⁰ Since Rosenlöcher's diary has become well known, Osang may have read it. For Rosenlöcher the end of the GDR leads to the question: Why has everyone slept so long? Why have GDR-citizens endured the political system for forty years? The canonical German works of the Grimm brothers, have become part of a globally shared cultural memory, also through the Disney adaptation. What is more, that this globally shared cultural memory should become fundamental for German writers in times of crisis, seems ironic. The comparison of awakening after the magic has worn off with the sudden fall of the Berlin Wall that liberated and reunited people is different from Osang's intertextual reference. Osang indicates the change of roles; from observer to participant. Being a part of 'the court of Sleeping Beauty' means that the tale has become true, that the crime affects the observer.

Osang's observation of the south tower collapsing, results in the sentence 'Es ist ein Bild wie ein Seufzer' (W, 118). He compares the tower with 'an old boxer' who 'zittert und wankt und [...] schließlich müde zusammen bricht' (W, 118). He prolongs this imagery of pugilism after the north tower has collapsed: 'Sie haben New York in die Fresse geschlagen. Die Türme fehlen wie zwei Frontzähne, denke ich und schreibe es auch gleich in meinen Block. "Die Insel rauch wie eine alte, zahnlose Frau"' (W, 225) What is still unclear at this point, however, is who the 'they' who hit the city refers to.

The fact that the north tower, though hit first, stood almost twice as long as the south tower, has an enigmatic attraction:

Ich laufe weiter auf den zweiten Turm zu, in dem die Antworten auf all die Fragen stecken, die mich umtreiben. Dieser Turm noch. Noch dieser Turm. Nicht einen Moment denke ich daran, dass auch er zusammenfallen könnte, so wie ich mir 1989 nie vorstellen konnte, dass die Mauer fällt, nicht einmal im Herbst. (W, 121)

Again in his latest memories of 9/11, Osang compares the moment with the 1989 turning point in the GDR. The association, however, is part of the retrospect, part of the framing, not of the moment itself. Apparently, autobiographical memory not only makes possible analogies between important experiences in life but also reflects the impossibility of imagining landmarks disappearing. The journalist born in the GDR seems to be able to look back at the disappearance of the World Trade Centre Towers only by blending in the collapse of the Berlin Wall. That a terrorist attack is framed by the result of a revolt might sound odd to a non-participant. Here, it appears to be an authentic autobiographical association of a European who recollects important episodes in history. The collapse of buildings in Manhattan inflames the association with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Symbolically, the collapse of the towers and the fall of the Wall indicate the attack on or failure of political systems. However, although Osang's association on a deeper level parallels the regime of capitalism and the totalitarian GDR state, it is not an argument he stresses.

¹⁰ Thomas Rosenlöcher, *Die verkauften Pflastersteine. Dresdener Tagebuch* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 45.

One indelible impression he conveys contains elements of disbelief. After the south tower has collapsed he reflects on the surroundings and the moment:

Die schwarze Frau neben mir ist mitten in einer Bewegung eingefroren, ihr Blick geht über die Schulter nach Manhattan, die Füße zeigen nach Brooklyn, sie ist barfuß, sehe ich, der Körper in ihrem Businesskostüm ist verdreht, ihr Mund steht offen. Auch mein Mund steht offen. Etwas Unvorstellbares ist geschehen. Ich erwarte, dass der Turm, den ich gerade zusammenfallen sah, immer noch hinter der Wolke steht, dass er da sein wird, wenn sich der Staub verzogen hat. Das wäre wahrscheinlicher als das, was ich eben gesehen habe. Ich wohne einem Weltwunder bei. (W, 119)

Osang expresses his understanding that this is a historical moment by writing: 'Ich bin jetzt einer dieser Menschen. Eine Figur auf einem Historiengemälde' (W, 119). After the south tower has collapsed, he and a photographer wade through the 'white World Trade Center-dust' (W, 244). The sense of entering a different planet is expressed thus: 'Wir sind Mitglieder einer Expedition. Wir betreten den Mond' (W, 125). By using this metaphor Osang aims to relate to the situation with a famous historical event that is beyond imagination. In this manner he expresses the adventure and stresses how the urban landscape has been transformed into terra incognita.

The historical sensation leads to outbursts of patriotism, as Osang observes. It also leads to the ritual burial of some 'paper fragments' that had been blown by the wind from the World Trade Center while he was planting a bush imported from the Middle-East (W, 245). Osang observes from his bathroom window how neighbours pray and commemorate, how they start to process the events immediately, while his shoes are covered by the white dust of the towers. Ever since Durkheim and Halbwachs focused on collectivities it has become clear that rituals contribute to collective remembering. The observation Osang narrates supports recent research by social psychologists who stress the ability of rituals to 'reinforce emotions and strengthen social cohesion'.¹¹

In an interview in 2005 Osang spoke about his trade-mark: 'Ich schreibe ja viel über einfache Leute, an die kann man als schreibender Journalist sehr viel unauffälliger und ruhiger herangehen, da fühle ich mich wohl'.¹² In his reportage of 9/11 in *Spiegel* a year after the 2005 interview, he continues his story of the eighty-ninth floor. He writes about the shock a woman experiences when she finds the northern tower in which she works burning. Knowing that her husband, who works on a different floor, had gone to work earlier, as he always did, makes her discovery worse (*Spiegel* 6/2006, 42). Then it turns out that he had a doctor's appointment she had forgotten about, and she is relieved (*Spiegel* 6/2006, 43). The story is reminiscent of the core-concept of the gripping novel *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country* (2006), by American writer Ken Kalfus, in which a woman and her husband each think that the other is killed in the 9/11 attacks, which would put an end to a hopeless divorce. This kind of black comedy, however, is not part of Osang's approach.

¹¹ Luminet and Curci, *Flashbulb Memories*, p. 241.

¹² Martin Höche and Jakob Buhre, 'Alexander Osang. Es gibt eine Nähe zur Macht, die korrumpiert', 25 September 2005 <<http://www.planet-interview.de/alexander-osang-25092005.html>>. Last access at 5 April 2018.

By writing a book with his wife, Osang seems to be aware of the reproach against reportage, that it can become personal without revealing the true flipside of the reporter's life. The personal tone of memoirs can achieve what a normal reportage cannot but can damage the solid image the reporter has managed to construct of himself.

Interestingly, in 2005 four German writers argued the necessity of a 'Relevant Realism' in novels opposed to dominant 'solipsistic self-examinations', 'self-referential literature':

[...] we believe that nowadays the novel must raise social questions: it must take on the problems of the present [...]; it must cover difficult areas — whether local or global — and present them authentically. [...] If this is to be done, the writer must adopt a recognizable position which uses an aesthetic medium to substantiate moral values. [...] ¹³

The response to the manifesto was limited, as though these young, white, male writers shared the last twitches of a merely polemical dichotomy against postmodernism. Deservedly, the topos of relevance demands clarification. If one understands this appeal for relevance as a phenomenon of the post-9/11 era and as a conviction that literature should play a role in society, it becomes clear that the border between reportage and literature is one that needs to be transgressed time and again. Osang's texts about 9/11 were published before this manifesto. The memoirs that he and his wife wrote are far more sentimental and self-absorbed than the relevant realists strive for, and belong to the category of ego-documents, not to fiction.

In 1929/1930 Siegfried Kracauer stressed that reportage needs to be understood as opposed to idealism, and that it would be naïve to think reportage is capable of representing life:

A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory. Reality is a construction. Certainly life must be observed to appear. Yet it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather it is to be found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning. Reportage photographs life; such an assemblage would be its image. ¹⁴

How Osang manages to build the mosaic that Kracauer proposes has, I hope, become clear.

If one agrees to accept reportage as part of relevant, realistic literature, then Osang can be regarded as a writer striving for relevance and self-scrutiny. He blends the

¹³ Martin R. Dean, Thomas Hettche, Matthias Politycki and Michael Schindhelm, 'Was soll der Roman?', *Die Zeit*, iss. 26 (2005) <http://www.zeit.de/2005/26/Debatte_1>. Last access at 5 April 2018. Cf. Ewout van der Knaap, 'German Literature: The Dialectics of Readability', in *Reconsidering the Postmodern. European Literature Beyond Relativism*, ed. by T. Vaessens and Y. van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), pp. 185–202.

¹⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany (1929–30)*, trans. by Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1998), p. 32.

journalistic mode with the memoir trend, which is at the core of atrocity literature. One might be tempted to qualify Osang's honesty as painful, because the reader enters private space, and because one can wonder what the relevance is of the *petites histoires* that Reich and Osang narrate when compared to the bigger events. Their strategy, to authenticate dreadful moments by using highly personal and trivial perspectives, makes access possible. Their book enables the reader to come close to the making of memory which adds sharp contours against the background of personal life. Osang shows how a global event is creatively received and incorporated into the specific literature and history of the national context of Germany.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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